

Address by President Zuma at the Multi-Stakeholder Forum on the Crisis in Universities, Emperors Palace, Kempton Park

03 October 2016

Minister Blade Nzimande

Deputy Minister Manana,

Vice-Chancellors, Council Chairpersons, SRC Presidents and all student formations,

Leaders representing important stakeholders from, business, labour, traditional leaders, religious leaders, soccer, professional organisations and SETAs,

Fellow South Africans,

Good morning to you all.

We meet here today at a critical juncture for our country's higher education system.

We thank all stakeholders for joining government to seek solutions to the current situation in our universities.

Education is a societal issue.

Government cannot work alone to find a solution. Universities cannot find a solution working alone either. We need to work together for the sake of the future as a country and as a nation.

As President Nelson Mandela taught us, education is a powerful weapon that we can use to change the world.

Education is the apex priority in our country. It is a powerful weapon at our disposal, to change our country for the better. It is a powerful weapon to produce

the kind of skills that will help us achieve socio-economic transformation and prosperity.

Our universities are among the most respected all over the world.

We want to draw on the collective wisdom of all present here towards finding a solution.

This is not the time for grand-standing of one sector portraying itself as being better than others. It is a period of sound leadership from all of us, to find solutions.

We run the risk of a whole academic year being wasted if parents, students, university management and all stakeholders do not act now. That is why this meeting is so important.

The choices we make here today, the positions we endorse and the leadership we provide have the potential to make or break our higher education system.

Let me state upfront that the call for free higher education for the poor is the vision of the African National Congress.

We are committed to addressing the legitimate concerns of students and their families about the high costs of higher education. We would like to give you that assurance as our stakeholders, partners and compatriots.

We have heard the call of the students loudly and clearly. We have been doing everything possible to assist students from poor households to obtain post-school education since 1994. We are however aware that more still needs to be done as many more students still need assistance.

While we confront the challenges, it is important to acknowledge the progress that the country has made already in promoting free education for children of the poor and the working class.

At the basic education level, nine million learners now attend no fee schools and receive free meals, while more than 10 million children from poor households are supported through the child support grants. Government also subsidises fees for

children at many early childhood development centres.

At the higher education level, which is what has brought us together today, Government continues to support poor students in our system through the consistent expansion of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), loans and bursaries.

Problems that have been stated by students about NSFAS are also acknowledged and are being attended to.

Government has been responding to the call for help from students of the poor and the working class for urgent relief. We have directed significant resources towards student funding over the Medium Term Expenditure Framework from 2016.

It must be noted that tuition and residence fees did increase in 2016. Government provided 16 billion rand additional funding this financial year to carry the zero percent for students. Government carried these costs for all, even for those who can afford to pay, and for the sponsoring private companies.

While universities are the only legal authorities for determining fees, government has recommended that fee adjustments for the 2017 academic year should not be above 8%.

Government has also committed to pay the fee increases for next year on behalf of all poor, working class and “missing middle” families – those with a household income of up to R600 000 per annum.

This means that both NSFAS qualifying students and “missing middle” students will experience a no fee increase in 2017. Government will pay the percentage fees adjustment.

It is estimated that seventy five percent of students will be covered by this support. At some universities this comprises more than ninety percent of their student population. An additional 2.5 billion will need to be redirected to fund this intervention.

Through these increasing commitments, government shows that it recognizes the challenges of affordability of higher learning, and that it is very serious indeed about addressing the challenges in the university sector.

These are short-term strategies that enable a rapid response at this moment while looking for lasting solutions.

We must allow time for this to happen so that lasting solutions will be put in place that do not in the long-term harm our system and our country.

Following a meeting with university management and students in October last year, we established the Presidential Commission on Higher Education Funding and other Issues to help us find long term solutions.

The Commission should be allowed to finish its work so that it can help us find lasting solutions.

At the same time, a ministerial task team appointed by Minister Nzimande is also developing a solid funding system for the future, which will enable us to support students from the "missing middle" to access higher education.

The new model is planned for piloting in 2017, with full implementation in 2018, if approved.

Work is being done to find solutions.

We do not agree with those who say that universities should be shut down while these solutions are being sought by government and stakeholders.

We do not agree with those who say the future of our youth and the future of our country must be put on hold.

We also do not agree that university infrastructure must be destroyed to send a message to government that education is too expensive in the country.

The wanton destruction of university property that we have witnessed are shocking criminal acts. The problems of education funding can never justify the

violence and destruction, including the loss of human life and injury.

As we speak a worker died at Wits University while another worker is fighting for his life in hospital after being attacked by students at the University of Zululand. This is not the future we want, of young people who resort to violence and intimidation to communicate what they would like to be done.

We have directed police to arrest those who are using the genuine grievances of students to commit serious crimes on campuses.

The right to education enshrined in our Constitution will be compromised for future generations if this horrendous destruction does not stop.

We are not just gambling with the futures of the current generation of students, we are compromising the future of coming generations, and indeed the country.

It is estimated that the costs of damage to university property as a result of the student protests amounts to 600 million Rand.

These are funds that could have been directed to address funding challenges. The money must now be directed to repair infrastructure.

South Africa has led the world in using dialogue to work towards solutions that are beneficial for the country and its people.

The zero percent fee increase that was implemented for this year was a decision made through listening, and through talking.

The establishment of the Presidential Commission to investigate the funding of higher education and to make recommendations on how the matter must be addressed was a decision made through listening and through talking.

The actions taken towards developing a more equitable student-funding model was also the result of dialogue.

The mechanisms that government is putting in place for 2017 have come about through very real engagement with the demands of students and society.

The announcement on the strategy regarding fee increases for 2017 was a decision made through consultations, talking and through listening. It was not a decision made in haste.

It was a considered decision based on the facts articulated in discourse. It was a collective decision of government, built on a firm commitment to more affordable higher education.

Dialogue has led to important strategies that are taking us closer to where we want to be as a country.

Today we meet again because we value dialogue as a country. When we come together and talk, we find solutions. That is the culture we want our youth to adopt, as it will ensure the survival of our country and our democratic system.

Indeed that is why we are meeting today. We are doing what South Africans do best.

We come together when there is a crisis, and together we find solutions constructively.

What is happening on our campuses at present has the potential to destroy our universities. But we have the power to change that, working together.

Let me reiterate that government is committed to do everything possible to progressively make higher education more affordable for all, and to be fee-free for the poor and the working class.

While doing this, we need to ensure the sustainability and development of our university system.

We look forward to constructive deliberations today, which will move the country away from the current crisis.

Together, let us find a solution that will strengthen our universities, and not which will destroy them.

Together, let us move South Africa Forward.

I Thank You.