

## **RESPONSE TO THE DEMANDS PUT FORWARD BY THE STUDENTS' REPRESENTATIVE COUNCIL**

**5 FEBRUARY 2019**

The University is committed to working with the Students' Representative Council (SRC) to address the various issues raised amicably.

The University's responses to the memorandum received from the SRC on Tuesday, 5 February 2019 are reflected below.

**REQUEST: All students who have been admitted to Wits must be able to register**

**RESPONSE:** Students who meet the University's admission requirements are able to register. The University has put a number of support mechanisms in place to assist students who may face challenges. These include a number of Council approved concessions (including no registration fees, the postponement of the first fee payment, enabling students who owe R10 000 or less to roll-over their debt and to register), and the establishment of a Wits Hardship Fund to assist students who may face difficulties.

The University has established a Wits Hardship Fund worth R12 million which is being allocated to students who are in urgent need of assistance. To date, the Wits Hardship Fund Committee:

- has assisted 187 students in the last two weeks,
- awarded funding to about 80 students for urgent accommodation, and is
- evaluating another 200 applications that have been submitted in the last five days.

The NSFAS limit for external accommodation has also been increased to R40,000 for new registrations in 2018 and 2019.

The University processes over R100 million in student financial aid, scholarships and bursaries annually.

**REQUEST: Returning students must be assisted with accommodation by Wits**

**RESPONSE:** The University has increased the number of beds on its campuses to 6 700 beds, and is working with the City and Province to find a long-term solution to this problem. Any possible barriers to entry into Wits' residences for the students from poor and working class families who meet the residences admission criteria, have been removed.

The University has entered into a number of agreements with external service providers to ensure that students are able to access accommodation. Additionally, the University has stipulated that students funded by NSFAS are able to access off-campus accommodation without deposits and/or any upfront payments.

**REQUEST: The opening of a residential building identified by South Point**

**RESPONSE:** The University has negotiated 160 bed spaces with South Point to assist students who have applied for accommodation through the Wits Hardship Fund, set up for this purpose.

**REQUEST: The re-opening of the Witwaters, Esselen and Parktown Village for accommodation**

**RESPONSE:** These buildings are not available for accommodation. The Witwaters buildings belong to the Gauteng Provincial Government's Department of Health and accommodates South African medical students studying in Cuba who have returned to South Africa for further training. Esselen has been sold and the Parktown Village buildings are being used for academic purposes by the Wits Business School.

**REQUEST: No upfront fee payments for all students with a family income of less than R600 000**

**RESPONSE:** The University does not have a registration fee. Poor and working class students, funded by the NSFAS, are not required to make any upfront payments. All students who meet the University's admission rules are able to delay the first fee payment to the end of March 2019. Students who may have challenges with respect to these payments, are assisted through the Wits Hardship Fund set up by the University to assist students who meet the criteria for this purpose.

**REQUEST: All students must be allowed to register and move into Wits residences if granted space despite historical debt**

Poor and working class students (funded by NSFAS) who meet the admissions requirements are able to register and access their accommodation. A number of concessions have been put in place to assist students, including allowing students with a debt of less than R10 000 to register, and enabling those students who have successfully applied through the Wits Hardship Fund for assistance, to register with a debt of up to R100 000. In both instances, students are required to sign an Acknowledgement of Debt form.

**REQUEST: There should be no closing date for the Wits Hardship Fund. The SRC commits to fundraising, the University must follow suit**

**RESPONSE:** The Wits Hardship Fund Committee determines the deadlines for various processes. The Wits Hardship Fund Committee has agreed to allow applications for registration assistance until Friday, 8 February 2019. There is no deadline to apply for accommodation assistance. The University continuously fundraises to address students' needs, and will continue its efforts in this respect, in partnership with the SRC.

**REQUEST: The SRC demands on student representation:**

- a. 4 voting seats on council. One for ARC;

- b. 4 additional seats on the University's Finance Committee. The SRC must hold a seat;
- c. 15 additional voting seats on Senate, 5 of which must be for the ARC.

**RESPONSE:** Student representation in the governance structures of the University is determined firstly by the Higher Education Act (Rule 28.2) and by the University's Statute. Membership of all governance committees is confirmed at the Nominations Committee and approved at Council on an annual basis.

**REQUEST: Private accommodation requesting upfront payments must have their accreditation revoked**

**RESPONSE:** The University has removed the barriers to accessing accommodation for poor and working class students both at its own residences and at private accommodation service providers.

The University has provided a guarantee of payment to the largest private external accommodation provider –South Point, that agreed to accept all NSFAS eligible students without any upfront payments.

Private accommodation service providers are commercial businesses who address in part the dire shortage of accommodation. The University does not accredit establishments although it has approved certain residences to facilitate group leverage and to uphold a preferred standard.

**REQUEST: International students across the continent and the diaspora should be assisted with late registration and accommodation**

The Wits International Office has been engaging with both new and returning students who have been faced with regulatory challenges (i.e. study permits), as well as financial challenges.

The Wits Hardship Fund is open to international students as well and the International Office has been working with the Fees Office where individual cases have been drawn to their attention.

Zimbabwean students in particular who are facing challenges are being assisted by the International Students and Fees Office. The University is engaging through IESA with the Department of Home Affairs and DIRCO to expedite the process.