

## **Minister Nzimande engages with university student leadership**

17 January 2016 - Some university SRC presidents and Secretaries General submitted a list of demands to the Ministry of Higher Education at a meeting held on the 15<sup>th</sup> January 2016. In the meeting the Minister explained progress in each of the areas tabled by the students, and explained what still remained to be done, including timeframes, as follows:

### **1. No financial exclusions in 2016**

Substantial progress has been made towards achieving this goal. Government has reprioritised R4.582 billion of State funding in the 2016/17 financial year to be allocated to the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) to provide:

- for loans amounting to R2.543 billion to assist 71 753 identified students, who qualified for NSFAS funding but were either partially or not funded at all over the past three academic years; and
- an additional allocation of R2.039 billion to ensure that any of these students, still in the university system in 2016, are supported financially to continue and complete their qualifications.

This funding is on top of the R10 billion that NSFAS will administer in the 2016 academic year.

NSFAS has been allocated over R700 million from the National Skills Fund for full bursaries in scarce and critical skills for the current year. This funding is made available through the financial aid offices at universities, and students wishing to make use of these bursaries are advised to enroll for critical skills study programmes, which include science, commerce, health science, engineering and many others.

R72.9 million has been set aside in the 2016 academic year to provide financial aid for disabled students in universities.

The 0% university fee increase announced by the President towards the end of last year has been accommodated through an additional amount of R2.33 billion.

The main challenge remains the 'missing middle'—students who are above the NSFAS threshold but for whom university education is unaffordable. Various short, medium, and long-term steps are in place for this important group.

- NSFAS is putting in place a process to develop a new funding model to provide loans for students that do not meet the NSFAS criteria, but who require financial assistance to access higher education, the so-called "missing middle". This new funding model will be tested in the 2017 academic year for full implementation in 2018.
- A Presidential Commission of inquiry into higher education funding and other issues has been set up, under the leadership of Honourable Justice Jonathan Arthur Heher, to examine fee structures and mechanisms to make higher education more affordable. The Commission has 8 months to conclude its report.

## **2. Historic debt must be cleared**

Substantial progress in this area was reported. The historic debt of all students who qualify for NSFAS has been resolved by the new funding to assist existing students in the system and the decision that no upfront payments would be required for 2016 registration would ensure access for these students.

If the historic debt of all students is cleared, our universities would be closed, some within a matter of months. In addition this would encourage wealthier students towards non payment of fees, putting our institutions at even higher risk. In the interests of ensuring that all academically able students are able to access higher education, and of sustaining and building our institutions, students who have accumulated debt but are above the NSFAS threshold need to pay it back to the institutions.

## **3. Free registration for all**

Substantial progress has been made towards achieving this goal. University students that meet the NSFAS means test will not be required to pay upfront payments or registration fees when registering for the 2016 academic year. NSFAS will inform all Financial Aid Offices through Vice Chancellors on the agreement to register all NSFAS qualifying students, including first years, without upfront payments. The Department is asking each institution for one person to whom all queries and complaints at each institution can be directed.

Universities are making provision for other categories of students, such as allowing a later payment of registration fees.

If no upfront or registration fees are paid, many of our universities would not be able to operate in the first quarter of the year and would have to close their doors. This is therefore not an option for the system. Government will strive to ensure that all who can't afford fees are supported.

## **4. Adequate implementation of NSFAS on campuses**

Substantial progress has been made in this area. This includes:

- NSFAS has already strengthened its administrative capacity through seconding resources from the banking sector to ensure more efficient and effective processes and additional administrative capacity will be sourced to ensure that the new funds made available are effectively managed.
- NSFAS will send roving supervisors to visit campuses to ensure quality implementation of the process at universities.
- A forensic investigation into the administration of NSFAS is underway. The purpose of this is to identify any fraudulent activity and to provide advice on systems and improvements to ensure that the funds allocated are fairly and transparently allocated and efficiently managed.

Ensuring further progress on this matter is a top priority for the Department.

## **5. Quarterly report backs from Presidential Commission**

As the Commission is a presidential one, reports from it are not in the hands of the Ministry of Higher Education and Training. The Minister agreed to approach the President together with student leadership to discuss the matter of regular reporting to student leadership.

#### **6. Barriers for students from other African countries**

The Minister undertook to take this matter up with vice-chancellors.

#### **7. Additional and better quality residences**

Much progress has been made in this area, and the Department is committed to furthering this. A Ministerial Committee on Student Housing which was published in 2011 identified the quantum of student housing required across the system. National benchmarks in terms of norms and standards for new residences have been established and the policy governing this has been published. The policy also provides time lines within which institutions must meet management standards for all residences, old and new. A great deal of funding has gone into the provision of residences, particularly for universities: in the last round of funding (2012/13 to 2014/15) a total of R 1,652 billion was provided for student housing, R1,413 billion of this to historically disadvantaged campuses. The 2015/15 funds have not yet been finalized but student housing remains a priority and a significant proportion of the new funds will be allocated to it (approximately 1 billion in 2015).

The Department also has a joint task team with the Department of Public Works and it is looking into possible unused or under-utilized government properties that can be refurbished and upgraded for universities and TVET colleges. Processes are also in place to find additional funds on top of the billions being made available through the infrastructure grant. This matter is high on the priority list of government's infrastructure development.

#### **8. Language must never be a barrier - English is the desired medium across all institutions**

The Ministry supports this in principle as long as adequate provisions are made for supporting and developing African languages as well. A report on African Languages has been developed and currently a process is underway to review the current Higher Education Language Policy. Further discussion would need to take place on this matter.

#### **The context in which the 8 demands were made**

These demands were tabled in a meeting which took place on Thursday between Higher Education Minister Blade Nzimande, MP, and Deputy Minister Mduzuzi Manana, MP, and Student Representative Council presidents and secretaries general from all South African Universities.

The meeting was called by the Ministry, to ensure that all student leaders were informed about decisions that government has taken to address the recommendations made by the Presidential Task Team on the short-term and

medium to long-term funding challenges. The Ministry also wished to give students a platform to raise any other concerns they have directly with him.

The meeting was not called by the students. No agenda items, requests, or demands were tabled ahead of time by student representatives.

The meeting was chaired by the Deputy Minister who opened the meeting by encouraging open discussion, honest engagement and a shared effort between the Department of Higher Education and Training and student leadership to debate, discuss, and reach resolution on the matters that were raised during the Higher Education Summit and the #Feesmustfall protests in October 2015. The Minister echoed these sentiments and spelt out Government's short-term interventions for 2016, many of which are captured above, as a first step towards easing the financial pressure felt by students in the University sector.

A key stumbling block in the meeting was that various issues are the responsibility of institutions, while others are systemic and therefore the responsibility of the Ministry. This obviously caused frustration for students. To address this frustration, the Minister proposed, and the meeting agreed, to establish a committee consisting of representatives from Student Representative Councils, Vice-Chancellors and the Department to look further at the eight demands and other issues. This committee will report back to the broader forum within a period of one month.

The Minister mentioned the Higher Education Bill that was before parliament and encouraged students to participate in parliamentary debate on the issue of institutional autonomy.

Shortly before the end of the meeting, at the point where the Minister was explaining progress towards the various 8 demands of the students, the student leadership of 8 universities chose to leave the meeting. It was not made clear to the meeting why this happened. The Ministry has read and listened to reports that the student leadership who left felt that none of their 8 demands had been met. This was clearly not the case as all of them were the subject of ongoing work, with clear time frames, and substantial progress in many instances. Student leaders who remained in the meeting expressed their disappointment at the actions of those who walked out as they felt that progress has been made, and undertook to engage their counterparts.

The Minister concluded saying that the Department was open to engagement on all issues but that some of these required longer timelines for finalisation.

He said that the Presidential Commission must be given space to do its work and appealed for university student registration process not to be disrupted and ensure stability on all campuses whilst long-term solutions were investigated.