

RESPONSE TO THE STUDENTS' REPRESENTATIVE COUNCIL'S

MEMORANDUM OF CONCESSIONS

THURSDAY, 02 FEBRUARY 2023

CONTEXT

On Friday, 27 January 2023, the University through the Office of the Dean of Student Affairs, received a "Memorandum of Concessions" from the Students' Representative Council (SRC). This was considered at a meeting of the Office of the Vice-Chancellor and Principal on Monday, 30 January 2023.

The response to the SRC's request must be read within the following context:

Commitment to Students

Wits University is committed to enabling access to higher education as far as our resources allow. The University acknowledges the role that the SRC plays in advocating for the interests of students, as well as the SRC's fundraising initiatives, and we commit to working with the SRC and other relevant parties and stakeholders to address issues related to student funding. We welcome donations for student funding which can be made through the Development and Fundraising Office or via this website: [Bursaries - Wits University](#).

To assist students, the University has already implemented a number of concessions including the following:

Student Funding in 2022

Wits University has progressively increased the amount of funding allocated to students. In 2022 Wits disbursed over R1,6 billion to 26,161 students, including R927m in NSFAS funding to 10,071 students. About R156m in Financial Aid and Scholarships (excluding NSFAS) was awarded in 2022, including:

- R34m for Undergraduate Merit and Scholarship Awards which helped 3 152 students.
- R74m for Postgraduate Merit Awards which assisted 1 764 students.
- R28m was allocated towards the Wits Council Hardship Fund to assist students who met the criteria to pay for their registration and accommodation fees.
- R4m was allocated to match the SRC's fundraising campaign.

The Wits Hardship Fund

The Wits Hardship Fund was established in 2016, with an amount of R10 million, which has today increased to R28 million. The University established the Wits Hardship Fund to assist academically deserving, missing middle students who have challenges with registration due to historic debt and with registration support and support towards accommodation, funds permitting. Students must meet the Wits Hardship Fund's eligibility criteria. The requests from the SRC are considered within this context and the range of concessions already in place, the amendments to the Wits Hardship Fund's rules and processes, the range of student support initiatives, and the impact of further concessions on the future sustainability of the University.

Students with a family income under R600 000 and who owe more than R10 000, can apply to this fund for assistance. Successful applicants receive 50% of the outstanding debt to a maximum of R50 000. In 2022, the previous outstanding debt limit of R120 000 was removed, thereby enabling the

University to assist more students with the funds available. An appeals process was also introduced for students who do not meet the funding criteria, with the academic requirement for the appeals process dropped to an average of 48%.

Re-registration with Historical Debt

A student who owes R10 000 or less from the previous year can register in the new academic year. A student whose total household income is below R600 000 (the GAP Funding defined limit) is able to apply for registration assistance by paying 50% of the outstanding debt due and by making an arrangement to pay the balance of the debt during the course of the academic year. Proof of household income, consent of income verification and motivation for assistance is required.

RESPONSE TO THE SRC'S REQUESTS

1. REGISTRATION CONCESSIONS

Request: All students with an outstanding balance From R10 001 - R150 000 must be allowed to register without paying the 50% required for the AOD approval.

Response: The University committed significant resources to the Wits Hardship Fund (R28 million in 2023) to provide eligible students with support towards registration and towards hardship accommodation, funds permitting. This mechanism is to uphold the University's rules that academically deserving students with outstanding debt of more than R10 000 must pay 50% towards their outstanding debt, sign an AOD, and then register. Successful applications receive support of 50% of outstanding debt to a maximum of R50 000. The University has also removed the R120 000 outstanding debt ceiling for eligibility to apply for assistance and introduced an appeals process that has dropped the academic requirement to a 48% average. Further concessions in respect of the Wits Hardship Fund are not possible given the University's financial position and given the extensive financial concessions already made. The University remains committed to partnering with the SRC through supporting its fundraising initiatives, as these have assisted many students in previous years.

Request: All students who received the funding from the Wits Hardship Fund should be able to register regardless of the outstanding balance.

Response: The Wits Hardship Fund is a mechanism to assist students, within pre-approved parameters. The University undertakes to assist all students who meet the Wits Hardship Fund criteria within the parameters of the Fund. The University believes that the changes to the rules of the Fund enables it to assist more students, but it is not able to sustain concessions beyond the current limits.

Request: Postgrads who were funded by the Postgraduate Merit Award in 2022 should be cleared to register.

Response: Postgraduate students who were funded by the Postgraduate Merit Award and/or any other scholarship and/or bursary, and who still have funds outstanding, are encouraged to apply for possible assistance from the Wits Hardship Fund which is the University's mechanism for providing registration assistance to qualifying students. The University undertakes to explore further mechanisms to provide support to academically sound postgraduate students who may need support, on a case by case basis.

Request: Students whose postgraduate degrees are more than a year, the PMA should be reinstated in the following year.

Response: The rules governing the Postgraduate Merit Award are set by the Financial Aid and Scholarships Management Committee (FASMAC) and are reviewed periodically. The SRC has full representation on this Committee, and we encourage the SRC to make these proposals to the FASMAC for consideration.

2. HARDSHIP CONCESSIONS

Request: All students who qualify for the Wits Hardship Fund should be awarded.

Response: The University will endeavour to support all students who meet the Wits Hardship Fund's criteria, have applied for assistance by the due date, and have been considered and approved for assistance, subject to the availability of funds. The Wits Hardship Fund allocation has increased from R10 million to R28 million in recent years, which demonstrates the University's commitment to assisting deserving students.

Request: Hardship Criteria should be broader for postgraduate students.

Response: The Wits Hardship Fund criteria was carefully crafted and allowed for inputs from the SRC during the process. Whilst emphasis is placed on assisting students seeking a first qualification, postgraduate students who meet the eligibility criteria are encouraged to apply for assistance which will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis. The University requests that the SRC makes specific proposals in respect of broadening the criteria for postgraduate students.

Request: All students who applied for hardship should be considered under the discretionary fund.

Response: All Wits students are encouraged to apply for consideration to the Discretionary Fund. The details are on the student portal. Please note that assistance from this Fund is not guaranteed as it is based on the criteria set by donors when making contributions to this Fund. Further, it may cover only partial fees, and may commence at any time during the year, as funding becomes available.

Request: Students who have received hardship before and are academically qualifying should be considered for the fund.

Response: The Wits Hardship Fund was originally established as a once-off support mechanism for students facing difficulty in a particular year. The intention was not for this to become an ongoing form of support. Having considered this, and taking the economic context into account, the University agrees to consider assisting students who have previously received support from the Wits Hardship Fund, provided that:

- they meet the academic requirements as stipulated in the Wits Hardship Fund criteria; and
- their repayment history at Wits shows progression.

This group of students will be enabled to apply as part of the special considerations category of students and will only be considered once the applications of first-time applicants have been processed and finalised.

Request: Hardship accommodation should open next week.

Response: The provision of funding for accommodation due to hardship is to enable students in need, and who meet the criteria, with accommodation on a short-term or an emergency basis. Through this programme the University acknowledges that there may be some students whose circumstances require this kind of assistance. The opening dates for placement into the few hardship accommodation beds that are annually secured is linked to the start of the academic year and must be carefully negotiated contracts with service providers. Applications are considered on a case by case basis, with

the most vulnerable prioritised for assistance. Students who are approved for hardship accommodation assistance, and who are in the Faculty of Health Sciences faculty, may approach the WCCO for possible assistance provided that all procurement processes have been concluded and beds are available.

3. INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

International students are important members of the Wits community and they contribute significantly to the richness of the Wits experience. When accepted for study at Wits, international students are required by South African law to provide proof that they are able to fund their full stay in South Africa. This is one of the conditions under which a study visa is issued to an international student. Upon renewing this visa, they are again required to provide such proof.

Request: Returning International Students should be able to register with historic debt of not more than R50 000.

Response: International students can apply to the Wits Hardship Fund for assistance with clearing their historic debt if they qualify in terms of the rules of the Fund. The SRC is reminded that international students are by law required to provide proof that they are able to fund their studies in South Africa. Allowing international students to thus apply for hardship fund assistance is a concession taking the challenges that some international students may face into account. The University can thus not provide further concessions or assistance in respect of the historic debt of international students.

Request: International students should pay 40% upfront fee instead of the 75%.

Response: International students are by law required to provide proof of funds to support them for their full stay in South Africa. This includes proof that they are able to fund their studies for the full study period. This proof is again required when a student renews their visa. The approach to international student fees should thus be understood within this context. Taking the global financial context into account and the current practise that enables international students to have their individual circumstances considered on a case by the basis, the University agrees to allow returning international students who are academically sound, and do not have any outstanding debt from the previous academic year/s, to register for the current academic year, provided that they have made a 50% upfront payment on the year's fees, and have additionally made satisfactory payments with the finance office and/or the international students' office for the balance of the fees.

CONCLUSION

We are doing all that we can within our means to assist students, be it through funding students, fundraising from various sectors, and administering financial aid, bursaries and scholarships. We will continue to work with the SRC and our partners in the private and public sectors to do all that we can to help students. The Office of the Vice-Chancellor is also leading significant efforts with stakeholders across all sectors of society to find a lasting solution to the funding challenges experienced by students in the missing middle.

The University looks forward to working with the SRC on resolving all matters affecting students, and to creating an environment that also supports the SRC's own fundraising initiatives.

Thank you

OFFICE OF THE VICE-CHANCELLOR

31 JANUARY 2023