

Minister Naledi Pandor's Statement on Addressing the Issues Raised by the South African Union of Students

15 February 2019

On Saturday 9 February 2019, I met with SRC presidents from all 26 public universities, along with the South African Student's Union (SAUS), the CEO of Universities South Africa (USAf) and the Administrator of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). The meeting was held in response to an urgent request from SAUS to address 12 high level demands made by SAUS in calling for a national shutdown of all universities.

At the meeting I committed to providing a detailed response to students and the public on the wide range of issues fuelling conflict on our university campuses. This statement expands on the inputs made at the 9 February 2019 meeting, and our presentation at the meeting of the Portfolio Committee on Higher Education and Training, held on 13 February 2019.

I would like to correct the misunderstanding that I do not take seriously the matters that students have raised with me. This is not the case. In addressing the twelve issues that SAUS raised with me, I would like to respond as follows:

1. Accumulating student debts and the financial exclusion of students from the 2019 registration in universities.

No NSFAS qualifying student who was registered in 2018, and who has been admitted to a university and meets the academic criteria for continuation should be prevented from registering in 2019 due to outstanding fees. I have previously outlined the process in this regard. Students in good academic standing who have debt and are NSFAS-qualifying must sign an Acknowledgement of Debt form (AoD) and will be allowed to register for 2019. This is the same process that was followed last year. I am working closely with NSFAS and institutions to ensure that these measures are put in place at universities.

I am addressing the matter of historic debt of NSFAS-qualifying students in accordance with the above process, and I have committed to make an announcement before the end of March on this matter.

I am particularly concerned about any final year students who may be on track to completion this year, but may have been blocked from registering due to outstanding debt. I have directed that the Department should identify these students immediately and work with institutions to ensure they can register and complete their studies.

We need to ensure that any student who is academically successful and unable to complete their studies for financial reasons, is enabled to complete. Government will find a way, in collaboration with institutions to resolve this matter urgently. I repeat, no academically successful student who is about to complete their studies should be prevented from graduating.

We are not able as Government to immediately resolve the full debt of all students in the university system. We have decided to prioritise students from poor and working class backgrounds. However we are developing a policy framework for the regulation of university fees from 2020 onwards, in order to ensure that fees are kept at affordable levels for all families that need assistance. I am pleased to confirm that R30.8 billion is made available this year to assist financially-needy students via NSFAS at universities and TVET colleges.

2. The crisis of student accommodation, student transport services and collapsed campus health services.

Addressing student accommodation is a priority of government, through support from the Infrastructure and Efficiency Grant (IEG) for student accommodation and other infrastructure projects. R4.1 billion has been allocated since 2015/16 until 2020/21 for student housing.

The Department is implementing the Student Housing Infrastructure Programme, which is working on a range of partnerships to provide 200 000 student beds for universities over a period of 10 years. 18 221 new beds will be provided over the next three years. The institutions involved are: Nelson Mandela University (2000

beds), University of the Western Cape (2680 beds), North West University Mafikeng (1760 beds), Sefako Makgatho University (2000 beds), University of Fort Hare (1437 beds), University of Limpopo (3008 beds), University of Zululand (3500 beds) and Vaal University of Technology (1836 beds).

The Department is also working with the Departments of Human Settlements and Public Works to explore options for off campus social housing. A range of private developers are also developing properties in the vicinities of our universities. We encourage all forms of activity towards ensuring that efficient, affordable and safe student housing is available to students across the system.

3. Lack of postgraduate funding and the shrinking of enrolment quotas for postgraduates

I must indicate that post-graduate enrolments are in fact growing in the university sector. In 2017 we had 173 441 postgraduate students in the system, and the number is expected to grow to 185 684 in 2019 based on the approved midterm enrolment planning targets. This is an annual growth rate of approximately 2.5%.

Funding for postgraduate students is available through the National Research Foundation (NRF) as well as through institutional funds. We acknowledge that the funding available is not adequate to meet the needs of all students. However, this is something that I will discuss with the Department of Science and Technology.

4. The problem of NSFAS appeals and confusion on the allowances

Student formations and university leaders have expressed their support for the turnaround of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme. This year, for the first time ever, students have been confirmed for funding at registration, and large numbers of students have received their first allowances. This means that they can start their academic year with peace of mind knowing they have the necessary support to succeed. I know that there are still some exceptions, and I urge that we allow NSFAS the necessary time to resolve these problems, working closely with

institutions. We are all appreciative of the turnaround at NSFAS that has ensured that 2019 students benefiting from NSFAS support are already receiving allowances.

I am aware that there is considerable discontent about the differences between the funding available for students on the new bursary conditions, and those subject to the old criteria and conditions. Unfortunately, we are in a situation where we cannot equalise all funding overnight. A phased in approach was essential, to manage the level of funding available to government. Last year, government ensured that the food allowance was equalised for all NSFAS students, on the new and old NSFAS criteria.

In consultation with NSFAS and in response to the concerns of students raised regarding the costs of learning materials, I have decided that we will immediately standardise the learning material allowance for all university NSFAS-qualifying students with immediate effect. Every NSFAS-qualifying student at a contact public higher education institution, registered for 2019, will receive the full R5000 learning material allowance.

UNISA students are students in a distance education institution. However, I acknowledge the difficulties that NSFAS beneficiaries at UNISA are encountering. In that regard, I am also pleased to announce that qualifying students with full-time course loads at UNISA will receive the R2750 per annum incidental allowance from 2019.

I have requested NSFAS to process appeals as a matter of urgency and I have been re-assured it is receiving priority attention.

5. The outstanding 2018 Sbox funds.

R154 million is still to be distributed to SBux-receiving students. The NSFAS Call Centre is tracing these students to ensure that the unclaimed funds can be disbursed. NSFAS is also working closely with the various institutions to ensure that students are identified and outstanding funds disbursed. Students who have outstanding funds due to them are requested to contact the NSFAS Call Centre urgently.

6. Student funding delays from other sponsors and bursary funders leading students to be denied access to registration.

I appeal to all sponsors and bursary funders supporting students at our public institutions to honour their commitments to ensure that students are able to register and receive allowances as per their agreements with students and to allow them to succeed.

7. Denial of universities to issue out academic records and certificates.

I have engaged Universities South Africa on this matter and I am happy to report that they have committed to ensure that all institutions make academic records available to all students, regardless of their outstanding fees to an institution. While certificates may be withheld by institutions, every student has a right to receive their academic transcripts so that they are able to find meaningful employment.

8. Academic exclusion and poor conditions of learning.

Academic matters and the conditions of learning are matters that individual universities must address and remain a priority of the system. As part of the transformation of the university system, significant emphasis is being placed not only on providing means for students to access university, but on student success, ensuring that conditions of learning improve and that students are able to succeed.

The University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG) is one mechanism intended to enable universities to improve student and staff support, as well as curriculum development. The total allocation for the UCDP over the Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) is more than R2.5 billion.

9. The plight of students with a disability and international students.

There is sufficient funding available for students with disabilities at all public TVET colleges and universities. I appeal to students to come forward to access this funding, and for institutions to support students in applying through the appropriate mechanisms. Funding is also available for assistive devices. This targeted funding is available to all students in the income category up to R600 000 family income per annum. This year the allocation is R91 million.

Regarding international students, in particular Zimbabwean students and visa delays, I am informed that there has been discussion with IEASA and Home Affairs and individual institutions to allow places to be kept open for students who have been affected by the delays in processing visas. This work is ongoing. I am also informed that the visa backlog is being addressed and many students have been able to enter the country. We are committed to assisting in addressing these matters with Departments of Home Affairs, International Relations and Cooperation, and universities, where possible.

10. Unfair treatment of security guards and cleaners and the in-sourcing of general workers

Labour relations matters are the domain of institutions, and have to be addressed with specific institutions and through Universities South Africa (USAf). There are different approaches being adopted across the system.

11. Compromised student safety and security, victimization of student leaders through suspensions and expulsions, security and police brutality.

The Department and the Ministry are extremely concerned about violence on any of our campuses. This includes violence by security officers and police, as well as violence during protests. The Department supports the rights of all students to peaceful protest and open rational dialogue, and urges students to utilise the formal channels available to them at their respective institutions to raise matters of urgent concern and to make proposals about areas requiring change.

The Department is concerned about campus security and is committed to work with USAF and institutions to improve on the capacity of institutions to maintain peace and keep campuses safe and secure. This includes the possibility of training security officers for public order security and looking at sector-wide guidelines, as well as working with the professional bodies of the security industry.

The Department has put aside an amount of R10 million to immediately conduct an audit together with students and management in universities and TVET colleges, of security infrastructure and health care facilities at all our public institutions. I have instructed my Department to begin this work immediately.

12) The urgent challenges of higher education transformation affecting both students and workers.

In conclusion, I urge that we continue engaging passionately about the challenges faced by all of us in building a productive, inclusive and sustainable university education system. I respectfully request all stakeholders to make use of the multiple channels available to all of us to ensure that we engage in a calm and peaceful way. We cannot support violence and threats and disruptions to the academic programme. I urge the leaders of universities and student formations as well as parents to continue working together to resolve difficult matters. My Department and I will do whatever we can to support the higher education sector.