Protest damage to campuses rockets to R460m

The trust deficit between university students and their vice-chancellors continues to deepen despite South Africa observing 40 years since the 1976 Soweto youth uprising.

Students protested against fee increases and insufficient student funding mechanisms at tertiary institutions last year and early this year, and caused serious damage to infrastructure.

This week, Higher Education and Training Minister Blade Nzimande revealed to the National Assembly that the cost of damage to property during student protests since October stands at about R460 million.

Lwazi Pakade of Stellenbosch University said: “We acknowledge the damages, but all of these things would not have happened if we were listened to in the first place. This happened because we were frustrated, just like with the [the 1976 generation].”

Pakade is one of several students who were involved in protest action that is being investigated by the university and faces suspension or expulsion.

Wits University and the University of Cape Town are two of the other institutions that have in recent weeks handed down suspensions or expulsions to students for their role in the protests.

Students are now calling on Nzimande to intervene on their behalf, arguing that they do not trust universities to hand down fair punishment.

Seth Mazibuko, who was one of the leaders of the 1976 student uprising, told City Press this week that the way universities were dealing with students today was unfortunately a copy of an “apartheid” approach.

“So, those students must be kicked out and handed over to nyaope [drugs]? Hand them over if you want to, hand them over to blessers and to prostitution. Is it because they’re black? Are they disturbing the capitalist class, so they must be taken out?”

Nzimande this week met with vice-chancellors and members of student representative councils about a way forward. But students told City Press they did not think the minister had a sense of urgency; they said he seemed clueless about what progress the presidential commission on funding for higher education was making, if any at all.

There has been relatively minimal protest action in the past few months, but some students say in light of disciplinary proceedings, there is a chance that they will return with a vengeance once the second semester gets under way.

The department is in the process of investigating which universities will be lodging insurance claims to cover some of the costs of the damage.

The department has contributed R40.496 million towards repairing damage at five historically disadvantaged universities.

- University of Fort Hare - R8 million
- Zululand - R4.5 million
- Western Cape - R25.888 million
- Walter Sisulu - R351.287
- Limpopo - R1.786 million

Four universities, including KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Tshwane and Western Cape, have thus far lodged claims with insurers estimated at R106.917 million. Insurers have to date paid out R28.227 million.