



Media Statement

For immediate release

QUALITY PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION FOR ALL

The current national debates on the financing of public higher education are critically important as they will shape the nature, quality and orientation of public higher education in this country. At the core of these debates is the question of the role, place and purpose of a public university in a society in which poverty, inequality, and unemployment are so pervasive. All role players in the public higher education sector are *ad idem* on the point that our public higher education system is chronically underfunded. Government subsidy dropped from 50% in 1994 to 40% in 2014, while the student proportion of higher education funding grew from 20% in 1994 to 31% in 2014. This decline in state subsidy has forced universities to increase the student fee income in order to maintain the quality of the educational experience of students. This shift in the burden of financing of our public higher education has reached a stage where public higher education has become inaccessible and unaffordable for many academically deserving students. The student protests of October 2015 (#FeesMustFall campaign) were sparked off by the student fee increases which had reached unsustainable levels.

We must acknowledge government's efforts to support students from indigent families through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). This Scheme has made it possible for thousands of academically deserving students to access higher education. The low threshold of family income that is required for one to qualify for NSFAS however excludes many young people whose families cannot afford higher education. The level of funding of NSFAS does not cover the full cost of study and other needs of students. We are as yet to devise a workable and financially sustainable scheme to assist the so-called 'missing middle' students. The work of Mr Sizwe Nxasana (Chairperson of NSFAS) in this regard is very important.

"Our public higher education institutions are very fragile and are under immense strain at the moment and there is an urgent and desperate need to come up with

sustainable mechanisms to fund the system. The best investment that any nation can make is in ensuring that its youth has access to quality and life-changing education. We at Rhodes do not believe that the circumstances of a person's birth should determine their ability to access quality education. We believe that it is a collective responsibility of all of us to ensure that every academically capable young person has access to quality public higher education," said Dr Sizwe Mabizela, Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University.

"Universal fee-free education, as an aspirational goal, is a noble and a worthwhile one to pursue. We should however interrogate the logic, desirability and affordability of such an arrangement in a society where poverty, inequality and unemployment are at every turn. We should also guard against an empty victory in which universal access is to education of dubious quality. Access to mediocre quality education is worse than no access at all. We should therefore safeguard the quality of our public higher education at all costs," continued Dr Mabizela.

In the short term, in order to maintain the level of quality education that Rhodes University is known for and to also ensure a financially sustainable institution, the University would require a minimum increase equivalent to CPI plus 2%, where the 2% corresponds to the Higher Education Price Index (HEPI), in their annual income for 2017. An income that is any less is likely to compromise the financial health of the University and the quality of our academic offerings.

Over the past number of months Rhodes University leadership has developed a financial sustainability plan for the University. Some aspects of this plan include:

- carefully interrogating operations with a view to realising efficiencies where possible;
- embarking on aggressive cost containment efforts which has become a central theme in the decision-making processes;
- exploring possible new sources of income;
- investing in improving throughput and graduation rates;
- engaging academics with a view to improving their scholarly outputs;
- In addition to this, Rhodes University has supplemented NFSAS funding by R40 578 million. In addition to this, other funds were made available for

bursaries, scholarships and merit awards to assist academically deserving students who are in financial need.

In the next few months Rhodes University also will be launching a student financial aid campaign, *Isivivane Fund*, to ensure that no academically deserving student is turned away from the University simply because he/she cannot pay the university fees.

“We at Rhodes University would like to reiterate our commitment to our students to do all in our power to provide them with quality and sustainable education. Meeting the challenges that we are faced with in the higher education sector will demand the collective, collaborative and supportive efforts of university leadership, students, academic and support staff, workers, parents, sponsors and funders, private sector, the state and the entire society of South Africa,” Dr Mabizela concluded.

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Issued on behalf of Rhodes University by Communications and Advancement Division.

For more information and interview opportunities, please contact:

Ms Veliswa Mhlope

Communications Manager

Tel: +27 46 603 8773

Mobile: +27 82 484 0161

Email: v.mhlope@ru.ac.za

There is no better investment that a nation can make than ensuring that its youth has access to quality education.