

NELSON MANDELA METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY
MANAGEMENT RESPONSE TO PETITION SUBMITTED BY GEORGE CAMPUS
STUDENT COUNCIL CHAIRPERSON IN RELATION TO FREE HIGHER EDUCATION

Management at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) acknowledges receipt of petitions submitted by the Student Council on the George Campus. After reading these petitions, we are of the opinion that the cause for widening access to quality higher education for academically-deserving poor and so-called “missing middle” students is noble and just. NMMU will continue to call on all sectors of society to invest more in higher education to ensure that universities can continue to provide quality teaching, research, and holistic support for our students.

Preamble

South Africa is recognised as one of the most unequal countries in the world and the increased provision of quality higher education contributes to greater social justice, transformation and development. Simply stated, the most sustainable manner the State can break the cycle of inter-generational poverty, stimulate the economy, create appropriate jobs, redress imbalances in society, and reduce inequality is by increasing its investment in, and broadening access to, higher education.

A decline in government funding for higher education over the past two decades coupled with a significant increase in student numbers, most of them from poor communities, has led to an over-reliance on student fees. Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) is committed to widening access and acknowledges the burden these funding challenges have placed on our students and their families.

Rules of Engagement

As requested in the rules of engagement in your Memorandum:

1. This document represents the written response from Management.
2. Issues related to academic activities that have been missed due to the prolonged suspension of classes and assessments, are dealt with in our responses in the relevant sections below.
3. We share your sense of urgency to address the matters raised.
4. The responses to all four memoranda received from students will be available for everyone to read on our various media platforms.
5. We note your undertaking to protest peacefully and are encouraged that you have kept to this. We also wish to emphasise that NMMU recognises that protesting students have the right to protest peacefully. However, equally, those who do not choose to participate in protests, have the right to continue with their studies. That is the essence of democracy.

NMMU’S POSITION ON FEE INCREASE FOR 2017, THE “MISSING MIDDLE” AND DEBT WRITE-OFF

This section will respond to the following three questions in your memorandum that are found in different sections:

Under “The requirements from the Student Body”:

- 1 *We as student request the university to draw up a vivid image to all the student what is their take on the fee increment that has been announced, also address the students what is going to take place on the students that are outside 0 EFC and “missing middle”*
- 2 *In the matter of the students who are now indebted due to down payment exemption the university’s obligation is to clarify the steps that it will take.*

And under “Finance”

- a) *In terms of finance we challenge our university to ensure that disadvantaged and poor students who have qualified to register with NMMU through DP exemption are not excluded from registering in 2017 also their debts are cleared.*

The announcement of the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande, on fees for 2017 identified interim measures to address the plight of poor and needy students by:

- Fully covering fees for students that qualify under the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS);
- Subsidising the so-called “missing middle” for the fee increase up to a maximum of 8%.

Government and the Minister, along with the higher education sector, have emphasised that universities need the 8% fee increase to mitigate rising national and international inflationary costs, to broaden access, and to sustain the provision of quality education. The financial health and sustainability of NMMU is at stake, especially given the costs associated with the debt/down payment relief measures implemented in 2016 and the reintegration of outsourced services.

Our understanding of the Minister’s announcement is that this is an interim measure for 2017. A fee increase will not impact negatively on the poor and “missing middle” students since the government will make up the difference of up to 8%.

A forecast of the impact of a 0% increase for all students at NMMU is that it will result in a deficit of R383 million by 2019. To this end, it will be irresponsible of NMMU not to take advantage of the government’s proposal to raise fees by not more than 8%, since this will ensure the continued provision of quality higher education and sustainability of the university.

Debt relief

This year, NMMU out of its own volition assisted those who qualified for 2015 debt relief – academically deserving and financially needy students – giving these students the opportunity to return to the University to continue their studies. This loan funding included 1531 students to an amount of R21m. For the first time, it also offered assistance with down payment relief for students from the “missing middle”. Altogether, NMMU assisted 5043 students, resulting in a R30m negative cash flow at the end of February.

We further assisted zero Expected Family Contribution (EFC) students with a contribution towards books, food and accommodation. This amounted to R25.4m. In addition, NMMU absorbed the cost (R34.5m) of ending outsourcing.

To date, the accumulated fees debt for NMMU is R198m (as at 31 August 2016).

The demand for a complete debt write off, including NSFAS loans, is new and requires further engagement by a number of stakeholders. It will be grossly irresponsible for Management to accede to this request, as the present financial position of the University does not make this possible without a significant injection of further funding.

We are committed to engage with the student community and other stakeholders to openly and collectively explore ways of widening access for academically deserving, financially needy students.

Position on free higher education for the poor and joining the campaign

The 2015 #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements brought home the realisation that our national project of creating a non-racial, non-sexist, prosperous and democratic South Africa had not achieved its avowed goals. Stalled social and economic transformation, exacerbated by virtually stagnant economic growth, has emphasised the need to address pressing social and economic challenges in a sustainable manner. Widening access to quality higher education offers the only practical mechanism for achieving this.

Experience has shown that broadening access to quality higher education carries additional costs. Opening the doors of learning to the poor needs to be accompanied by a holistic package of interventions to ensure that all students can achieve their full potential. Among these, NMMU has piloted the following on- and off-campus:

- Access to IT devices
- Access to textbooks and other learning materials in libraries
- Student nutrition
- Transport
- Accommodation
- Wi-Fi connectivity

Universities must be in financially sound positions to fund these additional support requirements or poor students will remain marginalised.

In highly unequal societies, like South Africa, research has shown that free higher education for all will proportionally benefit the privileged more than the poor. We therefore do not support free higher education for those who can afford to pay fees.

NMMU has been actively involved in advocating for fee-free higher education for the poor. Vice-Chancellor, Professor Derrick Swartz, for example, led the Ministerial Task Team on Fee-Free Higher Education for the poor in 2012. More recently, we made written and oral submissions to the Presidential Fees Commission, wherein we proposed fee-free higher education for the poor, as well as additional financial assistance to the “missing middle”. We will continue to lobby for this.

NSFAS

The current funding model for student financial aid holds several challenges. It is of concern that NSFAS student loan recoveries have basically collapsed, falling by 61% between 2008 and 2014. The cost to NSFAS and the government of this collapse in loan recoveries is estimated to be about R4.3 billion for this period. This loss in recoveries revenue has had a significant negative impact on the ability of NSFAS to extend further.

Government has been responsive to these challenges and has brought in a new chair of NSFAS to rework the financial aid model and ensure that it becomes a viable fund to assist the poor. We need to give this intervention a chance and then actively engage with the recommendations as these emerge.

Assistance for the “missing middle”

NMMU has been pioneering its approach to assisting the “missing middle” who consist of students who are not poor enough to qualify for NSFAS, but cannot finance their own tuition. As shared, NMMU assisted “missing middle” students with down payment relief in 2016. We appreciate the recent interventions announced by the Minister for the “missing middle” and look forward to the report on further interventions, which will be made by the Ministerial Task Team appointed to develop a model for implementation in 2017.

Private sector assistance with funding for poor students

A greater contribution and role played by the private sector and philanthropists will increase the number of beneficiaries of financial aid, as well as enhance the quality of teaching, learning and research by universities.

Given NMMU’s commitment to widening access to higher education for the poor, it has initiated a number of interventions to increase the amount of funding available to assist these students. This includes the restructuring of resource mobilisation activities at the University, and the increased lobbying of government and the private sector for additional funding.

The University already has a fundraising arm, the NMMU Trust, which is being restructured to improve its resource mobilisation capacities. The Trust raises funds from donors and the private sector for scholarships and bursaries. Thus far in 2016, an amount of just over R42m in donations has been raised.

The George Campus Student Council specifically asked the following question under “Finances” which links to the matter of external sponsorship:

b) We also request that our Campus Principal can make means and redirect his Madibaz Diamond funds to B.Tech students as they are less funded than undergraduates.

The Campus Principal and Madibaz Diamond Bursary Committee have provided sponsorship to B. Tech students in the past and will continue to raise external funds to provide more bursaries to students in this category by 15 November 2016.

INTERNSHIPS

Under “Finances”, the following was indicated in the petition:

- c) The university must ensure that those students that are doing courses that does not have practical are served by six months internship.*

The matter of practicals and internships is related to academic programmes and how they are packaged. Under the leadership of the relevant Executive Deans a discussion will be convened with faculty staff, student representatives and the George Campus Academic Forum to gain a fuller understanding of this matter. Thereafter the Executive Dean and faculty leadership will put a process in motion to respond to this request by 15 November 2016.

ACCOMMODATION

The first request regarding accommodation in the petition was:

The university must acquire residential accommodation for forestry and wood Tech students that have to go for practical.

The George Academic Forum has discussed the matter previously and has constituted a committee to address it. Subsequently, the School of Natural Resource Management is now planning to implement a system in consultation with all relevant stakeholders that will align with residence admissions and placement processes and other off-campus accredited providers’ practices to eliminate this problem from January 2017. A meeting will be arranged by the Campus Principal with staff from Student Affairs in George and PE with the relevant student representatives, to share the new residence admissions and placement system with them by 31 October 2016.

The next question posed in the petition was:

- a) We also challenge the university to create a space that will be user friendly to people with disabilities.*

The Disability Unit has done all the required audits to check the user friendliness of our campus and the spaces that do not comply are receiving attention. To this end, the George Campus has already implemented several Estate, Facilities and ICT interventions to create a space that is friendly to people living with disabilities, and will continue to do so.

- b) We want a more transparent placement system.*

The George Campus complies with NMMU’s residence admissions and placement policy. There is a new Administrative Assistant on the Campus who deals with placement and is currently receiving workplace training. This position is currently seasonal from September to March and will be changed through the Student Affairs Directorate so that we have a dedicated individual for placement on our George Campus to address all enquiries on a daily basis. The Campus Principal, staff responsible for student housing in George and Port Elizabeth will convene a session with the relevant student representatives to explain the admissions and placement system, and to gain a full understanding of student concerns in this regard by 31 October 2016.

- c) *Also the matter of not having guard rooms for securities in other residences must be attended to with an immediate effect.*

The George Campus Operations Forum will immediately assess the situation of guard rooms for security staff at residences and compile its recommendation to the George Campus MANCO for implementation via the Acting Deputy Vice Chancellor for Institutional Support by 15 November 2016.

ACADEMIC MATTERS

There were two questions in this section. Management's response is below.

In terms of the APS point we request careful reviews, as the APS increased dramatically compared to the previous years we also request valid reasons why there is that increase. The results out of our engagements it seems as unnecessary restriction to the poor.

NMMU has a strong ethos of "access for success". We do this through ongoing research into student progress. As a result, seven programmes in the Faculty of Business and Economic Sciences (BES) increased their Admissions Point Score (APS) for 2017 after following due process. This process is a lengthy one and includes student representation. The request to change the above APS requirements, for example, began in 2014 and was approved by various committees right up to the NMMU Council, prior to the #FeesMustFall in 2015.

Applicants who do not meet the APS and/or subject requirements could qualify for admission through access testing. There is a testing band linked to the APS for those who do not meet the direct admissions requirements. Those applicants who fall in the testing band are invited to be tested and considered for admission based on their school and admissions test results.

More than half of NMMU's registered first-time entering students enter via this alternative access route each year. On further reflection, changing both the APS and the testing band could have the unintended consequence of limiting access. Consequently, for the 2017 intake, we have put a process in motion to obtain permission from the relevant University committees to revert back to the 2016 APS testing band for these seven programmes.

If there are other concerns in this regard, or if more information is needed, Management is committed to engaging with students further. Furthermore, appeals from affected individual applicants can be lodged with Admissions for the Admissions Committee to consider.

The issue of getting 47% to 49% during examination and then we have to come back from home we also request to make adjustments in their system. Anything that is above 47% the system must automatically convert it to 50%.

NMMU's rules do not make provision to round marks up. However, NMMU has an approved process to review borderline marks before the final mark is submitted. It is regrettable that this process has not been systematically instituted across all faculties and departments. The Executive Committee of Senate has tasked the Executive Deans to ensure that this process is employed in all academic departments for the November examinations.

SPORT

One item was raised by students in this section, namely:

In terms of sport we request student assistant in our sport office, also the budget of sport codes must be known and be evaluated at the end of the year. There must be more improvement in terms of facilities.

A Student Assistant that meets our equity criteria will be appointed from 1 November 2016 to support the Sports Office. Furthermore, the NMMU Madibaz Sport Director is attending to sport code budgets and the improvement of facilities, in co-operation with the George MANCO. The Campus Principal will arrange a meeting to discuss these matters with the Madibaz Sport Director, Sports Office staff as well as relevant student representatives before 15 November 2016.

WAY FORWARD

NMMU Management wishes to bring it to the attention of our students that continued disruptions have wide-ranging implications that impact negatively on the academic activities and operations of the University. A continued shutdown will result in:

- The academic programme being compromised to the extent that we will reach a point where the academic calendar for the year will have to be significantly adjusted, and possibly extended into 2017.
- The possible postponement of the summer graduation along with the possibility that some of our final-year students cannot graduate in 2017.
- The University operations being severely compromised, including processing applications for admission to academic programmes for 2017, as well as the financial support for qualifying students.

As such, Management strongly urges that we return to normal operations from Tuesday, 27 September 2016. Any outstanding issues in the petitions can be addressed jointly with the aim of concluding them within agreed timeframes, while academic activities continue.

Depending on the students' response, and based on Management's assessment of the situation on the ground, the University may be compelled to implement drastic measures going forward, including possibly suspending lectures until we can guarantee the safety of all our students and staff.