



Report on meeting with Department of Higher Education and Training

The SRC in a bilateral meeting with DHET and other SRCs from other universities met on the 12th of May 2017 in Pretoria to discuss immediate issues facing universities, but also to follow up on the resolutions of the *10 February 2017* meeting where resolutions concerning the registration of students had been taken in a meeting convened by DHET with, NSFAS, University managements and SRC's from several universities. The University of the Free State was represented by Asive Dlanjwa.

Amongst some of the issues discussed was the *Student Leadership Capacity Development Project*. This is a product of a partnership between the Department of Higher Education and training (DHET) and the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD) to develop and implement a program that would develop and strengthen student leadership, particularly the SRC's.

The programme will be implemented in June 2017 and will be done regionally. The dates for the training are 12-14 June 2017 in Gauteng.

What proved to dominate the discussions and seemed rather urgent was NSFAS and all related issues. The University of the Free State proposed a few principles of engagements that would guide the meeting, some of these included the following:

- That the Department would commit to giving us clear commitments in the meeting on issues where we sought direction and commitment
- That the department would further give clarity in the meeting for where such was sought
- That where the Department wasn't able to provide the above immediately at the meeting, they would, following the meeting provide these through email.



Below are the points that formed the submission of the UFS SRC as led by myself in the meeting:

1. One of our major challenges were the previously funded returning students that had not yet received a communication from NSFAS regarding their funding for the 2017 academic year. You will also recall that these students were according to NSFAS not required to re-apply, but they'd be automatically absorbed into the current academic year provided they'd passed at least 50% of their modules from 2016.

Our crisis is that these students still haven't received communication from NSFAS regarding their funding for the current academic year.

The most obvious implication of this, is the fact that most of these students, particularly those that live in off-campus accommodations haven't been able to pay for their accommodation and as a result, most are currently facing evictions.

In the context of the UFS, there are about 1150 of these students.

2. As per the Departments directive to Universities beginning of the year, Universities were instructed to register all university first-time applicants that were coming from Quintile 1,2,3 schools and SASSA students whether they had applied for NSFAS or not, and that the Department would definitely fund these students for the year, up until today, these students still haven't been communicated with nor funded by NSFAS which has left them in exactly the same predicament as the above group with just far worse reaching consequences, since majority of these students are first-year poor students from outside Bloemfontein.

In the context of the UFS, there are about 600 of these students.

3. Students were also encouraged to appeal the decision if their NSFAS application had been unsuccessful, we wanted to know when this appeal's process would be concluded.

We further sought a commitment from DHET that all students who'd appealed and were qualifying, they be funded as some of them had registered with the hope that their appeals would be successful as they qualified for funding.

4. The Department had earlier towards the beginning of May issued an urgent communication urging students whose NSFAS application had been successful to sign the Loan Agreement Forms (LAFs) online immediately before the 31st of May so the Allocations could be made and further to avoid the forfeiting of the funding decision.

The clear problem with the above was that in order for the students to sign the online LAFs, they had to firstly receive SMSs from NSFAS allowing them to sign. Now, the students were not receiving the above SMS.

It is also crucial to note that, until a point where the students can sign the LAFs, no allocation can be made to students which would allow students to pay their tuition and accommodation fees. The implication of this has and is leading to the eviction of students from off-campus accommodation amongst other challenges.

5. We also have students whom were successful NSFAS first-time applicants, university returning (senior) students. These students are to receive funding for the current academic year, however still have outstanding debt from the previous academic year, 2016. We wanted to know what plans the department had to assist these students, as some of them had not even registered as yet.
6. We further sought a commitment from NSFAS that all currently funded students for 2017 would receive funding for 2018.
7. In view of the challenges posed by the NSFAS crisis, we asked that the department reconsiders some academic provisions firstly for NSFAS funding purposes and secondly for progression in universities, as we know for a fact that the challenges sustained had a direct or indirect impact on the academic performances of students. An example the homelessness of students caused by this crisis definitely has the propensity to affect the academic performance of the student.
8. We asked for an indication as to the date of commencement for the 2018 application process

9. Lastly was to seek a commitment and a clear plan on how the Department planned to deliver a successful 2018 NSFAS process addressing the massive failure of the 2017 NSFAS process.

To the above, no clear and precise response was given to seek to address or even clarify these concerns.

We have since emailed the Department to follow up on the responses, and to date no response has been provided.

This poses a huge problem for not only the university but us as student leadership, to a point of even seeking to render us 'useless' *informationally* as students are seeking answers, frustrated and understandably so.

As things stand, the truth is that we do have the answers as to the conclusion of these outstanding matters.

Compiled by Asive Dlanwja