

# Minister tackling students' challenges

Minister of higher education and training Naledi Pandor met with the SRC presidents from all 26 public universities, along with the South African Students' Union (SAUS), the CEO of Universities South Africa (USAf) and the administrator of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), in response to an urgent request from SAUS to address 12 high-level demands made by SAUS in calling for a national shutdown of all universities.

At the meeting on Saturday 9 February, Pandor committed to provide a detailed response to students and the public on the wide range of issues fuelling conflict on university campuses.

SAUS raised concerns of accumulating student debts and the financial exclusion of students, student accommodation, the refusal of universities to issue academic records and certificates, compromised student safe-

ty and security, academic exclusion and poor conditions of learning, among other things.

Pandor said: "I would like to correct the misunderstanding that I do not take seriously the matters that students have raised with me. This is not the case. In addressing the 12 issues that SAUS raised with me, regarding NSFAS, no qualifying student who was registered in 2018 and who has been admitted to a university and meets the academic criteria for continuation should be prevented from registering in 2019 due to outstanding fees. I am addressing the matter of historic debt of NSFAS-qualifying students in accordance with the above process, and I have committed to make an announcement before the end of March on this matter," she said.

Pandor said the department is implementing the Student Housing Infrastructure Pro-

gramme, which is working on a range of partnerships to provide 200 000 student beds for universities over a period of 10 years. A total 18 221 new beds will be provided over the next three years. The institutions involved are: Nelson Mandela University (2000 beds), University of the Western Cape (2680 beds), North West University Mafikeng (1760 beds), Sefako Makgatho University (2000 beds), University of Fort Hare (1437 beds), University of Limpopo (3008 beds), University of Zululand (3500 beds) and Vaal University of Technology (1836 beds).

"The department is also working with the departments of Human Settlements and Public Works to explore options for off-campus social housing. A range of private developers are also developing properties in the vicinities of our universities. We encourage all forms of activity towards ensuring that efficient, affordable and safe student hous-

ing is available to students across the system," she said.

She gave a detailed response to all the issues raised that are affecting university students.

In conclusion, Pandor said she urges everyone to continue engaging passionately about the challenges faced by all in building a productive, inclusive and sustainable university education system.

"I respectfully request all stakeholders to make use of the multiple channels available to all of us to ensure that we engage in a calm and peaceful way. We cannot support violence and threats and disruptions to the academic programme. I urge the leaders of universities and student formations as well as parents to continue working together to resolve difficult matters. My department and I will do whatever we can to support the higher education sector."