Media Statement

COMMITTEE BRIEFED BY UKZN AND DUT ON RECENT STUDENT PROTESTS

The Portfolio Committee on Higher Education, Science and Innovation was briefed yesterday by the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and the Durban University of Technology (DUT) on the recent student protest on their campuses.

The committee also extended an invitation to the Student Representative Council’s (SRCs) at both universities, as well as the South African Union of Students (SAUS) and Universities South Africa (USAF) to provide their inputs on the matter.

The briefing came after several student protests at both universities at the start of the 2022 academic year, in which property damaged and vehicles set alight.

The Chairperson of the committee, Ms Nompendulo Mkhatshwa expressed her disappointment that the DUT’s Council could not attend the meeting. According to the UKZN, students are demanding that they be allowed to register without upfront payments and that more student accommodation is acquired by leasing more buildings in Durban and Pietermaritzburg.

The UKZN also said that it had made some concessions to the students, including that every full-time unemployed student can register without being required to settle their historic debt in full. The university further informed the committee that its financial clearance has a cash-flow implication in excess of R1 billion and the financial clearance demanded by students has a total cost of R2.3 billion.

The university said it cannot make any more financial concessions, as this will push it to the brink of bankruptcy. The UKZN told the committee that despite the disruptions on various campuses, the academic programme has progressed smoothly.

Meanwhile the DUT attributed some of the unrest to the campaign called ‘sizofunda ngenkani’, which was spearheaded by the Economic Freedom Fighters Student Command-led SRCs. Incidents of arson resulted in losses to the university and staff members whose cars were burnt. The university informed the committee that over 5 000 students have been placed in the university-owned and leased residences.

The UKZN SRC lamented the shortage of student accommodation, which was made worse by the closure of some of the residences because they did not meet the DHET and the UKZN’s health and safety standards. Mr Siphelele Madondo, the UKZN SRC Secretary General, said the university had not replaced the unsafe residences with others, thereby adding to the existing shortage of student accommodation.

The UKZN SRC also lamented the university’s mandatory vaccination stance as unvaccinated students cannot access their residences. The committee said the issue of mandatory vaccination needs to be properly discussed. Ms Mkhatshwa asked if there had been any consultations with stakeholders on mandatory vaccinations in the sector.

The DUT SRC also lamented the exclusive use of online registration processes, which they argued cause delays in their National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) applications. They told the committee engaging with the institution to resolve the impasse has been unsuccessful and the suspension of their SRC President and treasurer has made meaningful engagement difficult, as they fear further suspensions.

The President of the SAUS, Mr Lubabalo Ndzoyiya, said: “There is no synergy between the calendars of institutions of higher learning and that of the NSFAS and its processes.” In addition, there is a delay in informing the universities which students have been provided with funding. Books, food and travelling allowances are other problems students must face.

The SAUS called for all the arrested student leaders to be released. It also called for students to receive their academic qualifications so that they can find employment and service their debts.

A Member of the committee, Mr Tebogo Letsie, supported the call to release student leaders but cautioned that those leaders who were found to have taken part in the destruction of property must face the law.

The Universities South Africa said that regarding student debt, at least 120 000 students are unable to graduate because of their debt. The debt issues cannot be left to universities to deal with alone. The crisis needs the input of all stakeholders in the sector.

The committee appealed to the universities to release student’s qualifications so that they can enter the labour market. The USAF also noted that the delays by NSFAS in publishing eligibility criteria, as well as inaccurate lists of qualifying students adds to the problems to students and universities already deal with.

On student accommodation, the organisation has found that there have been instances of alleged collusion by private accommodations providers and specific groupings of both student and staff.

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