

SA urged to boost innovation

CAPE TOWN: South Africa must boost support and funding for research and innovation if it is to compete with fellow developing countries, Science and Technology Minister Naledi Pandor said on Tuesday, 15 May 2012.



"We would like to create conditions that will encourage the private sector to invest its research funds in South Africa," said Pandor in her Budget Vote in Parliament, adding that her department intended to improve incentives for researchers and entrepreneurs.

She said one of the most repeated comments of the Ministerial Committee on Science, Technology, and Innovation Landscape (Nongxa report) - which she would publish shortly for public comment - was that the science and technology sector needed to strengthen links with industry and the private sector.

"They also propose an examination of international practice with respect to incentives for private sector research investments," she said, adding that South Africa needed to draw on lessons from successful emerging economies such as China, Brazil and India.

She said the department would be liaising with the board of the Technology Innovation Agency (TIA) - which is tasked with funding innovation - to develop a framework for an early review of the agency.

"I think the DST [Department of Science and Technology] must assess TIA progress and the experience of stakeholders that have received or sought support from the agency," she said.

The department would announce the details of the review before the end of July.

Pandor said South Africa had "very able, world-class" researchers in a range of disciplines, but that in comparison to many developing countries, the country did not allocate enough resources to innovation and research.

Opposition MPs were in agreement with the minister on the department's limited budget.

Of the department's R4.96 billion budget for the 2012/13 financial year, R2.6 billion or 53% has been allocated to its public entities, but Pandor said South Africa needed a significant increase in science and technology expenditure if the country was to meet its national goals.

"We are alert to the economic crisis confronting all economies, but it is vital to increase support for research if we are to retain the critical edge of an emerging world class research destination," she said.

Pandor said the government's commitment to building a strong research community was also bedevilled by the absence of effective co-ordination within government and in research institutions.

"We must decisively address co-ordination and purposeful collaboration. Working in silos is destroying our potential," said Pandor, adding that the department would this financial year finalise proposals for a co-ordinating body to assist government in achieving higher levels of success in research development and innovation.

However, she said a welcome sign was the insertion of a spending category for science and technology in the Budget Review. The Budget Review proposes that an allocation of R10.7 billion be made for science and technology in 2012/13, which is just over one percent of national expenditure.

Pandor hoped the inclusion of this category would help provide her department with responsibility for administering the provision of resources to all research institutions and help her department support these institutions.

Switching focus to the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) telescope project, Pandor said she had hoped that she would be able to inform MPs of the final site decision on the location of the SKA, but that the final decision had not yet been taken.

"The bidding countries submitted all the required technical information and we are impatiently awaiting the outcome of what we hope will be a final site consideration meeting on 25 May," she said.

A total of R500 million has this financial year been allocated to help fund the SKA initiative.

The department would be working with the SA National Space Agency (Sansa) to develop an implementation blueprint for its next satellite, following the launch of the satellite Sumbandila in 2009, and to help contribute to the African Resource Management Constellation.

To fund local companies to develop technology, the department had secured a commitment of R60 million over the next three years from the competitiveness fund announced by Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan this year.

"This will enable us to increase the number of companies we have on our register by a further 50 companies by the end of this financial year and grow them to 100 by the end of the 2014/15 financial year," she said.

The department was also implementing a fluoro-chemicals development programme targeting human capital development, new business formation and novel processes and products.

A multi-purpose fluorination pilot plant has been completed and will be launched this year.

South Africa has an abundant fluorspar reserve and is competent in the handling of fluoro-chemical processes and products. Pandor said they wanted to convert this strategic advantage to industrial activity and job creation.

The department had also invested close to R108 million in titanium initiatives, including the commercialisation of a novel process for low cost production of titanium powder, and over R100 million would be made available for the initiative over the next three years.

Pandor said the country's research capacity in Information Communication Technologies (ICT) was becoming a strong competitive advantage.

Over the last 18 months, the government had announced targeted partnerships with global ICT companies including SAP, Microsoft and Nokia.

These companies and others had, in the last financial year, invested over R15 million in kind and cash to the department's ICT research and development programme, which had been matched by the department's funds.

She said the department hoped to announce a partnership with IBM and one other multinational firm later this year.

Pandor would also announce a revitalised bio-economy strategy this year, adding that the department was exploring the possibility of developing human vaccines in South Africa drawing on the experience of Biovac and other institutions.

"We have initiated a feasibility study on a Cape based biotech park for health innovation and expect to receive the team's report in July this year," she said, adding that the department would continue its support to the tuberculosis vaccine initiative.

The department would add six new Centres of Excellence to the eight that had been set up since 2004.

The SA Research Chairs Initiative would be expanded by the addition of 62 chairs and the National Research Foundation (NRF) last year issued a call for 60 new chairs and several were now being filled, Pandor said.

Several SADC countries have decided to create a chairs programme and are working with the department.

The Swiss government and the department will partner to create two joint SA/Swiss research chairs to bring the number to 62.

The NRF had also established an additional 25 post doctoral fellowships each worth R180 000 a year for three years, the minister said.

She said the implementation of the Scientific Electronic Online (SciELO) open access platform had provided free access to SA scholarly journals and in all, 22 journals are on the platform and there were plans to grow to 180 SA journals.

Added to this, the first group of 50 interns had been accepted into the department's one-year science and technology graduate internship programme in partnership with the Da Vinci Institute and the TT100 companies.

The department would spend a further R110 million in the next three years on the internship programme drawing on the R9.5 billion economic competitiveness package announced in the February national budget.