**THE NATIONAL SKILLS AUTHORITY IN CONJUCTION WITH THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION CONVENED A SUCCESSFUL 5TH NATIONAL SKILLS CONFERENCE**

The National Skills Authority successfully hosts a Hybrid Skills Conference at Birchwood Hotel on 28-29 September under the theme “***Promoting innovation and digitization in the skills development ecosystem and contributing towards a responsive future of inclusive growth***”.

The PSET role players came together to solicit solutions to the challenges and blockages experienced in the implementation of skills development interventions particularly as the country contends unprecedented socio-economic challenges that have been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, that has gripped the world for over 18 months. The conference also charted a way forward in the implementation of agile skills development interventions in the digital world post-COVID-19.

The main speakers at the conference were Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation Dr Blade Nzimande; Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, and Deputy Minister of Communications and Digital Technologies, Mr Philemon Mapulane.

Opening the conference, the NSA Chairperson, Dr Charles Nwaila, remarked on the challenges experience by the Post School Education and Training Sector (PSET), which include, increasing demands, limited access to post school education, funding, digital divide, new demands for skills that meet the global shift to the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and digital economies and others. In this regard, the role of the Skills Development Sector is critical in producing a capable and skilled workforce needed to build and grow the economy. In order to achieve this, all-social partners need to proactively work together to build linkages and improve collaborations between workplace knowledge and skills demands and the academic curriculum.

In his keynote address, Minister Nzimande remarked on the need to align the work of the various stakeholders to advance the Human Resource Development Strategy (HRDS) of South Africa. He also called for the advancement of innovation and digitization in skills development which are key components in the country’s economic recovery as part of the Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan (ERRP). *“Now more than ever we need conversations about how to promote innovation and digitisation towards a responsive future of inclusive growth for the betterment of our society”,* said Dr Nzimande. A big advocate of the Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector, Minister Nzimande challenged business and institutions of learning to build industry partnerships to strengthen work-based learning.

The Minster concluded that, the Higher Education Science and Innovation (HESI) landscape must not only effectively respond to the 4IR developments as recipients, but must also be active innovators in themselves.

Minister Nzimande received and launched three researchreports from the NSA on the following studies:

* SETA Governance study reviewed the success and challenges of the SETA system, which also highlighted recommendations to strengthen corporate governance in these institutions.
* National Skills Fund (NSF) Evaluation study measured the performance and impact of the NSF skills development interventions/ programmes over the period between 2015-2020; and to determine the extent to which the NSF funding has created or increased the response (catalysed) of the PSET system to address (develop and maintain) skills that are in demand in the country.
* Alignment of Provincial Skills Development Forums to District Development Model study, aimed at creating a framework to align and synchronise the work of the Provincial Skills Development Forums (PSDFs) with the emerging District Development Models (DDMs).

The Minister welcomed the work of the NSA on these reports as they are key in informing decisions on strengthening the work of skills development, and committed to engage the reports further. Deputy Minister of Communications and Digital Technologies, Mr Philemon Mapulane spoke on the National Digital and Future Skills Strategy which aims to support the promotion of digitization and innovation to drive economic competitiveness. Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs Minister Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma presented the District Development Model (DDM) that is meant to bring quality services closer to the people and the role of skills development in capacitating local municipalities to provide services to the people.

Other key discussions were on the role of quality assurance institutions in recognising digital programmes. Dr Thabo Mabogoane of the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation stressed the importance of monitoring and evaluation for the skills development system. All social partner constituents made pledges and commitments on how to ensure achievement of planned outcomes for the next two years.

**Key recommendations arising from the conference include the need to:**

* Reskill and re-equip the workforce to support quick and agile response to digital skills demands (ERRP Skills Strategy);
* Collaborate with relevant authorities to ensure the review of Early Childhood Development curriculum to include digital literacy; and review curricula and methodologies by adding more modules to pre-vocation learning programme (PLP) to prepare learners for entrepreneurship
* NSA in conjunction with SETAs should create Digital hubs in community centres, libraries, education and training centres with free access to Wi-Fi for education and learning purpose;
* Refocus the application of the skills levy to include design and implementation of digital ecosystems underpinned by inclusive technology for use in upskilling and reskilling of vulnerable groups through accessible hubs;
* Build the requisite skills needed to leverage the green economy to contribute towards the livelihoods of people;
* Strengthen collaboration of stakeholders in PSET work across economic sectors;
* NSA to strengthen M&E to support collaboration beyond just signing MOUs but move towards effective implementation with measurable impact.

Representatives for the state, education and training providers, business, community and labour constituencies submitted pledges to implement the outcomes of the conference.

The conference concluded with closing remarks from the Deputy Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, Mr Buti Manamela.

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