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My Experience With NSFAS

I have started studying ND: Electrical (L/C) Engineering at DUT in 2014. I have applied for financial assistance on time, meaning I did my application while I was in matric. The application I did was with the CAO Form where you indicate that you need financial assistance or not. This I believe was going straight to the institution when NSFAS personnel or officers were still in our institutions unlike today where we are told that the applications are to be sent directly to the NSFAS main offices.

When I got to DUT I was told I need to pay for my own registration (including Residence deposit fee), before I even start the process of NSFAS applications, of which for me I do not understand since not all of us afford to even have a single thousand rands for registration. In this case my registration was R2100 and residence deposit was R2100. In total I needed R4 200. Honestly if you are from a disadvantaged background, trust me to save for a R1000 is a mission.

When I got to DUT was told that the NSFAS applications are all done online now, so we need to send our applications online to NSFAS offices. After the online application then wait for the sms approving your application. That bear in mind it takes days and days of waiting, lecturers start lecturing they wait for no one. So we always miss out on classes because of the delays from NSFAS. Luckily after sometime they responded and approved my application. They paid for everything I owed that time. That was for my 1st semester.

NSFAS should fund students as from registration fees all the way up. Reason I am saying that is because of what I have stated above. I had no money to register and I needed a place to stay as I was not a local student. I had to go to SRC offices to ask for assistance with the R4 200 to pay for my registration and residence deposit. If SRC did not give me that money, it means I wouldn't have furthered my studies.

When I was doing my second semester the new process did not work in favour for me. I had so many challenges with my registration process it was delayed. I waited for the SMS approving me to continue with my second semester studies, because without receiving that sms from NSFAS nothing you can do. I was blocked for the second semester which unfortunately the financial aid officers on campus could not assist me till I receive the sms permitting them to unblock me. I then made means to stay at relatives place in the meantime and it was still far from campus but I had no choice. I started attending classes without registration which was a risk.

Later in the semester NSFAS responded and paid for my fees. But there was another amount which they did not pay for about R9 800 and when I enquired about it from financial

aid officers on campus they referred me to NSFAS direct and tried contacting NSFAS and NSFAS said they paid everything for me I should ask on campus what happened.

This kept on going in cycles and cycles no one was saying a straight answer about the amount which was left unpaid. The unpaid amount of R9 800 carried over to the 3rd semester which then was a huge challenge again. It blocked me to register. For almost a month I had no residence, I was unregistered. Same challenge as the previous semester.

Just imagine if I decided to stay at home because NSFAS took its own time to respond I would have missed out on most lectures. So you just need to pray that they pay for your fees before examinations period starts as you cannot write exams unless you are a registered student. Again I could not do most of my practical classes as those you need to be registered for you to be able to get access to them. This is really a challenge that most NSFAS dependent students go through. I received the sms late in March in that semester, only then I was able to get a residence and attend practicals and classes freely.

The R9 800 amount which was unpaid from the second semester was still un-resolved, they kept on carrying it over. The financial aid assistant from campus started now to really investigate why this fee was not paid and kept on recurring all along. The NSFAS officers after being called by the financial aid officer from DUT only then they said they will pay that fee. Another challenge I had other than tuition fees, residence and registration fee, I also experienced meals challenge. I could not receive the monthly meals fee on some months. Some I ended up receiving them during holidays.

See some students really are dependent on these monthly meals fees. If they did not receive them on that month it means they have no food. It is sad. I have friends whom we had a similar problem and they had no one at all who can accommodate them while waiting for NSFAS's response. Some dropped out from the course, some sleep on campus in classes. That is not healthy at all for any person, imagine how do you concentrate in class when you are hungry and did not even sleep well. The semester I am currently on, luckily I had no challenges at all. Everything is paid off.

My tuition fee cost about R12510.00 per semester, my residence fee about R12000 per semester, and lastly the meals allowance I receive per semester is R5000, and so far Nsfas paid for everything. If they can always pay according to how much a student owes the institution then that would be fair and of course enough for the full cost of study. A few students I managed to interview also mentioned that everything was paid for, the only challenge they faced was that of the delaying payments which resulted to the delay of their registrations as well.

The difference between the old and current NSFAS system

The applications were going via the institution, then the financial aid officers from campus will then be in contact with NSFAS officers on behalf of a student.

Good thing about the old system at least the students were able to be in contact with financial aid officers and the issues we experiencing now compared to the old system are now more and difficult to deal with. The old system I guess it was working better than the one we have now. Students were able to bring forth the issues they have to their financial aid counsellors and the communication with the counsellors was effective and open. Having said that, it does not mean the old system was excellent with no hick ups, No it had its own problems as well but not As compared to now.

Looking at the current system, students need to have airtime to be able to contact the NSFAS offices and address the issues or any queries they have. You make a call today you talk to this person you explain your matter, they tell you they will get back to you or resolve your issue. You wait forever nothing happens, you call and do a follow up again and you find someone else and start from scratch explaining the same issue to another person and same happens you wait. Whereas in the old system you knew who you addressing your matters to and you get a feedback that shows at least there is some progress on the matter.

The new system after doing my research I found that it was introduced to actually try and solve the issues of tedious and long processes, the applications and any other matters that goes with manual handing in of NSFAS applications forms. Unfortunately for us students we've been having difficulties with this new system. Instead of it bringing solutions it looks like more issues the new system brought. A number of students I came with decided to drop out and go look for part time jobs as they could not handle the stress of not having the funds to further their dream careers. Some of us the thing that helped us was perseverance and patience.

Sadly these are the challenges we face every beginning of the semester as students who are dependent on NSFAS. Some had to sleep in classes because they had no residence and not finished with their registrations, hold up is on NSFAS approvals. NSFAS is made as if it is easy to get, they advertise it as this funding that if you qualify for it you will have it, whereas in practical it is not the case. You apply for it and you do qualify but the process of them approving you takes forever. Something needs to be done with this issue. I would suggest we have the NSFAS officers locally at our institutions to able to liaise with them and solve these slow funding approvals.

Going forward

Looking at both pros and cons of the old and new system, NSFAS should come up with the common point on how to make the system works better for us and for them as well. I always have this question in me that why when a student is approved for the funding, then at some stage or the following semester he/she is no longer funded?, sometimes it's not because

he/she did not perform well on the previous semester. I understand when a student did not perform as it was agreed on that you need to meet certain requirements for you to qualify. My question is when you did all right but all of a sudden you have funding issues. How is that possible? What causes that?

NSFAS should start going to the schools (High schools) and address learners at that level on how NSFAS works. We do not want them to go through what we went through. Finding out about NSFAS application methods at the institution and this might be one of the factors that result in the slow and tedious application process. Learners need to be aware of what is expected of them in regards to NSFAS. Some are from very disadvantaged places where information does not flow as in the cities.

NSFAS should jump in there and provide information. Late applications from High school leaving learners will decrease maybe as they will know when to apply and how to apply. Most of us we knew there is NSFAS but we did not know that it is now an online application process, the institutions are not part of the process as before. So such changes need to be addressed on time. The NSFAS representatives should also come down to the institutions and address us of any of the changes or important factors that we need to be aware of.

The strikes we have every year because of financial issues need to be resolved as this slows down and delays the academic year. I would love one day to see all these issues we have in terms of NSFAS not to be experienced by any any any of the students in the future.

Education is so important. Everyone needs to study, regardless of his/her background. NSFAS are the fundings that are implemented to assist those who can't pay for their own fees because they do not have money, so it should serve its purpose. Let the new system be revisited and ironed where it needs proper fix, let the challenges the students have be attended to and dealt with. Let us create a nation that is full of educated young stars that will take this country to another level. For us to be the stars of the country we need to be supported in every way, more especially the financial support is what we need.