

'Fees cannot fall'

NMMU vice-chancellor warns varsity will cease to exist if students don't pay

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NELSON Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) vice-chancellor Derrick Swartz has issued a stern injunction to his student body, saying: "Fees cannot fall – end of story."

Back from several months off last year as national fee protests peaked, Swartz was forthright in his message to first-year students at the weekend.

"Fees remain a critical, legal component of the existing system and without fees the university will simply cease to exist," he said.

"I cannot run the university. I have to collect fees.

"I want to make sure the fees on campus remain as low as possible, but I can't give free education.

"It's just not possible. End of story."

Swartz was addressing students and parents at a welcoming ceremony on Saturday at the Indoor Sports Centre.

Laying down the law, he said the university would not tolerate violent protests that trampled on the rights of others.

"We will take every legal step to protect and secure and to open universities," he said.

"There will be no shutdown of universities."

Swartz reminded the students that taking up the offer to study at the university meant they had agreed to adhere to its rules.

"You sign a contract to uphold the values, and therefore the rules, of the institution," he said.

"If you violate those rules, you are breaking your side of the contract.

"Your parents and I have to hold you accountable for this.

"We will allow peaceful, legal

protest, but not violence and infractions of the rights of others."

Swartz said about 45% of the income needed to pay lecturers and support staff came from tuition fees and he was legally bound to collect the money.

"Public funding has been declining for 20 years and that forced the universities, rightly or wrongly, to look for increases in student fees to make up for our government shortfall," he said.

Since 2015, universities have had student protests across the country.

Taking a swipe at the government and Higher Education Minister Blade Nzimande, Swartz revealed that universities had been in talks with the minister

"with great difficulty" for a number of years with regard to reviewing the funding system.

He said the process was under way.

"The government must increase its subsidy. It is unacceptable that we have a government that does not prize

and value higher education," he said.

"It's simply unacceptable because we can spend money on arms deals and all sorts of nonsense. Why can we not spend money on basic things like education?"

NMMU decided last year on an 8% fee increase for this year, a figure that Swartz said was the lowest the university could go, considering that the outstanding amount owed by students was R142-million.

"We as the universities cannot give free higher education and neither can we scrap the debt that students have – or fees for that matter," he said.

"I cannot concede to that whatsoever.

"It's a policy issue unless the government decides on that.



DERRICK SWARTZ

"It legally forces me to enforce the issue."

It was reported at the weekend that the interministerial committee on higher education had handed over a preliminary report to President Jacob Zuma advising how best to avoid further protests this year.

Its final report is expected later this year.

Student activist Qhama Zondani, a member of the #FeesMust-Fall movement, said it was important to note that "Derrick Swartz was nowhere to be seen during the protests, busy climbing a mountain somewhere".

Swartz led a team in September to Machu Picchu in Peru to raise money for student fees. They raised more than R2-million.

Zondani was nevertheless critical.

"He wasn't involved in the discussions with top management

in his absence," Zondani said.

"Those meetings we had were very progressive and, in fact, we discovered one thing in common, which was we all felt fees should fall but the management has no mechanism to do so."

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