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# South African illiteracy statistics and the case of the magically growing number of literacy and ABET learners

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## Abstract

This article examines the state of South African illiteracy and adult basic education statistics.

Firstly, it reexamines the mid to late 1990s consensus on South Africa's illiteracy statistics (based largely on Household surveys and the 1996 Census data) which formed the baseline starting point for various government adult education provision and campaign goals (such as Education for All and the South African National Literacy Initiative), and finds that the actual number of illiterates has not been significantly reduced (if indeed they have been reduced) by such interventions.

Secondly it provides a critique of the Ministry and Department of Education's claims and their supporting statistics on how various state interventions have allegedly rendered illiterates literate and provided adult basic education to millions of people. The authors present evidence to show that a series of these government claims are based upon unreliable, confused, self-contradictory, inflated and sometimes non-existent data and that these misleading claims about provision have indeed become endemic.

## The mid- to late-90s consensus on literacy statistics

After the publication of Harley *et al*'s *A survey of adult basic education in South Africa in the 90s* (1996) most South African commentators on literacy began using their figures (pp. 17-43) on adult illiteracy levels in South Africa. These statistics (derived from the Central Statistical Service estimates for 1991 and the annual October Household Survey of 1994) were updated in Aitchison *et al*'s *University of Natal survey of adult basic education and training: South Africa* (2000, pp. 15-21) (taking into account the 1996 General Population Census and 1995 October Household Survey). This latter summary stated that of the slightly more than 26 million adults in (people aged 15 and over) about 12 to 13 million of them had less than a full (grade 9) general education, about 7.4 to 8.5 million of these had less than grade 7 (often used as a minimum education level indicator of sustainable functional literacy) and about 2.9 to 4.2 million people had no schooling at all (and were presumably, by definition, illiterate). They also noted that these figures of functional illiteracy tended to be used rather loosely with some people talking about "12 million illiterates" when they should say "12 million people with an incomplete general education", though they considered it permissible to talk about 3 or 4 million total illiterates or 8.5 million functional illiterates. Aitchison *et al* (2000, p. 17) noted that there were no signs of a decrease in the percentage of functionally illiterate adults in the population.<sup>1</sup>

Subsequently, many Statistics South Africa compiled illiteracy statistics for adults tended to provide figures for those adults aged 20 and over and some other government publications use age 16 as the lowest age for an 'adult'. Though this made direct comparisons more difficult, these statistics did not materially alter the picture outlined by Harley *et al* (1996) and Aitchison *et al* (2000) and which had formed the basis for estimates of need and provision in the Department of Education's *A National Multi-year implementation plan for Adult Education and Training: Provision and Accreditation* (1997, pp. 78-86; 225-228).

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<sup>1</sup> Aitchison *et al* (2000) adduced various reasons that could be used to explain this – that some children are still receiving little or no general education, particularly in the more isolated rural areas; that the provision of adult basic education in state Public Adult Learning Centres is still reaching a very small proportion of those needing it; that the destabilisation caused by AIDS related deaths is deschooling the young orphans; etc.

## Summarising the literacy statistics from 1995 to 2001

The following table summarises figures for the literacy and basic education levels of adult South Africans aged 15 and over using the following sources – the 1995 October Household Survey, the 1996 General Population Census and the 2001 General Population Census:

| Literacy and basic education levels of South Africans aged 15 and over |                               |                                |                                |
|--|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Level of education   | 1995 October Household Survey | 1996 General Population Census | 2001 General Population Census |
| Full general education (Grade 9 and more)                              | 14.3 million (54%)            | 13.1 million (50%)             | 15.8 million (52%)             |
| Less than full general education (less than Grade 9)                   | 12.2 million (46%)            | 13.2 million (50%)             | 14.6 million (48%)             |
| Less than grade 7  | 7.4 million (28%)             | 8.5 million (32%)              | 9.6 million (32%)              |
| No schooling   | 2.9 million (11%)             | 4.2 million (16%)              | 4.7 million (16%)              |

These figures show that there has been no decrease in the actual number or percentage of functionally illiterate adults (less than grade 7). Some 32% of the adult population may therefore be regarded as functionally illiterate and therefore the functional literacy rate amongst the adult population is estimated at 68%.

The corollary of these statistics is that the state system of adult basic education and training and its parallels in the business sector and non-governmental organisations had by 2001 failed to reduce illiteracy in South Africa. At best it was keeping the percentage of functional illiterates the same though their raw numbers were still growing.

## The Education For All literacy goals

In the *Education for all status report 2002: South Africa, incorporating country plans for 2002 to 2015*, issued at the end of 2002 by the Department of Education in Pretoria, appears the following statement (pp.47-48):

The EFA goal of halving the illiteracy rate means an average increase in the number of people aged 15 and over who are functionally illiterate (*sic*) by just under 470,000 yearly from 1996 in order to halve the illiteracy rate. This is equivalent to increasing the national functional literacy rate to 83% by 2015 for people aged over 15 years old, from 1996 values of 67%, and increasing the functional literacy rate of 15 to 24 year-olds from the 1996 levels of 83% to 92% by 2015. This assumes a modest population growth of 1.44% (as observed in the respective cohorts in recent years) but a more vigorous growth (of about 2.5%) in the number of literate people aged 15 or over. By 2015, then, of the estimated population of 53 million people, 34 million will be aged 15 years and over and 28 million of these over-15-year-olds will need to be functionally literate if the EFA goal is to be achieved.

South Africa is on track to achieve the literacy target as long as the number of learners graduating from Grade 9 (particularly when the General Education and Training certificate is implemented) remains at levels above the 470, 000 mark per year. However, as well as being committed to improving literacy rates, the Department of Education, is committed to expanding lifelong learning adult education and training opportunities, particularly in partnership with SETAs, non-governmental and private organisations. This will enable the EFA targets to be achieved before 2015 for adult basic education as well as adult education and training.

Later (p. 49), this table is provided:

**Statistics on adult literacy and adult education levels in South Africa**

|   | 1991       | 1996       |
|---|------------|------------|
| Number of adults aged over 20 years with no formal schooling                            | 4 529 354  | 4 066 187  |
| % of adults aged over 20 years  | 26.5%      | 18.4%      |
| % of total population   | 14.6%      | 10.0%      |
| Number of adults aged over 20yrs  | 17 106 335 | 22 146 220 |
| Number of adults aged over 15 years   |            | 26 337 143 |
| Number of adults aged 15 years who have attained a Grade 6 or higher level of education |            | 17 550 913 |
| Functional literacy rate of adults aged over 15 years                                   |            | 6.6%       |
| Total population  | 30 986 920 | 40 583 573 |

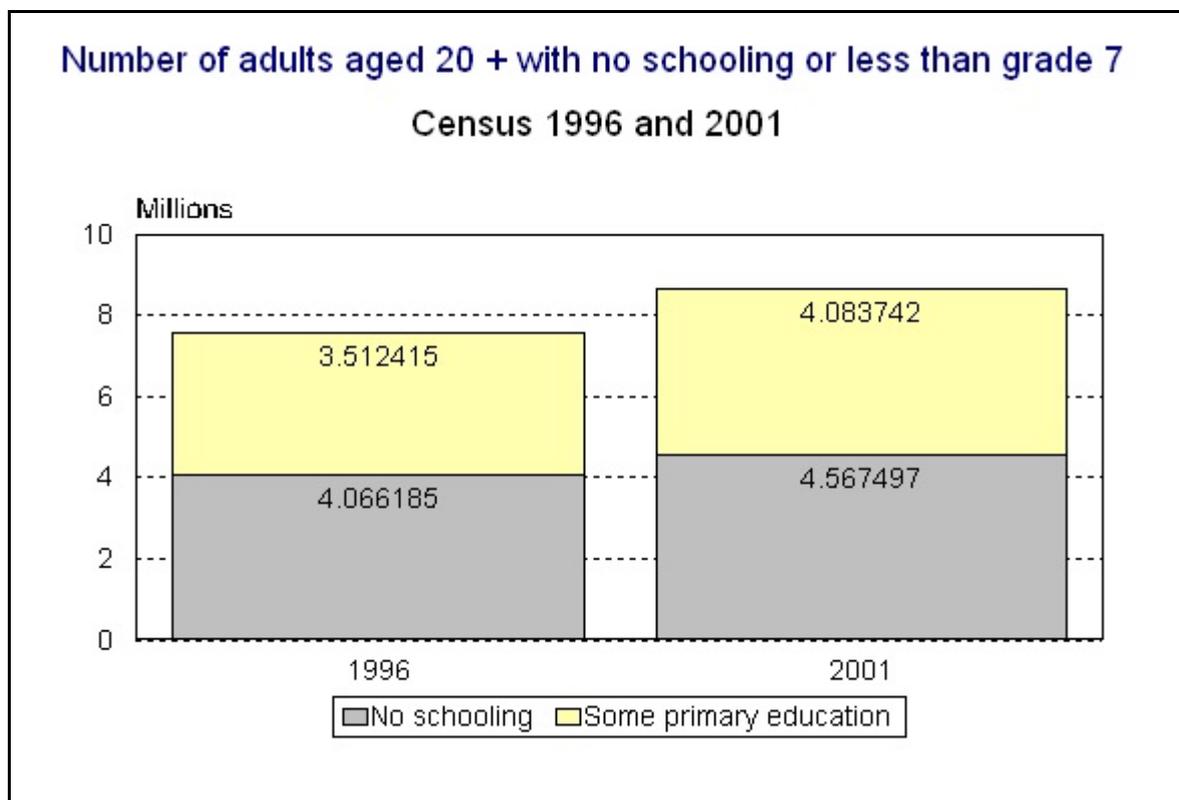
[Note: the 6.6% functional literacy rate is a calculation or typing error, it should be 66.6%]

and there is also a claim (p. 50) that according to 1996 national Census data, gender parity in literacy has also been achieved with equal proportions of female and male functionally literate persons (achieving Grade 6 or higher) in the population.

## The 2001 census results

According to the 2001 census, some 18 % of people aged 20 years or older had no education at all, whilst a further 16% had completed some primary school education (ranging from grade 1 to 6). In real terms, just over 4.5 million (4,567,497) had no schooling, and just over 4 million (4,083,742) had some primary education. Thus about 8.6 million South Africa adults aged 20 years or older (over one third, or 33.9%) could be calculated to be functionally illiterate.

The 1996 census had found that 18.4% of those aged 20 years and older had no schooling, and a further 16.7% had completed some primary school education. Harley (2003) points out that this suggests a slight drop in the **proportion** of adults with little or no schooling in 2001.



One curious phenomenon is that whilst the percentage of adults with no schooling at all fell between 1996 and 2001, their actual number increased (by 501,310) after decreasing between 1991 and 1996, as shown in this table:

| Adults aged 20 and older with no schooling:<br>Census 1991, 1996 and 2001 |           |           |           |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Census year   | 1991      | 1996      | 2001      |
| Number  | 4,529,354 | 4,066,187 | 4,567,497 |
| Change  |           | - 463,167 | + 501,310 |
| % change  |           | - 10.2%   | + 12.3%   |
| As % of adults aged 20+   |           | 19.3%     | 17.9%     |

It is difficult to explain this phenomenon, apart from suggesting one of three possible causes:

- The increase is a real and substantial increase – i.e. there really were more adults with no schooling in 2001 than there were in 1996. This would suggest that a significant proportion (1 in 8) of the 4 million children between 15 and 19 in 1996 never had any education at all. Though the Census 2001 figure of adults aged 20 to 24 with no schooling is large, 286, 269, it is not that large and it is less than the previous cohort (344,698).
- There is no real increase – the 2001 census was simply more accurate (either because it reached more people with no schooling or because people were more honest about their lack of any schooling than they were in 1996).
- The Census 2001 educational statistics are simply seriously wrong and it is pointless to enter into this sort of analysis of changes.

Of course, the figures for South Africa as a whole disguise the considerable inequities between the provinces. Limpopo Province (formerly Northern Province) remained the province with the highest proportion of adults with no schooling (over a third). As in 1996, the Western Cape had the lowest proportion of adults with no schooling in 2001.

As can be seen from the next table, the proportion of adults with no schooling has decreased in all provinces bar the Eastern Cape (where it has climbed from 20.9% to 22.8%), and the Free State (where it has remained relatively constant – 16.1% in 1996, and 16% in 2001) (has there been an exodus of more educated people from these two provinces seeking better employment prospects?).

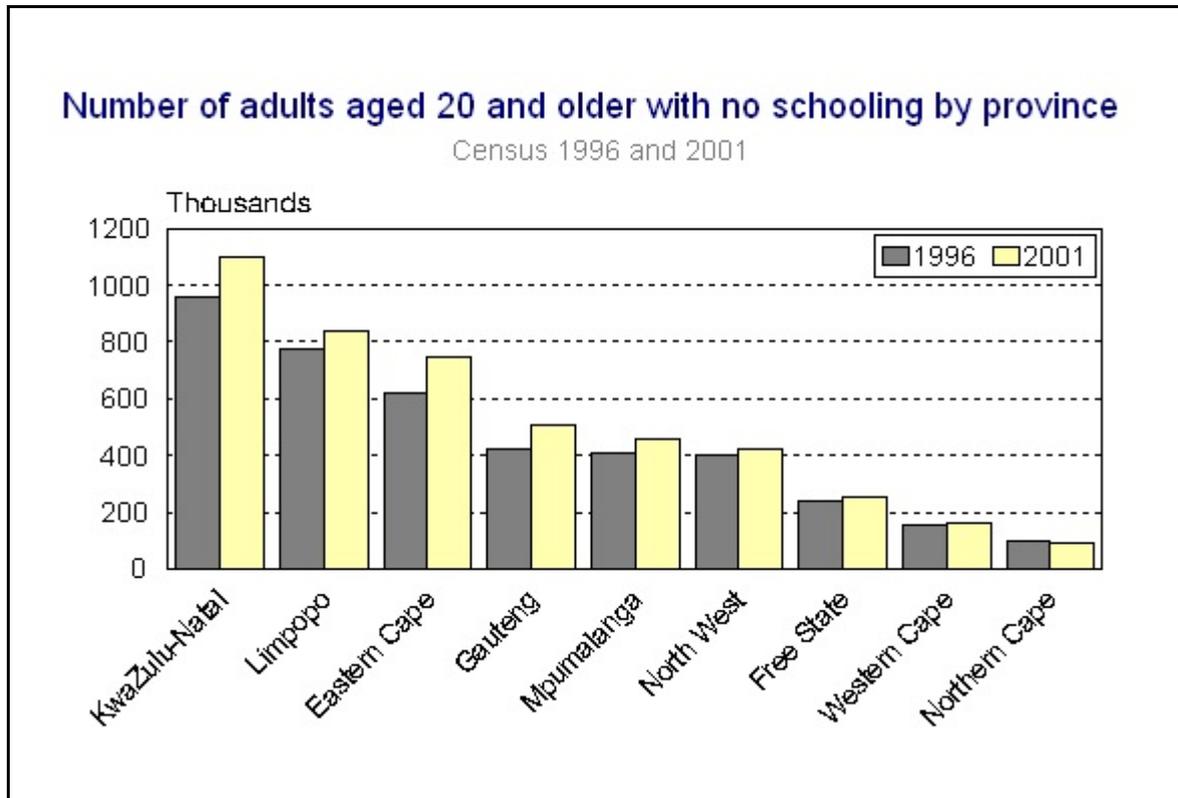
Percentage of population aged 20 years and older with no schooling by province: Census 1996 and 2001

| Province            | 1996         | 2001         | % change     |
|---------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| KwaZulu-Natal       | 22.9%        | 21.9%        | -1.0%        |
| Limpopo             | 36.9%        | 33.4%        | -3.5%        |
| Eastern Cape        | 20.9%        | 22.8%        | 1.9%         |
| Gauteng             | 9.5%         | 8.4%         | -1.1%        |
| Mpumalanga          | 29.4%        | 27.5%        | -1.9%        |
| North West          | 22.7%        | 19.9%        | -2.8%        |
| Free State          | 16.1%        | 16.0%        | -0.1%        |
| Western Cape        | 6.7%         | 5.7%         | -1.0%        |
| Northern Cape       | 21.7%        | 18.2%        | -3.5%        |
| <b>South Africa</b> | <b>19.3%</b> | <b>17.9%</b> | <b>-1.4%</b> |

Actual numbers, however, show a disturbingly different picture. In every province except the Northern Cape there has been an increase in the raw number of adults with no schooling.

Population aged 20 years and older with no schooling or less than grade 7 education by province: Census 1996 and 2001

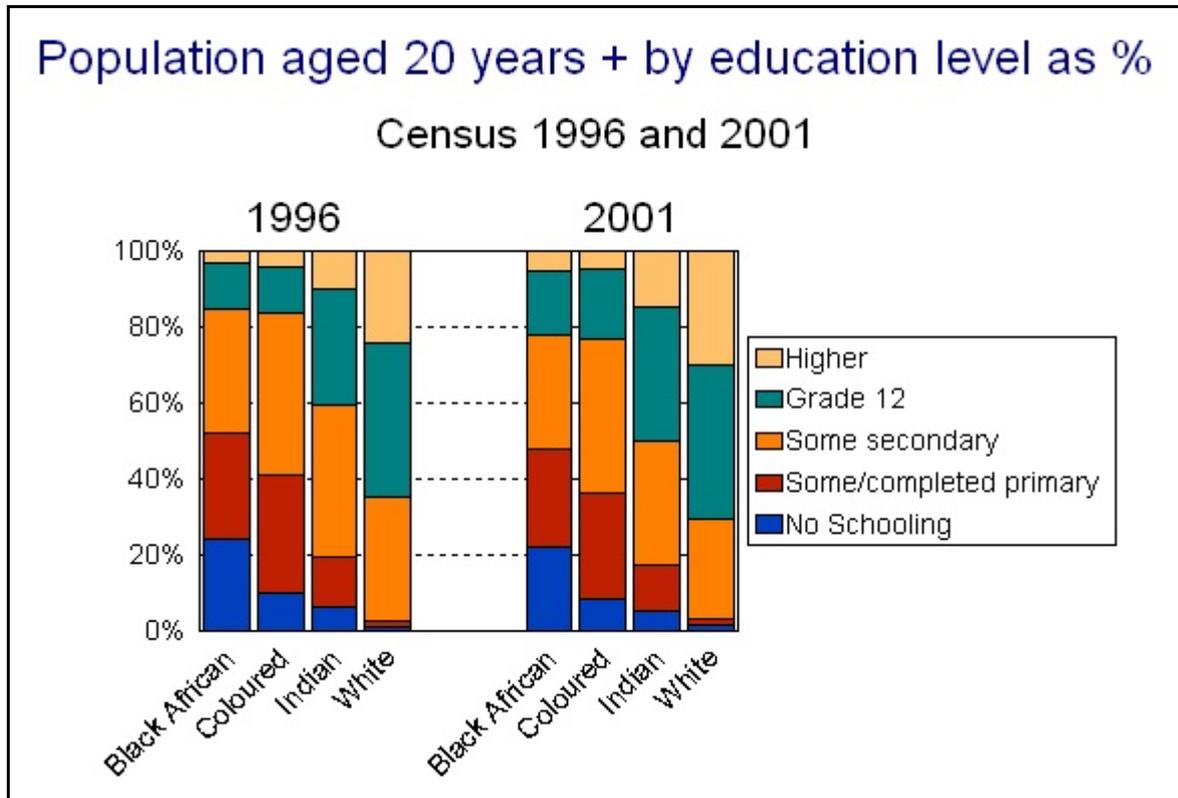
| Province      | No schooling     |                  | Some primary education (less than grade 7) |                  |
|---------------|------------------|------------------|--|------------------|
|               | 1996             | 2001             | 1996                                       | 2001             |
| KwaZulu-Natal | 957,217          | 1,100,291        | 747,586                                    | 849,144          |
| Limpopo       | 771,587          | 835,485          | 252,287                                    | 352,437          |
| Eastern Cape  | 617,796          | 743,700          | 635,475                                    | 643,921          |
| Gauteng       | 419,157          | 504,619          | 516,624                                    | 673,283          |
| Mpumalanga    | 410,336          | 456,747          | 211,216                                    | 264,548          |
| North West    | 403,143          | 423,787          | 364,297                                    | 426,025          |
| Free State    | 236,149          | 251,408          | 328,076                                    | 340,753          |
| Western Cape  | 153,109          | 162,781          | 362,284                                    | 431,698          |
| Northern Cape | 97,691           | 88,680           | 94,570                                     | 101,934          |
| <b>Totals</b> | <b>4,066,185</b> | <b>4,567,497</b> | <b>3,512,415</b>                           | <b>4,083,742</b> |



These increasing numbers of the unschooled are particularly noticeable in five provinces – Limpopo, Mpumalanga, the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng – and less so in North West, the Free State and the Western Cape. Indeed the only province in South Africa where there was a decrease in the actual number of people aged 20 and over with no schooling was the Northern Cape (possibly due to closure of mines – the Northern Cape was the province with the biggest out-migration between 1996 and 2001).

The largest increase was in KwaZulu-Natal, where, compared to 1996, an additional 143,074 adults had no education. KwaZulu-Natal remained the province with the highest number of adults with no education at all.

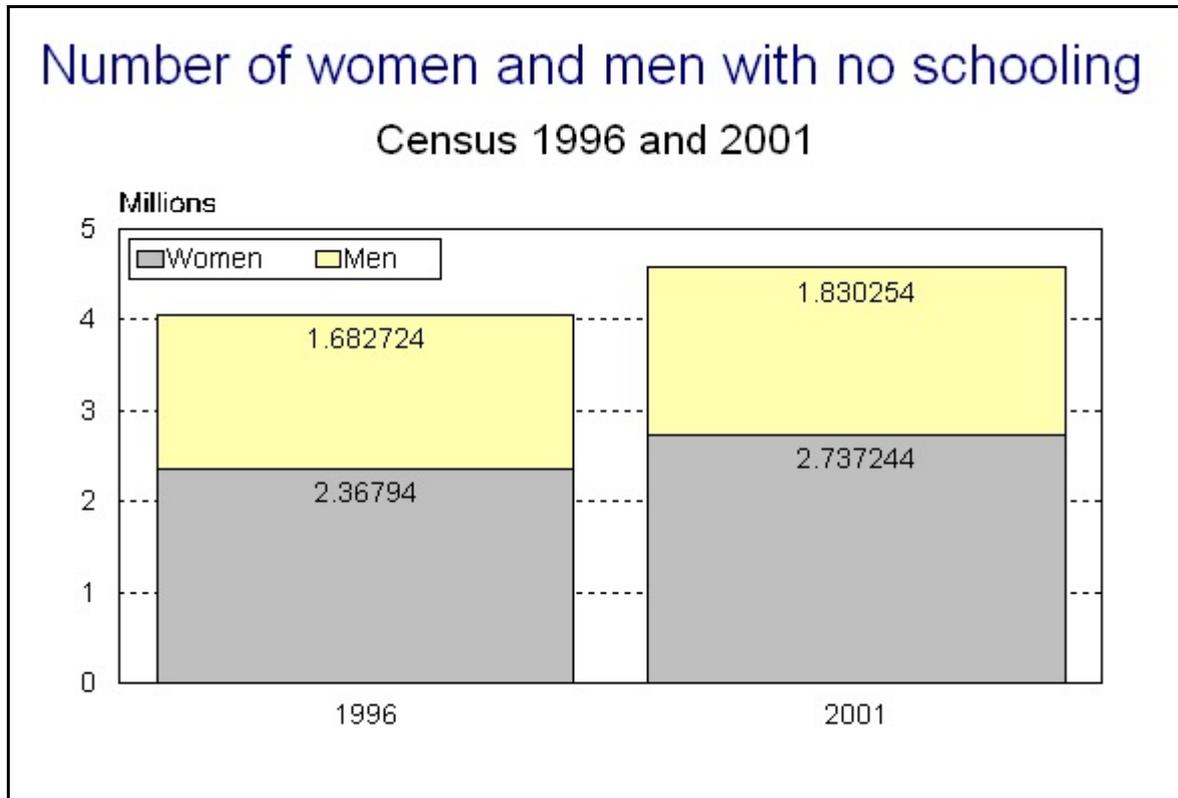
The considerable differences between the provinces is to some extent explained by the considerable differences between apartheid designated ‘race’ groups. As would be expected, the vast majority of adults with little or no education in 2001 were black Africans (93.9%), as was the case in 1996. Since there are far more black Africans living in South Africa, this is to be expected. However, the proportion of black African adults with no schooling is significantly higher than the proportion of coloured, Indian and White South Africans:



Expressed as a proportion of each race group, just over one in five (22.3%) adult black Africans in this country in 2001 had no schooling at all, compared to just over one in one hundred Whites (1.4%). For Black Africans this is slightly down from the 1996 figure (24.3%), and very slightly up for Whites (1.2%).

The sex differentiation is not as skewed: although more adult women have little or no (or very little) schooling than men, this is not as grotesquely skewed as in the case of race. In 2001 men represented 40% of the unschooled, women 60%. However, the increase in the number of unschooled women is nearly double that of men.

| <b>Number of women and men with no schooling:<br/>Census 1996 and 2001</b> |                   |                  |                 |
|--|-------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| <b>Sex</b>   | <b>1996</b>       | <b>2001</b>      | <b>Increase</b> |
| Men  | 1,682,724 (41.5%) | 1,830,254 (40%)  | 147,530 (9%)    |
| Women  | 2,367,940 (58.5%) | 2,737,244 (60%)  | 369,304 (16%)   |
| Totals   | 4,050,664 (100%)  | 4,567,497 (100%) | 516,833 (12.8%) |



As can be seen from this graph, the sex differentiation between unschooled illiterate adult men and women is increasing. The increase since 1996 in the actual number of people over the age of 20 who have had no schooling (some 516,833) consists primarily (71.5%) of women. Whereas in 1996 there were 685,216 more adult women who had never been to school than men, by 2001 this had increased to 906,990. Though this might suggest a growth in sex based discrimination in access to schooling in favour of males, it contradicts what is known about there being currently more girls than boys in schools. It is possible that this simply reflects the fact that the unschooled women are living longer than men.

### Conclusions from surveying the literacy and basic education statistics for adults

It is clear that the need for literacy and adult basic education interventions continues. It is also clear that such interventions are needed most urgently in the Eastern Cape, where not only the actual number of adults aged 20 and over with no education at all has increased, but also the proportion these adults make up of the total population of that province. However, the fact that there are now over a million adults with no schooling at all in KwaZulu-Natal suggests that this province also needs to be targeted, as does Limpopo, which

remains the province with the highest proportion of adults with no schooling. There is also the worrying growth in the number of functional illiterate adult women – and that must be of concern to everyone.

## Reprise on the Education for All promises

The *Education for all status report 2002: South Africa, incorporating country plans for 2002 to 2015* promised that the department of Education's commitment to "improving literacy rates ...[and] expanding lifelong learning adult education and training opportunities particularly in partnership with SETAs, non-governmental and private organisations ... will enable the EFA targets to be achieved before 2015 for adult basic education as well as adult education and training." (Department of Education, 2002, p. xiii ). The EFA targets included halving the illiteracy rates.

The evidence from the literacy and basic education statistics suggests that halving the adult illiteracy rates by 2015 means ensuring that about 3 million adults gain functional literacy.

What then, is the evidence of provision that is likely to meet this target?

## The data desert and misleading statistics

Aitchison *et al* (2000, p. 131-132) lamented the fact that statistical data and other information on provision on literacy and adult basic education was "still unreliable, confused, and self-contradictory, but more often, simply absent". Attempts to analyse what data are available has often led to acerbic exchanges (for example Aitchison, 1998) between Department of Education officials and researchers because the latter have made findings of lacklustre provision and criticised unlikely departmental claims. Misleading claims about provision have indeed become endemic.

## The Building an ABET system report

The report, *Building an ABET system: the first five years 1995 - 2000*, was published in mid-2001 as a Tirisano document by the national Department of Education and was the output of a project put out to tender by the Adult Education and Training Directorate of the Department and funded by the European Union. Not merely does the report contain misleading information but it also totally ignores and fails to address the findings and criticisms that have come from researchers and ABET practitioners. Indeed it even totally ignores findings from research commissioned by the Department from the Human Sciences Research Council in 1999 which do not accord with the rosy

picture which the report tries to present.<sup>2</sup>

The report's claims about ABET enrolments are particularly unlikely. The first extraordinary assertion occurs on the very first page of the actual report. It claims (p. 8) that:

According to the Education Information Systems evaluation report by Provincial departments, during 1999 alone provincial Departments of Education reached 300 000 ABET learners whereas the target set in the Multi-Year Implementation Plan was only 177 000 learners.

In examining this claim, one first has to note the following:

1. ABET is very clearly defined as being basic education for adults at the General Education level of the National Qualifications Framework (that is, NQF level 1 more or less equivalent to school education from Grade 1 to Grade 9 (Std 7)). ABET does **not** include education and training delivered to adults at NQF levels 2 to 4 (which is Further Education and Training).
2. The *Multi-Year Implementation Plan* (MYIP) targets are precisely for ABET and not for any FET at all.
3. The Department's own statistics for 1999 (in the *Draft ABET Sectoral Report* and the final *ABET Sectoral Report* both produced in 2000) which respectively provide totals of 190,822 and 156,858 (or 176,151)<sup>3</sup> ABET learners and the *Annual Survey of Public Adult Learning Centres 1999. Final Report* conducted for the Department by the Human Sciences Research Council which had a figure of 162,900 ABET learners.

How is it then that the report can claim nearly double these numbers for enrolment in 1999? On a closer inspection of the figures it becomes apparent how this statistical inflation has occurred. Examination of the provincial figures given in the report for the numbers of learners in 1999 (Eastern Cape, p. 16; Free State, p. 24; Gauteng, p. 35; KwaZulu-Natal, p. 45; Mpumalanga, p. 53; Northern Cape, p. 67; North West, p. 70; Northern Province, p. 78; Western Cape, p. 88) makes it abundantly clear that these figures include not

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<sup>2</sup> It is notable that this project report does not contain a single reference to any document or source. Whilst the publication is clearly a popular one for general distribution and it would be unfair to expect it to have a full scholarly apparatus, it is still unacceptable that, at the very least, it does not refer the reader to a fuller report or reports from which it has been distilled and makes not reference at all to contradictory or missing statistics.

<sup>3</sup> One obtains different totals from the general section of the report and by adding up the provincial subtotals in other sections of the report.

only ABET learners but **also** learners studying at the FET level (that is, mainly young people who have failed their matric at school and are now trying again through a Public Adult Learning Centre).

The Gauteng figures for 1999 provide an instructive example of this:

| Source                          | ABET  | FET   | Total |
|---------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Draft ABET Sectoral report      | 29848 | 25295 | 55143 |
| Human Sciences Research Council | 22991 | 35390 | 58381 |
| <i>Building an ABET system</i>  | 60307 |       |       |

The obvious conclusion from these Gauteng figures is that the report has reported some 30,000 or so FET learners as ABET ones. This also appears to be the case with every other province except the Northern Province (Limpopo). These figures would not be a problem if this report was about **all** adult education provision by the Departments (though one would worry that the authors do not seem to know what ABET is as distinguished from FET) but, when it claims meeting Multi-Year Implementation Plan targets for 1999 by 172% when that Plan's targets are specifically and only about ABET, it becomes misinformation.

The second extraordinary assertion is as follows (p. 8):

For the period 1995 to 2000 a total of 1,405,071 adult learners and 85,219 educators have been involved in ABET programmes across the country.

The report carefully specifies that this refers to Departments of Education only.

Now, like the claim about exceeding the Multi-year Implementation Plan target for 1999, these student and educator figures are thoroughly misleading.

To reach the total claimed 1,405,071 ABET learners over a six years period requires (mechanically averaging out this figure over six years) some 234,178 **new** learners in each of five of the six years under review. This must be nonsense on three counts.

Firstly, it is fantastically unlikely that there has been an enrolment in **each** of five years of 234,178 **new** learners.

Secondly, if the actual target for ABET learners was 177,000 for 1999 (a target we have already shown was not achieved) how on earth can the total for each of the preceding, building up, years vastly exceed this figure.

Thirdly, the Department's own previously reported statistics simply do not correspond to these outlandish claims. Examples of previously reported totals for ABET learners for some of this period are as follows:

|         |        |   |
|---------|--------|---|
| 1994/95 | 89,151 |   |
| 1996    | 150699 |   |
| 1998    | 173015 | (though these included FET learners amongst the 39,783 Mpumalanga learners) |

Regrettably, the Department has misrepresented the truth.

The Centre for Adult Education of the then University of Natal approached both the authors of the report and the Department to point out these errors but they were never corrected. Moreover, these claims continue to be recycled.

The Department of Education published statistics on "ABET" learners in *Education Statistics in South Africa at a glance in 2001* (Department of Education, 2003, pp. 26-27). In summary the following is presented:

| ABET learners, educators and institutions: 2001 |                |               |              |
|---|----------------|---------------|--------------|
| Province  | Learners       | Educators     | Institutions |
| Eastern Cape                                    | 55,517         | 2,917         | 668          |
| Free State                                      | 47,284         | 2,088         | 206          |
| Gauteng   | 165,074        | 3,211         | 225          |
| KwaZulu-Natal                                   | 27,394         | 1,517         | 259          |
| Limpopo   | 17,381         | 724           | 189          |
| Mpumalanga                                      | 18,411         | 1,789         | 212          |
| North West                                      | 32,679         | 2,750         | 474          |
| Northern Cape                                   | 3,981          | 198           | 99           |
| Western Cape                                    | 18,614         | 1,087         | 162          |
| <b>Totals</b>                                   | <b>386,335</b> | <b>16,281</b> | <b>2,494</b> |

It is interesting to compare these with the Human Sciences Research Council and *Building an ABET system* figures for 1999:

| Number of learners at PALCs: 1999, 2001 and 2002 |                          |                                |  |                                    |   |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|---|
|  | 1999 HSRC<br>(ABET only) | 1999 HSRC<br>(ABET and<br>FET) | 1999<br><i>Building an<br/>ABET system</i> | 2001<br>Department<br>of Education | 2002<br>Department<br>of Education<br>(ABET only) |
| Eastern Cape                                     | 37,119                   | 54,281                         | 69,426                                     | 55,517                             | 52,460  |
| Free State                                       | 10,499                   | 25,586                         | 9,737                                      | 47,284                             | 29,520  |
| Gauteng  | 22,991                   | 58,381                         | 60,307                                     | 165,074                            | 57,811  |
| KwaZulu-Natal                                    | 12,814                   | 20,671                         | 30,000                                     | 27,394                             | 12,002  |
| Limpopo  | 27,943                   | 28,807                         | 32,364                                     | 17,381                             | 22,842  |
| Mpumalanga                                       | 22,424                   | 25,207                         | 22,424                                     | 18,411                             | 4,519   |
| North West                                       | 17,348                   | 45,940                         | 50,872                                     | 32,679                             | 39,078  |
| Northern Cape                                    | 3,593                    | 5,763                          | 6,951                                      | 3,981                              | 5,277   |
| Western Cape                                     | 8,169                    | 23,044                         | 23,000                                     | 18,614                             | 26,069  |
| Totals   | 162,900                  | 287,680                        | 305,081                                    | 386,335                            | 249,578   |

From this table it appears that in the 2001 report at least six of the provinces have included FET learners in their supposed ABET statistics and that in two others it is unclear and in only one province, the Northern Cape, are the statistics unmistakably only for ABET. But what is particularly remarkable is that the 2001 statistics show, using the Department's **own** figures, a **decline** in numbers of learners in seven provinces. Only two provinces show growth and their expansion is somewhat unbelievable – Free State 386% increase; Gauteng 174% increase (the latter particularly so as in the other provinces the educator:learners ratio ranges from 10 to 22 whereas in Gauteng in 2001 it was 1:51, double what the Department itself recorded for Gauteng the previous year) ! The statistics for 2002 record a further decline (Department of Education, 2004, pp. 28-29).

An interesting though probably unreliable statistic from the 2001 census is that for people aged between 5 and 24 only 26,480 were attending adult education classes (Statistics South Africa, 2003, p. 49). Given that adult education centre attendance is normally highest amongst young adults (and that they are trying to gain FET qualifications, not ABET ones), this suggests again that claims of annual intakes of nearly a quarter of a million new ABET learners are preposterous.

## The national ABET examinations evidence

Backup for our contention that many of the national Department's ABET learner statistics are inaccurate is found in the figures of learners who enrolled for the national ABET examinations conducted by the Department from 2001 onwards. They can usefully be compared with the estimates prepared in 1997 for the National Department of Education's *Multi-year Implementation Plan for adult education and training* that proposed (in an admittedly "optimistic scenario") that in 2001 there would be 310,000 ABET learners in public adult learning centres, 341,000 in 2002 and 375,100 in 2003 (p. 91) and that at least 45 to 50% of them would pass the courses they were enrolled in those years (p. 230-231).

Well what happened in the new national ABET level 4 examinations run through the provincial education departments at public adult learning centres from 2001 to 2003? What kind of throughput was there? In 2001 some 18,438 candidates enrolled and by 2003 this had risen to 26,067. In 2001 a mere 78 qualified for a General Education and Training (GETC) certificate, in 2003 it had risen to 1,252 (Umalusi, 2004, p. 12). More broadly, Umalusi had by the end of 2003 only issued 440 ABET GETC certificates (it is unclear why the other successful candidates had not received theirs) and 19,028 learning area certificates (for individual learning area courses passed).

To get a more realistic idea of how this output relates to targets set in 1997 one must have some idea of what percentage of ABET learners are in level 4. In 1999 the HSRC survey estimated it at about 21%. Even if we assume that only about 10% of ABET learners in PALCs are at ABET level 4, the output seems very small. The *Plan* assumed a 45% pass rate in 2001. Therefore one would expect some 1,395 to pass the GETC – but only 78 did. In 2003 one would expect 1,876 to pass. There were 1,252. So output (even in the more limited sense of passing at least one learning area course), even when a very high drop-out rate is assumed, does not match the targets, suggesting either a smaller number of enrolments than expected or very inadequate instruction.

The possibility that, even if the state sector is performing badly, learners in the business or NGO sectors would enormously increase the overall national enrolments and throughput is remote. The Independent Examination Board examinations in October 2002 for some of the ABET level 4 learning areas only had 1,022 candidates.

## Blowing up the educators

Similarly inflated claims are made about the number of educators in the *Building an ABET system* report. When one looks at the claims about the number of educators (85,219) claimed over the same period, one must be equally suspicious (apart from the obvious caveat that these are statistics for educators for all PALC classes from ABET to Grade 12, not just ABET). Clearly many of these educators have been recounted each year (unless one really imagines that a completely new batch of educators replaces the old one each

year). Two other obvious points of interest (and equally alarming ones) are jumps in the educator: student ratios (as in KwaZulu-Natal) or the unusually perfect stability around the officially targeted ratio of 1:20 (as in Mpumalanga or the Eastern Cape – in the latter case, in spite of huge differences in enrolments in succeeding years).

University of Natal research (Harley *et al*, 1996; Aitchison *et al*, 2000) estimated that there were 14,373 educators in 1994 and 20,000 in 1998 delivering ABET and FET.

The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC, 2000) found 16,089 in 1999 (and was able to determine the provincial breakdown for 13,628 of them) with a teacher:learner ratio of 1:18 (the range was from 1:15 in the Free State and the Northern Province to 1:24 in the Eastern Cape).

| Educators numbers in PALCs – 1999, 2001 and 2002 |               |               |                                |                         |                         |
|--|---------------|---------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Province   | 1999          |               |                                | 2001                    | 2002                    |
|  | HSRC          | HSRC adjusted | <i>Building an ABET system</i> | Department of Education | Department of Education |
| Eastern Cape                                     | 2,245         | 2,651         | 3,370                          | 2,917                   | 2,928                   |
| Free State                                       | 1,310         | 1,547         | 735                            | 2,088                   | 2,042                   |
| Gauteng  | 2,336         | 2,758         | 2,984                          | 3,211                   | 2,789                   |
| KwaZulu-Natal                                    | 1,263         | 1,491         | 3,000                          | 1,517                   | 943                     |
| Mpumalanga                                       | 776           | 916           | 1,121                          | 1,789                   | 33                      |
| North West                                       | 2,466         | 2,911         | 3,494                          | 2,750                   | 1,712                   |
| Northern Cape                                    | 303           | 358           | 240                            | 198                     | 240                     |
| Limpopo  | 1,729         | 2,041         | 1,922                          | 724                     | 1,040                   |
| Western Cape                                     | 1,054         | 1,244         | 1,515                          | 1,087                   | 1,372                   |
| Not known  | 146           | 172           |                                |                         |                         |
| <b>Totals</b>                                    | <b>13,628</b> | <b>16,089</b> | <b>18,381</b>                  | <b>16,281</b>           | <b>13,099</b>           |

The *Building an ABET system* figures are consistently higher than the HSRC survey except in one or two provinces (possibly where there has been a genuine attempt to record the number of actual ABET teachers rather than all PALC educators). The Department's figures for 2001 show some provincial declines and some increases but with an overall decline, which has deepened in 2002 (Department of Education, 2004, pp. 28-29).

Research done by the HSRC for the Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority and reported on in the *ETDP SETA Annual Report 2002* (p. 5) gives a total of only 10,848 staff employed in South Africa's public ABET system.

The same caveats apply to claims about the number of Public Adult Learner Centres (PALCs) run by the Department of Education. One of the main reasons that policy makers in the early 1990s saw the future of ABET as within the Ministry of Education was the existence of a functioning night school system using the existing infrastructure of the schooling system. This is still very much the case and school buildings and school teachers (working part-time for ABET) are the major state resource for ABET. In 1994 there were estimated to be 1440 public adult education centres in South Africa. More current estimates of the number of PALCs (including so-called satellite centres) vary from the University of Natal figure for 1998/99 of about 3073 (Aitchison *et al*, 2000) to the Human Sciences Research Council count in 1999 of 2123 that catered for ABET (another 103 did not) (HSRC, 2000) to the Department's 2001 figure of 2494 (Department of Education, 2003, p. 27) and 2002 figure of 1895 (which distinguishes between ABET and FET centres)(Department of Education, 2004, p. 28-29).

| Estimates of the number of PALCs   |   |                |   |  |  |
|--|---|----------------|---|--|--|
| Province   | Aitchison<br><i>et al</i> (1997<br>or 1998) | HSRC<br>(1999) | <i>Building<br/>an ABET<br/>system</i><br>(2000 or<br>2001) | Departme<br>nt of<br>Education<br>(2001) | Departme<br>nt of<br>Education<br>(2002)<br>(ABET<br>only) |
| Eastern Cape   | 1118  | 319            | 429   | 668                                      | 256  |
| Free State   | 139   | 144            | 175   | 206                                      | 211  |
| Gauteng  | 223   | 196            | 196   | 225                                      | 210  |
| KwaZulu-Natal  | 270   | 166            | 320   | 259                                      | 139  |
| Mpumalanga   | 238   | 250            | 250   | 212                                      | 137  |
| North West   | 415   | 341            | 360   | 474                                      | 171  |
| Northern Cape  | 74  | 60             | 100   | 99                                       | 117  |
| Limpopo  | 457   | 520            | 750   | 189                                      | 369  |
| Western Cape   | 139   | 127            | 125   | 162                                      | 285  |
| Totals   | 3073  | 2123           | 2705  | 2,494                                    | 1,895  |
| Note: The HSRC figures exclude some 45 PALCs that did not provide any ABET at all. |   |                |   |  |  |

The HSRC figures for 1999 were probably the most reliable. What needs explaining is the big drop from 3073 (Aitchison *et al* estimate for 1997/1998) to 2123 (the HSRC estimate for 1999) followed by an immediate increase of some 27% to 2705 (in the *Building an ABET system* figures for 2000) and then a drop again in 2001<sup>4</sup> and further drop in 2002. The large Aitchison *et al* estimate maybe partially but not completely explained by their including a number of so-called satellite centres not included in later enumerations. But the most plausible explanation is that both the Aitchison *et al* and the *Building an ABET system* figures for most of the provinces appear to be essentially **claimed** figures from the provincial departments of education and it is likely that they are inflated. Research done by the HSRC for the Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority and reported on in the *ETDP SETA Annual Report 2002* (p. 5) gives a further indication of serious decline – it records a total of only 1,720 public ABET centres.

## Pronouncements on literacy and ABET provision in recent years

*ThisDay* of 9 December 2003 (Pretorius, 2003, p. 3) reported Duncan Hindle, the Deputy Director General of the Department of Education, as saying that the Department had reached at least 1.6 million people through adult literacy programmes since 1999. These may include the claimed 309,000 literacy learners reached through a joint University of South Africa/South African National Literacy Initiative (SANLI) partnership in 2002 and 2003 and another Department of Education initiative in four provinces that had reached 4,130 learners via service providers. But where do the other 1.3 million learners come from? What seems most likely is that the fantastical figures in the *Building an ABET system* report have been extrapolated into the period 1999 to 2002 and that these figures are now routinely bandied about by officials and inserted into the Minister of Education's speeches to portray the national Department of Education's adult literacy and basic education work in a good light. They have even made it into the National Treasury *2004 Estimates of national expenditure* (National Treasury, 2004, p. 365) where it states that "The department's literacy initiative exceeded the target set in February 2002 by 309 per cent. Since 1999, the department has reached 1.6 million illiterate people."

Examples of this sort of puffery can be found in a statements on the University of South Africa website reporting on the launch of the Department of Education/University of South Africa partnership. Hindle is reported to have said that the initiative aimed to reduce the

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<sup>4</sup> Three of the *Building an ABET system* figures are almost identical to the HSRC ones (Gauteng, Mpumalanga, Western Cape) whereas the six other provinces show an extraordinary higher figures for the number of centres (an average of 38%). However, what may in fact be being exhibited is a modest drop from the Aitchison *et al* number to the *Building and ABET system* and Department of Education number of **claimed** centres. This probably reflects a very real decline in the number of PALCs whose **actual** number is probably best captured by the HSRC research in 1999.

level of illiteracy by at least 35 per cent by 2004 and was a major part of the Department's strategy for "breaking the back of illiteracy" among adults and the youth. He was somewhat outdone by a another statement which said that the University's ABET Institute would, with its vast resources, assist SANLI in achieving its goal of reaching a target of two million adults and in ensuring that two million adult learners would complete the literacy programme by 2004 (University of South Africa, 2002).

In April 2002, the Minister of Education claimed that SANLI had reached 90,000 adults in 2001 (Asmal, 2002a) and on 15 July 2002 the African National Congress's web based magazine, *Umrabulo* published an article by him, entitled *Adult illiteracy shall be ended by a mass state education plan*, in which he said (Asmal, 2002b):

Our government has made a number of international commitments around the provision of education, including adult education and literacy. In particular, the Education Ministry is a signatory to the Dakar Framework for Action adopted by the World Education Forum in April 2000 in Dakar. In terms of this, and among other targets, we are committed to achieving a 50% decline in illiteracy by 2005, especially for women.

We are pleased to report that at present there are over 400 000 adult learners in our Adult Learning Centres across the country, and they are studying a range of newly designed programmes, ... We also have a large number of students, mostly adults, who are taking literacy classes. ... We are therefore glad to have over 200 000 such learners striving to become literate, .... These numbers will be expanded in the next year or two, as we get more volunteers and more resources.

Then the *Financial Mail* of 8 November 2002 published an article by the Minister in which he said that (Asmal, 2002c):

An estimated 5.2m people are illiterate, and nearly 1 million of these are enrolled in literacy programmes. ... There are about 400 000 adults in public adult education centres, striving to improve themselves and their communities.

Then, on 16 May 2003, in a keynote address launching the "Readathon 2003" in Johannesburg, the Minister of Education (Asmal, 2003) said that SANLI had presented literacy classes to more than 200,000 newly enrolled adult learners this year, the majority of them from the Eastern Cape and Limpopo.

Finally, in an address to the Cape Town Press Club on 16 March 2004, the Minister stated (Asmal, 2004):

... we said that we must break the back of illiteracy among adults and youths in five years.

In meeting this priority, Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) has been crucial. We have established 2 371 ABET centres, involving 210 569 adult learners in a variety of programmes in business management, agriculture, and applied technology. Together with a

range of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and statutory partners, the South African National Literacy Initiative (SANLI) has been able to advance literacy delivery.

As a result of these combined efforts, departmental literacy projects have reached nearly 2 million learners. Certainly, these efforts must be intensified, but we are making real progress in breaking the back of illiteracy.

Surely some magical and increasingly potent growth factor is at work.

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