



higher education
& training

Department:
Higher Education and Training
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Minister of Higher Education and Training Dr Blade Nzimande
National Assembly Statement on the Current University Situation

25 October 2016

Honourable Speaker,

Honourable Ministers and Deputy Ministers

Portfolio Committee Chairperson,

Honourable Members,

Colleagues, students, comrades,

We are holding this debate at the time when our universities are under the spotlight over access to post-school education based on affordability. This is so because the students, correctly so, have decided to take it upon themselves to raise their legitimate concerns about the cost of fees at universities and TVET colleges.

The students have put their demands firmly on the table for our attention, and for the country and society to respond to and avoid any form of financial exclusion, particularly for the poor.

Honourable members, we have heard the legitimate concerns of students, because as government we have for some time identified the

affordability of post-school education as a major challenge in our country.

To ensure the progressive realisation of the right to further education, government has developed a roadmap for the transformation of universities and TVET colleges to create opportunities for access, success, financing and support for students and institutions.

We have been addressing these challenges since 1994 and we have undertaken a number of measures to progressively realise improved access.

Honourable Deputy Speaker, let me reiterate without any shadow of doubt, that the policy of this government has always been the progressive realisation of access to higher education, particularly for the poor.

Government is committed to ensuring that all financially needy, academically deserving, university and TVET students, whether poor, working or middle class, are able to gain access to universities and TVET colleges.

As a result, we have made tremendous amount of progress, we have expanded access particularly to the poor through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) having funded over 1.7 million students since 1994. The scheme currently supports approximately 480 000 poor undergraduate students to access university and TVET colleges.

The Department of Higher Education and Training has received the largest budget increase in the 2016/17 financial year to the tune of R49.2 billion. This year alone, NSFAS has disbursed loans and bursaries to the tune R14 billion.

In this regard, we have short to medium term, and long term plans, as part of the roadmap, to transform post-school education and training.

In the short term, we have announced a number of interventions to assist students who come from poor and middle class families and for the first time in the history of post-school education, the so-called “missing middle”.

In the 2017 academic year, all students from families with an annual family income of up to R600 000 will experience a no fee increase. This means it is no fee increment in 2017 for this category of students. This will benefit more than 75% of university and college students, and in some institutions, more than 90% of students will benefit.

We have also gone further and made arrangements through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) to pay the registration fees for all NSFAS funded students as an upfront payment to universities and TVET colleges in January each year. Therefore, NSFAS qualifying students will not pay any registration or upfront fees in 2017.

Students from households with an annual family income of up to R600 000, i.e. the “missing middle”, will be allowed to register without paying any upfront or registration fees in 2017.

Government has also addressed the issues of historical debt of students. All NSFAS qualifying students who are registered in 2016, having historical student debt with institutions of higher education will be allowed to register in 2017. All universities will ensure that “missing middle” students who have historical student debt are not excluded on the basis of debt and will also be allowed to register in 2017.

We also wish to draw to the attention of students who are still studying or are in their first year of employment, that NSFAS will only collect debt from all graduates a year after they finished their studies.

Honourable Members, for the long term we have recently received a report from Mr Sizwe Nxasana, the Chairperson of the NSFAS Board on the development of support and funding model for poor and “missing middle” students. The report will go a long way in not only addressing the funding problems by poor and “missing middle” students but also in addressing among other challenges the NSFAS model itself. The report also received the backing from a range of stakeholders including business leaders who are part of the solution and will improve the partnership between government, the private sector and higher education institutions.

We are processing the Nxasana report and will be presented to Cabinet for consideration and decision.

We are also processing the draft Policy and Revised Funding Framework for Universities, which emanated from the recommendations of the report from the Ministerial Committee on the Review of the Funding of Universities which was led by the now Deputy President, Mr Cyril Ramphosa. The report reviews the experiences of six years of partial and full implementation of the current funding framework for universities. It also analyses the current funding framework to determine whether it has functioned effectively in achieving the goals set for it at its inception.

We have also established three new universities, the University of Mpumalanga in Mpumalanga, Sol Plaatje University in the Northern Cape, and Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University in Gauteng to further increase the number of spaces in higher education and ensure the

geographical spread of contact institutions. This includes the construction of three TVET college campuses and plan to construct a further nine.

The Commission of Inquiry established by President Jacob Zuma, to inquire into, report on and make recommendations on the feasibility of a fee free higher education and training, continues to do its work. We call on all stakeholders to provide support to enable the Commission to speedily conclude its work so that it can contribute to finding long-term solutions. The commission has undertaken to release its preliminary report in November 2016.

Honourable Members, our advances are clearly visible in Stats SA's latest survey. It indicates that at least part of the current pressure on university cost structures is a result of the interventions we have made.

For instance, the proportion of people over 20 years of age with post school education has increased from 9.3% in 2009 to 14.1% in 2015.

Never before have so many students had their fees paid by government alone or combined with bursaries and support from alumni. To name just two examples, at the University of Johannesburg 75% of students do not pay at all or a large part of their own fees. At Fort Hare, it is 90%.

We in the department are proud of the 51.6% rise in the numbers of young people achieving tertiary qualifications since the creation of the Department seven years ago, though a lot still needs to be done to address the port through put and pass rates.

Honourable Members,

The scenes we have witnessed in some of the universities have unfortunately tended to undermine the legitimate struggle of students. These scenes include violence, intimidation and destruction of property,

which our society has correctly condemned and rejected. We call on all students to isolate those who perpetuate these acts and report them to law enforcement agencies.

We convened a multi-stakeholder Imbizo earlier this month, which adopted a declaration, essentially expressed the need for dialogue, transformation of post-school education and the resumption of the academic programme immediately.

We call on all our institutions, working together with SRCs, to develop a central mediation and dispute resolution mechanism similar to the Institutional Forums within our institutions so we can resolve disputes speedily.

Madam Speaker;

We also acknowledge the efforts made by many institutions in resuming the academic programme. We equally acknowledge those institutions who have been fairly stable and largely continued with their academic programme.

In conclusion, let us acknowledge the Vice-Chancellors, academics and university support staff who are ensuring that teaching and learning are happening in extremely difficult circumstances.

Keeping our universities open is keeping our public sector open. If the 2016 trainee teachers don't graduate, about 20 000 classrooms will have no teachers at the beginning of the year. Junior doctors—those who are hoping to graduate this year—are at the front line of health service delivery in public sector hospitals.

I want to acknowledge the difficulties that this period poses for parents who are bewildered when they consider what is taking place in

institutions. Please, continue to support and place faith in these institutions in order to resolve the problems we face and there is no other alternative than dialogue.

Working with the Ministerial Task Team convened by my colleague, Minister Jeff Radebe and relevant stakeholders, we appreciate that this is a critical time of the year with examinations already upon us, we need to work tirelessly to immediately resume the academic programme in all campuses. We believe that dialogue in responding to the demands of students can continue while the academic programme is underway.

I wish to thank the President of the Republic of South Africa, Mr Jacob Zuma for his leadership, the unwavering support of Ministers Pravin Gordhan, Jeff Radebe and the entire Cabinet for the progress we have made in this regard. I also wish to thank the Vice-Chancellors, student leadership, parents, faith-based organisations, traditional leadership and other stakeholders for their support.

A lasting solution must be found and will be found, lets all go back to class.

Thank you very much.