

NEWS RELEASE

Barriers to learning: Visually impaired learners left behind by education system, experts warn at national Principals Forum



Prof Ronél Ferreira (2nd from the right) with participants from the 2025 Principals Forum, at UP's Groenkloof Campus.

PRETORIA - Thousands of visually impaired learners in South Africa are being excluded from meaningful access to education and future employment opportunities due to persistent systemic barriers. This was the urgent message at the recent 2025 Principals Forum, a national platform that brings together principals from the country's 23 schools for the blind and partially sighted, as well as education experts and policymakers.

The annual Principals Forum, arranged by the [South African National Council for the Blind](#) (SANCB), was hosted at the University of Pretoria's [Groenkloof Campus](#) ([Faculty of Education](#)) in May 2025.

Attendees heard that, despite some progress, many learners still lack access to basic tools such as braille textbooks, assistive technology, and teachers trained to meet their learning needs.

One of the most significant barriers is access to pure Mathematics – a critical subject for university admission and future participation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) careers. In some cases, schools for visually impaired learners do not offer any STEM subjects at all.

“Schools struggle to find educators who are equipped to teach Mathematics in braille,” said [Professor Ronél Ferreira](#), Director of the Centre for Visual Impairment Studies at the University of Pretoria (UP). “As a result, some learners are unable to access higher education – not due to a lack of academic potential, but because of gaps in systemic support.”

Critical issues

Another urgent issue is one of capacity. According to the SANCB, South Africa has a significant population of people with visual impairments, and the country’s 23 specialist schools serve thousands of learners, but the demand for services and support far exceeds the current capacity.

“As SANCB, we have been trying through these forums to get this critical issue addressed,” said Joseph Mabanga, SANCB Education and Training Officer. “Without proper resources, training, and policy support, these learners continue to face systemic barriers, limiting their opportunities for meaningful participation in STEM fields and future employment.”

The forum also highlighted how issues of access extend beyond subjects and into core aspects of the education system, such as language of instruction, discipline and teacher readiness. Many visually impaired learners are taught in languages they are unfamiliar with – and they are expected to master both the language and the curriculum at the same time. This dual challenge, combined with a lack of braille proficiency among teachers, creates an additional barrier to learning.

Prof Ferreira called for increased focus on braille training for all educators, saying “many teachers still aren’t adequately equipped to support learners who are blind or visually impaired”. This would also help change the public’s thinking about learners with special educational needs.

“We should move away from the idea that a learner with a visual impairment should only be accommodated in a school for the blind. A learner with visual impairments can function well in a full-service school,” she said. “But we sit with educators that don’t know. They’re uncertain, and they kind of want to avoid dealing with children who are living with an impairment.”

That avoidance, she said, is rooted in uncertainty and fear. “We have an inclusive education policy, but teachers still don’t know how to implement it. Some teachers still believe the government needs to provide resources for them to be able to effectively implement policy. It’s time that we start asking ourselves: What do we have in ourselves, and among ourselves, that we can contribute?”

She issued a call to action for educators and principals: “We must stop seeing disability as a barrier to success. These learners are bright. They just need to be seen, supported and believed in.”

During discussions about recent amendments to the [Basic Education Laws Amendment \(BELA\)](#) Bill, participants expressed concern that teachers had not been properly prepared for changes related to discipline, language policy and school governance. Dipolelo Tema, Principal of the Bosele School for the Blind and Deaf in Limpopo, urged school leaders to update their language policies in line with the new law and work more closely with school governing bodies to ensure compliance.

Finding solutions

As the forum turned to possible solutions, speakers called for better training and support for teachers, both in pre-service university programmes and through continuous professional development and research into how teachers can be better trained to teach STEM subjects in senior and further education phases (Grades 7 to 12).

Prof Ferreira said modules in inclusive education should be standard in teacher training, and she highlighted the Advanced Diploma in Visual Impairment Studies offered by UP as an example of how universities can support schools in creating more inclusive classrooms.

Changing societal attitudes is also key. “We still sit with stigma in South Africa,” she said. “We still have communities and families that hide children and do not take them to school because they’re ashamed. That’s a whole paradigm shift that’s required.”

The forum had opened with a provocative question from [Professor Lindelani Mnguni](#), Dean of the Faculty of Education at UP: “Is the curriculum you are currently using in your school preparing the child in Grade 1 today to thrive in 2040?”

He reminded delegates that a six-year-old starting school in 2025 would be 21 in 2040 – entering a world where artificial intelligence could be the norm, the climate crisis has intensified, and South Africa’s economy has evolved in unpredictable ways. “We can’t predict what 2035 or 2040 will look like,” he said. “But the question is: Can we prepare for it?”

The 2025 Principals Forum left no doubt that for learners with visual impairments, the answer will depend on urgent, sustained and systemic reform.

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the [Gordon Institute of Business Science](#) (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a [Faculty of Veterinary Science](#), which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The 2025 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of [Accounting](#) and [Finance](#); [Architecture](#); [Electrical and Electronic Engineering](#); Law; Sport Science; and Veterinary Science. UP’s Faculty of Law has been ranked as the top law school in Africa for a remarkable eighth consecutive year.

Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their [2024 World University Rankings \(WUR\)](#). UP was the only South African university featured in the [2023 World University Rankings for Innovation \(WURI\)](#), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

For more information, please go to www.up.ac.za