



higher education
& training

Department:
Higher Education and Training
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

**Opening remarks and introduction of
President Jacob Zuma
at the Multi Stakeholder Forum on Universities
by Higher Education and Training Minister
Blade Nzimande**

3rd October 2016

The President of the Republic of South Africa,
Fellow Ministers,
Student leaders,
Vice Chancellors,
The representatives of a cross section of South African
society,

Welcome to this very important event in our journey of
deepening transformation of our higher education
system.

We have gathered today for what we at the Department
of Higher Education and Training have dubbed a multi-
stakeholder forum on South Africa's universities.

We meet in the face of many challenges. Immediate
challenges which go far beyond our universities and
colleges, challenges whose broader political and social
dimension is visible to all of us.

As will be outlined by the President, we are also gathering against enormous progress that our higher education system has witnessed over the past 22 years. From a racially based institutional system with white majority student population, it now has majority black students with 58% being female. It is by the single largest university system on the continent, and also the only one with a consistently strong global reputation from a number of institutions. We need to transform and not destroy this system.

What is the purpose of this gathering? We need to find urgent, but long lasting solutions to some of the immediate challenges facing the system. But in finding solutions to immediate challenges facing the university system we need to ensure that we do not compromise our medium to long-term goals for the transformation of our university system.

Much more importantly, we need to ensure that in responding to urgent challenges we also do not lose sight of the bigger picture of the challenges facing the whole of the post-school education and training sector. For instance our research tells us that about 18 million South Africans require some form of further or adult education of one form or the other. This is far larger number than that in our universities and colleges.

Statistics South Africa also tells us that there is an estimated 4 million young South Africans between the ages of 15-24 who are neither in education, employment nor training, whose needs have to be addressed as part

of the mandate of our post-school education and training system.

The most immediate challenge we have is that we are faced with a minority of students who are determined to bring our higher education system to a halt, while the overwhelming majority of students are either in class or want nothing more than to be there.

We meet as a small minority is determined to spread anarchy and to destroy those assets the nation has dedicated to the empowerment of the next generation with the knowledge and skills they need to contribute to the future of our advanced industrial economy. What started as legitimate and peaceful protests now seem to have been hijacked by elements who seem to want to collapse the system.

This is at a time when government has made substantial increases to the funds available for the higher education system. That is due to the direct and committed intervention of our President, for which we are very grateful indeed. It is due to the efforts of my colleague, Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan, to whom we also offer our thanks.

It is also due to our students, young people who are wide awake to the issues and challenges we must face as we build a better future. It is our students who have put the issues on the agenda, both before and after 1994.

This therefore is a forum whose task is to find workable solutions to the current situation. Solutions which will allow our institutions of higher learning to complete the academic year without further delay while we continue together to search for the long-term solutions we all know we must find.

Because it is only if this academic year can be completed and those who are ready to graduate are allowed to do so that we will be able to say we are talking about the future with the poor and the previously disadvantaged in mind.

We also need to use this gathering to lay a strong foundation for building durable participatory structures in our education system. In particular we need strong parental participation. I am very pleased that in the midst of all this there are new initiatives to organise parents as well as the coming together of alumni and convocations, as well as university chancellors coming together to speak with one voice.

So let me welcome you all very warmly today. I would like to thank you all very much for taking the time to engage this pressing issue. It is a matter for our entire society, and we are very pleased that we see the representatives of a cross section of our entire South African society present here today.

We have a big job to do. As a country, as a society, as students and teachers, as government and communities we need to come together and find a solution to the

current disruptions and to the attempts at wholesale destruction.

We are grateful to the vast majority of our students whose passion last year put these matters firmly on the national agenda. Just as we are grateful to the same vast majority who today are determined to remain focussed on their studies and who daily resist the siren calls of people with no interest in building our universities.

Our job today as leaders is to find common ground. To find solutions which recognise and secure the space for legitimate protest while at the same time saying that the right to choose to go to class and finish one's academic year is as protected by the constitution.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very grateful that we are able to welcome today as our keynote speaker President Jacob Zuma.

President Zuma as you all know is passionate about education. He has dedicated his life to the principle that each and every South African should be able to exercise his or her rights without impinging on the rights of others, a principle enshrined in our democratic constitution. The President has been central in the more than tripling of NSFAS over the past six years for instance.

President Zuma, all of us gathered here welcome you now to officially open this meeting.

I thank you.