
SOUTH AFRICA: Massive growth in post-school places

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In its push to expand participation in tertiary education, the government announced last week that opportunities for South Africans who passed school-leaving examinations in December would grow by 56% this year. And under political pressure to provide free higher education, President Jacob Zuma promised students on state loans a free final year if they graduate.

On Monday Minister of Higher Education and Training Blade Nzimande said opportunities in universities, colleges, skills programmes and 'learnerships' (workplace training) would rise by nearly 104,000 to 288,487 this year - an increase of 56% over 184,547 in 2010.

"This government is determined to provide education, training and skills development opportunities for all post-school youth," Nzimande said in a statement. This growth will push the number of students in tertiary education to more than a million within a few years.

But even if all places are filled, which has not happened in the past, the target will still leave some 76,000 or more than 364,000 young people (around 20%) who passed the school-leaving examinations without a post-school learning place. Hundreds of thousands more who did not pass, also face a bleak future in a country with one-third unemployment.

This year nearly a quarter of school-leavers who passed the national examinations did so well enough to qualify for university. Their numbers increased to more than 126,000.

"The department is working closely with universities and colleges to ensure that every student has a fair chance of access in order to pursue their dreams," said Nzimande.

Although most new places are in the further education sector, last week universities were reeling from a flood of applications by students. The new academic year is about to start, with the usual promise of student protests against fees and dashed hopes of funding and places.

The pressure is especially on leading institutions in cities. *The Times* newspaper reported would-be students sleeping in queues outside the University of Johannesburg, which said some 63,400 students had applied for 13,000 first-year places.

The University of KwaZulu-Natal, which has the capacity for 40,000 students across all years, reported that it received nearly 60,000 applications, while the University of the Witwatersrand said nearly 30,000 students were competing for 5,500 first year places.

Universities denied accusations by student leaders and a trade union that they had raised admission criteria this year, to stem the tide.

Even bigger news was Zuma's announcement last weekend, marking the 99th anniversary of the ruling African National Congress, of a final year of higher education for free for graduating students on loans from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, NSFAS.

Zuma also promised that third year students registered at a public university who qualify for NSFAS funding - in other words, students from poor families - would receive a loan to cover the full cost of study, including living costs.

"If these students graduate at the end of the year, the loan for the final year will be converted to a full bursary. They will not have to repay the amount," he added.

The Sunday Times reported Zuma as saying the move was in line with the ANC's commitment to provide free education up to undergraduate level and that "this model will be phased in over the next few years to include students in earlier years".

Free education is a vociferous demand of the ANY Youth League and the South African Students Congress, SASCO, among other influential groups who supported Zuma's ascent to the presidency. It was also a resolution adopted at the ANC's 52nd National Conference.

Zuma further announced that needy students in South Africa's 50 public further education and training colleges would be fully exempt from paying fees and would receive a 15% subsidy for transport costs. The government anticipates assisting around 139,000 college students in this way.

Higher Education Minister Nzimande said the offer of a free year of higher education "will encourage final year students to focus on their studies. This model will be phased in over the next few years to include students in earlier years of study.

"The precise criteria under which the awards will be made will be communicated to universities in the next few weeks."

South Africa has a high student drop-out rate, and the government action is aimed at improving success rates through financial incentive.

It is increasing the amount of money available for student loans and bursaries, as well as the level of grants, as it has been shown that many students drop out for financial reasons - covering fees is not sufficient for needy students as they still have to find money to live.

Nzimande also announced additional allocations to the NSFAS totaling R150 million from the National Skills Fund, focused on addressing scarce skills such as in engineering, the sciences and teacher education.

The NSFAS welcomed the president's announcement of "significant future growth plans". But it said there had been some confusion and reminded students that the announcements "in no way discouraged students from paying back the loans they owe".

Students would still be required to complete the necessary forms, said CEO Ashley Seymour, and would remain contractually bound by the terms of their loan agreements. Further, students who graduated and had their loans for the final year converted into bursaries, would still have to repay loans on previous years of study.

The NSFAS recommended to universities that they grant awards that cover the tuition and accommodation costs, and books and food costs.

In a statement on Thursday SASCO "cautiously" welcomed Zuma's announcement of a free final year of studies for successful students, and said the government now needed to answer questions of when and how.

"Even in the presence of this progressive declaration our Free Education Campaign will take place to ensure that the state walks the talk," it said.