**NELSON MANDELA METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY**

**MANAGEMENT RESPONSE TO PETITIONS SUBMITTED BY THE FEES MUST FALL STUDENT COALITION IN RELATION TO FREE HIGHER EDUCATION**

A decline in government funding for higher education over the past two decades, coupled with a significant increase in higher education student enrolments,has led to an over-reliance on student fees by universities across the country. NMMU acknowledges the burden that higher funding challenges have placed on our students, particularly those from poor and so-called “missing middle” families.

The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements brought home the realisation that our national project of creating a non-racial, non-sexist, prosperous and democratic South Africa has not yet fully 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.

NMMU Management is of the opinion that the cause for widening access to quality higher education for academically-deserving poor and “missing middle” students is noble and just. We will therefore 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 all our students.

While NMMU respects the right to protest peacefully, equally, we wish to emphasise that those who do not choose to participate in such protests have the right to continue with their studies. That is the essence of democracy. As we are all aware, continued disruptions have wide-ranging implications for academic activities and University operations that will impact negatively on all students.

As such, Management strongly urges that all student formations assist us in returning to normal operations from Tuesday, 27 September 2016. **Any outstanding issues in the petitions can be addressed jointly with students within mutually agreeable timeframes, while academic activities continue.**

1. The University must not consider having a fee increase in 2017.

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 it is an interim measure for 2017 that will not impact negatively on the poor and “missing middle” students. Government will make up the difference of up to 8% for such students through a grant to all universities. As a result, the majority of NMMU students are unlikely to be impacted by the 8% increase.

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% for those who can afford to pay fees, since this will ensure the continued provision of quality higher education.

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 and we will continue to use all available platforms to lobby for this.

1. The University must clear the debts of all students who were put on the so-called “debt-relief” programme.

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.

1. The University must join us in a student-community based approach towards the struggle for free education by actively engaging with the State.

Management at 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 students.

It will further lobby the Government on this, just as it did with its recent input to the Presidential Fees Commission hearings.

1. The University must commit to advising the State re: establishing a funding model that will best fit free education for poor students.

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.

1. Debt relief must be extended to (accredited) off-campus accommodation.

We believe that the multi-stakeholder Financial Aid Task Team is best placed to assess the wide-ranging implications of such a request. This approach means that all parties have a better chance of co-creating mutually beneficial solutions that will not put the financial sustainability of the University at risk.

1. The University must revert to the previously established APS system as it was changed without consulting the student body.

NMMU has a strong ethos of “access for success”. As a result of ongoing research into student progress, seven programmes in the Faculty of Business and Economic Sciences (BES) increased their Admissions Point Score (APS) for 2017. 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. Students are represented in these committees.

As you will know, applicants who do not meet the APS and/or subject requirements can 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 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 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.