

FABI AT THE NEW AGE BUSINESS BRIEFING WITH THE MINISTER OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

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The opening sentence of the National Development Plan 2030 foreword makes bold to say: “Masupatsela! We chart a new course, we write a new story”. In charting this new course, an important acknowledgement is made, this being, that science and technology will be a key driver for economic development. To give impetus to the envisaged role of science, technology and innovation in this course, Minister Pandor tabled the budget vote speech for the Department of Science and Technology (DST), on the 22nd July 2014, for the financial year 2014/15 wherein she outlined how it intended to move South Africa forward. It is against this backdrop that stakeholders involved and interested in the science, technology and innovation domain converged at Gallagher Convention Centre on the 31st July 2014 for The New Age (TNA) business briefing with the Minister of Science and Technology, Ms Naledi Pandor. Included in the delegation of attendees were PhD students, Mmatshepho Phasha and Osmond Mlonyeni, who are part of the DST/NRF Centre of Excellence in Tree Health Biotechnology (CTHB) programme within the Forestry and Agricultural Biotechnology Institute (FABI) at the University of Pretoria.



Minister Naledi Pando flanked by FABI students Osmond Mlonyeni (left) and Mmatshepho Phasha (right)

As leader of the department tasked with creating an enabling an environment for innovation to thrive, Minister Pandor’s TNA business briefing address was different from the usual style

associated with these briefings, she opted for an interview style, which was facilitated by SABC news anchor Mr Peter Ndoro. He began by noting her delivery of the budget vote speech 9 days ago in Parliament and followed this with three overarching questions, namely; what initiatives is the DST going to spend the R6.74 billion on? What does the future look like for South Africa in terms of Science and Technology and how can it assist in driving the NDP? Minister Pandor outlined the exciting developments in the investment focus of the department. She highlighted four areas of focus, the first being the improved funding for research and development, which accounts for the greatest portion of the budget (R3.5 billion), in particular the support for postgraduates and postdoctoral fellows as a tool to cultivate and advance research potential of the country. Secondly, investment in the communication of science with the chief aims of putting science and technology in society so as to build a rapport that will enable the public to identify with science, as well as be at the forefront of young people's thinking. Thirdly, provide greater internship opportunities together with private institutions as a means to absorb young science graduates and therefore enable mainstream application of their acquired knowledge. Lastly, investments in critical equipment that will spur on cutting edge research to be conducted on our shores.

In assessing the outlook and impact of science and technology in the country, the minister made reference to how technology is being used to support small and medium enterprises. In Tzaneen, a community is using marula seed to produce marula tissue oil for the skin and hair products with the support of biochemists from SASOL. Other initiatives include the preservation of fruit and these also follow the model of partnerships between technologists and communities. On how the DST aimed to advance the objectives of the NDP, the minister drew the attention of the audience to the sobering fact that successful countries are largely driven by a significant pool of knowledge workers who underpin the knowledge based economy, which South Africa seeks to be. To be a player in the innovation landscape, the NDP set targets of producing 100 000 PhD's per million of the population which would require 6 000 PhD's per year, a vital ingredient in achieving the ideal of a knowledge base society. The reality however is that PhD throughput rates are currently at 1 800 per year and therefore the systematic approach to funding intervention and the minister's desire of international exposure for students can only augur well with moving towards the set targets.

It would most certainly have been a missed opportunity if the audience was not given an opportunity to engage the minister, and true to the intentions of these briefings the Q & A session was not compromised. Beyond the pertinent question of sparking interest of young people into science, to which the minister confirmed overwhelmingly exists among the youth, she cautioned that the low numbers of students in the sciences may largely be due to the

perception of difficulty that elders held and conveyed about science to the youth with the effect of such resulting in discouraging students to pursue science. Privy to the knowledge of PhD students in attendance Mr Ndoro sought their voice, Mmatshepho and Osmond duly obliged and shared some insights onto the possible challenges inhibiting students to pursue their studies till PhD level, student rationale behind field selection, and also turned a comment opportunity into posing a question to the minister about whether the department has set aside some funding for students to acquire skills abroad that would help in expediting their research. For comprehensive coverage on this interaction, herewith the link <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DgarBqUF-lg&index=7&list=UU8yH-ul81UUtEMDsowQyx1g>

As South Africa charts the course to address her known short-comings limiting the writing of this new story – of a knowledge based society, a dream is born which the minister articulates as building a better society through science. The tempo of the story guiding this dream rests in the determination and resoluteness with which the actors commit too, for it to be realized. Thus, when this new story is told and the dream realized the trail path leading to it would have recorded the advice given by Minister Pandor during her 31st July 2014 TNA business briefing session when she stated that *“we need to get to know South Africa and her capabilities much more”* and her plea to Mr Peter Ndoro to use the TNA platform he leads to call *“wonderful scientist such as Professor Brenda Wingfield (NRF A rated scientists)”* and many leading scientists in South African universities to share their world class research so as to reach many more people in order for South Africa to witness the *“tapestry of excellence”* it possess.