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Academic calls for caution on limiting university fees

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A LEADING academic says forcing universities to cap their tuition fees could threaten the existence of several institutions.

Professor Jonathan Jansen, dean of the Education Faculty at the University of Pretoria, says such a move, coupled with student enrolment planning which aims to limit the number of students that universities can register, would be very destructive for some institutions.

Jansen was reacting to the announcement by Education Minister Naledi Pandor during her department's budget vote debate in Parliament on Friday that she was considering placing a limit on tuition fees.

Pandor said she was concerned that rising tuition fees were restricting access to uni-

versity for many poor students.

She said student fee incomes had doubled over the past five years from R2,5 billion to R5 billion and that student fee collections had become a critical resource issue in higher education.

"Institutions have funded increases in their volumes of activity by raising tuition fees to unreasonably high levels," she said.

She said this had put pressure on state funding done through the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) which has just under R1 billion in reserves to dish out as loans to students.

Pandor said while fees had more than doubled, NSFAS funding had only increased by 30 percent during that period.

Jansen said the minister was using extremist examples to make policy.

"Is there enough money to enable universities to operate in a responsible fashion?" he asked.

He said subsidies being offered to universities were already too low with teacher education being funded on the lowest grid.

This meant that some universities could never survive if they were to depend entirely on the subsidies, he said.

Jansen said the minister should instead look into increasing funds available for financial aid and scholarships to needy students.

But the acting vice-chancellor of the University of Limpopo, Professor Mahlo Mokgalong, said he would welcome the standardising of tuition fees. He said this needed to be coupled with enough subsidies to ensure institutions remain operational.

Mokgalong said his univer-

sity, which charges about R12 000 per year in tuition fees for a BSc degree, was already on the lowest ebb of tuition fees compared to other institutions.

"High tuition fees give the impression that some courses are better than others and I don't believe in that," he said.

Pandor said such a move would be coupled by an increase in the amount of subsidies offered to these institutions.

South African Students Congress secretary-general Terror Yako welcomed the move, saying his organisation has been singing this chorus for years. He said an investigation needed to be conducted to determine why university fees were rising at such an alarming rate.

"Each year students face financial exclusions because of fees that sky-rocket," he said.