

President's statement on higher education

We have just held a very fruitful and historical meeting with Vice-Chancellors and the leadership of all universities in South Africa this morning.

The leadership of higher institutions of learning in the country consisted of Universities of South Africa, led by their chairperson Professor Adam Habib, and the University Council Chairs Forum - South Africa, was led by their chairperson, Mr Mbulelo Bikwani.

The meeting was held at the request of the two organisations and focused, among other things, on the unacceptable levels of violence currently being experienced at some University campuses across the country.

I wish to state from the outset that Government recognises and supports the right of university students, like all other members of our society, to protest and to voice their opinions and grievances. But this right should be exercised with utmost responsibility, ensuring that the rights of other South Africans are not violated in the process. We therefore strongly condemn the violence and destruction of property that have taken place at some of our universities in the name of student protests over the past year or so, and most recently at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

The meeting agreed that all forms of disputes must be resolved through negotiation, and that where wanton acts of criminality take place the law must take its course.

There were other areas of discussion in the meeting, including key challenges facing universities at this time – such as student financial aid, the increasing politicization of university campuses and transformation of higher education more generally.

We wish to reiterate government's commitment to funding poor students in higher education in the context of a constrained fiscal climate. Funding for poor academically capable students disbursed through the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), has increased from R441 million in 1997 to over R9.5 billion in 2015.

While funding has increased considerably, it is clearly still insufficient to support all poor and academically deserving students. Processes for improving the disbursement of funds, and concerted efforts to root out fraud, as well as sourcing additional funding to support students are currently being implemented.

We agreed to establish a Task Team made up of officials from the Department of Higher Education and Training, The Presidency, NSFAS, two Vice-Chancellors representing the leadership of universities, two student representatives as well as

other higher education stakeholders, to explore solutions to short-term student funding challenges. The Task Team will make recommendations by the end of November 2015.

While these processes are underway, students need to be brought on board for frank and honest discussions so as to ensure that they do not resort to violence and destruction of property, which can only lead to their further suffering and deprivation.

We have agreed to work together with all higher education stakeholders to ensure that students acknowledge the great strides that have been made in providing financial support in order to open access to higher education.

At the same time, while violent student responses have been condemned, the management of universities must open up legitimate channels for discussion and dialogue over matters concerning students, with a view to resolving whatever issues they raise.

We believe that university management must be more proactive and not allow matters to deteriorate to such an extent that students go on a rampage, often due to lack of understanding and knowledge of the situation and spurred by poor communication.

Similarly, institutions of higher learning must follow their rules and procedures to arrive at amicable solutions to whatever problems or challenges they may encounter. They must also be allowed to take strong disciplinary action where it is warranted.

The meeting further noted that where financial aid is well managed, and where there is good communication between management and students, student financial problems have not led to violent protests.

Issues relating to the transformation of the higher education sector were also discussed ahead of the 2nd Higher Education Summit that will take place in Durban from 15 – 17 October, 2015.

It was further noted that the current activity on many historically white university campuses by new student movements, were related to concerns around the slow pace of university transformation and the demand to open access more effectively and thus change entrenched institutional cultures.

We also discussed some of the real gains in transforming the higher education sector, while acknowledging that there is still much more to be done.

It is therefore expected that the Summit will open up dialogue and come up with concrete steps to deal with the challenges in the higher education system.

It was also noted that some of the violence was linked to a climate of political intolerance that occurred during the elections for new Student Representative Councils, with political parties weighing in on student politics.

We wish to affirm that institutions of higher learning are open spaces for free speech, academic freedom and independent thinking. In this regard, intolerance of opposing ideas is against the very essence of a university. Universities should exemplify how differences of opinion and disputes are resolved, and that it is through the exchange of ideas. It is therefore completely unacceptable in our democracy that disputes within a university should lead to physical clashes and the disruption of academic programmes.

Our meeting this morning also agreed that students should be supported to develop their leadership abilities, and encouraged to engage in open dialogue and negotiations.

Universities on the other hand should be open to such dialogue and not take on defensive positions, especially when it comes to deep issues of transformation of institutional cultures on our campuses.

I wish to reiterate that any shortfalls in financial aid should not be used as a justification for hooliganism and vandalism of state property. Equally, students protesting for the transformation of institutions must focus on dialogue and legitimate means of negotiation and protest to bring about change.

Where such unacceptable violent behaviour occurs, institutional management must take firm action in line with the law and their respective policies and rules.

We welcome this interaction between the leadership of our universities and government. I am certain that channels of communication have been sufficiently opened and this will yield to more engagements in the future amongst all the stakeholders of our higher education system.

I thank you.