

Walter Sisulu students spend the night in jail after NSFAS protest

By [Johnnie Isaac](#)

13 Oct 2023

The university says it is NSFAS's responsibility to resolve the issue with students.



Walter Sisulu University students picket outside the East London Magistrate's Court on Wednesday where more than 80 students were detained after protesting for unpaid NSFAS allowances. Photo: Johnnie Isaac

Chaos ensued outside Walter Sisulu University's Potsdam campus in East London this week as police fired teargas and rubber bullets to disperse protesting students.

Nearly 90 students were arrested for public violence and remained in police holding cells at three stations on Tuesday night. They were released on Wednesday afternoon after the prosecutor at the East London Magistrate's Court withdrew charges against them.

The students' protest was sparked by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) introduced a new payment system. This resulted in hundreds of students not receiving their meal allowances for October.

Sihle Mdingi, SRC secretary at the Buffalo City campus, told *GroundUp* that NSFAS had told them that it would not be paying students further because the university had been given enough money to pay allowances. The university denied this.

“Some students have not received anything at all, while others only received about R850,” said Mdingi. *GroundUp* has asked NSFAS for clarity on this issue.

While waiting to hear the fate of the arrested students at the court on Wednesday, a large group of students picketed outside, calling for their release.

Lawyer Mawande Magaleni of MO Magaleni Attorneys, for the students, confirmed that the prosecutor withdrew the charges after reading the case docket. “We have been here since this morning. The prosecution has elected to withdraw the charges and this matter is now finalised,” said Magaleni.



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“The students are beneficiaries of NSFAS but for the past ten days they have not been given allowances that are due to them. They are free but what are they going to eat?” asked Magaleni.

As the group was released at 5pm, the students outside the court started clapping, hugging each other and crying in celebration.

Nkululeko Tyatya, who spent the night in jail, said, “It was very stressful. As the chairperson of Sasco (South African Students Congress) I had to be strong and encourage those in the same cell that we were fighting for a good cause. Most of the detained students were first years and females.”

Walter Sisulu University spokesperson Yonela Tugwayo said, “This matter is between the students and NSFAS. NSFAS enters into agreements with students and service providers over their allowances. I don’t understand why the students would blame the university.”

NSFAS did not respond to our questions by the time of publication.

Published originally on [GroundUp](#).

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