

Transformation imperative in aviation: Mbalula

Transformation in the aviation sector remains a challenge, with the 2020/21 financial year aviation statistics showing that no meaningful progress has been made in terms of transformation, particularly for previously disadvantaged individuals.



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Virtually addressing the National Aviation Conference on Thursday, Transport Minister Fikile Mbalula said Africans, Coloureds and Indians represent 11% of licence holders, while at 89%, the proportion of White licence holders is still significantly higher.

"This scenario needs to change. The statistics must reflect the racial demographics of the country. Among other things that must be prioritised is the demystification of the industry from being an exclusive haven that is the sole preserve of a particular class in our society.

"We must agree on transformation targets and introduce innovative measures to create access for young people who come from previously disadvantaged communities," said Mbalula.

While the economic impact on local and international operators experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic have been devastating, the Minister has called on the sector to be ready for the lifting of travel restrictions that were brought about by the onset of the pandemic.

"There is no doubt that the aviation industry will eventually take off. However, when it does, the entire value chain must be ready to hit the ground running and take advantage of the opportunities of the new economy.

"Moreover, we must be ready to assimilate air taxis and other remotely piloted aircraft systems into the currently well-oiled, well-organised and well-managed conventional airspace.

"Very soon, airspaces across the globe will resemble nothing we have witnessed before. We must rise up and be equal to the challenge," he said.

According to a report released by the Airports Company South Africa (ACSA) at the beginning of March, the number of departing passengers in 2020 fell by 65.8% compared to 2019, from 21.6 million to 7.4 million passengers.

The decline in domestic departing passengers was 61.9% and the international departing passengers fell by 74.6%.

"Seats made available by airlines for destinations within South Africa and between the country and international destinations were 41% of the previous year's levels. In 2021, seats published by airlines are at 74% of the 2019 levels. This is the evidence of the serious economic impact on local and international operators," said Mbalula.

The sluggish growth in the passenger numbers remains a source of concern, as this has a direct knock-on effect on the country's gross domestic product (GDP).

"For the local aviation industry to expand and fulfil its potential, government, the regulators and operators must collaborate to ensure that the aviation industry is well-positioned to recover and capitalise on the opportunities presented by the pandemic.

"Technology and innovation will certainly play a pivotal role in simplifying processes and making air travel more attractive to the masses," the Minister said.

According to Mbalula, aviation skills are in short supply across the world.

"In our case, we have seen many of our well-trained and experienced aviators being lured away from South Africa to jobs and opportunities in countries that are offering much better remuneration.

"The aftermath of the Covid-19 outbreak will only serve to intensify the competition for limited scarce and critical skills. It is critical, therefore, to plan ahead for such a reality, as this may compromise our country's sterling record in relation to upholding civil aviation safety and security," he said.

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