

The Presidency

Media Statement

For immediate release

6 October 2015

The President, Honorable Jacob Zuma, met today with the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande, MP, Universities South Africa led by their chair Professor Adam Habib, and the University Council Chairs Forum- South Africa led by their chair, Mr Mbulelo Bikwani. The focus of the meeting was the recent unacceptable levels of violence currently being experienced on University campuses across the country.

President Zuma said: “I recognise that university students, like all members of our society, have a right to protest and to voice their opinions and grievances. However I strongly condemn the violence and destruction of property that has taken place at our universities in the name of student protests over the past year or so, and most recently at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.”

The meeting focused on discussions around the key issues facing universities at this time, including student financial aid, the politicization of university campuses and transformation of higher education more generally.

The meeting discussed government’s commitment to funding poor students in higher education in the context of a weak rand and constrained fiscal climate. Funding for poor but academically capable students disbursed through the National Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), has increased from R441 million in 1997 to over R9.5 billion in 2015. The majority of the funding, R6.2 billion in 2015, coming from government grants through the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). While the funding has increased considerably, it is clearly still insufficient to support all poor and academically deserving students. Processes for improving the disbursement of funds, and concerted

efforts to root out fraud as well as sourcing additional funding to support students are currently being implemented.

While these processes are underway, students need to be brought on board for frank and honest discussions to ensure that their frustrations at not being able to fund their own university education do not result in violence and destruction of property, which can only lead to more suffering and deprivation. All higher education stakeholders need to work together to ensure that students acknowledge the great strides that have been made in providing financial support to open access to higher education.

At the same time, while violent student responses have been condemned, the management of universities must open up legitimate channels for discussion and dialogue over matters concerning students with a view to resolving whatever issues arise. They must be more proactive and not allow matters to deteriorate to such an extent that students go on a rampage, often due to lack of understanding and knowledge of the situation and spurred by poor communication. Institutions must follow their rules and procedures to arrive at amicable solutions to whatever problems or challenges they may encounter, and take strong disciplinary action where it is warranted.

It has been noted where financial aid is well managed, and where there is good communication between management and students, student financial problems have not lead to violent protests.

Issues relating to the transformation of the higher education sector more broadly were also discussed ahead of the 2nd Higher Education Summit that will take place in Durban from 15 – 17 October, 2015. It was noted that current activity on many historically white university campuses by new student movements, were related to concerns around the slow pace of university transformation and the demand to open access more effectively and change entrenched institutional cultures. The meeting discussed some of the real gains in transforming the higher education sector, while acknowledging there is still

much to do. It is expected that the Summit will open up dialogue and come up with concrete steps to deal with many of the challenges in the higher education system.

It was also noted that some of the violence was linked to a climate of political intolerance that occurred during elections of new Student Representative Councils, with political parties weighing in on student politics. Institutions of higher learning are open spaces for free speech; academic freedom and independent thinking. Intolerance of opposing ideas is against the very essence of a university. Universities should exemplify how differences of opinion and disputes are resolved, and that is through exchange of ideas. It is completely unacceptable in our democracy that disputes within a university should lead to physical clashes and disruption of academic programmes.

It was agreed that students should be supported to develop their leadership abilities, and encouraged to engage in open dialogue and negotiations. Student politics should also be left to students and the leadership of political parties should not be campaigning on their behalf on university campuses. Universities should be open to such dialogue and not take on defensive positions, especially when it comes to deep issues of transformation of institutional cultures on our campuses.

The President reiterated, that shortfalls in financial aid, and the real concerns of individuals that they will not be supported financially going forward should not be used as a justification for hooliganism and vandalism of state property. Equally, students protesting for the transformation of institutions must focus on dialogue and legitimate means of negotiation and protest to bring about change. Where such unacceptable violent behaviour occurs, institutional managements must take firm action in line with the law and their respective policies and rules.

The end