

Protesters say Wits isn't taking them seriously

Council's no-show puts student restraint to the test

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WHEN the Wits council ditched the students gathered in the Senate House after agreeing to meet them there at noon yesterday, the student protesters reacted with fury.

The air of expectation was palpable among the thousands of students who crammed into the hall.

The council tried to move the meeting to an outdoor location on campus, but SRC leadership insisted the council meet them in the original location, where students filled every level of the four-storey building.

There they sang: *"Noma ngingamezeza, akusizi lutho."* (No matter how many times we cry out, it doesn't help.)

A small group of professors joined the students with a banner that read: "Students are SA's future."

The council did not show up,



ANNOYED: The police pull a motorist from his car after he tried to drive into a crowd of peacefully protesting Wits students who had brought traffic to a standstill on Empire Road.

PICTURES:
NOKUTHULA MBATHA



MASS ANGER: The protests by Wits students have been largely non-violent despite their increasing frustration.

citing health and safety reasons in a statement.

Shirona Patel, a representative for Wits, said the university was still committed to negotiating with student leaders.

"If management take a back-door exit, what does that tell you if we're trying to talk to them?" asked Lesiba Manala, a first-year student.

He said his father and mother's salaries together didn't make the R9 340 for this year's fees, let alone next year's.

The council had reached an agreement with the student protesters on Saturday that they would report to a student assembly on Monday after meeting to re-open negotiations on the student fees for next year.

The students say fees are already too high and that the 10.5 percent planned increase will exclude lower-income students from higher education.

On Monday, several other institutions around South Africa joined in solidarity with

the Wits protests, shutting down the universities of Cape Town and Rhodes.

Gauteng Education MEC Panyaza Lesufi said the state allocated more money to University of Johannesburg bursaries because it cost less to send students there than to Wits.

"There are some institutions that are using their brands to exclude other learners," he said, saying Wits needed to review its fee structure.

Former SRC president Mcebo Dlamini arrived in the Senate House to rally the students after they had waited three hours for the council to arrive.

"The university doesn't take us seriously. It's not just today. They have not been taking us seriously," he said.

"After all our peaceful demonstrations, the past four days we've maintained 100 percent discipline and non-violence when they have been violent to us."

Authorities try to find varsity-fee resolution

MARIANNE MERTEN

AS THE #FeesMustFall campaign is set to spread to more universities across South Africa, Higher Education Minister Blade Nzimande today meets university vice-chancellors, council chairpersons and students to find a common approach to the fees saga.

This comes as a report "is on its way to my desk", according to the minister, regarding possible changes to the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which cuts off financial support above an annual R120 000 household income. The report arises from recommendations tabled in the cabinet in January after a years-long review committee started by Nzimande's predecessor.

"We have asked NSFAS how we can support those students who come from families which do not qualify, but who are not rich. The report is on the way. It's done."

"It's on the way to my desk. We will look into it and what possibilities the report raises," said Nzimande yesterday.

The NSFAS means test effectively leaves stranded many students from the working class and lower and aspirant middle classes whose parents earn too much but not enough to carry the burden of university education, costed by some at R100 000 a year.

However, the minister yesterday also stressed the need for a study of cost-drivers at universities, many of which hiked their fees well above inflation, while a further step would also be a look at regulating fee increases. This could take the form of ministerial concurrence if fees were to go beyond the inflation rate.

Business also had to come to the table.

Nzimande dismissed the notion that the current student protests were a national crisis: "Yes, it is a challenge, but I would not call it a crisis because we have ways to discuss the matter."

Today's meeting, which includes student representatives, is set to come up with a common framework to fee increases for next year.

Urging institutions to negotiate, and students to allow the negotiations to run their course, Nzimande said he was sympathetic to the students, but his office wasn't the first port of call because universities were autonomous.



IN MIDDLE: Blade Nzimande

“These will again become white institutions”

Coming out in support of the student protests yesterday, labour federation Cosatu dismissed the government's argument that universities were autonomous institutions.

"Cosatu believes education should be treated as a societal issue, largely located in the hands of the government. The whole concept of institutional autonomy of universities does not work because it disconnects these institutions from the reality of our society," said Cosatu.

ANC national spokesman Zizi Kodwa said "unreasonable" tuition fee increases were effectively "reversing the gains, generally, we made to open up access to higher education, particularly for poor and black students", many of whom would not be at university otherwise. However, increased access to higher education had brought about new challenges, which had to be resolved.

A regulatory framework on fee increments was needed and, as the recent ANC national general council mid-term review decided, so was a relook at the NSFAS funding model.

"If we don't engage universities, these will again become lily white institutions," said



Kodwa. "Education is a right and we must commend students for having stood up in defence of the right to learn."

The NSFAS budget for poor academically capable students stood at R9.5 billion this year, up from R441 million in 1997. That allocation is part of the roughly R30bn funding the government allocates to higher education. It represents 0.72 percent of South Africa's gross domestic product. Following the NSFAS allocation, the remaining R21bn is split among universities according to their baseline requirements.

This year Wits got R1.148bn, UCT R1.074bn and Stellenbosch University R1.177bn, according to higher education deputy director-general responsible for universities Dianne Parker.

While NSFAS has funded 1.5 million students, the scheme has also been bedevilled by mismanagement and fraud allegations. These are

now subject to a forensic audit.

Students at Stellenbosch University and the universities of Johannesburg and Pretoria are expected to join colleagues at Wits, UCT and Rhodes University, where classes were suspended.

Meanwhile, a meeting between Fort Hare University and the student representative council was scheduled for today to discuss and "resolve" student demands, according to a letter from the registrar, Professor Mike Sommisso. Students demanded that fees should not increase and called for the reversal of the ban on those owing money from writing the upcoming exams.

UCT met last night to discuss the protests over fees.

Two university chancellors – Adam Habib from Wits and Dr Sizwe Mabizela from Rhodes – pledged to donate part of their income to financially disadvantaged students.

DEFIANT: Wits students protest on the campus yesterday. The students have said they will not stop until their grievances about fee increases have been heard.

PICTURE:
NOKUTHULA MBATHA



FIGHTING BACK: First-year UCT student Zahira Majiet puts up a struggle as she is removed by police yesterday.

PICTURES: MICHAEL WALKER

Systems in place for matric exams

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THE GAUTENG Education Department has established three structures to ensure that the matric exams run smoothly and free from fraudulent activities.

Education MEC Panyaza Lesufi announced this yesterday when he briefed the media on the readiness of the department to administer the exams.

He said they had established the provincial examination irregularities committees, district assessment irregularities committees and school assessment irregularities committees to ensure the exams proceeded without irregularities.

The three provincial structures will work with the national examination irregularities committee. Lesufi said most exam irregularities occur at independent schools.

"The majority of these problems happen at independent schools. That's where we need to strengthen the level of monitoring to ensure we don't have these problems."

"All the irregularities will be recorded and dealt with before the release of the results," he said.

The matric results will be released on January 6.

Lesufi said the provincial department has 954 exam centres, including 13 repeat centres and two Correctional Services centres.

A total of 9 800 pupils across the province who failed Grade 11 were promoted.

"The highest dropout of learners is in Grade 11. We have learners who failed and we progressed them to Grade 12 and all 9 800 of them remained in the education system."

"If we didn't progress them, they would have left the schooling system. They are now going to sit for the matric exams."

Lesufi said the pupils were now in a matric revision camp.

"We are drilling them. We are providing all the necessary assistance that is needed. These are the 9 800 learners, if we didn't promote them, I am quite convinced the majority of them would be in prison or smoking nyaope. We have contributed to their development."

The MEC said no provinces besides Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal reveal these numbers.

Matric exams will start for all pupils on Monday, when they sit for the English paper 1 exam in the morning. Yesterday, some candidates wrote computer application technology, and today they're sitting for information technology.

'Academic bosses deserving'

BONGANI HANS

RETIRED senior professors don't agree with former University of KwaZulu-Natal vice-chancellor Professor Malegapuru Makgoba's views that the country's university bosses aren't up to scratch.

Makgoba made the statement during the National Higher Education Transformation Summit in Durban last week. He said the universities' vice-chancellors were appointed using an outdated system, which made them unsuitable to perform their duties successfully.

He said that out of 26 vice-chancellors in the country, there was only one who was suitable for the position – but he wouldn't say who this was.

However, former University of

South Africa (Unisa) vice-chancellor Professor Barney Pitso and retired education specialist at the University of Cape Town (UCT) Professor Ian Scott said lack of funding and the proper curriculum should rather be blamed for problems facing universities.

Pitso was vice-chancellor at Unisa from 2001 until he retired five years ago. He had no reason to doubt the capabilities of UCT head Max Price, Rhodes University's head Sizwe Mabizela, University of the Witwatersrand's Adam Habib and Unisa's Mandla Makhanya.

"I have worked closely with those universities and I know they are doing very well," he said.

Pitso said that instead of blaming the vice-chancellors, the problem was with financing the

institutions. The universities were struggling financially because of poverty and unemployment, which meant students were unable to afford fees, he added.

"We need an approach that would mean that public funds, private sector as well as individual students share the burden of higher education."

Pitso said more higher education summits should be held in order to find solutions.

Makgoba said not enough research was done to improve academic performance. This was because vice-chancellors were not taking the lead.

Scott said: "The real crisis lies in the educational mission of our universities. Particularly, teaching and learning systems are not serving the majority of our students well."