# THE INTELLECTUAL DIRECTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

*Keynote Address by the Minister of Higher Education and Training*
*12 October 2026 | National Webinar*

Colleagues, Vice-Chancellors, distinguished scholars, Professor André Keet, Professor Sibongile Muthwa, Professor Hester Klopper, Professor Linda Meyer, students and everyone joining us this afternoon: good afternoon.

Thank you to Nelson Mandela University, the University of the Free State, Rosebank International and Higher Education Media Services for convening this conversation. Its title asks something more demanding than how we administer our institutions. It asks: what intellectual direction should higher education in South Africa take?

We have become accustomed to discussing universities through their immediate crises: funding, student debt, accommodation, governance disputes, protests, audits and institutional stability. These are not imaginary problems. I deal with them almost every day. Indeed, earlier today we were discussing the future financing of our post-school education system. But if every conversation begins and ends with the crisis of the moment, we may keep institutions functioning without asking what they are functioning for.

So I want to begin with a question. What is the South African university for, in the world that is emerging, and in the society we are still struggling to build?

The university is not a factory for producing certificates. It is not simply a consultancy for the state, nor a recruitment agency for employers. Yet it cannot be indifferent to work, to the economy or to the public institutions on which our people depend. It is a place for discovering knowledge, challenging received wisdom, developing human capability and cultivating the capacity to imagine a different future. These responsibilities belong together.

We should acknowledge what has been achieved. South Africa has universities recognised across the continent and internationally. We have expanded access, transformed the composition of our student body, built important research capabilities and sustained scholarly excellence in difficult circumstances. These gains did not happen accidentally. They reflect deliberate public policy, institutional effort and the work of generations of students, academics and workers.

But progress does not settle the question of transformation. We must ask who produces knowledge, whose experiences become legitimate subjects of inquiry, whose languages carry academic authority and which communities benefit from what our institutions discover. The unfinished democratic project is also an unfinished intellectual project.

Let me suggest four directions for our discussion.

First, we need to renew the public purpose of the university. Publicness is not established only by a funding line in the national budget. It is demonstrated by whom we admit, how we teach, what we investigate, whose voices we hear and whether knowledge moves beyond the campus gates. A

university located near communities experiencing water insecurity, unemployment, failing infrastructure or preventable disease should not be intellectually distant from those realities.

That does not mean every research project must promise an immediate economic return. Fundamental research, philosophy, literature, mathematics and the arts are indispensable. Some discoveries become useful only decades later. Some ideas matter because they enlarge our freedom to think. But academic independence is not a licence for social indifference. And public accountability is not permission for government to prescribe scholarly conclusions.

Here are three questions I would put to our institutions. If a resident living near a university were asked what difference it makes to their life, what would they say? Do our measures of excellence capture the public value of our teaching and research, or mainly what is easiest to count? And how can universities work with communities as partners in defining problems, rather than treating them merely as sources of data?

Second, we must face the political economy of higher education honestly. The demand for access is growing. Families carry debt and insecurity. Universities face rising costs, uncertain income and pressure to protect teaching and research. NSFAS has expanded opportunity for many, but its administrative weaknesses and the growing gap between commitments and available funding affect the sustainability of the whole system.

We cannot solve the financing problem by treating student support and institutional funding as unrelated. If we protect access while undermining the institutions that must educate students, we have not secured access in any meaningful sense. If we protect institutional balance sheets by excluding capable young people, we have betrayed the public mission. The challenge is to build a settlement that is equitable, financially credible and administratively deliverable.

That settlement also requires institutions to ask difficult questions about cost, differentiation and cooperation. South Africa does not need twenty-six copies of the same university, each competing to look like a particular international model. We need a connected system of distinct institutions, with different strengths and responsibilities, all committed to quality. Rankings can tell us something useful, but they cannot be the intellectual compass of the entire system.

So I ask: what must the state guarantee, and what should universities, students, employers and other partners contribute? How do we fund not merely admission but the conditions for student success, including academic support and wellbeing? And what could institutions do differently, together, to protect quality while reducing duplication and unnecessary cost?

Third, artificial intelligence and the changing world of work force us to reconsider the very meaning of learning. Manuel Castells helped us understand how networks reshape power and opportunity. Klaus Schwab has drawn attention to the speed of technological transformation. But the question is not simply whether universities can keep pace with technology. It is who owns that technology, who is excluded from it and whether it enlarges human agency or diminishes it.

Generative AI can assist research, translation, administration and teaching. It can also reproduce bias, fabricate evidence, deepen dependence on proprietary systems and encourage students to mistake a fluent answer for an understood argument. If a machine can produce a plausible essay in seconds, our response cannot be limited to finding a better machine to detect it. We have to rethink assessment:

can students frame a worthwhile question, test evidence, make ethical judgements, work with others and apply knowledge to an unfamiliar problem?

We must build African capability to develop and govern these systems, including research infrastructure, open resources, African-language technologies and trustworthy data. Digital transformation should not mean that our universities become permanent consumers of knowledge infrastructures designed elsewhere.

At the same time, the employment crisis cannot be explained away as a simple mismatch between graduates and vacancies. Skills matter enormously, but economies must also create productive opportunities. The Skills Revolution requires universities, TVET colleges, community colleges, employers and the state to work together. Universities must educate teachers, develop college lecturers, advance research and innovation and open pathways into work, without reducing the graduate to a unit of labour-market supply.

Three further questions follow. What should every graduate be able to think, judge and do in an AI-mediated society? Are we preparing to produce African technologies and knowledge, or only to purchase them? And how do we connect learning to productive work without allowing the immediate demands of employers to define the limits of the university?

Fourth, we must deepen intellectual transformation. Decolonisation is neither a slogan for strategic plans nor a rejection of every idea originating elsewhere. It is a disciplined interrogation of power in the production of knowledge: what has been treated as universal, what dismissed as local, who is permitted to theorise and who is expected only to supply experience.

Language is central. When African languages are absent from serious scholarship, we lose more than an opportunity to translate existing material. We lose ways of asking questions and making sense of the world. Multilingual teaching resources, scholarly vocabularies and digital tools can expand both access and intellectual possibility.

The same responsibility applies to climate, health, land, food, water and energy. The planetary crisis is not somewhere outside South Africa. It is present in our municipalities, farms, mines, coastlines and households. Universities should connect scientific, technical, social and indigenous knowledge to understand these challenges, while protecting the space to criticise prevailing economic and political arrangements.

And we must rebuild the academic profession. A university cannot sustain intellectual courage when early-career scholars face permanent insecurity, research time disappears, mentorship is weak and success is reduced to an endless sequence of indicators. We need a new generation of diverse scholars who are supported to take intellectual risks, challenge established ideas and teach with care.

Here, too, three questions: whose knowledge remains marginal in our curricula and research agendas? What concrete institutional changes would allow African languages and knowledge traditions to flourish without insulating any claim from criticism? And what are we doing to secure the next generation of scholars who will carry this intellectual project forward?

Colleagues, the relationship between intellectual freedom and public responsibility is not an inconvenience to be managed. It is one of the university's defining tensions. We need institutions

independent enough to question government, business and popular opinion, yet accountable enough to justify the trust and resources society places in them. Audit findings must be addressed. Councils must govern ethically. Executives must manage responsibly. But compliance alone is not a vision of the university.

Nor can the university author this future alone. Public and private higher education have different histories, funding arrangements and obligations, but their students inhabit the same society. We need quality, articulation and credible pathways across a broader post-school system. We need partnerships with industry, labour, civil society and communities that do not subordinate scholarship to the most powerful partner in the room.

We should also make room for the arts and humanities in this conversation. A society cannot innovate its way out of every moral disagreement, nor can an algorithm settle questions of justice, belonging or memory. Engineers, scientists, historians, philosophers, artists and educators must be able to work across disciplinary boundaries without losing the depth of their own disciplines.

The Ministry's role is not to prescribe one intellectual doctrine. It is to defend academic freedom, enable access and quality, support research and innovation, strengthen governance and help build a coherent and differentiated system. We must create conditions for universities to imagine and experiment, while insisting that public resources are used responsibly.

Let me end where I began. What kind of university does South Africa need for the world to come?

One that is excellent but never detached; critical but never cynical; African but never enclosed; technologically capable but resolutely human; ecologically responsible and attentive to workers and communities; autonomous and publicly accountable.

And I leave this webinar with a final challenge. If we were designing our university system today, knowing what we know about inequality, artificial intelligence, climate change, the future of work and the unfinished work of democracy, would we design the system we currently have? If not, what are we prepared to change—and what must we protect?

The answers cannot be supplied by a Minister alone. They must be developed, debated and tested by the people who teach, learn, research, govern and live with the consequences. That is the intellectual conversation I hope we begin today.

I thank you.