



# UNIVERSITIES SOUTH AFRICA

## KEEPING OUR UNIVERSITIES ON AN EVEN KEEL - A CALL TO ACTION

Today, South Africa's universities are standing at a major crossroads. Our system is in unprecedented turmoil, our students not receiving much deserved tuition support, our staff under tremendous stress and a climate of fear, disunity and strife pervading most of our campuses. We are writing to the South African nation to express our deep concerns about the threat of the current crisis in higher education on the sustainability and quality of our universities.

We write also to express our utter commitment and conviction that the 2016 academic project will be completed at each of our universities and that these public institutions will be ready to receive new cohorts of students in 2017.

As vice-chancellors, we are deeply aware of the growing unaffordability of university study for most households in South Africa and support the call by students and the State for fee-free higher education for the poor. We would consider the financial exclusion of young South Africans from higher education as antithetical to the public good purposes and mission of our universities.

We are also acutely aware and deeply concerned that the current crisis is a result of the chronic underfunding of the sector by the State over the last 20 years. We strongly believe that a bold, imaginative and systematic revamping of the entire university funding system is urgently and decisively required.

The academic project of 2016 at South Africa's 26 public universities is at serious risk of internal collapse due to the ongoing disruptive and destructive activities of a small minority of students. It is fair to say that universities today face their most serious crisis in the post-apartheid era in our country.

We wish to remind the nation that South Africa's universities, as a system, with all the challenges they face, perform above their weight class internationally. They represent an enormous national resource that is central to the projects of nation building, social equality, democratization and economic prosperity while still offering students a globally competitive qualification.

### A CALL TO ACTION

The 26 vice-chancellors, speaking as one, call on **all** South Africans to work with our universities towards ensuring that the 2016 academic year is successfully completed in the national interest and in the interest of individual students and their families.

We begin by making a call on our **students** to take up the challenge of succeeding academically in this deeply fragmented year and to see this as a form of national duty, a contribution to the national project of universities to produce highly skilled individuals for our complex, multilayered society. We call on student political leaders not to sacrifice the academic project on the altar of narrow interests, party political agendas, and to desist from making demands that universities cannot possibly fulfill.

We wish to thank our staff, both academic and support for their professionalism and dedication during difficult times, and further call on them to be resolute in making this yet another successful academic year. You are central to the academic project at our universities. Without you there isn't one. This has been a year of much tension, division, anxiety and even despair. It would be a tragedy of major proportions if we did not get our institutions back on an even keel to complete the academic year and to begin the rightful process of renewal and reconstitution of the place of universities in society.

We thank the faith-based organisations and other community organisations for the gracious role they have played in mediation and in trying to generate sufficient consensuses between the universities, the protesting students and the State. While these may not have always worked they did provide a textured foundation for conversations and engagements that were extremely important. We call on you to remain engaged, together with other sectors of society.

We call our business community to action in supporting and partnering our university system and the State in a more systematic and sustainable manner, given the crucial role it plays in skills development, technological innovation and economic growth. While we acknowledge your support of our sector through the bursaries you grant to our students and your contribution to research at universities, we call on you to engage our sector to determine ways in which resources may be generated to support students who face financial risk in the 2016 and/or 2017 academic years.

While we appreciate the steps taken by the State and especially by the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr BE Nzimande, to diffuse the crisis, we do make a call on Government to renew its efforts to decisively, clearly and substantively address the issues raised in the student **#FeesMustFall** campaign and to provide our universities with the assurance that they will be havens of peace, a condition so fundamental to the academic enterprise.

### RIGHTS OF STUDENTS AND STAFF TO PROTEST

Our universities fully embrace the rights of students and staff to participate in protest and to challenge the status quo whenever that is deemed necessary. We see social and personal agency as vital to the flourishing and strengthening of our democracy and in the development of new cohorts of leaders and intellectuals – a project very much at the heart of the purpose of higher education.

What we have witnessed recently, however, is the slippage of this student action into violent forms where a million students find themselves forcibly prevented from participating in their studies. This cannot, under any circumstances, be deemed to be acceptable in a functioning democracy.

Alongside this we have observed the devastating impact of an assault on the infrastructure of our universities, the replacement of which will run into a figure in excess of R1 billion. And this figure is growing daily.

Universities cannot withstand the forms of violent protest we have witnessed in recent weeks. They are necessarily open institutions and accommodate democratic communities based on the free flow of people and competing ideas. Subjecting them even temporarily to heavy policing to cope with violent protest and the violation of the rights of those not in agreement with protests is antithetical to their purpose. And hence we say that notwithstanding the role of these student protests in the emergence of new layers of astute and courageous student leadership, we are deeply concerned by some of these protest strategies. They undermine the very essence of what a university is about.

We are however, united in our duty to protect the rights of the vast majority of our students and staff to exercise their rights to study and to work and to protect the infrastructure of our universities. They are a national resource that must be protected for future generations of students.

### IMPACT OF A POSSIBLE SHUTDOWN

Our universities face the real prospect of an early shutdown with very serious consequences. On the one hand the abandonment of the 2016 academic year will delay the entry of more than 180,000 graduates into the workplace. This may not seem important but consider this: our medical schools produce approximately 1,500 medical graduates every year who would normally, in January, be placed as interns in our public hospitals. While these are doctors in the last phase of their training, they are doctors, nonetheless, and they treat patients. They will be absent from the public hospitals for the first half of 2017. The same is true for teachers, engineers, social workers, psychologists and so on. One sees immediately the impact of a closure of the academic programme on social services and the economy, accompanied by the impact on the individual students and families involved. On the other hand the impact of closure on incoming matriculants will be to postpone their entry into university.

**THE VICE-CHANCELLORS OF SOUTH AFRICA'S 26 PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES MAKE THIS CALL TO ACTION OF ALL SOUTH AFRICANS SO THAT WE MAY ENSURE THE SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF THE 2016 ACADEMIC YEAR AND SHAPE A DYNAMIC, RELEVANT HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM AS WE LOOK TOWARDS THE FUTURE**

