PARLIAMENT
OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

2026 BUDGET

EDUCATION AND RECREATION CLUSTER

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 2026 BUDGET: EDUCATION AND RECREATION CLUSTER

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PARLIAMENTARY RESEARCH UNIT (PRU)
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HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 2026 BUDGET: EDUCATION AND RECREATION CLUSTER

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1. 2026 BUDGET HIGHLIGHTS

The 2026 Budget review projects that, social services expenditure which includes learning and culture function will receive approximately R1.6 trillion in 2026/27 financial year. Government expenditure towards learning and culture function is projected to increase from R527.2 billion to R568.7 billion in 2028/29, representing an average growth of 3.4 per cent over the medium term This function constitutes the largest component of the consolidated government expenditure by function and includes basic education, post-school education and training, and sport, arts and culture.

Of the overall budget of **R2.67 trillion**, a total of **R527.2 billion (23.7%) *** is allocated to departments within the Education and Recreation Cluster

* Excludes direct charges against National Revenue Fund (NRF).

The basic education component remains the largest government spending and receives R358.6 billion or 68.1 per cent of total allocations. Spending on post school education and training grows by 2.2 per cent over the medium term. Notably, basic education forms a central part of the social wage supporting millions of learners.

Over the medium-term expenditure framework (MTEF), provincial education budgets grow by 4.2 per cent. Provinces' spending is dominated by compensation of employees, at 77.7 per cent. The National School Nutrition Programme provides meals to over 9.9 million learners in 19 800 schools. Allocations to the programme grow by 4.5 per cent to R33.9 billion over the medium term and have not been adjusted for the lower inflation outlook given that food price inflation is higher than the overall inflation rate. Expenditure on early childhood development increases from R12.2 billion in 2025/26 to R18 billion over the medium term[1]. This will enable early childhood development services to be expanded to an additional 300 000 children. Spending on post-school education and training grows by 2.2 per cent over the medium term.

The National Student Financial Aid Scheme has been allocated R54.3 billion in 2026/27 to provide bursaries to enable 744 203 poor and academically deserving students to access universities and technical and vocational education and training colleges. The skills development levy paid by employers funds the sector education and training authorities and the National Skills Fund to provide skills development and training. Levy income is projected to be R88.2 billion over the 2026 MTEF period. These institutions are struggling to deliver the skills required to drive economic growth. The National Treasury has commissioned the Government Technical Advisory Centre to conduct a comprehensive review of the national skills ecosystem in the year ahead.

Arts, culture, sport and recreation have been allocated R38.5 billion over the medium term to support school sports; promote cultural, heritage and linguistic diversity; and foster nation-building and social cohesion.

The Cluster has four departments under its purview. Table 1 shows the 2025/26 main and adjusted appropriation, the 2026/27 main appropriation, and percentage increases for each vote under the Education and Recreation Cluster, as well as the share of total appropriated funds.

[1] Based on the Budget Review.

Table 1: Departments within the Education and Recreation Cluster

Vote	Department R million	2025/26 Main Appropriation	2025/26 Adjusted Appropriation	2026 /27 Appropriation	2025/26-2026/27[2] Percentage Increase/ Decrease	2026/27 Percentage Share of Total Appropriated Funds per Vote
16	Basic Education	35 489,2	38 258,3	38 225,9	-0,1%	3,1%
17	Higher Education	116 441,7	116 441,7	121 571,3	4,4%	10,0%
35	Science, Technology, and Innovation	9 063,7	9 397,7	10 439,6	11,1%	0,9%
37	Sport, Arts, and Culture	6 309,9	6 309,9	6 617,3	4,9%	0,5%
	Total	**167 304,6**	**170 407,7**	**176 854,1**	**3,8%**	14.6%

2. VOTE 16: BASIC EDUCATION

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) receives R38.2 billion in 2026/27, representing a decrease of 0.1 per cent compared to R35.53 billion in the 2025/26 adjusted appropriation, increasing to R41.1 billion in 2027/28 and R42.5 billion in 2028/29. This funding supports the Department's mandate to provide quality basic education for all and develop a modern South African schooling system. The Vote has five Programmes:

- Administration
- Curriculum Policy, Support and Monitoring
- Resources and Institutional Development
- Planning, Information, and Assessment
- Educational Enrichment Services

2.1. MTEF FOCUS AREAS[3]

DBE will focus on the following areas over the MTEF:

- Improving school infrastructure.
- Enhancing teaching and learning.
- Providing skills and competencies for a changing world.
- Improving ECD services.
- Providing nutritious meals for learners.

2.2. ALIGNMENT TO THE 2026 SONA FOCUS AREAS AND MTEF PRIORITIES

The 2026 Budget Speech operationalizes SONA priorities through:

- Targeted ECD investment.
- Funding for foundational learning.
- Language policy implementation.
- Teacher development programmes.
- Nutrition and social support funding.

[2] Based on the adjusted allocations.
[3] ENE, 2026.

- Infrastructure investment.

However, alignment is strongest at the policy design level, while success will depend on implementation capacity and provincial execution.

The relationship between the 2026 SONA and the Basic Education budget demonstrates a classic policy cycle dynamic. SONA sets developmental direction, while the budget converts vision into resource allocation. The coherence between the two reflects a government strategy centred on human capital development within constrained fiscal space. Yet, the decisive test of alignment lies not in policy consistency, but in whether funded programmes translate into improved classroom outcomes and reduced educational inequality.

Table 2: SONA[4] and MTEF priorities for Vote 35 and funds allocated to the priorities

SONA PRIORITIES	MTEF PRIORITIES	ALLOCATED BUDGET[5]
• Early childhood development and compulsory Grade R • Literacy and numeracy in early grades • Mother-tongue-based bilingual education • Learner retention and subject participation • Stronger links between schooling, skills, and employment • Expanded post-school access • Socio-economic support for effective learning	• Fiscal discipline prioritization. • Human capital development as a growth strategy • Early Childhood Development and Preventive Spending. • Focus on outcomes, not just expenditure. • Social protection and learning conditions. • Infrastructure investment and service delivery. • Managing trade-offs and constraints.	Among other priorities: • R2,1 billion towards the building of additional classrooms and safe sanitation to 50 schools. • R57 million for the printing of Grade R-9 workbooks. • R4 billion over the medium term for 29 831 Funza Lushaka bursaries. • R6,3 billion over the medium term for subsidies for children accessing ECD. • R210 million over the medium term for ECD infrastructure support. • R325.5 million to fund National Science Month and career exhibitions and provide operational support for science centers over the medium term. • R85 million over the MTEF period is directed towards advancing indigenous knowledge systems over the MTEF period. • R32.4 billion towards national nutrition programme to feed 9 million pupils in 19800 schools each year.
R9.9 billion is allocated to compensation of employees and other pressures in education	• Enhancing teaching and learning ○ Training teachers in bilingual and mother tongue teaching and assessment methods ○ providing support material to allow leaners to access mathematics, science and technology	• R95 million is allocated over the MTEF in the Curriculum Policy, Support and Monitoring Programme • R4.1 billion is allocated to the Programme over MTEF for printing and delivering mathematics and literacy books

[4] SONA, 2026.
[5] Figures from the ENE.

	instruction in home language	• The Department plans to award 29 900 Funza Lushaka bursaries over the MTEF to prospective teachers at a cost of E4.1 billion in the Teachers, Education Human Resources and Institutional Development Programme
• Early childhood development grant receives an additional R12.8 billion over the next three years expanding service to an additional 300 000 children to assist in maintaining the increased per child, per day subsidy of R24 introduced in 2025/26	• Improving ECD services	• ECD grant is allocated R18.6 billion over the MTEF which includes an additional R12.8 billion to subsidise the provision of these services and offer infrastructure support to ECD providers, providing for an increase in subsidy from R17 to R24 per child, per day to enable 300 000 more children to access subsidized ECD services
• The increased allocations align the National School Nutrition Programme to food inflation to continue providing meals for over 9.9 million learners in almost 20 000 schools.	• Providing nutritious meals for learners	• The Department provides nutritious meals to more than 9.9 million in 19800 schools. • The programme is funded through the national school nutrition programme grant, which is allocated R33.9 billion over the MTEF period. • A further R772.4 million over the MTEF is earmarked in the Curriculum Policy, Support and Monitoring Programme
	• Improving school infrastructure	• R50.4 billion over the MTEF period is allocated to the education infrastructure grant and the schools infrastructure backlogs grant. • The school's infrastructure grant will be incorporated into the education infrastructure grant as all infrastructure projects managed by the national department were expected to be completed by the end of 2025/26.

2.3. CRITICAL ISSUES FOR OVERSIGHT

The following issues should be considered by the Committee:

2.3.1 IMPLIMENTATION OF BASIC EDUCATION REFORMS

Parliament must closely oversee:
- The rollout of **compulsory** Grade R
- Expansion and regulation of Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres
- Delivery of literacy, numeracy, and mother-tongue-based bilingual education reforms

Oversight is critical to ensure that policy commitments translate into improved classroom outcomes, especially in under-resourced provinces.

2.3.2 EDUCATION OUTCOMES BEYOND HEADLINE INDICATORS

While the President reported an 88 percent matric pass rate, Parliament should interrogate:
- Learner dropout rates, particularly in Grades 10–11
- Access to and performance in mathematics and science
- Quality differentials between schools

This guards against over-reliance on aggregate pass rates that may mask systemic inequality.

2.3.3 ALIGNMENT BETWEEN BUDGET ALLOCATION AND POLICY COMMITMENTS

Parliamentary committees must scrutinize:
- Whether MTBPS and annual budget allocations adequately support SONA commitments
- Efficiency and equity in provincial education spending
- Conditional grants linked to ECD, nutrition, and school infrastructure

3. VOTE 17: HIGHER EDUCATION

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) receives R121.5 billion in 2026/27 which is an increase of 4.4% compared to the 2025/26 adjusted budget of R116.4 billion, increasing to R127.1 billion in 2027/28 and R131 billion in 2028/29. The Vote has six Programmes:

- Programme 1: Administration
- Programme 2: Planning Policy and Strategy
- Programme 3: University Education
- Programme 4: Technical and Vocational Education and Training
- Programme 5: Skills Development
- Programme 6: Community Education and Training

3.1. MTEF FOCUS AREAS[6]

Will focus on the following areas over the MTEF:

- Upgrading ailing infrastructure at higher education institutions;
- Providing bursaries and loans to deserving students; and
- Subsidising higher education institutions.

3.2. ALIGNMENT TO THE 2026 SONA FOCUS AREAS AND MTEF PRIORITIES

The SONA of 2026 outlined the following areas pertaining to Higher Education and Training:

- Reform and modernise the skills system;
- Expand access to public technical and vocational training (TVET) and higher education;
- Strengthening work-integrated learning and youth employment pathways;
- Align skills to growth sectors and industrial policy; and
- Build an inclusive, transformation-driven post-school system.

Table 2: SONA[7] and MTEF priorities for Vote 17 and funds allocated to the priorities

SONA PRIORITIES	MTEF PRIORITIES	ALLOCATED BUDGET[8]
• Reform and modernise the skills system; • Expand access to TVET and higher education; • Strengthening work-integrated learning and youth employment pathways; • Align skills to growth sectors and industrial policy; and • Build an inclusive, transformation-driven post-school system.	• Upgrading ailing infrastructure at higher education institutions.	• R3.9 billion over the medium term is allocated for the University infrastructure and efficiency grant. • R2.1 billion over the medium term is allocated for the TVET infrastructure and efficiency grant. • R676 million in the Planning, Policy and Strategy programme will be used to construct basic skills centres, classrooms, workshops and ICT laboratories at community education and training (CET) colleges.

[6] ENE, 2026.
[7] SONA, 2026.
[8] Figures from the ENE.

	• Providing bursaries and loans to deserving students.	• NSFAS allocation is R50.5 billion in 2026/27. The department will provide bursaries and loans to students from families earning below R350 000 per year through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, in line with the available funds.
	• Subsidising higher education institutions.	• Subsidies to the 26 universities constitute an estimated 35.9 per cent (R152 billion over the MTEF). • Subsidies to 50 TVET colleges, including for the operationalisation of new campuses, account for an estimated 3.5 per cent (R15 billion).

3.3. CRITICAL ISSUES FOR OVERSIGHT

The following issues must be considered by the Committee:

- Infrastructure backlogs remain severe across universities, TVET and CET colleges, despite increased allocations for the University Infrastructure Grant and TVET Infrastructure Grant. Persistent delays, capacity constraints and aging facilities threaten service delivery and access.
- NSFAS faces continuing governance, financial control and system related weaknesses, affecting timely disbursement, appeals management and data integrity. Sustainability pressures remain despite a R53.4 billion allocation for student funding.
- TVET college system performance remains low, with stagnant enrolment (520,000 projected), weak certification rates, slow curriculum modernisation and ongoing governance and financial irregularities across colleges.
- CET colleges continue to underperform, with declining enrolments, inadequate funding and persistent governance weaknesses, limiting their ability to deliver adult and community learning programmes.
- Academic and lecturer capacity constraints persist, particularly in TVET and CET sectors, where lecturer numbers, qualifications and training lag behind system needs. University staffing also requires renewal and demographic transformation.
- Work integrated learning and labour market alignment remain inadequate, with inconsistent placement outcomes across sector education and training authorities (SETAs) and post school institutions, despite SONA's call to modernise the skills system and expand youth employment pathways.
- Governance weaknesses in DHET entities: (NSFAS, Quality Council for Trades (QCTO), South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), SETAs) persist, including irregular expenditure, overlapping mandates, poor risk controls and uneven performance, requiring stronger departmental oversight.
- Digital transformation gaps and ICT vulnerabilities across NSFAS, SAQA, TVET and CET systems pose risks to data quality, cybersecurity and programme efficiency, limiting progress toward a modernised skills system.
- Alignment with SONA 2026 priorities: Expanding access, modernising skills, and supporting growth sectors remains uneven, with several programmes underperforming relative to national development commitments.

4. VOTE 35: SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION

The Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI) receives R10.4 billion in 2026/27 which is an increase of 15.2% compared to R9.1 billion in the previous financial year, increasing to R10.8 billion in 2027/28 and R11.1 billion in 2028/29. The Vote has five Programmes:

- Administration
- Technology Innovation
- International Cooperation and Resources
- Research Development and Support
- Socioeconomic Innovation Partnerships

4.1. MTEF FOCUS AREAS[9]

Will focus on the following areas over the MTEF:

- Providing targeted postgraduate development, infrastructure investment and research support
- Advancing science missions with maximum developmental impact
- Strengthening the long-term health and competitiveness of the national system of innovation

4.2. ALIGNMENT TO THE 2026 SONA FOCUS AREAS AND MTEF PRIORITIES

The 2026 Budget Speech and the 2026 SONA and related debates do not specifically mention the Science, technology and Innovation priorities or allocate funding directly to it. However, there are references to initiatives related to science, technology, and innovation:

- Data Infrastructure and Artificial Intelligence
- Payments Ecosystem Modernisation (PEM)

Table 2: SONA[10] and MTEF priorities for Vote 35 and funds allocated to the priorities

SONA PRIORITIES	MTEF PRIORITIES	ALLOCATED BUDGET[11]
Although SONA did not specifically provide standalone STI priorities, multiple commitments directly relate to South Africa's science and innovation system. These priorities are embedded across the President's focus on digital transformation, energy reform, crime-fighting technology, infrastructure modernisation, and skills development.	• Provide targeted postgraduate development, infrastructure investment and research support	Amongst other priorities: • R4.9 billion towards doctoral bursaries and pipeline postgraduate scholarships over the period ahead • R2.9 billion for national research facilities over the MTEF period
	• Advancing science missions with maximum development impact	• R6.2 billion over the medium term for the development of human capital and targeted socioeconomic development linked to the field of astronomy

[9] ENE, 2026.
[10] SONA, 2026.
[11] Figures from the ENE.

		• R828.8 million over the medium term in human capital, research infrastructure, knowledge generation, partnership projects and targeted socioeconomic development intervention
	• Strengthening the long-term health and competitiveness of the national system of innovation	• R325.5 million to fund National Science Month and career exhibitions, and provide operational support for science centers over the medium term • R85 million over the MTEF period is directed towards advancing indigenous knowledge systems over the MTEF period

4.3. CRITICAL ISSUES FOR OVERSIGHT

The following issues should be considered by the Committee:

- **Declining Resources and Funding:** the National System of Innovation (NSI) faces underfunding and there is concerning decline in available resources for research.
- **Translating of Research (Commercialisation)**: Significant barriers exist in moving innovations from the lab to the Markert, including funding for startups and navigating regulatory frameworks.
- **Poor Local Coordination:** Theres is insufficient coordination of science and technology efforts at provincial and municipal levels.
- **Dependency on Foreign Funding:** A reliance on international funding, particularly from the global North, poses a risk to national sovereignty and research stability those partners withdraw support.
- **Square Kilometre Array and other large expenditure projects:** Total expenditure is expected to increase at an average annual rate of 5.8 per cent, from R9.4 billion in 2025/26 to R11.1 billion in 2028/29. This is attributed to baseline increases amounting to R3 billion over the MTEF period for the Square Kilometre Array. This should be prioritised as part of the focus on infrastructure expenditure during oversight.
- **Entities responsible for key deliverables:** Transfers and subsidies to the department's entities account for an estimated 92.8 per cent (R30 billion) of total expenditure over the period ahead. These funds are intended to support entities in carrying out various research and development projects, maintaining national research infrastructure and administering grants for scientific research.
- **Compensation of employees vs. achievement of targets and priorities:** The department's second-largest cost driver is compensation of employees, spending on which is expected to increase at an average annual rate of 4.1 per cent, from R386.7 million in 2025/26 to R435.9 million in 2028/29.
- **Holistic impact in South Africa:** Overall involvement of the DSTI in contributing towards an era of prosperity and growth in relation to plans and actual expenditure. This should be prioritised to

keep track of the level of integration of science, technology and innovation being achieved across all spheres as influenced by the DSTI.

- **Future readiness:** Evaluate the ‘Future skills’ development involvement of the DSTI in terms of plans, entities, projects and expenditure. This should be prioritised to maintain a focus on skills transfer and development from school level, learnerships and higher education within the context of science, technology and innovation.
- **Impact of legislation in a STI context**: Conduct a critical assessment of all legislation, policies and plans noted during SONA with reference to key MTEF priorities and plans to be presented in Annual Performance Plans. This should be prioritised to verify the holistic impact achieved from a legislative context as influenced by the DSTI.

5. VOTE 37: SPORT, ARTS AND CULTURE

The Department of Sport, Arts and Culture (DSAC) receives a budget of R6.6 billion which is an increase of 4,9% compared to R6.3 billion in 2025/26. In 2027/28, DSAC's budget will increase to R6.4 billion in 2027/28 and R6.6 billion in 2028/29 DSAC has the following programmes:

- Administration;
- Recreation Development and Sport Promotion;
- Arts and Culture Promotion and Development; and
- Heritage Promotion and Preservation.

5.1. MTEF FOCUS AREAS[12]

DSAC will focus on the following areas over the MTEF:

- Unlocking economic impact and job creation;
- Promoting social cohesion and national identity;
- Driving transformation and professional capability;
- Expanding access to infrastructure; and
- Developing participation in sport and recreation.

5.2. ALIGNMENT TO THE 2026 SONA FOCUS AREAS AND MTEF PRIORITIES

The 2026 State of the Nation Address (SONA) affirms sport as a unifying and nation-building instrument, highlighting "*the unifying power of sport*" in strengthening social cohesion. The priority areas emerging from the 2026 SONA were: i) sport plays an instrumental role towards the National Dialogue and social cohesion; and ii) sport is positioned as a strategic powerhouse tool to enhance social cohesion, identify formation and unify constitutional values of the Republic of South Africa. However, SONA 2026 does not introduce new sport-specific fiscal commitments or sectoral expansions. This position is consistent with the fiscal consolidation framework set out by the President in the 2025 Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement (MTBPS).

Table 2: SONA[13] and MTEF priorities for Vote 35 and funds allocated to the priorities

SONA PRIORITIES	MTEF PRIORITIES	ALLOCATED BUDGET[14]
• Sport plays an instrumental role towards the National Dialogue and social cohesion. • Sport is positioned as a strategic powerhouse tool to enhance social cohesion, identify formation and unify constitutional values of the Republic of South Africa.	**Unlocking economic impact and job creation**	• R400 million in 2026/27 is towards the Presidential creative industries stimulus programme to create an estimated 27 000 job opportunities. • R96 million over the medium term is allocated towards providing 9 provincial community arts development programmes with technical and financial assistance for diverse arts initiatives delivered through provincial agencies. • R492 million over the medium term (R201 million is towards Cultural and Creative Industries Development, R23 million is aimed at advocating programmes with inclusion, skills development and transformation of young people.

12 ENE, 2026.

13 SONA, 2026

14 Figures from the ENE

		• R100 million in 2026/27 is allocated in the *Winning Nation* subprogramme in the *Recreation Development and Sport Promotion* programme for the licence fees to host the LIV Golf South Africa tournament in March 2026.
	Promoting social cohesion and national identity	• R156.8 million is allocated over the MTEF towards implementing initiatives that promote dialogue across social divides and commemorate national heritage, including 15 community conversations and 6 national days. • R9 million is set aside over the MTEF to implement 90 public awareness initiatives to raise awareness of national symbols and distribute 1 050 flags to educational institutions and other beneficiaries.
	Driving transformation and professional capability	• R42.4 million is allocated to support 12 human language technology projects over the medium term. • R17.2 million is allocated to support 420 university students studying languages. • R17 million is aimed at awarding 135 heritage bursaries over the next 3 years. • R80.9 million is allocated to the subprogramme over the medium term to fund the mass participation and sport development grant. • R367.3 million is allocated to support 60 national sport federations with training and participate in competitions, as well as for administrative functions over the next medium term.
	Expanding access to infrastructure	• R5.6 million over the medium term is allocated in the 2026 financial year to Infrastructure Support subprogramme in the Recreation Development and Sport Promotion programme to complete the Bombed Clinic at Winnie Madikizela-Mandela House in Free State and develop the Sarah Baartman Centre of Remembrance in Eastern Cape. • R178.7 million was set aside in 2026/27 to support the construction of 18 new or modular libraries to instill a culture of reading and learning.
	Developing participation in sport and recreation	• R48.7 million was allocated to supporting 600 sport and recreation programmes in communities to develop and enhance lifelong and wellbeing of South Africans over the medium term. • Over the medium term, R189 million is set aside to support 624 school sport programmes at district and/or local level, R220 million to enable 15 000 learners to compete in the national school sport championship, R248

		million is aimed at the provision of equipment and/or attire to 10 500 hubs, clubs or schools.

5.3. CRITICAL ISSUES FOR OVERSIGHT

The following issues should be considered by the Committee:

The President during SONA announced a number of anniversaries such as the

- 70th anniversary of the Women's March to the Union Buildings to protest the extension of the Pass Laws to women;
- 60th anniversary of the destruction of District Six and the forced removals thereof; and
- 50 years of the June 16 Soweto Uprising, when students in primary and secondary schools boycotted classes to protest the system of Bantu Education's imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction.

- Provisions that will be made available to mark these events mentioned above should be closely monitored.
- Assess how the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture (DSAC) is formally integrating sport into the National Dialogue process;
- Monitor measurable outcomes demonstrating sport's contribution to dialogue, unity and shared national purpose;
- Evaluate whether sport development programmes are intentionally designed to promote non-racialism, non-sexism and constitutional values;
- Review funding allocations to ensure equitable access across all nine provinces, particularly the rural areas and townships; and
- Monitor transformation targets and diversity within sport structures to ensure alignment with constitutional imperatives.

Sithabiso Buthelezi
Chief Researcher
sibuthelezi@parliament.gov.za

Cluster Researchers
Linda Stofile
Senior Researcher
lstofile@parliament.gov.za

Madimetja Kekana
Researcher: Basic Education
mkekana@parliament.gov.za

Agnetha Arendse
Researcher: Higher Education and Training
aarendse@parliament.gov.za

Jacques Verster
Researcher: Education & Technology
jverster@parliament.gov.za

Lindinxiwa Mahlasela
Researcher: Arts and Culture
lmahlsela@parliament.gov.za

Jakobo Jacob Moroe
Researcher: Sport
jmoroe@parliament.gov.za

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sibuthelezi@parliament.gov.za