



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

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**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY MR BUTI MANAMELA, MINISTER OF HIGHER
EDUCATION AND TRAINING AT THE LAUNCH OF THE CIDB CENTRE OF
EXCELLENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WALTER SISULU, EAST LONDON ON 8
APRIL 2026**

Programme Director,

Deputy Minister Zikalala,

MEC of Public Works in the Eastern Cape Ms Siphokazi Lusithi,

Vice-Chancellor of the University of Walter Sisulu Dr Thandi Mgwebi,

Chairperson of the Board of CIDB, Mr Khulile Nzo,

CEO of the CIDB, Mr Bongani Dladla

Distinguished guests, colleagues, students, and partners,

Good morning.

It is a real privilege to be here at Walter Sisulu University on this important occasion. What we are marking today is not simply the launch of a Centre of Excellence. It is something far more significant. It is a moment that speaks directly to how we are repositioning our higher education and training system to respond to the needs of our country.

We are, as government, firmly in the midst of what we have defined as a Skills Revolution. And I want to emphasise that this is not a slogan. It is a deliberate and necessary shift in how we think about education, training, and their role in society.

For too long, we have treated education as something that happens in isolation, within lecture halls, within institutions, often disconnected from the real economy. At the same time, industry has continued to raise concerns about the availability of skills, while young graduates struggle to find meaningful opportunities. This contradiction between skills shortages and unemployment, is one of the most urgent challenges we face.

The Skills Revolution is about resolving this contradiction. It is about ensuring that what we teach, what we research, and what we produce in our institutions is directly aligned with the needs of the economy and society. It is about producing graduates who are not only qualified, but capable, capable of working, building, innovating, and contributing from day one.

And that is why today matters.

Because the Centre of Excellence we are launching here at Walter Sisulu University sits exactly at that intersection between education, industry, and development. It represents a shift from a fragmented system, where universities, industry, and government operate in silos towards an integrated system where these elements are brought together in a purposeful and structured way.

We must be honest with ourselves about the challenges we are trying to address.

In the construction sector, we face a number of deep and persistent issues. There is a shortage of critical technical and professional skills. There is a gap between what students learn and what the workplace requires. There are young graduates who leave institutions with qualifications but without practical experience. There are emerging contractors who struggle to access opportunities and build capacity. And there is a sector that is rapidly evolving technologically, while parts of our education system are still catching up.

These are not small issues. They are structural challenges. And they require structural responses.

At the same time, the construction sector itself is central to our national development agenda. Every road we build, every school we construct, every clinic we upgrade, every housing development we roll out—these are not just infrastructure projects. They are instruments of economic growth, job creation, and social transformation.

Government has made it clear that South Africa must become a construction site. But that ambition raises a fundamental question: do we have the skills, the capacity, and the knowledge to build at the scale and quality that our country requires?

The answer lies in how we organise our system.

The Centres of Excellence model is a direct response to this. It is designed to position universities as active participants in sector development not just as producers of graduates, but as hubs of knowledge, innovation, and practical problem-solving.

These centres bring together academic expertise, industry experience, and public sector priorities in a way that allows us to close the gap between theory and practice.

Here at Walter Sisulu University, this Centre must play a number of critical roles.

Firstly, it must contribute to building a stronger and more reliable skills pipeline. It must ensure that students are exposed to real-world environments, that they engage with actual construction projects, and that they graduate with the confidence and competence to operate effectively in the industry. Work-integrated learning must become central to the student experience, not an afterthought.

Secondly, it must drive applied research. We cannot afford a situation where research exists only in academic journals, disconnected from the challenges faced by practitioners on the ground. The work done through this Centre must address real issues—project delays, productivity, sustainability, cost efficiency, and the adoption of new technologies. Research must become a tool that improves how we build.

Thirdly, the Centre must contribute to transformation within the sector. It must support the development of emerging contractors, strengthen the participation of small and medium enterprises, and create pathways for more inclusive economic participation. Infrastructure investment must translate into broader economic empowerment, not just completed projects.

And fourthly, it must position the sector for the future. The construction industry globally is being reshaped by digital tools, data-driven systems, and new methodologies. If we do not prepare our students and professionals for this shift, we risk falling behind. This Centre must be at the forefront of integrating innovation and technology into both teaching and practice.

Walter Sisulu University is uniquely positioned to carry this responsibility. As an institution rooted in the Eastern Cape, it understands the development needs of this province. It understands the realities of rural and peri-urban communities. And it is well placed to ensure that skills development is not abstract, but directly linked to the lived experiences and needs of the people.

Importantly, the inclusion of WSU in this network of Centres of Excellence also speaks to a broader commitment to transformation within our higher education system. Excellence must not be confined to historically advantaged institutions. It must be extended, supported, and strengthened across the system, particularly where it can have the greatest developmental impact.

But let me also say this: the success of this Centre is not guaranteed simply because we have launched it today.

Its success will depend on the strength of the partnerships that sustain it.

Industry must be actively involved as observers yes, but also as partners who help shape training, provide opportunities for students, and contribute to the development of skills. Government must ensure that infrastructure programmes are aligned with skills development efforts, so that we are building both infrastructure and capacity at the same time. Universities must remain responsive, continuously adapting curricula and research to meet the needs of a changing sector.

If any one of these elements is missing, the model will not achieve its full potential.

This Centre must also not operate in isolation. It must form part of a broader, integrated Post-School Education and Training system. It must connect with TVET colleges that are producing artisans, with SETAs that are funding skills development, and with other

universities that are advancing research and innovation. Only through this level of coordination will we begin to realise the full impact of the Skills Revolution.

Ultimately, what we are doing here is redefining the role of education.

We are saying that education is not just about acquiring knowledge. It is about producing value. It is about enabling people to work, to build, to innovate, and to contribute meaningfully to society.

And if we get this right, if this Centre delivers on its mandate, it will not only strengthen the construction sector in the Eastern Cape. It will become a model for how institutions across the country can anchor the Skills Revolution in practical, measurable ways.

The true measure of success will not be the number of reports produced or meetings held. It will be the number of skilled professionals entering the sector. It will be the number of young people who find meaningful work. It will be the quality and efficiency of the infrastructure we deliver. And it will be the extent to which the sector becomes more inclusive and more dynamic.

Today, therefore, is both a celebration and a responsibility.

A celebration of what has been achieved through partnership between government, academia, and industry.

And a responsibility to ensure that this Centre becomes a living, working instrument of change.

Let us commit to making it work.

Let us commit to building a system where education and development are fully aligned.

And let us commit to ensuring that the Skills Revolution is not just an idea—but a lived reality for our people.

I thank you.