



# ‘Pay students’ fees timely’

Education minister is tackling university and college funding issues, student housing needs and campus security

**H**igher education and training minister Naledi Pandor is extremely angry. As a parent, she cannot imagine how beneficiaries of state bursaries could be expected to survive for months on end at universities and other tertiary institutions because of delays in issuing government funds.

Pandor, the department’s political head, was appointed by President Cyril Ramaphosa last month, and took over from Hlengiwe Mkhize, who is currently an ordinary ANC member of Parliament.

Pandor has four children with husband Sharif, and two grandchildren.

As a parent, she believes it is “tragic” that state institutions tasked with ensuring that funds meant to assist students at universities and technical and vocational education training colleges are not paid on time.

To stop the continuing trend of late payments, Pandor wants universities, colleges and the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (Nsfas) - which is responsible for disbursing student funds - to have an integrated system to avoid delays, discrepancies and student data going missing.

She wants to ensure that, by next year, government “doesn’t have these kinds of queries”.

“It’s a regrettable situation and I have been horrified that this is happening to a number of students,” the minister told City Press on Thursday.

The new scheme, a student-based model in which students apply directly to

Nsfas, had created a gap that disabled liaison lines between the scheme and universities. There were colleges and universities with systems that were not integrated with that of Nsfas, while others were running smoothly.

Pandor said parents and students had asked her to intervene, and her office had helped in several cases. She said she hoped a resolution would be found to deal with the discrepancies in the system in the next two weeks.

Pandor also said some students were reluctant to sign agreements with Nsfas, believing they would be forced to pay back the money paid for their studies. This, she said, resulted in payment delays for their tuition, accommodation and food allowances.

“We have to engage with students to complete the process. We’ve come across this. We cannot send the money to the wrong person,” she said.

Her department was still investigating the extent of students’ historic debt from unpaid fees at universities and colleges.

After the investigation has been finalised, government will decide on a policy position and how to recover money owed by students who were funded by Nsfas in previous years.

Pandor’s department also wants to close the gap in student housing, aiming to provide 300 000 beds at universities and colleges by 2026. This, she says, will be no easy task, but she insists it is possible with partnerships with the private sector and other government departments, such as the departments of public works and human settlements.

Pandor says there are many unoccupied state buildings belonging to public works that could be converted into student residences. She says she is in discussion with these departments about these issues.

However, even though reaching the 300 000-bed

target is a daunting task, Pandor said taxpayers should acknowledge the work government was doing in this area.

“In a country that does not have resources, at least government is doing something. We do face a huge legacy [of apartheid inequality] that has massive challenges, and student accommodation is one of the significant challenges,” she said.

Among her prioritised plans ahead of the 2019 general election is to reach the required number of artisans in the country, and support the colleges that produce them.

“I want to pay a great deal of attention to colleges in the country, including community education and training centres. I don’t think more academic education with them, but rather focus on skills development.”

Other plans include the decolonisation of university curricula. She said she will be meeting with the transformation committee that has been working on this to get advice about what needs to be done.

The sector education and training authorities were also receiving attention and had readvertised 16 council chair posts after these were dominated by men.

She also wants women to occupy these positions.

Tightening security on campuses is another focus area and a meeting with Universities South Africa, an organisation that represents vice-chancellors at 26 universities in the country, is on the cards. This follows an increase in the number of sexual assault incidents on campuses.

“Access to campuses is something we need to look at carefully. Women are often sexually assaulted at libraries and on campuses. Any student should be safe on campus,” Pandor said.