



**29 October 2017**

## **Universities SA Response to Statement of the Presidency**

While we welcome the long-awaited release of the final report of the *Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education Funding and Related Issues* chaired by Justice JA Heher, Universities SA (USAf) is deeply concerned with the way in which it has been released. Not only has it been leaked to the public through a City Press report, but it has not been accompanied by the government's response to the recommendations, and a statement on the process to be followed now that the report is in the public domain. This failure then inflames a highly tense political environment and could expand the protests at universities thereby compromising the final year examinations currently underway in most institutions.

USAf's major concern at this stage is the manner in which this report has been brought to the public's attention. USAf and a number of SRCs had previously requested the Presidency to enable an engagement with both constituencies prior to the release of the report. This unfortunately has not yet happened. This failure and the manner in which this report has entered the public domain indicates a certain irresponsibility and a deep lack of understanding of the conditions on our campuses. We are concerned that the leaking of this report could mean that those with self-serving intentions are manipulating the issues for other than noble outcomes.

For now, we have to think of this Report as an important document that begins a significant national process of engagement, discussion and debate around one of the most important socio-economic issues raised in the last ten years, that of fee-free higher education. At the very least, we would hope that the Presidency immediately releases a clearly delineated process document that lays out exactly what steps will be followed as we head towards the end of this academic year and the start of the next.

USAf's immediate primary concern is that the examinations process at all 26 universities are brought to a successful conclusion and that the preparations for a successful start to the 2018 academic year are effectively prosecuted. We call on all stakeholders, both internal constituencies and external ones, to work together, in the first instance, to ensure that the examinations are brought to a successful end. Any alternative outcome will have devastating consequences for slightly more than a million students and the greatest impact will unfortunately, be on students (and families) who come from financially-stressed backgrounds.

There's need now for cool heads, responsible actions and clear commitments to safeguard the successful participation of students in the examinations process and to protect the higher education system as an engine for social mobility, economic growth and social renewal.

USAf will be involved at many levels in the process of engagement related to the Report of the Presidential Commission. It is an important contribution to helping South Africa come to grips with this very important issue.

USAf is a representative association of all 26 public universities.

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