

Address by Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande at the US-South Africa Partnership for Skills Development Launch, Waterberg FET College, Mokopane, 20 October 2009

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It gives me great pleasure to be here today to officially seal the partnership between the Department of Higher Education and Training and the USAID, and launch the Partnership for Skills Development Programme which will be implemented in 12 Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges in three Provinces.

Ladies and Gentlemen, this programme will see the implementation of an extensive three-year Skills Development initiative aimed at capacity building, consultation and education within the FET college sector in line with the objective of the USAID/Southern Africa Economic Growth strategy. The American Council on Education (ACE) has a dedicated unit working on the implementation in co-operation with the Department of Higher Education and Training.

Research has shown that in developing economies, one of the underlying principles for producing a skilled workforce is to have a quality general and further education and training system. It is therefore our aim to strengthen the Further Education and Training College sector and ensure that it develops into an important and effective component of government's skills development programme.

In line with this vision, government decided to recapitalise FET Colleges with an investment of R1,9 billion in the three years ending in March this year. The recapitalisation of colleges has repositioned FET colleges into modern and responsive institutions for skills development and advanced learning. Teaching and learning at most colleges now takes place in well equipped workshops, high-tech laboratories, and ICT centres. This we believe has been a worthwhile investment and part of our overall objective to make colleges into institutions of choice for the new generation of school leavers.

The R 1.9 billion recapitalisation of the FET Colleges was largely spent on infrastructure, acquisition of equipment, development of a new curriculum and skilling of human resources. I am looking forward to seeing how this college in particular has utilised its recapitalisation funds. While we have invested wisely in FET Colleges, more still needs to be done to support

the lecturing staff and to ensure throughput of the students. It is therefore appropriate that a partnership of this nature is formed with FET Colleges. In 2007, the Department of Education introduced the National Certificate (vocational) Programmes which are intended to directly respond to the priority skills demands of the South African economy.

In developing these vocational programmes, the Department works in consultation with employers to determine the needs of the economy and to respond with suitable programmes. This is done in response to the Government's Programme of Action for 2009 - 2014. We believe these programmes can assist our young people acquire the needed skills to compete for jobs in a 21st Century labour market.

In order to do this more effectively, though, we need the employers not only to help us to develop our programmes and to keep us informed of the unfolding needs of the labour market. They also need to help ensure that our students have work-placements for their practical training. It is rather strange that many of the employers - in both the public and private sectors - complain about the shortage of skilled labour, yet are reluctant to take on trainees in the form of interns and young people on learnerships and apprenticeships.

The Colleges with the full support of the government, especially the Department of Higher Education and Training and the provincial education departments, must make every effort to mobilise employers to provide these opportunities. I myself am fully committed to engaging with other government departments, with major employers and employer organisations and trade unions to ensure that workplace placements for FET College students are expanded because without them the training provided by the Colleges really cannot prepare students fully for the labour market. Until such opportunities are available to all, we will have to try to ensure that facilities are available for simulated workplaces for our students to develop the practical skills they need.

To date government has invested R600 million in bursaries for FET College students in order to create access for the financially needy students. This investment by Government is continuing to serve deserving students. We are aware that it is still not enough and government will endeavour to expand it further despite the very many demands that face us and the severe limitations placed on us by the current economic downturn. We are committed to ensuring that no young person is deprived of

the opportunity for education or training merely because of a lack of money, even if this goal takes a few more years before it be fully realised.

Having elaborated on Government's investment in the sector, it would be appropriate to direct a few words to the students here today. Whilst Government will continue to improve the quality of education and training, I also want to urge the students to commit to attending all lectures and studying diligently. It is important not only to you as students but to the development and welfare of South Africa as a whole that you complete your studies successfully.

Education is the most empowering and liberating asset that you can acquire for yourselves. It will enable you to earn a living and care for yourselves and your families. But, in addition, the development of our national skills base is one of the most important instruments for developing our country and is essential to ensuring that all our people can enjoy a decent life, free from poverty and deprivation.

In a very real sense, then, the future of our country depends on you, the youth, ensuring that you complete your studies successfully and contribute to the growth of our economy. Your country's future is in your hands so you must ensure that you don't waste the opportunity you have to develop your skills and qualify in your chosen field. Just as your parents generation liberated our country from the clutches of apartheid and oppression, so you must commit yourselves to liberating it from poverty and underdevelopment.

In the state of the Nation Address on 3 June 2009, the President announced that 'the Further Education and Training sector with its 50 colleges and 236 campuses nationally will be the primary site for skills development and training'. I note with appreciation that USAID has responded to the President's call by agreeing to invest \$ 6.7 million over three years in FET Colleges for skills development.

Education and training is a joint venture, and a partnership of this nature is more than welcome. I believe that the partnership will enable us to realise our vision of improving access and success in the college sector. The new education and training landscape will help to ensure that we are able to provide the country with the much needed scarce skills through the development of an integrated skills development strategy and its implementation through the colleges.

I believe that this partnership presents an increased opportunity for our country to develop solutions to accelerate capabilities and systems for sustainable development of the FET College sector. I am happy that the partnership will support existing interventions being implemented at FET Colleges; in particular Student Support Services. This will enhance student access, retention, throughput and linkages with sustainable economic opportunities.

I believe that the support systems which colleges put in place through Student Support Services can have a significant influence on how well the students perform.

It is my wish that the partnership will be utilised to support students to make correct programme choices and will provide suitable materials for academic support that will lead to higher retention and throughput rates. This will assist our youth to fulfill their historic mission of developing South Africa to become a great nation which can care for all its people and become an effective force for good in the world.

One of the biggest strengths of this programme is that it incorporates a labour market research component which will give colleges access to labour market data. In this way, training at colleges can be matched to demands of the marketplace. A budget in excess of \$320 000 has been assigned to this important aspect of the programme.

We are also pleased that \$1.7million is dedicated to the much needed HIV/AIDS programme, which I hope will go a long way in liberating our youth and our country from the scourge of this pandemic.

The budget will be distributed amongst the 12 FET colleges from Limpopo, Mpumalanga and the Northern Cape and will also cover Skills Development Support Services, Academic Support and Project Administration. To the colleges which have been selected to participate in the programme, congratulations! Use this opportunity for the benefit of the students, the whole college sector and the entire country. I urge you to cooperate with the donor partners and to ensure that this initiative is a success which can be extended and emulated in other parts of the country.

In the spirit of cooperative governance, I urge the Provincial Education Departments as well as the municipalities of the

selected colleges to support the 12 colleges participating in this programme. Remember that FET Colleges have been created to further serve the needs of the communities in which they are located and need to develop strong bonds with those communities. We are aware that the delivery of critical skills has mutual benefits for both the FET Colleges and the communities they serve.

I look forward to feedback and interaction with the college principals as the programme unfolds so that we are able to establish the effectiveness of this innovative venture over time.

To USAID, I thank you for this initiative. The task is huge and calls for governments to work together. Our aim is to strengthen current interventions and coordinate, integrate and focus on new initiatives.

In the spirit of nation building, I call upon all the partners in this initiative to join hands so that 'working together we can do more'. I wish you success and continued cooperation in the future.

I thank you.