

GOVERNMENT INVESTS IN FUTURE DOCTORS

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Grooming future medics... Premier Ace Magashule has encouraged Cuba medical students to graduate and come back and serve their communities

The Free State government is sending over a hundred students to Cuba to study medicine and come back to serve their communities across the province

The Free State provincial government has granted 148 students, from across the province, an opportunity to go study medicine in Cuba. This is in line with the agreement between the government of Cuba and South Africa. 10 students from all provinces, will be provided with funding, by the national government, to pursue their medical studies in Cuba.

The Free State provincial government has, however, sourced funding to make it possible to extend the opportunity to more prospective students from across the province, in efforts to address serious skills shortages in the healthcare sector of the province. The aim is to ultimately take 200 students to Cuba to study medicine.

According to the department of health, the programme seeks to produce a new model doctor, whose focus is not on material acquisition, but also the commitment to improving the public health system in South Africa.

The students who have been selected into the programme are drawn from disadvantaged rural villages, towns and cities from across the province. They are expected to serve their respective communities upon completing their studies.

The study costs will be covered by the provincial government and they will study in various universities across Cuba. They will study Spanish in their first year and then proceed to study for their medical degree for the following five years. After completion, the students will come back and do community service for a year in South Africa.

The prerequisites for qualifying in the programme stipulate that they should have passed mathematics, physical science, biology or life sciences and English, in line with the medical university's entry requirements.

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Various checks are done into the backgrounds of the student candidates, including criminal and drug checks. Only students with excellent academic record and passion for community service were selected into the programme, and students older than 25 years of age are not eligible for enrolment into the programme.

The send-off ceremony for the students heading to Cuba was attended by MECs, the Executive Mayor of Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality, Thabo Manyoni, and Cuban officials and diplomats.

The premier of the Free State, Ace Magashule, said the provincial government is committed to training more students in medicine, to address the current shortages of doctors in the province's hospitals and clinics. He said the government will continue to approach the private sector to fund the project.

"As you know, our province, like all others in South Africa, is facing a serious skills shortage in the medical field. Through this project we seek to address such challenges facing the province and the country."

He said the province made a conscious decision to invest in education as a number one priority.

"When we took office in 2009, we realised we had to do something about the fact that our children are unable to access higher education."

Magashule said the province took inspiration from state president, Jacob Zuma, who has made education one of the key priorities of government. He alluded that the province has increased its investment in education and the awarding of bursaries since he took over the provincial government.

"In 2010 alone, we spent R154-million on 3 098 fulltime bursary holders. For the 2012 academic year, we have allocated an additional 1500 new bursaries to the most deserving students, to study at various universities and colleges throughout the country."

Magashule has instructed the MEC for Finance, Seiso Mohai, to approach the private sector to help fund the bursary programme, and financial institutions such as Standard Bank have since come on board. The private sector has assisted government to allocate almost 6000 bursaries to youth from previously disadvantaged background.

Magashule called on selected medical students to work hard and focus on their studies, so that they can return and serve their communities with pride. He urged them not to misuse the opportunity and the privilege that government is giving them.

"We want you to come back and serve your communities; hence we have made the means to spread the reach for the bursaries across various communities in the province.



Passionate about education ... Free State Premier
Ace Magashule

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This programme is designed in a manner that ensures that each community benefit. So, do not forget the conditions under which you left.”

Magashule said the decision to partner with Cuba in the exchange programme was based on the rich history both countries shared under apartheid, and the country’s excellent public health care system.

He said the provincial government will continue to give each bursary holder a laptop and visit all the bursary holders to monitor their progress.

“Some students come from poor backgrounds and when they get the money we send them, they sacrifice it and share it with their families because there is no source of income at home.

So, students’ performance is not solely based on their academic abilities but there are other socio-economic factors that contribute as well.”

Magashule will accompany the students to Cuba later this year and government will also provide them with basics such as stationary and assist them to adjust into their course.

One of the students, Dumisani Mnyamane (22) from Ventersburg, said he was thrilled to have been selected into the programme.

He said when his father told him about the opportunity, he applied immediately in pursuit of his childhood dream of becoming a medical doctor “Going to hospitals and seeing how insufficient was the number of health professionals providing health care services to our communities encouraged me to go into medicine.

I cannot wait to come back and serve my community and my country.”

Another jubilant bursary holder, Thandiwe Make from Bothaville, said she could not believe it when she got accepted into the programme.

“I never imagined I would get this opportunity. So, when I get to Cuba, I want to study hard and come back with a qualification and assist my community.

We do not have a lot of medical professionals where I come from.”

Make said she wants to bring an end to the struggles that her community has been enduring, particularly the problem of accessing medical assistance

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