

MEDIA STATEMENT

DATE: Saturday, 04 March 2023

TO: All media

ATTENTION: News Editors/ Reports For Immediate use:

MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION STATEMENT ON MEETING WITH UNIVERSITIES SOUTH AFRICA (USAF) ON CONCERNS RAISED BY STUDENTS IN SOME OF OUR PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

AFFECTING THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR 2023

The Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, Dr Blade Nzimande held a meeting with Universities South Africa (USAf) yesterday, the 03 March 2023, to discuss matters that are a common feature on concerns raised by students in some of our public universities.

NSFAS R45000 accommodation blanket cap

The meeting discussed the issue of the recently introduced NSFAS R45000 accommodation blanket cap.

The meeting resolved to establish a committee comprising the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), Universities South Africa (USAf) and Vice-Chancellors from all affected institutions to consider solutions for those impacted by the R45000 Cap. The committee will meet urgently next week to look at cases and practical solutions. In doing so, we must take in account a number of contradictory facts affecting the implementation of the R45000 cap, inter alia, evidence of price collusion by landlords to profiteering, the realities of differentiated costs of living in various localities where NSFAS students have to find accommodation and the continued existence of unaccredited accommodation establishment that imperil the affordability and safety of student accommodation.

NSFAS eligibility criteria

Concerns were also raised about the application of the NSFAS eligibility criteria, which required students to have an overall 55% pass rate. NSFAS clarified that new eligibility criteria would apply prospectively in 2024.

To date 1,084 574 students have been funded by NSFAS. Student funding is confirmed when registration data is received from universities and TVET Colleges. This is to ensure that the NSFAS Funding Criteria and Policy is applied and complied with.

Of the total number of first time entering students provisionally funded 532,602 are SASSA beneficiaries - this accounts for 80% of First Time Entering Student who applied and are funded by NSFAS. 443 617 Student have opted to study at

universities as compared to 211,235 students that have chosen TVET college as their preferred institution to study.

Confirmed funding for universities and TVET College continuing students is 350,014 and 81,281 students respectively.

NSFAS has improved its systems to enable it to make real time funding decisions. At this stage NSFAS is able to make real-time funding decisions for SASSA beneficiaries, while it continues to engage with SARS to enable the same for all its other applicants.

Minister Nzimande also reiterate the fact that arrangements were made for all NSFAS funded students to be registered by all institutions without paying an upfront registration fee.

Previous agreements to assist students with registration challenges
The meeting reiterated the commitment by the Department of Higher Education and Training and USAf to implement all previous agreements with the South African Union of Students (SAUS). Among others, these agreements include that:

- All NSFAS students with academic places who have debt be allowed to register at our universities, provided they sign the Acknowledgement of Debt form and they meet the academic requirements for continued funding;
- We continue to support that all NSFAS-qualifying students to be able to register for the academic year without making upfront payments;
- All students, whether they owe the university or not, must be given their academic records, either for the purpose of pursuing employment opportunities or further study. I have been informed that USAf has been working on a common approach to this matter and that it has been agreed that all universities will provide a form of academic transcript to all students, regardless of their financial status.
- The matter of post-graduate funding, and in particular students who are NSFAS recipients wishing to continue to advance to postgraduate studies be prioritised for funding through the National Research Foundation funding. However, it must be borne in mind that entry to post-graduate studies has its own requirements, that often require a much higher pass mark at undergraduate level.
- All “missing middle” students, those who do not qualify for NSFAS, but struggle to afford higher education fees, will be comprehensively dealt with in our comprehensive funding model, which is in its final stages of development and approval. However, since the 2020 academic year, USAf confirmed that all universities have processes and funding arrangements in place to assist missing middle students with debt so that they can register. The issue of the student debt is also being dealt with as part of the development of a comprehensive student funding model. It is therefore incorrect and misleading to say that the issue of student debt is not being dealt with, in all its complexities.

On submission of enrolment data

Minister Nzimande urged all our institutions who have not submitted their enrolment data to NSFAS to do so urgently and accurately, in order to enable NSFAS to promptly process the student allowances in instances where such allowances have not been proceeded due to incomplete data.

NSFAS will also ensure that in instances where there are systematic delays and change of agreed dates on the payments of allowances, such information should be communicated timeously and seamlessly to all affected students and institutions urgently.

Student protests

The meeting noted that there are some pockets of protests which causes instability in some institutions.

In order to deal with these issues, using universities internal mechanisms, the meeting agreed that all institutions should urgently convene meetings through forums such as the Institutional Forums and with the leadership of the students, to deal with all outstanding registration challenges.

Minister Nzimande said the best place to develop localised mitigation strategies to deal with students challenges is at the institutional level. Accordingly, the Minister encourages all stakeholders at our institutions to ensure that Institutional Fora are revived and actively engage on challenges facing our institutions.

However the Minister is concerned about the violent nature of some of the protests, such as the protest at Wits, which in part is manifested isolated acts of intimidation of students, staff and members of the public and the destruction of public and private property.

Minister Nzimande, strongly condemns these instances of violent student protests.

The Minister said violent protests are wholly unacceptable and provides no solution to student concerns.

Delays in the release of the matriculation results

The meeting also discussed the implications to the Post School Education and Training sector delays in the release of the matriculation examination results and its impact on the overall readiness of the start of our academic year. This included the decision by NSFAS to open application processes until the 31st of January in order to cater for the first time university and TVET college students. This decision led to delays in the confirmation of funding decision by non-SASSA NSFAS beneficiaries.

The meeting agreed that the Department of Higher Education and Training Director-General, Dr Nkosinathi Sishi, will engage with his counterpart at the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to discuss this issue going forward.

Campus safety and security

Minister Nzimande reaffirmed the announcement he made in his statement on the occasion of the assassination of Mr Mboneli Vesele of the University of Fort Hare, that the Department of Higher Education and Training will establish a Task Force that will be looking at the safety and security of our institutions. The Task Force will be working together with the Cabinet Security Cluster.

The meeting also confirmed that the Department of Higher Education and Training together with USAf will also develop protocols and training for security officers on public order security.

Minister Nzimande also indicated that the Department of Higher Education and Training is considering a report he commissioned through the University of Zululand to look at campus safety and security. The report will be soon be shared with all Vice-Chancellors.

Call for return to class

Having established engagement mechanisms and having addressed concerns raised by students in various institutions, Minister Nzimande urges all students to return to class in order to enable the commencement of the academic year without any disruptions.

The Minister also urges all the student leaders who have disengaged from various internal engagements with the institution management to return to those engagements. In instances where such engagements were not held with students on pertinent registration issues, the university management, through USAf committed to ensure that such engagement will be prioritised.

The Minister is pleased that virtually all of our institutions have started with teaching and learning whilst dealing with whatever outstanding matters, especially to ensure that students from working class and poor families, and those who meet the academic requirements are not being excluded.

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