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 university for many poor students.

"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 university, 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.