

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER OF PUBLIC WORKS, Ms THOKO DIDIZA,MP ON THE OCCASION OF THE CBE MEETING WITH INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

DATE: 13 AUGUST 2007

VENUE: Kievits Kroon Estate, Pretoria

Programme Director

Chairperson of the CBE, Mr Siphon Madonsela

Members of the CBE Board and Professional Councils

Deans and representatives of the built environment faculties

Distinguished Guests

It gives me great pleasure to join you at today's meeting which assembles key representatives of the built environment professions and institutions of higher education to address the challenges faced in developing our professional skills base.

I would like to thank the Council for the Built Environment (CBE) for bringing us together to take stock of progress and challenges, to identify critical interventions, and to map out a path of cooperation between academia, the professions, business and government.

The CBE is charged with coordinating the professional regulatory systems necessary to the performance and health of the various built environment professions. The Institutions of Higher Education shape and renew our professional expertise, a scarce resource of high value in South Africa's agenda for growth and transformation. Together we

must elevate our efforts to ensure the professional capability necessary to meet rapidly growing construction demand.

1. GROWTH – A CHALLENGE TO ALL STAKEHOLDERS

The expansion of our built environment is key to South Africa's Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative (ASGISA). Construction growth is driven by probably the largest public investment in infrastructure our country has ever seen. Specifically, in order to create the infrastructure for growth and development, government is increasing public sector capital budgets at an unprecedented rate of 10 – 15% percent per annum.

With overall growth rates of more than 10% per annum, the construction industry is likely to treble its output in 10 years. Cement and other materials manufacturers are also expanding their production capacity to meet this rising demand.

This growth path creates immense opportunity for employment, skills development and for empowerment. It also presents all stakeholders with challenges that require new responses and intensified effort to grow our capacity. It is the capability of the built environment professions that bring to bear the conception, development, implementation and the long term operation of our infrastructure. It is the institutions of higher learning that shape this critical human capital.

A competent and transformed professional skills base is critical to the delivery capacity of industry, government and the private sector.

2. CHALLENGES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Responding to the growth challenge a number of initiatives have endeavoured to understand the skills deficit and to signpost a way forward. These include the *Joint Initiative for Priority Skills Acquisition* (JIPSA), the CIDB study *Skills for Infrastructure Delivery in South Africa*, and the *CBE Framework for a Skills Strategy*.

On the basis of these initiatives, stakeholders have already begun to implement concrete interventions that address some of the constraints to development of the built environment professions. In the first instance we have recognized that these constraints stretch over the entire skills pipeline, including

- suitable matriculation graduates,
- the capacity of our tertiary institutions and,
- the experiential training required to achieve competent professional practice and registration, and
- the role of continuous professional development.

We have also recognized that government, the professions, business and institutions of higher learning all have a role to play at each stage of this development pipeline. It would be important today to review not only the constraints, challenges and new initiatives, but also our

ability to consolidate existing initiatives into a national programme of action.

We are all aware that the fundamental overhaul of our education system is an ongoing process. I am pleased that a senior representative of the Department of Education, Mr Feroz Patel will address today's meeting on steps taken by his department, including progress made in the recapitalization of Higher Education Institutions and FET Colleges.

Although gradual, progress in transforming our education system is increasingly evident. The Construction Industry Status Report of 2004 noted that in 2004 the percentage of matriculants with higher grade maths and science had increased. Together with an improving overall matric pass rate this represented (at the time) a ten percent increase in the total pool of available entrants to tertiary level education. I trust this trend is continuing and hopefully improving.

However, we still need to attract these potential entrants into the built environment professions that compete with other career options, notably in the financial and IT sectors. Regrettably, many that do choose a built environment career are dropping out. It has been estimated that about 20% of engineering students fail to make it into the 2nd year of study.

This throughput rate is an unacceptable waste of resources and of investment by parents and young people. It needs to be clearly

understood so that we can identify appropriate responses by all stakeholders in the form of bursaries, bridging courses and mentoring programmes. It is interesting to note, for example, that the University of KwaZulu-Natal has a bridging programme in place called the “Unite” Programme specifically for the Engineering students where a 95% pass rate is achieved.

I am also aware of a number of initiatives by the construction industry. These range from bursaries and internships to other forms of support to HE Institutions, including the equipping of computer laboratories, and an expressed readiness to second practitioners to lecture in various built environment disciplines.

Government departments, including national and provincial Public Works already provide bursaries and internships to built environment students – but we are aware of the need to achieve greater impact.

Public Work’s planned contribution to the National Youth Service will include the recruitment and built environment skills training of no less than 10 000 unemployed youth and graduates. The National Department has also identified the potential to employ and mentor about 260 unemployed built environment graduates, to ensure that they obtain the necessary experiential training to enable them to complete their qualifications and register as built environment professionals. Provincial Public Works Departments are doing likewise.

In the Western Cape, through the initiative of my colleague, MEC Marius Fransman, Public Works is pioneering cooperation between government and business to expand the provision of built environment bursaries. Last week we were able to launch the Masakh' iSizwe Bursary Collaboration Venture (BCV).

This venture represents a unique form of partnership to deliver bursaries combining private resources with those of the National Skills Fund. Based on a sliding scale of contribution, the BCV financing model enables large and small companies to contribute to engineering and built environment skills and to experiential training. Notably, in line with our transformation objectives, the programme has a substantive focus on black and women students. We will monitor progress with a view to a national roll-out.

3. CHALLENGES TO THE INSTITUTIONS AND PARTICIPANTS

I have mentioned just a few of many positive interventions. But in view of the current growth trajectory and the skills gap, we cannot be satisfied with our efforts to date. Today's meeting must identify constraints, possible further interventions, consolidation and areas of cooperation to achieve greater impact.

It is particularly worrying that many of our graduates are not finding employment. There is still a great disparity in the curriculum and quality of qualifications offered by different institutions, suggesting perhaps a need for greater standardisation – particularly in line with

the needs of the industry. Standardisation would facilitate student articulation between tertiary institutions.

It is also unacceptable that graduates of some of our Institutions of Higher Education are unable to gain professional registration because we have not yet succeeded to coordinate the accreditation of these Institutions by both the Council for Higher Education and the relevant Professional Councils.

Our goals for transformation of the professions also require us to recognise the challenges facing those students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, including blacks and women. These are not only financial in nature. They relate also to basic education and the exposure of our youth to issues of the built environment.

Attracting and retaining a quality research and academic capability is another critical challenge facing higher education. Meeting this challenge also requires collaborative intervention. In the context of limited resources it may be necessary, as a first step, to consider concentrating resources to create centres of academic excellence.

South Africa's built environment professions are internationally recognised and sought after in the global contest for competent technical skills. We must ask ourselves, however, whether we are doing enough, both educationally and in terms of professional registration, to instil in our professions an ethos of national pride and service to a developmental state.

4. CONCLUSION

Our meeting coincides with National Construction Week, instituted by government to mark the significance of the construction industry as creator of the built environment. Its key aim is to mobilise the partnership of government, industry and tertiary institutions in attracting and promoting young people into construction and built environment careers.

I have no doubt that today's meeting will reflect on trends, constraints and possible interventions to address critical skills of the built environment professions. I wish you fruitful discussion that must crystallize into action the effort of all stakeholders. The meeting can be assured of government's commitment to the professions as a national asset in our development agenda.

The intrinsic value of the professions lies in their ability to deliver the infrastructure for economic growth and to shape a more equitable built environment for all the people of South Africa.

I thank you.