**MEDIA STATEMENT**

**REGISTRATION FEES AND ACCOMMODATION CHALLENGES CONTINUE TO HAUNT HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR**

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) gave an update on the commencement of the 2023 academic year in the post-school education and training sector, including technical and vocational education and training (TVET) centres, and community colleges and training centres.

According to the department, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme’s (NSFAS’s) budget is projected to be R47 billion to fund an estimated 1 083 055 students, including a living allowance of R6 000 for TVET college students.

DHET officials have visited 23 of the 26 public universities and had engagements with registrars, CFOs and the NSFAS to check preparations for the 2023 academic year. The department has encouraged NSFAS to pay student allowances timeously at the start of the academic year. To this end, DHET informed the committee that arrangements are in place to achieve this at most universities. The NSFAS claimed that delays in issuing allowances are often caused by delays in providing supporting documents, including the financial eligibility assessment verification from SARS.

Student accommodation continues to be a problem and NSFAS has introduced a cap of R45 000 to manage the increasing costs of privately owned student accommodation. NSFAS further said 39 companies have been appointed as accreditors to track accommodation costs in affected areas. Meanwhile, the committee criticised the poor response students receive from the NSFAS call centre. It takes too long for NSFAS to answer calls and the staff manning the call centre are “unprofessional”, committee members said.

The DHET further informed the committee that it is working to resolve issues at the universities of Cape Town, Western Cape and Sol Plaatje around financial blocks and residence allocations, which have had a negative effect on registration processes. DHET Director-General Dr Nkosinathi Sishi said: “Despite some initial concerns about late funding decisions and delays to confirming spaces and some protests last week, the system is currently relatively settled.”

The DHET also informed the committee that teaching and learning at TVET colleges started on 18 January 2023 for new and returning students. However, classes for returning students could not start due to the late release of results. Some colleges experienced technical glitches in retrieving students’ results, however, the National Examinations and Assessments team is providing assistance to address exam-related queries. Dr Sishi said TVET colleges can no longer accommodate walk-ins and are only considering students who have applied online to fill spaces where targets have not been reached.

Community colleges opened on 11 January 2023 for inland and 18 January for coastal provinces. These colleges use 96 per cent of the Department of Basic Education’s calendar and most of them share space with public schools. Application and registration processes were slow in January, partly due to a number of examination irregularities associated with alleged acts of dishonesty, which affected KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga. Results from colleges or students linked to allegations of acts of dishonesty have been blocked while an investigation is underway.

The committee asked what is being done to curb gender-based violence on campuses. The Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Bonginkosi Nzimande, replied by saying that gender-based violence is a societal scourge and universities are part of society.

The committee is also concerned that Vice-Chancellors are forced to use body guards in response to threats of violence and intimidation.

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