

Report seems to be written in support of a particular view

WITH reference to the article (“Shock at hike in tuition fees at Stellenbosch”, Cape Times, November 30), it is necessary to point out some inaccuracies that could have been easily avoided if the journalist had taken the trouble to liaise with the university’s media office.

Unfortunately, the report seems to be written in support of a particular view.

For example, on what number of students is the opening sentence referring to Stellenbosch University (SU) students rejecting the 8percent increase based?

The financial crisis in higher education has highlighted two major seemingly irreconcilable challenges: Deep-seated societal challenges such as poverty and inequality that makes higher education unaffordable for low-income and working-class families; and the chronic underfunding of higher education by the government that is posing a very real threat to the sustainability of universities.

The university council and management are deeply aware of the financial concerns of our students due to the

increasing costs of higher education and the general cost of living.

We have repeatedly said that we support affordable education for low-income and working-class families, and that we would explore every possible avenue to ensure that academically deserving students are not excluded from higher education based on their socio-economic situation.

While fee-free higher education is not currently feasible without substantial government funding, we implement a differentiated approach whereby students from upper middle-class and wealthy families are required to pay full tuition and accommodation fees.

The announcement of an 8percent increase in tuition fees should not come as a shock.

For many months now, an 8percent proposed adjustment in tuition fees has been discussed in various forums, including the media, and it was even given as a guideline by Minister of Higher Education and Training Blade Nzimande, with the undertaking that the government would provide

gap-funding up to 8percent for households earning less than R600 000 per year.

- Students from households with an income of less than R122 000 per year qualify for NSFAS funding. The government will provide funding to cover the 8percent increase in tuition and accommodation fees, and SU will provide an accommodation bursary to fund the additional 2percent increase (8percent plus 2percent).

- In the income bracket between R122 000 and R240 000 per annum (not funded by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, NSFAS), the university provides financial assistance. These students will also be assisted via government’s gap funding and the SU accommodation bursary: so effectively no rise in tuition and accommodation fees for them.

- Students from families with a household income of between R240 000 and R600 000 will pay exactly the same tuition and accommodation fees as what they paid in 2015 and 2016.

- Students from families that earn

more than R600 000 per annum are in a better position to pay tuition and accommodation fees, and the increases will be applicable to them.

SU applies the same means test that NSFAS has been using to determine the annual household income of students.

It is an instrument to calculate the contribution of the family of the student towards the total study costs and the financial assistance the student is eligible for on the basis of the family’s total gross income per year.

Eligible students have to apply for financial support and provide the required documentation.

At SU, various committees – all with student representation – are involved in the budget process.

Various communiqués were sent to students via e-mail, with follow-up on social media, explaining the financial situation in higher education; the impact of the zero percent increase for 2016 and how the university assists academically deserving students who cannot afford to pay tuition fees.

In addition, a webpage was created

to explain complex financial matters in a user-friendly way.

University staff also made presentations to various student bodies.

SU has been following the same annual budget cycle and process for a number of years.

The budget process starts in May and is concluded with the approval of the integrated budget for the following year by the university council at its very last meeting of the year: in 2016 it was on November 28, followed by the customary statement after the meeting.

The timing of the announcement is exactly as it has been for many years.

Therefore the innuendo that it was purposefully held back for particular reasons is simply inaccurate.

It is really unfortunate that universities are made out to be the “villain” whereas all institutions are sincerely grappling to find a balance between financial sustainability, academic excellence, realistic expectations and affordable study fees.

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