



**MINISTRY
HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY BUTI MANAMELA, MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING AT THE 2025 SOUTH AFRICAN TECHNICAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING STUDENT ASSOCIATION'S STUDENT-DRIVEN ACADEMIC CONFERENCE

BIRCHWOOD HÔTEL AND OR TAMBO CONFERENCE CENTRE, BOKSBURG

12 DECEMBER 2025

Deputy Director-General: TVET Branch, Mr Sam Zungu

CEOs of PSET entities

Regional Managers

Leadership of SAPCO, TVETCGC, CoSACSA

Strategic partners NBI, HEDSA

Leadership of SATVETSA and SAUS

SRCs

SASU

SAYC

Good morning

It is a real honour to address this historic Student-Driven Academic Conference. This is not simply a conference that includes students; it is one that is led by students, shaped by student thinking, and grounded in a clear understanding that the transformation of South Africa's TVET system cannot be achieved without the voices, ideas, and leadership of students themselves.

This gathering represents an important shift. It signals a move away from seeing students as passive recipients of policy, and towards recognising students as active contributors to ideas, critique, and solutions. And that matters deeply, because any system that truly listens to its students is a system capable of renewal.

We meet at a moment of profound change — not only for the TVET sector, but for South Africa and for the world. The global labour market is shifting at a pace faster than any previous generation has experienced. Automation, artificial intelligence, renewable energy, advanced manufacturing, green hydrogen, logistics modernisation, biotechnology, and digital integration are reshaping every industry. Entire categories of work are emerging, while others are disappearing altogether.

South Africa must respond boldly to these changes. And the first place where that response must take root is the TVET college — the engine room of skills development, innovation, and community resilience. Let me be clear: you, the students, are not a footnote in this transformation. You are the centre of it. The system we build must be fit for your future, aligned to your aspirations, and responsive to the realities you face every day.

The SATVETSA concept document is correct in observing that the TVET sector stands at a defining crossroads. We are moving away from fragmented and outdated qualifications and towards a new generation of industry-aligned occupational programmes that produce workplace-ready graduates, entrepreneurs, and innovators. That is not a temporary adjustment. It is a fundamental shift in direction — and it is irreversible.

One of the most important changes underway in the sector is the growing recognition that policy cannot be designed in isolation. Transformation cannot be achieved only in boardrooms or technical committees. It must be co-created with those who experience the system daily — its strengths, its gaps, and its contradictions. This is why the role of

SATVETSA is so important. It exists not as a ceremonial structure, but as a platform through which students can advise the Minister on academic challenges, curriculum relevance, student support systems, and institutional accountability.

This conference is a powerful demonstration of that mandate in action. You are not here simply to listen. You are here to analyse, to question, to critique, to propose, and to lead. When students engage meaningfully in academic and policy conversations, the system becomes more relevant, more democratic, and more accountable.

To understand where we are going, we must be honest about where we are coming from. For decades, the TVET system was anchored primarily around NATED programmes, designed for a different economy, a different labour market, and a different historical moment. The introduction of the National Certificate (Vocational) in 2007 was intended to modernise the system and attract younger learners. But the data tells us a more complex story. Between 2020 and 2022, only a small proportion of NCV students were aged between 15 and 19, while the majority were between 20 and 24 years old — many already in possession of a National Senior Certificate.

In practice, this meant that many students were repeating qualifications at the same NQF level, with limited articulation and uncertain labour-market returns. This misalignment has contributed to dropout rates, frustration, and qualifications that do not always translate into employment. We must confront this reality honestly, without defensiveness. You deserve a system that is clear in purpose, coherent in structure, and meaningful in outcome.

That is why the TVET sector is now undergoing the most significant curriculum transformation since 1994. We are transitioning away from legacy programmes and repositioning the system around occupational qualifications that deliberately integrate theory, practical skills, structured workplace learning, competence-based assessment, and strong industry partnerships. These qualifications are not simply new; they are strategic. They are designed to ensure that every TVET graduate leaves college with a credible pathway into work, entrepreneurship, or further learning.

We must also be honest about the world you are entering. The jobs of tomorrow will not look like the jobs of yesterday. You are entering a world where warehouses are automated, construction sites are surveyed by drones, agriculture is driven by data, and

renewable energy is reshaping national development strategies. Employers are looking for graduates who can think critically, solve problems, adapt quickly, and innovate continuously.

This is why the Department is embedding digital skills, renewable energy, robotics, coding, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence into the TVET curriculum. Digital skills are already integrated into NCV programmes through partnerships with CISCO and HUAWEI, and new occupational qualifications — including Solar PV Technician training — are expanding rapidly. This is not incremental reform. It is a generational shift.

Students often ask an important and fair question: how will we succeed if our lecturers are not equipped for this new curriculum? That question has guided our response. We have launched one of the largest lecturer-upskilling programmes in the recent history of the TVET sector. Thousands of lecturers have already been trained in digital skills, emerging technologies, occupational qualification theory, and practical implementation. At the same time, SETAs have invested heavily in 4IR centres of excellence, AI laboratories, coding and robotics hubs, smart manufacturing facilities, and cybersecurity infrastructure.

These investments exist for one reason: to ensure that no TVET student in South Africa feels disadvantaged in the global economy.

We also recognise that the future of work cannot be discussed without addressing entrepreneurship. That is why seventeen Centres for Entrepreneurship and Rapid Incubation are now operational across the system. These centres support idea development, prototyping, mentorship, incubation, and enterprise formation. We are preparing you not only to seek opportunities, but to create them.

But transformation is not only about curriculum and infrastructure. It is about the total student experience. Safe campuses. Psychosocial support. Academic advising. Digital access. Work placements. Career development services. And strong, democratic student governance. Your success is not measured only by throughput rates. It is measured by whether you feel supported, capable, and hopeful.

This conference seeks to deepen scholarship, strengthen the link between research and policy, and generate practical ideas for reform. And I want to say this clearly: students have more power than they sometimes realise. You have the power to shape curriculum. You have the power to influence policy. You have the power to innovate. And you have the power to lead.

Let this conference mark the emergence of a new generation of confident, skilled, and engaged TVET graduates. The transformation of the TVET sector is not a government project. It is a national project, driven by students, lecturers, researchers, and industry partners working together.

You are the heartbeat of this system. Your aspirations shape our policy choices. Your success is the success of our country.

This is your time.

I thank you.