



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

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**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY HONOURABLE MINISTER BUTI MANAMELA, MINISTER
OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE
INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF QUALITY OF QUALITY ASSURANCE
AGENCIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION (INQAAHE) FORUM 2026**

Date: Wednesday 4 February 2026

Time: 9am

Venue: Sun City Convention Centre, Northwest Province

Programme Director,

President of INQAAHE and Members of the Board,

Chairperson and Chief Executive Officer of the Council on Higher Education,

Distinguished guests, colleagues, members of the media,

Delegates from across the world,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a real pleasure to welcome you to South Africa and to the INQAAHE Forum 2026. We are honoured to host this global gathering of quality assurance leaders, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers at a moment when higher education worldwide is under intense pressure, but also rich with possibility. South Africa welcomes you with

warmth, generosity of spirit, and a deep sense of shared humanity. We hope you will feel at home here, not only in Sun City, but in our country more broadly.

It is particularly meaningful that this Forum is taking place on the African continent. Africa is home to the world's youngest population and some of the fastest-growing higher education systems globally. At the same time, the continent faces profound challenges: unequal access, funding constraints, capacity limitations, and the long shadow of historical injustice. Hosting this Forum here is not about showcasing perfection. It is about creating space for honest exchange and mutual learning — where African experiences of system-building, differentiation, transformation, and regional cooperation can meaningfully inform global thinking on quality assurance, and where we, in turn, learn from practices and innovations across the world.

South Africa's own higher education journey has been shaped by struggle, transition, and deliberate reform. We are proud of the progress we have made since the advent of democracy, but we remain acutely aware of the work that still lies ahead. Your presence here reflects a shared commitment to higher education as a public good, and to quality assurance as a central instrument for protecting that good.

Quality assurance, in our view, is not simply a technical or bureaucratic exercise. It is a moral and societal responsibility. It is about safeguarding the integrity of learning, protecting students, ensuring public trust, and enabling institutions to fulfil their academic and social mandates. In South Africa, quality assurance is inseparable from transformation. Our system carries the historical burden of exclusion, inequality, and epistemic marginalisation. As a result, quality cannot be defined narrowly in terms of compliance, metrics, or rankings alone. It must ask deeper questions: whose knowledge is valued, who gains access, who succeeds, and how higher education contributes to social justice, economic development, and sustainable futures.

We reject the false choice between quality and transformation. A system that is exclusionary or unresponsive cannot be truly high-quality. Equally, transformation without rigour and accountability is unsustainable. The two must advance together, and quality assurance has a critical role to play in holding that balance.

In South Africa's post-school education and training system, the Council on Higher Education plays a central role. As an independent statutory body, the CHE advises the Minister, sets standards, accredits programmes, conducts quality reviews, and

supports institutions in strengthening their internal quality cultures. Importantly, the CHE is not only a regulator. It is also a developmental partner, working with institutions through capacity development, communities of practice, and improvement-oriented processes. This approach reflects our understanding that quality is built, not imposed, and that sustainable quality depends on trust, dialogue, and shared responsibility.

We meet at a critical global juncture. Across the world, higher education systems are grappling with massification, fiscal pressure, geopolitical instability, rapid technological change, and heightened public scrutiny. In this environment, quality assurance agencies are increasingly expected not merely to police compliance, but to enable innovation, support transformation, and ensure accountability at the same time. This is a demanding and often uncomfortable space to occupy. But it is precisely why gatherings such as this Forum matter.

There are also broader global dynamics that should concern all of us. We are witnessing a rise in inward-looking politics, growing conservatism, and the erosion of spaces for open debate and knowledge exchange. Borders are hardening, mistrust is growing, and conflict is escalating in many parts of the world. In such a context, the idea of a global community — rooted in the African philosophy of ubuntu, “I am because you are” — is under strain. Higher education cannot be neutral in the face of these developments. It has a responsibility to promote dialogue over division, critical thinking over dogma, and shared knowledge over isolation. Quality assurance, too, cannot stand apart from these questions. It must ask how standards, practices, and frameworks support the development of critical, ethical, and engaged citizens.

Access to higher education remains one of the most persistent global challenges. In countries such as South Africa and many others in the Global South, demand far outstrips available places. Each academic year, we are confronted with the painful reality that many capable young people are unable to access higher education. In other parts of the world, declining and ageing populations are placing institutions under threat as student numbers fall. These contrasting demographic pressures should prompt us to think more creatively and collectively. How can global higher education resources be better shared? How can cross-border education, mobility, and collaboration expand opportunity rather than deepen inequality?

Technology has already begun to reshape the answers to these questions. The traditional binary between contact and distance education is giving way to a spectrum of modalities — blended, hybrid, hiflex, and fully online learning. When these approaches are thoughtfully designed, pedagogically grounded, and adequately supported, they hold real potential to widen access and diversify learning pathways. At the same time, they pose serious questions for quality assurance. How do we assure quality in learning environments that are increasingly personalised, technology-mediated, and geographically dispersed? How do we do so without stifling innovation or undermining academic freedom? These are not theoretical questions; they are already at our door.

Alongside this, we are seeing rapid growth in alternative credentials, including micro-credentials and other short learning programmes. These developments promise flexibility and responsiveness to labour-market needs, but they also raise concerns about coherence, comparability, and recognition. Without thoughtful quality assurance frameworks, there is a real risk of fragmentation and erosion of trust. Quality assurance agencies have a critical role in ensuring that new forms of provision expand opportunity while maintaining integrity and public confidence.

Artificial intelligence adds another layer of complexity. AI is no longer a future possibility; it is actively reshaping curriculum design, assessment practices, academic integrity frameworks, and even our understanding of authorship and learning outcomes. While AI offers powerful tools to enhance teaching and learning, it also challenges long-held assumptions about what it means to learn, to assess, and to demonstrate competence. Quality assurance systems must engage with these questions seriously and proactively, not reactively.

International collaboration is therefore no longer optional. It is essential. Global challenges — from climate change and public health to inequality and technological disruption — do not respect national borders. Higher education systems, and the quality assurance frameworks that support them, must be capable of operating in an interconnected world. Recognition of qualifications, joint programmes, collaborative research, and transnational education all depend on trust, shared principles, and sustained dialogue.

In this regard, global networks such as INQAAHE play an indispensable role. INQAAHE has, over many years, provided a platform for sharing good practice, building capacity, developing guidelines, and strengthening the global quality assurance community. For countries in the Global South, participation in such networks is particularly important. It ensures that global quality assurance conversations are not dominated by a single perspective, and that frameworks reflect diverse contexts, epistemologies, and development pathways. We commend INQAAHE for its commitment to inclusivity and for creating space where emerging and established quality assurance systems can learn from one another.

This Forum offers a valuable opportunity to reflect, to debate, and to collaborate. Over the coming days, you will engage with pressing questions about digital learning, micro-credentials, transnational education, student engagement, and the role of quality assurance in promoting equity and transformation. For South Africa and the African continent, the Forum is also an opportunity to strengthen regional capacity, build partnerships, and share innovations that are often under-represented in global discourse.

It is important to emphasise that higher education in Africa and the broader Global South is not only expanding in scale. It is also growing in quality, relevance, and global impact. Universities and quality assurance agencies across the continent are producing world-class research, innovative teaching practices, and meaningful community engagement. They are also contributing vital perspectives on decolonisation, sustainability, indigenous knowledge systems, and inclusive development. Quality assurance frameworks must be globally informed, but they must also be locally grounded, responsive to context, and respectful of diversity.

As we open the INQAAHE Forum 2026, I invite all of us to use this space with honesty and courage. Let us share successes, but also failures. Let us challenge assumptions, including our own. And let us work collectively towards quality assurance approaches that are rigorous, humane, and future-oriented.

I wish you productive discussions, meaningful connections, and an enriching experience in South Africa. May this Forum strengthen our shared resolve to advance higher education quality in service of students, societies, and the global public good.

Thank you.