REGISTRATION AND ENROLMENT ALMOST COMPLETE AT TROUBLED UNIVERSITIES
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The Portfolio Committee on Higher Education, Science and Technology has heard that enrolment and registration at rioting universities is almost complete.

The University of Fort Hare (UFH), University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and the University of the Western Cape (UWC) were all asked to come and brief the committee on challenges they encountered that resulted in chaotic situations. The three universities were accompanied by their respective Student Representative Councils (SRCs), the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), and the department.

The universities were called to Parliament so that the committee could understand the recent spate of violence and vandalism of property. The issues the universities highlighted as challenges included financial exclusions, student accommodation, and safety on campuses. Students complained about the implementation of the fee-free policy of government that was announced in 2017.

Sifiso Simelane, the UKZN SRC President, said the students wanted the implementation of free education as was promised. “Institutional autonomy should not compromise the implementation of policy. If institutions believe that this is not binding on them, they must come out clearly.

The Vice-Chancellor of UFH, Prof Sakhela Buhlungu, said the university did not allow financial exclusions as claimed by students, but was rather suffering because it had been over-enrolling. “The issue at Fort Hare is that students are saying ‘register one, register all’, which is very dangerous. That approach will put the university at a huge financial risk. The current trend is not sustainable.”

He said the university has been compelled to revisit its enrolment plan, and that over-enrolment will no longer be an issue. UWC’s Acting Vice-Chancellor, Prof Lawack, said the main challenge was around private accommodation and the group of students categorised as the “missing middle”.

“There are still massive challenges with the missing middle. Universities are accruing debt in South Africa as a result of this category of students. We should deal with the missing middle, it is a major challenge with accruing debt and that could lead universities to bankruptcy.”

UWC accrued debt of over R390 million on accommodation alone. Members raised a number of issues, including how NSFAS was being administered, communication lines between management and the student leadership, clarity on the R350 000 policy for NSFAS’s qualifying students.

Committee member Mr Bafuze Yabo cautioned on student challenges being used to instigate violence. “Proxy battles should be dealt with, students should not allow themselves to be used as tools for proxy battles.”

He said there is suspicion that students were being used and if that continued, the system will collapse.

The Chairperson emphasised that violence and vandalism are condemned for students. “Destruction of property is a no no. Students should not destroy property belonging to the future generation, that is selfish.”

He called on students to speak to everybody who participates in the protests they organise. “Tomorrow there will be no lecture halls, and you will forget that you are responsible for their destruction,” Mr Mapulane said.

By Sibongile Maputi
3 March 2020