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Namibia: Russian Scholarships Heavily Underused

NAMIBIA, June 25, 2014 (New Era) -- The Russian Embassy says it is concerned about the low uptake of scholarships provided to the Namibian government through a political quota, revealing that only one of the 25 scholarships offered last year was granted.

The Ministry of Education however says it is working tirelessly to fully utilise the scholarships, but is struggling to get suitable candidates. Also, Russian tertiary requirements are not making the situation any easier, the ministry said.

During an exclusive interview with New Era in June, Russian Ambassador to Namibia Alexander Khudin said: "There is a sad trend whereby not all the scholarships are taken up. Last year only one of the 25 scholarships was taken up."

Khudin said education is one key area in which his country can forge stronger ties with Namibia, whose population is striving to be educated in a variety of fields.

Commenting on the underutilisation of the scholarships yesterday, Education Minister Dr David Namwandi said the search for qualified candidates has been a tough one for his ministry.

"The issue here is not that we are not taking up the scholarships, but rather that we cannot find suitable candidates," the minister told New Era.

"We are thankful for the support from our Russian counterparts who are providing these scholarships and we are really trying our best to send students from this side."

Namwandi bemoaned the general lack of interest in reading by Namibians, saying such reluctance has made many people miss out on opportunities.

"Our people do not read to see the opportunities available to them," Namwandi said.

He said the status quo is not entirely under the ministry's control.

"I can say that we have sent names but only a few are accepted, therefore there is nothing we can do from this side if those universities reject the applications we send."

"We do the selection from this end, but it is up to the universities in Russia to reject or approve our selections," said Namwandi.

The minister said the ministry has instructed the Namibian Student Financial Assistance Fund (NSFAF) to identify students with good grades who applied for loan funding to be considered for the scholarships.

"The NSFAF should identify those with good grades and transfer them onto the scholarship programme," he said.

For this year, the scholarship quota has been increased from 25 to 46. Government only needs to cater for the travel fares of selected students.

"We have already submitted 14 names which we hope will all be admitted to universities in Russia. But if they are rejected, then there is nothing that we can do from this side because the universities use their own selection criteria that side," he said.

Namwandi said his ministry has also suggested that Namibian students already studying in Russia who wish to pursue postgraduate studies also be considered because it would be easier for them to be accepted by universities in that country since they are already conversant with the Russian system.

According to Namwandi, a perception that the ministry is not doing anything to take advantage of the fully-funded scholarships should not be created, because "the ministry is being very proactive to make use of the opportunity."

There are currently over 200 Namibian students studying in Russia, many of whom are enrolled in medical fields.

A portion of the available quota - 18 - will go towards students who wish to pursue bachelor's programmes. Eleven scholarships are available for advanced professional education, while two are for master's programmes. The rest will be allocated to other fields on offer at Russian universities. **(Source: New Era)**