



Press statement

20 February 2025

USAf urges students to prioritise constructive dialogue over protests, for sustainable resolutions to their grievances

The Board of Directors of Universities South Africa (USAf) has observed with regret, the incidents of protests and unrest at several campuses as students demand to be allowed to register for the 2025 academic year, notwithstanding unpaid debt, amongst other challenges.

At least two of USAf's member institutions have had to start the academic year online in the wake of student blockages over financial exclusion and accommodation. All of this is to pressure the institutions' management to resolve these issues.

USAf, representing South Africa's 26 public universities, is alive to the challenges students face and understands that many are struggling to settle their outstanding tuition fees. In particular, the Board fully empathises with the first-time-entering students awaiting funding confirmation from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) -- pending which they can neither register nor secure accommodation. The directors have also noted the issue of returning students barred by landlords from accessing their previous accommodation on account of outstanding 2024 rentals from NSFAS.

The Board categorically states that universities have pulled out all the stops to accommodate the affected students, either by making special concessions on outstanding debt or mobilising funding from every possible source to assist those who can be helped. These efforts demonstrate that universities' executive management teams understand household struggles. Besides, universities are equally affected by the funding inefficiencies that are experienced by the students.

"While the students' grievances are legitimate, we reiterate what we've said before: that these issues are being presented to the wrong role players. Universities are not the primary source of student funding, and so, they are in no position to settle outstanding fees or the amounts due or overdue from NSFAS. Therefore, the protests are being misdirected," says the USAf Board. "We continue to engage our partners at NSFAS and in Government on these matters to find collective solutions. That said, the disruptions across campuses are counter-productive as they ultimately impact on the very academic agenda our students seek to access."

The universities' representative body adds that disrupting registration and the academic project sets the institutions' processes back and places the university communities at risk, including the protesters themselves. While acknowledging the need for students to raise awareness of their despair, the USAf Board is calling for calm and the voice of reason to prevail.

The USAf Board urges students to recognise that their grievances, while valid, should be directed through the appropriate channels for resolution. Engaging with government representatives and advocating for systemic changes to funding mechanisms will be more productive than placing pressure on universities, which are already making efforts to support their students under challenging circumstances.

“By fostering a spirit of collaboration between students, universities, and government entities, we can work towards sustainable solutions that ensure access to education for all,” the Board states.

“Moving forward, let us prioritise dialogue and constructive engagement to create a more equitable and supportive educational environment. Together, we can navigate these challenges and uphold the integrity of our academic institutions while addressing the urgent needs of our student population.”

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