



STUDENTS from various tertiary institutions marched in Pietermaritzburg yesterday. University students have been holding protests at institutions across the country over financial issues including historical debt.

‘UNREALISTIC DEMANDS’

Shutdown tarnishing the country's higher learning image: experts

SAKHISENI NXUMALO

sakhiseni.nxumalo@inl.co.za

EDUCATION experts believe the ongoing nationwide protests at various higher education institutions are tarnishing the image of the country's universities and some of the demands are unrealistic.

The nationwide shutdown at 26 universities and colleges, which was called for by the SA Union of Students (SAUS) on Sunday, has seen a number of student protests across the country.

Student leaders are demanding that the Department of Higher Education and Training, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), Finance Ministry, and universities clear students' historical debt, fund postgraduate studies and implement free education. It is believed that the total debt owed by students across all institutions is more than R10 billion, with the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) accounting for R1.6bn.

On Monday, some KZN student leaders had indicated that they would not protest this week as the province was in mourning following the death of Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini.

However yesterday, students from Unisa's Pietermaritzburg (PMB) campus, Umgungundlovu TVET campuses, and the University of KwaZulu-Natal PMB campus marched to the offices of the KZN provincial treasury in the

capital city.

KZN provincial police spokesperson Colonel Thembeke Mbele, confirmed that a number of students picketed in Pietermaritzburg yesterday.

Mbele said the police, however, had the situation under control, as they were at the scene to monitor and stabilise the situation.

At the University of Zululand (Unizulu), where students blockaded the main entrance on Monday with burning tyres and bricks, did not experience any protest action yesterday.

Unizulu's Student Representative Council (SRC) president-elect Nkosinathi Sibiya, said the protest had been put on hold to allow the registration process to proceed smoothly.

"We are still engaging with management. We cannot have students who are deprived of the right to education. We are going to let the university proceed with the process, while we engage with them," he said.

Education analyst and professor from the University of Pretoria's Department of Educational Psychology, Kobus Maree, said the ongoing protests were destroying the image of higher education in the country. "What is happening is tarnishing the image of our universities. We are talking about internationally respected universities here. Such protests, mostly violent, are painting a bad image."

Maree said historical debt and

demands for free education were not new, and all parties involved should have engaged on them and concluded the matters long ago.

"We are sending a bad message to the rest of the world regarding our education system. This is just a country that is fighting itself. Looking at some demands made by the students, they are unrealistic. It is going to be very difficult and a long journey to find the money to clear the outstanding debt that students have in all institutions," he said.

UKZN's School of Education director, Professor Labby Ramrathan, said the demands made by students were not feasible. Ramrathan said the decision by government to reduce funding to institutions over the years had made it harder for universities to clear historical debt.

"The students are making unrealistic demands considering the economic state of the country. There is so many competing demands for much bigger basic needs that government needs to pay attention to."

He said the reality was that the country had more pressing issues such as housing, employment and infrastructure. "We may claim that government should inject more for the university subsidy and NSFAS, however, education is competing with all these needs. Every sector is in demand of more money."

