

Student housing crisis hits NMMU

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NMMU students have resorted to sleeping in TV rooms and laboratories while others squat with friends and family amid what the Black Students Stokvel (BSS) has called a housing crisis at the university.



Image source: <http://international.nmmu.ac.za>

A change in the institution's debt resolution programme and slow or no responses from the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) are among the reasons for the university's inability to provide accommodation for all the students who need it.

Some students say they simply cannot afford off-campus accommodation.

The BSS has so far assisted 60 students with accommodation at a hall which students have renamed Marikana House on the south campus, where they sleep on mattresses.

Second-year LLB law student Lawrence Lwanga, 20, of the BSS, said the organisation had called for students who needed accommodation to come forward.

"The numbers are not reflective of the magnitude of the problem because we have only been in operation since Friday," he said.

Lwanga said students arrived on campus and were left stranded.

They went to the department of student housing where they were then referred to off-campus accommodation, which was already full.

"Students have nowhere to go "" they sleep on car park benches, in labs and even classrooms," Lwanga said.

Last year, the university allowed students who fell in the zero-expected family contribution programme to register without a down payment and have their debts for 2015 "resolved".

But NMMU said recently it would not accept any new students on the programme.

Final-year information technology student Lindi Ntakana, 23, of Bizana, said he was squatting with a friend as his debt resolution status was pending approval.

"After being kicked out of temporary accommodation at the Sanlam Student Village because I was done with my exam, I was stranded and had to sleep on a couch in the TV room at Veritas Residence on campus," Ntakana said.

His debt of R23,000 continued to be a stumbling block to his registration.

First-year BA student Nkqubela Chithelo, 21, of Knysna, said he was struggling to get accommodation as he waited for the NSFAS to respond to his application.

He is living with relatives at Wells Estate in Port Elizabeth.

"I have had to miss my 7.45am and 6.20pm lectures because of transport," Chithelo said.

Second-year public relations student Sive Kupati, 20, of Mthatha, said not having accommodation had been stressful.

Kupati registered through the debt resolution programme at NMMU last year.

He is staying temporarily at Kings Residence in North End, where he was placed by the student housing department.

But he will have to move out again tomorrow because his NSFAS issues have not been resolved.

"It's been very hard. I am finding it hard to concentrate in class and I'm even thinking of dropping out," he said.

Two stranded NMMU students, who did not want to be named, have spent the past five days sleeping on benches at the train station.

The students, one from the Northern Cape and the other from Gauteng, are unable to afford the R1000 deposit and R2300 monthly rent for off-campus accommodation.

The 25-year-old from Hanover said he had high hopes of studying BA Administration, but it would appear his dream had been dashed.

For the past five days they have been sleeping at the station, unable to bathe.

"It's hard. I cannot attend lectures in this condition. The whole episode makes me feel bad. I am very angry," he said.

"We are thinking of hiking [home]."

Shaun Dundelo, the EFF Student Command representative in the interim SRC structure, said they had assisted more than 100 students to access temporary accommodation.

He attributed the lack of available housing to the South Point residence in Central no longer being NMMU-accredited.

"The capacity of South Point is about 800 beds and without these beds there is a gap. This is the main problem," Dundelo said.

He hoped more students would be accommodated after an additional 250 beds at accredited off-campus properties were made available.

"The institution needs to build more on-campus accommodation and if that's not possible, on-campus accommodation should be made available to first-year students while senior students stay off-campus," Dundelo said.

NMMU spokeswoman Zandile Mbabela said the university could only accommodate 3500 students at on-campus residences.

"We have heard rumours of students who are sleeping in the labs but this has yet to be verified," she said.

"The university staff has provided accommodation to some of the stranded students out of compassion."

Mbabela said the student housing department had not been officially made aware of students who did not have accommodation.

She said facilities and maintenance problems were among the reasons cited for South Point losing its accredited status.

NSFAS spokesman Kagisho Mamabolo said the scheme had processed all applications from NMMU and had already approved more than 2496 from new students.

"We have so far sent messages to close to 200,000 applicants [across the country] and we are sure that we will complete the messages before the end of this month," Mamabolo said."

Additional reporting by Hendrick Mphande

Source: Herald