

Yusuf Cassim: Minister's cronyism prevents progress in Higher Education

Honourable Chairperson

The Higher Education and Training budget put before us does not represent progress.

I cannot in good conscience support a budget with plans that are destined to fail the majority of our people, particularly the poor and vulnerable.

Succinctly, the current crisis facing Higher Education in general and students in particular is symptomatic of the following:

- an ANC government that values patronage over progress and will never allocate a sufficient budget;
- a Minister who embodies this patronage by appointing or protecting his cronies who run public entities and colleges as their own fiefdoms; and
- a Department without the capacity or political will to ensure that even the current funds available are spent efficiently and that students are safe from exploitation

Let me start with the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) funding:

The NSFAS increase from 2015/2016 to 2017/2018 is less than R1 Billion whilst the Department Subsidy allocation over the same period only increases by R700 Million. This while it is common knowledge that less than half of students who are financially needy can be assisted with the current budget. Just as worrying is the fact that the administrative capacity of this public entity will halve over the same period whilst it currently fails to ensure current funds are disbursed properly.

This mirrors the overall lack of capacity in the department to ensure even mediocre service delivery.

You Hon. Minister and your department have become a curse and disease to the students of this country.

The cronies you have deployed into the SETAS for example, have by and large wasted Billions, running most of the SETAS as their own fiefdoms, with the cost to benefit in its core functions in some surmounting to over R300 and R400 thousand per student trained or assisted. All the while you and your department do nothing.

NSFAS money at Universities and TVET colleges is being diverted for the benefit of more of your cronies and their friends and yet again all the while you and your department do nothing.

This can best be illustrated through what is happening at the University of Fort Hare and Lovedale TVET College in the Eastern Cape which are symptomatic of what is happening across the country.

At the University of Fort Hare, the management has been allowed to divert NSFAS funds into its own coffers and into the coffers of private service providers whilst exploiting its students.

This has been done through massive increases in tuition and residence fees. Residences where, I must add, our NSFAS students are being forced to stay in the most squalid of conditions. This while students have not received a single meal allowance yet we expect them to succeed in the examinations?

Your department and public entity should be investigating this but surely one does not want to investigate their own cronies. I have written to you on this matter and you have not even cared enough about these students to respond!

At Lovedale TVET College the situation is worse. NSFAS students have not received a single meal allowance, not just this year but the whole of last year.

Those staying more than 10km away do not receive a transport allowance and many NSFAS beneficiaries were forced to pay an upfront registration fee at the beginning of the year. Here again we have College Principals running colleges as their own fiefdoms, wrongfully firing any whistleblowers and wasting millions of rands on frivolous court cases.

I know you are aware of these happenings Hon. Minister because you are one of the respondents in these lawsuits and I have seen emails from whistleblowers to your DG, Mr Qonde, dating as far back as 2011 yet still nothing is done and the status quo is protected.

Last year I challenged you to commit that no student will be prevented from furthering their studies, both undergraduate and post-graduate, just because they cannot afford to do so.

Typically, you did not respond to my challenge. This past weekend the DA adopted this as a resolution at its Federal Congress.

It has become clear that the only way to achieve this is for South Africans to do what the students of Fort Hare did, vote out the ANC and vote in the DA!