

Speech by Minister Naledi Pandor MP, at the 12th National Science and Technology Forum Awards

Date:

2010-05-04 10:00

Venue:

Johannesburg

Professor Brenda Wingfield (National Science and Technology Forum Chair)

Mr. Enver Surty (Deputy Minister of Basic Education)

Professor Lee Berger

Executive Committee and members of the NSTF;

Ms Jansie Niehaus (Executive Director of the NSTF)

heads of science councils and professional bodies; sponsors, funders; winners and nominees,

guests

Let me start by thanking the Forum for the huge effort put into these annual awards.

We have many award ceremonies in the fields of science, engineering, technology and innovation, all of them point to the growing health of these key sectors.

The Forum's mandate is to promote quality in and increased access to science, technology and innovation. This is a critical mandate shared by many institutions in our country.

As we celebrate this evening, it's critical to reflect on the degree to which real progress is being achieved and on the steps necessary to build on the successful work being done by organisations like the Forum.

South Africa's greatest lever for success is its world-class practitioners in science and technology fields. Our universities and science councils are well established in research and have built a foundation for firmly supporting South Africa to move into a knowledge-based economic future.

We have identified five key research and development priority areas as our platform into this knowledge-based economy. They are the bio-economy opportunity of our farmer to pharma research and development programme, space science and technology

(satellite industry, earth sciences, communications and navigation among others), renewable energy sources and technologies, global change (regional climate change), and the full exploration of policy and practice in human and social dynamics.

These priorities, as well as those detailed in our various policy documents, form the basis for support to the Forum and other institutions in the science family.

The existence of functioning institutions and a widely accepted policy framework essentially leave three areas for ongoing exploration, debate and action.

The first is ensuring we have the human resources for the tasks at hand, the second is securing adequate financial and infrastructure resources and the third is the most difficult one of assessing the appropriateness and efficacy of our strategies on a regular basis.

On the subject of human capital development for science, engineering technology and innovation, I wish to acknowledge first of all the presence and support of Deputy Minister Surty, the Department of Basic Education and Deputy Minister Hanekom who leads DST's Youth into Science strategy.

They have put real energy into our national effort to expand the numbers of young people able to enter science, technology and engineering at university level. Their task is not easy. We need to triple the numbers of mathematics and science subject passes if South Africans are to realise their potential. The Forum and other institutions need to substantially "up their game" if we are to achieve our goals.

There are signs of improvement but the need is so immense that we must redouble efforts. The need to alter the profile of able researchers is so urgent that no institution should celebrate until there are significant shifts. In fact, we need to design awards that will recognise and reward those who are ensuring we grow our pool of capable and productive scientists.

The public value of science must also be profiled more effectively to attract talent and retain it.

The Forum is already doing such work, but we have to do even more if we are to see real change.

The DST has energised change at the senior levels of science research and development. Our PhD project, the SARChi programme, and increases in bursary support signal our commitment. We should consider similar initiatives at school level – where teacher 'chairs', with funding for graduate tutors, work with us to increase the number of future researchers and innovators.

The second area - adequate resourcing - is one that I plan to address comprehensively in the coming year. Specifically, the Forum has a complex and challenging mandate. We should ensure that it has the staff, support, and resources to execute its mandate.

The third area - constant review of indicators - is one that we tend to neglect. All our institutions must embrace democratic transformation as part of their agenda. Their assessment criteria should examine failure to meet goals and identify interventions that could lead to increased success.

Partnerships between education, DST and industry are a potential source of future success. Much more attention should be given to this neglected area. Furthermore, universities that are advancing our goals should become the primary beneficiaries of our interventions.

These are a few of the areas that should receive increased attention. I have no doubt that given the Forum's success in the past decade, the organisation will continue to play a significant role in advancing research, development and innovation in South Africa.