

■ ACCOMMODATION

Call for private sector intervention

Parliament's pleads with private sector to help provide residences for students

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PARLIAMENT has called on the private sector to assist government to provide accommodation for students at higher institutions of learning, following widespread protests at universities across the country.

This comes after different bodies, including the South African Union of Students (Sasu), Universities SA and the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) were in Parliament to brief the committee on higher education and training on the current situation at universities.

Sasu president Misheck Mugabe detailed to the committee how the lack of accommodation was affecting students, leading to unrest in universities.

Committee chairperson Connie September said: "Regarding accommodation, the committee believes that the private sector should play a meaningful role to complement what government is doing to provide funding. However, the committee also condemns the destruction of property and violence on South African campuses".

Last week, the SRC from tertiary institutions in Johannesburg and KwaZulu-Natal gathered to mobilise a national shutdown. Meanwhile, on Wednesday, the Cape Peninsula University of Technology students put up shacks on the Bellville campus to highlight problems with accommodation.

Speaking on behalf of the Department of Higher Education and Training, deputy director-general Dr Diane Parker said it was unreasonable to expect institutions to be held responsible for accommodating all students in university residences.

Parker, however, said the department had plans to address students' grievances.

"The department's student housing infrastructure programme has been developed to enable the construction of 300000 beds over the next 10 years. The department is (also) working with the Department of Human Settlements and Public Works to explore options for off-campus social housing," said Parker.

The issues raised at the meeting included historical student debt, academic exclusions and increases in higher education costs as problems that are common to all tertiary institutions.

The committee also heard that students owed universities about R9 billion, consisting of debt that has accumulated over the years before fee-free higher education was introduced.

The DA has called on Higher Education Minister Naledi Pandor to address the issue of historic debt for both students who are not on the NSFAS, and those who are beneficiaries.

DA MP Belinda Bozzoli said: "Minister Pandor needs to make it clear that she will provide universities and students with urgent assistance to deal with the debt they are carrying.

"The ANC's fee-free higher education will not address the plight of senior students with sky-high debts and this matter therefore requires urgent attention from the minister," said Bozzoli.

During the State of the Nation debate on Tuesday, Pandor called on institutions of higher learning to make every effort available to find solutions to students' ongoing concerns.