



EFF STATEMENT ON THE FOLLOW UP MEETING WITH THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION REGARDING NSFAS AND STATUS OF READINESS

Friday, 02 February 2024

The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) parliamentary caucus delegation led by the Deputy President and parliamentary chief whip met with the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation on the 31st of January 2024. The meeting was a follow-up to a previous meeting held on the 23rd of January 2024 to receive an appraisal on the state of readiness of the department to start the academic year and challenges confronting the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS).

We made a follow-up on many of the critical issues that were raised in the previous meeting and were not responded to adequately. However, judging by the details in the presentations and responses to follow-up questions, it is clear that the department and NSFAS are not fully ready to ensure that there is a smooth registration process for the majority of poor students who rely on the NSFAS bursary.

We are concerned that there are still students who have not received confirmation from NSFAS to allow them to register. Consequently, many of these students, who qualify for NSFAS bursaries, find themselves stranded without accommodation, food, and sometimes at a very high risk of being victims of crime. We proposed to the department and NSFAS to consider an immediate transitional arrangement to cater for students whose applications are still pending to ensure that there is temporary shelter and allowance for food.

The EFF condemns and rejects the fact that the NSFAS board still maintains that the four companies that were unlawfully and fraudulently awarded contracts to become middle-men to facilitate disbursement of grants, must fulfil contractual obligations

despite indisputable evidence and forensic investigation outcomes that show they do not have either necessary capital adequacy, or administrative and technical capacity. What is even more shocking is the attempt and the rhetoric to appear as if NSFAS is going to implement the recommendation of the investigation and cancel the tender, when in reality, the board is saying one thing and doing the opposite.

The consequence of this is that the majority of students dependent on NSFAS grants in many institutions of higher learning, particularly TVET colleges, will not be able to register for the 2024 academic year, both returning and new students. This will cause serious havoc and chaos in many of the institutions, something that is avoidable as the EFF has shared many practical and implementable solutions.

We therefore demand that all students' formations and institutions of higher learning must outrightly refuse to cooperate with the companies that were unlawfully and fraudulently appointed by NSFAS. We also caution the Board and DHET that their imposition of these companies on institutions of higher learning, despite the irrefutable evidence that were unlawfully appointed, will lead to a dispute.

Furthermore, the EFF maintains that there is no logic for institutions of higher learning, particularly universities, to keep certificates of students who have graduated as collateral because they are still owing institutions. Firstly, many of these debts are so old that they are now prescribed and the likelihood of collection is impossible. Secondly, given the rise of fraudulent qualifications, the current solution of giving graduates a letter of completion without certificate will only make the situation worse. The EFF, therefore, calls on immediate intervention by government to ensure that all graduates whose certificates are withheld because of outstanding fees to be released before the end of March 2024.

In the meeting, the Minister acknowledged the department's lack of immediate solutions to the systemic challenges, including insufficient space to accommodate students who have completed their studies and seek further education. Furthermore, the accommodation crisis and the poorly defined loan scheme will prejudice many students who don't qualify for grants, highlighting a significant gap in the support system for higher education.

Therefore, the EFF calls on all institutions of higher learning to put the safety of students first and intervene where necessary to ensure that the lives of students are not in danger and have the opportunity to further their studies.


ISSUED BY THE ECONOMIC FREEDOM FIGHTERS

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