

STATEMENT BY THE FREE EDUCATION MOVEMENT ON THE APPOINTMENT OF MR. BUTI MANAMELA AS THE MINISTER OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The **Free Education Movement (FEM)** extends its warm and considered congratulations to **Mr. Buti Kgwaridi Manamela** on his appointment as the Minister of Higher Education and Training. As a professional, nonpartisan organisation committed to advancing a transformative, accessible and sustainable postschool education and training system in South Africa, we welcome this development as both timely and potentially catalytic for addressing the deep-rooted structural challenges that continue to beset the higher education and training landscape.

Mr. Manamela assumes this critical portfolio at a time when the higher education sector stands at a crossroads, marked by both persistent crises and expansive potential. The sector continues to face acute pressures relating to public funding, institutional governance, infrastructural constraints, curriculum transformation, academic precarity, systemic inequalities, and the widening gap between higher education outputs and the skills demands of a complex, rapidly changing economy. These structural realities are further compounded by rising social discontent among multiple constituencies within the sector, including students, academics, administrators and research communities, as well as concerns about institutional autonomy, accountability and transformation.

Against this backdrop, the appointment of a minister with extensive sectoral experience, both at policy and operational levels, offers a renewed opportunity to recalibrate the architecture and trajectory of postschool education and training in the country.

Mr. Manamela is not unfamiliar with the intricate demands of the higher education portfolio. Having served with distinction as Deputy Minister in the same department since 2014, he brings with him institutional memory, political continuity and a firm grasp of the policy tensions and implementation challenges that have defined the last decade. His active engagement with stakeholders across the spectrum, from students and academics to institutional leaders, researchers and labour formations demonstrates a level of understanding that will be invaluable in the strategic repositioning of the Department.

Under his stewardship as Deputy Minister, we observed key interventions including the strengthening and deepening of access to Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), ongoing efforts to stabilise the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), and support for infrastructure rollouts at historically disadvantaged institutions. While some of these interventions have yielded mixed results, it is Mr. Manamela's familiarity with their institutional dynamics that positions him well to undertake the systemic reforms now urgently required.

As the Free Education Movement, we hope that his tenure will be characterised by bold, decisive and visionary leadership. A mere continuation of incrementalist reforms will no longer suffice. We therefore call on Minister Manamela to urgently prioritise the following:

1. **A Comprehensive Public Funding Framework for the Postschool Education and Training Sector:** The crisis of underfunding continues to constrain the ability of both students and institutions to meet their academic, developmental and infrastructure mandates. A sustainable and inclusive funding model must be

developed to ensure that institutions can deliver quality teaching, research and innovation, while guaranteeing that no academically deserving student is excluded on the basis of financial need.

2. **Stabilisation and Governance Reform of NSFAS:** The integrity and administrative capacity of NSFAS must be restored through professionalisation, robust oversight, digitisation and the elimination of patronage networks. Efficiency in student financial aid administration is central to the sector's credibility and functionality.
3. **TVET Sector Revitalisation:** Greater attention must be given to improving the quality, status and throughput of TVET colleges. This includes enhanced lecturer development, curriculum relevance, industry partnerships and the acceleration of certification backlogs, all crucial to building a skills base aligned to national development.
4. **Infrastructure Investment and Academic Staffing:** A long-term capital investment plan is required to respond to the chronic infrastructure backlog, particularly at historically disadvantaged institutions. At the same time, greater investment in the academic and professional staffing pipeline must be prioritised, with a focus on transformation, equity, development and institutional sustainability.
5. **Institutional Autonomy and Democratic Governance:** A healthy balance between government oversight and institutional autonomy must be upheld, with clear norms and standards for governance, stakeholder participation and sector-wide accountability. Strong institutions require sound governance structures, visionary leadership and inclusive decision-making processes.
6. **Advancing the Research, Innovation and Knowledge Agenda:** The department must lead in building a dynamic national system of innovation that supports both developmental priorities and global competitiveness. This includes investing in postgraduate studies, knowledge production, research commercialisation, indigenous knowledge systems, and science and technology advancement.

We are encouraged by Mr. Manamela's demonstrated willingness to engage, listen and act in a manner that is grounded in the values of equity, justice and accountability. However, this moment also calls for courageous disruption, a break from technocratic inertia and bureaucratic entrenchment that often stalls progress. The burden of leadership now rests on his shoulders not only to administer but to transform, to not simply manage crisis, but to boldly envision and implement a new social compact for the postschool education and training system in South Africa.

As a strategic thought leadership collective, FEM stands ready to collaborate with the Ministry and all key sectoral stakeholders, including universities and TVET leadership, research institutions, academic and administrative staff bodies, student formations, and civil society partners to shape a higher education system that is equitable, innovative, transformative and socially responsive.

Issued by the Free Education Movement

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