

Department concerned about fraud and mismanagement at varsities

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The Department of Higher Education and Training says it is concerned by the state of four universities, some of which have been rocked by allegations of rampant corruption and maladministration.



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This week, officials briefed Parliament's higher education and training portfolio committee on the state of affairs at the University of Zululand (UniZulu), Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), Walter Sisulu University (WSU) and Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), which has taken the unusual step of requesting an administrator.

The crises at some universities, which have all been affected by the fee protests of recent years, threaten the academic programme. The most unstable of these universities appear to be UniZulu and MUT.

The portfolio committee had raised its concern about the continuous absence of the UniZulu vice-chancellor and chairman of council in meetings with the committee in Parliament. There have been questions raised about the suitability of the vice-chancellor to hold office, the polarised relations between the university and its stakeholders, the disappearance of R11.5m from the university's account and allegations of corruption.

The department said it was of the opinion that the portfolio committee should invoke the provisions of 167 (a) of the National Assembly rules to compel the vice-chancellor and chairperson of the UniZulu council to appear before the committee.

Student governance at the university was said to be unstable, with the student representative council election process being disputed.

The department is also concerned about the atmosphere of fear at UniZulu, with allegations of staff victimisation by the management. Higher Education Minister Hlengiwe Mkhize has received the council of UniZulu's responses and is awaiting the Council on Higher Education's final institutional audit report in order to make a determination on the next step to take within the prescripts of the legislation.

DA MP and higher education spokeswoman Belinda Bozzoli said UniZulu "truly needs an administrator. It has been shown to have been corrupted, badly managed and unanswerable even to Parliament. But the department has not yet taken the plunge.

"In the case of MUT, the striking fact is that it is extremely unusual for a university to ask for an administrator - another admission of complete failure of authority. Usually an administrator is put in when the university is deemed by the department to have failed to manage itself. This selfadmission is another worrying sign."

MUT was rocked by allegations of irregularities. The chairman of the council submitted a letter in October, requesting Mkhize to approve the council resolution to appoint an independent assessor.

Issues identified at CPUT included the leadership crisis, with no permanent vice-chancellor and chairperson of council present and student protests associated with vandalism of infrastructure, especially at the Cape Town campus. The department said its observation was that the university leadership had surrendered its statutory authority to the "anarchists" and would have to decisively reclaim that authority to restore order.

WSU was recently rocked after R14.1m was paid into a student's account. A forensic investigation has been instituted.

Source: Business Day