



STATEMENT BY THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION, PROF BLADE NZIMANDE, ON THE OCCASION OF THE OPENING OF THE NSFAS BURSARY APPLICATION FOR THE ACADEMIC YEAR 2024 HELD AT THE GCIS TSHEDIMOSETSO HOUSE, PRETORIA

Deputy Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology, Mr Buti Manamela; Acting Director-General of the Department of Higher Education and Training, Ms Thembisa Futshane;
NSFAS Board Chairperson, Mr Ernest Khosa;
Acting NSFAS CEO, Mr Masile Ramorwesi;
DDGs of the Department of Higher Education and Training;
NSFAS Executive and Staff;
Officials from the Department of Higher Education and Training;
Student leadership;
Members of the media;
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Good Afternoon

I have convened this media briefing to announcement the official opening of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme bursary application season for the academic year 2024.

However before I provide further details on the 2024 application season, I would like to raise concerns and necessary for both the government and the post school education and training sector to intensify campaigns to confront and defeat the scourge of gender based violence in our institutions the issue of Gender Based Violence in our society and at our post school education and training institutions.

In the past weeks we have seen video footage of a university student stabbing his wife at a private student residence in Belhar, Cape Town. This kind of barbaric behaviour my males against women must be condemned and perpetrators must face the full might of the law.

We cannot continue like this in our society where as many as 38% of murders are committed against women, often by their intimate partners.

As part of dealing with gender-based violence in our institutions, I launched the Transforming MENTalities Initiative, which is a multistakeholder partnership within the PSET, with a particular focus on mobilising men in our sector to be part of championing a world free of gender biases, stereotypes, violence and discrimination.

I urge all institutions working with Higher Health (which oversees wellness at higher education institutions) to continue to collectively implement programmes towards addressing the challenges of sexual and gender based violence within the PSET (Post School Education and Training) system.

Arrest of senior Fort Hare University employee

I wish to welcome further arrests that have been made by the police at University of Fort Hare. We had indicated to Minister Cele that indeed no stone must be left unturned in going to the reasons for the killings at Fort Hare. Without prejudging the situation, as Minister, I am however deeply concerned about the latest arrest of someone inside the Vice-Chancellors office and ostensibly responsible for the security in the institution.

This may point to the fact that the problems at UFH may be deeper than meets the eye. I will be further engaging with Council on the latest developments, particularly given the fact that complaints have been raised with me about alleged illegal surveillance of Council and staff members.

NSFAS mandate

Back to the purpose of our media briefing today, I want to remind all South Africans as to the mandate of NSFAS.

The National Student Financial Aid Scheme was established under the NSFAS Act (Act No. 1 of 1999) with the mandate of providing financial assistance to deserving beneficiaries who qualify for access to post-school education.

As a scheme, NSFAS truly represents one of the most progressive efforts by the government to systematically break the legacies of inter-generational social inequality in access to and outcomes of, post school education and training.

This is particularly important if we consider the structural and social constraint to accessing education that was imposed by centuries of colonial and apartheid rule.

There is no doubt that this government has made a decisive contribution towards a break with these reproductive legacies of the past.

Since 1991, NSFAS funding has grown from disbursing R21.4 million to almost 48 billion to fund children of the working class and the poor seeking to further their studies in public universities and TVET colleges.

This is a clear indication that government has prioritised student funding and broadening of access to those sections of our communities who had no access to post school education and training in past.

The other notable milestone for the scheme has been the integration of all public universities and TVET colleges to the student-centred model wherein students apply directly to NSFAS for funding.

In this current financial year, NSFAS is funding 1,6 million students. This follows an unprecedented surge in the number of applications received by the scheme.

The entity has been working tirelessly to ensure that it improves on its processes for applications and ensuring quick turnaround times on funding decisions in preparation for the 2024 funding year.

You would agree with me, that in order for NSFAS to successfully implement the funding of 2024 funding, there needs to be closure of the

2023 funding cycle. This includes the finalization of all the appeals and payment of all outstanding allowances for the academic year 2023.

NSFAS committed that all appeals and the payment of outstanding allowance will be finalized this year.

For all those students who did not get successful funding outcomes for the 2023 academic year, they are all encouraged to apply for 2024 funding.

Let me also indicate that the proposed 2024 funding policy is almost complete, and will be issued by the end of November, to allow stakeholders to prepare for the 2024 academic year.

The funding policy will cover the eligibility criteria and student allowances.

Chair, I am hoping that moving forward the policy can be reviewed every two years, to bring some level of stability, and only be reviewed when necessary or where there are substantive changes.

Ladies and gentlemen

Opening of the 2024 applications season

NSFAS has officially opened its application this morning and will close on the 31st January 2024.

The reason we are opening the application period now is that NSFAS was awaiting SARS completion of the tax period which is very important to

enable NSFAS to have the necessary and updated information available during the application season.

Furthermore, this is done to afford the beneficiaries shorter turnaround times for decision making which is aligned to NSFAS financial eligibility assessment which requires updated SARS information.

I implore on all students who wish to study in any of the public universities and TVET Colleges to apply timeously and not to wait until the last day.

Student **DON'T HAVE** to wait for matric results in order to apply for NSFAS.

NSFAS is mandated to make funding available to poor and working-class families and in adhering to this mandate they will continue to make immediate funding decisions for SASSA First Time Entering (FTEN) students.

I was pleased to hear as part of improving the services to students, for this application period there will be no supporting documents required at time of application.

The reason for this is due to our improve third party relations. These third parties include SASSA, SARS and the Department of Home Affairs. They will be providing NSFAS with information to verify what the student would have declared in the application.

The only time supporting documents will be required, is when prompted by NSFAS in case where they cannot verify the parental relationship.

Communication will be sent directly by NSFAS to a student to initiate this process.

In the case where a student is submitting an appeal, documents required will be based on the NSFAS declaration form available on the NSFAS website.

In addition, disabled students will be required to submit the disability annexure form, because they are assessed at R600K threshold. All these improvements will ensure that funding decisions are confirmed timeously.

I, therefore, urge students to provide accurate information particularly parental information when applying so that when validations occur with Home Affairs students can be funded timeously. NSFAS will reject or request additional supporting documentation where validations with 3rd parties have failed.

All the first-time applicants will be able to appeal as soon as they are rejected.

However, the returning students and continuing students will only be able to appeal from the end of November as NSFAS is still improving the processes so that students have multiple reject reasons and appeal at once instead of the current process where they have been rejected at different points in the funding value chain.

The scheme continues to improve its controls in ensuring that those who do not qualify do not access the funding. This is done in collaboration with

other public entities such as SARS and the Department of Home Affairs (DHA).

In 2023, the scheme continued to fund SASSA beneficiaries in real time. This year, SASSA beneficiaries account for 35%(526,970)of the funded students.

In preparation for the 2024 funding cycle, I was informed NSFAS had already engaged the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and that quite a number of students who are in matric are SASSA beneficiaries. I therefore urge all those potential students to apply, as they will be immediately funded.

Remember, applying does not mean you have been confirmed for funding. You still need to be registered first, in a public university or TVET College for a funded qualification to be confirmed.

While some challenges continue, the scheme is working to improve its systems and processes.

As part of the NSFAS digital strategy, to date the scheme has improved its student application portal, following the experiences encountered this year.

The whatsapp and USSD functionality have already been introduced to assist students with the tracking of applications for the 2023 and will now be expanding to include more funding statuses such as confirmation of registration information.

I am also pleased to announce that NSFAS has a mobile app that can be downloaded on IOS, Android and Huawei to allow students to apply seamlessly.

Congratulations to NSFAS for introducing this modern technology innovation which will make it easy for students to apply for NSFAS funding.

The entity is also planning on rolling out a strategy that would improve its query handling processes.

The intention is to provide additional services on the whatsapp functionality, USSD, and introduce additional solutions such as chatbots.

The introduction of these applications will enable students to receive responses directly and reduce the reliance on calls. This application will provide a self-service mechanism.

Student Accommodation

I was informed that the chairperson of the Board and the Acting CEO, met with Universities South Africa (Usaf) Chairperson and CEO on 18 November 2023, to discuss issues of student accommodation.

It was brought to my attention that the entity will be embarking on a pilot project for Universities in 2024. Details of the pilot will be shared by NSFAS, after a detailed concept document is finalized.

The TVET College pilot had already commenced in the 2023 academic year and the entity will be leveraging on lessons learnt to improve accommodation services for 2024.

Institutions are therefore requested not to enter into long term lease agreements and are further advised to consult with NSFAS on issues affecting student accommodation, particularly for NSFAS beneficiaries.

Close Out Project

In relation to the Close Out Project, Usaf was updated of the findings of the Auditor-General South Africa (AGSA) on Close Out Project 2017 to 2023.

Subsequently, NSFAS met with all Universities and TVET Colleges to share progress on this project and the implementation of the AGSA recommendation.

Both the South African Public College Principal Organization (SAPCO) and Universities South Africa (Usaf) will be notified of the institutions with outstanding submissions to conclude this process. I must urge all our institutions to work with NSFAS to ensure that this project is concluded without any further delays.

NSFAS call centre

The other area that I have directed NSFAS to look at is the improvement of the call- centre. I am expecting these improvement before the beginning of the academic year.

Comprehensive Student Funding Model

I am delighted to report that the Comprehensive Student Funding Model is in the process of been finalized by Cabinet. More details will be provided on this development.

Conclusion

In closing, I would like to urge all young people aspiring to attend our public TVET colleges and universities from 2024 to utilise the online applications system and other access points, to apply on time for funding, to ensure that decisions can be made timeously. I wish all applicants the best of luck.

Once again I would like to reiterate my commitment and that of my Department to work closely with the NSFAS Board and the team at NSFAS as well as with all our public universities and TVET colleges to improve the effectiveness of our student funding system.

I would like to thank all our state organs which includes SARS, SASSA, the Department of Basic Education and the Department of Home Affairs who continue to work with NSFAS to ensure that we fund all the deserving students.

I would like to thank the leadership of my Department of Higher Education and Training, NSFAS, our TVET colleges and universities and the many people working at our universities and colleges who are continuously providing support to our students to succeed.

Your hard work is critical to the success of students, who are our future leaders.

I would also like to thank the student leadership of our institutions and national organisations for their support to students and to NSFAS and institutions.

Together we can make this work!

I thank you