

DATE: 14 March 2021

TO: All media

ATTENTION: News Editors/ Reporters

RESPONSE BY THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION, DR BLADE NZIMANDE ON THE SOUTH AFRICAN UNION OF STUDENTS LETTER OF DEMANDS

The South African Union of Students (SAUS) sent a letter to Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation Dr Blade Nzimande on 10 March 2021. The following is the Minister's response to the SAUS demands:

- 1) Financial clearance and the clearance of historical debts for all students to ensure smooth registration.**

The University of Western Cape set a good example in this regard. The Department of Higher Education and Training is not in a financial position to be able to support institutions to clear all student debt of fee-paying students. We are aware that there are many students whose families struggle to keep up with fee payments, and indeed many families who have also been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, given the difficult fiscal situation, all government departments, including the Department of Higher Education and Training have been subject to budget reductions in 2020 and 2021. I am aware that many institutions are doing what they can to assist students in need, and to allow them to make payment arrangements to be able to register, where this is possible. However, institutions also have to remain financially sustainable in order to continue to operate effectively, and financial decisions are made at the level of university councils. The historic debt of NSFAS-qualifying students is being addressed through a process between NSFAS and institutions. NSFAS-qualifying students with historic debt are able to register when they sign an Acknowledgement of Debt (AOD) form, while the process is underway.

2) Justice for the family of a person who was killed by police on the 10th of March 2021 at WITS University. We demand an end to police brutality targeting protesting students and we are against victimization of students and student leadership.

I am deeply distressed by the death of Mr Mthokozisi Ntumba in Braamfontein on 10 March. The issues relating to the police investigation into the matter will be dealt with by the Minister of Police.

3) Immediate provision of post-graduate funding. We are advocating for advanced diploma qualifications to be included in the funding framework.

Postgraduate funding is an issue that does require attention, as there is limited funding available from the National Research Foundation. However, in 2021, the new NRF policy does consider funding of students who were NSFAS recipients. This is an important matter that needs to be addressed in the policy review process that will be undertaken in 2021 by the Department of Higher Education and Training, as outlined in my media statement on 11 March 2021.

4) Allocation of NSFAS funding for first time entering students (FTENs) or new students. All first years must be unblocked for registration whilst government is still resolving the funding matters.

This matter has been addressed, and we have committed that first-time entering students will be able to register following the commitment to reprioritize funding from the Department of Higher Education and Training to address the NSFAS shortfall for 2021.

5) Laptops must be provided to students as the academic year starts. The agreement last year was that students will receive laptops before the start of the 2021 academic year.

This process is being managed by NSFAS. As reported by the Executive Officer, NSFAS has placed a first order for laptops, and these will be made available to students, in line with the agreed processes, as soon as they are available. NSFAS has indicated that the first deliveries will be made in April 2021.

6) We demand all student allowances to be provided in March because the academic year starts in March. Landlords are already harassing students for payment.

These processes are being managed by individual universities in line with their registration dates. However, NSFAS funding to students is only released once students are registered and confirmed for funding. It is also important to note that NSFAS will receive its first tranche from the fiscus on 1 April 2021 in line with National Treasury's processes.

7) Increase in students enrolment quotas to allow admission of matriculants. This includes the 20 000 students from UNISA.

The Department of Higher Education and Training works together with institutions to agree on an enrolment plan, which is outlined in a Ministerial Statement. The current enrolment plan covers the period 2020 to 2025. It is critical that all institutions adhere as closely as possible to their enrolment plans, as they guide both the funding of the system, as well as ensure that institutions have the capacity to support quality education for their students. Should the system expand beyond the agreed enrolments it will be unable to provide effective teaching and learning. The matter relating to UNISA's decision to reduce its enrolments based on over enrolments in 2020 is currently in the courts.

8) Free registration for all students during the 2021 academic year. We reject the imposition of minimum initial payment (MIP).

As with payment plans for students who have fee debt, registration and minimum initial payments are determined at institutional level, in line with council-determined financial policies. NSFAS-qualifying students are not expected to make upfront payments. 9) Students must be provided with their academic records and certificates, even those who owe the universities.

All institutions have confirmed to the Department that they have mechanisms in place to ensure that students with debt are able to receive academic records and certificates of completion for the purposes of further study and accessing employment opportunities. The Department works directly with institutions where necessary to facilitate queries on these matters. I agree that no student should be prevented from accessing employment or other opportunities because they have outstanding fees.

10) We demand zero percent fee increase for the 2021 academic year. Student leaders were not consulted when this decision was taken.

Fee consultations take place at institutional level. In addition, student leaders are represented on university councils, where budgeting and fee decisions are taken. For the 2021 academic year, the Department and universities have reached another fee compact to ensure fee increases are kept at affordable levels and to ensure the sustainability of universities. All institutions rely on student fees for their core operating income and additional funding is not available from government to support a zero percent fee increase. Institutions have to remain financially sustainable in order to meet their operational commitments and their academic responsibilities.

11) We are demanding free quality education for the poor and the missing middle. The increase of VAT from 14% to 15% is meant to cover for free education.

I acknowledge that the demand for student funding is significant. Government has committed to providing fully subsidized support to students from poor and working class backgrounds and has been doing so since 2018 through the NSFAS. As already

indicated, the Department of Higher Education and Training will be doing urgent work to review the current funding policy of government, to examine its overall affordability and sustainability. This will also entail examining the funding requirements to support missing middle and postgraduate students.

12) We demand suspension of academic exclusion for the 2021 academic year because of the impact of COVID-19.

Decisions about academic matters are the domain of individual universities, within their relevant academic policies. I recognize that 2020 was a difficult year for many students as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown and the move to emergency remote multi-modal teaching and learning. However, all institutions put in place plans and mechanisms to support students and to provide opportunities for catch-up and support/completion programmes.

13) SAUS & SRC members are demanding the 100% return of all students to campuses under level 1 of the lockdown. Students who are from homes without connectivity are already excluded from online registration.

I support that students who have challenges with connectivity should be able to return to campuses where they are able to access the relevant connectivity and support from institutions. However, individual institutions must manage these processes in line with their own resources and strategies and the ability to provide a safe environment for the return of students and staff in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. I will be releasing directions to support and guide institutions in managing the return of students and the start of the 2021 academic year.

14) We demand the extension of the registration period to the 30th of April 2021 considering the difficulties that students and institutions are facing.

After discussion with Universities South Africa, it was agreed that the registration period would be extended for two weeks, to ensure that all first-time entering students, in particular those who qualify for NSFAS, are able to register.

15) We demand NSFAS appeals to be opened and finalized within the next two weeks. Currently students who intend to appeal are excluded from registration.

I am informed by NSFAS that it is working hard to finalise appeals so that students are not prevented from registering in time to start the 2021 academic year. I urge student structures to continue engaging with the management teams of all our public universities, utilising the communication structures that are already in place for this engagement. Many of the matters that you have raised with me require that students and university management work together at institutional level. Given the above explanations, many of the issues that have been raised will require careful consideration and planning at the national level and will be addressed through the work that the Department of Higher Education and Training will be doing in collaboration with other government departments, including National Treasury, the Department of Science and Innovation and the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation.

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