



higher education
& training

Department:
Higher Education and Training
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



RESEARCH AGENDA

2023-2028



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Message from the Director-General

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) engages with the research community to convey its priority interests; improve its own knowledge base; support mutually productive research partnerships with local, regional, and international research bodies; enhance its own capacity to manage, conduct, interpret, disseminate, and apply research; and (so far as is practically possible) test and modify its policy ideas against appropriate research evidence.

The Department produced its first Research Agenda in 2014, focusing on a three-year period that ended in 2017. Since then, there have been two updates to the Agenda, one in 2017 and the other in 2020. This is the third update to the Department's Research Agenda and it now covers a five-year period from 2023 to 2028.

The DHET Research Agenda reflects the Department's approach to research and its research priorities. The themes and topics provided in the Agenda are centred around Post-School Education and Training (PSET) which is the core focus of the Department.

We encourage researchers and other stakeholders to be guided by the Research Agenda in terms of areas of research to be considered when planning future research endeavours. We also encourage stakeholders to share completed research with the Department to promote efficiency, prioritise the use of limited resources, and to signal possible partnerships that could be explored.



Dr. Mkosinathi Sishi
Director-General: Department of Higher Education and Training

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ACRONYMS

CET	Community Education and Training
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DOL	Department of Labour
GIS	Geographic Information System
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HRDC	Human Resource Development Council
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
NDP	National Development Plan
NPPSET	National Plan for Post-School Education and Training
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NSA	National Skills Authority
NSF	National Skills Fund
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
PQM	Programme Qualifications Mix
PSET	Post-School Education and Training
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SMME	Small, Medium and Micro Enterprise
SETA	Sector Education and Training Authority
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
WBL	Workplace-Based learning
WIL	Work Integrated Learning

1. INTRODUCTION

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) was established in May 2009 to administer and manage Post-School Education and Training (PSET) in South Africa. The PSET system is an important institutional mechanism that should effectively, efficiently, and successfully respond to the needs of society. The system was designed to educate and skill citizens so that they can become employable and are able to be economically self-sufficient and contribute to the socio-economic strength of the country.

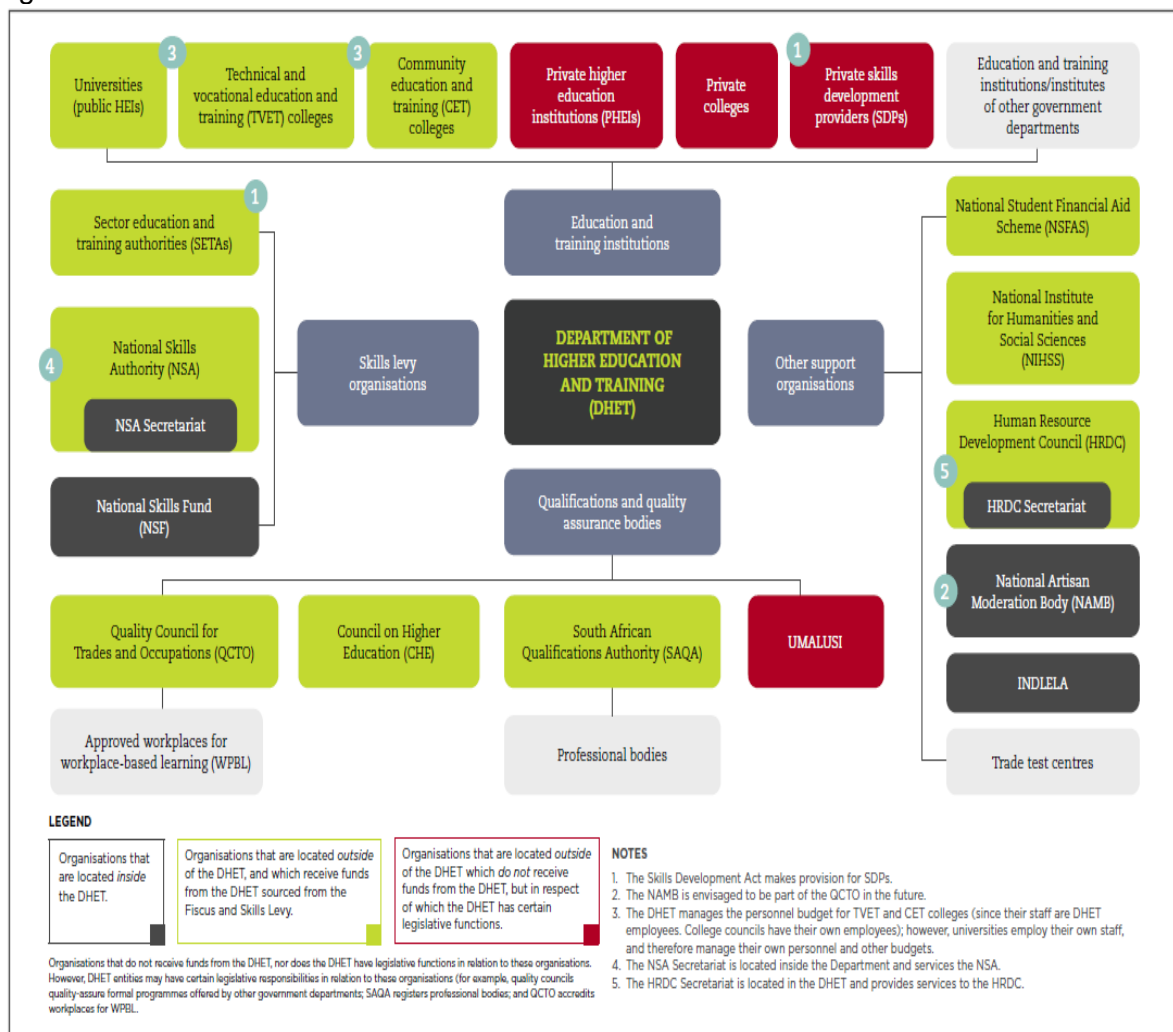
The PSET system comprises all education and training provisioning for those who have completed school, those who did not complete basic schooling, and those who never attended school. It consists of three main types of public institutions: Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Colleges and Community Education and Training (CET) Colleges, as well as private providers in the HEI, TVET and CET, sectors.

PSET institutions include the:

- 26 public HEIs;
- 50 public TVET Colleges;
- 9 CET Colleges;
- Private Colleges offering TVET qualifications;
- Private HEIs;
- 21 Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs);
- Regulatory and quality assurance bodies, including the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO), and the Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training (Umalusi);
- The National Skills Authority (NSA);
- The National Skills Fund (NSF);
- The Human Resource Development Council (HRDC), and
- The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS).

Figure 1 illustrates the various PSET institutions that the Department has oversight of.

Figure 1: PSET institutions



Source: National Plan for PSET 2021-2030 (DHET)

The Department’s vision is to have an integrated, coordinated, and articulated PSET system that will ensure improved economic participation and social development of citizens. The primary goals of the Department are, therefore, to provide access; improve success and efficiency; ensure quality provisioning of higher education and training opportunities; and improve its responsiveness to industry and the economic needs of the country.

2. CONCEPT OF RESEARCH

In this Research Agenda, “research” means rigorous and systematic enquiry and analysis. Research may be empirical or theoretical, quantitative or qualitative, applied or basic. It involves the critique of policy; in-depth analysis of regularly compiled datasets and explanations of trends; observations; case studies and other research investigations, meta-

reviews and analyses. Rigorous evaluation studies of educational and training programmes or interventions, including cost-benefit analyses and impact studies, are considered as research, as do high level analyses of statistical data.

3. IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH

Research is key to the realisation of the vision outlined in the *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* (PSET) (2013). It can provide insights into the PSET system and the constituencies it serves about the success or otherwise of policies and their implementation; and provide information and analyses about the experiences of other countries with similar challenges. It also enables practitioners to test and compare diverse theories and approaches to the provision of PSET as well as the development of leading-edge information, services and applications for the system. Most importantly, research can make available the evidence on which the Department is able to plan, make decisions, develop and review policy and improve upon the system, both in policy and in practice.

In acknowledging the value of research, the *National Development Plan* (NDP) (2011) emphasises the advantage of using new modes of knowledge production, economies of scale and opportunities presented by working across knowledge disciplines.

4. PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH AGENDA

The Research Agenda sets out the research needs of the Department for the period 2023 to 2028. The Research Agenda informs planning processes within the Department, it informs research stakeholders of the Department's research priorities, and signals to funders and development partners what areas of research require investment. It also assists the Department to guide the resource allocation for research.

5. RESEARCH-POLICY NEXUS

Research is undertaken to produce the evidence that can be used by policymakers, practitioners, programme planners and other decision-makers to improve the responsiveness, effectiveness, efficiency, and quality of PSET education. However, one of the problems experienced is the limited extent to which research findings are utilised to inform policy development. The Department therefore places significant value on research and its role in informing policy decisions.

The research-policy nexus is the engagement and interaction between researchers and policymakers on policy formulation, that is informed by rigorous evidence. The influence of research on policy and practice is indirect, long-term, and may be difficult to observe. Nevertheless, such research makes a valuable contribution to our knowledge and understanding of PSET in South Africa.

Researchers, public servants, social partners, business, industry and education and training practitioners work closely to ensure that all South Africans have access to and succeed in a high quality and relevant PSET system, to fulfil the economic and social goals of participation in an inclusive economy and society. Research must be interactive so that researchers have a better understanding of policy processes and policymakers are involved in the conceptualisation and implementation of research. There is a need for discussions on how evidence from research may be best communicated to policy makers, how good practice can be shared and how research can contribute to strengthened communities of practice.

6. RESEARCH FOCUS AREAS, THEMES AND TOPICS

The scope of the Research Agenda is therefore broad, even as the Department selects certain areas and topics for priority attention. Six focus areas have been derived from the *National Development Plan* (NDP) (2011), the *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* (PSET) (2013), and the *National Plan for Post-School Education and Training 2021-2030* (NPPSET) (2021). These areas include:

1. An integrated, coordinated and articulated PSET system.
2. Expanded access to the PSET system.
3. A responsive PSET system.
4. Education and training institutions and the world of work.
5. Quality of PSET provision.
6. Efficiency and success of the PSET system.

Whether or not a research project becomes operational will depend on a variety of factors, such as the availability of resources and research partnerships. Financial and human resources are limited and choices have to be made by both the Department and research organisations, and it is particularly important to build synergies and research partnerships in order to conserve resources, focus on agreed priorities and maximise research impact. Consultation, networking and information-sharing will help decision-makers to focus on what is both important and do-able.

The Department has identified specific themes and topics under the research focus areas that are of priority for the next five years.

a) An integrated, coordinated and articulated PSET system

The *White Paper on Post-School Education and Training* (PSET) (2013) envisages a socially just, responsive, and single coordinated system, bringing together institutions and traditions with very different histories and investments, and finding ways of making them work together towards common goals; a system that provides access to a diversity of quality opportunities and where there are vastly improved links between education and the world of work, and where students have a reasonable opportunity for achieving success.

The Department, together with SAQA and the three Quality Councils will continue to develop an enabling environment for a well-articulated PSET system. This includes working with education institutions to ensure that programmes have clear articulation pathways.

Key Themes/Topics on an integrated, coordinated and articulated PSET system

1. Articulation and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)
2. Geographic Information System (GIS) Mapping
3. Pathways from school to PSET
4. Pathways of students within the PSET system/Graduate destination studies
5. Provision of education and training at state owned entities and other government departments
6. Simplification of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)

b) Access to the PSET system

The *National Development Plan* (NDP) (2011) has set enrolment targets to increase participation in education institutions and it is crucial to address barriers to access and to seek innovative ways to expand access. Access to higher education has improved, with enrolments increasing in almost all the PSET sectors over the ten-year period from 2010 to 2022.

Equity in access to PSET programmes is important in South Africa, and it is essential to ensure that previously disadvantaged individuals, including persons with disabilities, those who live in rural areas and those in financial need, have improved access to PSET opportunities. Open learning opportunities are one of the key strategies towards expanding access to students in remote locations.

Key Themes/Topics on expanded access to the PSET system

1. Access to PSET by students with disabilities
2. Affordability of student fees
3. Availability of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructure at PSET institutions
4. Decolonisation of curricula
5. Indigenous knowledge systems
6. Evaluation of Career Development Services
7. Expansion of the private sector/ Private provision of education and training
8. Fourth Industrial Revolution and Digitisation
9. Gender, race and xenophobia in the PSET system
10. Impact of loadshedding on the PSET system
11. Improving access through articulation and Languages of teaching and learning
12. Meeting the needs of those Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET)
13. Online learning opportunities in the PSET system
14. Private providers providing student accommodation
15. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)
16. Student funding model/ Sustainable financial aid
17. Transformation in higher education
18. Use of mixed modes of learning (contact, distance, and blended) to improve access

c) A responsive PSET system

The PSET system is an important institutional mechanism that must be responsive to the needs of society. Government has developed various policies on workplace training to deal with growing skills shortages. The focus of government's skills development initiatives has been on SETAs. They have a critical role to play in linking education and training institutions with the world of work.

Cooperation is needed between PSET institutions and the world of work, focusing on partnerships between provider institutions and skills levy institutions, and provider institutions and employers. Partnerships will assist PSET institutions to locate opportunities for Workplace-Based Learning (WBL), to place students when they complete their studies, and to obtain regular workplace exposure for staff to keep them abreast of developments in industry. In addition, employers should also be able to advise the college system and individual colleges on curriculum, programme, and qualifications issues. The objective is to provide qualification programmes and curricula that are responsive to the needs of the world of work.

Key Themes/Topics on a responsive PSET system

1. Analysis of Programme Qualification Mix (PQM) in PSET
2. Career development services in the PSET system
3. Critical skills list
4. Curriculum relevance, responsiveness, and review
5. Employability, graduate employment, unemployment
6. Employer perceptions of graduates and the curriculum
7. Entrepreneurship development programmes
8. Environmental sustainability
9. Evaluations of programmes and curricula offered at PSET institutions
10. Green Hydrogen
11. New curriculum development initiatives
12. Pathways from PSET to the labour market (graduate destination studies/tracer studies)
13. Programme offerings in colleges
14. Skills for sustainable livelihoods
15. Climate change

d) Education and training institutions and the world of work

According to the *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (PSET) (2013)*, the South African PSET system suffers from negative reputation problems which are compounded by limited post-labour market prospects for graduates from both public TVET Colleges as well as universities. This is partly due to weak 'systemic' relationship between the state, the education and training provider system and the main economic actors, the employers. TVET college students will be involved in Workplace Integrated Learning (WIL) and this has been embedded in the curriculum. WIL will be undertaken in partnership with employers and may also be delivered in college facilities that meet workplace standards and practices.

Key Themes/Topics on education and training institutions and the world of work

1. Evaluation of Employment and Skills Development Agencies (ESDAs)
2. Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping and the identification of employers located near PSET institutions
3. Skills needs in the informal/township economy
4. Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs) and WBL
5. Partnerships between industry and SETAs
6. Partnerships between PSET institutions and the world of work
7. SETAs as intermediaries
8. Skills audit
9. Skills supply and demand in South Africa

10. WBL

e) Quality of PSET provision

In order to deliver on the NDP and *White Paper on Post-School Education and Training* targets for 2030, every institution across the PSET system must to improve the quality of its provisioning. The *White Paper on Post-School Education and Training* (PSET) (2013) identifies the following as some of the main contributors towards success in the PSET system:

- Quality education provided by a well-educated, capable and professional teaching staff.
- Effective student support programmes and services with adequate funding is needed.
- Universities need to support the development scarce skills areas amongst graduates.
- Curriculum development initiatives that will contribute to improved success and graduation rates
- Improvements in the living conditions and nutrition of students.

Key Themes/Topics on quality of PSET provision

1. Analysis/impact of programmes and qualifications offered at public and private PSET institutions
2. Capacity building of lecturers /Lecturer development in colleges
3. Conditions of employment of staff in PSET institutions
4. Current and projected staffing needs of PSET institutions
5. Evaluations of key DHET policies, programmes and interventions
6. Gaps in infrastructure provisions
7. Governance and management in PSET and in DHET entities
8. ICT integration in teaching and learning and capacity to use new teaching methods
9. Impact of blended learning in PSET institutions
10. Impact of student accommodation and infrastructure
11. Improving pedagogies in the PSET system, including vocational pedagogy
12. Practical work in PSET institutions
13. Qualification and curriculum development
14. Quality assurance in the PSET system
15. Quality of artisan training in Centres of Specialisation (CoS)
16. Quality of PSET lecturing staff (qualifications, experience etc)
17. Quality of teaching and learning in PSET institutions
18. Recruitment and retention of lecturers in PSET institutions
19. Student and staff perceptions of safety in PSET institutions
20. Student demand, student satisfaction, and student sentiment analysis in PSET
21. Student support programmes at PSET institutions

f) Efficiency and success in the PSET System

The *White Paper on Post-School Education and Training* (PSET) (2013) talks to the importance of improving success given that it is still generally low amongst college students, despite some improvements over the past few years. Similarly, success rates remains a challenge for the university sector. The *National Development Plan* (NDP) (2011) draws attention to the unacceptably high proportion of first-time entrants who drop out of TVET Colleges and universities in their first year, as well as the poor student graduation and pass rates. It points to the unsustainable high costs of producing graduates in South Africa which lead to a massive wastage of much-needed resources in the country and result in gross inefficiencies in the system.

Throughput rates and dropout rates are good indicators of efficiency.

Key Themes/Topics on efficiency and success in the PSET system

1. Analysis of the performance of NSFAS funded students
2. Assessment practices/efficiency in WBL programmes
3. Cost benefit analysis of PSET programmes and components
4. Dropout and retention
5. Effective resourcing of the PSET system
6. Factors affecting student performance in colleges
7. Health and wellness programmes and services to students
8. Impact of NSFAS funding
9. Student performance in WBL programmes
10. Supply and demand of lecturers
11. Quality of graduates
12. Throughput in the PSET system

9. RESEARCH FUNDING AND PROCUREMENT

There is scope for research partnerships between the Department and research organisations that have a direct interest in advancing the goals, objectives, and outcomes aimed at achieving an integrated, coordinated, expanded, responsive, cooperative, quality, efficient, successful, and articulated PSET system.

The Department is not able to fund all the research that is in the Research Agenda and therefore welcomes investment by research councils, universities, foundations, development agencies and other bodies in any of the areas listed in this Research Agenda.

The Department's procurement practice is governed by the Public Finance Management Act, 1999 (Act 1 of 1999) and Treasury Regulations. Therefore, procurement decisions on research provision will combine considerations of cost, functionality, and quality. The Department intends to fund research within the scope of its own financial resources. Research topics, whose terms of reference are specified by the Department as part of this Agenda, will be commissioned and funded by the Department.

10. CONCLUSION

The Department has a vital interest in the production, management, dissemination and utilisation of knowledge that will help to enhance the quality, quantity and diversity of PSET in South Africa. This document relates the Department's interests to the broader interests of the research community; positions the Department as an active contributor to that community; helps sharpen the focus and improve the quality and effectiveness of departmentally driven research; and describes the instruments the Department will use to accomplish its research tasks in collaboration the research community at large.

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