

MEDIA STATEMENT BY THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION ON 2021 FUNDING DECISIONS FOR PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS

8 March 2021

Programme Director;
Deputy Minister Bhuti Manamela;
Senior Management of the DHET;
NSFAS CEO, Andile Nongogo;
USAF leadership;
SACPO leadership
SAUS and SATVETSA leadership;
Leadership from Unions;
Members of the media;
Ladies and gentlemen;

Fellow prospective students, parents and South Africans at large good day

Let me take this opportunity to congratulate the matric cohort of 2020 on the outstanding achievement of a 76.2% pass rate.

These results illustrates the resilience of the South African youth and our schooling system, despite the unprecedented challenges brought by COVID-19.

I also wish to convey comfort to all those matriculants who did not achieve their desired results, and encourage them to take advantage of support initiatives, including the Second Chance Matric Programme offered by the Department of Basic Education.

As many of you know by now the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has not yet been able to confirm funding eligibility for first-time entering students wishing to study in public universities in 2021.

I am aware that this is causing great anxiety for prospective students and their families, given that the academic year is about to start and registration processes and induction programmes are already underway at the majority of institutions. This situation has also put considerable pressure on institutions, which have been unable to finalise their admissions and registration processes.

I wish to provide clarity on this matter today. NSFAS is facing a shortfall on its funding for 2021, which means that it has been unable to confirm funding for new university students.

There are few reasons why we are having this shortfall, first is because of COVID-19. We had to continue to pay NSFAS allowances even at the time when universities were closed, as part of students' access to multimodal teaching and learning. This means we had an extended academic year which we did not allocate additional money for. Secondly, we had budget cuts across government departments. Thirdly, because of the deteriorating economic situation, were many NSFAS applicants who were not previously meeting the funding requirements for NSFAS now do. Due to COVID -19 a majority of them qualifies because their parents lost their jobs in the process.

Of course not all these shortfalls are not due to covid-19 alone. The deteriorating situation associated with budget cuts started a long time ago before COVID-19.

In terms of the laws and policies regulating public finances for departments and entities, including the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA), NSFAS is not able to commit to funding students without the requisite budget available to support this commitment.

I am however pleased to formally announce and confirm today that NSFAS is going to be funding all returning NSFAS beneficiaries students who meet the academic and other relevant criteria for continuing their studies.

In this regard, the usual processes apply, whereby institutions share the relevant registration data and information with NSFAS, which is then able to confirm the funded lists of students with institutions.

During the budget vote speech of the Minister of Finance, Mr Tito Mboweni, on the 24th February 2021, indicated that Government remains committed to ensuring that deserving students are supported through higher education. In line with this commitment, the Minister of Finance directed that the Department of Higher Education and Training should work with the National Treasury to identify policy and funding options to be detailed in the Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement (MTBPS).

I can confirm that this work is underway and options will be presented to Cabinet on Wednesday this week for consideration.

The student funding policy is the responsibility of government as a whole, and as Minister responsible for higher education and training, I to get concurrence and approval by Cabinet.

We are doing everything possible to resolve this issue as a matter of extreme urgency.

The funding Guidelines for universities for 2021 will be finalized as soon as Cabinet has made a determination in this regard.

This morning I consulted the universities, through Universities' South Africa (USAf) and I have also engaged with the South African Union of Students (SAUS) on these matters.

As a common practice, we will continue to consult all the PSET stakeholders on any developments within the sector to ensure that there is no stakeholder that is left behind.

Not only is our sector experiencing challenges, however we also have good news to share today.

We have agreed with all our universities that they will extend their registration period for first time entering students for two weeks, so that none of the first-time entering students are disadvantaged by the delay in the finalisation of this matter.

The Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation has been building comprehensive programmes, systems, controls through establishment of guidelines, protocols, capacity building, at all levels firmly grounded in the growing body of science and latest epidemiological data in responding to COVID-19.

COVID-19 is here to stay for the foreseeable future. It is not seasonal. This means that we must all stay alert to the changing landscape and keep on planning for months and possible years ahead.

I applaud the many students who have adapted to these difficult circumstances, and developed new ways of learning and of coping.

I must also acknowledge that this has been a challenging time for the academic staff of our institutions, who have had to adapt rapidly to new forms of teaching and student support, and who have shown commitment to learning themselves and supporting students, often across multiple different platforms.

I commend this work, as well as the work of institutional managers, administrators and support staff who have worked hard to adapt to the necessary changes.

Let me once-more take this opportunity to express my most sincere appreciation, in particular to the ordinary frontline workers such as security guards, cleaning and administrative staff, whose crucial role in the fight against the spread of the virus is often not properly recognised.

These workers have, and continue to play a very important role in ensuring that as people move about and enter different work and other spaces, they do not spread the virus, or expose themselves and others.

I also thank the staff union leaders and student leaders, who have contributed to planning and support at institutional level. Let us keep on keeping safe.

As I conclude following the outcome of this week's Cabinet meeting later in the week, I will hold a detailed media briefing to update the sector on the beginning of the 2021 academic year and further developments on the funding issues for FTEN as I indicated earlier.

Thank you