

Nzimande to be quizzed on fees

Higher Education Minister Blade Nzimande faces tough questions regarding university fees in the National Council of Provinces (NCOP) amid reports that President Jacob Zuma has declared a zero rate increase.

By Khulekani Magubane and Penelope Mashego ^{23 Aug 2016}



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On Tuesday, Nzimande will be grilled on the 2017 academic year and possible fee increases.

University fees have become a key national issue following 2015's #FeesMustFall protests that saw university students take the streets to protest for access to education.

Zuma has since set up a commission to look into the feasibility of free higher education. The commission, the state and universities are continuing to work on finding a solution with the threat of fresh protests hanging over them.

On Monday, Minister in the Presidency Jeff Radebe briefed media on the outcomes of government's Cabinet lekgotla but was vague on the university fees matter amid reports that Zuma had ordered a zero percentage fees increase.

The Presidency has since denied that any decision has been taken regarding fee increases and said an announcement would only be made once the fees commission, established to investigate the matter, had concluded its work.

Asked whether there was indeed a decision to declare a zero rate fees increase at universities, Radebe referred to the fees commission headed by Justice Jonathan Heher, saying that no decision has been made yet and asked that the commission be afforded the opportunity to conclude its work.

"We did discuss the issues of higher education. It is our apex priority. In terms of the process, the president appointed a commission headed by a judge to look deeply into this issue. There is a process unfolding where all stakeholders can present their views on this matter of national importance," said Radebe.

After the release of the medium-term budget policy statement later in 2016, the government would be able to indicate what its position is, he said.

Among the written questions that Nzimande will have to answer is one from EFF MPL in Gauteng Leigh-Ann Mathys asking whether he knew if universities intended to increase fees for the 2017 academic year and by how much. Mathys also asked

Nzimande whether he knew if the students would accept a fee increase.

Nzimande has previously called for a 6% fee increase for 2017 in line with inflation, as per a recommendation from the Council on Higher Education.

Another question was submitted by ANC MPL in the Eastern Cape Phindiwe Samka, who asked how the Department of Higher Education and Training planned to deal with calls for free higher education and training.

Meanwhile, the commission of inquiry into the feasibility of free higher education continued hearing submissions in Nelsprong on Monday. The Council on Higher Education made its submissions to the commission saying that suggestions that wealthy students subsidise poor students so that they have access to higher education which they cannot afford was not a viable option.

"While this is a sound principle, the reality is that the quantum of need is such that the number of poorer students is growing rapidly, and that the 'missing middle' is similarly expanding, while the number of students able to pay fees is decreasing," said the council in its presentation.

The South African Students Congress (Sasco) also made its submission to the commission.

The congress said fees could be replaced with public investment and universities could be funded through an independent public institution which would account to the president directly.

Sasco also suggested that small, medium and micro-sized enterprises and South Africans with jobs make a R20 compulsory contribution to free education.

Source: *Business Day* via I-Net Bridge

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