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OPINION: Higher education challenge: education for everyone

In establishing the Higher Education ministry in 2009, President Jacob Zuma emphasised that: “We have to ensure that training and skills development initiatives in the country respond to the requirements of the economy.

“The further education and training (FET) sector – with its 50 colleges and 160 campuses nationally – will be the primary site for skills development training. We will improve access to higher education of children from poor families and ensure a sustainable funding structure for universities.”

We in government also took an oath in Parliament in 2009 to uphold the Constitution. Therefore in planning for our delivery, it is proper to reflect on the enshrined values that are relevant to the challenges facing higher education. Our vigilance should aim at ensuring that we widen access to education as a right.

The preamble to the Constitution compels us to recognise the injustices of our past and be united in our diversity. We adopted the Constitution as the supreme law of our land, so that we could heal the divisions of the past, establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights, thus improving the quality of life of all citizens and freeing the potential of each person.

This preamble promised all South Africans a better life, redress of the imbalances of the past and as a result, Archbishop Desmond Tutu called us the “Rainbow Nation”. In this context, education and training becomes the means of restoring our people’s dignity and the realisation of their right to economic participation.

Our challenge in skills development, education and training has a long history. Education was used as a tool of the apartheid machinery together with influx control, pass laws, Group Areas Act and job reservation laws.

HF Verwoerd, the architect of the Bantu Education Act of 1953, anchored the thrust of the legislation, thus: “There is no place for (the Bantu) in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour. It is of no avail for him to receive training which has its aim, absorption in the European community. What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice?”

Fifty eight years down the line, the legacy of colonialism and all other apartheid relics are still with us. We cannot tackle the current challenges, without interrogating the past. Without a deeper understanding of systematic racism, we would be blind to subtle forms of racism.

The question is, whether we have achieved a single, united, diversified education and training system where all people young or old, rural or urban, male or female, healthy or sick, black or white, rich or poor enjoy equal opportunities?

In acknowledging progress made so far, we need to be able to account accurately in terms of access, enrichment programmes and outputs for the government's special target groups in all our institutions. The determinants are race, class, gender, age, geography, disability and HIV-Aids.

My premise is that we have not moved fast enough, quick enough and wide enough in increasing access for all. Admittedly, our responses to progress will differ depending on where one is located in society, as either a beneficiary or as alienated by our education and training skills pipeline.

Why have we not honoured our constitutional obligation? Is it because of racism and prejudice or other invisible factors and forces, set to undermine our democracy, or is it that we have not invested sufficient resources to deal with inequalities in our education system. We need to use this budget to quantify the costs and implement measures to eradicate these social ills.

All of us, including our partners and stakeholders in the education and training system, have a degree of institutional autonomy but we also have a duty and obligation to ensure that government policies and legislation aimed at the promotion of social cohesion are taken seriously.

If resources are a constraint then we are prepared to make them available and if systems are a constraint then we as government are prepared to put systems in place.

The Soudien Report commissioned by the former minister of education concludes thus: "It is clear from this overall assessment of the state of transformation in higher education that the experience of feeling discriminated against, in racial and gender terms in particular, is endemic within institutions." This report will form a framework from which we will pursue our commitments.

Minister Blade Nzimande made the report the subject of vigorous discussion and debate within the sector through the Higher Education Summit. The summit concluded with a firm declaration, that we have to deal quickly and decisively with the question of access for all. Transformation cannot take place without a cost.

In this regard the strategic plan of our department deals with administrative actions required for inclusion and equity. We welcome the launch of the National Skills Development Strategy III by the minister.

We have great expectations for this strategy because it deals deliberately with challenges related to race, class, gender, geography, age, disability and the HIV-Aids pandemic that our system must address through its institutions, the sector education and training authorities and the National Skills Fund. In addressing these challenges the impact achieved over the five-year life of the strategy must be measurable.

The National Skills Fund is a "catalytic" fund that will enable government to drive key skills

strategies as well as meet the training needs of the unemployed, non levy-paying entities, cooperatives, NGOs, community structures and vulnerable groups. It promotes strategic partnerships and innovation in project delivery.

The fund will be used to target gaps and complement resource shortages for national priorities. Funds will be set aside for competitive grants and bids from community-initiated skills development projects and other initiatives in line with the objectives and goals of the strategy.

The department will review the funding policies applicable to universities and FET colleges so that consideration is given to fund innovative and creative programmes relating to race, class, gender, age, disability, geography, HIV and Aids.

Our strategic objectives cannot be realised without collaboration and cooperation with other departments and structures of civil society.

In research done, funded by the Ford Foundation, it was found that some 2.8 million people between the ages of 18 and 24 were in the category of not in employment and not disable, aged 18 to 24. I am sure that by now this figure is over 3 million.

What is of concern is that half million of these young people have less than a primary education, another half million have a secondary education less than grade 10, a million have either a grade 10 or 11 and 600000 a matric without an exemption to enter university. We have a responsibility to do everything in our power, to provide them with opportunities for education and skills development.

We cannot ignore patriarchy-related challenges that exist within the education system. Women within fields of study such as mathematics and science and technology still have to deal with many barriers, cultural stereotypes and attitudes.

The department will support research and projects and analyse the status of women in the post-school system to establish the level of skills development as well as their participation and contribution to the economy.

This will help us come up with relevant policy plans to ensure that they become full beneficiaries of the post-school system and ensure their economic participation. Hlengiwe Mkhize is the Deputy Minister for Higher Education and Training, This is an extract of her maiden speech in Parliament last week