

Address by the Deputy President, Kgalema Motlanthe, at the Higher Education Summit, Bellville, Cape Town

22 April 2010

Programme Director;
Chancellors and Vice-Chancellors;
Chairpersons of University Councils;
Trade Union and Business leaders;
Distinguished guests;
Ladies and gentlemen:

It is an honour for me to address this august gathering, the Higher Education Summit.

I believe this summit is long overdue and offers an opportunity for major stakeholders from universities and technikons, Further Education and Training Colleges, Sector Education and Training Authorities and other representatives from government departments to engage and exchange ideas on higher education transformation.

I am informed that this is the first summit of its kind since 1994, and that it aims to build a common understanding of the role of higher education in the national development of South Africa.

I wish to applaud the organisers – the Department of Higher Education and Training and their partners – for hosting this historic Summit in a changed landscape where now we have an established unitary post-school education and training system.

It is not often that one can put together a programme that seeks to generate a common understanding amongst academics!

Therefore I wish to congratulate the Minister of Higher Education and Training for this stellar initiative in creating a platform where various stakeholders can deliberate on a variety of matters that affect higher education and its role in furthering the objectives of building a united, non-racial, non-sexist and prosperous South Africa that provides comfort for all.

I premise this submission on the understanding that in contemporary South Africa, the primary role of higher education is to develop people's potential and capacity to contribute meaningfully to serving the needs of their families, communities and ultimately the nation.

The right of every young man and young woman to an education and training that empowers his and her life is enshrined in the Preamble of the Constitution, and states in section 29:

“Everyone has the right to further education” in order to free the potential of each person.

It is for this reason that I am pleased to learn that the Summit, in its core objectives, seeks to achieve the following:

- § revisit the notion of transformation focusing on issues of access, equity and quality in relation to the core functions of higher education,
- § examine the role of higher education in national development, and
- § discuss the need, feasibility and possible modalities for more systematic and structured communication between the sector and the Minister of Higher Education and Training.

Programme Director,

These critical issues cannot be overemphasised. We need a catholic and integrated approach to tackle the human resource needs of the country. Inter alia, by human resource development we refer to the enhancement of people's skills levels, knowledge and abilities with the ultimate purpose of increasing their productivity in areas of work and improving the lives of their families and society at large.

It is imperative that we increase the country's human resource capacity by producing high-level and scarce skills that are needed by the economy and for effective service delivery to the population.

I am convinced that if we can reach a workable consensus on identifying the challenges and solutions to South Africa's education transformation potential, we would be better placed to respond to the five (5) government priorities of education, health, rural development and land reform, creating decent jobs as well as fighting crime and corruption.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We have come far since 1994, and therefore it is only proper that we ask ourselves whether we are on track regarding our higher education system. Such an appraisal is fitting if we are to determine whether the trajectory we have selected is appropriate for the challenges we face as a nation.

The challenges presented by a globalised world necessitate that we remain ahead in conceptualising and implementing proposals that would position our country at a competitive edge.

It is notable that last year when we began our tenure in office, we emphasized the need for plans to be supported by measurable outputs and outcomes so as to be able to administer remedial interventions in meeting our developmental objectives.

The challenges of poverty and unemployment are a major concern and we need to isolate and exploit our comparative advantage in education.

To underscore my point, I was troubled by the report which appeared in the Financial Mail last month which says, “2.5 million young people aged 18 to 24 are neither working nor in any kind of education or training”.

“At university level...about 35% of students drop out of degree studies, 52% out of certificate or diploma studies and 70% out of distance higher education...At further education & training (FET) colleges...only about 29% of those who enrol eventually pass” (source, FM March 26, 2010).

Programme Director,

Indeed, it is not acceptable to find that sixteen (16) years after the attainment of political democracy, higher education is still inaccessible to the majority of potential learners because of a combination of hurdles.

Furthermore, it is troubling that a majority of those who make it into the higher education system do not complete their studies but drop out because they are not suitably prepared for university and technikons.

I also find it disheartening that the research output in natural and engineering sciences remains dismally low.

In this regard, how are we to address the reality that the research profile at most universities still does not reflect the country’s demographics? Most importantly how are we to address the question of who and what informs the research agenda?

Also, we should ask: what is the impact of the private sector’s determination of academic research. Does this support our national aspirations? Does it help us with innovation and advance our economy especially in niche markets?

Still on this subject of specialisation, let me pause here and make reference to a recent groundbreaking academic development in our country in the area of palaeontology.

Two weeks ago South Africa grabbed the worldwide media spotlight when the University of the Witwatersrand announced the latest hominid fossils discovery.

This priceless discovery once more elevated South Africa to international intellectual pedestal, giving further credence to Africa’s claim as the cradle of humanity.

A discovery of “Australopithecus Sediba” and the baby hominid significantly augment and expand the academic research interest spawned by the discovery of “the Taung Child”, “Mrs Ples”, and “Little Foot”.

When we say government has identified palaeontology as a scientific area in which South

Africa is uniquely placed to contribute to global knowledge, we say this for the simple fact that, these discoveries practically symbolise and underline the unity – the oneness – of the people of the world.

While there may be differences in culture and beliefs in people in society, we are bound by a singular ancestry to endeavour to realise the potential of all our people to fulfill their educational goals, irrespective of race, class or gender.

There are other research areas where South Africa is distinguishing itself, but the output remains low and is in fact a far cry from what we are capable of producing.

The readiness and willingness of universities to support and nurture researchers must be encouraged. It is here that many questions on transformation should be asked.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As a country we are not adequately able to maximise our research pool and are hampered in producing a social capital base needed by the economy.

We believe it is not enough to applaud transformation at a superficial level. Yes, higher education enrolments have increased since 1994 by seventy percent. Yes, the racial composition of student bodies has changed substantially.

And so we agree that transformation in our tertiary institutions remains a major challenge.

Broadly speaking by transformation we mean a process that addresses the accumulated disabilities in our society ranging from cultural, economic, racial and gender exclusions as they manifest themselves in numerous institutions and organisations.

In this regard, the findings and proposals emanating from the Soudien Report on Racism and Discrimination need to be constructively engaged with in terms of reaching a fuller understanding on training “curriculum, institutional cultures, democratisation of higher education and its role in development”.

In this connection, we trust that your discussions in the plenary and breakaway sessions will give rise to concrete suggestions on how to overcome these accumulated disabilities.

Programme Director,

It is reported that the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, which has been allocated R1.2 billion in this financial year, has so far provided funding to about 140,000 learners for access to tertiary education.

It is debatable whether the R17 billion allocated to universities is adequate to support their

training needs. I am sure you would agree that under the circumstances brought about by the global economic downturn, we all have to do the best we can with the limited amounts at our disposal.

Equally, I acknowledge that when we speak of quality we should also recognise that higher education functions are dependent on the feeder system from Basic Education and the reverse is equally true – our schools depend on the quality of teachers trained at colleges and universities.

Moreover, I acknowledge that the higher education sector still has to surmount the hurdles of facilitating the training and throughput of skilled personnel needed by our country.

On a positive note, we are pleased that there has been a concerted effort to direct considerable amounts of resources – both human and material – to upgrade the Further Education and Training Colleges resources.

At the same time, other specialised institutions such as nursing and agricultural colleges must also be used optimally to contribute to skills development, especially as they support our priorities of health and rural development.

Programme Director,

I am confident that this Summit will deal with the major challenges such as the low retention rates, an insufficient number of postgraduates, and the skills mismatch between tertiary training and the needs of the economy.

Without belabouring the developmental role of higher education, let me reiterate that its function is to advance the developmental agenda of society in assisting both the public and private sector to overcome poverty, stimulate research and innovation and accelerate shared economic growth.

I am therefore encouraged that this extraordinary forum, as part of its Summit Outputs and Outcomes, intends to “adopt a Declaration elucidating a set of principles and understandings agreed to by the participants”.

Distinguished guests,

A more structurally aligned interface between tertiary institutions with the Sectoral Education and Training Authorities plus the National Skills Fund is imperative so that we respond effectively to the twin challenges of unemployment and poverty.

I am pleased by the position taken by the Department to focus their efforts in “increasing the numbers and relevance of academic, professional and vocational learning programmes... through professional placements, work integrated learning, apprenticeships, learnerships,

internships and the like”.

As you are aware, government is finalising the Human Resource Development Strategy led by the Human Resource Development Council (HRD Council).

This is a national multi-tiered and multi-sectoral advisory body that seeks to oversee coordination efforts and identify policy and implementation blockages and subsequently recommend appropriate solutions.

The HRD Council will ensure that the Human Resource Development Strategy is sufficiently canvassed and finalised by the end of this year.

In essence, initiatives like the Human Resource Development Strategy are geared towards effectively countering the unrelenting inequalities in education and poor educational outcomes!

In the final analysis, if we fail to attend to the challenges of holistic transformation, then our freedom will have limited meaning for many of our people, especially the poorest of the poor.

We wish you well in your deliberations.

I thank you.