The high price of protests at universities

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Universities are looking at insurance as well as maintenance and council budgets to cover the R145 million worth of damage caused to campuses during the #FeesMustFall protests.

In a statement released on Tuesday night, the Department of Higher Education and Training listed the cost of damage to 13 universities across the country between October 2015 and January this year.

The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) sustained the highest amount of damage in the country with a R82m bill. The Star made several attempts to speak to UKZN but had not received a response at the time of publication.

The University of the Western Cape (UWC) sustained the second highest cost of damage, totalling more than R46m, with the University of Cape Town sustaining an estimated R1.4m and Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) R689 850.

With damage at Wits University estimated at just over R1.4m, spokesman Buhle Zuma said yesterday the university’s insurance claims were still being considered by its insurance company.

“The university has had to replace several windows, doors, access card readers and equipment in recent months.”

The University of Johannesburg (UJ), which has damage estimated at R345 000, said it was using funds from its maintenance budget to fix the damage.

“While every rand spent unnecessarily repairing damage is a rand missing from budgets that could empower our students for the future, the relatively low figure for UJ is testimony to our students, who have raised significant issues in a manner conducive to dialogue and the shared search for lasting solutions,” said Mpho Lefapane, deputy vice-chancellor: strategic services at UJ.

“The repairs are covered by our maintenance budget. And we are determined that learning, teaching and research should be able to continue unhindered and in safety throughout the academic year.”

Damage at North West University is at R612 000, but this figure excluded the damage caused to a science lab and the administration building last month.

The Department of Higher Education and Training said the figure would be released with the fuller assessment of costs for 2016 damage to universities, which was being done “to appreciate the scale of damage”.

CPUT spokesman Lauren Kansley said the university would get the money to fix the damage from insurance, and the rest would come from the money they had requested from the university’s council, which was approved.

Department of Higher Education and Training spokesman Khaya Nkwanzya said the department “is particularly concerned about the damage to universities as a result of the 2015 students protests”.

He added: “The net effect of this means that a lot of money must be directed to renovations than to important areas of improving our system and deploying resources to assist poor students.”

Nkwanzya said that while Minister of Higher Education Blade Nzimande insisted that to protest was a democratic right for all, resorting “to violence and damage to property, as has happened repeatedly, constitute a criminal act that must be prosecutable”.

“It is in the light of these events that the minister has met with Police Minister Nathi Nhleko to agree on stronger deployment of police into universities where protests are reported to protect university property, the staff and students from protesters,” Nkwanzya said.

He urged the majority of students to stand up and denounce these acts.

“We are calling on parents, faith-based organisations and society at large to condemn this new phenomenon of criminal behaviour,” Nkwanzya added.

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