

STATEMENT BY THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION ON THE OCCASION OF THE STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIONS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF FORT HARE – ALICE CAMPUS

11 January 2023

Programme Director: Mr Ishmael Mnisi;
The Minister in the Presidency responsible for monitoring and evaluation, Mr Mondli Gungubele;
Director General of the Department of Higher Education and Training, Dr Nkosinathi Sishi;
Deputy Director General responsible for Universities, Dr Marcia Socikwa;
All university stakeholders comprising of the University Council, Trade Unions and the Student Representative Council;
Members of the media;

Thank you for attending this important media briefing on our engagements with the stakeholders of the university following the pattern of assassinations and threats on staff at the university.

Let me upfront indicate that we have a very frank, fruitful and progressing meeting characterised by robustly engaged with the Council of the University, Trade Union representatives, the Student Representative Council and a Local Ward Councillor on the issues that effects the university in relation to security arrangement and general management of the university in relation to various issues. We have therefore agreed on short, medium and long term solutions to the challenges facing the university.

On the role of the University of Fort Hare

It is undisputed that the University of Fort was a key institution in higher education for black Africans from 1916 to 1959 and today post our democratic dispensation the enrolment patterns of the university still remain an institution in the main accommodating the children of the working class and the poor, who in the main a black. 80% of the University of Fort Hare are beneficiaries of the National Student Financial Aid.

offered a Western-style academic education to students from across sub-Saharan Africa, creating a black African elite. Fort Hare alumni were part of many subsequent independence movements and governments of newly independent African countries. Amongst those who studied at Fort Hare who later became leaders of their countries were Kenneth Kaunda, Seretse Khama, Yusuf Lule, Julius Nyerere, Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo.

Within our country, we have amongst our liberation leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Oliver Tambo, and Desmond Tutu. This in indeed a very important institutions within the community of our post school education and training sector.

Fort Hare is a public institution and one of our pride. Like any other institution in our country, we remain concerned of these assassinations and threats at this university

and some of our other institutions in our country where there were instances of threats and violence mooted against members of management and the members of staff.

On Mr Vesele's assassination

I once-more passes my heartfelt condolences to the Vesele Family, Friends and the University of Fort Hare on the murder of Mr Mboneli Vesele, the Executive Protection Officer to the University of Fort Hare, Vice Chancellor, Prof Sakhele Buhlungu.

As I indicated in my public statement before, I remain outraged by this inhumane act of disdain and strongly condemn it.

I however remain more confident that the law enforcement agencies, led by the Minister of Police, Mr Bheki Cele have already begun with investigations into this outrageous act to find and hold those responsible accountable.

We humbly appeal to the community to provide any meaningful information that will assist SAPS in this regard. This pertains to both information related to the killings of Investigation Mr Vesele's and Mr Peter Roets who was the university's fleet and transport manager who lost his life in May 2022.

It is also important that I emphasise that their attack is not only an attack on the University of Fort Hare but also an attack on the entire Post School Education and Training sector.

On fight against corruption, maladministration and capture of our institutions

The Post School Education and Training sector, like some of our public and private enterprises have been plagued by corruption, maladministration and the capture by some unscrupulous individuals posing as business people who often collaborate with individuals employed within our institutions. This follows a similar pattern in other parts of society which our State President has spoken in recent days and which we are committed to root out with all the ruthlessness and commitment that it deserves.

This phenomenon now finds expression within our institutions of higher learning as targets by criminal syndicates assisted often by the employees of our institutions. These syndicates see our institutions as cash cows. We believe that the University of Fort Hare experience reflects this phenomenon.

Together with my officials, led by Director General Sishi, we are determined for fight any acts of corruption, maladministration and institutional capture everywhere where it emerges in all our Post School Education and Training institutions, including here at the University of Fort Hare. This includes putting appropriate safety and security measures to protect both our employees and staff.

I also once more encourage all the Vice Chancellors (VC) and TVET College Principals to engage with my department on all security related issues to enable us

to engage with the Cabinet Security Cluster, particularly on security concerns that have an impact on the institutions' ability to perform their duties.

Part of our interventions include working together with our sector stakeholders namely, former administrators, researchers, university registrars, representatives from the Council on Higher Education (CHE), Universities South Africa (USAf), to develop the Guidelines for Good Governance Practice and Governance Indicators for Councils of South African Public Higher Education Institutions in order to develop governance indicators and monitor governance practices of our universities.

I must say that we are yet to realise the full implementation of these guidelines by some of our institutions Councils because we still experience some governance challenges in some of our institutions.

This is amongst the reason that my department has developed a plan that we are considering to ensure that we provide ongoing monitoring and support to all of our institutions through our Regional Offices.

Amongst the institutions that we will be commence with this support is the Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), University of South Africa (Unisa) and University of Fort Hare (UFH), amongst others.

On consultation outcomes

During my consultation meetings today with the university council, the executive management, trade unions and students, it become glaringly clear that the university has challenges which needs to be addressed urgently. I must also indicate that I have also received written submissions as part of my consultations.

I want to take this opportunity to thank all individuals and organized stakeholders who have made me and my team to further understand the challenges at this university which need by urgent attention.

These challenges relate to accusations and counter accusations by various stakeholders on the challenges of the institution. This includes issues raised around controls over procurement and contract management.

These claims correspond to various reports and investigations such as the financial health report on our twenty-six public higher education institutions for the financial year 1 January 2021 to 31st December 2021.

In the instance of the University of Fort Hare, the According Financial Heath Report indicates that:

a) Members of staff did not declare any business that my raise a conflict or possible conflict of interest with the university and notify the University of any conflict or possible conflict of interest before such public higher education institution procure any goods or services from such member of staff or an organization within such member or employee held an interest in contravention of section 34 (4) (a) (b) of the Higher Education Act.

b) Employees conducted business directly or indirectly with the university in which they were employed that entailed or may have entailed a conflict of interest with the university in contravention of section 34 (5) (a) (c) of the Higher Education Act.

In terms of the control deficiencies, the management of the university did not implement the necessary policies and procedures relating to procurement and contract management to ensure that conflicts of interest and identified and approved as required by the Higher Education Act.

As we many know, any form of corruption is a crime against the people of South Africa.

Corruption is a betrayal of our democracy and an assault on public institutions that we established to advance the values of our Constitution and the interests of our people. Now our post school education and training institutions and the University of Fort Hare is part of those institutions which we must protect against any form of corruption, maladministration and capture by private interests.

Our assessment of the assassination attack on Professor Sakhela Buhlungu

Although the Vice Chancellor was not in the car at the time of the attack, his personal protection officer, Mr Mboneli Vesele, who has worked with him since 2018 was shot and killed.

A number of attacks also took place at the homes of the VC and two other senior officials in March 2022. Though no one was hurt in these attacks, it required the university to improve security at the staff village in Alice (where shots were fired).

In terms of our own assessments, these events are most likely linked to the work of the Special Investigating Unit (SIU), which has been underway since the Presidential Proclamation of 5 August 2022 (Gazette 47199).

The proclamation followed a request from the University in 2020 to the SIU and the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the University and the SIU in June 2020.

This was partly a response to forensic work that the university had undertaken, but where they had faced certain limitations, as investigators did not have the statutory powers necessary to undertake certain responsibilities.

The terms of reference of the SIU are outlined in the gazette and include investigating corrupt and unlawful activities over a ten-year period from 2012 to 2022.

The schedule also outlines specific focus on procurement irregularities in cleaning and gardening services (between 2012 and 2019); leasing of student accommodation since 2013; appointment of a service provider for maintenance and repair of air conditioning systems (2018); and collusion of officials and suppliers or service providers.

The schedule also focuses on alleged maladministration in the affairs of the University's Faculty of Public Administration in the awarding of honours degrees; mismanagement of funds and sourcing of public servants to study in various programmes for individual financial gain.

These allegations are also linked to the University's suspension of Professor Edwin Ijeoma, who was Head of Department, and who subsequently resigned in February 2021. The disciplinary processes continued following his resignation and he was found guilty on all charges.

There were reports of how deep maladministration was entrenched in the institution, which Professor Buhlungu had reportedly been actively rooting out since he assumed office. These endeavours saw several senior managers and staff members suspended, some resigning and others dismissed.

I must also indicate that some of the issues to be investigated by the SIU were also briefly noted in the Independent Assessor Report (October 2019). One of the six key findings was that "there are disturbing signs of a widespread belief that the university is a kind of cash cow which everyone is entitled to milk for personal benefit. The problem is not only that this may happen outside of rules and policies. The problem is also that some of the rules and policies are quite generous in distributing university largesse."

On what have we done as a Department to assist the university

I outrightly want to dismiss the narrative that my office as the Minister and my department have done little or nothing in response to the challenges faced the university. This is simply not borne out by the evidence on several fronts.

Though the Office of our Deputy Director General Universities, Dr Marcia Socikwa, we sent messages our condolences to the Roets family, friends and the university and subsequently we delegated Ms Mandisa Cakwe, who is our acting Chief Director to represent the Department at his memorial service. We also directed Higher Health, my department health and wellness agency to provide the necessary psycho-social support to all affected individuals.

It is also a matter of public record that we have swiftly condemned the most recent killing of a security official attached to providing protection services to the Vice Chancellor and have almost immediately engaged with our law enforcement agencies to assist the university in both finding the culprits and assessing the security situation at Fort Hare. This work, as indicated previously, is underway.

The Ministry has also supported the University of Fort Hare and the Special Investigating Unit's work since the Presidential Proclamation of 5 August 2022 (Gazette 47199).

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Now I must indicate that prior to the intervention of the SIU, various investigations were conducted at the university at the behest of my Department.

On 05 November 2021, Council reported that the reports of the Administrator were discussed extensively; and that as part of the post-administration institutional rebuilding process, Council is currently monitoring, on a quarterly basis, the progress on the University's Annual Performance Plan and the Consolidated Turnaround and Performance Improvement Plan (CTPIP) which incorporated the recommendations from the 2019 Independent Assessors' report, the 2018 Ernest and Young Governance Review report, and the Ralekhetho & Gering Review of the Academic Enterprise report.

I then processed the responses of the Council and the letter in order to issue post-administration directives which I subsequently signed off in December 2022.

The letter directs the Council to report bi-annually to the Department specifically on the Turnaround and Performance Improvement Plan and other measures to address the findings of the Independent Assessor.

During this time, the University of Fort Hare has also received extensive funding by the Department to ensure its sustainability and development.

By way of example:

- R282 029 000 was released from the IEG/ Infrastructure grant over a 5-year period;
- R288 920 063 released between 2015 and 2021/2022 from the Sibusiso Bengu Grant;
- R130 million was granted within a few weeks of request by the Vice Chancellor in response to the dire water sanitation challenges in Alice for the development of the water and sanitation treatment plant;

- R122 million was contributed to the creation of the Alice student village (through design, cost management and maintenance strategy) releasing 1437 bed-structure for student accommodation;
- R117 976 000 for foundation provision over a 5-year period. In summary almost close to billion over the past five years.

Our goal is to make our institutions conducive to learning to all who hunger for education and beacons of excellence, and the University of Fort Hare like all our 26 public institutions constitutes an important role in our aspirations.

We want to illuminate the crown jewel embedded in this province, the notable graduates of this illustrious institution have done so much for this continent – we cannot fail them now.

As I conclude, allow me to draw on the prescient comments made by the former Administrator of the Fort Hare university, Professor Nongxa in his report to the Ministry:

“The Department has, over the last few years, ringfenced resources and made significant investments to address backlogs at especially the Historically Disadvantaged Institutions like Fort Hare. This is meant to provide the quality education and life-changing university experience that children of the privileged take for granted at Historically Advantaged Institutions. It is a subversion of Government objectives when some of these funds are diverted away for personal enrichment; it is a subversion of our democracy when business people bidding for tenders allegedly bribe students who serve on adjudication committees, thereby encouraging the emergence of the next generation of corrupt leaders. It undermines Fort Hare when the investment meant to ensure that it delivers on its mandate is not deployed for such purposes or is not transferred to the university, due to avoidable delays.”
Way-forward

As a Minister responsible for Higher Education and Training together with my department, we will further process any relevant submissions made today by various stakeholders and the University Council to see what further measures can be taken to secure the safety and security and full functionality of the university especially in the lead-up to the start of the new academic year.

All other matters relating to criminal investigations, the SIU and Hawks will lead this and report independently on its outcomes. Our wish is for those found to be involved in wrong doing to face the full might of the law and that the university management should continue to institute internal disciplinary measures against any officials involved in wrong doing.

Let me take this opportunity to thank you all our stakeholders who we meet this morning and all those who gave us written submission, my cabinet colleagues, Minister Mondli Gungubele and Minister Bheki Cele; the Eastern Cape Premier, MEC Fundile Gade; MEC Xolile Nqatha, Fort Hare University Council, Director General Dr Nkosinathi Sishi; DDG Dr Socikwa, Vice Chancellor, Prof Sakhele

Buhlungu and the entire Executive Management, all university stakeholders comprising of Trade Unions and the Student Representative.

Thank you so much for your valuable inputs today and off course I thank you members of the media.

Thank you