

Minister Pandor's address at the fourth annual Top Empowerment Conference

Emperors Palace

11 April 2019

“Transformation in the education sector – how can it be fast-tracked to make a bigger contribution towards realising the goals of the National Development Plan by 2030?”

Youth unemployment is one of our central challenges. South Africa needs partnerships that will generate innovative solutions to address our many challenges. One of the critical challenges we need to address is the large number of young people who have no education, no skills, or occupation.

Government has embarked on a number of initiatives to tackle this challenge – not alone but in partnership with employers. We believe that effective use of TVET colleges is one of the tools available to support transformation of education and skills.

For example, one important project is the Centres of Specialisation programme for artisans. The programme involves employers providing apprenticeships for young people, colleges providing training, and the DHET supporting the initiatives through funding and policy.

It's not only skills at the lower end of the spectrum that we require. We also need high-level skills for the dynamic parts of the economy - hi-tech manufacturing, the creative industries, hi-tech medicine, business services, education and computer software, in advertising, in mobile phones, and in aerospace engineering.

A second potential contributor to education transformation is better use of the university sector. We have opened up our universities to change, and thousands of black students and women today enjoy state-supported access to higher education. We have substantially re-organised the sector to erode its past racial character.

Yet South Africa remains in the grip of a high-level skills shortage. Globally the market for people with portable skills is exploding - in engineering, finance, marketing, construction, healthcare, management and technology. Companies operate in dozens of countries, requiring complex technologies and a massive pool of highly skilled people able to navigate tricky international waters. All these processes are creating a fierce competition for talent. It's a competition we have to take part in and to win. Our universities must be encouraged to be more responsive.

We must support the creation of a higher education system that addresses automation, digitisation and machine learning. One in three jobs in South Africa – almost 5.7 million – is currently at risk of automation within a decade. Universities should be teaching high-level skills in order to prepare graduates for emerging jobs and enterprises. We know young people will have to continuously upgrade skills and learn new skills through lifelong learning. That's why we're investing in skills to become a learning and knowledge society.

Effective education transformation will require careful planning and collaboration in the higher education sector. We cannot continue with current practices in which there appears to be a very tenuous connection between the economy and skills training. We continue to qualify graduates that cannot be

absorbed by the economy and who do not have the means to create their own enterprises.

One of the advantages we have is the entry of non-traditional students – black people and women to higher education – they create a basis for higher education to transform its agenda and develop new programmes and opportunities drawing on emerging technological development.

Our institutions of higher learning are poised to play a critical role in advancing the new skills agenda for South Africa and our continent. We can offer capable research programmes in fields of study that address our development challenges. Much has been done to lay the foundation for responsiveness.

The DHET has introduced free education for students from low-income families.

The implementation of the free-education decision has taken place within a short period of time.

The government will pay for those who qualify for NSFAS assistance via the new bursary scheme.

This investment in people and talent will over the long term assist in moving many families out of poverty as they reap the benefits of having received a university or TVET college education.

The majority of students (8 in 10) at public higher education institutions are black and the majority (6 in 10) are women. We must ensure they study in non-traditional disciplines and

become key allies in implementing new programmes and in staffing our research and education institutions.

Taken together, these numbers represent a huge step away from the discriminatory education systems that hobbled our country and our people in the past. They represent a massive step forward in the empowerment of our young people, and through them communities and our economy.

But while these figures represent very good news, the fact is that we recognise that we must do even more as a country to open up higher education and training to poor and previously disadvantaged communities.

It is also a problem that our post-school education and training is skewed towards university education. This is because even though we now have a very good and important financial support system, many young people would be much better off pursuing vocational training.

More students enter universities each year than TVET colleges, a situation which is neither ideal nor sustainable if the skills needs of the economy and society are to be met on a sustainable basis, and if we are to equip those tens of thousands of young people for the world of work who are not suited to a university path.

This challenge becomes visible if one notes that of the roughly one million learners leaving school annually, many do so without a Grade 12 certificate.

This is why we are putting ever more emphasis on TVET colleges. They need to grow substantially and to become much more responsive to the changing labour market, they must be

flexible enough to help address the country's skills shortages and developmental needs.

In tandem with this, we must also all – schools and post school institutions – work harder to reduce dropout rates while ensuring that the majority of students graduate in regulation time. It really is disconcerting that dropout and throughput rates still reflect apartheid-era patterns on race — 24 years into our democracy.

This requires a responsive, properly planned and effective post-school education and training system, and we are hard at work making this happen. But it also means that the synchronisation between basic and post school education must improve dramatically as well.

In closing, I believe that taking up the challenge is something we all need to think about, to put our hearts into, and to master in the interests of those we serve – the young people of our country, and through them all of our people.