

State of the Nation Address: HESA response

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Higher Education South Africa (HESA) would like to commend President Zuma on two crucial points and to add one caveat of caution in the light of his State of the Nation address.

Firstly, since the publication of the *Green Paper on Higher Education and Training*, there has been little civil and media comment on the fundamental shift of focus from the responsibilities of the universities to the growing importance on the role that the Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges need to play in order to address the skill shortages that confront the country. This shift in thinking towards the development of a coherent post-school education system provides an extremely important basis for rethinking education in South Africa. And so the primary message of the *Green Paper*, released late last year, was that the university cannot solve all post-school education problems. Rather its duty is to produce highly qualified professionals and rare skill sets and to actively engage in the production of new knowledge and to generally contribute to the construction of a strong, viable knowledge and innovation intensive society.

This theme was continued and expanded upon in the President's speech. On the one hand the idea of building a knowledge economy requires a much higher participation rate in post-school education than currently exists. It is only through the construction of a coherent post-school system that this may be achieved. The President's speech also points towards the emergence of differentiation in that system. And so the FET Colleges represent the sites at which the training and skills development for the massive infrastructure build must occur while the R&D to enhance our capacity to beneficiate raw materials – which also formed an important part of his address – becomes the province best addressed by the universities and science councils.

Ever since the last formidable policy on higher education in 1997, the universities have been blamed for not delivering on skill sets that have not been theirs to deliver. The fact of the matter is, and which is clearly recognized in the President's speech, that for every engineer, there is an incremental demand for engineering technologists and an even greater need for artisans to support this human infrastructure. President Zuma's focus on the Colleges finally points to the pragmatic urgency that is needed if the re-industrialisation of South Africa is to take place.

Secondly, the building of two new universities in the Northern–Cape and Mpumalanga has long been a matter of record rather than reality. These two institutions have been on the cards since 2003 and 2006 respectively and every year the promise of them becoming fully operational has been declared as fact. That these provinces need universities is not contested and that they will be built using state funds and existing academic expertise (from neighboring universities) is to be commended. However these institutions need to become fully operational as soon as possible in order to begin the process of broadening access to higher education.

“This brings us to the caveat”, says Prof Ahmed Bawa, the Chair of HESA. “While the President is spot–on in his vision of the re–industrialisation of South Africa, it requires a joining of the strategic dots, especially in the post–school education sector. This rebuilding of our economy will inevitably need an increase in graduates within the critical areas of study and with that, a large–scale infrastructural expansion (new buildings, accommodation and laboratories) within the university and FET College sectors. It will also mean that students are correctly channeled into institutions that best suit their abilities and to ensure at the same time that there is effective articulation between these sectors. As much as the late Kader Asmal sought to reduce the sector, the time has now come to expand it significantly, and urgently, in order to meet the basic requirements of a knowledge economy”.

About Higher Education South Africa

Higher Education South Africa (HESA) is the leadership body that represents the 23 public Higher Education Institutions. Led by the Vice-Chancellors of these universities, HESA acts to support and advance the higher education sector in South Africa.

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For more information contact: admin@hesa.org.za