Ekurhuleni university targets 2027 start

The proposed Ekurhuleni University could take in its first students in 2027, with the government still working through feasibility, infrastructure, and funding plans.



Higher Education and Training Minister Buti Manamela says the proposed Ekurhuleni University is still in the planning stages, with government exploring the possibility of admitting its first students in the second half of 2027.



Dr Tembile Kulati, project manager of the proposed New Higher Education Institution, outlined the feasibility study and plans for an dual higher education model that would bring universities and industry closer together.



Laurie Less, Group Executive: Corporate Services at Airports Company South Africa, highlighted the range of specialised technical and operational skills required across the aviation industry, as well as ACSA's potential to support workplace-based learning.



Dr Nomhle Ngwenya, chief executive officer of the Science, Technology and Innovation Business Forum, emphasised the importance of business participation in developing the proposed university's curriculum and industry partnerships.

By Amahle Banda

The proposed university in Ekurhuleni could begin admitting its first students in the second half of 2027 but the institution is still some distance from becoming a reality, with government yet to finalise its location, funding arrangements, academic programmes and the regulatory processes required for its establishment.

Higher Education and Training Minister Buti Manamela said the project had been reactivated and was progressing through feasibility and institutional planning. However, he cautioned against treating the proposed opening date as a confirmed commitment. "The university is still a project in development. It has not yet been formally established as a university. And it has not yet enrolled students," Manamela said.

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The government is exploring an initial intake in the second half of 2027, while permanent campus construction is envisaged for 2029. Both timelines remain dependent on the completion of the necessary planning, regulatory approvals, and funding arrangements.

Manamela said establishing a university required more than a public announcement, pointing to the need for sound governance, academic quality, sustainable funding and partnerships with industry. The proposed institution is intended to respond to the skills requirements of Ekurhuleni, a region with a significant industrial and manufacturing base and to its proximity to OR Tambo International Airport and the associated aviation and logistics industries.

Dr Tembile Kulati, project manager of the proposed New Higher Education Institution (NHEI), said the feasibility process had identified a need to address the gap between the skills industries require and what existing higher education institutions can offer. He said the region also had young people who performed well in subjects such as mathematics and physical sciences but struggled to secure places at other universities.

Kulati said the institution was being designed to bring industry into its academic and governance structures rather than treating businesses as partners only after programmes had been developed. "It is a very novel idea where we bring in industry partners, in curriculum development, in academic governance and basically assisting the institution to be responsive to the needs of industry," he said.

The project team has identified Boksburg as the preferred area for the proposed institution, with several possible properties under consideration. These include a former prison, railway-related properties and existing municipal buildings that could potentially be converted into academic facilities.

Campus planning specialist Ludwig Hansen said between five and six properties had been identified within an area of approximately 1.5km in Boksburg. The approach is not necessarily to construct an entirely new campus from the ground up. The project team is also investigating the possibility of repurposing underutilised buildings and utilising existing facilities.

One of the properties being considered is an old Boksburg municipal council building, which could be converted to enable an earlier academic start, subject to heritage and other assessments.

The team is also investigating Denel facilities near OR Tambo International Airport. These include its technical academy, teaching spaces, underutilised office buildings and a student residence with more than 800 beds.

However, identifying possible properties is only part of the process. Further investigations into land ownership, infrastructure requirements, environmental considerations and geotechnical conditions will be necessary before decisions can be finalised.

Kulati said the proposed institution would differ from conventional universities by emphasising applied learning and fostering closer relationships with employers.

The emerging model is based on dual higher education, which combines academic instruction with structured workplace learning. Students would move between classroom-based learning and practical experience in industry, allowing them to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings.

The institution is also being designed around a STEAM approach, incorporating science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics. This would bring the humanities and social sciences into programmes traditionally associated with science and technology.

The initial areas of academic focus include aerospace and aviation, renewable energy, transport and logistics, agro-processing, information and communication technology, and smart manufacturing. Digital health is also being explored. The proposed qualifications would initially range from NQF levels 5 to 8, with postgraduate programmes potentially introduced as the institution develops its academic capacity.

Industry representatives at the engagement emphasised that the institution's relevance would depend on whether businesses were genuinely involved in shaping its curriculum and providing students with practical experience.

Laurie Less, Group Executive of Corporate Services at Airports Company South Africa (ACSA), said the aviation industry required a much wider range of specialised skills than those commonly associated with flying and aircraft engineering. "Besides, naturally, all of the aviation, electrical and mechanical engineering skills are critical for us in airport management," she said.

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She outlined several occupations necessary to keep an airport operating, including airfield lighting technicians, aircraft rescue firefighters, airside safety officers, apron controllers, air traffic controllers, aviation data specialists and baggage systems engineers. She also highlighted less-familiar roles such as runway friction testers, aircraft marshals and foreign object debris inspectors, who help ensure that runways remain safe for aircraft.

Her contribution highlighted the range of technical and operational careers to consider when developing programmes relevant to the aviation sector. She said ACSA was willing to work with the proposed institution, including by providing opportunities for workplace-based learning. Less described the airport as a potential "living laboratory", where students could gain practical experience and apply their knowledge to real operational challenges.

Dr Nomhle Ngwenya, chief executive officer of the Science, Technology and Innovation (ST&I) Business Forum, said industry involvement would be important in ensuring that the institution did not become another university whose programmes were disconnected from employers' needs. "We don't want this university to be any typical university as we have. We wanted it to be driven by science, technology and innovation but business is so crucial for that," she said.

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Ngwenya said the strongest signal from the Dialogue came from industry itself. The panel brought together leaders from companies that already employ the engineers, technicians and specialists the new university aims to produce: Dr Lindokuhle Mpanza, Head of Engineering at Denel Aerospace; Khangi Khoza, Executive Chair of Swissport South Africa; Marc Van Pelt, Strategic Advisor at Pepperl+Fuchs South Africa; and Phathizwe Malinga, Group Chief Information Officer of PG Group. Together they span aerospace, aviation services, industrial automation and advanced manufacturing, the sectors at the core of the institution's proposed focus. Prof Arnold van Zyl, former President of Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University in Germany, showed how the dual model works at scale, with thousands of companies training students alongside the university.

"This was not business being consulted after the fact. These are the employers who will hire the graduates, telling us exactly what skills they need and what role they are prepared to play. That is how you build a university that industry trusts from day one."

Manamela acknowledged that a university alone would not resolve unemployment but said it could help prepare young people for a changing economy, support innovation, and strengthen relationships between education and industry.

The next steps include finalising the feasibility study and submitting it to the minister, who must seek advice from the Council on Higher Education. The subsequent establishment process will involve further regulatory and parliamentary procedures.

Government will also invite public nominations for the institution's name and its interim council through a government notice. The working name used during the feasibility process is not necessarily the name the institution will eventually adopt.

Kulati said further engagement with businesses and other stakeholders would take place over the coming months, particularly through the ST&I Business Forum.

For communities in Ekurhuleni, the proposed university represents the possibility of accessing higher education and technical training closer to home. But with the institution still in the planning stage, its success will depend on whether the government can translate the proposed partnerships, academic model, and infrastructure plans into a functioning institution.

For now, the second half of 2027 remains a target, not a guaranteed first day on campus.

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