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# MANAMELA PUSHES POST-SCHOOL REFORM

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## POST-SCHOOL EDUCATION

# Manamela: ‘Universities not the only path to success’

*SETAs, TVET Colleges and Community Education and Training Colleges are central to the Minister’s post-school vision*

## THEBE MABANGA

Higher Education and Training Minister Buti Manamela has put increased focus on revitalising post-school education by adopting a holistic view of the sector’s needs. This includes moving beyond the number of available spaces to focus on areas such as lecture development, physical and digital infrastructure, as well as psycho-sociological support to students, especially new entrants, to improve their chances of coping and succeeding in the post-school education system.

Manamela also appears to place more emphasis than any of his predecessors on the role of private universities, arguing that they have a more strategic role to play than they may be offering.

His starting point is that South Africa must broaden its focus beyond university education being the be-all and end-all of post-matric education and strengthen Technical Vocational and Education and Training (TVET) Colleges, Community Education and Training Colleges (CETs), as well as the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs).

“A country that focuses and tries to drive everyone into uni-

versity is not a country that has aspirations of what we are thinking about,” Manamela says, noting that he is getting “positive vibes” about TVET Colleges and that students are “not waiting to be declined” by universities.

Manamela points out the many career opportunities offered by SETAs, including those that will come on stream after April at the start of the SETAs’ new financial year.

Last year, SETAs, which also offer bursaries to help mitigate funding challenges, provided 350,000 internships, artisan development opportunities and learnerships ranging in duration from six to 18 months and up to three years for full learnerships.

Manamela points out that aside from 1,1 million places available at universities, there are also about 570 000 places available at TVET colleges, as well as 120,000 places at Community Education and Training Colleges, which cater for matric rewrites and short courses for school leavers and learners.

For Manamela, the state of readiness is more than just the number of available places at the start of the year.

“Readiness in quality is the number of years we have invested in lecture development for both



**Turning point:** Higher Education and Training Minister Buti Manamela says South Africa must broaden its focus beyond university education being the be-all and end-all of post-matric education. - Photo: Supplied.

TVET Colleges and universities,” he says.

The minister says readiness also speaks to infrastructure, both physical and digital.

South Africa has only built two new universities in 30 years of democracy — Sol Plaatje University in the Northern Cape and the University of Mpumalanga in Mbombela.

South Africa’s universities have undergone expansion and now accommodate just over a million students compared to 400,000 before 1994.

The government has also built 11 new campuses at various TVET Colleges, and historically black universities have been “encouraged, funded and supported” by the central government through a special grant.

Over the past two years, for example, the University of Fort Hare in the Eastern Cape had its water and sanitation infrastructure upgraded for R130 million and a new building for Early Childhood Development built for R96 million.

The University of Venda received an advanced nursing science simulation building for R11 million as well as water supply and residence upgrades, and campus-wide wi-fi access costing just over R250 million.

The Walter Sisulu University has had a new engineering building and workshop constructed

preparedness than it has been for years.

The funder has already communicated funding decision outcomes to almost 1 million applicants, both first-time and returning students, with those who have been rejected currently appealing the decision.

Manamela says there will need to be “sacrifices” to ensure that all eligible candidates are funded and that NSFAS and the department are not caught in a situation similar to last year, where they had to fund a shortfall of R13, 5 billion.

He says the amount spent per student will need to be reviewed.

NSFAS currently spends an average of R120,000 per student on tuition, accommodation, allowance, meals and a laptop.

Manamela says the private university sector, which accommodates about 350,000 students — about 30% of the university population — also has a crucial role to play in providing career opportunities.

The Department of Higher Education and Training says it is in discussion with the institutions to broaden their range of programmes to include Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths courses.

He notes the decision on what skills are provided by the country’s schooling system is guided by a Skills Master Plan, labour market intelligence, and research, done mostly by universities, to determine what skills the country needs and how various players and entities should allocate their resources to offer in-demand skills.

South Africa currently lags in its National Development Plan (NDP) post-schooling targets.

The NDP envisages 1,6 million university students — there are currently 1,1 million.

It calls for 2,5 million in TVET Colleges against the current 570,000 and Community Education and Training Colleges should enrol 1 million students by 2030 against the current 120,000.

Manamela says CETs need investment in digital infrastructure to accommodate increased numbers and “with investment in infrastructure, and the development of lecturers and other proposed interventions, we should achieve these numbers.” \* See Page 8

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## DG'S CORNER

# Focus on improving schooling, not the 30 percent pass mark debate

**MATHANZIMA MWELI**

Every year during the matric results season, the so-called “30% pass mark” debate reignites, capturing headlines and fuelling protests. The concern that 30% should not be enough to pass a subject has a strong emotive appeal at first glance, but there are three major problems with this line of critique.

First, it is based on and perpetuates a myth that standards have been lowered and were higher at some point in the past when our education system was better.

Second, the alternative proposal to raise the matric pass criteria to 50% in at least six subjects is a very bad idea, if you stop and think about what will happen.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, debates about the pass criteria distract us from discussing what actually needs to be done to improve the quality of teaching and learning in our schools.

Let me explain each of these three key points.

**The myth of lowered standards**  
When critics lament things like slipping standards or lowering the bar, they usually imply or state explicitly that the standards have been reduced. But this is simply false.

Firstly, it is important to note that the criteria for obtaining the National Senior Certificate are more complicated than “you just need 30%”. In reality, the NSC requires six subjects to be passed, with three at a minimum of 40% and the others at a minimum of 30%.

While the exact combination of criteria changed somewhat in 2008, this change did not amount to a clear lowering of standards. In fact, under the old Senior Certificate system, learners could pass certain subjects at a “Lower Grade” level, which required only 25%. But there was never a time in South African history when 50% was required for all subjects to pass matric.

A related myth is that universities are now receiving weaker candidates who scraped through with just 30%. In fact, there are other, more stringent criteria for university admission. About 84% of those who passed matric in 2024 also met the more stringent diploma pass criteria, and the criteria for bachelor-level admission require even stricter standards. Specific university courses may also apply additional selection



*Faulty critique: Mathanzima Mveli, Director-General of the Department of Basic Education, says raising the pass mark may offer the illusion of action, but it avoids the real work needed to raise standards, particularly in the early years. - Photo: Eddie Mtsweni*

criteria, such as a score of at least 50% in both mathematics and physical science.

“Okay,” you might say, “Even if standards weren’t higher in the past, shouldn’t they be?”

### The fallacy of raising the pass mark

The desire for higher standards is understandable. But higher standards are achieved through better learning, not by redefining failure. Simply increasing the pass criteria will not miraculously improve the quality of learning and teaching across South African classrooms.

This would be like telling a high jumper to just raise the bar as a way to improve their performance, rather than doing the hard work of exercise and improving their technique.

But more than being merely ineffective, a dramatic change in the pass criteria would do real harm. Why do I say this?

Raising the NSC pass requirements to 50% in at least six subjects would inevitably lead to two highly undesirable outcomes:

1. Massive educational exclusion: Roughly half of current matric candidates would pass under such a system, dramatically reducing the number of young people with a qualification. This would be deeply unfair to future

generations of youth, result in widespread unhappiness, increase dropout rates in earlier grades, and cause significant disruption to the labour market. Under a 50% threshold, hundreds of thousands of learners, disproportionately from poorer provinces, would fail matric each year, not because they learned less than before, but because the rules changed.

2. Lowering of standards: It may take a few years, but because of pressure on the system to avoid mass failures, exam difficulty would inevitably have to give. A level of knowledge that previously earned 30% would now earn 50%, rendering the pass mark change a symbolic farce. Ironically, changing the pass criteria would lead to grade inflation and the actual lowering of standards. Moreover, universities and employers would lose a valuable range of results to differentiate between candidates.

Instead of achieving its intended goals, raising the pass mark would compromise the credibility of the NSC and worsen the sorting of learners into post-school education pathways.

### A strategic focus on fundamentals

The obsession with pass mark thresholds distracts from the real challenges in South Africa’s education system. While the percentage of youths completing matric has improved, too many children still exit the education system without achieving an NSC pass or equivalent qualification at a college, and educational inequality remains unacceptably high.

The more sustainable solution lies in strengthening the foundations of learning so that more children are equipped to write the NSC examinations and take key subjects like mathematics and physical science.

This is the strategic shift being pursued by the Department of Basic Education, and which many academics and critics have been calling for: Instead of obsessing over the matric pass rate or pass criteria, the focus is on better quality early learning.

We need to give more children access to well-functioning Early Learning Programmes to improve school readiness. We need to ensure better teaching of reading and literacy in and through Home Language in the early years of school. We need to improve the numeracy foundations children learn in primary school so that more learners are equipped to take mathematics in matric.

Changing the quality of edu-

cation across thousands of classrooms is not easy. It requires the right guidance for teachers, support materials, and in-service training and monitoring. In a resource-constrained environment, we must invest in specific forms of support that have been proven to raise learning outcomes.

### A balanced approach

Incremental adjustments to pass requirements could be considered, such as introducing an average pass mark of 40%. However, these changes must be coupled with the development of alternative educational pathways, such as the rollout of the General Education Certificate at the Grade 9 level, and better opportunities at TVET colleges.

Drastic changes, like a sudden increase to a 50% pass mark, would either exclude vast numbers of learners or force a lowering of standards. Neither outcome is acceptable.

Raising the pass mark may offer the illusion of action, but it avoids the real work. If we are serious about standards, we must be serious about teaching and learning, especially in the early years. That is where real improvement begins, and where the future of South Africa’s education system will be decided.

*Mathanzima Mveli is the Director-General of the Department of Basic Education*

## SKILLING MZANSI — ADVERTORIAL

# Passion and patriotism drive the Mining Qualification Authority's success

**THEBE MABANGA  
& AKANI NKUNA**

**T**he Mining Qualifications Authority (MQA) is one of the star performers in South Africa's skills development landscape, boasting four clean audits and meeting 100% of its targets. Dr Thabo Mashongoane, CEO of the MQA, attributes this success to "passion and patriotism".

"The secret to achieving is passion for the work you are doing," he says of the clean audits. He notes that the staff also treat their work as service to the country and treat it as such.

Mashongoane expect his staff to lead by example, and since they are in the business of providing skills, he expects them to be continually engaged in training themselves. Thus, 60% of his staff are currently registered for studies in various courses.

The CEO describes mining as a "unique" sector to operate in because it catalyses other sectors. "When a mine is set up," he says, "it attracts other types of business around it." A town can be built and sustained around a mine, and businesses such as food retailers and other suppliers mushroom around it.

He notes that the sector is accident-prone, which is what led to the formation of the MQA, and requires extra care, starting with additional preparation time for workers to get ready for underground, including assessments of their mental state and sobriety. The requirements are much stricter than in other work environments.

**S**o what skills are in high demand in the sector? Mashongoane says boilermakers, electricians, and welders are in high demand. The difference now is that as mines move to mechanisation and automation, artisans need to update their skills. The MQA has introduced management and executive development.

The MQA marks its 30th anniversary in February this year, which means it predates other Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), which were formed through the Skills Development Act of 1998 and launched in subsequent years.

The MQA came about as a direct result of a tragic event. The 16th of September 1986 is one of the darkest days in



**Crucial sector:** Dr Thabo Mashongoane, CEO of the MQA, says mining is essential to SA's development because it catalyses the involvement of a range of other sectors. - Photo: Eddie Mtsweni

South African mining history. This was the day of the Kinross Mine Disaster, which occurred in what is now the province of Mpumalanga. A total of 177 workers died, while 235 were injured and 2,400 rescued after a cutting torch set alight a range of flammable materials from plastic piping, foam and surface coverings, causing toxic fumes that killed the workers.

The disaster sparked varied reactions from a range of ac-

tors, including staging a strike and a day of mourning at the beginning of October. The Minerals Council of South Africa, then known as the Chamber of Mines, introduced guidelines that sought to eliminate plastic material use underground wherever possible and started improving safety guidelines, which changed the face of the industry.

The government appointed the Leon Commission of Inqui-

ry into Mine Health and Safety in 1994 to investigate the causes of 69,000 deaths and 1 million injuries in the century to 1986, since mining had begun in Johannesburg.

One of the key outcomes of the Commission's work was the enactment of the Mine Health and Safety Act of 1996, which led to the formation of the MQA and the Mine Health and Safety Council.

The MQA was founded with

the mandate to provide safety training for workers. This then expanded with the introduction of the Adult Basic Education and Training initiative to provide literacy skills after recognising that some accidents arose due to some workers' inability to interpret signs or instructions.

When the Skills Development framework was established, the MQA saw its mandate broaden to include skills training from technical to digital skills, as well as management and executive development. The MQA had dual reporting lines — to the Minister of Minerals and Energy as well as the Ministry of Higher Education, alongside other SETAs.

When asked what some of its proudest achievements were over the past three decades, Mashongoane notes: "For me, the first thing that comes to mind is the reduction in fatalities, because that is why we exist." The South African mining industry recorded 500 deaths a year around the time of the Kinross Disaster, and in 2024, it recorded 42, the lowest in South Africa's history.

**M**ashongoane notes that the achievement is due to the efforts of mines, unions and the health and safety inspector, but the MQA sits at the centre as a "catalyst" with the training, funding and monitoring that it provides, including refresher courses for experienced workers.

Alongside this reduction in fatalities, another notable achievement Mashongoane notes is the increase in the literacy rates at mines, which he says has changed the face of mining from being dominated by migrant workers and low-skilled local labourers speaking Fanakalo, the pidgin language that is the lingua franca in mining. "Now I hear people speaking fluent English and their own languages," he says with pride. He notes that this change has been accompanied by a proliferation of African managers in mines as well as the increase in women engineers, geologists and underground workers.

The MQA does critical work in mining communities as well as labour sending areas such as the Eastern Cape to help mines implement their Social Labour Plans. "We first assess and consult the community about what skills they need, Mashongoane

# SKILLING MZANSI — ADVERTORIAL



**Lifesaver:** Robot dogs like this one, pictured at the 2022 Mining Indaba, are transforming mining safety by navigating hazardous, confined, or unstable underground environments to perform autonomous inspections, monitor air quality, and scan for structural risks. - Photo: Supplied

says and notes that some of the most popular skills they provide, including through service providers, are road construction technology, commercial farming, as well as admin and computer literacy.

The mining industry has fully embraced Artificial Intelligence, and Mashongoane says the industry now helps provide training for the operation of robots that can be fitted with cameras and used for underground exploration without putting workers at risk.

The MQA offers elaborate training, including simulated machinery training to prevent actual damage as well as mock mines, for students to take part in an actual production process in a supervised environment.

Last year, the MQA, alongside the Transport Education and Training Authority and Chemical Industries Education

and Training Authority, established the Green Hydrogen Centre of Excellence at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research in Pretoria.

Mashongoane notes that while each of the SETAs is looking for skills for their own sectors, pooling resources to offer common training for green hydrogen makes sense. “We have to collaborate; we cannot continue training in silos,” he says.

The MQA also recognises the need to provide training that prepares workers for the Just Energy Transition, as mining will be one of the most affected sectors through the closure of coal mines. Some of the training includes reskilling electricians to become solar technicians, for example.

Mashongoane recently had an opportunity to attend the Post-School Education and Training Strategy session with

Higher Education and Training Minister Buti Manamela, and what he took away was that the system is under pressure and needs to expand.

This is because of the pipeline of learners who passed matric, with about 900 000 writing last year. The increasing pass rates, as well as that of bachelor’s passes, means that universities, TVET Colleges and SETAs must expand their capacity.

**M**anamela says SETAs provided 350,000 training opportunities last year. The university system, which accommodated 400,000 students in 1994, currently has a population of 1,1 million. But Mashongoane notes that even more is required and that 26 public universities are not enough for a middle-income developing country.

Mashongoane is unperturbed by talk that SETAs should be

closed, including by people like politician Mmusi Maimane. “Our SETA system is the envy of other people around the world,” he says of his time serving on the skills development workstream of the International Labour Organisation.

He argues that SETAs have accumulated a body of knowledge that is invaluable and would be difficult to replicate, including by the private sector. He is dismayed by academics who produce reports that support the call to close down SETAs when SETAs fund a quarter of their student population. “You need a dedicated body to coordinate the skills development,” he says.

Mashongoane is a trained Fitter and Turner whose career spans almost 40 years across industry, government and academia. He started in the automotive industry in the 1980s and worked his way up to become an

instructor and eventually a lecturer. He went on to become a Deputy CEO at Further Education and Training institutions, now called TVET Colleges. He has worked in government, including as a Director at the National Skills Authority and had oversight of SETAs. He took up his current role in 2021.

He described the current outlook for the mining sector as “stable despite challenges around the globe”. He says the rally in the gold price, which has seen it double over the past year and touch a record \$5,500 an ounce, will spur demand for other metals and hopefully attract investors.

When that happens, he has to be ready to supply the required skills.

# MY FAVOURITE TEACHER

## Snuki Zikalala on studying in Bulgaria: discipline, language and survival

SIMON NARE

For African National Congress veteran Dr Snuki Zikalala, studying at Sofia University in Bulgaria, in southeast Europe, required a combination of determination, commitment and discipline.

Studying in a foreign country always comes with disadvantages, but in the Balkan nation, the odds were stacked against Zikalala and a host of other students from Africa and the rest of the world who had enrolled at the institution.

Because Zikalala and his peers could not speak the language, they had to spend a whole year learning Bulgarian, as teaching was conducted strictly in the language. To this day, Zikalala can speak and write Bulgarian fluently.

He speaks with deep admiration and gratitude about how much he benefited from the country's education system. He was also struck by the enthusiasm of Bulgarians to learn about South Africa, which was then under the apartheid regime.

He recalls that there were about 100 South African students enrolled at the university, alongside others from Africa and South America.

"Their education system was very good compared to our Bantu Education. It was at a much higher level than what we had back home. Bulgaria was an agrarian country, meaning it was largely rural," he said.

"They later developed into a modern country, so education was very important to them. I think we benefited a lot, those of us who studied there, even though South Africa, in terms of industry, was far more advanced at the time."

Zikalala noted that South Africa's industrial development at the time mainly benefited the white minority, while Bulgaria, with the support of the Soviet Union as it was then known, transformed into a modern society within a few years.

He explained that during the first year, students from across the world were placed together in a single class and taught Bulgarian as if they were toddlers. Only after one or two years, once they had grasped the language, were they enrolled in their respective courses. For Zikalala, that course was journalism.

"You had to speak the language to understand. What also encouraged us was the knowledge that we never had these opportunities back



*Disciplined: Dr Snuki Zikalala spent a year in Bulgaria learning the country's language before starting his university course. He still speaks Bulgarian fluently. - Photo: Antoine de Ras*

home. We told ourselves that we were here, given an opportunity by this country and its people, so we had to study hard," he said.

"We had no time for fun or parties. We did not allow ourselves to party during the week or at weekends. We had a strict regime among our students. We had come to study, and we had to go back qualified and better people, so that we could impart that knowledge to our people back home."

Zikalala said the experience was not easy. The challenges were so severe that some students committed suicide, overwhelmed by the distance from home, the lack of communication with family and loved ones, and the harsh weather conditions. Winter temperatures dropped to as low as minus 30 degrees Celsius.

Despite this, students persevered because opportunities to study back home were scarce. That hardship forged lasting bonds among students from South Africa and neighbouring countries such as Lesotho and Zimbabwe.

The local population was largely supportive, although many Bulgarians had never seen a black person before. Their fascination was such that some wanted to touch the stu-

dents' skin to see if it was real.

"Some of them were seeing a black person for the first time. Some wanted to touch our skin. They thought we had charcoal on our bodies, and when they touched, there was nothing — just skin. For us, it was a good experience, a very good experience," he said.

The group that Zikalala studied with has maintained strong ties with Bulgaria, and whenever a new Bulgarian ambassador is deployed to Pretoria, they make a point of meeting and speaking to them in Bulgarian.

Zikalala regards education as a vital tool for development and believes teachers play a critical role in shaping both students and society.

"Teachers are very important to society because they encourage students to study and pursue their ambitions. They help students understand that even though there are ups and downs, the most important thing is grasping the content of what they are studying," he said.

Zikalala urged students in higher education to put their studies first in everything they do, stressing that an educated youth is es-

sential for the country's future.

### My favourite teacher Q & A with Snuki Zikalala

**Q: What is the name of your favourite teacher?**

A: Mrs Slavovar.

**Q: What is the name of the institution you attended at the time?**

A: Sofia University, Bulgaria.

**Q: What were your favourite subjects there?**

A: History, social sciences and ethical journalism.

**Q: How did your favourite teacher endear herself to you?**

A: She wanted to know more about South Africa, what apartheid was, and how it was affecting the country.

**Q: What did you most like about your favourite teacher?**

A: She was a knowledgeable professor and had a strong interest in African studies.

**Q: Did this influence your choice of career?**

A: Yes, in a big way. When I did my thesis on SABC apartheid propaganda, she wanted to know more and encouraged deeper engagement with the subject.

**Q: What was the one phrase from your teacher that inspired you?**

A: If one works hard and studies hard, one will achieve what one wants.

**Q: Why are teachers so important to society?**

A: Teachers are important because it is through them that students learn, develop understanding, and can excel in the subjects they are studying.

**Q: What advice do you have for learners today?**

A: They must study very hard because the more educated you are, the better you are for the country and for yourself. Life changes daily, and the world needs young people who are well educated, well-skilled, and able to interpret the world we live in today.

**Q: While at school, did you imagine ending up where you are today, and why is it important to believe in one's dream?**

A: Believing in your dream is important because it gives you purpose and direction, even when circumstances are difficult.

**Q: Lastly, any advice for teachers?**

A: Teachers also need to further their studies and help students interpret the world better. If a teacher does not improve their qualifications, their knowledge does not improve either.

## SKILLING MZANSI — ADVERTORIAL

## QCTO — accredited occupational qualifications boost employability

AKANI NKUNA

**Q**uality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) Chief Executive Officer Vijayen Naidoo says occupational qualifications significantly improve employability and are key to addressing South Africa's stubbornly high unemployment rate.

Speaking to *Inside Education*, Naidoo said the lack of work experience remains a major barrier to employment, arguing that occupational qualifications help close this gap by integrating practical training into learning.

"We have a high unemployment rate in the country. Many learners cannot secure employment because they have no work experience. Our qualifications ensure that learners have work experience and are work-ready," he said.

*Occupational qualifications offered through QCTO-accredited Skills Development Providers can make you employable — in many cases even more employable than some university graduates.*

"You can come to the QCTO and do an occupational qualification and be employable — often more employable than a university graduate. We integrate real practicals and workplace experience so that when you are employed, you can prove you have the competency required for the job."

The QCTO is responsible for overseeing the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework. Its mandate includes developing occupational qualifications and skills programmes, accrediting public and private providers, and ensuring compliance with standards set out in the Skills Development Act.



**Wide choice:** Quality Council for Trades and Occupations Chief Executive Officer, Mr Vijayen Naidoo, says the QCTO has registered more than 900 occupational qualifications, including new and emerging programmes that support the Just Energy Transition. - Photo: Eddie Mtsweni

The entity also monitors the delivery of qualifications at accredited institutions, including assessments and certifications of learners.

Naidoo encouraged learners to consider alternatives to the traditional university route, saying occupational qualifications offer diverse ca-

reer pathways and meaningful workplace exposure aligned with current labour market needs.

He noted that many universities face capacity constraints, leaving qualifying students without placement, and said occupational qualifications present a viable and practical

alternative.

"We have a wide range of qualification types on offer. Learners who qualify for university but don't get in can enrol in occupational qualifications. At present, we have more than 900 occupational qualifications and over 300 skills programmes to choose

from," Naidoo said.

Popular options include Certificates in Project Management, Hairdresser, Early Childhood Development, Health Promotion Officer, and various trades like Electrician, Boilermaker and Tool Maker.

The QCTO has also accredited community colleges offering short skills programmes ranging from two weeks to a month. These programmes — covering areas such as basic welding, sewing and baking — are open to all age groups. Learners who demonstrate aptitude can progress to higher-level studies beyond basic skills.

While acknowledging challenges in attracting learners, Naidoo said enrolments have grown steadily over the past two years. He attributed this to the broad range of qualifications available and the QCTO's focus on identifying industry skills gaps and responding accordingly.

**H**e emphasised that occupational learning caters for learners from diverse academic backgrounds, including those without matric, offering them a second chance at building a professional career.

"Even learners who are struggling at school or have dropped out can enter occupational qualifications at NQF levels 1, 2 and 3, become employable, and still have the opportunity to return and further their studies," he said.

Naidoo also highlighted measures to combat bogus institutions, including verifying and shutting down unregistered providers and qualifications. However, he stressed that communities, parents and learners also have a responsibility to help curb the problem.

He urged prospective students to conduct thorough research before enrolling.

"Learners must check that the institution is registered and accredited by the QCTO. They must also verify that the qualification itself is registered on the NQF — either on the QCTO platform or the SAQA platform," Naidoo said.

## AFTER SCHOOL

## This coming year marks a turning point

## BUTI MANAMELA

Every January, we speak about higher education as though it were a neutral system that simply needs to open its doors wider. But for millions of young South Africans, post-school education is not a neutral space. It is where hope either consolidates or collapses. It is where the promise of democracy either becomes tangible or feels indefinitely deferred.

As the country enters the new year, the post-school education and training system stands at a point where incremental reform is no longer sufficient. What is required now is a decisive shift in purpose, scale and alignment.

South Africa produces close to one million matriculants a year, with pass rates that have steadily improved over the past decade. Yet only a fraction of those who pass are absorbed into post-school institutions immediately following matric. Universities collectively enrol just over one million students, while TVET colleges enrol under 600,000, and community education and training colleges remain below 300,000.

At the same time, more than three million young people between the ages of 15 and 24 are not in employment, education or training, and youth unemployment for those under 35 remains above 40%. This is the central contradiction of our moment: rising educational attainment alongside deepening exclusion from opportunity.

The task for the year ahead is, therefore, not simply to expand access, but to redefine what access means. A post-school system must be judged by whether it creates credible pathways into work, further learning and economic participation.

Too many young people enter institutions without a clear sense of where their studies will take them, and too many leave with qualifications that are disconnected from labour market demand. This disconnect is costly, both socially and economically. It entrenches inequality, fuels frustration and weakens confidence in the state's ability to translate education into opportunity.

The approach being pursued in the new year is grounded in the recognition that post-school education must be treated as part of the country's growth and inclusion strategy. The Growth and Inclusion (GAIN) agenda emphasises energy, infrastructure, manufacturing, digitalisation, agro-processing and the oceans economy as drivers of economic expansion



**Time for action:** Buti Manamela, the Minister of Higher Education and Training, says a decisive shift in purpose, scale and alignment of the post-school education and training sector is needed in 2026.  
- Photo: Eddie Mtsweni

and job creation.

Each of these sectors has explicit skills implications, from artisans and technicians to engineers, technologists, data specialists and managers. Aligning post-school education to these growth nodes is a precondition for success.

Projections show that infrastructure investment alone, if properly sequenced and executed, could unlock hundreds of thousands of jobs over the medium term. Energy expansion and grid maintenance require electricians, millwrights and technicians at scale. Construction and infrastructure programmes require artisans, site supervisors and engineers.

Digital transformation across both public and private sectors is driving demand for software developers, data analysts and cybersecurity specialists, while agro-processing and food security depend on skills in agricultural science, logistics and quality assurance. Without a post-school system capable of supplying these skills in sufficient numbers and at the right quality, growth targets will remain aspirational rather than real.

This is why the year ahead places strong emphasis on occupational and skills-based programmes, work-integrated learning and apprenticeships. Evidence consistently shows that young people who receive workplace exposure as part of their training are significantly more likely to find employment within a year of completing their studies. Yet historically, workplace learning has been uneven, fragmented and often treat-

ed as an afterthought.

The intention now is to make it central. Over the next three years, the system aims to scale workplace placements, learnerships and apprenticeships to levels that meaningfully affect youth absorption, with particular focus on priority sectors.

Infrastructure, often overlooked in policy debates, has emerged as one of the most binding constraints on progress. Many institutions simply do not have the lecture halls, workshops, laboratories, residences or digital connectivity required to expand enrolments or modernise programmes. This has direct consequences for access, quality and resilience.

The new year, therefore, marks a deliberate shift toward treating physical and digital infrastructure as strategic enablers of growth. A system-wide baseline is being established to identify where capacity exists, where it is constrained and where targeted investment can unlock the greatest impact within a twelve to thirty-six-month horizon.

This matters not only for enrolment growth, but for equity. Infrastructure backlogs are often most acute in historically disadvantaged institutions and rural areas, precisely where unmet demand is highest. Addressing these gaps is essential if post-school expansion is to support inclusion rather than reproduce existing inequalities.

It also matters for system stability. Digital infrastructure, power resilience and student accommodation are no longer peripheral concerns. They determine wheth-

er institutions can function during disruptions, whether students can complete their studies, and whether public investment delivers returns.

Institutional reform is another unavoidable part of the agenda. Student funding and skills development institutions play a decisive role in shaping access and outcomes, yet both have faced governance and operational challenges in recent years. Stabilising and reforming these institutions is about restoring trust and ensuring that resources reach students and programmes when they are needed.

Work continues to strengthen governance, improve systems and align funding more closely with completion and progression rather than enrolment alone. International evidence suggests that even modest improvements in funding efficiency and predictability can have outsized effects on student success, particularly for first-generation students.

Community education and training colleges occupy a particularly important place in the strategy for the year ahead. They are central to addressing the needs of young people and adults who have been excluded from formal pathways. Expanding CET provision, particularly in skills-oriented and foundational programmes linked to local economic activity, offers one of the most direct ways to reduce the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) population.

International comparisons show that countries that invest seriously in second-chance and adult education achieve better long-

term labour market outcomes and social cohesion, even if immediate employment effects take time to materialise.

Underlying all of this is a shift in how success is measured. The post-school system can no longer rely primarily on inputs as indicators of progress. Enrolments, budgets and buildings remain important, but they do not tell the full story. The year ahead places increasing emphasis on outcomes: completion rates, progression, workplace exposure, employment and enterprise creation.

This is not about reducing education to narrow economic metrics, but about recognising that in a society marked by mass unemployment, education must demonstrate tangible social and economic value. Transparency, regular reporting and clear targets are essential to rebuilding public confidence and ensuring that reforms translate into lived improvements.

The projected impact of this approach, if implemented with discipline and coordination, is significant. Within the GAIN framework, improved alignment between skills supply and growth sectors could meaningfully reduce skills bottlenecks that currently constrain investment and productivity.

Over three years, targeted infrastructure investment and programme alignment could unlock tens of thousands of additional training places, increase artisan output toward national targets, and improve labour market absorption for young people entering the system. While post-school education alone cannot solve unemployment, its contribution to growth, inclusion and social stability is indispensable.

Ultimately, the year ahead is about choosing coherence over fragmentation and delivery over rhetoric. Post-school education must be understood not as a collection of institutions competing for scarce resources, but as a single system serving a national purpose. That purpose is clear: to equip South Africans, particularly the young, with the capabilities to participate meaningfully in a changing economy and a democratic society.

If the reforms now underway are carried through with resolve, the coming year can mark a turning point where post-school education begins to close the gap between promise and reality, and where growth and inclusion cease to be competing ideas and start to reinforce one another.

**Buti Manamela is the Minister of Higher Education and Training.**

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| Energy efficiency    | Instrumentation and control | Wastewater operations           | Leak detection and repair | Data analysis                              | Health and safety |
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# TETA TAKES A STAKEHOLDER-DRIVEN APPROACH TO SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN THE TRANSPORT SECTOR



**Strategic alignment:** Dr Maphefo Anno-Frempong, TETA's Chief Executive Officer, speaks at the Stakeholder Engagement Sessions at the Birchwood Hotel in Boksburg. - Photo: Eddie Mtsweni

## THAPELO MOLEFE

The Transport Education and Training Authority (TETA) has launched a nationwide series of high-level Stakeholder Engagement sessions, with its Chief Executive Officer, Dr Maphefo Anno-Frempong, emphasising a decisive shift towards a more consultative, stakeholder-driven approach to skills development in the transport sector.

The engagements commenced in Gauteng, before moving to Cape Town and Durban. Anno-Frempong said the sequencing reflected the concentration of transport operations and companies in these areas.

"The transport sector is structured in a way that Gauteng, the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal carry the bulk of transport activity," she said.

"That is where most companies are based and where operations are initiated, which makes it critical for us to begin our engagements there."

Anno-Frempong said the stakeholder sessions form part of TETA's broader effort to align its strategic direction with industry needs, following a comprehensive strategy evaluation that assessed the authority's performance, impact and relevance over the past five years.

"We undertook research to ask stakeholders whether our strategy was making sense, whether it was having an impact, and what we should improve," she said.

"One of the strongest findings was that the industry wants deeper and more meaningful engagement, and that stakeholders want to contribute directly to shaping our strategy."

Anno-Frempong explained that while the evalua-

tion showed that a significant majority of stakeholders felt valued by TETA, recurring concerns were raised around accreditation processes, communication, and the complexity of discretionary grant applications and reporting requirements.

"As an organisation that listens, we have to respond where we can," Anno-Frempong said. "These engagements are part of that response."

The CEO outlined that TETA's revised five-year strategy is built on five pillars, with four requiring active stakeholder participation. These include supporting small, medium and micro enterprises, revenue diversification, innovation in the transport sector, and strengthening partnerships across public and private institutions.

"The transport sector is made up of about 90% SMMEs," she said. "If we are not investing in SMMEs, then we are not investing where the majority of our stakeholders are."

She added that revenue diversification has become increasingly important as the demand for transport-related skills grows, while funding from the skills levy remains limited.

"We need to do more with limited resources, and that requires partnerships and co-investment," Anno-Frempong said.

Innovation, she noted, is also central to the sector's future sustainability.

"The transport sector is changing rapidly, driven by technology and new operating models," she said.

"Innovation requires skills, and skills development

cannot happen in isolation. It requires collaboration with universities, TVET colleges, business schools, government departments and industry players."

Anno-Frempong said the current stakeholder engagements also reflect a structural shift in how TETA engages with industry, following feedback calling for stronger strategic leadership from governance structures.

"The industry was very clear that they want to hear the voice of the board together with the CEO on strategic matters," she said.

"That is why these engagements are board-led and focused on strategy, policy and long-term vision, rather than operational issues."

She stressed that the sessions were not designed to deliver announcements, but to gather insights and solutions from stakeholders.

"We are here to listen, to build trust, to secure buy-in and to create together," Anno-Frempong said.

Anno-Frempong said TETA remains committed to refining its systems, improving communication and ensuring that its programmes continue to produce work-ready beneficiaries who can contribute meaningfully to the transport sector.

"Our focus is impact," she said. "Doing fewer things better, in partnership with our stakeholders, and ensuring that skills development translates into real economic and employment outcomes."

Further stakeholder engagements are expected to continue as TETA rolls out its revised engagement model nationally.

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# THEMBA DLAMINI: TETA CHAIRPERSON MEASURES SUCCESS BY IMPACT, NOT APPLAUSE

THAPELO MOLEFE

**W**hen Themba Dlamini speaks about leadership, there is little room for ambiguity. He talks in numbers, in evidence, in outcomes that can be tracked and defended. For the newly elected chairperson of the Transport Education and Training Authority (TETA) Board, credibility is not built through promises or polished speeches, but through delivery that leaves a visible impact.

Dlamini assumes the TETA board chairmanship at a time when the skills development landscape is under intense scrutiny. SETAs continue to face public scepticism, governance pressures and rising expectations to demonstrate value in an economy struggling with low growth and high unemployment.

For Dlamini, the task ahead is clear: Stabilise governance, restore confidence, and ensure that every rand spent translates into measurable impact for the transport sector and the broader economy.

With more than 30 years of experience in the public sector and over 15 years of board-level leadership, Dlamini brings a depth of institutional memory that few can rival. His career spans executive leadership, regulatory oversight, national planning and skills development.

He has served as chief executive officer of major public institutions, including the Construction Education and Training Authority, the Media Development and Diversity Agency, the National Gambling Board, the Public Protector of South Africa, and the Performing Arts Centre of the Free State.

He has also chaired and served on boards and audit committees across government entities, including Statistics SA, QCTO, the National Library of South Africa and the National Heritage Council.

This breadth of experience shapes his approach to TETA. His priority, he says, is governance — specifically, audit outcomes.

“Even if an organisation looks good financially, the real question is whether it has a clean or unqualified audit,” Dlamini says.

“If not, you go to the root causes. You do not manage symptoms. You manage the problem.”

At TETA, that means confronting weaknesses in supply chain management and discretionary grant funding head-on. These areas, he notes, are historically vulnerable to maladministration across the SETA system.

His directive to the audit and risk committee is uncompromising. Resolve findings, close gaps and move decisively towards a clean audit, but not one that only exists on paper.

“I am not interested in a clean audit without impact,” he says. “Impact must be measurable. It must be felt in the sector, in the quality of training, and in employment outcomes.”

Central to Dlamini’s leadership philosophy is a strict separation between governance and administration. As board chairperson, he sees his role as providing firm, independent oversight while respecting the authority of the accounting officer.

“I will never interfere in operations,” he says. “I have been on both sides, as a CEO and as a board chair. Oversight must be real, but it must not collapse into micromanagement.”

At the same time, he emphasises accessibility and honesty. He describes an open-door relationship with management, where issues are raised early, not when systems begin to fail. Transparency, ethical



**Wealth of experience: TETA Chairperson Themba Dlamini has served as chief executive officer of major public institutions and also chaired and served on boards and audit committees across several government entities.** - Photo: Eddie Mtsweni

leadership and evidence-based decision-making are non-negotiables.

That same standard extends to staff and labour relations. Dlamini is openly critical of a compliance-driven culture that prioritises ticking boxes over real development.

“Having interns or learners is just the beginning,” he says. “If someone completes an internship, they must leave with skills, direction and a pathway into employment. Otherwise, we are failing them.”

His engagement with TETA staff, including organised labour, reflects this thinking. He challenges unions to demonstrate value beyond wage negotiations and encourages officials to see themselves as ambassadors of the institution, not occupants of positions. Career stagnation, he argues, is a risk to both individuals and organisations.

“You cannot have people sitting in the same position for 15 or 20 years without a development plan,” he says.

“Succession planning, coaching and hand-holding are essential. Skills development starts in your own backyard.”

Beyond the institution, Dlamini is placing strong emphasis on stakeholder engagement. Under his leadership, TETA has rolled out provincial engagements across the country, not as ceremonial exercises but as platforms for accountability and dialogue.

“These engagements are about over-communicating,” he explains. “We must explain how decisions are made, especially around discretionary grants. Stakeholders must understand the criteria, and they must also challenge us where the system is too rigid or unclear.”

He is acutely aware of the reputational damage

SETAs have suffered over the years, often accused of favouritism or poor governance. Ongoing investigations within the sector, including at TETA, reinforce the need for openness and patience with due process.

“You wait for facts,” he says. “You do not speculate. You act based on evidence.”

Dlamini is equally firm on the strategic role TETA must play in strengthening the link between education and the labour market, particularly through TVET colleges and community education colleges. Drawing on his experience as former chairperson of QCTO, he stresses alignment between qualifications, industry needs and quality assurance.

“TVETs are often underestimated,” he says. “In many cases, they offer better employment prospects than traditional academic routes. But the qualifications must be relevant, current and properly aligned to QCTO standards.”

As the national conversation turns to the future of SETAs beyond 2030, Dlamini rejects calls for their abolition. He argues that the system has evolved through multiple national skills development strategies and continues to play a critical role in supporting small and medium enterprises, which remain the country’s largest employers.

“If there is maladministration, deal with it,” he says. “But do not destroy an entire institution because of governance failures in specific cases. Solutions must be targeted and evidence-based.”

Underlying all of Dlamini’s views is a strong belief in integrated planning. Skills development, economic growth, infrastructure, safety and innovation, he argues, cannot be addressed in isolation. In the transport sector, this means confronting issues of road safety, regulatory compliance and technological change with urgency and realism.

**H**e is candid about the country’s economic constraints, noting that low growth limits opportunities for large-scale employment absorption. Yet he remains optimistic that disciplined planning, quality training and partnerships can unlock progress.

“Money is not the only problem,” he says. “Capacity, execution and accountability matter just as much.”

Dlamini’s academic grounding reinforces his pragmatic approach. He holds a Master of Arts in Development Economics from Williams College in the United States and an Honours degree in Economics, cum laude, from Howard University. His early career included research, teaching and development finance work, experiences that continue to inform his policy-oriented mindset.

Despite his formidable résumé, he resists the language of legacy.

“I do not talk about legacy,” he says. “I talk about footprint. Where were we when we started, and where are we now?”

At TETA, that footprint will be measured in improved governance, credible stakeholder relationships and skills programmes that translate into real jobs and safer, more efficient transport systems. For Dlamini, leadership is not about comfort or popularity. It is about finishing what you start, standing by the facts, and being prepared to account for every decision.

And if there is one thing he makes clear to stakeholders and partners alike, it is this: claims mean nothing without proof.

“My middle name is Thomas,” he says, with a smile, alluding to the doubting disciple. “If you say you have done something, I will ask to see it.”

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# TETA BOARD TACKLES SKILLS GAPS TO EMPOWER SA'S TRANSPORT SECTOR



**Addressing the challenges:** The board of the Transport Education and Training Authority (from left to right) are Thabang Molefe, Matthew Ramosie, CEO Maphefo Anno-Frempong, Chairperson Themba Dlamini, Roland Setlako, and Irvin Phenyane. - Photo: Eddie Mtsweni

## THAPELO MOLEFE

South Africa's transport sector is a critical driver of the economy, yet a growing skills mismatch threatens to hold back its full potential.

The Transport Education and Training Authority (TETA) is addressing this challenge head-on, with its board leading a strategic push to ensure training aligns with market demand and creates real employment opportunities.

TETA board member Thabang Molefe highlighted a striking gap in current training programmes, particularly in the maritime sector. While coastal regions like Port Elizabeth and East London serve as significant hubs for vessel activity, local young people often lack access to relevant skills programmes. Conversely, inland institutions offer maritime training in areas without practical industry exposure.

"This is a clear mismatch between available training and market needs," Molefe said.

"TETA is prioritising curriculum development that meets the actual requirements of the industry. Our goal is that learners acquire skills that make them employable and capable of creating jobs, not just completing a course."

Molefe added that TETA is also working to incentivise training providers to link learning directly to employment opportunities.

"We want to ensure that graduates are not only trained for today's economy but are prepared to respond to future demands, such as emerging technologies and green skills," he said.

Board member Irvin Phenyane emphasised the importance of innovation and forward-looking thinking in the sector. He explained that training must now combine compliance with creativity and adaptability to meet evolving demands.

"Universities and TVET colleges must innovate, not just replicate old programmes," Phenyane said.

"For instance, road freight, passenger transport, maritime and aviation sectors need learners to engage with electric vehicles, drones, cybersecurity, and green technologies. Skills development cannot remain static; it must anticipate the future."

Phenyane also pointed to systemic challenges in the transport sector that make strategic training even more crucial.

"Transport is expensive and underprovided in South Africa, and that constrains economic growth," he said.

"By equipping learners with the right skills, TETA ensures they can take advantage of opportunities and contribute to



**Looking ahead:** "We want to ensure that graduates are not only trained for today's economy but are prepared to respond to future demands, such as emerging technologies and green skills," says TETA board member Thabang Molefe. - Photo: Eddie Mtsweni

sector development, whether in freight, ports, or emerging green technologies."

Supporting small and medium-sized enterprises is another key priority for the board. Molefe explained that SMMEs represent the backbone of the sector and require tailored support to compete alongside larger conglomerates.

TETA is refining its resource distribution and funding mechanisms to ensure fairness and proportionality across provinces and industry players.

"By enabling new entrants and smaller players to thrive, we strengthen the sector and stimulate economic growth where it is most needed," Molefe said.

TETA's five-year strategic plan is built around four pillars: supporting SMMEs, revenue diversification, innovation in the transport sector, and strengthening partnerships.

Organisational excellence underpins all these pillars, ensuring that programmes are delivered efficiently, sustainably, and with measurable impact.



**Importance of innovation:** TETA board member Irvin Phenyane says "universities and TVET colleges must innovate, not just replicate old programmes". - Photo: Eddie Mtsweni

Phenyane noted that TETA's approach extends to preparing the workforce for the green economy.

"Reducing carbon footprints and adopting sustainable technologies is critical," he said.

"By integrating green skills into our programmes, we are equipping South Africans to lead in environmentally responsible transport practices."

Both Molefe and Phenyane emphasised that TETA is committed to creating training that is responsive, forward-looking, and closely linked to real economic opportunities.

"Transport is an enabler for the entire economy," Molefe said. "If we train the workforce correctly, we not only empower young people but also strengthen the sector, create jobs, and contribute to national growth."

Through strategic leadership, innovation, and targeted support for both learners and industry, TETA is redefining skills development in South Africa's transport sector, making training relevant, impactful, and ready for the future.

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# TETA POSITIONS SMMES AT THE CENTRE OF TRANSPORT SECTOR GROWTH



**Focused:** Delegates at the TETA Stakeholder Engagement panel discussion on the importance of developing small, medium, and micro enterprises as key drivers of transformation, job creation, and innovation across the transport value chain. - Photos: Eddie Mtsweni

## THAPELO MOLEFE

As South Africa confronts stubborn unemployment, economic inequality and slow growth, the transport sector continues to play a decisive role in connecting people, markets and industries. At the heart of this ecosystem are small, medium and micro enterprises, whose sustainability and growth are increasingly recognised as essential to the country's economic future.

The Transport Education and Training Authority has placed the empowerment of SMMEs at the centre of its strategic agenda, positioning them not as peripheral beneficiaries but as key drivers of transformation, job creation and innovation across the transport value chain.

This focus took centre stage during a recent high-level panel discussion on empowering SMMEs in the transport sector, where TETA board members, industry leaders and public sector stakeholders explored practical solutions to long-standing challenges facing small businesses.

Opening the discussion, the moderator, Nnoni Mohlaphuli, a brand communications and marketing manager at Traxtion, noted that SMME empowerment ranked among TETA's top board outcomes and organisational priorities, reflecting a deliberate shift towards a more developmental and inclusive skills ecosystem.

TETA board member Thabang Molefe said the authority had repositioned itself to play a catalytic role within the transport economy, recognising that sustainable growth depends on enabling smaller players to participate meaningfully.

"In many economies, SMMEs are the foundation of growth, innovation and employment," Molefe said. "TETA has positioned itself not only as a transactional institution, but as a developmental partner within the skills ecosystem."

Molefe explained that TETA had adopted a new funding architecture designed to broaden access and remove structural barriers that have historically excluded smaller enterprises. Central to this approach is proportionality, fairness and a focus on impact rather than size.

"It is no longer about how strong your balance sheet is," he said. "It is about the cost per learner, the proportional distribution of resources, and ensuring that businesses in townships, rural areas and semi-urban spaces can participate on equal footing."

He added that the board had prioritised predictability and transparency in funding processes, enabling SMMEs to plan with confidence and engage competitively alongside larger corporates.

The panel also examined sustainability as a defining challenge for transport SMMEs. Freight Logistics South Africa Association representative Kgomotso Mogale described sustainability as the ability of a business to generate consistent profits under changing conditions without exhausting its people or resources.

"For many SMMEs, sustainability is still a mystery," Mogale said. "We know that a large number of small businesses dissolve within ten years, and often a single bad month can trigger collapse."

He highlighted access to markets and finance as persistent obstacles, noting that small firms are often expected to comply and compete like large companies, without access to the same resources.

Lanseria International Airport CEO Rampa Rammopo reinforced the importance of sustaining SMMEs, citing their contribution to employment and economic output.

"SMMEs employ the majority of the workforce and contribute significantly to GDP," Rammopo said. "Without them, economies do not survive."

Rammopo said one of the most practical interventions TETA could support was financial literacy and clearer guidance on funding pathways.

"Finance exists, but many SMMEs do not know where to go or how to prepare," he said.

"Understanding cash flow and business planning is often the difference between survival and failure."

From a policy and operational perspective, South African Airways executive Mpho Letlape stressed the importance of designing interventions that reflect the realities faced by SMMEs.

"We need to meet SMMEs where they are," Letlape said. "Applying rigid compliance models without understanding context limits growth."

She pointed to the taxi industry as South Africa's largest transport SMME sector, arguing that inclusive solutions must recognise its scale and importance.

"Without taxis, South Africa cannot function," she said. "Yet we often expect compliance without providing the capacity or support needed to achieve it."

Responding to these concerns, Molefe said TETA had begun decentralising its services to bring them closer to communities and businesses they are intended to serve. He said the board was also reviewing the organisation's strategy to ensure alignment with future market demands.

"One of the questions we are asking is what skills the market will demand five, ten and fifteen years from now," Molefe said. "For example, Europe is moving away from petrol-powered vehicles, and South Africa is a major exporter to that market. Our skills strategy

must respond to that reality."

He added that TETA was strengthening governance while simultaneously levelling the playing field through digital systems that reduce gatekeeping and human interference.

"Governance and compliance are important for sustainability," Molefe said. "But we are also digitalising our systems to improve transparency and access."

A second panel discussion focused on strengthening partnerships within the transport sector, highlighting collaboration as a cornerstone of TETA's long-term strategy.

TETA board member and Governance and Strategy Committee chair Matthew Ramosie said partnerships with industry, academic institutions and technology providers were essential for building future-ready skills.

"We are not intervening for the sake of intervening," Ramosie said. "We are focused on infrastructure, safety, compliance, AI and sustainable logistics, and identifying partners who can help us deliver for the sector."

International supply chain expert Charles Dey emphasised the impact of technological change, particularly artificial intelligence, on the future of work.

"AI will significantly reduce routine, entry-level jobs," Dey said. "This requires urgent strategic planning in training and skills development."

G20 Empower representative Florence Musundwana highlighted the value of collaboration in building competitiveness, particularly within global and continental trade frameworks such as the African Continental Free Trade Area.

"Collaboration creates access," Musundwana said. "It allows us to benchmark against best practice and build a competitive edge."

She added that sustainability must precede expectations of SMMEs giving back through employment and mentorship.

"Sustainable businesses are better positioned to contribute to job creation and skills development," she said.

"Entrepreneurs must also see themselves as leaders and part of the solution to South Africa's challenges."

As TETA continues to refine its strategy, the discussions underscored a shared commitment to building an inclusive, innovative and sustainable transport sector anchored by empowered SMMEs.

Through targeted funding, decentralised services, strengthened partnerships and future-focused skills development, TETA is positioning itself as a catalyst for meaningful transformation, ensuring that small businesses are not only supported but enabled to thrive as drivers of economic growth and social progress.

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# TETA PARTNERSHIPS ACCELERATE MARITIME TRAINING AS DURBAN BUILDS BLUE ECONOMY MOMENTUM

**DES ERASMUS**

South Africa's push to grow its blue economy is starting to show practical, on-the-ground momentum.

This includes Durban's new Maritime High School, a first-of-its-kind Maritime Teacher Qualification, and partnerships between the eThekweni Maritime Cluster (EMC), the city and the Transport Education Training Authority (TETA).

The partnerships aim to align training with what the maritime industry actually needs.

But the eThekweni Maritime Cluster (EMC) managing director, Zenzile Gwamanda, says those gains now need to be scaled urgently.

She warned that long-standing skills gaps – including the absence of core offerings such as naval architecture at local tertiary institutions – will continue to limit the country's ability to turn maritime policy into jobs, investment and globally competitive capability.

Speaking to *Inside Education* at a Transport Education Training Authority (TETA) high-level Stakeholder Engagement panel discussion in Durban, Gwamanda said that the country's blue-economy ambitions are being undermined by a very practical shortfall.

Even in a port city, she said, local tertiary institutions have long failed to offer something as basic as naval architecture.

The cluster, she said, helped mobilise partners to develop a naval-architecture related qualification pathway after identifying this "structural mismatch" in 2021.

Collaborators on the project were the University of KwaZulu-Natal and Durban University of Technology, alongside TVET colleges.

Support was also secured from the South African International Maritime Institute (SAIMI) to move from curriculum design to funding teacher qualifications.

Naval architecture is critical to fostering and retaining skills in South Africa that will grow the maritime, and thus blue, economy, Gwamanda said.

"This is where we work with the boat builders, the boat repairers and also the ship builders and ship repairers.

"Currently, all our naval architects have to go abroad to study to become qualified naval architects."

This skills push – a passion for Gwamanda – is necessary to translate the policy ambition into jobs and investment along the country's vast coastline.

According to the government, the Operation Phakisa oceans-economy sector could add as much as R177 billion to South Africa's GDP by 2033. It could also deliver over a million jobs.

But the speedy delivery of the project – promised over a decade ago – has not materialised. Progress in work streams like marine transport and manufacturing hinges on closing the very skills gaps that Gwamanda is confronting.

Durban, where the EMC is based, is at the centre of that challenge. The city hosts the country's largest container hub, and performance at key terminals is closely tied to national trade outcomes.

In December 2025, Transnet signed a 25-year concession deal with Philippines-based ICTSI to upgrade Durban Container Terminal Pier 2 – South Africa's busiest container terminal, handling over 40% of the country's container traffic – in an effort to lift capacity and efficiency through new equipment and technology.

But Gwamanda told *Inside Education* that infrastructure upgrades alone will not deliver sorely needed change if the skills pipeline remains thin, particularly in technical fields that support ship repair, boat building, port engineering and marine manufacturing.

"We work together to implement different programmes that are related to the maritime sector," she said, describing



**Wake-up call:** Zenzile Gwamanda, managing director of the eThekweni Maritime Cluster, warned the TETA Stakeholder Engagement panel discussion that long-standing skills gaps limit South Africa's ability to turn maritime policy into jobs, investment and globally competitive capability.

- Photo: Wandile Hlatshwayo

the cluster as a convening platform that lines up public funding and private demand. "We provide a platform for collaborative engagement between the different stakeholders."

One of the cluster's most immediate labour-market interventions is graduate placement, she said, which is done with TETA support and industry co-sourcing.

"They fund the graduate placement... They provided the stipend for the graduates and then, through partnerships... we look for co-sourcing," she said.

This was a response to unemployment among the newly qualified who cannot get workplace exposure without placements.

But there is another gap that needs filling, said Gwamanda, although one less visible than a curriculum shortcoming: public awareness and local ownership of the maritime economy in port cities.

"It is a fact, unfortunately, that the industry is still not really known," she said.

It shocked her, she said, to find there were residents in eThekweni who didn't know the city even had a port.

That awareness gap translates into fewer entrants, weaker career pathways, and limited pressure for skills-focused investment, she said.

"Every year, when I sit and watch these matriculants who graduate and speak about their careers, they talk about becoming doctors or accountants. They don't know about opportunities in the marine sector, where we need work. The careers they are all looking into, they can't even get placements."

Another example of the skills gap in the maritime sector was port construction. Such a qualification does not exist in South Africa, she said.

"People must go and study in Germany and in the Netherlands to come back here to work in port construction or harbour engineering."

But, she added: "I am working with the Mangosuthu University of Technology, currently, to try and come up with that kind of qualification."

EMC's biggest institutional partner is the eThekweni municipality, through a maritime development project aimed at addressing unemployment, poverty, skills development and all things maritime.

The cluster model, in other words, is meant to bring to-

gether the city, national agencies, universities and private employers to execute programmes, rather than to simply advocate for them.

For Durban specifically, the thrust is towards modernisation and competition at container terminals. But the benefits for local jobs and suppliers depend on whether local firms can meet technical standards, and whether young people can access clear training-to-work pathways.

According to Gwamanda, this is where clusters can add leverage that does not replace government or industry. Instead, it brings together the co-sourcing and partnerships needed to turn funding into placements and curricula into graduates that can be hired.

And, she said, thanks to a partnership with SAIMI, which is funded through the national Department of Transport, "for the first time this year in South Africa, we are going to have our first class of students that are actually learning to become qualified maritime educators."

She is also working with Elangeni TVET College, she said, which has produced an aircraft maintenance qualification.

"We are also working on a boat-building course, which is going to be offered for the first time in KwaZulu-Natal at Elangeni TVET College."

Operational inefficiencies are a pet peeve for Gwamanda, and need urgent addressing, she said.

An example was when visiting the Port of Durban in 2025, where automated cranes were being launched.

"A lot of money has been invested there, but we do not have qualified people who can operate them. It was mentioned that 17 people were sent to Croatia to go and learn how to operate these cranes, which are the first of their kind in the country."

"There are real skills gaps in the sector. We need to capacitate our institutions in the country so they can offer this kind of training," she said.

"Everyone wants to become a doctor, but our [graduate] doctors are standing in the streets [unemployed]. We need naval architects, we need harbour engineers," she said.

"For the maritime sector, we need to build capacity here. We have lots of problems in this country, and we can solve so many of those problems if we [meaningfully] address skills shortages and capacitate our training institutions."



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## EDUCATION NEWS

# The matric class of 2025 provide inspiration and encouragement

## CYRIL RAMAPHOSA

In January, the Minister of Basic Education announced that the matric class of 2025 had made history by achieving the highest pass rate in our country's history. More than 650,000 learners passed the National Senior Certificate, achieving a pass rate of 88%.

We congratulate all the learners and their teachers, families and communities for this great achievement. We applaud every learner who sat these exams.

The matric results have shown a steady improvement over many years, both in the quantity and the quality of the achievements. They have contributed to a dramatic increase in the number of South Africans older than 20 who have a matric qualification, increasing from 30% in 2002 to 52% in 2024.

This outstanding achievement shows the value of the investment we are making in education and the efforts we have made to ensure that all children, regardless of their background and gender, have access to quality education.

Global experience has shown that one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty is to ensure that girls receive a good education.

It is therefore significant that in 2025, more girls sat for the matric exams than boys, and that the pass rates of boys and girls were much the same.

A higher proportion of girls attained admission to bachelor studies than boys, and nearly twice as many obtained distinctions. This bodes well for the continuation of their studies at universities and colleges.

It is also significant that more than two-thirds of all bachelor's passes came from schools in the most disadvantaged communities, classified as quintiles 1-3.

This is both a testament to the determination of these learners and their teachers, and to the effectiveness of policies like no-fee schools and the child support grant.

Taken together with the expansion in recent years of funding for tertiary students from poor backgrounds, these results give us encouragement that many of these young people will be able to lift themselves and their families out of poverty.

We are encouraged by the fact that 90% of learners with special education needs passed



*Well done! President Cyril Ramaphosa has congratulated the matric class of 2025. - Photo: Esa Alexander/pool photo via AP*

matric and 52% achieved bachelor's passes, both higher than the national average. Our task is now to ensure that more learners with special needs are able to write matric exams.

As we applaud these great results, we must acknowledge that challenges remain.

Of the 1.2 million children who started Grade 1 in 2014, only 778,000 made it through to Grade 12 in 2025. That's nearly half a million young people who left school before finishing. As we strive to improve the quality of our matric results, we must

work harder to ensure that more children complete their schooling.

Another challenge is the drop in performance in subjects like mathematics. While more learners are taking these subjects, we have seen a drop in the pass rates for mathematics and accounting. These are subjects that our learners need to excel at if they are to succeed in a rapidly changing economy.

In working to address these challenges, we are starting with the foundations of learn-

ing. In the same week that the results came out for the class of 2025, the class of 2037 started their first day of Grade 1.

From this moment, they are starting their preparations for matric and beyond. That is why we are placing greater emphasis and making more investment in the early years of schooling.

We have made Grade R compulsory and embarked on an ambitious drive to register and provide subsidies to more early childhood development centres. We are strengthening early grade reading, improving teach-

ing materials and focusing on teacher development in the early grades.

By investing in children at the start of their school career, by giving them a solid educational foundation, we are preparing them for success. We are working to ensure that they all finish their schooling, that they excel in matric and that they go on to thrive in everything they do.

The achievements of the Class of 2025 must inspire and encourage all the years of learners that are to follow.



## The Department of Basic Education congratulates the Class of 2025 on achieving an impressive 88% National Senior Certificate pass rate.

This achievement reflects the hard work and resilience of our learners, the dedication of educators, and the vital support of parents and communities across the country. It is a clear demonstration that, even in challenging conditions, excellence in education is attainable.

As you move forward into the next chapter of your lives, we encourage you to remain committed to learning, growth, and service to our country.

Well done to the Class of 2025. Your success makes the nation proud.



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## EDUCATION NEWS

# Floods, a cash crunch and staff shortages couldn't stop KZN from topping the 2025 NSC results

THAPELO MOLEFE

**K**waZulu-Natal overcame years of financial pressure, damaging floods and persistent staffing shortages to finish as South Africa's top-performing province in the 2025 National Senior Certificate results with a 90.6% pass rate — up from 89.52% in 2024.

It overtook the Free State for first place and also delivered six of the country's top 10 districts, including uMkhanyakude, one of South Africa's most rural areas.

Last year was a turbulent one for education in the province.

Severe floods damaged school infrastructure in several areas, compounding long-standing budget pressures that have limited the department's ability to appoint teachers, repair facilities, and procure learning and teaching support materials.

By March, the KZN Department of Education had already overspent its budget, triggering partial administration and urgent interventions by the national government.

The province's leadership credits its performance to a deliberate focus on disadvantaged schools and sustained commitment from educators, learners and parents across socio-economic divides.

"We have a plan, which we call the academic improvement plan, with six pillars," according to KZN Department of Education head Dr Nkosinathi Ngcobo.

"It's a simple plan that is followed by all our schools, which gives strategic guidance on what needs to be done.

"We are focusing on rural and township schools unapologetically, in terms of assisting them with resources and support," he said.

The strategy, he said, was beginning to yield visible results across the province.

"Our rural districts are performing even better than some of the districts which are in urban areas across the country," Ngcobo said.

"uMkhanyakude District is in one of the deepest rural areas, but it's in the top two in the country. It's the fruit of our focus on previously disadvantaged schools."



**Top marks:** Minister of Basic Education Siviwe Gwarube, top achiever for public schools Abigail Kok and Deputy Minister of Basic Education Dr Makgabo Reginah Mhaule at the announcement of the 2025 matric class top achievers. - Photo: Kopano Tlape/GCIS

He said the department's emphasis on no-fee schools was informed by where the bulk of learners are located.

"We realised that this is where the majority of learners are — the Quintile 1, 2 and 3 schools — and that is where support must be directed," Ngcobo said.

Ngcobo acknowledged that financial pressures remained the department's most persistent obstacle, with far-reaching consequences across the system.

"When you have financial challenges, you can't appoint staff, you can't repair infrastructure on time, and even your audit outcomes are affected because you don't have managers in place," he said.

"When you separate them, it looks like many challenges, but in fact it's one challenge with many facets."

Despite these constraints, Ngcobo said the province had leaned heavily on its human capital.

"Despite the limited resources that we have, the main resource we have is our teachers," he said. "No one would expect that we would be number one in the country under these conditions, but it's focus, focus, focus."

**H**e added that criticism of the department had been used as motivation rather than a distraction.

"We shut out the noise, but we listen to our critics, and we improve. In fact, they are the fuel that fuels our passion and our resolve to turn around the narrative that achievement is the preserve of the privileged."

Private-sector and civil society partnerships also played a role in supporting schools.

Ngcobo cited organisations such as the National Education Collaboration Trust and VVOB among several partners working with the department.

"There are many partners from the private sector who have taken an interest in the KZN Department of Education, and we share this success with them. They have contributed to where we are today," he said.

KwaZulu-Natal MEC for Education Siphosihle Hlomuka echoed this view, attributing the results to collective effort rather than isolated pockets of excellence.

"The main reason is the commitment from our educators, the officials at the district and head office level, our learners and their parents," Hlomuka said.

"Education is a social challenge. It needs everyone to

work together."

Hlomuka said the fact that six KZN districts ranked in the national top 10 showed that improvement was spread across the province.

"It's not about one district. It's about education across KwaZulu-Natal," he said.

The national NSC pass rate was 88%. Basic Education Minister Siviwe Gwarube said this was evidence that "excellence" was becoming entrenched in township and rural schools. She noted that more than 66% of bachelor's passes were achieved by learners from no-fee schools, including districts such as uMkhanyakude and Umlazi.

"Poverty is not destiny," Gwarube said, adding that strong districts and sustained support were key to narrowing historical performance gaps.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

## How ECD centres can thrive despite systemic gaps in early learning

THAPELO MOLEFE

South African children are falling behind before they reach the classroom.

The 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study confirmed that early learning before primary school remains one of the weakest links in the South African education system, with long-term consequences for literacy and learning outcomes.

Yet across the Eastern Cape, some early childhood development centres are demonstrating that quality early learning is possible, even amid funding shortages, infrastructure backlogs and unreliable municipal services.

According to the Eastern Cape Department of Education (EC-DoE), 5,695 ECD centres are operating in the province, both registered and unregistered.

About 62% fully meet the minimum norms and standards set out in the Children's Act, while a further 28% are near compliant, often falling short on one or two requirements such as infrastructure, health and safety or outstanding municipal documentation. The remaining 10% face deeper challenges related to structural conditions or governance gaps.

"These challenges are not due to a lack of commitment," said EC-DoE spokesperson Malibongwe Mtima. "The biggest barriers are inadequate infrastructure, delays in municipal approvals, limited financial capacity and practitioner knowledge gaps around regulatory requirements."

Despite these constraints, ECD centres such as Little's Daycare & Preschool in Amalinda, East London, and Faith Kids Pre School in Matatiele show how steady progress toward compliance and quality can be achieved.

Little's Daycare & Preschool started operating in 2010 and was officially registered in 2017. Founder Sinalo Ntlabathi says the path to compliance required patience and gradual improvement rather than instant transformation.

"In our area, only about 50% to 60% of centres are fully registered," she said. "Another 20% to 30% are close but struggle with infrastructure, health and safety documentation, or practitioner qualifications."

For Ntlabathi, the motivation to persist came from witnessing a gap in early learning provision in her community.

"I believe education is the



*Learning is fun: Grow ECD is a non-profit social enterprise that works with Early Childhood Development centres across South Africa. - Photo: GrowECD*

foundation on which futures are built," she said. "I wanted to create a nurturing environment where children can thrive, even when resources are limited."

Her centre relies on a mixed funding model that includes parent fees, a Department of Social Development subsidy and occasional fundraising initiatives. While this approach has helped keep fees affordable, funding gaps remain, particularly for infrastructure upgrades and learning materials.

"We could have done a lot more if we had more funding," she admitted. "But we focused on achieving what was possible with what we had."

Across both centres, practitioner development emerges as the most consistent driver of quality. At Little's Daycare, staff training and continuous professional development have had the most visible impact on child development.

"When practitioners are supported and skilled, children benefit immediately," Ntlabathi said.

Faith Kids Pre School founder Mamisto Maqelana echoed this view.

"Training makes qualitative and effective teaching possible," she said. "It ensures that when

children leave preschool, they can cope in primary school interviews and classrooms."

Both centres prioritise daily nutrition, age-appropriate learning materials, structured routines and hygiene. Little's Daycare integrates balanced meals and sanitation into daily practice, while Faith Kids places strong emphasis on maintaining clean, safe indoor and outdoor spaces to reassure parents.

Child development is monitored through observation-based tools. Little's Daycare conducts quarterly assessments using milestone tracking and school readiness tools, supported by daily informal observations. Faith Kids tracks skills development monthly, assessing language, fine motor skills and social development.

Municipal service disruptions, particularly water outages, remain a significant operational risk. Faith Kids has installed two water tanks to ensure continuity during municipal failures, while Little's Daycare stores emergency water and uses gas stoves to reduce reliance on electricity.

Financial sustainability has also been a challenge. Faith Kids charges R150 a month in fees

and relies mainly on government subsidies, with no donor or grant funding. Before receiving its subsidy, the centre struggled with late payments from parents.

"We still had to pay practitioners," Maqelana said. "Now that we are subsidised, things are much better."

Parent engagement has been critical in improving attendance and communication. Little's Daycare holds regular parent meetings and workshops, supported by daily WhatsApp communication. Teachers use these platforms to discuss learning progress and support needs at home.

Faith Kids faced low attendance at parent meetings, but adapted by using WhatsApp groups to share information.

"Parents may not always attend meetings, but communication still happens," Maqelana said.

The ECDoE said it has adopted a supportive regulatory approach to help ECD centres overcome compliance barriers. This includes district-level registration clinics, standardised templates for policies and governance documents, and coordinated engagement with municipal health and planning units to fast-track approvals.

Quality is monitored through

a provincial ECD Quality Assessment Tool aligned with the Children's Act, quarterly district visits and national datasets such as the ECD Census and Thrive by Five assessments. High-risk and newly registered centres receive intensified monitoring.

Safeguarding remains central. Both centres screen staff before employment and ensure children are never left unattended. At the provincial level, practitioners receive training on mandatory reporting under Section 110 of the Children's Act, supported by referral pathways involving social development, the SAPS, clinics and child protection forums.

For ECD centres still struggling to meet standards, the advice from those who have made progress is clear.

"Start with the basics and improve gradually," Ntlabathi said. "Invest in staff training, keep proper records and build strong relationships with parents and the community."

Maqelana added that upgrading must go beyond academics.

"Safety, supervision and hygiene are just as important," she said. "Children must always be protected."

# THE CRITICAL EARLY YEARS

## The silent crisis: How early learning failure derails SA's future

THAPELO MOLEFE

In 2014, approximately 1.2 million children entered Grade 1 across South Africa. By 2025, twelve years later, only 778,000 reached matric. Nearly half a million young people, 422,000 learners, vanished from the system before completing their schooling.

They did not simply drop out in Grade 12. Most left between Grades 10 and 11, exhausted, discouraged, and convinced they had no future. But government officials gathering at the Basic Education Sector Lekgotla in January say the real moment of failure happened years earlier. Not in a high school classroom, but in a creche, a Grade R class, or a Grade 1 numeracy lesson that a child simply could not grasp.

"If we fail our children during this critical period of birth to nine years, we fail them throughout the education journey," Basic Education Minister Siviwe Gwarube told the lekgotla on its opening day.

It was a warning rooted in evidence that this year's gathering, its theme focused on "Strengthening Foundations for a Resilient and Future-Ready Education System", represents less of a policy summit and more of a national reckoning.

The connection between early childhood development and everything that follows — matric passes, university throughput, skills shortages, unemployment — has long been whispered in education circles. In January, it moved to the centre of the national conversation.

President Cyril Ramaphosa spent time at the lekgotla doing something unusual for a sitting head of state: arithmetic.

He recounted visiting the Kruger Mpumalanga International Airport and asking young managers basic operational questions.

"How many passengers come here? How many planes land here? Do you know the population of your province? Do you know the population of your country?" The answer each time was silence or fumbling.

"You cannot manage what you cannot count," Ramaphosa told them. "You cannot manage it."

It was a seemingly simple observation that cut to the heart of South Africa's crisis. If young people in managerial roles



**No compromise:** Basic Education Minister Siviwe Gwarube told the Basic Education Sector Lekgotla in January that "foundational literacy and numeracy are the canvas for national development". - Photo: Eddie Mtsweni

cannot confidently work with numbers, cannot understand the world numerically, then the nation has failed them not at matric, but far earlier. And if this happens at scale, it ripples through the entire economy.

The numbers are devastating. Of the 1.2 million Grade 1 learners from the 2014 cohort, only 778,000 (65%) reached matric in 2025, while 422,000 (35%) left school before completing their education. Of those who reached matric, 88% passed (more than 650,000 learners), the highest pass rate in South African history.

But only 34% of 2025 matric candidates wrote mathematics; most chose mathematical literacy instead. Of those taking mathematics, only a fraction achieved the 60% threshold required for university STEM programmes.

The 88% matric pass headline reads as a success: South Africa's matric pass rate has climbed from around 50% three decades ago to 88% today. But beneath the surface, the pipeline is fractured beyond recognition.

"What we now need to focus on is the quality outcomes," Ramaphosa said. "What we now need to focus on is what the

economy needs."

The economy needs engineers, scientists, doctors, technicians, and skilled workers. Instead, it is receiving school-leavers without confidence in mathematics, without foundational numeracy skills, and often without the conceptual clarity necessary to engage with complex, technical subjects.

*"If we fail our children during this critical period of birth to nine years, we fail them throughout the education journey."*

*Basic Education Minister Siviwe Gwarube*

And it begins much earlier than most people realise. Gwarube identified a specific inflection point, which is Grade 4.

"More children must read

and read for meaning by Grade 4," she told delegates.

"Foundational literacy and numeracy are not just an education priority. They are the canvas for national development. Without it, higher-order learning cannot occur."

Grade 4 is where the system typically transitions from "learning to read" to "reading to learn". It is where abstract mathematical thinking becomes necessary. And it is where, historically, learners without strong early foundations begin to visibly struggle, the so-called "Grade 4 slump".

The evidence, presented across multiple sessions at the lekgotla, suggests that this slump is not inevitable. It is a design failure rooted in how children are taught from the moment they enter formal schooling.

When the department analysed learners exposed to mother-tongue-based bilingual education (teaching in home languages through Grade 3, with progressive English introduction), the results shifted dramatically. Children taught mathematics and science in languages they understood — isiZulu, Sesotho, isiXhosa

— showed greater conceptual clarity and confidence than peers taught entirely in English.

The implication is uncomfortable: for decades, South Africa has been teaching complex abstract concepts to young children in a language many do not yet fully command. It is equivalent to teaching calculus to an English speaker in Mandarin. The failure is not the child's; it is systemic.

"Mother tongue-based bilingual education is not a compromise on excellence," Gwarube stated. "It is a pathway to excellence."

But this intervention cannot happen in Grade 4. It must begin in Grade R and Grade 1, in the foundational phase that government documents now describe with unusual urgency as the "bedrock" of everything that follows.

South Africa's early childhood development sector has long been neglected. For years, ECD meant informal creches where children "played and slept many hours and played with rocks and stones", as Ramaphosa put it with notable candour.

Only recently, in the fifth and sixth administrations, did the nation begin a serious con-

# THE CRITICAL EARLY YEARS



*Basic arithmetic: President Cyril Ramaphosa told the lekgotla that “what we now need to focus on [in education] is what the economy needs”.- Photo: Eddie Mtsweni*

versation about early learning as a deliberate, cognitive investment rather than mere childcare.

“We delayed, inordinately delayed, to start vigorously with early childhood learning,” the President acknowledged.

“We thought somehow getting our children to attend creches ... that that was learning. Now that, as we all know, did our country and our young people a bad service.”

By the end of 2025, nearly 12,000 schools had access to mother-tongue-based bilingual education. But that represents less than half of South Africa’s roughly 25,000 schools. The majority of the nation’s 13 million school-age children still pass through early learning environments that, by the government’s own assessment, have failed to adequately prepare them.

The result is that children entering Grade 1 are already behind. By Grade 4, when abstract reasoning becomes necessary, children struggle. By Grade 8, lacking confidence in foundational subjects, children begin to disengage. By Grade 10, facing the reality of matric mathematics or science, these children often leave.

This is not a metaphor. This is a documented pattern affecting nearly half a million learners over a single twelve-year cohort.

The lekgotla’s discussions around retention and dropout

rates revealed a painful secondary crisis, which is gender-specific patterns of departure from the system.

Ramaphosa highlighted equity gains: more girls than boys wrote the 2025 matric exams, with similar pass rates, and a higher proportion of girls qualified for bachelor’s studies. Nearly two-thirds of all bachelor’s passes came from schools in disadvantaged communities, classified as quintiles 1 to 3.

**Y**et progress at the top obscures the crisis in the middle. Girls without strong early foundations are more vulnerable to dropping out, particularly around the ages of 15 to 17. Teenage pregnancy, often a consequence rather than a cause of school disengagement, provides the final push.

For boys, the pattern differs slightly but is equally troubling: boys without early numeracy and literacy confidence are more likely to self-exclude, believing they “cannot do” academic subjects.

Both pathways lead to the same endpoint: young adults without matric, without employable skills, and without access to the further education necessary to change their trajectory.

“We need to ensure that learners complete their schooling,” Ramaphosa emphasised, invoking the image of a protective hen ensuring her chicks remain close.

“Leave no one behind should not just be a political slogan. It must mean that those whom we are responsible for should not be left behind.”

Yet the system has been leaving children behind systematically — 422,000 in a single cohort — and the roots of that abandonment are planted in

“*We need to ensure that learners complete their schooling.*”  
—  
*President Cyril Ramaphosa*”

the early years.

Despite knowing what works, South Africa struggles with implementation at scale. Dr Stephen Taylor, Director of Research, Coordination, Monitoring and Evaluation at the DBE, explained that while structured literacy programmes, quality learning materials, and intensive teacher coaching produce proven results, scaling these interventions across 25,000 schools remains extraordinarily difficult.

Teacher preparation compounds the problem; universities train generalist teachers while the system demands spe-

cialists in literacy and numeracy.

The lekgotla commissions proposed concrete solutions. An Early Childhood Development Blueprint outlines 23 actions targeting universal access to quality ECD by 2030, with a national orchestration team to coordinate implementation.

For foundational learning, recommendations include establishing common instructional approaches across all schools within two years, developing numeracy benchmarks currently lacking, and training 80% of system officials in curriculum and instructional leadership within three years.

Mother-tongue-based bilingual education represents a critical intervention. A national pilot running from 2026 to 2030 will scale MTBBE across 200 rural schools, with Grade 5 functioning as a continuation phase rather than an abrupt transition to English.

Teacher professional development must shift from generic to specialised preparation, with universities modelling the bilingual pedagogies they teach.

The economic stakes could not be higher. Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation Blade Nzimande emphasised that no country achieves developmental goals without investing in science, technology and innovation capabilities.

Yet South Africa produces insufficient STEM graduates while facing acute shortages

in engineering, software development and skilled trades. Without strong foundational numeracy and literacy, learners avoid mathematics and science, creating a cascade effect that undermines the entire pipeline from schooling to employment.

The linkage is clear: early childhood development shapes foundational phase success, which determines subject choice confidence, which influences matric outcomes, which offers post-school opportunities, which determines labour market participation and ultimately drives economic growth or stagnation.

Of the 1.2 million children who entered Grade 1 in 2014, 422,000 might never complete their schooling. Each child represents human potential constrained by preventable systemic failure. Each failure represents lost economic productivity, lost innovation, lost possibilities for personal transformation.

The lekgotla concluded with timelines, success indicators, and specific recommendations. Whether these translate into actual investment, coordination, and sustained focus will determine whether South Africa arrests its education crisis or continues to watch 422,000 learners per cohort fall through the cracks created decades earlier.

South Africa’s education leadership has made clear that the time to act is now.

## EDUCATION NEWS

# Takunda Muchuweni: a shining light for learners with special educational needs



**Resilient:** Takunda Praise Muchuweni is South Africa's top National Senior Certificate candidate among Learners with Special Education Needs for the Class of 2025.  
- Photo: Jan Kriel School Facebook Account



**Persistent:** Takunda Praise Muchuweni has a chat with Western Cape Education MEC David Maynier. - Photo: Jan Kriel School Facebook Account

## JOHNATHAN PAOLI

**W**hen Takunda Praise Muchuweni speaks about her matric year, she does not begin with her results or the trophies she won.

She begins with pain: physical, constant, and unavoidable; and the quiet battle to keep believing in herself when her body seemed to be working against her.

"The most difficult part of my year was battling self-doubt and being in real physical pain. I had to write exams while sick, and I was wondering whether I would be physically able to make it," Muchuweni told *Inside Education*.

Muchuweni, a matriculant from Jan Kriel School in the Western Cape, has been named South Africa's top National Senior Certificate (NSC) candidate among Learners with Special Education Needs (LSEN) for the Class of 2025.

Her achievement places her among the country's most exceptional matriculants, not only for her academic performance but for the resilience and leadership that have defined her schooling journey.

For Muchuweni, the road to national recognition was marked by challenges far beyond the pressures of final examinations.

Living with muscular dystrophy and limited mobility following major spinal surgery in Grade 6, she navigated her final school year while paralysed from the neck down and reliant on a wheelchair.

Chronic pain and recurring illness accompanied her daily, even

as she prepared for three-hour examination papers.

"It was demotivating to put in all the work and get the strength to go to school, and then when you sit for the exam, you are hit with sharp pain. You have to focus and write for three hours with a smile on your face when you are just racked with pain," she said.

Yet Muchuweni refused to allow her circumstances to dictate her outcome.

Matric, she said, was unpredictable and mentally exhausting, but persistence became her anchor.

"There were a lot of days when I was in pain and a lot of days when I felt like giving up. But I just kept going despite all of that," Muchuweni said.

Her story has resonated across the education sector, challenging persistent stereotypes about disability, academic ability, and leadership.

Jan Kriel School, a specialised institution in Kuils River supporting learners with physical disabilities and learning barriers, has been central to that journey, providing a framework where high expectations are matched with comprehensive support.

Muchuweni's academic excellence has been consistent rather than sudden.

Over the years, she has repeatedly ranked among the school's top achievers, earning the Dux Learner trophy, subject awards in Business Studies and Mathematical Literacy, and the Principal's Award.

In 2025, she was elected Chairperson of the Representative Council of Learners, a role that

placed her at the centre of learner advocacy and leadership.

Her leadership extended beyond the school gates.

In 2024, Muchuweni served as a Junior City Councillor for the City of Cape Town, where she led a plastic recycling initiative that raised funds for a local school.

The project earned her the Nest Leadership Project Award and reinforced her belief that young people with disabilities should be visible in decision-making spaces.

"I want to see more people in my situation represented and involved in making decisions that affect us," she has said, calling for greater inclusion of learners with disabilities in leadership programmes and civic platforms.

**T**hat sense of purpose was shaped early in her life. In July 2019, while in Grade 6, Muchuweni underwent major spinal cord surgery: a defining moment that temporarily confined her to a hospital bed and drastically altered her physical abilities.

Despite this, she continued her schooling with the support of occupational therapists, physiotherapists, facilitators, and teachers, maintaining strong academic performance even while undergoing rehabilitation.

She draws inspiration from Jan Kriel alumni who have gone on to excel in higher education and professional life, seeing in their stories proof that disability does not limit potential.

Her own support system has been extensive and deeply personal.

She credits her parents, sister, educators, school counsellor,

psychologist, and medical team at Red Cross Children's Memorial Hospital for sustaining her through years of physical strain.

During examinations, she was assisted by a transcriber, while therapists worked closely with her to manage fatigue and pain.

Rather than viewing her disability as a limitation, Muchuweni believes it has reshaped how she approaches learning and problem-solving.

"Because some things are difficult for me to do, I've learned to think creatively and work closely with others," she said.

She described adaptability as one of her greatest strengths.

Her achievements were recognised on a national stage at the NSC Top Achievers Breakfast hosted by MTN, where she joined South Africa's highest-performing matriculants.

She was also invited to the Basic Education Department's Ministerial Matric Awards in Gauteng, an honour reserved for just 44 learners nationwide.

Jan Kriel School described her achievement as historic, noting that it reflects both individual determination and the power of inclusive education.

The Western Cape Education Department confirmed that the province achieved a 91.9% LSEN matric pass rate in 2025, with the second-highest bachelor's pass rate nationally for LSEN candidates at 60.4%.

Looking ahead, Muchuweni plans to pursue tertiary studies at the University of Cape Town in 2026, with interests spanning psychology, industrial psychology, and law; fields rooted in her

desire to understand human behaviour and advocate for others.

Despite facing multiple university rejections, she has remained resolute, currently appealing and reapplying following her recognition as a top achiever.

Her mother, a cum laude master's graduate, remains her strongest role model and source of inspiration.

**W**hen asked what principle guides her intellectual and emotional resilience, she said: "The quality of everything we do depends on the thinking that we do first."

To the Class of 2026, her advice is practical and unromantic, shaped by lived experience rather than platitudes.

"Remain consistent and work a little each day. Small steps lead to big results," she said.

She also urges learners not to lose themselves entirely to pressure.

"Matric is a roller-coaster. Just keep on going, keep on believing in yourself and don't forget to enjoy the moments you can," she urged.

Muchuweni's journey stands as a powerful counter-narrative to deficit-based views of disability in education.

It is a story not of overcoming disability, but of succeeding because of resilience, community, and opportunity; and of redefining what excellence looks like in South Africa's classrooms.

As she steps into the next chapter of her life, Muchuweni is not only celebrating academic success but also her future.

## FEATURE

# Dealing with the challenges of special needs learners

LEBONE RODAH  
MOSIMA

**S**outh Africa has made notable advances in special needs education over the past two decades.

This includes institutions like the recently completed Dr WK du Plessis school in Springs by the Gauteng Education Department for learners with special educational needs, epilepsy or specific learning disorder and who can follow the CAPS mainstream curriculum.

However, thousands of children on the autism spectrum still face limited, divided, and deeply unequal access to appropriate schooling.

Long waiting lists, high diagnostic costs, and a shortage of specialised schools have left many families navigating an education system that struggles to accommodate neurodiversity.

*Inside Education* spoke to Jackie Selley, an occupational therapist and principal of CARE — the Centre for Autism, Research and Education — a private and independent special needs school in Orange Grove, Johannesburg, dedicated to supporting children with autism, from 18 months to 21.

For 15 years, the school has operated at the intersection of education, therapy, and advocacy, attempting to bridge gaps that national policy has yet to close.

Selley said CARE functioned as an educational institution and a therapeutic centre, where intensive programmes offer learners up to seven hours a week of occupational and speech therapy.

She explained that this model is essential for children with autism, whose learning needs differ significantly from those of neurotypical peers.

“Autism is a neurodevelopmental disability, meaning that the children generally look typical, but they develop differently. So they think differently, and they have differences in the way they communicate and socialise,” she said.

“They will be the child alone in the corner. They don’t know how to play or interact, and they often have huge temper tantrums because they can’t communicate.”

They can also display rigid and repetitive behaviours,



**Challenges:** Jackie Selley, an occupational therapist and principal at CARE, the Centre for Autism, Research and Education. - Photo: Lebone Rodah Mosima

where they don’t play as many other “typical” kids do.

“So they spin, they flick, they like repeated things — instead of driving a toy car, they might spin the wheels. Instead of playing with a doll, they will hit the doll, suck it, flick the toes, flick the eyes,” Selley said.

“They change, they develop, but they will always have autism.”

**S**elley highlighted that many learners arrive at CARE after struggling in mainstream or remedial schools, or after spending long periods at home following diagnosis.

CARE has been described as the first environment where their needs are fully understood and supported, and Selley believes that if the government were able to allocate more money to human resources, there could be enough therapists, more special needs schools, and well-trained educational psychologists at schools.

Selley said the solution lies not in sympathy, but in investment.

“The process isn’t streamlined enough to help these children and these families. We’re losing three years of a child’s life.

“Let’s say, parents realise their child’s different at three, and by the time we get them into a school that can support them at seven, we’ve lost four years of supporting their development.”

Despite its impact, CARE remains financially inaccessible to most South Africans. The school is entirely parent-funded,

with therapy costs partially covered by medical aid, but only at the highest tiers of coverage.

“It is incredibly expensive to maintain a medical aid and to support a child who is on the autism spectrum,” she said.

“Let’s say, parents realise their child’s different at three, and by the time we get them into a school that can support them at seven, we’ve lost four years of supporting their development.”  
— Jackie Selley, occupational therapist and principal of CARE

Selley said that it becomes a more daunting pathway for some families who are relying on local districts for a diagnosis to get admission to a special needs school.

Diagnosis through Gauteng provincial hospitals can take between six months and a year, with the same time frames when parents refer back to the education system and wait for their expensive educational

psychologist assessments.

“These assessments range from R3,000 to R12,000 — that’s a huge amount of money to come up with,” she said.

Selley said that placements into special needs schools, especially government schools, may take an additional one to two years due to waiting periods, during which children often remain at home without structured support.

“We’ve got a lot more autism-specific schools in Gauteng — but there are far fewer in other provinces like Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal, and parts of the Western Cape, with huge waiting lists,” she said.

**A**nother pressing challenge in terms of policies is the huge gap between remedial and special needs schools, which Selley described as the “missing space in education” for children who cannot cope in mainstream or remedial schools but do not require the highest level of special needs support.

Recent legislative changes, including the Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Act, have also introduced uncertainty for alternative education models such as homeschooling, a big change that will be brought in over time.

“The BELA act is pulling in homeschools, but I do feel that they need policy and guidance,” she said. “We’re trying to move into that gap a little bit, but obviously we have to fulfil what the Department of Education requires.”

CARE’s work does not end when learners leave the class-

room. The school operates vocational units focused on functional skills and community integration, preparing older learners for adulthood in a society that often excludes them.

Some learners transition to sheltered employment, family businesses, or assisted living facilities.

Selley said a small number of their learners move on to remedial schools, and even fewer to mainstream education or tertiary studies.

CARE has had one learner progress from the school to the University of the Witwatersrand.

Beyond structural challenges, Selley said that families and the school face persistent stigma.

“We’ve had families kicked out of where they stay — they are being kicked out of their estates or their block of flats because their children scream,” she said.

CARE is in a residential neighbourhood, and neighbours have repeatedly complained about the noise from the children during the meltdowns they have outside the school — sometimes using dehumanising language.

“Our children do scream because that’s their way of communicating,” Selley said. “Our neighbours hate the school. They complain, they call our children ‘farm animals’ — they’ve said ‘tape their mouths shut’. But we are not going to restrain our children.

The school employs approximately 20 therapists and maintains small class sizes, limiting them to eight learners per class.

While private institutions like CARE relieve pressure on the state, they cannot replace a fully resourced public system. Without meaningful reform, thousands of children will continue to fall through the cracks — unseen, unsupported, and unheard.

CARE is in the process of opening a remedial school aimed and adapted specifically for autistic learners, but Selley has highlighted that zoning restrictions to register it as an educational institution pose a challenge.

“South Africa has come far, and we do really have quality autism support in South Africa, but there’s not enough,” she said

## POST-SCHOOL TRAINING

# University or TVET? Inside South Africa's two-lane road to a career in engineering

LEVY MASITENG

For thousands of South African students each year, the road to a career in engineering does not run straight from matric to university. Instead, it zig-zags through waiting lists, funding shortfalls, rejection letters and, increasingly, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges.

As debates about the affordability, relevance and outcomes of higher education intensify, students who have moved between universities and TVET colleges are offering a ground-level view of how engineering education stacks up — especially when cost is factored in.

At the centre of the discussion is a growing realisation that engineering is not a single pathway, but a broad field entered through different institutional routes, each with its own strengths, weaknesses and price tag.

According to Varsitywise, universities and TVET colleges are built on distinct educational philosophies. Universities focus largely on academic and theoretical training and require a bachelor's pass in matric. Engineering degrees typically take three to four years to complete, often followed by postgraduate study or professional registration before graduates are fully employable.

TVET colleges, by contrast, emphasise hands-on, practical skills designed to prepare students for specific occupations. Many engineering programmes allow entry with Grade 9 or higher, widening access. Courses are generally shorter — between 18 months and three years — and many colleges offer mid-year intakes, reducing the waiting period faced by many matriculants applying to universities.

Students interviewed by *Inside Education* said cost plays a decisive role when choosing where to study, particularly when finances are tight.

The fee gap between universities and TVET colleges is stark. University engineering degrees can cost tens of thousands of rand a year, excluding accommodation, textbooks, transport and living expenses, although bursaries are available.

The University of the Free State (UFS), for example, estimates en-



**Multifaceted:** Engineering is not a single pathway, but a broad field entered through different institutional routes.

- Photo: Vecteezy.com

gineering course fees at R68,310 in the first year, R52,430 in the second year and R54,400 in the final year. Accommodation costs about R39,580 a year for a single room and R35,560 for a shared room.

By comparison, TVET colleges are widely regarded as more affordable. The government subsidises up to 80% of tuition, and NSFAS funding is available to qualifying students. Fees are often charged per module or trimester, making costs easier to manage for students without stable funding.

**P**rudence Matlhatsi Lubisi, a Mechanical Engineering student at Tshwane North College, said she found relief in the TVET system after years of uncertainty.

"I initially applied for Mechanical Engineering at university, but the response took too long, so I decided to go with TVET instead of delaying my studies," she said.

Lubisi said she spent four years at home after applying to university, unsure of her future. When she applied to a TVET college, she was accepted within two weeks.

Her course runs for 18 months. She pays R650 per module, taking four modules per trimester —



**Hands-on training.** Students at the Motheo TVET College in Bloemfontein in the Free State get to grips with the nuts and bolts of an engine.

- Photo: Supplied

R2,600 per trimester in total.

"Sometimes I use NSFAS, and other times I pay out of pocket," she said. "University fees are much higher, and it would be difficult to afford everything without support."

Her experience is increasingly common. Many students are moving from universities to TVET colleges after finding the cost, pace or academic demands of university education unsustainable.

Sfiso Mashaba, now studying Engineering Graphics and Design (N3) at Motheo TVET College

in Bloemfontein, began at UFS, where he was enrolled in a three-year BSc degree majoring in Physics and Chemistry.

"The course was tough, and the tuition and accommodation costs were difficult to manage," he said. After repeating some modules, Mashaba lost his bursary — a turning point.

"At varsity, if you lose funding, everything collapses at once," he said.

At Motheo, Mashaba discovered that some of his university modules could be recognised, al-

lowing him to complete just one remaining module before moving into practical training.

"If I had known I didn't have to spend three years repeating the same modules and delaying employment, I would have gone to Motheo much earlier," he said.

According to Motheo TVET College, annual tuition ranges from about R10,000 to R24,000, depending on the programme — a fraction of what Mashaba paid at university.

Beyond costs, students consistently pointed to differences in

# POST-SCHOOL TRAINING



**Building the future: South Africa can integrate both universities and TVET colleges to build an engineering workforce that is skilled, employable and economically relevant.** - Photo: Vecteezy.com



**Respected: The offices of the engineering faculty at the University of Pretoria.** - Photo: X

curriculum focus. University engineering programmes are often described as theory-heavy and research-oriented, while TVET programmes prioritise technical competence and practical exposure.

“At university, you theoretically know engineering,” Mashaba said. “At college, you actually do it.”

Another student added: “TVET is better because it deals with skills. When you have a skill, no one can take it away.”

A University of Pretoria student

framed it this way: “Engineering is a field with many technical departments, while an engineer is someone with the skills to perform technical tasks.”

For many, the appeal of TVET lies in how quickly those skills translate into employment. TVET qualifications are often directly linked to occupations such as electrician, fitter and turner, or IT technician, allowing graduates to enter the labour market — or start businesses — sooner than many

university graduates.

The government has also stepped up efforts to promote TVET colleges. Higher Education and Training Minister Buti Manamela recently rejected claims that the post-school system is in crisis, blaming an entrenched “university-only” mindset.

“The narrative that the only option after matric is university is creating a sense of crisis,” Manamela said while briefing the media on readiness for the 2026 academ-

lished pathways, including credit transfer, do exist — especially for students with older National Accredited Technical Education Diploma qualifications moving into universities of technology.

Researchers argued that stronger collaboration and clearer communication are needed.

Lubisi remains optimistic. “I do plan to further my studies at university after completing my TVET course,” she said. “Especially to grow academically and expand my opportunities.”

Beyond structural barriers, students said stigma continues to shape choices.

“We are controlled by the stigma of varsity life,” said one university student. “People think varsity means intelligence, but employers want experience and skills — something you get from TVET.”

TVET researcher Njabulo Mabaso echoed this sentiment in a Facebook post last year, arguing that many university programmes are no longer responsive to economic needs.

“The economy needs job creators more than job seekers,” Mabaso wrote. “With an N Diploma and a trade test, you can start a business, work in industry or lecture at a technical college.”

**H**is comments sparked debate. Some agreed, while others cautioned against over-simplification.

“It depends on the course,” wrote Emkay Mokoena. “You can’t compare TVET colleges and universities in healthcare.”

Odirile Moeketsi noted that many occupational programmes sit at NQF Level 4, making university progression unavoidable for certain careers.

Still, perceptions appear to be shifting.

“The problem is that some think TVET colleges are for failures,” wrote Kagisho Malese Chukudu. “But skills allow you to contribute as an employee or entrepreneur.”

What emerges from students’ experiences is not a simple contest between TVET colleges and universities, but a complex ecosystem where cost, time, skills and opportunity intersect.

For students running out of time, funding or patience, TVET colleges often offer a second chance — or a faster route into engineering.

“If you can’t afford university and don’t have funding, TVET becomes your option,” Mashaba said. “And it’s not a bad one.”

With government urging a shift away from a “university-only” mindset and students sharing their lived realities, the real question may no longer be which pathway is better, but how South Africa can better integrate both to build an engineering workforce that is skilled, employable and economically relevant.

ic year.

He noted that South Africa’s post-school education and training system has about 535,000 planned and funded spaces across universities, TVET colleges, community colleges, skills programmes and workplace-based learning.

“We should not fall into the trap of training 1,000 lawyers simply because there is demand,” he said, calling such thinking “populism rather than rational planning.”

Manamela insisted TVET colleges are “not residual options” but a central pillar in addressing unemployment and skills shortages.

Despite these endorsements, challenges remain — particularly for students hoping to move between TVET colleges and universities.

Research presented at the 2018 Education and New Developments conference in Budapest highlighted persistent articulation problems between the two systems. The study, by Bruce Graham, D.B. Lortan and Savathrie Maistry, identified “epistemic injustice” in relationships between TVET colleges and higher education institutions.

Limited understanding of articulation pathways by staff often gives students false expectations about progression. However, the research confirmed that estab-

## EDUCATION NEWS

## SA's roads become deadly avenues of grief as scholar transport crisis deepens



**Overloaded:** Metro police in Nelson Mandela Bay arrested a taxi driver transporting 40 passengers — most of them schoolchildren. - Photo: Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality

## LEVY MASITENG

In just the opening weeks of the 2026 school year, dozens of families have buried children who never made it to their desks — learners whose lives were cut short while using scholar transport meant to guarantee access to education, not end it.

From Gauteng to Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal and the North West, a trail of fatal crashes, injuries and shocking safety violations has once again exposed a scholar transport system in deep crisis.

On 19 January 2026, tragedy struck Vanderbijlpark when a scholar transport vehicle was involved in a devastating crash that claimed 14 lives, including 12 pupils and their driver. Survivors were rushed to hospital with serious injuries, but two later succumbed.

The incident sent shockwaves across the country and reignited painful memories of previous disasters authorities had vowed would “never happen again”.

A few days later in KwaZulu-Natal, nine children were injured when a taxi transporting learners collided with a bakkie in

Durban's Glenwood area. Shortly afterwards, another scholar transport vehicle lost control and crashed into a tree near Sarnia Primary School in Pinetown West, injuring nine more pupils.

Last year, in August, a seven-year-old Grade 2 learner from Muhluri Primary School in Limpopo was knocked down and killed moments after alighting from a scholar transport bus in the Vhembe West Education District.

According to reports, the child was struck by another bus while attempting to cross the road and was declared dead at the scene.

“The death of a learner is always tragic to the family and a great loss to the nation,” Limpopo Education MEC Mavhungu Lerule-Ramakhanya said. “I am deeply saddened by the untimely death of yet another learner in an accident. My thoughts are with the family and the learners during this difficult time.”

Social workers were dispatched to provide psychosocial support to the grieving family and school community — a familiar intervention that has become routine as scholar transport fatalities continue to mount.

These deaths are not anomalies. They form part of a grim pattern that has haunted South Africa's learner transport system for years.

In 2024, Statistics South Africa reported that more than 800 pupils were killed in scholar transport-related accidents between 2018 and 2022. Despite repeated policy reforms, safety campaigns and enforcement blitzes, the carnage has not slowed.

Political parties have also raised alarm. The African National Congress (ANC) recently acknowledged that since the start of the 2026 school year, the country has witnessed “harrowing incidents” that have “shattered futures”.

“Our observation of the industry, including the taxi sector, has revealed serious shortcomings — unroadworthy vehicles, overloading, non-compliance with the law, reckless and negligent driving, and disrespect towards commuters and other road users,” the party said.

Each January, provincial governments roll out highly publicised road safety campaigns, vehicle inspections and compliance

drives. Critics argue, however, that these interventions are reactive, short-lived and fail to address the year-round reality faced by learners.

South Africa's scholar transport system operates through two parallel models — government-subsidised transport and private scholar transport. Both are governed by the same road safety laws but are marked by starkly different accountability structures.

Under the government-subsidised model, provincial departments of Transport or Education contract operators to ferry qualifying learners to and from school. The Department of Education does not own a fleet of buses; instead outsourcing the service to private operators through formal agreements.

Learners who qualify for subsidies are identified by school principals and school governing bodies based on criteria such as distance from school — often five kilometres or more per trip — poverty levels, and the absence of nearby schooling options, according to the Gauteng Department of Education.

Once approved, the depart-

ment pays operators directly for services rendered. Operators are required to be formally contracted, licensed, insured, roadworthy and fully compliant with legal requirements.

Despite this framework, investigations — including a South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) inquiry in the North West — have found that weak oversight, late payments, corruption and the use of unroadworthy vehicles have severely undermined learner safety.

Alongside the subsidised system exists a vast private scholar transport market, used by families who do not qualify for government assistance or who seek more flexible arrangements.

In these cases, parents or guardians pay drivers directly, entering into private agreements with operators. Fees are usually charged monthly, per term or annually, often covering 11 or 12 months to help operators manage fuel, maintenance and insurance costs.

While these agreements are private, operators remain legally required to comply with transport laws.

# EDUCATION NEWS

Enforcement authorities warn that many private operators function outside the law — without valid operating licences, Professional Driving Permits (PrDPs), insurance or roadworthy vehicles — placing learners at serious risk.

Local scholar transport operator Simon Mabaso from Hammanskraal said competition and affordability heavily influence pricing in the informal market.

“When charging parents, I usually look at my competitors so I can beat them, because this is a business,” Mabaso said. “I have two cars — one for local schools and one for schools in town. For local, I charge R250 per child per month, and for long distance, R350.”

Authorities stress that private payment does not exempt operators from the law. Whether subsidised by government or paid by parents, every scholar transport vehicle must be licensed, roadworthy, insured and driven by a properly vetted driver.

**A**s deaths continue to mount, officials warn that confusing affordability with legality may be costing children their lives.

In Gauteng, the Department of Roads and Transport intensified enforcement under its Zero Tolerance Campaign. Between 19 and 25 January 2026, the Gauteng Transport Inspectorate issued 176 handwritten notices, recorded 216 e-force infringements, impounded 28 vehicles, discontinued 33 for defects, and arrested three drivers for fraud and reckless driving.

Seven scholar transport buses and two Toyota Avanzas were impounded in Benoni alone for

non-compliance with roadworthiness and operating licence requirements.

At the Jabulani Testing Station in Soweto, mandatory pre-test inspections conducted between 21 and 23 January painted an even darker picture: of 51 scholar transport vehicles inspected, 48 failed. Only three passed.

Inspectors found torn seats concealed under blankets, non-functional seatbelts, cracked windscreens, bald tyres with tread below 1mm, missing wheel nuts, defective door handles, filthy engine compartments, and drivers operating without valid licences or PrDPs.

“These results are unacceptable,” said Gauteng MEC for Roads and Transport Kedibone Diale-Tlabela. “The fact that 94% of vehicles tested failed to meet basic roadworthiness requirements demonstrates the grave danger our children face daily. We will not allow this to continue.”

She also cautioned against shutdowns and intimidation. “If you cannot meet minimum legal requirements to safely transport learners, you have no business operating in this space. Our learners’ lives are not negotiable.”

In KwaZulu-Natal, law enforcement uncovered equally disturbing violations.

At a roadblock near Apollo Secondary School in Umhlatuzana, police found 29 children crammed into a 16-seater vehicle driven by an unlicensed 22-year-old. Fifteen scholar transport drivers were found contravening the National Road Traffic Act, with offences ranging from overloading to expired or absent PrDPs.

Umhlatuzana Community Policing Forum chairperson Phillip Hiralall said authorities had no choice but to act.

“The number of accidents involving scholar transport in recent weeks is alarming. We cannot wait for more children to die before acting,” he said.

In response, more than 500 scholar transport operators gathered outside the Gauteng Department of Roads and Transport head office in Johannesburg, protesting delays in issuing operating licences.

Diale-Tlabela acknowledged information gaps and application challenges but issued a stern warning.

“The department is willing to work with operators who genuinely want to regularise their operations. However, compliance is not optional,” she said. “Scholar transport is a safety-critical service, and the safety and dignity of our learners remain non-negotiable.”

**M**ore than 1,000 operating licence application forms were issued at the engagement, along with guidance on required documentation. The department said the initiative aims to improve transparency and access. Each application costs R600.

Beyond enforcement, a damning SAHRC report has laid bare the systemic failures undermining scholar transport.

In January 2026, the commission released findings from an inquiry into the North West Province, concluding that widespread rights violations in the scholar transport programme had been substantiated.

The SAHRC found that thousands of qualifying learners were denied transport, forced to walk long distances, arrive late or drop out entirely. Vehicles were routinely overloaded and unsafe, and drivers were inconsistently vetted.

“These failures violate learners’ constitutional rights to basic education, equality, dignity and safety,” the commission said, noting that impoverished and disabled learners bear the brunt.

The report detailed harrowing testimony from van Rooi, guardian to a child referred to as “baby Nino”.

Van Rooi told the commission that the child lost a leg after being struck by a vehicle following an eight-hour scholar transport delay in the Lichtenburg district. Despite the amputation, the same bus continued transporting the learner without supervision or assistance.

“Following the accident, the same bus continued to transport the child, who now uses crutches. The learner boards and alights without assistance, placing crutches outside the bus and climbing in with her remaining leg. Safety conditions and transport arrangements have not improved,” the report stated.

The North West Treasury, represented by the head of department, NI Kunene, said the scholar transport budget had been increased and ring-fenced from R300 million to R450 million. However, he stressed that additional funding requests must be supported by detailed business cases.

He criticised departments for submitting generic funding requests without data and said ev-

idence of efforts to reduce inefficiencies was required. Kunene undertook to clarify whether formal submissions for additional funding had been received.

The commission issued strict directives, ordering progress reports within 60 days, the establishment of a complaints call centre within 90 days, and a comprehensive policy overhaul within 180 days.

**E**xperts warn that without sustained enforcement, proper budgeting and accountability, deaths will continue.

A 2025 academic study by Babra Duri, Tracey J.M. McKay and Ashley Gunter found widespread reckless driving, corruption, mismanagement of funds and weak oversight — exposing a gap between policy and reality.

“The study found widespread reports of reckless driving, unroadworthy and inappropriate vehicles, and traffic accidents involving scholar transport. In addition, issues of crime, corruption and mismanagement leave disadvantaged learners stranded, vulnerable or dead,” the study states.

For grieving parents, policy reviews offer little comfort.

As South Africa mourns yet another group of learners lost on the road, a painful question remains: how many more children must die before scholar transport becomes what it was meant to be — a bridge to education, not a path to the grave?

Until compliance is enforced not only in January but every day of the year, learner transport will remain one of the country’s most urgent — and deadly — public failures.



**Safety first: Until compliance is enforced not only in January but every day of the year, learner transport will remain one of the country’s most urgent — and deadly — public failures.**  
- Photo: Supplied

## HIGHER EDUCATION

## Anxiety, debt and exclusion: The hidden cost of starting university in South Africa

CHARMAINE NDLELA

The transition into higher education is often framed as an exciting milestone — a step toward independence, success and a better life. Yet for many students in South Africa, the academic year begins not with celebration, but with anxiety and uncertainty.

As universities open for a new year, students are confronted with multiple pressures at once: complex online registration systems, academic exclusions, NSFAS rejections, accommodation shortages and financial strain. For many, particularly those fresh out of high school, it can be difficult to navigate these demands without clear guidance.

For first-year students, registration is often their first encounter with university bureaucracy. What should be a supported process can become chaotic and isolating. Students frequently turn to Student Representative Councils (SRCs) for help, expecting advocacy and practical support. But many report that SRCs are most visible during registration, yet ineffective, and at times exploitative, when students are most vulnerable.

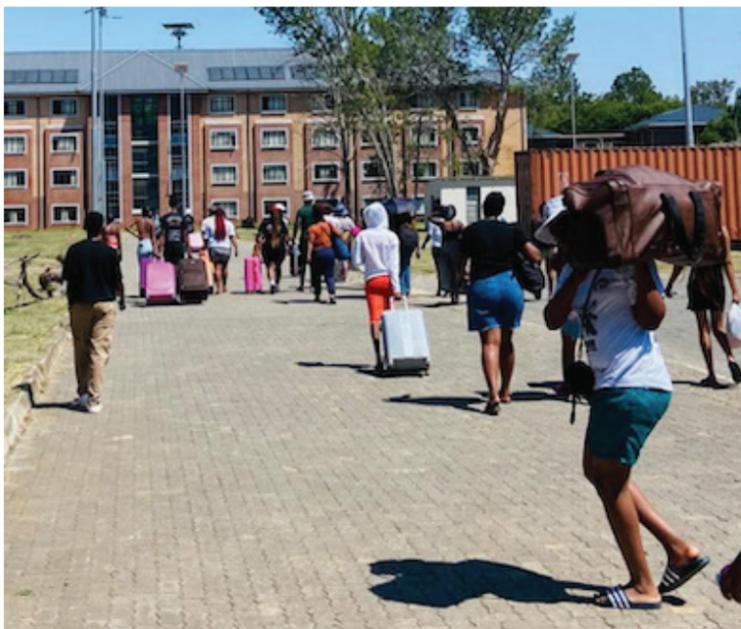
This is particularly concerning for newcomers who are unfamiliar with procedures and still adjusting to campus life. Universities should monitor how support is provided during registration and ensure students are protected from abuse, gatekeeping and neglect.

For many students, university is not only personal hope, but a family investment. Those from disadvantaged households often stretch bursary allowances to help support siblings at home, adding pressure to already fragile circumstances.

Securing funding, accommodation, food and registration simultaneously can take a serious toll on mental health. Increasingly, students are airing their frustration online, warning that their academic journeys may be derailed before they properly begin.

One Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) student, appealing an academic exclusion, asked anonymously whether death certificates could be used to support their case. Another expressed panic after waiting months for NSFAS academic and financial data to be processed. At Rhodes University, students reported delays in receiving required propensity letters, a crucial document for NSFAS appeals.

The emotional weight of these



*New beginnings: Students starting a new phase of their lives at universities and colleges need support and guidance at a time when they are vulnerable. - Photos: Supplied/Facebook*

experiences is evident. Some students are expected to prepare for supplementary exams while coping with rejection letters, financial uncertainty, and depression. As one student put it bluntly: “Schooling is a scam.”

For students without funding, the struggle extends beyond academics. Hunger, debt, and unstable housing are daily realities. Many attend lectures on empty stomachs, spend nights hungry while roommates cook, and endure the shame and pain of poverty in silence.

A University of the Free State (UFS) student asked how others had survived without funding, and admitted to deep depression and uncertainty about whether to continue studying. Another said that they would rather “die in Bloemfontein trying” than stay home without hope.

Accommodation challenges further worsen the transition. Late NSFAS payments, mid-year defunding, unsafe private housing, and limited residence spaces have plagued students for years,

with conditions seemingly deteriorating annually. Landlords take advantage of vulnerable students who are desperate for accommodation, but these cases of sexual assault are sometimes not reported by students because they fear they will be left homeless and cannot afford court procedures.

Students across institutions, including TUT, UFS, Rhodes, University of Fort Hare, Wits, Boston College, and others report administrative delays, unclear communication, and systems that prioritise fees over academic progress. Some students are unable to register due to outstanding debt or missing documentation, while others face the reality of full modules, forcing them to extend degrees beyond the funding period allowed by NSFAS.

One student shared how a full year module added two extra years to what was meant to be a three-year degree — a devastating outcome when funding is scarce.

Speaking to *Inside Education*, Bonolo Maphanga a returning

student at Boston College studying for a diploma in business management, shared how stressful registration has strained her academic preparations.

“I had to come to Boston College offices because when I tried it online, it needs some form of a payment but I’m funded by a bursary so I had to come here to sort it out because I don’t have any form of payment for myself.”

Maphanga added that she lives in another province and had to borrow money for transport to come to Johannesburg to sort out her application. “Now I have to take another bus going back home because I don’t have accommodation or anyone I know to accommodate me until February,” she said.

The psychological impact of this transition cannot be ignored. According to the Council on Higher Education, a significant number of students fail to complete their studies, with dropout rates particularly high in the first year. Mental health challenges, financial stress, and lack of support

are major contributing factors.

While universities do offer support services — such as counselling centres, peer intervention programmes, food kitchens, and meal assistance schemes — many students are either unaware of these services or unable to access them in time.

Despite record numbers of 345,000 learners who achieved Bachelor’s passes in Matric 2025, university capacity remains limited.

Higher Education Deputy Director-General Sam Zungu says universities only have space for about 230,000 students, leaving over 100,000 students who can’t be accommodated at public universities.

The University of Johannesburg reported 450,000 applicants for only 11,200 spaces for the 2026 academic year.

This leaves thousands of hopeful students without a placement, reinforcing inequality, frustration and dreams shattered.

An unplanned gap year often leads to depression and anxiety, as individuals may feel stuck, unproductive, and uncertain about their future. Spending long periods at home without clear goals or structure can result in frustration, low self-esteem, and a sense of hopelessness, which may eventually manifest as negative or unhealthy behaviour.

Education remains one of South Africa’s most powerful tools against poverty and unemployment. But for it to truly serve its purpose, students must be supported not only in classrooms, but through compassionate systems that recognise their realities.

Universities should actively listen to student concerns and involve them in shaping policies that affect their academic experience.

These approaches ensure that while time may bring clarity, universities actively shorten the distance between confusion and success by meeting students halfway.

Student support, in any form, brings hope to those who feel hopeless and provides a clearer understanding of the academic process. A mind that races without answers grows weak and exhausted, but proper guidance restores confidence, focus, and the motivation to succeed.

Education should empower, not exhaust. Until students are met with real support, fairness, and dignity, higher education will continue to fail those it promises to uplift.

## EDUCATION NEWS

# Competition Commission will prosecute over excessive uniform prices

*Trouble coming for those who do not comply with Commission guidelines and the Competition Act*

JOHNATHAN PAOLI

The Competition Commission has warned that it is preparing to prosecute schools and uniform suppliers that continue to flout competition guidelines, after more than a decade of complaints from parents about excessive prices driven by exclusive supply agreements.

“When we find prices are excessive, this is often also coupled with the finding that the school would have had an exclusive supply agreement with a particular supplier,” said Competition Commission analyst and legal secretary Mpho Moate.

While the Commission is unable to set or publish a benchmark price for school uniforms, Moate said the volume and consistency of complaints leave little doubt about the underlying problem.

Between 2020 and 2025, the Commission received 490 complaints related to school uniforms and learning materials and resolved 465.

Moate said complaints continue to flow in, showing the persistence of the problem.

Parents have raised suspicions that some schools may receive financial benefits from preferred suppliers, but Moate said that the Commission has not found evidence to substantiate those claims.

In response to widespread complaints, the Commission published the Procurement of School Uniform and Learning Material Guidelines in 2021.

The guidelines promote pro-competitive procurement practices and are aimed at school governing bodies, parents and schools.

They discourage exclusive supply arrangements entered into without transparent tender processes and encourage the appointment of multiple suppliers and the use of generic uniform items.

The guidelines emerged from a 2017 investigation into numerous schools and uniform suppliers for potential abuse of dominance and restrictive vertical practices.

The investigation found that long-term exclusive agreements substantially lessened competition and forced parents to pay inflated prices.

According to the Commission, the guidelines have had a measurable impact.

A national survey conducted in 2022 found that almost 90%



**Clampdown:** The Competition Commission is determined to put an end to the unfair pricing of school uniforms. - Photo: X

of participating public and independent schools were aware of the guidelines, with many indicating that they had begun implementing them.

However, some schools cited challenges such as the voluntary nature of the guidelines, lack of awareness, weak enforcement and limited capacity.

Monitoring compliance remains a major hurdle, given the large number of schools across the country.

To address this, the Commission is developing a new monitoring tool in collaboration with the Department of Basic Education.

The tool will collect data directly from schools on uniform suppliers, prices and procurement practices.

“We are hoping that we will issue this tool sometime this year. We

are also banking on the relationship and the collaboration that we have with the Department of Basic Education to assist us in this regard,” Moate said.

The Commission said the data gathered will help identify non-compliance, excessive pricing and the exclusion of small and medium suppliers from the uniform market.

To date, the Commission has avoided punitive measures against schools, preferring settlements and undertakings over litigation.

Moate said this approach was taken to avoid dragging schools into costly legal battles.

In 2017, the Commission reached settlement agreements with several prominent independent schools and large uniform

suppliers, requiring them to comply with the Competition Act and the guidelines.

More recently, public schools that were the subject of complaints have been asked to sign undertakings committing to limit supplier contracts to five years or less and to follow competitive procurement processes in future.

Schools are also encouraged to reduce the number of unique or branded items on their uniform lists in favour of generic items that parents can buy from multiple retailers.

However, the Commission says patience is wearing thin.

“Given the number of outreaches and initiatives that we have done with the schools and within the school uniform market, unfortunately, the Commission now is at a

point where we are going to prosecute schools and suppliers who do not comply with the guidelines as well as the Competition Act,” Moate said.

He added that in at least one or two cases, parties that previously settled with the Commission appear not to be adhering to their commitments.

The Commission stressed that it does not regulate prices directly, but that competitive markets are the most effective way to bring prices down.

Parents, school governing bodies and suppliers are urged to report suspected anti-competitive conduct via the Commission’s WhatsApp line or official complaint channels.

Ultimately, the Commission said, affordability depends on collective action.

## EDUCATION NEWS

## eThekweni library earns global recognition for STEM initiative

JOHNATHAN PAOLI

The world has taken notice of a public library in eThekweni that is quietly reshaping the futures of hundreds of young people from under-resourced communities.

Woodhurst Public Library, located close to Chatsworth, has been named one of four global winners of the 19th EIFL Public Library Innovation Award for STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics), in recognition of a grassroots programme that is encouraging children to imagine themselves as future scientists, engineers, coders and innovators.

EIFL — Electronic Information for Libraries — is an international non-profit organisation that works with libraries to improve access to knowledge, support digital inclusion, and strengthen their role in education, innovation and community development.

At the heart of the accolade is the library's STEM Makers digital skills programme, a hands-on initiative that has sparked interest in science and technology careers among more than 90% of participating learners.

Delivered through bi-monthly coding and robotics workshops, as well as popular school holiday programmes, the initiative has reached 450 learners between 2023 and 2025 across nine branch libraries in eThekweni.

The award places Woodhurst Public Library among a select group of public libraries worldwide recognised for innovation in education and community development, with many celebrating it as a remarkable achievement for a local institution serving communities grappling with poverty, unemployment and limited access to quality STEM education.

Librarian Nomalungelo Ngcobo, head of Woodhurst Public Library, described the programme as born out of a clear and urgent need.

"The eThekweni municipality spans urban, peri-urban and rural areas, and libraries serve diverse middle-class and low-income communities. These communities share socio-economic challenges experienced across the municipal area, such as high youth unemployment, limited access to quality education and low household incomes," Ngcobo explained.

She notes that quality STEM education remains especially scarce in many of these areas, making public libraries critical access points.

"Libraries that offer free access to computers and wi-fi serve as vital access points for digital tools and ed-



ucational support," she said.

Recognising this gap, Woodhurst Public Library began experimenting with ways to introduce children to science and technology in an accessible, engaging way, even when computers and sophisticated equipment were limited.

"Recognising the gap in STEM exposure, we introduced robotics activities and unplugged coding — in which children learn about computer programming through practical games, without using computers — and robotics activities. We followed up with the formation of STEM clubs and makerspaces in branch libraries. These initiatives are designed to make Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics relatable and hands-on," Ngcobo said.

A defining feature of the STEM Makers programme is its emphasis on practical, low-cost and playful learning.

While the libraries do provide tablets, laptops, microbit kits and free wi-fi, many activities rely on recyclable and everyday materials such as cardboard, plastic bottles and scrap electronics.

Ngcobo described this approach as not only making the programme financially sustainable, but also teaching learners that innovation does not require expensive resources.

Educational activities include unplugged coding and robotics sessions that introduce computational thinking without reliance on advanced devices, scientific experiments and project-based learning, maths games, model-making, and a range of innovation challenges designed to strengthen problem-solving skills.

Librarians themselves are trained in unplugged coding before the launch of each programme, ensuring that the initiative builds capacity within the library system, not just among learners.

Participation extends beyond the library walls, with learners taking part in science fairs and exhibitions, attending guest talks and workshops, and going on field trips to science museums and research centres.

Reading and research workshops further strengthen literacy and scientific inquiry, reinforcing the idea that STEM and learning go hand in hand.

A key driver of the programme's success has been strategic partnerships with academic institutions, non-profits and industry-linked initiatives.

Woodhurst Public Library works closely with the University of KwaZulu-Natal, whose students volunteer to facilitate workshops, as well

**Hands-on: Learners gather at Woodhurst Public Library for a STEM presentation.**

- Photo: Supplied

**Making a difference: The launch of the STEM Makers Programme at Woodhurst Public Library.**

- Photo: Supplied

as the Eskom Expo for Young Scientists, South Africa's national science fair, and Tangible Africa, a non-profit organisation that develops systems for teaching coding through play.

"With these partners, we can create inclusive, engaging environments that foster curiosity, creativity, and lifelong learning; ultimately demystifying science and mathematics and empowering youth to pursue STEM careers and contribute meaningfully to their communities," Ngcobo said.

The partnerships also expose learners to role models in science and technology, helping them visualise career pathways that may once have seemed impossible.

Ngcobo praised the impact of the programme as already visible, with teachers reporting improved academic performance among learners participating in coding clubs, while children themselves speak of growing confidence and new ways of thinking.

Holiday programmes have proven especially popular.

In April last year, Woodhurst Public Library hosted a three-day holiday programme that attracted 90 children who conducted STEM experiments and learned basic coding skills.

At Klaarwater Public Library, more than 70 children took part in

a STEM programme focused on building structures to inspire innovation in science and engineering.

According to the organisers, these sessions often serve as a learner's first meaningful exposure to technology, and for many, the moment when science and maths shift from being intimidating school subjects to exciting possibilities.

The EIFL Public Library Innovation Award for STEAM recognises libraries that use creativity and community-driven approaches to promote science and technology learning.

For Woodhurst Public Library, the award validates years of patient work in under-resourced communities, often with limited budgets but abundant commitment.

The recognition also comes at a pivotal moment.

With youth unemployment remaining one of South Africa's most pressing challenges, early exposure to STEM careers is increasingly seen as essential for long-term economic inclusion.

Ngcobo says the programme is already laying the groundwork for expansion.

"The programme is ongoing, and participants are again busy with prototypes to enter into the Eskom Expo for Young Scientists competition. It is generating valuable information for scaling up to other libraries, and there are plans to introduce STEM programmes in all of eThekweni municipality's 92 public libraries soon," she said.

Beyond trophies and global acclaim, she praised the success of the STEM Makers programme for prompting a broader rethinking of what public libraries can be.

No longer just spaces for books and quiet study, libraries like Woodhurst are positioning themselves as active hubs of learning, experimentation and opportunity.

By meeting children where they are, both socially and economically, and by using play, creativity and curiosity as entry points, the library is helping young people look beyond their immediate circumstances and imagine futures in science, technology and innovation.

In doing so, Woodhurst Public Library has demonstrated that world-class innovation does not have to come from well-funded laboratories or elite institutions.

Sometimes, it begins in a local library, with cardboard, curiosity and the belief that every child deserves the chance to dream big.

## EDUCATION NEWS

## IEC steps up youth-focused drive to rebuild voter participation and democratic culture

JOHNATHAN PAOLI

The Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) is intensifying its efforts to directly engage young people, positioning youth participation as central to the future health of the country's democracy amid long-term declines in voter turnout and growing political disillusionment among younger citizens.

Speaking to *Inside Education*, IEC deputy CEO Mowethu Mosery said the Commission had deliberately shifted its focus towards schools, universities and youth outside formal education, recognising that first-time voters and future voters are overwhelmingly found in this demographic.

"Young people carry the bulk of your first-time voters. Your new voters are in this age group, and your future voters are also in this age group. For us, talking to South African citizens before they reach voting age, and as they enter voting age, is critical to encourage continued participation in our democracy," Mosery said.

The IEC's youth strategy was anchored in a broad civic education programme that ran from April to September, deliberately timed to avoid clashing with end-of-year examinations.

While the programme is not new, Mosery said the Commission had decided to use the non-election year to deepen engagement rather than rely on short, campaign-style interventions closer to voting periods.

"We said, since it's not an election year, let's give ourselves sufficient time to interact with the youth," he said, describing the initiative as an opportunity to build a sustained democratic culture rather than chase last-minute registrations.

A key pillar of the strategy is the School Democracy Programme, rolled out in partnership with the Department of Basic Education.

The IEC works with schools to reinforce civic education already embedded in the curriculum, covering the Constitution, national symbols, governance structures and the role of citizens in a constitutional democracy.

Beyond classroom content, learners are exposed to mock voting exercises, giving them a tangible sense of how elections work.

Mosery said the experience had



proven unexpectedly powerful.

"When we went into schools, the young people below the voting age got to go through a mock voting process. Having ink on their thumbs was all the excitement. They were taking selfies and saying the experience was good for them," he said.

At tertiary institutions, the approach shifts towards debate and discussion.

The IEC encourages open forums on topical political issues, creating space for students to express frustration with the state while also engaging with democratic processes.

"There were robust views and robust exchanges of ideas. Matters of discomfort around the state and the work of the state were voiced, but overall, there was enthusiasm. Young people appreciated having a platform to share their views," Mosery said.

The Commission is also extending its reach beyond schools and universities to include out-of-school youth and young professionals entering the job market.

Mosery said this group often falls through the cracks of traditional civic education, despite being politically affected by decisions on jobs, service delivery and economic



**Democracy in action: The IEC Free State team conducted voter education and on-site registration at Ntsu Secondary School in the Dihlabeng Municipality. - Photos: X/IEC**

As a result, the IEC has consciously shifted away from negative or fear-based messaging, instead focusing on positive, action-oriented communication aimed at rebuilding trust.

"Our messaging needs to create hope. When you make a statement, it must be intended to encourage and call people to action," Mosery said, adding that social and youth activism are increasingly important entry points for democratic engagement.

The Commission is also adapting its methods to account for differences in access between urban and rural youth.

While overall participation trends are similar, Mosery noted that access to information and digital platforms creates uneven opportunities.

"In areas with better access to information, online services are more prevalent," he said.

This has informed the IEC's push for online registration tools and mobile registration units, which it refers to as "mutation stations", to reach young people who are digitally connected as well as those in more remote communities.

Looking ahead, the IEC is exploring further electoral innovations, including expanded use of technology and long-term discussions around forms of e-voting, while emphasising that transparency and trust must remain paramount.

For now, Mosery said the immediate task is social rather than technical.

policy.

Underlying the IEC's strategy is an acknowledgement that youth voter participation has been on a downward trend for more than a decade.

Research conducted by the Commission points less to apathy and more to disillusionment and lack of trust in politics.

"We see that it points more to disillusionment than opportunity. Many young people want nothing to do with politics, but if you engage them, you find they do want to do something; they're just not sure whether voting is that something," Mosery said.

## EDUCATION NEWS

# Gauteng school crisis: How thousands of learners started 2026 without classrooms to go to

THAPELO MOLEFE

**W**hen Gauteng schools opened on 14 January 2026, thousands of learners had nowhere to go. By the third week of term, approximately 2,700 children remained without placements, a crisis concentrated in Johannesburg East and Ekurhuleni that left parents exhausted, children distressed, and serious questions about the province's capacity to educate its youth.

Before schools opened, the Gauteng Department of Education reported a 98.5% placement rate, but the remaining 4,858 unplaced learners represented thousands of families facing an uncertain start to the academic year. Johannesburg East alone struggled to place over 1,000 Grade 8 learners.

As the crisis unfolded, rumours circulated suggesting foreign nationals were being prioritised over South African learners. Gauteng Education MEC Matome Chiloane dismissed the claims as "misleading and unfounded", warning that any school or official found contravening admissions policies would face consequences. "No school is permitted to prioritise foreign national learners ahead of South African learners," he said.

Writing in the *Daily Maverick*, Dr Nathan Ferreira, a lecturer in the Department of Inclusive Education at the College of Education, University of South Africa, said: "The GDE cites 'high-pressure zones' as the root cause, but critics argue that chronic underinvestment and poor forecasting perpetuate this annual crisis. Township schools are already overcrowded and cannot absorb the influx of learners from informal settlements and new housing developments."

For affected families, the weeks of uncertainty came at a steep cost: lost learning time, strained finances, and shattered trust in a system meant to serve them.

Boitumelo Morobane, a Krugersdorp mother, followed every step the system required. She applied during the official July 2025 window, carefully selecting two high schools in her area. One was a feeder school linked to her child's primary school, a choice that should have made placement straightforward.



**Warning:** Gauteng Education MEC Matome Chiloane said reports that foreign nationals were being prioritised over South African learners were "misleading and unfounded" and that any school or official found contravening admissions policies would face consequences.

- Photo: X

Months passed without any response from either school. When Morobane contacted the district office seeking clarity, officials sent her from "pillar to post" with no resolution. A placement notification eventually arrived, but for a school she had never applied to, one she describes as having a troubled reputation.

"We raise our kids to become better citizens, but instead our government pushes them to be mixed with ill-mannered kids," she said. "This government has failed in everything they do."

**A** Fourways father who works at the Johannesburg Central SAPS found himself in a similar nightmare. Despite applying early for his child to attend Fourways High School, the nearest school to both their home and his workplace, the system placed the child at Northriding High School instead.

During the first week of term, determined to find answers, he woke at 2am and began a frustrat-

ing journey through the bureaucracy. He moved from office to office, only to be told at the head office that officials could merely check the system and confirm what he already knew.

"We applied very, very early," he said. "But they decided, no, we are not placing your child there. We are placing your child at Northriding High School."

Officials told him Fourways High was full and offered only one option: wait 10 days for possible movement on the waiting list, with no guarantees.

The distant placement created impossible logistics for the working father. A spot at Fourways High would have allowed a simple morning routine, dropping his child at school before heading to Central SAPS. The Northriding placement shattered that possibility entirely.

"Now you find that the school at which the child is placed is far from where you are staying," he explained.

"We want the child to be placed

nearer to where we are staying. Because it's easy for us. When we wake up in the morning, we just drop the child off, then we come to work."

The department's inflexibility left him exasperated.

"They don't want to understand. That's the challenge that we are facing," he said.

"Parents end up taking the children to the private schools. What is that? We can't afford private schools."

**S**ystem errors compounded the crisis for some families. A Linksfield Ridge parent had relocated in October 2025 and promptly updated her proof of residence in November, ensuring the department had her correct address on file.

The system ignored the update entirely, placing her child at a school in Kempton Park, a 60km daily round trip that would consume hours and money the family does not have.

"I uploaded my proof of res-

idence already in November. That's when I got it from my landlord because I moved in October," she said.

"I'm not going to drive 60kms a day to Kempton Park to go and drop my son at school."

When she attempted to resolve the issue, officials offered no assistance. Instead, she encountered hostility that left her feeling victimised by the very system meant to help her.

"We are experiencing bullying because when we do talk to them, they don't respond to us very well," she said.

For a Bedfordview mother, the crisis arrived without warning. Her son had been living with her father in Margate, KwaZulu-Natal, until he fell ill, and the child had to relocate suddenly to Gauteng. There had been no time for a standard application.

Hoping for assistance, she visited the department's Marshalltown office, only to discover that they only handle just Grade 1 and Grade 8 placements. For her son's

# EDUCATION NEWS



Space problem: Critics argue that chronic underinvestment and poor forecasting perpetuate this annual crisis. - Photo: X

grade, officials directed her to the Benoni district office, a journey requiring two taxi fares each way.

In a struggling economy, the transport costs alone were crippling, and that was before uniforms, stationery, and other school expenses.

"The economy is bad, bad, bad," she said. "You don't have that kind of money to be taking one taxi to another taxi, coming back. And you still have to buy uniforms, stationery, all that stuff."

Phone calls to district offices went unanswered, leaving her trapped in uncertainty while precious time slipped away.

"They don't answer their phones. They don't get back to you. And time is going. We need to place him in a school."

Other parents found themselves caught between institutions, with schools and district offices pointing fingers at each other while children remained in limbo.

One parent described arriving at the district office after being turned away from her chosen school. Officials told her to return to the school and request documentation. At the school, administrators dismissed her, saying they could do nothing without proof from the district.

"I got to the school. They dismissed me. They told me I need to come here," she said. "If I don't have any proof of these people saying I must go to the school, there's nothing they can do for me."

At Ekurhuleni district offices during the first weeks of term, the human cost of the crisis was impossible to ignore. Learners in full school uniform stood in queues alongside their parents, ready for classrooms they could not enter.

Some had arrived at their assigned schools on the first day, only to be told their applications had not been processed correctly. Now they waited in administrative limbo while classmates began the year without them.

"We went to school, and they said we must come here to the district because the school application wasn't submitted through," one uniformed student said.

"I feel very sad because some of the learners in my class are being educated, while we are falling behind."

Another learner captured the helplessness many families experienced.

"Time is moving. But we must try and try and try."

Throughout the crisis, Gauteng Education Department spokesperson Steve Mabona acknowledged the pressure on the system

while defending the department's efforts. The fundamental problem, he maintained, was infrastructure.

Gauteng simply did not have enough schools and classroom space for everyone seeking placement.

*"It's an inconvenience, yes. But we also need to acknowledge, and parents need to acknowledge, that we are pressured in Gauteng."*

*Gauteng Department of Education spokesperson Steve Mabona*

"Our challenge is capacity. We need to make sure that we have enough schools, enough spaces where we will be in a position to

accommodate learners," he said.

The pressure was concentrated in predictable hotspots: Ekurhuleni North, Ekurhuleni South, and Johannesburg East, with Tembisa, Kempton Park, Ivory Park, Midrand, and parts of Alexandra bearing the heaviest burden.

Mabona explained that the 10-day waiting period was standard policy. Schools needed time to conduct headcounts and identify learners who had been placed but never arrived. Only after deregistering those no-shows could they create space for families still waiting.

"After 10 days, then the schools have the right to deregister those who are not coming. Then we create space for those who are coming."

The department deployed several interventions, including mobile classroom units, accelerated construction of satellite schools, and temporary placements in school halls, libraries, and primary school buildings.

Mabona acknowledged that some schools worsened the problem by refusing to assist parents directly, instead redirecting them to already overwhelmed district offices.

"It looks like schools are shifting the goalposts," he said. "We called upon them not to do that."

Migration into the province added further strain. New applicants arrived daily from other provinces, many having never applied at all. Economic hardship was also pushing families out of private schools and into a public system already stretched beyond capacity.

While apologising for the disruption, Mabona urged patience and assured parents that catch-up programmes would help affected learners recover lost ground.

"It's not easy to tell your child that there's no space, we are still waiting," he acknowledged.

"It's an inconvenience, yes. But we also need to acknowledge, and parents need to acknowledge, that we are pressured in Gauteng."

The 2026 placement crisis has raised difficult questions about Gauteng's readiness for growing educational demand. Migration into the province shows no sign of slowing, and economic pressures continue pushing families from private to public schools. The conditions that produced this year's chaos appear structural rather than temporary.

For parents like Morobane, who followed every rule, met every deadline, and still found her choices ignored, the experience has left deep scars.

## SCIENCE &amp; TECHNOLOGY

## Africa, China to expand their scientific collaboration

CLEMENCE  
MANYUKWE

Higher education collaborations between Africa and China are poised to expand this year, building on the momentum generated by the designation of 2026 as the Year of People-to-People Exchanges between the two regions. A range of activities form part of the exchanges, including key initiatives in higher education and science.

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced a series of flagship developmental initiatives related to Africa for the year of people exchanges.

These include the annual meeting of the China-Africa University Alliance Exchange Mechanism and China-Africa University Presidents Forum; the China-Africa Technical and Vocational Education and Training Cooperation Plan; a training programme on biodiversity conservation; an educational empowerment programme for African women entrepreneurs; a youth innovation and entrepreneurship competition; and a series of activities at Confucius Institutes in Africa.

Additionally, the programme will feature the Training Programme on Chinese Modernisation and African Development, the African Literary Works Translation and Publication Project, and the China-Africa Innovation Cooperation and Development Forum.

In an interview with University World News, Benjamin Mulvey, a China expert and the deputy director of postgraduate research at the University of Glasgow's school of education, noted that China distinguishes itself from other countries by placing unusually strong emphasis on people-to-people relations as a cornerstone of its engagement with African nations.

This focus is particularly pronounced in higher education, a sector that has long played a vital role in fostering these exchanges.

Mulvey said China placed a greater emphasis on universities and postgraduate training compared to initiatives by other countries that have historically focused on basic or secondary education.

This approach underscores China's conviction that higher education cooperation and exchanges are potent tools for cultivating long-term influence.

By targeting future leaders,



**Empowerment:** The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has announced a series of flagship developmental initiatives related to Africa for 2026, designated as the Year of People-to-People Exchanges between the two regions. - Photos: Vecteezy.com

academics and professionals, China is strategically leveraging higher education as a means to shape perceptions, forge relationships, and foster alignments in Africa over the long term, he added.

"There was considerable uncertainty following the most recent Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) meeting, especially given the absence of an explicit commitment to a specific number of scholarships. Against that backdrop, the Year of People-to-People Exchanges can be read as a signal that China remains committed to educational cooperation and mobility, even if the precise scale and modalities are now less clearly articulated than in the past.

"While it is still too early to assess concrete impacts, the initiative clearly signals that education and people-to-people exchanges remain central to China's broader strategy in Africa. Higher education, in particular, is viewed by China as a long-term investment that helps create favourable political, social and institutional conditions across the continent," he added.

Asked about the number of African students in China at the moment, Mulvey said this has become increasingly difficult to assess as the Chinese govern-

ment stopped regularly releasing detailed data on international students during the COVID-19 period, and transparency around mobility figures has not fully resumed.

"That said, China-Africa higher education cooperation currently operates through several main modalities. One is institutional partnerships, which have been expanded in recent years through initiatives such as the '100 Universities Cooperation Plan'.

"Another is scholarships and student mobility, which suffered a significant setback during COVID-19 but are likely to recover, even if the scale is now less visible. A third area involves academic networks, including think tanks, conferences and other exchange mechanisms that bring scholars together for research collaboration and policy dialogue," he added.

Professor Peng Yi, a higher education expert working with the Association of African Universities (AAU) on collaborations with China, told University World News that cooperation and exchanges in higher education between China and Africa began in the 1950s, mainly in fields such as the Chinese language, medicine and agricul-

ture, aiming to cultivate urgently needed construction talents for the newly independent African countries.

From the 1990s to the early 21st century, the cooperation model gradually transformed into a two-way interaction, she added.

"Inter-university exchanges, academic visits and Chinese language-teaching Confucius Institutes became increasingly diverse, and the content of cooperation became more multifaceted," she said.

"A leap occurred after the establishment of FOCAC in 2000, when China-Africa higher education cooperation was elevated to a strategic level between heads of state. Under the framework of FOCAC, at each triennial summit, the Chinese government would announce a series of major measures to support Africa's education development," she added.

She noted that, in recent years, the cooperation has continued to expand to the levels of scientific research innovation and digital transformation. Joint laboratories have been established, and research projects have been jointly initiated to address common challenges such as public health, agriculture, and climate change.

"So, through the AAU and China Association of Higher Education, we established the China-Africa Consortium of Universities exchange mechanism, pushing the China-Africa collaboration of the higher education field into a new high level, although it is still young, and we set 10 major areas for collaboration, which we believe are the most urgent and important," she added.

She said these are digital education, health, agricultural development, trade and investment, mining resources, an interdisciplinary focus on modern systems from technology to biology, environment and sustainable development, language, culture and civilisation exchanges, national social governance as well as media and communication, which also include building the economic reputation – the national images – of the countries involved.

Peng said that, building on progress made so far, efforts are underway to develop a more robust and integrated platform that unifies scattered cooperation initiatives and harnesses cooperation mechanisms to drive collaborative innovation and networking.

## TRAVEL



*Magnificent: The Big Five — lion, leopard, rhino, buffalo and elephant — can all be seen by lucky visitors to the Kruger National Park.*

*- Photos: Vecteezy.com*



# Kruger National Park: Where wildlife steals the show

SIMON NARE

**N**ever in my life did I imagine I would one day witness a leopard in the bush being a full-on drama queen — until a recent visit to the iconic Kruger National Park on an unforgivingly hot summer's day.

As stunned and excited visitors sat packed in safari vehicles, cameras clicking relentlessly, the big cat moved with aplomb — her progression calculated, measured and deliberate — delivering what felt like an Oscar-worthy performance. You would swear she was doing it for the cameras.

It's one thing to see these animals on television, but completely different to encounter them up close and personal. The experience fills you with an indescribable thrill and creates an intimate connection with the wild.

Had we caught her on a kill, the spectacle could easily have earned some photographers a picture of the year. But the heat was oppressive, and despite a few impalas grazing a stone's throw away, the leopard could not be bothered. Instead, she chose to give us a show, demonstrating her power and grace with an elegant and lazy stroll through the bush.

These are the moments to savour in the Kruger National Park — seeing wildlife as close as possible in their natural habitat.

The park hosts a vast array of species, making it one of Africa's richest biodiversity reserves. There are more than 147 mammal species, over 500 bird species, 114 reptile species, and numerous fish and amphibian species.

It is estimated to be home to between 13,000 and 17,000 elephants,



40,000 to 48,000 buffaloes, about 180,000 impalas, roughly 30,000 zebras, and between 1,500 and 2,000 giraffes.

Covering an area of 19,485 square kilometres, the park offers visitors who plan their game drives carefully a strong chance of spotting the Big Five — elephant, rhino, Cape buffalo, lion, and leopard — in a single day. It teems with elephants, black and white rhinos, giraffes, zebras, buffaloes, warthogs, hippopotamus, crocodiles and a wide range of antelope species.

**C**arnivores such as lion, leopard, cheetah, wild dog and spotted hyena are constantly on the prowl, hunting to feed themselves and their young. This diversity is what makes the park unique and a powerful drawcard for tourists.

Our group was not fortunate enough to see all of the Big Five in one day, but we managed four. Seeing towering giraffes, massive elephant tuskers, buffalo wallowing in the mud, and a solitary male lion resting lazily in the shade made the trip unforgettable. The endangered rhino proved elusive, though we were told sightings were more likely around the Skukuza Camp area where we were based.

A bush braai under the stars at Delaporte came a close second to the thrill of seeing the leopard strut her stuff. Dining on braaied buffalo meat beneath the night sky while hyenas circled the area was simply awesome — made more comforting by the presence of armed guards. Only the mosquitoes threatened to spoil the evening for those who had forgotten to apply repellent.

As Thabo Tlalanyane, general manager for the park's commercial operations, explains, game drives are only one of many activities available in the park. Others include birding, guided bush walks, hiking, mountain biking and wilderness trails, where visitors can encounter more than 300 tree species, including the baobab and marula.

There are also optional adventure activities such as 4x4 trails, picnic spots, cultural site visits, golf, rafting and tubing on the Sabie River, and zip-lining for thrill seekers.

With ten entrance gates — Paul Kruger, Numbi, Phabeni, Orpen, Crocodile Bridge, Phalaborwa, Punda Maria, Pafuri and Giriyaondo — as well as five bush camps (Bateleur, Biyamiti, Shimuwini, Sirheni and Talamati), the park truly is heaven waiting to be explored.

Tlalanyane said it was encourag-



ing to see more South Africans visiting the park, with 1.4 million visitors recorded in 2024 alone. SANParks, he said, is exploring ways to make the park more affordable and accessible to locals, stressing that the country's parks belong to all South Africans and that its role is simply to manage them.

**T**here is no denying that many visitors — particularly international tourists — come to Kruger to watch animals roam freely through dense bush and vast open plains. The park recommends early-morning and late-afternoon game drives for the best chance of sightings, as most animals rest in the shade during the heat of the day and are harder to spot unless they are close to the road.

The park's popularity and success have also made it a target for poachers, particularly those seeking prized rhino horn. Vultures — which play a crucial role in maintaining biodiversity — have increasingly been caught in the crossfire.

Head of Rangers Cathy Dreyer told journalists during a media excursion in late 2025 that the year had been the worst on record. Since 2023, the park has recorded the deaths of 886 vultures due to poisoning. Drey-

er said management was still trying to understand the motive, though some rangers believe the birds were not directly targeted but poisoned after feeding on carcasses laced with poison by poachers.

While fighting this scourge, the park is also expanding its facilities to accommodate growing visitor numbers. Recently, new modern self-catering units were unveiled at Skukuza Camp as part of a R700-million upgrade project across several camps, following a government cash injection.

Major improvements are focused on Skukuza and include refurbished visitor accommodation, modernised staff housing and upgraded viewing areas to cope with high visitor volumes. The project aims to upgrade 100 accommodation units and build a new 500-seater conference centre, a move expected to boost business tourism.

However, another challenge looms. Devastating floods caused by heavy rains recently left a trail of destruction, damaging bridges and accommodation facilities. Several areas were submerged for extended periods, forcing management to ban day visitors and temporarily close all bush camps.

## SPORT

# Across the Atlantic: The sailors behind SA's Alexforbes' Angel Wings Cape2Rio triumph



Almost there: The Angel Wings yacht approaching Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.  
- Photo: Alexforbes



Triumph: The Alexforbes Angel Wings crew: Sesona Ntsaluba, Yonela Temela, Renaldo Mohale, Skipper Sibusiso Sizatu and Philasande Gwala. - Photo: Alexforbes

## JOHNATHAN PAOLI

When six young South Africans set sail from Cape Town on 27 December, few outside the sailing world fully grasped what lay ahead of them.

Nineteen days later, after crossing 3,300 nautical miles of the Atlantic Ocean, the Alexforbes Angel Wings crew arrived in Rio de Janeiro, having completed one of the world's most demanding offshore yacht races and reshaped perceptions of who belongs in elite ocean sailing.

Backed by financial services company Alexforbes and developed through the Royal Cape Yacht Club Sailing Academy, the youth-led crew completed the 2025 Cape2Rio Yacht Race under extraordinary conditions, including a critical equipment failure mid-Atlantic.

Their campaign was defined not by privilege or resources, but by discipline, composure and collective resilience.

At the heart of the achievement were six sailors whose personal journeys reflect a broader transformation underway in South African sailing.

**Sibusiso "Sibu" Sizatu: Leadership forged through mentorship**  
Captain Sibusiso "Sibu" Sizatu carried the dual responsibility of leading the yacht and mentoring a largely first-time crew through one of offshore sailing's most unforgiving passages.

An instructor at the Royal Cape Yacht Club Sailing Academy, Sizatu had previously skippered the Alexforbes ArchAngel team to a podium finish in the 2023 Cape2Rio.

That experience proved invaluable when the Angel Wings campaign encountered adversity thousands of kilometres from land.

Under his leadership, the crew remained calm and solutions-focused after a boom failure during a downwind turn in the early hours of the crossing, a scenario that forces many teams to retire.

"The crew were tested properly out there. The way they stayed calm, solved the problem and kept racing says everything about their growth," Sizatu reflected after the race.

For Sizatu, the crossing reaffirmed his belief that mentorship and preparation can produce world-class sailors from any background.

### Renaldo Mohale: Experience when it mattered most

First mate Renaldo Mohale brought more than 15 years of sailing experience and crucial offshore knowledge to the team.

A Day Skipper licence holder and Cape2Rio veteran from the 2023 race, Mohale played a stabilising role throughout the crossing.

His composure was especially critical after the boom failure, when decisions needed to be made quickly and confidently to keep the yacht safe, balanced and competitive.

"There's space in sailing for young people, especially women. But they need to know these opportunities exist," Mohale said.

Mohale's presence bridged generations within the crew, ensuring that experience was shared rather than guarded, and reinforcing a culture of trust on board.

### Sesona Ntsaluba: Discovering strength far from shore

At 21, Sesona Ntsaluba was the youngest sailor on board and among those completing their first Atlantic crossing.

Introduced to sailing just three years ago, her progression through regattas and offshore races had been rapid, but Cape2Rio tested her in entirely new ways.

Night watches, fatigue and extended time at sea forced moments of doubt, she later acknowledged, but also revealed inner strength.

"Waking up in the middle of the night for shifts was tough, and doubts crept in. But teamwork and focus helped me push through. I realised I'm stronger than I thought," Ntsaluba said.

Holding a Day Skipper qualification, Ntsaluba emerged from the race with greater confidence and a clearer vision for her future in the maritime sector.

### Yonela Temela: From school excursion to global stage

For Yonela Temela, the Cape2Rio finish line marked the realisation of a dream sparked years earlier during a school visit to the Royal Cape Yacht Club.

That early exposure led her to pursue sailing seriously, competing in events such as the Mykonos and West Coast races, travelling internationally, and even representing South Africa as a sailing instructor in the United States.

"I've always wanted to do this race. Doing it with this team made it even more meaningful," Temela said after arriving in Rio.

Temela's contribution throughout the crossing reflected both technical competence and emotional intelligence, qualities essential in the confined, high-pressure

environment of offshore racing.

### Philasande Gwala: Academic discipline meets ocean reality

Originally from Durban and now based in Khayelitsha, Philasande Gwala brought a blend of academic training and practical seamanship to the crew.

A National Diploma holder in Maritime Studies, Gwala also holds a Day Skipper licence and is nearing completion of her Yachtmaster Offshore Skippers qualification.

Cape2Rio provided a real-world test of everything she had studied and trained for.

"I kept picturing us arriving in Rio and seeing the Christ the Redeemer statue. That moment made every challenge worth it," she said.

Gwala's steady presence and growing leadership were evident as the crew navigated both technical setbacks and physical exhaustion.

### Yobanathi Klaas: Strength beyond the start line

Although sailing as a reserve, Yobanathi "Yobs" Klaas was an integral part of the campaign, training alongside the team and supporting preparation throughout the months leading up to the race.

Introduced to sailing through an education programme, Klaas describes the sport as an unexpected discovery that changed the trajectory of her life.

"Sailing has shown me what resilience looks like. More young people from our neighbourhoods deserve access to this experience," she said.

Her inclusion underscores the team's commitment to development and long-term impact beyond a single race.

### More than just a competition

The Alexforbes Angel Wings campaign extended beyond competition.

During the race, the crew contributed to environmental research through a partnership with race organisers, yacht owners and the International SeaKeepers Society, collecting ocean data across the Atlantic.

Their performance drew national attention, with leaders highlighting the broader significance of the achievement.

The Deputy Minister of Sport, Arts and Culture, Peace Mabe, described the result as "far more than winning a race", noting the maturity and decision-making displayed by a young crew under pressure.

From Masiphumelele, Khayelitsha, Grassy Park and Athlone to the shores of Rio de Janeiro, the six sailors demonstrated what becomes possible when talent is matched with access, structure and belief.

The ocean, as sailors often say, does not care where you come from.

And over 3,300 nautical miles, the Alexforbes Angel Wings crew proved exactly what they were made of.

Their successful Atlantic crossing has reinforced the value of long-term investment in youth development, access and mentorship within South African sport.

For the Royal Cape Yacht Club Sailing Academy, the campaign stands as proof that structured training and belief can translate into world-class performance.

For young South Africans watching from shore, it offers a powerful message: the ocean is no longer a boundary, but a pathway, and they belong on it.