

**NELSON MANDELA METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY**  
**MANAGEMENT RESPONSE TO PETITION SUBMITTED BY**  
**GEORGE CAMPUS FMF STUDENTS IN RELATION TO FREE HIGHER EDUCATION**

Management at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) acknowledges receipt of petitions from student formations, including the one submitted by George Campus students who are part of the #FeesMustFall movement. 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**

1. This document represents the written response from Management.
2. We share your sense of urgency to address the matters raised.
3. The responses to all four memoranda received from students will be available for everyone to read on our various media platforms.
4. 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, free education, the “Missing Middle” and debt write-off**

In your memorandum you made it clear that you want free quality education for all and that while you know that “you cannot be granted free quality education tomorrow”, you demanded “a decrease in fees, which will be a right step towards free education”.

You further recognised that government cannot carry the burden of free quality education for all alone and thus called on the private sector to assist with funding. You further requested that NMMU sends “out proper communication to where they stand in relations to the #FeesMustFall campaign”. In response, this section will respond to these matters.

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.

### **Financial-related Academic Matters**

George campus students raised academic administration matters related to:

1. The waiving of the registration fee and the registration fee for the residences.
2. The removal of the re-examination fee.
3. The accessing of academic records even of students owing money.

The Campus Principal is liaising with the leaders of the relevant portfolios in finance, academic administration and student housing in PE for these matters to be addressed, and they will respond as a matter of highest priority.

### **Equal treatment across NMMU campuses**

George campus students made the point that all NMMU campuses should be treated equally with no differentiation between George and PE. The university is committed to equity of provision for all of its campuses, and is working hard to ensure that this is experienced by all.

### **Administration**

Students raised the matter that administrative matters should be handled on George campus, “especially for the residences”, as waiting for responses from PE takes too long.

While there is a demand for the administration related to George Campus students to be done on the campus, this issue of effectiveness and efficiency is more extensive. The matter can be addressed by amending the register of operational delegated decision-making to deliver the requisite services that can be delivered locally. This matter has been referred to the NMMU MANCO for priority attention.

## **Residences**

George campus students indicated in the petition that:

1. More residential and recreational spaces were needed on campus.
2. Maintenance of the residences needed to be attended to immediately.
3. Residences needed to be renovated.

The George Campus has provided the Institutional Support Division of the NMMU with information on the critical requirement for general maintenance of residences that are in need of full restoration and/or upgrading. Furthermore, the campus has also proposed that the NMMU urgently provides a further 150 new beds to address the limited capacity of residences on the George Campus. The Acting DVC (IS) will provide a response to this matter by 31 October 2016.

## **IT Services**

George campus students indicated that IT Services for students such as connecting to WiFi, cleaning devices of viruses and so on must be free.

NMMU has SITS centres with an operating model that provide ICT-related services for a fee. The Operations Forum in collaboration with the CIO and the Director of ICT Services will immediately review the system at the George Campus in the light of the request from students.

## **Academic Administrative Matters**

George campus students indicated in the petition that:

1. The re-examination timetable needs to be sent out in time so that students have enough time to prepare and study.
2. There should be two graduations for George campus with one in summer and another in autumn.

For unforeseeable reasons, too little time was provided at the end of the June exams to allow for sufficient time to notify students timeously of the re-examinations in July. NMMU apologises for this and has put mechanisms in place to ensure that this does not happen again.

The matter of two graduation ceremonies in George has been referred to the Registrar. He will report on this request to the next George Campus MANCO.

## **Academic Matters**

Students raised the fact that more needed to be done:

1. To keep quality lecturers on campus.
2. To not have more than one lecturer lecturing a module as the different teaching styles confused students.
3. For contingencies to be in place to make up for time lost and assessments that could not be completed during the prolonged protest action.

Under the leadership of the DVC Teaching and Learning and the Executive Deans of faculties, new strategies to attract and retain quality academic staff in accordance with our transformative agenda are being put in place.

It is furthermore important to note that some academic modules are multi-disciplinary, and therefore require more than one lecturer to deliver the specific elements of the curriculum. However, students are requested to identify specific modules that are of concern to them for the attention of the Head of Department and Executive Dean, who will follow up on the matter.

Faculties are also developing contingency plans to catch-up on the time lost in terms of lectures and assessments in the second semester. Please refer to the final section on “Way forward” for further information in this regard.

## **Naming Matters**

Students demanded that:

1. The “Student Council” be renamed the “Campus Student Representative Council” along with 10% of the SRC budget.
2. That the name “Saasveld” be removed wherever it still appears on campus.

ICT and MCR are ensuring that the “Saasveld” naming is being corrected at the George Campus.

The campus supports the request to re-name the Student Council to Campus Student Representative Council, and will recommend this to the University Administration for approval as soon as possible.

The university will also review the formula for budget allocation such as a special student levy dispensation for George Campus students only. Furthermore, there is a need to have a policy summit to deal with these issues, which should be facilitated by the Acting DVC (IS) as a matter of priority.

## **Insourced Workers**

George campus students demanded that insourced workers be treated in the same way as other NMMU staff.

The University remains committed to ending outsourcing in accordance with the Council resolution of 21 November 2015. This commenced with the insourcing of catering (80 staff) and security (270 staff) services in April and July 2016 respectively.

NMMU has been engaging with the issues that have emerged from Council's decision through a multi-stakeholder task team, with significant student representation, in an effort to co-create workable and sustainable models for ending outsourcing and for equitable conditions of service.

### **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.