

Dear Alumnus,

By now you would probably be aware that the higher education sector in South Africa has been facing widespread protest action following the announcement by Minister Blade Nzimande in respect of fees for 2017. Sadly, the complexities of the situation are often not fully understood by stakeholders due to the many conflicting narratives circulating in the public domain.

NMMU values the relationship with its alumni and we would therefore like to update you directly on the events that have unfolded.

At NMMU, various student formations, including the Student Representative Council (SRC), initially formed a coalition to collectively voice their concerns in relation to the Minister's announcement, but were divided in their approach.

By Wednesday (21 September), it emerged that the SRC was no longer part of the coalition. By close of business on Friday (23 September), NMMU had received petitions from four different student formations in Port Elizabeth and George, and had responded to each by Sunday (25 September) evening. These are available on the NMMU website <http://news.nmmu.ac.za>.

On 26 September 2016, management held meetings with two student formations in George and at the Kraal on the South Campus in Port Elizabeth respectively. The SRC also held a public meeting at the city hall.

At the meeting in the Kraal, it soon became apparent that the students present were not prepared to accede to management's request that the University re-open, while engagements in respect of the Fees Must Fall demands continue. The executive of the SRC approached NMMU management later in the day, advising them of their call for students to return to classes on 27 September.

In light of the above events, and the present escalating tensions and violence within the sector, which has seen many universities closed for more than a week, NMMU management felt it could not continue operations until an environment conducive to teaching and learning had been re-established.

The operations and academic activities of NMMU were therefore suspended until further notice on 26 September 2016. Effectively, the University has been closed since Wednesday last week.

Subsequently, it has emerged that one of the parents might be coordinating a legal challenge against the University to force the opening of our campuses. NMMU will deal with this if and when it arises, but we would hope that all stakeholders understand the need for the University management to strike a balance between those students who wish to protest and those who wish to resume academic activities, whilst ensuring the safety of all involved. Thankfully, our campuses have been spared the violence and vandalism that has occurred at some other universities.

Many of the issues raised by the various student formations are beyond NMMU's ambit and certainly cannot be resolved in a short period of time. Others, unique to NMMU, such as its debt and down payment relief interventions, will be engaged with in consultation with students by reconvening the multi-stakeholder Financial Aid Task Team that has been functioning since the end of 2015.

The decision to suspend University operations until further notice was not taken lightly. We recognise that it is far from ideal, especially given the present anxieties of staff, students and their families.

We would like to thank all alumni for their continued support and encouragement in the current difficult circumstances. We can assure you that, as the University management, we are continuously striving to find ways of resuming operations as a matter of urgency whilst addressing issues raised by students.

Dr Sibongile Muthwa
Acting Vice-Chancellor
NMMU