

The national budget 2013/2014: Education, the environment and science and technology

In the final days of the run up to Minister of Finance Pravin Gordhan's 2013/2014 budget speech, the primary topic of popular discussion was concern about the decline in state revenue and the fear that this decline might result in higher levels of personal tax. The fear turned out to be unfounded and early on in his speech the Minister borrowed a phrase from President Obama: in reply to his own rhetorical question 'Can we be a winning nation?', he said 'Of course we can!' In light of this enthusiasm, it is interesting to see what was allocated for education, the environment, and science and technology – and what the Minister had to say about these topics.

Taking pains to make it clear that the '2013 budget takes the National Development Plan as its point of departure', Gordhan went on to say that '[t]he strategic plans of government and the medium term expenditure plans will be aligned to realise [the National Development Plan's] objectives' and that continued attention would be given to further education and training. Giving substance to this statement, the education budget was raised by 12% from a figure of ZAR207 billion in 2012 to ZAR232 billion in the 2013 budget. This sum consists of ZAR164 billion for basic education, ZAR28 billion for higher education and ZAR20 billion for vocational and further education. The remaining ZAR20 billion is for sport and culture. While this increase is to be welcomed, 12% represents a real increase of about 6%, from which much is expected.

In addition, two significantly limiting challenges remain in place. The first is that expenditure on education is probably the least effective of all state spending. Despite the state devoting about 21% of the total budget to the education sector, South African schoolgoers continue to perform at the bottom of the world classroom: the problem is not the funding, but the ways in which it is used.

Gordhan did not ignore this challenge and, spurred on by *Equal Education's* success in forcing the Minister of Basic Education to produce standards and norms for schools (a document that has since been dismissed as being 'unconstitutional'), he reminded members of parliament that the 'education accountability chain' would be reinforced and that 'lines of responsibility' would be established from the state to the classroom. The Minister went on to say that the increased spending on education would also be expected to provide free education to the poorest 60% of learners, to expand and support vocational education and training and to prepare for an increase of nearly 9% in the number of students enrolled in higher education.

The second challenge that remains in place is the poor quality of facilities and teaching in the further education and training colleges, and the fact that they remain, for the time being, firmly in the secondary sector. As a result, school leavers who do not gain entry into a university remain without much to choose from in terms of furthering their education and ability to find work.

Finally, in terms of education, ZAR1.7 billion has been allocated for the construction of two new universities in Mpumalanga and the Northern Cape, with construction planned to start in 2013. The budget is disconcertingly silent on how the operating budgets of the new institutions will be funded from 2015 onwards.

Minister Gordhan's budget attends to the environment in slightly unexpected ways. Severe water risks and food security receive no mention at all, while climate change is only dealt with in terms of cause, rather than in terms of managing effects. Instead, attention is given to carbon taxes, power consumption and saving the rhino. Carbon taxes

are to be introduced in January 2015 at a rate of ZAR120 per ton of CO₂ equivalent. Tax-free exemptions will be set at 60%, and additional allowances will be granted, rather ironically, to emissions-intensive industries. Support is to be provided for biofuel production, but there is no mention of the potentially negative environmental or food production consequences of this strategy for creating alternative sources of fuel. Undisclosed portions of the budget will also be directed towards installing solar geysers, cleaning up disused mines, supporting South Africa's national parks and saving the rhino population.

The Green Fund, however, will be expanded from its present value of ZAR800 million to ZAR1.1 billion. The funds will be made available to the private sector and small public entities for the development of low-carbon projects. No mention is made, in this regard, to funds that might be awarded for higher education research to support such projects – a missed opportunity that might well have delivered considerable benefits for both the country and higher education.

'Science' and 'technology' are each mentioned twice in the budget speech, including a reference to the Department of Science and Technology – leaving just one other occurrence of each word. In view of the central position given to the National Development Plan in the allocation of state funds, this paucity is a strange anomaly. Without substantial growth in science and technology research and application, very few, if any, of the goals of the National Development Plan can be achieved. That said, the budget allocation in this area rose from ZAR9.9 billion in the 2012/2013 budget to ZAR12.4 billion in the current budget (a growth of about 24%) – but that amount includes ZAR2 billion ring-fenced for the Square Kilometre Array. Without the Square Kilometre Array allocation, the budget has in fact grown at 4% – somewhat below the rate of inflation.

It is encouraging that education has received significant attention in the budget and that the environment and science and technology are given some, albeit scant, consideration. In the end, alas, as is always the case, it is more a question of how the state's funds will be put to work (if at all) than the question of the actual sums involved.



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