

Higher education and training

By **DR BE NZIMANDE MP**

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BE NZIMANDE matriculated from Georgetown High School in 1975 and went to the University of Zululand where he completed his BA in Public Administration and Psychology. He later gained an Honours degree in Psychology, an MSC in Industrial Psychology and a DPhil in Personnel Management. He is a member of the ANC and serves as a National Executive Committee Member (NEC). He also holds the position of the General-Secretary South African Communist Party (SACP) since 1998. In 2009 he was appointed as minister of Higher Education and Training.

Never before in the history of our democracy have we been better placed to advance the vision of a truly comprehensive, and differentiated, post-school system which is capable of contributing to the lives of individuals, to the economy and to broader society.

The establishment of the Ministry for Higher Education and Training will produce far-reaching changes to improve the provision of post-school opportunities, particularly for the youth but also adults. There is a window of opportunity for crafting a system that provides a myriad of opportunities and to make a meaningful impact on the lives of individuals, the economy and society.

Participation in higher education

A critical question that remains after 15 years of democratic rule is whether South Africa has succeeded, or is on track towards successfully creating opportunities for greater participation in higher education. During this time policies have been developed and are being implemented. Some of the common features of these policies include the realisation of a single, co-ordinated higher education system that is built on the principles of redress, representivity and equity and are achieved through the levers of planning, quality assurance and funding.

The South African Human Science Research Council (2004) found that South African learners would enter higher education based on perceptions of enhanced employability, an intrinsic interest in a field of study, perceptions that higher education will lead to higher incomes (linked to employability), being spurred on by family to undertake higher education study, being offered a bursary and/or a scholarship, qualifying to finance their study through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (a government funded programme), or being able to finance study through a bank loan.

Recent achievements

The most visible achievement is the synchronisation of higher education and training in a single government department. Previously, skills development was a function under the Department of Labour. The newly-established Department of Higher Education and Training comprises the functions of University Education, Skills Development, College Education (Further Education

and Training Colleges) as well as being the Secretariat to South Africa's National Human Resource Development Strategy. The implementation of a post-school education and training system is welcomed as a priority by a large majority of South Africans.

Another achievement relates to the highly effective implementation of a national quality assurance regime for the higher education system as a whole. Any publicly funded university or private higher education institution in South Africa is subjected to an institutional accreditation process that is led and managed by the Higher Education Quality Committee, a permanent committee of the Council on Higher Education, an advisory structure to the Minister of Higher Education and Training. More than two-thirds of the public universities have been audited to date.

Challenges and priorities

Notwithstanding the tremendous strides made in higher education in the last 15 years, the challenges that remain and which impact on the success rates of students in higher education are career information and guidance at the pre-tertiary level; integration and harmonisation of planning between the secondary and tertiary education systems; available articulation opportunities for higher education studies from any track (that is at exit or senior levels) in the Further Education and Training sector; diversifying the types of higher education to allow for varied sets of learners entering higher education; positive discrimination policies for particular groups whose prior educational disadvantage is well identified; making available incentives for Higher Education Institutions to broaden participation through the provision of extra support for students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds; the affordability of higher education and; institutional admission management processes.

Adequate and equitable funding of the higher education system remains a pressing challenge. This will however require a robust social contract between the State and providers of higher education (the public universities and colleges) to ensure that agreed-to outcomes are aligned to national developmental priorities in addition to the more conventional practices associated with particularly universities. The Ministry for Higher Education and Development has prioritised a review of the resourcing of the higher education system as an urgent matter. **E**