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| MEMORANDUM FROM THE PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE |

**NATIONAL ASSEMBLY**

**FOR WRITTEN REPLY**

**QUESTION 467**

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**INTERNAL QUESTION PAPER NO 10 OF 2019**

**Prof B Bozzoli (DA) to ask the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology:**

(1) Why did the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) decide to stop providing book vouchers and award cash grants for books to each student;

(2) (a) what is the monetary value of the book grant received by each student for the 2019 academic year and (b) how was this amount calculated;

(3) whether NSFAS has put any mechanisms in place to monitor that the cash grants are used for its designated purpose of purchasing books; if not, why not; if so, what are the relevant details;

(4) what is the position of NSFAS on the possibility that students are purchasing pirated or illegally photocopied books instead of legally published books?

**NW1459E**

**REPLY:**

1. The learning materials allowance is only available to DHET bursary students at universities. NSFAS stopped book vouchers for a number of reasons:
* Students have been the target of voucher scams on various campuses;
* There were many commercial interests involved, with merchants providing services to students using vouchers for a fee;
* Students were trading the book vouchers for cash outside many shops;
* The voucher system was limited to selected merchants that monopolised the student market;
* There was no space for students to choose where to purchase books, including from second-hand retailers; and
* The book allowance was changed to a learning materials allowance so that students can also decide to purchase other learning support materials, including laptops and tablets.

In addition, the call to change book vouchers to cash was one of the many demands by the student leadership, as part of their input into the policy governing student funding.

1. (a) R5 000 is the monetary value of the learning materials allowance received by each full time NSFAS student on the new DHET bursary scheme for the 2019 academic year.

(b) The learning materials allowance is set by the Department in the annual guidelines and is based on an affordable and fair standardised amount.

1. NSFAS has no mechanism to monitor the spending of cash allowances by students. NSFAS believes that students should be treated as adults and have the financial freedom to withdraw the cash voucher and make an informed decision on how best to utilise the funds. The ultimate responsibility is in the hands of the students. In the process, NSFAS expects students to grow to be responsible citizens and take charge of their economic freedom.

There is a concern that book sales have declined with the change in the policy. NSFAS and the Department believe that it is necessary to conduct proper research to explore the patterns of textbook usage and buying amongst students, and will engage with the university sector on this matter.

1. Research is necessary to determine whether this is indeed happening and what the patterns of student behaviour are in this area. NSFAS funding is provided to support student success and NSFAS students have to meet academic criteria set by institutions. There are many factors that play a role in student success, and access to learning materials and other financial support are part of these factors.