

# Students let down by the failure of oversight

By **Belinda Bozzoli MP** – DA Shadow Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology

If you are seeking an education after you have finished school, or as an adult, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) sounds like a place filled with promise.

From here you can expect to find a place suitable for your type of Matric and your particular interests. You should expect:

To enter Universities, Colleges or training premises that are well managed, well equipped and pleasant;

To experience a high quality, reliable, well-managed course or programme;

To be able to listen to and learn from the best possible people, who are highly qualified in their area, who are helpful and knowledgeable; and,

To exit proudly with a qualification that every employer will be impressed by, that is fully up to date with the latest information, insight and skills, that has widespread recognition and that is quality assured in every way.

But instead we have a Department which is drowning under the tsunami of demands for student funding and has had little time, or perhaps even inclination, to worry about actual teaching and learning.

The DHET has become swamped by, and is now virtually synonymous with, NSFAS. This doesn't mean student funding isn't important. Of course it is. But, it has now become so all-consuming a concern, that the Department:

Spends a vast amount of its time worrying about food allowances, travel vouchers, book money and accommodation, instead of learning, teaching and research;

Has no clear plan for growing new programmes and skills relevant for the future;

Is planning for very small increases in student numbers in both Universities and TVETs over the next 3 years;

Is caught in an insoluble bind: in spite of the billions put on the table, there is still insufficient funding for students who cannot afford fees or living expenses – there is a massive “missing middle”. At the same time, the Department knows that the levels of student funding at present are unsustainable in the long term - but is unable to do anything about it;

Has hobbled its oversight of University teaching, and operates on an outdated, disconnected syllabus in TVETs, as my colleague will point out later;

Fails entirely to oversee rigorously an R18 billion budget - that of SETAs and the NSF – to ensure that the necessary skills are taught well and properly certificated; and,

Oversees a R2.5 billion budget for a division – Community Education and Training – which spends 90% of its time and money helping high school pupils rewrite their matric, which is not really the function of a Higher Education Department

Our job, as Members of Parliament, is to make sure that these problems are addressed. But how can we do so given the haste with which these budgets are expected to be processed?

The Department manages a budget of R108 billion and has 110 entities reporting to it. Twenty-six of them – the Universities - only report indirectly. But no fewer than 84 entities report directly.

Yes, there are 84 entities directly reporting to the Minister.

This includes:

50 TVET Colleges;

21 SETAs;

8 CET Colleges; and,

5 other entities, including NSFAS, an entity which on its own receives and disburses no less than R30 billion per annum and is under administration.

And yet **not a single one of these entities** has presented its budget and Annual Performance Plan (APP) to our Committee. Nor have we seen the Auditor General's (AG) report on the Department, a report which usually signals where the problems are in terms of the budget. We have not seen the APPs or budgets of:

NSFAS – a R30 billion organization which serves hundreds of thousands of students, which is under administration and has been the site of constant, relentless criticism for the past 20 years;

Any of the 21 SETAs, which together receive R15 billion per annum, a good many of which have had to be put under administration over the years, institutions which are widely regarded as unsuccessful and often have very critical AG reports;

Any of the 50 TVET Colleges – many of which we know are failing, and which have struggled to conform to the PFMA;

The R3 billion National Skills Fund, which appears to have become something of a piggy bank for random use; and,

All three quality oversight bodies – SAQA, CHE and QCTO – none of which are working ideally.

It is also widely known that several Universities which are autonomous, but in which the Minister is entitled to intervene in when clear problems emerge, are in trouble. One, Fort Hare, is under administration. Others, such as Walter Sisulu or Zululand, are filled with intractable problems.

We have a major problem of oversight here. How can we support this massive budget if we have little or no idea of what the situation is in many of its sub-budgets? How can we blandly approve of expenditure in this troubled portfolio, with no clue of where the problems lie and how they are, or are not, being addressed?

These issues do not appear to trouble the ANC members of our committee, who will clearly support anything put in front of them. But we, in the DA, take oversight seriously.

We cannot, in good conscience, tell students that we are sure that what they are being offered is of adequate quality, well managed and is not stagnant, riddled with inefficiency and corruption.

The weakness of the Department's own oversight over what is taught and what the qualifications are like coming out of Universities, Colleges and SETAs is yet another example of an issue of oversight, which affects the future of our students and their careers.

Built into this department is an elaborate and important quality control system. The quality of our education and skills training is meant to be protected by two main bodies – the CHE – which deals with Universities, and QCTO which deals with skills in both Colleges and SETAs.

But so overwhelmed is the Department with the complexities and failures of student funding and the vast costs contained in that, that these two bodies have not been developed, or have been virtually decimated by underfunding, and have thus become Cinderella organisations within a vast behemoth.

We can see the results of this in the levels of qualification coming out of our system. Most SETA qualifications are not properly certificated by the QCTO which is the quarter of the size it needs to be in order to work effectively. SETAs do their own certification, but we have little evidence that the billions spent on SETA courses are anything more than tokens, given to students to justify the massive expenditure on course providers who are often in a patronage relationship with SETA management.

College qualifications are, as we shall point out later, unable to hold their own in today's job market.

And Universities vary hugely in what they offer. Those with their own rigorous quality control mechanisms (external examiners, certification by Professional bodies and internationalization being the most important) do deliver quality programmes.

But many have given up on rigorous external examining and have decided to do it themselves, and have become parochial and inward looking while failing to offer the quality required in every possible way. Many students leave such universities as virtually unemployable, many of them badly advised by Universities keen to fill subsidized places, and obtaining qualifications which are not likely to lead to employment in the first place. None of this is picked up by the overburdened and underfunded CHE, which just cannot do the job it is supposed to do as the system teeters.

The Department now has been merged with Science and Technology – one of the most sophisticated and advanced Departments in government, geared entirely towards supporting, nurturing and developing the most advanced knowledge and skills.

But at R8 billion, it is only less than one tenth of the size of Higher Education. So, we have to ask:

Will postgraduates start to receive levels of funding equivalent to that of undergraduates, or will they remain pitifully underfunded?

Will the mediocrity and paralysis of Higher Education affect its smaller partner?

Or will excellence be allowed to thrive, grow and in turn enrich the bigger partner?

Students be warned. The situation is very serious, and it remains to be seen whether our new (old) Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology has the energy and inclination to tackle it head on. For students and adults alike, we believe there is justification for grave concern as to whether much of the education and training they are receiving is up to scratch.