

MEDIA BRIEFING

21 September 2016

Introduction

I have on a number of occasions since my arrival said to people that WSU looks a lot better from within than from a distance. Despite its known difficulties, WSU is an important institution, from an historical perspective, but also when its potential is considered. With students numbering over 28, 000, a budget of around R1.3 billion and a provider of employment for 1300 permanent staff and a further 2200 contract and temporary staff, the University is a significant player, in the Province and at national level. It is therefore vital that its status in society is properly restored.

WSU's Vision and Mission Statement emphasises the desire to be an African comprehensive university in which its core business is responsive to local, regional and national developmental priorities. While maintaining its traditional role as a centre of intellectual pursuit, the University also considers itself to be a societal resource centre with a mandate to infuse regional, national and continental development into its educational role.

For many young people, access to, and a qualification from WSU serves as an entry point to the job market, or a springboard towards another. The fact therefore remains: 95% of our students come from the eastern part of the Eastern Cape Province, primarily from rural areas, and the value that WSU adds to young people's growth and development, and in providing further opportunities to them, should not be underestimated.

Staffing

I am pleased to report that we are finally close to settling our management team. In September we welcomed the following executive managers into our ranks:

- Prof Victor Mtetwa, Campus Rector, Butterworth;
- Mr Sinethemba Mpambane, Executive Director, Operations and ICT;
- Ms Pateka Ntshuntshe-Matshaya, Senior Director Library Services.

And we have made offers to fill the post of DVC Academic Affairs and Research as from January 2017 and the Executive Director, Human Resources at an earlier date, and we are waiting for replies.

I am happy that we now have a strong leadership team in place, with a good blend of experienced internal members and new members with experience at other universities. We now have to work on developing a cohesive strategy for taking the Institution forward.

Higher Education Context

The student fees issue has dominated the Higher Education landscape. Students are demanding a fee-free system, while universities have called for an increase to match the higher education sector inflation. The Minister has now left it to Universities to decide their own fees.

As with most other universities, financial sustainability remains the key institutional risk and Management is giving this issue close attention. WSU Management is currently determining the expenses side of the budget and reflecting on the implications of the Minister's recent announcement. Once Management has determined what is needed, it will engage internal stakeholders – the SRC and Labour Unions – to enquire what they think is best for the Institution. Thereafter Management will table a proposed budget to Council for final determination at its meeting towards the end of November. The time frames are in line with past budget processes.

Regarding the broader issue of fee-free education:

The University made submissions to the Heher Commission which was appointed by the President to investigate the feasibility of free-free tertiary education. Earlier, the Minister had indicated to Parliament that, should there be no fee increases, WSU is projected to have the largest deficit of all the tertiary institutions. The information was based on a CHE modelling process based on 2014 financial statements, and certainly did not consider our current post-turnaround situation.

We are currently living within our means, although to achieve such discipline, service provision expenditure has been cut to the bone; human resources expenditure is insufficient to operate effectively; backlog and ongoing maintenance has been put on hold; and there is no cushion to meet unexpected expenditure. So, even though we are certainly financially stressed, the situation, I believe, is not as dramatic as has been portrayed.

In its submission Management pointed out:

- The extent to which it is reliant on government funding. In 2016 its state subsidy (R586m) and its NSFAS allocation (R571m) together constitute 85% of the University's total income;
- That the traditional fee-paying financing model is not sustainable income-generating option for an institution like WSU, given its recent history of bad debt that has had to be funded from other government sources;
- That WSU fee increases in the past were below inflation which resulted in a reduced maintenance and capex provisions;
- That our residence provision (27.8% of undergraduate students) is grossly inadequate and it is unlikely to be redressed in the near future;
- That insourcing demands will create additional financial risks;
- That, to ensure some kind of fee parity, fee parameters should be set at sectoral level, with Councils having the autonomy to set fees within those broad parameters; and
- That we favour a hybrid system in which fees are paid and/or subsidised according to persons' ability to afford fees. It is in principle acceptable to have a fee-based model coupled with a strong financial support system to prevent inequities.

The reality is that of our 26988 undergraduates, 24 324 (90%) applied for NSFAS funding in 2016 and 19 604 (72.6%) qualified for support. We are still processing claims, so the figure might even be higher. Therefore, in terms of current nomenclature, approximately a quarter of our students fall within the "missing middle" category, while by far the majority are unlikely to afford university fees.

The Minister's recent announcement therefore appears to cater for the needs of the majority of WSU students.

A key strategic issue

Without doubt, the University needs to prioritise student living and learning conditions. While there are some good quality residences in Mthatha and Buffalo City, the quality of many of our residences leaves much to be desired. Much of the poor living conditions that students find themselves in may be attributed to over-crowding. The statistics are as follows:

	U/Grad student	University-owned beds	Official private accommodation beds	Total number of beds	Percentage
WSU	26988	4848 + 384 (2017)	3476	8324 (8708)	30.8 (32.3)%
BCC	6905	254 + 384 (2017)	2744	2998 (3128)	43.4 (45.3)%
Butterworth	5662	898	0	898	15.9%
Mthatha	12212	3696	432	4128	33.8%
Queenstown	2209	0	300	300	13.6%

- WSU currently supplies 7 500 beds to students across the four campuses – 4548 in University-owned residences and 2952 in private accommodation;
- Only 27,8% of its undergraduate students are officially in residence accommodation;
- Residences are over-crowded with non-fee paying students thus giving rise to unacceptable living conditions, as well as excessive strain on bulk infrastructure and maintenance, without generating income from the unregistered users;
- Failure to improve living conditions and teaching facilities will lead to student unrest and additional security cost;
- In my view, we need at least a further 12 500 beds are needed to provide a semblance of appropriate living and learning conditions for around 75% of our undergraduate students.

Some recent highlights in the student sphere

Cultural

The Butterworth drama troupe performed well and their shows were in demand and well attended at the Grahamstown Festival.

A team of 40 students was chosen from all campuses to represent WSU in the Enactus National Competition. They won 1 of the categories sponsored by Nedbank. A group of 8 (executive members) will go for an all-expenses paid training trip to Johannesburg to be trained on standards used for judging National Competitions. They were also given a desktop to use for their project.

WSU did pretty well at the recent South African Tertiary Institution Choral Association Festival.

- The Buffalo City choir achieved position 2 in the Tenor Solo, position 2 in the female voice category, position 1 in the own choice category, position 2 for the vernacular piece and position 2 for the western piece. Overall they came second, while they were first in the gold category.

- Queenstown achieved position 1 for vernacular piece, position 3 for western piece and they won a trophy for the best dressed choir.
- Mthatha took position 2 for the vernacular piece, position 3 for the western piece, position 3 for the indigenous section and were overall winners and winners in the platinum category.

Sport

- Although sport is played in all campuses we select the WSU Teams for National Competitions from internal trials.
- Our WSU A Rugby side lost in the final Provincial Super League but qualified for participation in the 2017 Rugby Shield Competition sponsored by FNB during the USSA Tournament hosted by WSU in July.
- Our Karate student (Anele Madlala, Mthatha Campus) is a champion (under 70 kg) in the All Africa Student Games.
- WSU won Silver in the National USSA Ballroom Dance Competition

Health Services

The University's Faculty of Health Sciences upholds a mandate to prioritise six fundamental pillars that will ensure not only the development of the faculty but also our communities. In a formidable collaboration with the Eastern Cape Department of Health, WSU has launched provincial medical units to support local medical students and registrars and in so doing, the Faculty has partnered with government, non-governmental organisations and civil society to empower local communities. In partnership with the Eastern Cape Department of Health:

- We have established Academic Community Health Centres (CHCs) such as Mhlakulo, Ngangelizwe, Baziya and in Lusikisiki.
- We have set up district teaching & learning complexes.
- We have worked towards increasing access to specialist services for the disadvantaged communities.
- We have established the Eastern Cape Regional Training Centre, which made a dent on the burden of HIV and AIDS in this Province through the provision of in-service training for health professionals.
- We have placed senior medical students in district hospitals for a 20 week-long period of training to retain medical professionals in the rural health districts.
- In the fight against poor access to specialist care, we are training medical specialists in various disciplines such as obstetrics & gynaecology, paediatrics, family medicine, anaesthesia, internal medicine and surgery. The number of medical specialists is gradually increasing owing to this initiative amongst others.