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BELA Act paves the way for decolonised, multilingual education in SA – UCT scholars

Education scholars at the University of Cape Town (UCT) have lauded the implementation of the Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Act and the Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education (MTbBE). There is general consensus that the law will advance multilingual education, improve governance and ensure inclusive learning environments for all students.

Professor Lolie Makhubu-Badenhorst, the director of the [Multilingualism Education Project \(MEP\)](#) in the [Centre for Higher Education Development \(CHED\)](#), described the BELA Act as a much-needed update to the South African Schools Act of 1996 and the Employment of Educators Act of 1998.

She said the Act strengthened provisions for language policy in schools, a particularly pertinent change as 21 February marks International Mother Language Day, a UNESCO-recognised celebration of linguistic diversity.

“However, UCT will be celebrating the day on 27 February when the newly approved UCT multilingual language policy will be launched. We view the timing of the BELA Act passing as opportune following the approval of the multilingual language policy and the framework for its implementation by the UCT Council. Processes for assisting faculties and professional, administrative & support staff (PASS) divisions with the language implementation plans are under way,” said Makhubu-Badenhorst.

The Act introduces the compulsory enrolment of learners in Grade R, ensuring all schools admit students from this foundational level. This is a critical step in addressing early childhood education disparities. The Act also shifts the responsibility for educator appointments from school governing bodies (SGBs) to government officials. This shift may encounter resistance from certain schools and stakeholders, said Makhubu-Badenhorst.

She said schools will have to adequately budget for recruiting suitably qualified educators, particularly for African indigenous languages (AILs), also stressing that South Africa’s 12 official languages, including South African Sign Language (SASL), must be fully integrated into the curriculum.

MTbBE: A long-awaited milestone

Dr Xolisa Guzula, a leading language and early biliteracy expert in the School of Education, regards the BELA Act as a groundbreaking step towards fulfilling South Africa's long-overdue commitment to multilingual education.

Guzula said the late Dr Neville Alexander – an acclaimed linguist, academic and anti-apartheid struggle veteran – must be happy in his grave as he envisioned a system where African language-speaking children could learn in their mother tongues beyond Grade 3, rather than being forced into an English-only medium from Grade 4 onwards.

"This enforced switch to English medium in Grade 4 was happening during apartheid and has continued for 30 years post-apartheid even though we have a Language-in-Education Policy of 1997 (LiEP,1997) that promotes bilingual and multilingual education.

"Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education is about equity," said Guzula. "It ensures that learners grasp mathematical, scientific and social sciences concepts in languages they understand while acquiring proficiency in English." She believes this approach will not only improve literacy and meaning making but also foster deeper engagement with academic content.

"There are many other factors that must be addressed simultaneously, including teacher training, effective pedagogies, content knowledge and the provision of conducive learning environments," she cautioned.

Currently, English and Afrikaans teachers receive training in their respective languages, whereas educators teaching literacy in African languages are often trained in English, with the exception of a few Foundation Phase B.Ed programmes that have begun training teachers in isiXhosa.

"This discrepancy must be corrected not only in the foundation phase, but for the rest of schooling if we want to create truly multilingual education systems," said Guzula.

Schools can also not discriminate against learners based on language, a measure that has drawn criticism from some. "Parallel and dual-medium schools have long existed for white English and Afrikaans learners. There's no reason why African language speakers should not have the same opportunities," said Guzula.

The formal recognition of translanguaging practices among educators has also been welcome. The MTbBE being implemented legitimises these practices, allowing for bilingual learning and assessments that align with real-world language usage.

Makhubu-Badenhorst and Guzula envision a South Africa where multilingualism becomes the norm. "In provinces like the Western Cape, learners should graduate fluent in isiXhosa, English and Afrikaans," said Guzula. This will eliminate the current crisis where medical professionals, social workers and educators are unable to communicate effectively with non-English speakers."

The BELA Act has the potential to accelerate the development of African languages as academic languages at universities and prepare ground for decolonised education.

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