

Beautiful Noise at Universities

Amidst all the media on planned state spending of over R 800 billion on new infrastructure and the bemoaning of tardy rollout, lost from sight is the beautiful noise of exciting new construction at universities across the land and the success of public-public and public-private partnerships.

In 2007, at one of the biannual meetings between president Mbeki and select ministers and vice-chancellors, the president suggested to minister Manuel that there was perhaps insufficient support for universities.

This was the catalyst for vital new Infrastructure and Efficiency funding for universities. If minister Kadar Asmal will be recalled for university mergers and the transformation of the higher education landscape, securing critical funds for higher education infrastructure after a long drought is the wonderful legacy of previous minister Naledi Pandor.

Beginning in 2007, R x y billion was allocated between 2007-2009 and R v c billion between 2010 and 2012 to universities to support much needed investment in academic buildings and facilities, equipment, student residences and other infrastructure critical to high quality higher education.

Last October a further R b n billion was allocated for the period 2012-2015. And it appears that there are good prospects that such investments in building the capabilities and capacities universities will continue into the future.

Infrastructure funding and development at universities has witnessed successful public (state)-public (university) partnerships as well as private sector partnerships.

During the first round of state funding, universities were not required to commit any own funding to projects. In reality, while state support was welcome it was inadequate and universities invested a total of R c b billion of their own funds – either through their accumulated reserves or endowments or through support from alumni, philanthropic foundations and business.

Noting the ability of universities to commit own funds and raise funds, during the second and third rounds of state funding, universities have been required to co-fund developments in accordance with the strength of their balance sheets. As a result, state funding has leveraged own funding from universities of R vbn billion during 20ss-20dd and R dfg billion during 20ss-20dd.

A spectacular new Life Sciences building at the University of Western Cape has transformed its face onto Modderdam Road and laid the basis for exciting advances in knowledge and in the production of the quality of new graduates.

Costing R tyu million, R rty million was provided by the state, R wer million came from ?? and rrr invested R wer million. R ddd million was committed by philanthropist Chuck Feeney, the founder of the Atlantic Philanthropies foundation which has invested billions in South Africa and elsewhere.

A magnificent new library, indispensable for the pursuit of the core purposes of a university, at Rhodes has transformed the heart of its academic centre. Initially costed at R97 million, the agreed tender price was R 86 million. The final cost was R75 million.

The library was built during the lead-up to the World Cup and opened in late 2010, yet came in R11 million under budget, when the final soccer stadium costs were billions over budget.

The reason is simple: there was no tender rigging, involvement of tenderpreneurs, kick-backs, over-invoicing, and perverse self-enrichment – just disciplined and honest project management and understanding that private gifts and taxpayer public funds had to be fully accounted for.

The new state investments in infrastructure facilitate long overdue institutional redress and equity for the historically black universities (HBUs) that relative to the historically white universities were poorly supported under apartheid. Understandably, a proportion of funding has been reserved for the HBUs – fg% between 20ss and 20kk and fg% between 20ss and 20kk.

The backlogs at HBUs remain considerable, as a recent Higher Education South Africa study on infrastructure and equipment shows. Continuing dedicated and targeted infrastructure funding for HBUs holds the promise of the backlogs being overcome sometime in the future.

In some areas, the backlogs at universities are severe. A recent report commissioned by Minister Nzimande shows dire conditions at some universities and that ccc new student residences are needed, at an estimated cost of R bvh billion. In the current round of funding, only R nbv billion could be devoted to student residence construction and refurbishment.

While state infrastructure spending helps to make a dent in the backlogs, a major challenge at all universities is investment in the effective maintenance of current buildings and facilities. The request by the Department of Higher Education and Training for comprehensive maintenance plans to be developed by each university is to be welcomed. The costs are likely to be many billions.

Of course, it is not entirely all smooth going with the rollout of infrastructure. There are instances of tardy spending at some universities, because of inadequate planning and project management expertise. Hence the support now being provided to universities to secure effective project management services.

New infrastructure investments and rollout at universities is a cause for celebration. It is wise investment by government in maintaining and enhancing the quality of graduates and

knowledge produced, both of which are critical for addressing socio-economic development challenges of South Africa.

Completed projects

Project	University	Value (R)	State contribution
Life sciences building	UWC	Cft million	
Library	Rhodes	R 75 million	R 50 million

Projects in the pipeline

Project	University	Value (R)	State contribution
Life sciences building	Rhodes	R 100 million	R 86 million

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