



Statement on the Wave of Student Protests on Fees

The CHE welcomes the outcome of the engagement between the President and all stakeholders to resolve this issue.

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) has observed with deepening concern, the escalation of student protests at our universities, with the attendant threat of disruption of the academic and examination programmes. The CHE is mindful that the scale of the protests and the momentum that they have gathered in a short period indicates deep-seated grievances with the above-inflation increases across the higher education sector, which have captured popular sentiment.

The CHE supports all efforts by the relevant stakeholders at governmental, institutional and student leadership levels to address them. The view of the CHE is that sober engagement is called for, based on a commitment to resolve the impasse with due regard to the best interests of students, sustainability of our higher education institutions, and social stability. Ironically, the current wave of student protests erupted while the Higher Education Summit was going on in Durban. The Summit provided a platform for all stakeholders, including students, to place matters on the table for deliberations and chart the way forward.

Without detracting from the merits of the matter at the heart of the protests, the CHE finds their timing, close to year-end examinations unfortunate. The CHE is also disturbed by the reports of violence and vandalism that has accompanied protests at some institutions. It is the view of the CHE that these are not justified for any reason, and may even detract from the legitimate issues that have been raised by student protest action.

The CHE urges students, management of our universities, and all other stakeholders to create an atmosphere of tolerance, dialogue and constructive engagement on the complex issues at hand, central to which are the plight of students who find university education unaffordable, and the sustainability of our universities, in a climate of economic stagnation. This responsible approach all round will allow the academic activities, including examinations, to continue while the proper channels of engagement work towards finding lasting solutions to the perennial challenge of student funding.

The CHE is of the view that the ideal of free higher education for all will take time to be realised *in toto*, given that education competes with other pressing areas of need for a share of the resource pool. The CHE therefore urges students who can afford to pay for their higher education to continue doing so; and for those employed graduates who were funded by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) when they were students and who are in a position to repay their loans, to do so more diligently, so that deserving students can be supported financially in larger numbers.

CHE's own research and data reveal shockingly high dropout rates among university students in the country, and finance is cited as a major contributing factor. This trend goes against the country's transformation imperative of increasing access to higher education, so that the country can have sufficient numbers of professionals in all fields who contribute to cultural, social, economic, health and technological development. The CHE is therefore of the view that, the issues of transformation

and optimal resourcing of higher education, cannot be separated. Students are required to put in the requisite effort to ensure success in their studies. Universities in turn are urged to pay greater system-wide attention to factors that impede student success.

Approached responsibly and calmly, through dialogue, we are confident that the current challenges can be amicably resolved. In this regard, the CHE welcomes the outcome of the engagement between the President and all stakeholders in higher education to resolve this issue.

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Date: 23 October 2015