

Fees mayhem spreads

By [Sipho Mabena](#), [Nathi Olifant](#) and [Poppy Louw](#)

21 Sep 2016

Students are adamant that free education is feasible as university protests enter their third day, despite the Treasury saying those who can afford to should pay fees.



Image source: [@FeesMustFallWC](#) on Twitter

Yesterday saw tense stand-offs between students and police and university security at Wits University, with 31 students arrested.

Rocks flew on the steps of the Great Hall, resulting in windows being smashed.

Classes were also disrupted at Tshwane University of Technology and the University of the Free State.

In Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal students marched to the provincial legislature. University of South Africa students have vowed to join the fee-free protests. Some analysts have described free education as unrealistic.

The nationwide protests, which threatened to rival those of the #FeesMustFall campaign a year ago, were triggered by an announcement on Monday by Higher Education Minister Blade Nzimande that fee increases for next year would be decided by individual universities, but that they must be capped at 8%.

Students already on financial aid will pay no increases and the government will assist those whose families earn less than R600,000 a year to ensure that they, too, do not have to foot the bill for the increases.

A presidential commission on the feasibility of free university education is scheduled to deliver its interim report in November.

Call to scrap fees

However, protesters insisted on the scrapping of fees entirely, with some student leaders yesterday referring to the fee-free university education report commissioned by Nzimande in March 2012 as justification for their call.

The report of the working group chaired by Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University vice-chancellor Derrick Swartz, concluded that free higher education for the poor was feasible but would require significant additional funding of both the National Student Financial Aid Scheme and the university system. Its preliminary calculations of the cost of introducing free university education is between R100-million and R1-billion based on 2013 prices and 160,000 students.

Free higher education activist and student at Tshwane University of Technology, Elias Modiba, said it was insulting for the government to plead poverty when R700-billion had been lost to corruption in 20 years.

"We have a report, from a panel of experts, which says free education is feasible. The problem is not money, it is lack of political will," he said.

Banele Malefe, Tshwane University of Technology's Pretoria West campus SRC president, said corporates and mining companies that extracted billions of rands worth of minerals, must be taxed to fund free education.

Unrealistic

However, Ronen Aires, CEO of Student Village, a student development group, said students' demands for free education were unrealistic given South Africa's economic structure. He said free higher education could not happen overnight.

"It is a complicated process that requires a long-term lobbying process. Young people are looking for immediate solutions.

The fee-free revolution will take years to achieve its goals," he said.

Aires said the suggestion that less corruption would translate to availability of funds for free education was a bit off the mark, saying education was getting a huge proportion of the budget as it was. South Africa could not be compared to developed countries like Denmark, which has free higher education.

"The structure of the economy is different. For instance, a third of our taxes go to social grants. Increasing taxes would hit the man on the street really hard and companies are already heavily taxed, with the recent introduction of the skills levy," he said.

The Department of Higher Education and Training has estimated the cost of the shortfall for 2017 fee increases for the poor and middle class was at about R2.6-billion and the Treasury had to find the money somewhere.

The Treasury yesterday said it found itself in a "constrained fiscal environment that is extremely challenging".

"The Treasury has been exploring different mechanisms of finding the money to pay for the subsidy. The department is embarking on a prioritising drive and working with various departments and agencies to address the shortfall," spokesman Xolisa Dodo said.

Political economy analyst Daniel Silke said unless drastic improvements in the economy were made, free tertiary education remained an illusion. "The economy has to grow beyond the present 0.1% or 0.3%." said Silke.

Source: *The Times* via I-Net Bridge

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>