

R7bn boost for university infrastructure

Higher Education and Training Minister Blade Nzimande has announced major new investment in university infrastructure, which will see government spending R7 billion on a range of projects countrywide.



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Making the announcement on Wednesday, 19 April 2017, Minister Nzimande said the investment will be spent over the next two years on new student housing, laboratories, communications technology, and other essential facilities, as well as essential maintenance and the further expansion of the new universities.

It also includes R1 billion per year into the new Mpumalanga University and Sol Plaatje University in the Northern Cape.

“None of this spending will go towards repairing or replacing buildings damaged and vandalised over the past 18 months by a small group claiming to represent protesting students, as this is being dealt with through other means,” the Minister explained.

Historically disadvantaged universities

Minister Nzimande also announced that a further R2.5 billion has been targeted to the historically disadvantaged universities for over the next five years so that they can realise their full academic potential, while shaking off their historic image as the academic orphans of apartheid.

The Minister said government is committed to strengthening, developing and broadening access to universities, as is visible in the doubling of student numbers over the past 20 years.

“In doing so, we have opened a major route to empowerment through knowledge and skills, which can benefit both individuals and the economy. But access is just one side of the coin, we have always been aware that we must also strengthen the institutions, not least by increasing our infrastructure spending.

“Investment in infrastructure, including teaching and research spaces, equipment and conducive student living environments is key to ensuring that the universities can deliver on their empowerment mandate. This approach required a particular commitment to improving living and learning conditions in the historically disadvantaged institutions,” Minister Nzimande said.

Student housing

He said that the department is aware that there is still much to do, especially in areas such as student housing.

“The department continues to prioritise the refurbishment and new construction of student housing at universities and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges because of the huge need, largely because more young people from poor backgrounds than ever before are studying away from home.

“The R2.1 billion will assist in accelerating the program to provide an additional 200,000 beds at universities. Meeting this target within a reasonable period cannot be achieved by government alone,” the Minister said.

Donor investment still needed

He added that the department is looking at innovative ways of using government’s funding to leverage additional private sector and donor investment as “we further accelerate the construction of new residences for TVETs and universities”.

The Minister’s announcement of a massive boost in university infrastructure spending, builds on the significant progress achieved since 2007 through the department’s Infrastructure and Efficiency Grant.

This has in the past 10 years seen R14.87 billion spent on ensuring that the universities have adequate infrastructure to ensure growth in priority areas such as science, technology and engineering, animal and human health sciences, and teacher education programs.

All universities across the country have benefited from this investment, with historically disadvantaged institutions prioritised since 2010 for a greater proportion of the funding.