

**Summarised Focus on Access Matters:  
Supplement to VC's Quarter 1 Report to Council**

**27 March 2025**

**1. Introduction and broader context**

- a. Universities face recurring structural and systemic challenges, including an imbalanced post-school education system where universities enrol far more students than TVET colleges. Chronic underfunding (compared to peer economies) and uneven student distribution across knowledge fields, shaped by schooling outcomes, hinder national development, skills development, workforce alignment, and youth employment.
- b. Further, South Africa's access ambitions for the PSET sector are constrained by a stagnant economy; and resource requirements across socio-economic sectors. Despite government efforts to support access for disadvantaged students, public universities cannot, and could not, meet soaring demand, exacerbated by record-high 2025 matric pass rates.
- c. These structural mismatches create persistent barriers for students seeking access to universities, reflecting deeper flaws in our education system and political economy of higher education. This was a focus of a Council discussion in a seminar last year, and in several Council engagements with regards to the functionality of the University system.
- d. Institutional instability occasioned by student protests, happened at more than 10 universities, including our own, at the beginning of the 2025 academic year. These protests stem from both external, sector-wide issues (beyond any single institution's control) and internal/local factors relating to our own university-specific access barriers and operational glitches. The University has addressed these (internal and external drivers) holistically to stabilise operations,

safeguard the University's communities, protect the academic project; whilst at the same time striving to widen access for students.

- e. The National Student Financial Aid Scheme's (NSFAS) administrative inefficiencies have compounded existing socioeconomic challenges faced by students, intensifying challenges for both students and universities, which are often the catalyst for student-driven institutional stability.
- f. As is standard, the Q1 report theme centres on **student access**, examining 2025 enrolment status, challenges at the start of the academic year, and mitigation strategies. As Council is aware, authorities at a national level are closely tracking post-school sector readiness for 2025, with two critical engagements with our University in February, which I'll briefly mention.

## 2. External engagements to assess readiness

- a. The first engagement was the visit by the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Nobuhle Nkabane, and a contingent of senior officials from the DHET and NSFAS, to Mandela University on 17 February. The delegation conducted site visits at the Financial Aid Office, the new student residences on North Campus, and the Science Centre where a presentation on various dimensions of student access was made, including funding and accommodation.
- b. Following the Minister's visit, the University (together with the University of Mpumalanga) presented to the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Higher Education and Training on 21 February 2025 regarding 2025 academic year readiness. Joined by Council members (led by Deputy Chair Ms Mbaco), the top management team, union reps, the SRC, and the Institutional Forum leadership, we outlined student access initiatives and sector-wide/institutional challenges. Today's Council meeting will consider a report on the University's engagement with the PPC. Suffice to say, our reading is that access and

success matters, as well as the state of governance of universities, are receiving focused attention which, if harnessed positively, can only propel our sector forward.

### 3. Readiness and status: 2025 Academic Year

#### a. Admissions

By the end of 2024, the University received a total of 188 853 applications and issued 54 693 provisional admission offers for the target of 8 556 first-time entering (FTEN) spaces.

As part of the new merit-based admission procedures, enrolment caps were not implemented when the cycle opened in April 2024 but only when the final selection took place for all applicants in January. Applicants who met the minimum admission requirements during the application cycle were provided provisional acceptance.

#### b. Registration

Online registration opened on 13 January 2025, with assisted registration taking place from 3 to 7 February. Registration closed on 9 February, with the late registration period extended to 28 February 2025.

#### *Total student enrolments*

By 13 March 2025, the University had enrolled a total of **33 511** students, which exceeds the target for 2025 (33 326) by 0.6% but is still within the 2% variance allowed by the DHET.

#### *First-time entering students*

The same trend was observed for FTEN students with the University exceeding its enrolment target for a second consecutive year. As of 13 March 2025, **8 790** FTEN students had enrolled compared to the target of 8 556, which is 2.7% above the target.

### ***Undergraduate student enrolments***

In total, **30 580** undergraduate students have enrolled at the University compared to the target of 29 911 (2.2% above the target). Undergraduate students constitute **91%** of the total student population at Nelson Mandela University.

### ***Postgraduate enrolments***

As of 13 March, **2 931** postgraduate students had enrolled for the 2025 AY. While this is a slight improvement compared to the same time last year, the University is 10.8% below the target of 3 285 for 2025. However, postgraduate registration will continue until the end of April.

Each faculty has been assigned a postgraduate access professional to handle applications. This shifting of postgraduate admissions to faculties is showing improvements in turnaround times, and the quality of engagements with applicants. The Enrolment Management Committee is conceptualising a proposal to address administrative bottlenecks. This is expected to be completed by the end of 2025.

### ***International student enrolments***

There has been an increase in applications from international students for full-degree studies. As of 13 March 2025, 594 international students had enrolled, against a target of 842 for 2025 (29.5% below the target). International students constitute nearly 2% of total student enrolments at Nelson Mandela University, mostly from other African countries.

Visa issues continue to impact international student enrolments, particularly for embassy and consulate applications. Key interventions to boost enrolments include expanding financial support, strengthening partnerships and marketing in key regions, and developing flexible hybrid and online offerings.

#### **4. Reflection on student success**

- a. We have noted, with concern, the decline in our student success rate from 81% in 2022 to 74% in 2023. The 2024 success rate data will only be available at the end of April.
- b. This decline occurred despite a wide range of academic, psycho-social, and co-curricular support interventions aimed at ensuring that students are given every opportunity to succeed. These include student success coaching, academic advising, the early identification of academically vulnerable students, supplemental instruction, and peer-led mentoring.
- c. The DVC Learning and Teaching has commissioned an institutional research study to be conducted by the LT Collab to identify the root causes of the decline in student success complemented by data analytics produced by the Office for Institutional Strategy. The findings of this research will be used to inform future-focused strategies and interventions to improve student success.

#### **5. Determinants of student access: Financial and support aspects**

##### **5.1. Financial/funding aspects**

###### **a. NSFAS**

- As of 14 March, 59 257 applicants had NSFAS statuses. Of these students, 20 493 had registered, with 8 284 being first-time entering (FTEN) students.
- NSFAS has confirmed that universities may distribute the learning allowances until the end of June 2025, which is positive news for our laptop scheme for FTEN, NSFAS-funded students.

## **b. Concessions**

- The concessions system is a relief mechanism to enable qualifying, academically deserving students to register with outstanding debt and be exempt from down-payment on tuition and on-campus accommodation.
- The University grants concessions to qualifying academically deserving students who are unfunded and whose family income does not exceed R600 000. Qualifying students sign an acknowledgement of debt (AOD), and appeals for those that do not qualify are subjected to a case-by-case review.
- A Task Team with representation from SRC, Student Governance, and Financial Aid meets regularly during registration to resolve bottlenecks. Any escalations are directed to the Dean of Students and ED Finance for final determination by the VC.
- The sustainability of concessions depends on the University ensuring that only academically deserving and financially needy students are considered, and that concession conditions are honoured. The concessions, also applicable for NSFAS students who become unfunded, only cater for registration and tuition fee deferment.

## **c. Student debt**

- In 2023, the University's debt ratio was just under 29% whereas the Universities South Africa (USAf) target is 20%.
- Over the past two years, 9 799 students owed the University nearly R358.5 million in student debt.
- This indicates the need for ongoing close monitoring of this sustainability indicator, along with concessions protocols, to reduce and alleviate the University's debt exposure.

#### **d. Bursaries and scholarships**

- In total, R117 million has been budgeted by the University for the 2025 financial year for student bursaries: R57.3 million for undergraduate and R59.7 million for postgraduate studies respectively. The University has also budgeted R14.4 million to assist staff and their spouses and children with their studies.
- The Presidential PhD Initiative (PPI), hosted by the NRF with R1 billion in initial seed funding from the National Skills Fund, is part of a government strategy to boost research capacity by increasing PhD graduates in South Africa. Faculties have been encouraged to respond to the call for proposals.

### **5.2. Support and operational determinants**

#### **a. Student accommodation**

- The national challenge of insufficient affordable, quality student accommodation acutely affects Nelson Mandela University. As of 14 March, 5 238 beds were fully occupied in University residences on the Gqeberha and George campuses.
- Nearly 15 100 students live in off-campus accommodation, requiring close collaboration with NSFAS to streamline funding. NSFAS caps accommodation for university students based on location. The cap for students in metro areas is R50 000 per annum, while it is R41 000 for all other areas.
- The Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality falls within the R50 000 NSFAS cap, but our George campus does not, as some accredited off-campus accommodation exceeds this cap. In 2024, the University received permission to raise the George cap to R50 000. We await confirmation of the 2025 cap amount.

- The University faces legacy issues in on-campus residence pricing due to the merger process. On-campus accommodation fees range from R34 420 to R65 620 per annum. Management is exploring ways of reviewing on-campus accommodation fee structures to be in line with cost drivers and sustainability considerations.

#### **b. Student transport**

- Mandela University offers a dual student transportation system:
  - The first is an inter-campus shuttle for transporting students who, due to limited accommodation at Second Avenue and Missionvale campuses, are housed at North and South campuses. These shuttles enable students to attend classes at the two campuses. This operation is funded from student levies and Council allocations.
  - The second transport operation emerged from creating an off-campus student accommodation system to meet growing demand. Accredited providers were required to transport students daily to University. However, due to taxi violence, this practice was halted by an agreement that Mandela University would provide the service on an agency and user-pay basis. Accredited service providers pay for this function.
- With effect from 2024, NSFAS implemented a centralised student accommodation accreditation system. Currently, the University has less than 15% of student accommodation in the central business district of Gqeberha and the rest is with NSFAS. This has negatively impacted the shuttle operation's viability and sustainability.
- Against the foregoing contexts, shuttle services began on 8 January 2025 for medical school students and on 10 February 2025 for other students. The number of student transport users increased, with bookings surging by 34% this year, partly due to new off-campus residences accredited by NSFAS.



- Due to increased demand, shuttle numbers rose from 167 in 2024 to 182 in 2025, with 151 operating during the day, 30 at night, and one for persons with disabilities. More trips were added between Wilderness and the George campus.
- Management is reviewing the student transportation system due to NSFAS factors and ongoing conflicts in the taxi industry. The future off-campus transport options are being considered, focusing on financial viability, service efficiencies, and safety of staff and students.

**c. Safety and security measures**

- The University conducted a 360-degree security assessment to identify safety and security risks across all seven campuses. Due to increased crime, infrastructural changes were identified to enhance security and move towards a closed campus model. Meantime, we continue to strengthen security technologies deployment across campuses. An amount of R20 million has been allocated to enhancing camera capability and related security digital technologies.
- To build partnerships against crime, the University launched the Campus Community Safety Forum in Gqeberha and George in 2024. The Forum includes internal stakeholders, SAPS, security providers, youth structures, and the Departments of Safety and Security and of Social Development. The collaborative effort has shown positive developments such as improved intelligence sharing, joint patrols, and safety campaigns for students and staff, including collaborative publicising of emergency 24-hour toll-free numbers. The University has also improved campus and residence access control.
- In response to armed robberies at Missionvale campus, the University has deployed armed security, and has extended this service to all Gqeberha campuses in the evenings. An arrangement has been made with private rapid response security services to ensure added protection of students and staff in

adjacent streets. In addition, SOS towers are operational to alert the control room of any incidents.

**d. Infrastructure readiness**

- From 2024, the People and Operations portfolio introduced campus-wide walkabouts to assess infrastructure readiness for the academic year's commencement. Observations and findings are documented for immediate correction and reported to the Estate and Facilities Management Committee meetings.
- The University has a funded five-year capital maintenance programme that is implemented by the infrastructure department.
- As part of improving service responsiveness, an integrated workplace management system has been implemented. This includes the appointment of a professional at a Deputy Director level in the ISSO division to interface with faculties and divisions, ameliorate service experiences, and attend to urgent requests.

**6. Comment on Gender-Based Violence (GBV)**

- a. The University has a zero-tolerance policy towards GBV and is committed to creating a safe, inclusive environment for all students and staff. The University promotes awareness campaigns and runs educational programmes and workshops to prevent GBV. Survivors have access to counselling, medical assistance, and legal support through dedicated University structures.
- b. The Commission for Gender Equality issued a report late last year based on its research at Nelson Mandela University and two other universities. The report highlighted disturbing issues including, amongst others, alleged abuse

of power by male student leaders in allocating residence rooms; and the alleged poor handling of LGBTQIA+ complaints.

- c. We thank Council for the public statement issued supporting the University's efforts to eliminate GBV and sexual harassment on our campuses. We welcome the establishment of an Inquiry Panel by the Executive Committee of Council (EXCO) to investigate GBV and Sexual Harassment on all Nelson Mandela University campuses. Staff and students have been invited to make written submissions in line with the Panel's mandate outlined in the Terms of Reference (ToR).
- d. In response to advice of EXCO of Council, the University has, during the 2025 admissions period, intensified its anti-GBV campaigns, strengthened its management and oversight in the residence space, extended both its safety and security operations, as well as its psycho-social support services. An addendum outlining these measures is attached to the Q1 Council report.

## **7. Conclusion**

In closing, I wish to express our gratitude to Council for its unwavering commitment to good governance and its diligent oversight of the work of our University.