

Study halls, labs being used, as crisis hits hard

By **Yoliswa Sobuwa**

Scores of desperate Wits University students have been forced to sleep illegally in study halls, laboratories and in corridors on campus due to a shortage in accommodation.

When night falls on campus groups of students, some who lost their bursaries and those who are still waiting to be approved by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, saunter on campus to find the best spot to sleep.

One such student is Tshepo* who huddled with his friends in a corner in one of the laboratories at Wits University.

He is one of at least 500 students who have been struggling to find accommodation since the start of the academic year, according to student leader Thato Sakong.

Tshepo and his friends have spent a month alternating their sleeping spots in different faculty laboratories and study halls. The 25-year-old third-year student in metallur-



A Wits student who does not have accommodation sleeps at a desk on campus. They alternate sleeping spots. PHOTOS / SANDILE NDLOVU

Wits students forced to sleep on campus

gical engineering has made peace with the fact that he has nowhere to sleep.

Dressed in skinny jeans, slightly rolled up, and a

T-shirt, Tshepo had a backpack with clothes he needed to change into the following day.

“Sleeping here is very safe for me as I don’t have to worry about being mugged.

“I spend half the night studying or doing projects with my friends. It is only after midnight that I get to sleep, when everyone is gone,” he said.

Tshepo lost his bursary last year after he failed some of the modules. He now uses earnings as a part-time online English tutor to pay for his fees and support his unemployed mother and siblings in Vuwani in Venda, Limpopo.

“Sleeping on a chair is a small price to pay to secure a better future for me and my family. Not having a place to stay used to bother me at first but I have to stay focused.”

Tshepo has to wake up just before 5am every day to take a shower at the campus gym and prepare for his lectures.

On the other side of the campus at another faculty, a group of engineering students were found sleeping on couches in the study hall, including a 25-year-old electrical engineering student from Ladysmith in KZN. He also lost his bursary after failing some modules.

The student, who did not want to be named for fear of victimisation, said he spends most of the evenings studying with a group of other desperate students. They all get to

sleep after midnight.

During the day, the students said they relied on food hand-outs from humanitarian organisation Gift of the Givers.

“All I want is proper accommodation; I get really tired because I don’t get enough sleep. This is a study hall and students are getting free Wi-Fi so I cannot just ask them to switch off the lights because I want to sleep. At times they leave after 2am and I only get two hours of sleep,” he said.

According to Sakong, the students form part of a group of more than 500 who have been struggling with accommodation since the beginning of the year. She said they have assisted 200 students so far.

“We have residences like Witswaters and Esleen but the university refuses to open them for emergency accommodation and claim that the buildings are not owned by Wits,” she said.

Wits University spokesperson Buhle Zuma said the university has set aside R13m for the Wits Hardship Fund. She said the university encouraged students to apply so that they could be assisted with accommodation.

“We have provided urgent accommodation and food to hundreds of students requiring assistance in recent weeks,” she said. “We have also increased the number of beds on our campus to 6,700 beds and we are working with the City of Johannesburg and the province to find a long-term solution to the problem.”

Student leaders at different universities said the Wits situation is also mirrored at other institutions.

Lucky Nkambule, SRC president at Tshwane University of Technology Soshanguve campus, said the institution has 17,000 students and only 10% have accommodation.

* Not his real name

Department’s response

Lunga Ngqengelele, the spokesperson for the department of higher education and training, said addressing student accommodation is a priority.

“R4.1bn has been allocated since 2015/16 until 2020/21 for student housing.

“The department is implementing the Student Housing Infrastructure Programme, which is working on a range of partnerships to provide 200,000 student beds for universities over a period of 10 years. There are 18,221 new beds that will be provided for over the next three years,” he said.

The institutions involved are Nelson Mandela University (2,000 beds), University of the Western Cape (2,680 beds), North

West University Mafikeng (1,760 beds), Sefako Makgatho University (2,000 beds), University of Fort Hare (1,437 beds), University of Limpopo (3,008 beds), University of Zululand (3,500 beds) and Vaal University of Technology (1,836 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 housing is available to students across the system,” Ngqengelele said.



One of the rooms Wits students sleep in after hours.

“It is only after midnight I get to sleep, when everyone is gone