



OPENING REMARKS BY MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION ON THE OCCASION OF THE DHET FIRST VIRTUAL SENIOR MANAGEMENT MEETING

Wednesday, 02 September 2020

Senior Managers

My Advisors;

Ministry Staff;

Ladies and gentlemen

Good Afternoon

I requested that we must have this gathering today for me as the Minister to connect with yourselves as the senior management team of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), and to share information on where we are currently in the work of the department.

I also want to share with you once more my vision for the Post School Education and Training (PSET) sector, in particular the role we are now called upon to play in the midst of a major global health pandemic, whereupon the South African economy, similarly to the global economy, has suffered severely, and needs to be reignited and put on a high-growth path. To borrow from the European Union, we need to ensure that our

economy “bounces forward rather than backwards” after COVID-19, and the PSET sector has a crucial role to play within that.

It goes without saying therefore that DHET has a critical role to play in this process of stimulating our economy, and it becomes extremely important that the senior leadership of the department not only understand and buy into this vision and role of the department, but also to work diligently and collaboratively in translating it into tangible deliverables that have a meaningful impact on the lives of the people, in particular the working class and the poor.

Following severe restrictions that had to be imposed in response to the advent of COVID-19 in our country, the move from Alert Level 3 to Alert Level 2 of the national lockdown with effect from 18 August 2020 has seen further opening of the economy and other activities.

As a sector we have now allowed more (a maximum of 66%) of university students to a controlled return to university campus-based tuition.

We have also continued to manage the staggered return of Technical and Vocational Education and Training college students, the reopening of Community Education and Training centres, all of which was preceded by a return of staff to their workplaces.

We have also opened up most of the socio-economic activities of our country, which will significantly revive our economy and contribute to the creation of much-needed jobs, but still posing. Challenges on how to live with the virus.

Our challenges as a country can now be characterised as that of triple developmental challenges of Covid-19, economic crisis and the multiple crises of social reproduction. The major contradictions and social fault lines of the South African economy have been exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is also clear to me that as we are dealing with COVID-19, we remain constrained by the very same contradictions that our struggle sought to address, the triple challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment.

As a country, we have tight fiscal constraints, a low-growth economy and other economic challenges such as reduced fiscal revenue, higher borrowing costs as a result of the country's credit risk. Furthermore, we have had to redirect most of government spending to deal with COVID-19 directives.

In our sector, the issues of social and institutional inequality have been evident in the manner in which some of our universities and TVET Colleges have struggled to implement multimodal learning methods.

You might have also realised that in measuring university readiness towards the transition to Alert Level 2, most of the universities which were deemed to be at high and medium risk are those which were historically disadvantaged. So is the case with TVET College!

As conscious public servants you must now ask yourselves critical questions about the role that you must play in your place of employment to reverse the uneven development within our sector.

The twin challenges of COVID-19 and the deepening economic crisis require a well-co-ordinated twin strategy of skills development and innovation, to support both the management of COVID-19 as well as economic and social recovery.

Again, we know that at the inception of this pandemic, President Ramaphosa, correctly included our sector amongst the critical sectors to be at the forefront of the national response to COVID-19.

We welcomed this, although in subsequent engagements on which departments were considered to be frontline departments, and therefore whose budgets ought not to be cut, we were not included. This is a matter we are following up on with the relevant authorities and thrush out other initiatives.

In the light of COVID 19, we must work towards greater alignment and integration of policy, processes, people and resources across the Sector. In many senses, the COVID-19 crisis, like that of the FeesMustFall crisis, has compelled us to think and act as a single, though differentiated system of post-school education and training, and how this system should best interact with society and economy.

To feed in our thinking the District Development Model the state of PSET in each district is to be done.

At the commencement of the 6th Administration, and as part of streamlining the work of government, in order to deal with some of our challenges, President Ramaphosa identified the complementary nature of the work of the two departments, and opted to enable us to align our work,

effect better coordination and optimally leverage the resources and opportunities, by bringing together the Department of Higher Education and Training and the Department of Science and Technology under one reconfigured Ministry.

All of us must now work towards understanding this new landscape and empowering ourselves about the opportunities provided by the new Higher Education Science and Innovation (HESI) landscape and its potential to tackle the triple structural challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment, as well as the twin immediate challenges of COVID-19 and post lockdown economic recovery.

In an innovation-led economic growth and development strategy, the key challenge is that of addressing what is sometimes referred to as the “Innovation Chasm” and linking this to the centuries’ long inequality challenge. Taking innovation to higher level through Research and Development and skills development

In simple terms, this means addressing and removing the barriers that slow down and in some cases prevent the movement of ideas and inventions from the laboratory into products that play a crucial role in the productive economy, including in the commercial section of our economy. It also means creating an eco-system in which knowledge workers at all levels of our economy have the capacity to constantly upgrade and deploy their knowledge and skills to drive innovation across all sectors of society and the economy. The Post School Institutions have a critical role to play in this regard, as I also intend supporting innovation and entrepreneurship in TVET Colleges.

This is aimed at closely aligning our skills development and innovation strategies much closer together in order to facilitate an innovation-led economic growth and development strategy.

This effectively means that there should be closer interaction of policy, programmes and people between our TVET Colleges, SETAs, National Skills Fund, and some of DSI entities such as the National Research Foundation, Science Councils, the Technology Innovation Agency and others. It will therefore be critical that each and every Branch seek closer cooperation with programmes with the Department of Science and Innovation, as some have done. I have also been holding joint Minister Management Meetings (MMMs) hoping that they filter down.

In reality, there is a dialectical relationship between knowledge, skills and innovation. In practice, this link has been fragmented across different administrative mandates and, historically, the way our PSET and NSI institutional landscape has been organized.

This has resulted in wastage, duplication and, frankly speaking, lost opportunities. But the crisis facing our country today compels us to push the boundaries of this fragmented sector such that we have a more integrated and transformed NSI and PSET system that is capable of making a more profound impact on the economy and society.

This will require us to deliberately and systematically find different points of intersection between the mandates, budgets, resources and expertise of DHET and DSI, working from national to institutional to district levels, to align and deploy our Programmes closer to the productive core of our

economy. We already have the policy frameworks in place - the PSET White Paper and the White Paper on STI.

What is required is to align and deploy their collective resources at the core of the national Economic Recovery and Revitalisation Strategy of Government. My view as Minister is that this strategy cannot work if it is not facilitated and enabled by an innovation-led skills and knowledge strategy.

I would like to have a joint high-level team between the two Departments to develop an integrated DHET-DSI response plan linking our collective mandates – with a particular focus on an innovation-led skills strategy – to robustly support the strategic priorities identified in the national Economic Recovery and Revitalization Plan.

One of the challenges we need to deal with decisively is our commitment to ensure that allegations of corruption relating to COVID-19 procurement are swiftly investigated, if there are any in our department.

It goes without saying that those implicated will be severely punished, and money stolen from the State by unscrupulous companies and individuals by inflating the prices of personal protective equipment will have to be recovered.

The necessity to develop and drive a comprehensive skills development strategy must be informed by, and based on, the imperatives arising from Government's economic and social recovery Plan.

This is going to require a better alignment, integration and articulation in the work of the branches, and crucially, all PSET institutions, with a new vision and leadership to drive this innovation-led skills development strategy within the context of a HESI landscape.

Working together we also need to reposition and strengthen all our branches, including the re-organisation of some of the branches where needed.

We must end a silo working approach by branches in which some of the critical programmes ends up being duplicated. It is also important for all of us to understand that there is only one Executive Authority in the department, and that is myself as the Minister, and I am supported by and work closely with the Deputy Minister on responsibilities that are assigned to him, after consultation between us.

The next and critical layer in the implementation of the programs and mandate of the department is yourselves as the senior management team. Without your support and commitment we are unable to meet the mandate given to us through the President by the nation.

I therefore expect you to implement the programs of Government diligently and without fail. As senior management of the department I expect you, to be 'problem solvers and innovative and to do everything possible to remove obstacles that stand in the way of an effective and efficient implementation of the work of the department. I do not expect any of you to be part of those obstacles or specialists in telling me why this or that can't be done, unless it is illegal.

All this will require a new leadership style and ethos in this department. The treatment of senior managers and workers with an attitude that if they belong to a certain race, class or gender they are better, and if not, they are no good, has no place in my department. This is the attitude that perpetuate the prejudicial view that if you white you are smart, if you are black you are dumb.

Working together, we need to forge an ethos of inclusivity, non-racialism, gender equality and an end to all forms and types of patriarchy and tribalism. The treatment of some of the staff as favourites and others as outcasts must come to an end.

We need to build a climate of professionalism, collegiality and a high work ethic. We must also confront any kinds of disinformation aimed at dividing staff and discrediting of each other, including abuse of one's senior position to suppress or victimize others.

There is also a new and dangerous tendency that has just emerged, to leak confidential documents of the department, like the ones leaked to the UDM from within the senior ranks of this department. The UDM leader has said this on the record that he has been approached by senior management of the department to help.

There are also acts of plain thuggery, interfering with laptops of some staff members and mysterious loss of computer equipment at the same time as these leaks are happening.

I am going to go to the bottom of investigating these matters and I will leave no stone unturned to act against the culprits.

Unofficial leaking of confidential departmental documents for tempering with information is a very serious offence. Anyone with information in this regard please bring it to my attention. But, I have also reported this to the relevant law enforcement agencies. Leaking information means you are no longer loyal to this department and its objectives but on a self-serving journey all alone.

Let's us not allow spoilers to create a hostile and conflictual environment in this department.

Let us all place the interests of the people we must serve, especially the interests of the workers and the poor first, rather than narrow personal interests.

Building the type of the department as outlined above does not mean turning a blind eye to some of the racial and gender realities that still face us.

In order to work towards gender equality, we must affirm very strongly government policies of affirming women, especially black women. So must we uncompromisingly drive affirmative action as a precondition for building an inclusive and non-racial society.

It is against this background that I have taken some of the measures I will outline below.

But before outlining these, let me just explain two matter that has been a subject of disinformation and being used by some to spread dangerous

rumours in the department, first, the issue of the Chief Financial Officer (CFO).

As some of you may be aware, the CFO has been placed on precautionary suspension, pending an investigation and the proffering of charges, which will lead to a disciplinary process.

This stems from very serious allegations arising out of the Auditor-General's report of 2018/2019, which enjoined the Director-General to take the kind of action that is being taken now. As senior managers you know the roles and responsibilities as per the PFMA, and that as Minister my role is to approve, or not approve, such actions as initiated by the Accounting Officer.

I urge you not to allow peddlers of false information to give you distorted information around this matter, and to allow due process to take its course, and to respect the rights of the CFO until this matter is concluded.

My style is not to target people, but where there is wrong-doing I will raise that directly, just as I will directly tell any senior manager that I have lost confidence or trust in him or her.

As a Minister I always seek to deal with issues in an open and transparent manner. What you see is what you get as I do not believe in victimization or secret manoeuvres to unfairly punish anyone.

Second, is the issue of the tender for the provision of laptops, run by NSFAS. All of you know the background to this, and why it became necessary to undertake this tender, to support online teaching and

learning, in response to the pandemic. Given the size of this tender, and having learnt from the controversy from COVID-19 procurement already at the start of this tender, we decided to go for an open tender process, to avoid similar experiences. As mentioned in the press briefing last week, unfortunately the Administrator of NSFAS informed us that none of the received bids met the mandatory requirements of the tender, and precisely to avoid potential legal and other challenges, he decided not to award the tender, and start it afresh.

Having his received his explanation, I supported his decision, notwithstanding the further delays in distributing the devices to students. I remain convinced that it is better to err on the side of caution, than make a disastrous decision that would land us in legal and other difficulties for a long time to come.

I therefore would like those who are seized with paddling disinformation about this process to desist from doing that and allow due procurement processes to take cause. What is certain is we will not allow the manipulation of the processes by unscrupulous individuals.

For a while now there has been unfilled vacancies at all levels and in all branches. I have started advertising these posts, and what you have seen in the media is the first batch to be followed by others, and everyone is free to apply, and please do apply if you so wish and tell all the staff to do so as an opportunity for upward mobility in the department.

I have also advertised all the vacant DDG posts. We have too many vacant DDG positions, and this is both a challenge but also an opportunity to renew and re-invigorate the department at senior management level.

This is also an opportunity to reorganize the department and it will be an exercise that will be done transparently.

Filling senior management posts is also an opportunity to select people with an understanding of the challenges emanating from the new HESI landscape, which is why I decided to re-advertise some of the senior management posts.

I want to emphasise and assure all of you and all the employees of the department that everyone has a home and a place in this department, provided each and every one works hard.

I must indicate that I am also committed to the training and development of all staff. Our government is a developmental government, it needs a public service which is adequately skilled and driven by the principles of Batho-Pele.

I would like to encourage all of you to participate in training programmes for members of the Executive and senior managers in the Public Service that will be conducted by the National School of Government (NSG), in partnership with the Wits School of Governance and the OR Tambo School of Leadership.

This training is one of the two that has been approved by Cabinet to give effect to the commitment of building the capacity of the state. This programme in the form of the Economic Governance Spring School training, is for members of the Executive from all spheres of government. It is designed to broaden learning perspectives through analysis and critical reflection on the nature of challenges of government.

The second programme is designed for heads of departments. It consists of three components, namely an Executive Induction Programme, Executive Education Programme and a new programme to be called Etella. These programmes will be conducted by the NSG, in partnership with the University College London.

I will also occasionally address staff as and when necessary, either in this form or through our internal media platforms.

Having said that, we should not lose sight of our achievements, that we have achieved a lot of progress through your individual and collective effort.

I would like to thank all the staff in this department, and you as senior managers for executing your duties with dedication and commitment.

Before I close, I want to acknowledge that we have all been impacted by Covid-19, through losing our loved ones, relatives, friends, neighbours and possibly colleagues to the virus and even where some have been lost due to natural causes but during Covid-19 restrictions. I therefore pass my condolences to all of you who lost their loved.

As I conclude I would like to say to all of you that together, as the Ministry and the public service, we should all say, in word and deed, that beyond serving our people, we have no other ambition. And with all hands on deck, we know we shall overcome.

Thank you all

Word count: 3230