



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

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**SPEAKING NOTES
BILATERAL MEETING: MINISTER BUTI MANAMELA (MP)
AND VICE MINISTER XU QINGSEN
PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA**

World Digital Education Conference | Hangzhou | 12 May 2026

Your Excellency Vice Minister Xu Qingsen, and members of your delegation,

OPENING

Allow me to express my sincere appreciation for this bilateral engagement, and to thank the Government of the People's Republic of China for the warm hospitality extended to the South African delegation since our arrival in Hangzhou. I also congratulate China on hosting another outstanding World Digital Education Conference.

This meeting takes place at a moment of genuine strategic importance — for both our countries and for the global education system. Artificial intelligence, digital transformation, and the reconfiguration of skills economies are reshaping the conditions in which our young people will live and work. South Africa and China share a common interest in ensuring that this transformation serves development, inclusion, and the expansion of human capability.

We have built a solid foundation of cooperation between our two countries. The purpose of this meeting is to take stock of what we have achieved together — and, more importantly, to agree on the strategic direction for the next phase. South Africa comes to this table not as a passive recipient of assistance, but as an active and committed partner, with a clear developmental agenda and a readiness to build institutional cooperation that delivers results at scale.

I should also note that our delegation has had a productive engagement with Alibaba here in Hangzhou, and we look forward to visiting Huawei in Shanghai in the coming days. We are equally looking forward to our engagement with the National Centre for Educational Technology in Beijing. These engagements reflect South Africa's serious intent to build deep, multi-level cooperation across China's education and technology ecosystem.

BUILDING ON THE BI-NATIONAL COMMISSION

Our engagement today follows naturally from the 9th Session of the South Africa–China Bi-National Commission, co-chaired by Deputy President Paul Mashatile and Vice President Han Zheng in Cape Town in March 2026. The BNC set a clear political mandate to deepen our cooperation. This bilateral is an important opportunity to translate that political commitment into concrete institutional action.

South Africa also sees this relationship in a broader strategic context. As the continent's most developed post-school education system, South Africa is well-positioned to serve as a bridge for China–Africa education and skills cooperation more broadly. We would welcome discussion of how our bilateral partnership can carry continental significance.

TVET AND TECHNICAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

The cooperation between our Department and Beijing Polytechnic College is among the most promising elements of our bilateral relationship, and I want to acknowledge its quality directly.

The first cohort of 36 South African TVET students completed six months of training at BPC in new energy vehicle and hybrid vehicle technology. Critically, BYD has committed to providing internships and permanent employment for these graduates — this is exactly the education-to-employment pipeline that South Africa's skills system needs to replicate at scale.

The second cohort, focusing on Artificial Intelligence and Robotics, is now being prepared. This reflects a deliberate alignment with South Africa's industrial and green economy priorities.

We are also advancing the conceptualisation of China–South Africa Vocational and Technical Centres across all nine provinces. The delegation from BPC and the Beijing Municipal Education Commission visiting South Africa on 26 June 2026 to finalise the MOU is a significant milestone, and we will ensure it receives full ministerial support on our side.

South Africa proposes the establishment of a Joint Technical Working Group to coordinate implementation modalities, provincial alignment, and timelines for the Vocational and Technical Centres. We would welcome agreement on this today.

We further propose that future TVET cooperation prioritise AI, robotics, renewable energy, smart manufacturing, and green hydrogen — sectors directly linked to South Africa's industrial development agenda.

SCHOLARSHIPS AND STUDENT MOBILITY

South Africa values the Chinese Government's scholarship programmes. We are currently co-administering 30 government scholarships across four Chinese institutions. Our NEET

scholarship programme has enrolled 100 young South Africans who are not in education, employment, or training, with 47 having departed for China in March 2026 and the next cohort due in September 2026.

Our SETAs are deepening this further. The Local Government SETA and Insurance SETA are jointly funding 500 students in sector-critical skills. The ETDPA SETA's Chinese STEM Bursary Programme is supporting 40 post-matric learners in four-year degrees at Sanda University, Nanjing Vocational University, and Nanjing Normal University.

This is significant investment. But we believe the next phase should be more strategically anchored.

South Africa proposes that future scholarship frameworks be explicitly aligned to industrial priorities: AI, engineering, green energy, advanced manufacturing, and TVET lecturer development. We would welcome expanded opportunities for postgraduate cooperation and joint research programmes in these areas.

SHORT-TERM TRAINING PROGRAMMES

Between February and November 2025, 234 South African officials participated in Chinese short-term capacity-building programmes — drawn from universities, TVET colleges, and the Department itself. A further 52 have been approved for May 2026.

These programmes are valued. But we believe their development impact can be significantly enhanced through greater thematic alignment.

South Africa proposes that future short-term programmes be targeted toward: AI governance and ethics, digital learning systems, TVET management, industrial policy, and digital public infrastructure. This would more directly strengthen our institutional and developmental state capacity.

WORLDSKILLS SHANGHAI 2026

South Africa has concluded our national selection processes for the WorldSkills International Competition to be held in Shanghai from 22 to 27 September 2026. We have had productive engagements with Chinese institutions willing to support our competitors' preparation. We look forward to strong South African participation and to the collaborative spirit that has characterised our engagement with the Chinese vocational education community in this regard.

PROPOSED OUTCOMES FROM TODAY'S MEETING

Your Excellency, in the interest of ensuring this engagement produces concrete forward momentum, South Africa proposes that we agree today on the following:

- 1. A structured cooperation framework between our two Ministries on AI in education and digital transformation.*
- 2. Establishment of a Joint Technical Working Group on the China–South Africa Vocational and Technical Centres.*

3. *Expansion of TVET and technical skills cooperation, with explicit alignment to future industrial sectors.*
4. *A strengthened scholarship framework focused on industrial priorities, postgraduate study, and lecturer development.*
5. *Enhanced industry-linked training pathways, building on the BYD model, to support graduate employment.*
6. *Greater thematic alignment of short-term training programmes with South Africa's developmental state priorities.*
7. *Agreement on institutional follow-up mechanisms and timelines.*

CLOSING

Your Excellency, the relationship between South Africa and China in education and skills development has produced real results. But I believe we are still in the early stages of what this partnership can achieve.

South Africa is ready to move from a relationship characterised by individual projects to one defined by coordinated systems cooperation — cooperation that contributes directly to industrialisation, employment, youth development, and the building of capable institutions on both sides.

I look forward to a productive exchange, and to the decisions we can make today that will be felt in our institutions and by our young people for years to come.

Thank you.