More than 18,000 graduates are ready to join the job market, following a week of graduations at the major KZN universities. Nabeelah Shaikh and Charmel Payet look at graduation by numbers and whether it will address the skills shortage.

KZN’s graduates to arm SA

Graduation fever was in full force this week as more than 18,000 students got their degrees and diplomas from the major universities in KwaZulu-Natal. But of the thousands of graduates poised to join the workforce, are enough students graduating to address the critical skills shortage in the country?

Education expert Graeme Bloch said the country’s universities performed much better this year compared to previous years in producing scarce skills graduates.

“We were previously not producing enough doctors and Masters graduates.”

Bloch admits, however, that there is still room for improvement.

“We are making progress, but it doesn’t end here. We have the potential to do a lot better.” He said that even though scarce skills are important for the country, there is still much space for artisans and other graduates coming out with Bachelor of Arts degrees.

“As much as we need doctors and engineers, there is also a need for people who can manage others. Not everyone is cut out for maths and science, although those are essential skills. Every skill counts.”

Higher Education and Training Minister Blade Nzimande in a report detailing the department’s third-quarter performance, said the department is on course to progressively deliver on its strategic goals.

He said this included the building of two new universities which were opened late last year.

“Rebuilding of existing buildings to accommodate this year’s academic programme were also undertaken.”

The report also reflected the continued strengthening of capacity of Further Education and Training (FET) colleges to improve performance and efficiency.

There were 18,601 graduates from the three main universities, namely the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), the Durban University of Technology (DUT) and Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) this week.

UKZN had 10,081 graduates of which 1,118 were teachers, 211 doctors, 314 engineers and 372 graduated as lawyers.

Fifty-seven students graduated with Bachelor of Arts degrees in visual arts, fine art, drama and performance studies, and music.

The university conferred a number of degrees including 80 to students with disabilities as well as honouring five leading South Africans. Interestingly 62 percent of the graduates at UKZN were women of whom 284 graduated cum laude and 117 summa cum laude.

The College of Agriculture, Engineering and Science made a significant contribution to SA’s much needed brain pool of highly qualified science, technology and engineering specialists, with an impressive 98 PhDs awarded.

One honorary doctorate of science was also awarded.

Of the 6,261 graduates at DUT, 1,163 graduated from the engineering and built environment department, 506 from arts and design, 580 with health sciences qualifications, 494 in applied sciences, 1,380 in accounting and informatics, and 2,406 in management sciences.

Of the students in engineering this year, only 66 are graduating from the 1,399 who enrolled in 2011 for the course.

In the health sciences, 127 are graduating from the 307 who started the diplomas three years ago.

And in the arts and design, 207 students graduated from the 408 that enrolled for the qualification in 2011.

At MUT, there were 2,209 graduates of which 788 were engineers.

Of this figure, nine are mechanical engineers, 63 chemical, 301 electrical, 131 building, 218 civil and 36 surveying.

Other universities across South Africa are also doing their bit to address the skills shortage.

The University of Pretoria will confer 10,338 degrees and diplomas in this year’s autumn graduation which is under way and make up the bulk of graduates.

Two graduation ceremonies will be held later this year.

University spokeswoman Nicolize Mulder said there had been about 13,000 graduates in the past four years.

She said construction was under way to expand the health sciences and veterinary sciences departments to accommodate more students to meet the demand.

The intake of first-year medical students was increased to 300, to produce more medical doctors.

Patricia Lucas, spokeswoman for UCT, said this year’s graduation figures were not yet available.

She, however, said 9,798 students graduated last year in scarce skills including 21,176 in commerce, 9,814 in engineering and built environment, 7,766 in health sciences, 2,310 in science, 9,260 in humanities and 8,288 in law.

nabeelah.shaikh@iol.co.za
charmel.payet@iol.co.za

The University of KwaZulu-Natal held 21 graduation ceremonies last week. The last one will be held on Tuesday. Picture are students from UKZN’s College of Agriculture, Engineering and Science, which had a bumper crop of 98 PhDs and one Honorary Doctor of Science.

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