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## A Critical Moment for Youth Inclusion: Reflecting on the Q1: 2026 Labour Force Survey



The release of the [Quarterly Labour Force Survey \(QLFS\) for Q1:2026](#) by Statistics South Africa serves as a sobering reminder of the structural challenges we face. With the national unemployment rate climbing to **32.7%**, the data confirms that our economy is currently shedding jobs faster than it can create them, with a net loss of 345,000 positions in just three months.

While the national outlook is difficult, the burden remains disproportionately concentrated on young South Africans:

- **Youth unemployment:** Stands at **60.9%** among those aged 15–24, followed by **40.6%** among individuals aged 25–34.
- **The NEET Gap:** **45.6%** of youth aged 15–34 are currently Not in Employment, Education, or Training.
- **The Gender Divide:** Young women continue to be the most vulnerable, with a NEET rate of **39.2%** for those aged 15–24, significantly higher than their male counterparts.

## What the Data Tells Us to Do Next

These figures are not just data points; they reflect the lived realities shaping the prospects of the next generation of our workforce. However, amidst these challenges, there are clear signals of where our collective focus must lie:

- **Resilience in Industry:** Mining and Manufacturing were among the few sectors to show growth. We must intensify efforts to better align technical training with these specific value chains.
- **The TVET Mandate:** With the absorption rate for the youngest cohort sitting at a low 10.1%, the role of **Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET)** institutions has never been more vital. We must bridge the gap between “graduating” and “participating”.
- **Economic Inclusion:** We cannot rely on growth alone to address this. It requires intentional interventions, such as the **Installation, Repair and Maintenance (IRM) Initiative**, that create practical pathways into both the formal and informal economy.



## Aligning with the National Mandate

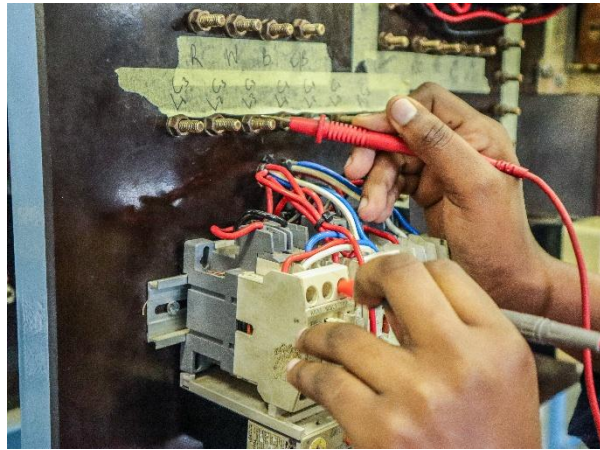


It is worth noting that the QLFS survey also comes after a period of growing policy alignment and renewed commitments at the highest levels of leadership. In his State of the Nation Address (SONA) earlier this year, President Cyril Ramaphosa **reaffirmed** skills development as a national priority, noting that the groundwork is being laid for a national “skills revolution”. Central to this vision is the positioning of TVET colleges as key sites for occupational training and artisan development, closely linked to the practical skills needs of the economy.

Building on this direction, the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Buti Manamela, **reinforced** the call for stronger collaboration with the private sector at the recent Human Resource Development Council Summit. The Minister emphasised the importance of deepening public-private partnerships to strengthen skills pipelines and improve pathways into employment.

The labour market trends reflected in the Q1 2026 data underscore the importance of this shared responsibility.

For organisations such as the **National Business Initiative (NBI)**, working to advance economic inclusion, the current labour market realities reinforce the importance of practical, coordinated interventions that strengthen pathways into economic participation.



This moment calls for stronger alignment between skills development, labour market demand and inclusive economic opportunities, ensuring that more young people are equipped not only to access work, but to participate meaningfully in the country's economic future.

