**MEDIA STATEMENT**

**HIGHER EDUCATION COMMITTEE TO SUMMON CPUT TO PARLIAMENT**

**Parliament, Tuesday, 23 March 2021 -**The Portfolio Committee on Higher Education, Science and Technology has resolved to summon the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) to appear before it to engage on the outstanding issues raised by students and workers.

This follows a failure by the university to honour the committee’s invitation to attend a meeting today. Today’s meeting was a continuation of a meeting that took place on 24 February 2021, which unfortunately could not be concluded owing to time pressure.

The committee rejected CPUT’s apology, that the meeting was at short notice. “We are getting increasingly tired with the kind of excuses we get from CPUT every time we invite them to a meeting. We sent them an invite last week Thursday, for a meeting today, which was at sufficient notice, especially given the fact that they didn’t have to prepare any presentation. All what needed to happen was for them to present themselves and to answer questions raised by Members and their stakeholders” said Mr Philly Mapulane, Chairperson of the committee.

The committee has resolved to summon them to appear before the committee in the next two weeks.

**ON CURRENT STUDENT PROTESTS**

Today, the committee held a follow-up meeting with the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology, Dr. Blade Nzimande, the Universities South Africa (USAf), University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) Council, Management and the Student Representative Council (SRC), the South African Union of Students (SAUS) and the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) on the current national shutdown of public higher education institutions.

The committee welcomed and commended the work of the Wits SRC in raising R3,6 million towards assisting the 3% of students who could not register due to owing the university outstanding fees. This is a patriotic act by the SRC to ensure that no student is left behind.

The committee further welcomed the commitment by the Wits University management to extend its registration period to allow students to register. The committee also welcomes the university’s commitment to raise funds during its centenary celebrations to address the questions of the missing middle and the historic debt of the students, which is always a source of contention at the beginning of the academic year.

The Chairperson of the committee, Mr Philly Mapulane said: “we note and applaud the change in posture of the Wits University management to learn from the disagreements that led to the protracted student protests at the university and to find a better way of resolving conflict and mediation. This is welcomed as it will go a long way in ensuring that students’ grievances are speedily addressed and compromises are reached without resorting to protests that delay the commencement of the academic programmes”.

**ON STUDENT DEBT**

The committee further welcomed the announcement by Minister Nzimande that government has started a process of profiling the current student debt in order to understand who is owing, how much is being owed, which universities are being owed how much and how much of this debt is recoverable. This, he says, will assist government to develop an appropriate policy intervention to deal with the question of student debt.

Mr Mapulane said: “historic debt is an albatross on the neck of the universities, and the current student debt is estimated at R14 billion and it is growing. This should concern everyone and the society in general has to come to the party to ensure that the debt is resolved, given the current economic constraints”.

The committee also made a clarion call to those who can afford to pay to do so.

**ON THE MISSING MIDDLE**

The committee noted that government has honoured its policy pronouncement to fund students from poor and working class families with a combined income of R350 000 per annum. However, there is a policy vacuum to address the funding needs of students who fall outside of the R350 000 threshold and there is a need for a national plan to fund the “missing middle”, particularly those falling in the category of the lower middle class.

In this regard, the committee has noted and welcomed the decision by Cabinet to request the Minister to present a comprehensive proposal to Cabinet on, among other things, the funding of the missing middle by June 2021. The committee has further noted that the Minister will soon be appointing the Ministerial Task Team to commence with this work. “We wish the Task Team success in advance and look forward to engaging with its work once it is concluded and presented to Cabinet”, commented Mr Mapulane.

**ON FUNDING OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

Notwithstanding that, the committee welcomed the additional funding to cater for the NSFAS shortfall while it was noted with grave concern that National Treasury did not allocate new funding. Instead, funding for universities and TVET infrastructure, including the skills levies to support skills development interventions for unemployed youth, small, medium and macro enterprises and cooperatives by the National Skills Fund (NSF) has been reprioritised to fund university students.

“The Post-School Education and Training is already financially stressed due to the underfunding levels experienced over the years. It is concerning that the much needed infrastructure and the skills needed to address youth unemployment will take a back seat, while funding is taken to address student funding at universities. This is not sustainable. Therefore, the country needs to priorities funding higher education so as to secure the future of our nation”, Mr Mapulane said.

**ON THE USE OF EXCESSIVE FORCE DURING STUDENT PROTESTS**

The committee supports the student leadership’s clarion call to have the police desist from using excessive force, including the use of rubber bullets and live ammunition during student protests. The committee will, at the earliest convenience, engage with the Portfolio Committee on Police on this matter. The committee also calls on the Minister and USAf to look into the issue of the security and militarisation at institutions of higher learning.

**ISSUED BY THE PARLIAMENTARY COMMUNICATION SERVICES ON BEHALF OF THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, MR PHILLY MAPULANE.**