

# Public Works' initiative a boon to go-ahead students

## Analysis

### MOTLHABANE SKADE

THE Department of Public Works is making inroads by empowering young people through an academic skills development programme in its bid to help South Africa overcome a shortage in technical expertise.

The programme has been running for four years in partnership with schools and tertiary institutions that provide courses in the built environment such as engineering, project management, architecture, urban and regional planning and property management.

Public Works has awarded at least 40 bursaries to top pupils to pursue studies in the built environment and forms part a skills development initiative spearheaded by Minister Thulas Nxesi.

Since he took over in 2011 Minister Nxesi has a number of visible changes that he has brought about that are now paying off, includ-

ing the filling of senior posts.

Some officials lacked appropriate skills for the positions they occupied. These challenges hampered the work of the department, especially because technical skills are seen as the backbone of the department and the broader economy of this country.

The three-pronged skills development programme is coordinated by the human capital investment.

The first level involved partnership with selected schools. From 2013, Public Works has adopted schools throughout the country – working with provincial departments of education. The rigorous selection looked at well-performing schools with pupil achievement of 65% and above in maths and science, schools from disadvantaged communities – most importantly schools that display a continuous commitment to hard work, success and excellence.

The second level was the bursary scheme. To date the Department of Public Works has awarded 228 bursaries since 2014 which are

playing a significant role in funding the critical skills in built environment disciplines like engineering (electrical, mechanical, chemical and transport among others), construction project management, architecture, urban and regional planning and property management.

The programme is funded jointly by the department and the Construction Education and Training

The department does not only award bursaries to students and leaves them to fend for themselves. As part of the third level intervention, the students are offered continuous support throughout the duration of their tertiary studies. They are also given a good foundation to prepare them for university studies.

The bursary award recipients are an investment in the department and the country as a whole because they are pursuing studies in fields that will benefit the whole country.

At the end of studies, the students sign contracts to work in the department for a duration equivalent to the years that the student was funded for.

Those students who do not know where money will come from in the midst of challenges faced by funding for tertiary education, should consider a career in built environment.

South Africa is a country that is facing a backlog in infrastructure and, as much as progress has been made, there is still more that needs to be done.

The Department of Public Works is playing its role to grow its own timber. It should be commended for its role in investing in the creation of critical skills. This initiative by Public Works is in reality an invitation to children, parents and teachers.

The private sector can also play a role.

If the funding for university studies in built environment is a challenge for aspirant students, Public Works offers support and solution.

It hasn't been an easy task but is an achievable one. Yes, it can happen.

*Motlhabane Skade is a communicator from the Department of Public Works and writes in his personal capacity*