



higher education & training

Department:
Higher Education and Training
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Statement by Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr BE Nzimande after meeting Higher Education Stakeholders

Pretoria, 26 January 2017

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, and thank you very much for making it to this media conference.

I have been continuing with my regular meetings with a range of higher education stakeholders – including university student leaders, university vice chancellors as well as the Executive of the South African College Principals Organization representing Principals of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, and the Technical Vocational Education and Training College Governors Council (TVETCGC) representing TVET College Councils– to discuss preparations for the 2017 academic year. I had also attempted to meet the South African Further Education and Training Students Association, representing TVET students; before this press briefing however they were unable to meet me as they are engaged in a campaign to raise their issues. Nevertheless, we have agreed to meeting them tomorrow 27 January 2017.

These important engagements have imbued me with much confidence about the prospects for higher education this year, amid early suggestions that many of the challenges, which affected our sector in 2016, including the issues of fees and student access, are being addressed substantially.

In this regard, I want to reiterate the importance of continuing open dialogue among stakeholders, and the need for them to work together to ensure stability in the system.

In my engagements thus far, stakeholders have discussed the need for the country to ensure, over the medium to long term, that Post-School Education and Training (PSET) is funded at an appropriate level, and that sufficient financial aid is made available to support all academically deserving, financially-needy university and college students, through loans, grants and bursaries, while keeping student fees affordable.

We also discussed a number of interventions needed to assist students who come from poor and working class families, including the so-called “missing middle” – that is, those students who come from families with income levels above the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) threshold, but who cannot afford post-school education.

The processes for applying for the 2017 fee adjustment grant, up to a cap of 8% was also discussed, with my Department committing to releasing a significant portion of this grant to universities and colleges in the first quarter of the year, to assist them with the cash flow challenges that they face.

We also wish to inform you that NSFAS has already paid R1,3 billion to our 26 public universities and TVET colleges– an advance payment for registration fees for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, so that they can be admitted for their 2017 studies.

All this will assist universities and colleges to pay their operational costs in the first quarter of the year and thereby help with cash flow management at the institutional level.

On the matter of historic debt, broad agreement was reached with universities and colleges to ensure humane and transparent debt management and relief processes to assist academically successful students, so that they can register in 2017, where this is possible.

We also discussed a number of key initiatives that we are investigating, such as the Ikusasa Student Financial Aid Programme (ISFAP), which is aimed at assisting the “missing middle” – and which will be piloted at six universities and one TVET college this year.

The pilot programme will fund the studies of about 1 500 students studying in a number of general formative degrees, as well as seven professional qualifications and one artisan qualification for the duration of their studies. Funding to enable the pilot has been sourced mostly from the private sector.

Ladies and gentlemen, although 2016 was yet another challenging year for the higher education sector, many South Africans were gratified to note the minimal disruptions to study programmes at our TVET colleges while there is a campaign by SAFETSA for a shutdown. The concerns and issues they raised with me in the Memorandum are legitimate. While they have the right to protest and bring their issues to the fore, they should do so responsibly without violence and intimidation and without the disruption to staff and students who wish to start their 2017 academic year. I must say that I have not received any reports with regards to any violence or intimidation, including any harm to person or destruction of any property and I must commend SAFETSA for this. We have identified the issues they raised and we are working tirelessly to ensure that the issues under our control are speedily being attended to, where there is a lack for adequate budget to deal with infrastructure funding and expansion of the student enrolment, government as a whole is trying to find relief in these economical trying times.

The lack of disruptions in the TVET system last year was not only most welcome, it was an indication of the seriousness with which all the key stakeholders in our colleges, including students, approach their core business of empowering the next generation of young people with practical skills. This bodes well for the South African economy, as well as the future of our young democracy.

The mandate of the Department of Higher Education and Training is to develop a skilled and capable workforce that can contribute to a sustainable and inclusive growth path for our country, and the TVETs are crucial to this task.

Unfortunately, we as South Africans have in recent times often focused disproportionately on our universities, instead of giving appropriate attention to the entire Post-School Education and Training (PSET) sector, and TVET colleges in particular.

Indeed, our 50 public TVET colleges are vital national assets, which empower the next generations with very practical skills and knowledge. They make a vital contribution to the ability of our economy to be competitive.

This is despite the fact that they currently face a number of real challenges: by the way, many more than the challenges we are facing at universities, including funding – challenges we are taking very seriously as we move to ensure a unified national approach to our TVETs.

This is because it is only in the last two years that the TVETs have been managed and directed on a consistent national platform. You may recall that it is only fairly recently that the Department has taken responsibility at national level for the TVET and further education sector, because it was previously part of the provincial education competence.

Bringing the sector into a centrally-managed and guided framework was a very important step towards ensuring that we create and sustain real and viable alternatives to a university course for those young people who want to gain a post school skill, but who may either have not achieved a university pass, or who may not have the inclination to pursue a course of academic study.

What we inherited was a mix of Colleges with some Provinces having managed their College sector better than others in ensuring that the sector could at one and the same time be expanded to accommodate the many thousands of previously excluded young people, while ensuring that new entrants received the kind of training and support which could ready them with skills the job market is looking for.

Frankly, some of the provinces had not done well at all, and here and there, we were confronted with a real mess.

In some places, we are still in the process of ensuring that the right procedures are used when processing students, and we are aware that some institutions need further help to get on track, for example, in ensuring that students who qualify also receive their certificates quickly – because those certificates are the passport to the future for those young people who have put great effort into getting themselves qualified.

Ladies and gentlemen, we recently received a list of grievances from the body representing TVET students, SAFETSA. We take this list and the students' body very seriously.

Over and above the current initiatives being implemented to improve the quality of teaching and learning at TVET colleges, I have requested the Director General to set up an intervention task team to speed up the process in those colleges, which are still lagging, and important announcements in this regard will be made in the next few weeks. We are determined not to let this situation go on for longer than is absolutely necessary.

In addition, I have instructed the Department to immediately convene an ongoing TVET forum, which will bring student representatives, College administrations, and senior officials from DHET to the table. The aim is to ensure open, frank, and effective channels of communication, and an ability to resolve challenges quickly, effectively and sustainably.

There is nothing in the memorandum we have received from SAFETSA that cannot be resolved with a bit of goodwill and determination by the TVET Colleges, of course supported by DHET. Moreover, for that reason I am today inviting the students to be a part of this effort to get things right.

The government's commitment to the higher education cause is demonstrated in part by the substantial increases in funding to NSFAS since 2010.

We remain committed to finding the resources to support the children of all poor, working class and middle class families in their quest to better their lives and those of their families through skills acquisition.

For example, and as already alluded to above, I announced last year that all students who come from households with a combined income of less than R600 000 per annum would be given subsidy funding to cover this year's fee increases, up to 8%.

This is one example of the issues raised by SAFETSA, and the answer is very clear. Yes, the moratorium on fee rises up to 8% for 2017 also applies to all TVET students whose family income is below R600 000 per year. This is definitely not just for universities!

This will bring huge relief to factory workers, miners, nurses, teachers, police, social workers and other working families in occupations that do not earn huge salaries, and who have children at colleges and universities.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have made significant progress, and we continue to make significant progress in expanding access to higher education for the poor through NSFAS. This system, for all its challenges, has funded more than 1.7 million students since 1994.

Last year alone, NSFAS supported about 480 000 poor undergraduate students to access TVET colleges and universities — disbursing loans and bursaries totalling R14 billion. This figure will rise to R15.2 billion this year.

As the Medium Term Budget Policy Statement made clear, the government will provide an additional R9 billion for NSFAS over the three year period ahead. In addition, most importantly, NSFAS will be funding more than 200 000 first time and continuing students at TVET colleges in 2017.

That by anybody's standards is a massive amount of money and shows the high priority that this government is giving to further and higher education. It makes very clear the extent to which we are emphasising TVET education as a path to the future for young people.

Again, and as alluded to above, we have also made arrangements to pay the registration fees for all NSFAS-funded students upfront to TVET colleges and universities every year from now onwards. This means that NSFAS-qualifying students will have a much easier time registering and starting their courses each year.

Government has also addressed the issue of historical debt of NSFAS-qualifying students who were registered in 2016, and who were successful in their studies, but who have accumulated debt with their institutions of higher education. They will be allowed to register in 2017.

You may also be interested to know that as a result of our efforts, a recent Stats SA report showed that South Africa is empowering ever more young people through post-school education and training.

Indeed, there have never in our history been more young people studying in our TVET colleges than today. Moreover, never before have so many students had their fees paid by the government.

Nevertheless, our efforts do not stop at fees support. In pursuit of our mandate to increase access to and success in TVETs, and to transform them into institutions of choice, three new campuses will come into operation this year, including:

- the Thabazimbi Campus of the Waterberg TVET College in Limpopo;
- the Bambanani Campus at uMfolozi TVET College in KwaZulu-Natal; and
- the Nkandla A Campus at uMfolozi TVET College in KwaZulu-Natal.

On the critical matter of student housing at TVET colleges, our 2015 survey of the 50 public colleges showed that for the 710 000 students at the time, there were only 10 120 beds. This means that colleges could only provide accommodation for about 1.4% of their students — that is 1 in 70 students.

The Department is implementing a programme to fast track the delivery of student accommodation in the post-school system over the next ten years. Feasibility studies at 12 institutions, 10 universities and 2 TVET colleges, are underway to develop financial models to enable funding affordable student housing. The Department aims to add 300 000 beds at universities and TVET colleges over the next 10 years through different financial models supported by private investments.

Of course, we will need improved ways of procuring these projects worth billions of rands, and we will not tolerate corruption, collusion or maladministration.

In relation to the November 2016 examinations, results for the entire TVET sector were published and released to all examination centres on 31 December 2016. Currently there are 8 224 subject results out of 2 004 177 subject entries outstanding, representing 0.4% of all subject entries and this is attributed to:

- a low capture rate by examination centres for Internal Continuous Assessment (ICASS), Integrated Summative Assessment Task (ISAT) and/or examination marks;
- an absent codes submitted examination centres instead of a valid raw mark; and
- data processing errors on the examinations IT system.

The Department's national examinations unit will be following up with individual examination centres to verify and resolve the outstanding marks for the November 2016 examinations.

Each college is responsible for the submission of marks as it is at the examination centres of a college that all ICASS and ISAT marks are generated and captured along with examination marks for the National Certificate (Vocational) Level 2 and 3 qualifications and N1 part-qualifications. During my meeting with the South African College Principals' Association (SACPO) earlier this week, college principals committed to respond urgently to requests for verification and submission of outstanding marks.

A further 54 561 subject results (2.7% of total subject entries) remain blocked on the system due to the examination paper leakages reported in four subjects. The Department concluded its investigation this week and will be in a position to release these results only after the quality council Umalusi has considered the report and approved the release of these results. Other results blocked due to acts of dishonesty, i.e. copying, use of crib notes, ghost writing, etc. affect 1 298 candidates (0.2%) out of the total of 842 772 candidates that enrolled to write the November 2016 examinations. The outcome of the investigation into each individual incident will determine whether the result will remain blocked or be released.

The State Information Technology Agency (SITA) has admitted as much that its IT system is not functioning optimally, all of which impacts on the release of the results to institutions.

In a meeting held yesterday, 25 January 2017, between management from the Department and SITA, SITA has committed to providing the Department with a functioning IT system to resolve all resulting and certification challenges.

In terms of the agreement with SITA, all outstanding results for the November 2016 examinations will be resolved by 28 February 2017 and all certificates for the November 2016 examinations will be processed by 31 March 2017.

The Department has been instrumental in reducing the certification backlog for the National Certificate (Vocational) Level 2, 3 and 4 qualifications from 236 821 in August

2015 to 973 outstanding certificates. SITA has also committed to resolve all outstanding certificates for earlier examination cycles.

Finally, I want to reiterate my call to formations representing students at TVET colleges to engage constructively in discussion with both my Department and college administrations, and to strengthen efforts to resolve their many legitimate issues. Our doors and our ears are open, and we are determined to find solutions together with you.

Please do not also forget that while everyone has the constitutional right to protest peacefully, the equally important right of those who wish to continue with teaching and learning, unhindered and without intimidation, must also at all times be respected.

Some of the issues facing our colleges can be dealt with in the short term, particularly if we all display goodwill and a willingness to engage. But whether we like it or not, many others will require time to solve, and I'm calling for patience, understanding, and ongoing engagement and dialogue as we work together to resolve these challenges.

Thank you.

Enquiries: Busiswa Gqangeni on Gqangeni.B@dhet.gov.za/ 0795475299

Issued by Government Communications (GCIS) on behalf of the Ministry of Higher Education and Training

26 January 2017