

## **It Has Been Another Year of Challenges and Protests**

By Siyabonga Mviko

Release date: 19 June 2023

Over the years since 2016, when the biggest student mass protests in the last 10 years ended, there has been sporadic but continuous struggle at various universities. In 2023, students from the Durban University of Technology (DUT); Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), Walter University of Technology (WSU) – all former ‘bush colleges’ in a sense – have been protesting. This includes other less-talked-about universities such as the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), University of Free State (UFS), and even ‘Stellies’ (Stellenbosch University).

The #FeesMustFall (FMF) students’ struggle that took place in 2015-2016 reached a truly national scale and produced somewhat of a cadre, of which much literature has been produced by and about. Because former President Jacob Zuma announced ‘free education for poor students’ at the twilight of his office tenure in 2017, it might have been easy by some to see FMF movement’s conclusion as a resolution of student problems such as a cancellation of historic debt owed to universities and the NSFAS, and the end to the exclusion by financial means. But it has not been the case.

The grievances of this year’s protesting students are both within the context of each university, and its particular location but they are also shared among the institutions, including in the newer universities.

Being a student is meant to be a time when learning and development take place but in South Africa university students often spend precious time pushing back against fee increases, accommodation hikes, and so on. The year’s first semester has recently ended but students at various universities across the country are still waiting for feedback from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS).

On 10 February 2023, students from Stellies held a peaceful picket outside the NSFAS offices. According to student, William Xkhoa Sezoe Blake on Facebook, the picketing took place while the Minister of DHET (Department of Higher Education and Training) was on site. They were able to raise issues with the financial institution, including how the ‘Residence Allowance Cap’ is creating a housing crisis for students at the university.

The crisis of accommodation for students extends to some TVET Colleges as well. NSFAS caps accommodation funding at R45 000 per year for privately owned but accredited accommodation, which may have to be divided into 12 months. Because many students travel from their home provinces to study at universities in other provinces, they need to find places to stay from January and some may have to stay until December in order to write supplementary exams. This means the yearly amount from NSFAS is often not enough since many private accommodations charge more than R3,750 per month.

At UFS, the demands students made in protests during the first quarter of 2023, included resolutions on Gender Based Violence, following accusations leveled against one Sihle Matshoba of the Economic Freedom Fighters. According to a statement released from the South African Students Congress (SASCO) released on 12 February 2023, Matshoba must face charges after a student alleged on a social media platform that he had raped her. The victim was allegedly taken advantage of as she needed accommodation.

According to SASCO, NSFAS confirmed student financial aid application outcomes for 2023 after the UFS's registration window for some courses had closed, leaving NSFAS-dependent students enrolling for those courses unable to register.

Students took to protesting the issues through the annual 'Right to Learn' campaign of SASCO, from 16 January 2023. During the protests, there were arrests, including student leader, Nkosinathi Mtshali of UFS, who can be seen pinned down by at least three police officers in a video posted on 17 February, by Nhlakanipho Marlo, also of SASCO.

In late February, dissatisfied students also took action at the relatively new Sol Plaatje University (SPU) in Kimberley. Registration and orientation were suspended due to these protests according to the university. The other big problem at SPU is student accommodation but the university said on its website that it, "secured another 150 beds in accredited off-campus accommodation" and promised to update the list of accredited residences for students.

The SPU administration also acknowledged the administrative problems with syncing payments with the student's arrival times into nearby areas so as to secure accommodation and complete their enrollment for the year. SPU committed to making agreements with private accommodation landlords for later payment for NSFAS students.

On 8 May 2023, students from the University Currently Known as Rhodes (Rhodes University) in Makhanda, Eastern Cape, took protest action saying the water crisis in the area affected them and that it has been left for very long without any resolution. The city recently renamed Makhanda, and the surrounding areas have had a long-running water problem, forcing residents and students to buy water from big retailers.

In the Western Cape, the big issue for the University of Western Cape and the University of Cape Town students is fee blocks. Many students cannot register while still owing fees to the university. UCT student leaders have demanded in protests that took place from the beginning of February to early March 2023, that students from poor backgrounds be prioritized for accommodation.

Protests continued in the Western Cape, at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) – leading to a temporary shutdown of the institution – and at the

University of Western Cape (UWC) during February this year. According to some disputed claims, students at these universities set buildings and property on fire to voice out their grievances. This was disputed by Siphosethu Mpemana, a student, who said that the fire started when the private security was roped in, putting squarely on them the responsibility for the fire.

UWC Students allege that at the Belhar campus, during the protests the police not only used tear gas against protesting students but also attacked studying students inside the campus' student centre. Students and police had a stand-off where the SAPS fired tear gas and rubber bullets at the protesters who in turn threw stones at their attackers.

In UWC, students from the Bellville campus also took to the streets to complain. At the heart of the issue are the same age-old problems students face. A big part of the reason is NSFAS and a lack of student accommodation. The NSFAS only issued communication about appeals on 31 May 2023, after more than a week of students protesting the lack of allowances to help secure living and housing expenses.

At Wits University, at the start of March 2023, students went on days-long action protesting the lack of student accommodation and against financial exclusion. Some students protested at the university's South Gate on Yale Road and demanded to be let into the premises of the Wits to register. The same protesters also blockaded Empire Road leading to redirected traffic by the Johannesburg Metro Police.

The Wits protesting students wanted the R10 000 upfront fee to be waived to allow for registration, also demanding that those owing less than R150 000 should be allowed to register and study for this year. In what could be a win for private accommodation owners, the students at Wits also said the R45 000 NSFAS cap for accommodation should be done away with.

The Wits SRC president, Aphiwe Mnyamana, was suspended by the university administration on 6 March after the students united struggles with the workers on campus. Students and private security clashed on campus during the strike.

Many of the (former) student leaders who were active during the FMF protests have not commented on the situation at universities, with only a few FMF activists making comments.

Thobani Zikalala, who was a student of UKZN in 2015, said that the current crisis is worse than during FMF because many universities have gone digital, which makes organizing protests challenging for students.

However, Phemelo Motseokae who studies at the North West University pointed out that contact classes have become popular again with some institutions of higher learning.

Students have continued to face the same challenges each year and the Department of Higher Education does not seem to be able to resolve these challenges or want to. If there is no change, South African higher education will see protest as a permanent feature of student life.

*This article is an opinion piece submitted on 19 June 2023. The views expressed by the author do not necessarily reflect those of Karibu! Online or Khanya College. You may republish this article, so long as you credit the authors and Karibu! Online ([www.Karibu.org.za](http://www.Karibu.org.za)), and do not change the text. Please include a link back to the original article.*