Campus protests led to R300m damage

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TSHWANE University of Technology (TUT) suffered damages to property of about R5 million during student protests since last October, the Higher Education Department has said.

The University of Pretoria, meanwhile, reported little damage, while Unisa had yet to calculate the cost. Collectively, universities across the country recorded damage of up to more than R300m.

During the 2015/2016 financial year, universities saw a wave of student protests over a variety of concerns, including fees, insourcing of workers and accommodation. The figures reflected damage that occurred from October 2015 to this year.

The money that could have been used to improve systems and deploy more resources to assist poor students would now be used to repair the damage at the 14 universities, the department noted.

With average fees costing about R30000 a year, the money could have covered the fees of about 10 000 students.

TUT spokeswoman Willa de Ruyter said the bulk of the damage was incurred at Soshanguve campus and to a lesser extent Pretoria West. Damage included physical and fire damage to buildings and a security vehicle, security installations, doors and digital notice boards.

The offices in a number of buildings were damaged and the roof structure in the Gencor Hall set alight in Soshanguve.

There were also many broken windows and fire damage to the tennis clubhouse at the Pretoria West campus. The perimeter fence at the Soshanguve South campus was also damaged.

Unisa spokesman Martin Ramotshela said they had not yet quantified their damages, while Anna-Retha Bouwer of the University of Pretoria said they were fortunate to have very limited damage to their property.

The Central University of Technology, Durban University of Technology and the University of Fort Hare had not yet quantified their damages.

The Vaal University of Technology, Mangosuthu University of Technology, University of Venda, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University had reported little to no damage.

Higher Education Minister Blade Nzimande said he was astounded by the extent of damage to property.

“It cannot be acceptable from us as government that students protests are resulting into violence and destruction of university properties that belong to the public of South Africa and future generations,” Nzimande said.

“We have agreed that law enforcement agencies must work with us in protecting the property, students and staff.”

The minister said the department was worried about a particular fringe within students who had captured and diverted genuine students’ demands for its own ends, through the use of violence and damage to property.

Nationally, the damage was highest at the University North West University at R151m, where a science lab and an administration building were burnt down. Second is the University of KwaZulu Natal at R82m.

Stellenbosch University damages were R352 000, while damage to the University of Johannesburg was R345 000; Walter Sisulu University R351 287; and, the Cape Peninsula University of Technology R689 850.

Protests cost Rhodes University R250 000, Wits University R1.41m and the University of the Free State R2.8m.

Department of Higher Education and Training spokesman Khaya Nkwanyana said some repairs would take two years.

“The net effect is that a lot of money must be directed to renovations (rather) than to important areas of... assisting poor students,” he said.