



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

Private Bag X174, PRETORIA, 0001, Tel: +27 12 312 6339, Fax: +27 12 326 1161, 123 Francis Baard Street, PRETORIA

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY MR BUTI MANAMELA, MP.  
MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING  
AT THE AFRICA UNIVERSITIES SUMMIT 2026,  
Nairobi, 30 MARCH 2026**

Theme: Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Gender Equality  
in African Higher Education

Programme Director,

Distinguished Ministers and Government  
Representatives,

Vice-Chancellors and leaders of higher education  
institutions,

Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to address this distinguished gathering at the Africa Universities Summit 2026, under the theme, Powering Africa's future through talent development, innovation and inclusion.

Let me begin with a proposition that may sound simple, but is in fact deeply political: there is no neutral education system. Paulo Freire reminded us that there is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either reproduces the world as it is, or helps us transform it. That is as true for questions of gender and disability as it is for questions of class, race and power.

So when we speak about equity, diversity, inclusion and gender equality in African higher education, we should be clear that we are not discussing a side issue, or a matter of institutional image. We are discussing who gets access to knowledge, who succeeds, who leads, who is left

behind, and what kind of society our universities help to build.

## **SOUTH AFRICA: PROGRESS AND CONTRADICTION**

In South Africa, the data presents us with both progress and contradiction.

In 2023, public universities enrolled 1,071,715 students. Of these, 671,988 were women, or 62.7%, while 399,258 were men, or 37.3%. Women are now the majority in public university enrolment. In the same year, public universities produced 220,758 graduates. Of these, 144,287 were women, or 65.4%, and 76,389 were men, or 34.6%. Put simply, women are not only entering higher education in larger numbers; they are also graduating in larger numbers.

That matters. It reflects long struggles for access, democracy and redistribution. It reflects public policy, public investment and social change far beyond the education sector itself. It tells us that what happens in

higher education is not merely the achievement of universities. It is also a reflection of wider shifts in households, communities, aspirations, social movements and the democratic order.

### **But that is only one side of the story**

Because if we stop there, we tell the wrong story. The correct question is not whether women have made progress. Clearly they have. The correct question is whether our systems are producing genuine equality, and whether they are doing so for everyone.

If we use a simple completion proxy from the 2023 South African data, women are still ahead: women's graduates as a share of their enrolment are about 21.5%, compared with about 19.1% for men. So the issue cannot be lazily explained away as women not progressing. They are progressing. But that also means we must ask a more uncomfortable question: what is happening to boys and men in the system, and what social conditions are

pushing many of them away from sustained educational participation?

This is why gender equality must mean exactly that: equality.

It cannot mean one historic injustice simply giving way to another pattern of imbalance. It cannot mean celebrating female gains while ignoring male disengagement. Nor can it mean invoking concern about boys and men in order to deny the structural barriers that women still face. A serious approach must hold both truths together.

In South Africa today, women are the majority in enrolment and graduation, but they are not yet equal in power. That is the contradiction

## **THE POWER GAP**

If we look at the academic staffing profile, the picture changes sharply. In 2023, among professors in South

African higher education, there were 1,129 women and 2,216 men. That means women made up only about 33.8% of professors. So the pipeline has changed, but the summit of institutional authority has changed far more slowly.

The lecture hall may have feminised, but the senior chair has not

This is why EDI cannot be measured only at the point of entry. It must be measured across the full chain: access, progression, completion, employment, leadership and institutional power.

## **TVET AND THE WALL AT THE WORKSHOP**

And if we widen the lens to technical and vocational education and training, the same broad pattern appears.

In 2023, South African TVET colleges recorded 564,089 enrolments. Of these, 360,378 were women, or 63.9%,

while 203,711 were men, or 36.1%. Again, women are the majority. Yet one of the exceptions is telling: in TVET skills programmes, men outnumbered women, with 4,378 men compared with 2,619 women. That reminds us that even where women dominate overall participation, occupational segmentation and labour-market pathways remain gendered.

That is important for Africa as a whole. Because our argument should not be that women are now doing fine and men are in crisis. The argument should be that the education system sits inside a wider social order, and that order still channels opportunity unevenly. It pushes girls and women into some pathways, boys and men into others, and many young people out altogether. The real problem is not women's progress. The real problem is a society that still produces unequal destinations.

**STEM: STRUCTURE, NOT ACCESS**

And once we say that, we are compelled to go beyond enrolment.

In South Africa's Science, Engineering and Technology field, the aggregate picture is actually more complex than the old cliché suggests. In 2023, women in public universities numbered 164,867 in SET fields, compared with 154,255 men. Women also accounted for 36,213 SET graduates, compared with 29,436 men. So the broad field no longer supports a simplistic claim that women are absent from STEM. They are there. But representation in a broad field is not the same thing as equality in specialisation, career progression, research leadership, pay, or institutional authority.

The issue is not only access. It is structure.

## **NSFAS: FINANCING AS A GENDER INSTRUMENT**

This is where public financing becomes politically important. In South Africa, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme is one of the clearest instruments of social

redress in our democratic era. In 2023, NSFAS supported 763,756 beneficiaries. Of these, 515,057, or 67.4%, were women. Of the R44.6 billion disbursed, about R30.3 billion went to women and R14.3 billion to men. In practical terms, public student funding in South Africa is already functioning as a gender-transformative instrument. That is not a small matter. It tells us that the state can act deliberately to redistribute opportunity. But it also tells us something else. Access to funding does not automatically produce equality in life outcomes.

The NSFAS-linked graduate employment research shows that even among funded graduates, women had a slightly lower employment proxy than men: about 90% compared with 92%. The gap is not enormous, but it is politically revealing. It tells us that the labour market still penalises women after the educational hurdle has been crossed. So even when women get in, complete and graduate, the world beyond the institution does not reward them equally.

That is why I say the education system alone cannot claim this story as its triumph, nor can it solve it on its own.

What we see in enrolment, graduation and employment is a reflection of wider social systems: family structures, poverty, violence, labour-market discrimination, masculinities in crisis, gendered care burdens, geography, disability, digital exclusion, and the historical ordering of class and race in our societies.

Higher education does not float above society. It condenses society

## **DISABILITY: INCLUSION IS DESIGN**

And that brings me to disability.

If we are serious about inclusion, then disability cannot be treated as an afterthought or a charitable concern. It must be understood as a core systems question. In South

Africa's public universities in 2023, the reported number of students living with disabilities was 13,722, about 1.3% of total public university enrolment. Across the wider PSET system, earlier DHET monitoring found around 18,304 students with disabilities, roughly 1% of total PSET enrolment. Those are not figures of inclusion at scale. They are signs of how much work remains to be done.

And here again, the problem is not only at the point of admission. The problem lies in infrastructure, digital design, assistive technology, curriculum adaptation, staff training, and whether institutions are built on the principle of universal accessibility or on the assumption of a 'normal' student. Inclusion is not a speech. It is design.

## **THE CONTINENTAL PICTURE**

Let me now widen the lens to the continent.

South Africa's female-majority enrolment pattern is not the African norm. Across sub-Saharan Africa, the region still has one of the lowest female-to-male ratios in tertiary

education, at roughly 80 women enrolled for every 100 men. So while South Africa must confront the contradiction of women advancing in participation but not yet in power or labour-market equality, many other African countries are still contending with a more basic challenge of female access at tertiary level.

That continental contrast matters because it cautions us against easy generalisations.

### **Africa is not one gender story.**

In some systems, girls and women remain underrepresented in tertiary access. In others, they have advanced strongly in participation, while men's participation has weakened. In nearly all systems, inequalities persist beneath the surface, in field of study, completion, employment, region, class and disability.

That is why this conversation in Nairobi matters. And it is why Kenya provides such a useful reminder. According to UNESCO data, Kenya's gross enrolment in tertiary

education stood at 13% for men and 10% for women. So even where progress is visible, parity is not automatic. And even national averages can conceal regional disparities between urban centres and historically marginalised areas.

## **WHAT WE MUST DO**

So what then should we ask of ourselves as African higher education leaders?

First, we should stop treating equity as a matter of optics, and start treating it as a matter of measurable institutional justice.

Second, we should reject two equally shallow positions: the first is to pretend that the job is done because women have advanced in enrolment; the second is to respond to male underrepresentation in some parts of the system by retreating from gender justice. Both positions are wrong. The task is not to choose between women and men. The task is to build institutions capable of producing equality for all.

Third, we must change what we measure. Too often, institutions celebrate enrolment and stop there. But enrolment is the beginning of the story, not the end of it. Every university represented here should be able to publish, annually, disaggregated data on enrolment, retention, completion, employment outcomes, disability access, and leadership representation. Without that, we do not have transformation. We have anecdotes.

Fourth, we must be honest that higher education reflects wider social change. If boys and men are falling behind in some contexts, that is not only a problem for universities to mop up at the end. It raises questions about schooling, family stability, worklessness, social identity and mental health. If women are still blocked from leadership and equal labour-market returns, that too reflects the structure of the economy and the unequal burdens carried beyond the campus.

The higher education question is inseparable from the social question.

And that is why our response must be both institutional and political.

We need funding systems that widen opportunity. We need curricula that do not reproduce old hierarchies. We need campuses that are safe and accessible. We need support systems that recognise real student lives. We need labour-market partnerships that do not carry gender bias forward into the world of work. And we need a conception of equality that is broad enough to include every student's dignity.

Let me conclude.

South Africa's experience offers a lesson, but not a finished model. It shows that policy, public finance and democratic struggle can indeed transform participation. It shows that women can move from exclusion to majority presence in higher education. But it also shows that this does not, by itself, resolve deeper inequalities. The same system that has opened more widely to women still reproduces gaps in leadership, in labour-market

outcomes and in disability inclusion. And it now also raises a new and serious question about boys and men whose educational participation is weakening.

So our task is not to celebrate one side and ignore the other. Our task is to build an education system that reflects the society we want: balanced, fair, accessible, humane and equal.

Not equality for women at the expense of men. Not concern for boys as a backlash against women's progress. Not access without success. Not inclusion without power. But real equality.

If we can hold that line firmly, then higher education can become not merely a mirror of society's inequalities, but an instrument for overcoming them.

I thank you