



**MINISTER
HIGHER EDUCATION,
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

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Mr Lwandile Mtsolo
Secretary General
South African Union of Students

By email: saus.secretariat@gmail.com

Dear Mr Mtsolo

The 2020 Memorandum of Students' Demands

I am in receipt of a memorandum of demands from the South African Union of Students, submitted on behalf of university SRCs of all 26 public universities, received on the afternoon of 16 January 2020. I would like to thank you for raising these matters with my office. I provide a response to each of the demands below. I also hope that through the engagement that took place this week, we were able to achieve a common understanding on some of the matters you raise in your memorandum.

Please note that although my office is the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) remain separate Departments at this time.

1. All students with historical debts must be allowed to register in all universities and we demand the department of higher education to eradicate all historic debts.

The Department has provided significant funding towards the eradication of historic debt for NSFAS-qualifying students. Funding was allocated more than once during my previous term as Minister to address debt of NSFAS students. Following the due diligence process conducted in 2018, former Minister Pandor announced close to R1 billion in historic debt relief for NSFAS-qualifying students who were registered in the 2018 academic year. This was based on information received for over 50 000 students and is being processed through NSFAS. NSFAS has so far processed about R450 million of this historic debt, and is engaging with institutions to reconcile amounts claimed in line with the criteria developed by DHET in consultation with NSFAS. NSFAS qualifying students who carry debt from 2019 are allowed to register provided they sign the Acknowledge of Debt (AOD) form at the institution to which they are returning.

I am aware that there is significant student debt within the university system owed by students who are not NSFAS beneficiaries. Unfortunately, public funds for the university system are constrained and there is no possibility that debts of students

who are not NSFAS-qualifying can be eradicated by government. A longer-term solution lies in improved funding opportunities for “missing middle” students, and working with the private sector. I hope that we will be able to develop a more comprehensive student financial aid scheme in the future. It is therefore important for SRCs and universities to continue with their productive work in raising funds to support students who are not NSFAS beneficiaries, and for the private sector and other donors to continue to provide university bursaries.

The Department is also working to develop a regulatory framework for university fees, which will in the longer term ensure that fees are kept at affordable levels.

2. Examination results, academic records and certificates to be issued to all students even if they are owing the university.

As agreed in 2019, all students, whether they owe the university or not, should be able to access their academic records, either for the purpose of pursuing employment opportunities or further study. This issue was discussed extensively with universities in 2019, and the Department has engaged closely with universities where any complaints are received. However, no student should be prevented from accessing further study or employment by not having access to an academic record. The methodology employed for the release of academic records to prospective employers is managed at university level. I will raise this issue with Universities South Africa.

3. Postgraduate students be allowed to register whilst we continue pushing the Department to provide postgraduate funding. This includes advanced diplomas. We demand that the National Research Fund (NRF) automatically provide funding to postgraduates who are previously NSFAS beneficiaries.

1. The National Research Foundation (NRF) has developed a new student funding policy for implementation in 2021, which is pro-poor and focused on improving equity, access, success and throughput in postgraduate studies. This policy is a direct response to Government’s priority of supporting financially needy and academically able students and aligned to the policies of the NSFAS. I am aware that SAUS has been consulted in the development of this new policy. The NRF is also working closely with NSFAS and the two Departments to ensure that the links between undergraduate and postgraduate funding administration can be more effective. Seventy-two percent (72%) of students who were previously funded by NSFAS for their undergraduate degrees submitted applications for honours funding by the NRF for the 2020 academic year. The outcome of these applications will be known by 31 January 2020. It is important to let you know that of the NRF awarded 3785 postgraduate bursaries at all levels in between 2006 to 2014 to students who had previously been NSFAS beneficiaries.

However, we acknowledge that there is a shortage of postgraduate funding for students who wish to pursue further study. The South African government has prioritised fully-subsidised funding for poor and working-class undergraduate students to obtain a first qualification. At the same time funding for postgraduate studies has not kept pace with demand. The Department of Science and Innovation, through the National Research Foundation, provides funding for post graduate studies. The National Skills Fund also provides some funding for post graduate qualifications and advanced diplomas in scarce skills areas. The National Institute of Humanities and

Social Sciences provides some funding as well for Masters and Doctoral studies in the humanities and social sciences. In addition, many universities provide postgraduate funding for students from their own funds. However, more needs to be done.

Each university manages their registration processes differently. The Department cannot determine policies in this regard for each university, especially given that the new funding for post graduate study will not materialise overnight. This demand simply cannot be met at this time, given the fiscal constraints that exist. I am committed to working together to find a longer-term solution to the shortage of funding for postgraduate students, including a focus on students from poor and working-class backgrounds.

4. The accreditation of students' accommodation must be revised to ensure that all deserving students receive places to stay.

This matter is being addressed with universities, to ensure that, in the absence of fully accredited accommodation, NSFAS qualifying students are able to access non-accredited accommodation, as long as the university has a registration and verification process in place. This is an interim arrangement, while working towards a more comprehensive accreditation and verification system. Students are able to stay at home and receive travel and living allowances, live with a relative or friend and receive travel and living allowances, make their own arrangements and receive travel and living allowances. If their home address is far from the university campus at which they are studying, and there is insufficient university accredited accommodation, they can access single-use private accommodation with a formal lease agreement, in line with university policies and then receive an accommodation and living allowance. This will ensure that all NSFAS qualifying students are supported.

The Department of Higher Education and Training wrote to all institutions on 20 January 2020 about this matter following a meeting with university administrators on 16 January 2020. I have attached a copy of the Department's correspondence. Individual institutions will engage with their SRCs on the implementation of this arrangement.

5. Free registration for all vulnerable, poor and the missing middle students.

All NSFAS-qualifying students are able to register at all 26 public universities without paying an upfront fee. This mechanism was in place in 2019. Students not qualifying for NSFAS have to make upfront payments to universities, according to the policies of the institutions.

6. Re-opening of NSFAS applications for new students and walk-ins

The NSFAS process is not closed to new entrants to TVET colleges and universities, however the NSFAS online system will not reopen. NSFAS has a process in place, working with universities, to verify the applications of students who are admitted to an institution for registration, but did not apply for NSFAS. If a student is admitted to a university and has not applied to NSFAS for funding and identifies as a student who may qualify for NSFAS, they must sign an Acknowledgement of Debt to register while

NSFAS verifies that the student is eligible for funding. This will be done on a case by case basis. I would like to reassure you that this process has been discussed with institutions and NSFAS and is in line with what was implemented in 2019.

7. Revision of the DHET bursary guidelines to include submissions made by SRCs last year, these amongst others is to ensure that students who stay in private and off campus are not excluded from allowances and female students who are on NSFAS receive an additional allowance for free sanitary towels.

The matter of accommodation is addressed in point 4 above. With regards to the differential allowance for female students for sanitary towels, as discussed previously with SAUS, this proposal is being explored for implementation the 2021 academic year.

8. Increase of enrolment quotas amidst high demand for higher education.

Enrolment quotas are carefully determined to align with the capacity of universities (both in terms of academic staff and infrastructure) to ensure that a quality learning and teaching environment is possible in all institutions and to prevent over-crowding. Enrolment growth has to be planned in line with available funding.

9. A clear implementation plan for student mental health, safety and security in campuses.

I have had substantive discussions with universities in 2019 about matters of safety and security and together with USAf we are working to address some of the urgent security matters. USAf has also kept me informed of work that is going on in the area of mental health with the support of the Medical Research Council. I will continue to work to support improvements in this area. I will also continue discussions with USAf to build on the plans in this regard. I am planning to convene a Summit together with Higher Education Health on these and related matters before the end of April 2020.

10. We demand the inclusion of UNISA in all NSFAS allowances.

I have engaged directly with UNISA students and the university in this regard. Changing the allowance policy with regards to UNISA students would require substantial policy change at other levels and would have significant financial implications. As discussed at our engagement on Thursday, I am committed to further engagement with UNISA and its student leadership to explore these matters further.

11. Shortage of student accommodation, dilapidated infrastructure for teaching and learning.

As outlined in my media statement on 16 January 2020, the Department is working to support growth of student accommodation through the implementation of the Student Housing Infrastructure Programme (SHIP). A partnership is in place between the Department, National Treasury, the European Union Infrastructure Investment Programme for South Africa (IIPSA), the Development Bank of South Africa (DBSA), and the private sector to support the SHIP. The Department has allocated substantial funds for infrastructure to universities. The Infrastructure and Efficiency Grant (IEG) of the Department supports a range of infrastructure initiatives in all our universities. The Department is working closely with all institutions, and historically disadvantaged

institutions in particular, to ensure that improvements can be made and to address maintenance of existing buildings. Between 2015/16 and 2019/20 a total of R12.356 billion has been allocated to 24 universities to improve their infrastructure. A significant amount of this was focused on student housing, backlog maintenance and Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs). In addition to this R 4.076 billion was allocated for the construction of the two new universities, the University of Mpumalanga (UMP) and Sol Plaatje University (SPU) over this period. In 2019/20 an additional amount of R496 million was also earmarked specifically for HDIs to deal with urgent infrastructure backlogs. Over the coming MTEF (2020/21 – 2022/23) R 8.807 will be allocated for further improvement of 24 universities, with a focus on dealing with the poor conditions in our HDIs. An additional R 3.178 billion is earmarked for the further development of UMP and SPU over the 2020 MTEF. In addition to this an amount of R596.5 million has been allocated by National Treasury in 2018/19 and 2019/20 to support the implementation of the Student Housing Infrastructure Programme.

I also intend drawing up a comprehensive student housing strategy that aims to balance needs between urban and rural institutions, private and institution owned accommodation, with government funded student accommodation that prioritise rural institutions.

In the coming weeks I also intend holding a meeting with the leading private providers of student accommodation to discuss a variety of issues, particularly rental prices, quality and safety in private student accommodation. This is all part of my department's effort to ensure safe and quality student accommodation.

12. NSFAS appeals process must be made transparent, efficient and responsive to ensure that students do not lose their spaces in universities, and many students still await responses on their NSFAS application. We reject the exclusionary policy of N+1 and we call for the reinstatement of N+2 when it relates to NSFAS funding eligibility.

NSFAS has, for the first time, processed all applications prior to the commencement of the new 2020 academic year, and has communicated with all the NSFAS applicants. This will ensure that no NSFAS qualifying student will lose a place because his/her NSFAS application has not been processed on time. As pointed out under 6), all deserving NSFAS students who have been admitted to an institution but had not applied for NSFAS will be catered for on a case by case basis.

In addition, the Department engages on a daily basis with NSFAS and institutions, particularly during the registration period, to ensure that NSFAS-qualifying students are not disadvantaged by any administrative delays. NSFAS has committed to an efficient appeals process, which was vastly improved in 2019, and the Department will continue to engage with NSFAS, institutions and the public to make sure that appeals are dealt with timeously.

The decision to provide N+1 years of funding to students on the DHET bursary scheme was carefully considered, taking into account available funding and the fact that the new bursary scheme provides a fully-subsidised bursary to students. The Department is providing substantial funding to universities to support capacity

development in the area of teaching and learning to ensure that students are able to access appropriate academic support.

Given the improvements in throughput and the greater levels of support being provided to students across the university system, a limit of N+1 years of fully subsidised funding is considered a fair decision. We need to ensure that funding is made available for new students coming into the system. It is important to note that if a student stays in the system for an additional year to complete their qualification, they would need to find an alternative funding source

13. Food security program in all campuses to fight hunger

Many universities have put in place food security programmes to support access to food for students on campus. However, the Department urges all NSFAS students to utilise their living allowances to access food. It is also important that students have access to healthy food options on campus, and I urge universities to work to improve the quality of food options available to students on campus and to consider the implementation of catered accommodation, especially for undergraduate students.

14. The central applications process is obsolete and we are demanding an urgent improvement of the CACH process as students' documents and information gets missing and the CACH is currently dysfunctional.

The Central Applications Clearing House (CACH) is not a central applications process. This demand may be based on a misunderstanding of the purpose of CACH, which is a referral system to ensure that student who have applied to institutions but are unsuccessful, are able to access possible open spaces at institutions that have not yet met their enrolment quotas in some programmes. It also provides access to career development services and opportunities in other parts of the post school education and training system, such as TVET Colleges, SETA learnerships, skills development programmes, artisanship placements, and internships. In actual fact, CACH is only open for a short period at the start of the academic year. The Central Applications Service (CAS) is not yet operational and is still under development. The Department is planning to test the implementation of CAS in 2020 at selected universities and TVET colleges for the 2021 academic year. Once the CAS is operational the CACH will be incorporated into it.

15. All universities that increased fees without consulting SRCs must reverse their decisions and institutions that increased fees above the inflation rate must decrease them as a matter of urgency.

Since 2016, the public higher education system has worked on the basis of an agreed compact for tuition fees. The purpose of these compacts is to keep fee increases as low as possible. SRCs are represented on the Councils of all public universities where the final decisions about tuition fees are made, and should engage through the appropriate governance structures of their university to raise any matters regarding fee agreements. The Department will engage with the few universities who have increased tuition fees outside of the agreed compact on inflation-linked sector increase.

I hope that the above is sufficient in addressing your concerns at this time. I hope that the channels of engagement between SRCs, universities and the Department are sufficiently open to allow for continued engagement on medium, and longer-term issues as well as any urgent matters.

In the mean time I urge that we work together to ensure a smooth start to the academic year that allows students the best possible opportunities and support for success.

Yours sincerely

Signed electronically

DR BE NZIMANDE, MP
MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY
DATE: