

Underfunded students take frustration out on universities

South African universities have their backs to the wall as the demand for financial assistance outstrips the available state funding and universities have to dig deep into their own pockets to accommodate as many students as possible.

Last month Higher Education Minister Blade Nzimande announced that the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) had been allocated R9.5bn for the 2015 academic year, but tertiary institutions have complained that their allocations were not sufficient for the number of students seeking financial assistance.

Mr Nzimande also said a forensic audit would be held into allegations of fraud and corruption at NSFAS because this could be robbing deserving students of funding.

Universities face a further problem: the state sets targets for admissions in order for the institutions to earn subsidies, meaning that more students gain admission than can be accommodated through NSFAS funding.

University of Johannesburg (UJ) spokesman Herman Esterhuizen says the recent unrest sparked by students at universities about inadequate NSFAS funding has brought the question of support for students into sharp focus.

"Though key, the relationship between universities and NSFAS must not be conflated. In terms of the current arrangement, universities act as intermediaries between NSFAS and the student. The student enters into an agreement with NSFAS and not the university."

Like all other universities in SA, UJ gets an annual allocation from NSFAS to administer on its behalf. Universities have no influence on the amount allocated to them to administer. NSFAS provides rules, which have to be applied in this administration process. The two overarching parameters are financial need and academic achievement, Esterhuizen says.

"This year, as with previous years, universities did not receive sufficient funds to assist all students who qualify for NSFAS funding."

While the funding shortage makes universities an easy target for blame, this is inappropriate, and the government's efforts to fund students should not be scoffed at, Esterhuizen says.

"While it is disappointing that the NSFAS funding is inadequate for all who need it, we know that without this assistance, a major part of the student population would not be able to afford post-school education," he says.

Augmented funding

UJ's NSFAS allocation allowed it to assist 7,463 students, leaving 4,378 who met the requirements but could not be helped. The university attempted to mitigate the situation through augmented funding of R25m this year.

Deputy vice-chancellor of finance at UJ Jaco van Schoor says the university is deeply concerned about the significant number of academically deserving students excluded because of inadequate funding.

"UJ has a very strong focus on obtaining more bursaries for students and continuously engages corporates, the Setas (sectoral education and training authorities), local and national government departments, and the City of Johannesburg to fund students. In 2014 an amount of R209m was obtained for bursaries, R30m more than in 2013," Van Schoor says.



Minister of Higher Education and Training Blade Nzimande briefs the media on a North West University report, in Kempton Park in September last year. Photographer: Puxley Makgatho

In addition, UJ runs a meal assistance programme and a bus service for students.

University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) vice-chancellor Adam Habib says the R9.5bn for all 26 universities is not enough. The NSFAS allocation to Wits was R175m.

He confirmed that Wits is also using its own funds to support qualifying students.

Last month Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) acting vice-chancellor and principal Lourens van Staden said that there was a need for a sustainable, broad-based source of student funding at TUT and that this gave impetus to the establishment of the TUT Bursary and Scholarship Fund.

Prof van Staden said the university offered bursaries and scholarships through major donors. However, funds were often linked to science and engineering to the exclusion of other disciplines.

This year, NSFAS allocated R633.5m for student financial aid at TUT, which will fund more than 21,000 students.

Source: Business Day

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