

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

FOR WRITTEN REPLY QUESTION 146

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Mr GG Boinamo to ask the Minister of Education:

(1) With regard to each university, what (a) was the estimated backlog in research technology, equipment and infrastructure as identified by the National Research and Technology Audit of 1998 and (b) amount was budgeted between the 1997-98 financial year and the most recent financial year for which information is available for research technology, equipment and infrastructure towards fulfillment of the National Key Research and Technology Infrastructure Strategy;

(2) Whether this expenditure is adequate to ensure that South Africa develops state-of-the-art research infrastructure and equipment; if not, what is the position in the regard; if so, what factors were taken into account in reaching this conclusion?

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REPLY:

(1)(a) The erstwhile Department of Arts, Culture, Science, and Technology conducted the National Research and Technology audit in 1998. The audit provided government with an overview of the state of research infrastructure for the national system of innovation, which includes universities, science councils, and research laboratories in the private sector. The audit did not itemize the equipment and infrastructure backlogs for each university.

(b) The Department of Education allocates funds to institutions through its funding formula, 12.8% of the block-grant component of which (currently around R1 billion) is calculated on the basis of research outputs. Institutions currently use these funds for a range of activities including research equipment.

In this year's budget the Minister of Finance announced that an additional R2 billion (R353,558 in 2006, R652,278 in 2007, and R1,006,469) would be available over the current MTEF for higher education. This is part of government's broad commitment to boost the funding of universities. In the current financial year 2006/07 the higher education budget is R11,8 billion. Total government funding of the higher education system has more than doubled since 1996. Over this period there has been an average annual increase (in nominal Rands) of 8.5% in block grants and 8.1% in all earmarked funds.

The National Key Research and Technology Infrastructure Strategy is not a Department of Education strategy but a Department of Science and Technology strategy that was part of its budget submission to Treasury in August 2005.

(2) Yes, the issues raised by the 1998 Audit are being addressed proactively by the Department of Education and the Department of Science and Technology.

The Department of Science and Technology's National Key Research and Technology Infrastructure Strategy identifies three different categories of research equipment, namely, "well-founded" laboratories, world-class multi-user equipment, and large expensive facilities, each of which requires an investment of R200 million per annum in order to rebuild the core infrastructure at speed.

Currently the science councils are spending about R100 million on research equipment each year, the current funding instruments (innovation fund, biotech, nanotechnology) are spending around R70-100 million, and the universities and donations are spending (conservatively) R50 million from their own funds. Altogether, this new money means that we will be able to reduce the average age of research equipment to 6-8 years by 2012 and halve this again over the next 5 years.