

## Fees 'cop-out' rage

"A cop-out" and a "short-term reaction to a crisis" is how analysts have described the government's decision to shield poor and middle-income students from university fee increases.



Source: TimesLive on [YouTube](#)

Higher Education Minister Blade Nzimande's promise yesterday that the state would find an estimated R2.6-billion to offset fee increases at universities did not satisfy the student campaigners.

His announcement triggered immediate protests and the closing of several campuses.

Yesterday Wits and Pretoria universities closed their gates as anger mounted.

Thousands of University of KwaZulu-Natal students have vowed to march to the provincial legislature to protest against the government not providing free tertiary education - currently being considered by a commission set up by President Jacob Zuma.

The University of Cape Town was closed by vice-chancellor Max Price this weekend.

Nzimande announced that:

- The government would continue to fund poor students through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme;

- Universities will themselves decide on fee increases for 2017, but limited to 8%;
- An estimated R2.6-billion would be appropriated to fund fee increases for students whose parents' income was under R600,000 but who did not qualify for National Student Financial Aid Scheme funding.

Nzimande said this category of students, known as "the missing middle", made up more than 70% of the undergraduate population in higher education.

"As to where the money will come from, unfortunately I am not the minister of finance - I cannot address that," Nzimande said.

The Treasury did not respond to requests for comment.

Nzimande's decision has been welcomed by university managements. But hours after the announcement students mobilised to shut down their campuses.

Kabelo Mahlobogwane, the chairman of the EFF student body at Pretoria University said he felt insulted by the announcement.

"He said nothing about free education and that is what we want. We have decided that we are shutting down the campus."

Experts have slammed the government's decision to pass the buck, and the burden of deciding on fee increases, to universities.

Education analyst Graeme Bloch said that although Nzimande was correct in saying that the rich must pay fees, the decision to let universities decide on the amount of the increase was "a cop-out".

Bloch said free education was possible but the government had to find a lasting solution and not "these temporary measures".

Ahmed Essop, a research associate at the University of Johannesburg's Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies, said putting responsibility for fee adjustments on the universities was a "short-term reaction to a crisis".

Essop, a former CEO of the Council on Higher Education, said the solution was to progress step-by-step towards free higher education.

Economist Dawie Roodt said Nzimande was "asking for trouble" and had opened "a can of worms" with his decision to cover fees for students who qualified for the National Student Financial Aid Scheme and for "the missing middle".

He said that the state had no budget for this.

"What happened is that the minister stuck his neck out where it didn't belong. Intervening in decisions meant to be made by universities was not his [right]. The students have seen his fear and are going to haunt him for this," Roodt said.

One of the #FeesMustFall leaders at the University of Cape Town, Masixole Mlandu, who has been suspended by the university, said he and his supporters were going to "shut down the universities and the country" if their demands for free education were not met.

"We know free education is possible in this country. There are several reports that have been submitted to the state and to the universities that clearly state how free education is possible," he said.

Source: *The Times* via I-Net Bridge

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