



Independent

THINKING

Lifelong learning Curves

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Blade Nzimande, Minister of Higher Education and Training

Transforming higher education for a transformed South Africa

This week's National Higher Education Transformation Summit takes place at a critical time for South African higher education. While there are many different views about the nature of transformation and the pace of change over the past 21 years, there are few who believe that we have done enough.

In the past few months, new expressions of social and political activism have placed universities back in the public eye. We need both to assess what has been achieved and highlight areas where we need to do much more work.

The aim of this week's summit is to bring together key stakeholders for a

critical dialogue on transformation in the higher education system. This follows from the 2010 Higher Education Summit that took place at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

Since then, there have been many changes in institutions and in the system as a whole that we should reflect on and exchange views about. We also need to take stock of the current situation and share ideas on what goals we should set ourselves for the future.

The White Paper on Post-School Education and Training, adopted by Cabinet in November 2013, provides a strategic framework for all policies and plans of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and

identifies major priorities. It lays out a vision to fundamentally restructure and transform the South African post-school system of education and training.

On the basis of the White Paper, the DHET has embarked on a process to develop a comprehensive and integrated national plan for post-school education and training, and the summit is intended to assist that process. The university sector is a crucial component of the post-school system. While this summit will focus on the role and functioning of the universities, it should always keep in mind the post-school system and the universities' role within it.

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President meets with Chairs of Universities

THE President of the Republic, His Excellency JG Zuma, on Tuesday 6th October met with the Chairs of Universities South Africa and the University Council Chairs Forum, who had written a letter requesting a meeting in which they expressed concern over unacceptable levels of violence being experienced on campuses across the country. Also in attendance were Higher Education and Training Minister Blade Nzimande and senior Departmental staff.

In a statement issued by the Presidency following the meeting, the President expressed his pleasure at having had the opportunity to discuss the pressing matter of the current university unrest.

The university stakeholders had expressed their belief that the cause of this unrest is partly the heightened party political climate in the country as a whole together with underlying historical social tensions, and were concerned that this unrest is feeding off and further fuelling a deeper societal problem of the use of violence as a means to resolve differences.

They thus perceived the levels of violence as a crisis that requires urgent attention. Among the issues discussed were the recent situation with respect to student politics and violence on university campuses, including transformation of higher education and the Durban Summit. The discussions were held in a convivial spirit and it is hoped that they will inform the discussions to be conducted in this Summit.

After the discussions, the President announced the formation of a task team to find solutions to student funding challenges that have evoked violent protests in some tertiary institutions across the country in the last few months.

The task team comprises officials from the Presidency, Department of Higher Education and Training, the National Students' Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), two vice-chancellors representing the leadership of universities, two student representatives as well as other higher education stakeholders, and will explore solutions to short-term student funding challenges.

It is mandated to report back to the Presidency before the end of November this year.

The President said that funding for poor academically capable students disbursed through the NSFAS has increased from R114m in 1997 to more than R9.5bn in 2015. He added that processes for improving the disbursement of funds, and concerted efforts to combat fraud, as well as sourcing additional funding to students are currently being implemented.

Importantly, the President strongly condemned the violence and destruction of property that has taken place at some of our universities in the name of student protests over the past year or so, and most recently at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, while also urging university management to be proactive and not allow matters to deteriorate to such an extent that students go on a rampage.