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‘A skills revolution is coming’

Higher education minister wants to reduce unemployment by ensuring students are fit for the workplace

By **SABELO SKITI**

● For higher education & training minister Buti Manamela, the past 12 months have required him to engage in a delicate balancing act in which responding to the “noise” of political and public scrutiny is offset by the quiet, urgent work of systemic reform.

On the University of Pretoria’s engineering campus this week to reflect on a tenure marked by intense pressure, Manamela remained focused on his vision: a “skills revolution” designed to bridge the gap between classroom training and practical competencies for the labour market.

He is aware and welcomes the fact that his department operates under a microscope, whether in the form of intense parliamentary oversight or relentless media speculation.

He views this scrutiny as a double-edged sword: “South Africa’s attitude towards education is not left to the devices of the ministry or the department. It’s like soccer – everyone has an opinion,” he observes.

While he acknowledges that public interest in higher education is vital, Manamela is concerned about the corrosive effect of turning the department’s administrative hurdles into an existential crisis.

The constant volume of criticism, he argues, threatens to undermine the morale of the very people tasked with delivering services. “We should not create a sense of crisis to the extent that even people in the system who know there are certain parts of it that work, doubt it is functional,” he says.

For the minister, the ultimate challenge is maintaining focus. He frames the constant barrage of questions and scandals as a kind of filtration system: “Every question put to us could either be a scandal waiting to erupt or an opportunity to make one of the greatest interventions ever. And we must be able to get back to the important issue: the success of the sector and the country,” he adds.

Central to Manamela’s agenda is the “skills revolution”: a mission to transform the post-school education and training (PSET) sector into a robust engine for youth employment. His vision moves beyond policy, grounding the entire sector – which comprises universities, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions and community colleges – in a single measurable outcome: jobs.

“We will have made progress in the PSET system if we’ve been able to change the system to skill young people for employment,” he asserts.



Minister of higher education & training Buti Manamela interacts with students at the University of Pretoria. Picture: Thapelo Morebudi

To achieve this, Manamela is pushing for a shift beyond just pedagogy. He wants to expand the sector’s priorities past traditional, siloed lecture halls to include work-integrated learning, ensuring training is responsive to industry demands. By partnering private sector players such as Sasol, in terms of which initiative students were absorbed into the company, he aims to show that training institutions can produce graduates who are instantly employable, effectively addressing the persistent issue of skills shortages.

Manamela emphasises that this revolution cannot occur while the system is distracted by the governance crises that have seen three sector education and training authorities (Setas) placed under administration, court challenges concerning the reappointment of several Seta CEOs, and a fight to the death between his ministry and the axed board of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS).

> **I know the issue of the NSFAS CEO, for instance, was made quite central by the former board ... For me, the interest was bigger than just filling a post – it was about the ability of the board to execute**

His strategy includes creating a “centre for leadership and governance” to bolster the capacity of the hundreds of councils and institutions that comprise the PSET sector, rather than simply relying on the disruptive process of staff removals.

Looking back at his first year in office, Manamela says it’s been an “exciting roller-coaster” and “tricky period”, acknowledging there was a weight of expectation associated with his appointment because he had spent almost a decade as the understudy to the role.

“In the past 12 months and a few days, we’ve managed to centre the narrative on the PSET sector ... We’ve elevated the discussion of TVET institutions and community colleges – and, I mean, Setas were all over the show, but now we’re beginning to get them to cohere.”

Perhaps the most contentious aspect of his tenure has been the ongoing drama at NSFAS. Manamela was grilled by MPs over his falling out with the board he axed – and which is now looking to overturn his decision in the courts – amid allegations he meddled in the botched process to appoint a CEO.

But he insists the friction between himself and the board is rooted in a fundamental disagreement over priorities. He also points out that the administrator had to address crucial issues relating to the departmental work culture, especially with regard to staff being physically present in the workplace, when he became aware of employees working from Johannesburg, Durban and Port Elizabeth despite the NSFAS offices being in Cape Town.

Addressing “simple” matters such as ensuring people report for work is a necessary step towards fixing the institution’s broader challenges, he said.

“I know the issue of the NSFAS CEO, for instance, was made quite central by the former board ... For me, the interest was bigger than just filling a post – it was about the ability of the board to execute.”

He is candid about the structural failures that plague the organisation, arguing that it was expanded without the necessary legislative or structural foundations.

“The challenges at NSFAS arose when we started speaking about ‘fee-free higher education’ without putting in place any legislative and policy changes. We were placing an additional R60bn institution onto a R2.5bn structure. It’s not going to work.”

He acknowledges that the changes are being resisted by some who benefited from the status quo, saying some relationships between the institution and service providers were “more extractive than beneficial”.

His priority now is a sustainable student funding model. He envisions an NSFAS that, in its simplest form, can distribute finance to students while accounting for every cent.

“We need a national compact on how we use what we have to accommodate as many students as possible,” he says.

For Manamela, the revolution is not about silencing the noise but ensuring the work continues.

Court tussle over NFS CEO appointment

By **SABELO SKITI**

● The leadership vacuum at the National Skills Fund (NSF) has become the latest flashpoint for higher education minister Buti Manamela, as the department struggles to finalise the appointment of a new CEO.

The Johannesburg high court on Friday dismissed an application by Innocent Sirovha, who accuses Manamela of interference by halting his appointment at the NSF. Acting judge Albert Nxumalo ordered that the matter be referred to the labour court.

Manamela, who opposed the application, said the NSF was one of the department’s institutions that the president had highlighted as needing urgent intervention, beginning with filling the CEO vacancy that had been unfilled for an entire year.

But, he said, he could not put Sirovha’s name to the cabinet for final ratification as the department of public service & administration had identified missing critical documents in the paperwork submitted to him, including the scores of the candidates.

“It would be ridiculous for me to submit a preferred candidate without the scoring required.”

He said he had pressed the director-general to investigate the administrative lapses. “Why don’t you have this information? What happened to this information? And how do we prevent this from happening?”

Of critical importance, he said, was to understand whether the lapse was as a result of competence or policy-related issues.

He had faced pressure to move forward despite these gaps, but decided that pushing through with the existing information would be untenable. “I couldn’t look ridiculous and say to the cabinet, ‘appoint this person, but take into consideration that I don’t have this information’.”

Manamela emphasised that this was not a move to exclude previous applicants or derail the appointment, but was necessary to ensure transparency and proper governance.

“Let’s reopen the process and everyone is welcome to apply, including those who participated in the initial round. We want to restart the process as quickly as possible with justifiable records and processes.”

In his application Sirovha said he was informed that the job was his through a request for him to provide his biometric information.

Manamela emphasised that only the cabinet could make the appointment.

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