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Dear Honourable Dr Minister Nzimande

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY

The North-West University (NWU) has always been recognised for the excellent and energetic organised student life on its three campuses: Mafikeng, Potchefstroom and Vaal Triangle. This is largely due to good and well-organised residences. The percentage of contact students on the three campuses who live in residences, are between 28% and 33%. On two campuses (Potch and Vaal), students living in private housing, organise themselves (with the blessing of the university) in "town residences". These groups are often bigger than a traditional on-campus residence. All residences participate in the organised student life, including sport and cultural activities. Every residence at the NWU has a house committee and a house parent, and they are mandated by the University to run the residences effectively and ensure stability and an environment conducive to academic and non-academic activities. Each house parent of an on-campus residence lives in or adjacent to the residences. House committee members are eligible for an honorarium at the end of their term if they have fulfilled their duties well.

2. BACKGROUND ON ORIENTATION/WELCOMING OF NEW STUDENTS AROUND THE WORLD

The idea of orientation or the welcoming of first years is a worldwide phenomenon. Student orientation or new student orientation (often encapsulated into an Orientation week, Welcome Week or Freshers' Week) is a period of time at the beginning of the academic year at a university or other tertiary institution during which a variety of events are held to orientate and welcome new students. The name of the period varies by country. The orientation helps new students to organise their classes, acclimatise to student life, and introduce themselves to other new students. Although usually described as a week, the length of this period varies widely from university to university and country to country, ranging from about three days to a month or even more. The length of the week is often affected by each university's tradition as well as financial and physical constraints. During this period, students participate in a wide range of social activities, including live music and other performances, sports challenges, stunts, and open-air markets.

The week before the term starts is known as: *Frosh* (or *frosh week*) in most colleges and universities in the United States/Canada, others call it by the acronym SOAR for Student Orientation and Registration; *Freshers' week* in the majority of the United Kingdom and Ireland and *Orientation week* or *O-week* in countries such as Australia, South Africa and New Zealand. In Sweden, it is known as *nollning* (from *nolla*, "zero", in this case meaning zeroth-year student, i.e., before the first university year starts) or *inspark* (being "kicked in" to university life). Orientation week is the coming phrase in the United States. Some schools use the acronym WOW for Week of Welcome.

In Canada, first year students are called "Frosh" or "first years". In the United States, first-year university students are typically referred to as freshmen. In Australia and New Zealand first-year students are known simply as "first years", although in some colleges of the University of Melbourne and the University of Sydney they are also called "Freshers". In the UK and Ireland first-year students are known as *freshers* or *first years*. *Freshies* is also an emerging term in New Zealand. In Sweden, the student is a *nolla* (a "zero") during the orientation period and usually upgraded to the status of an *etta* (student who is in her/his first college term) at a ceremony involving a fancy three-course dinner and lots of singing.

3. RECEPTION AND INTRODUCTION PROGRAMMES AT THE NWU

As part of the effort to welcome first-year students every year, each campus has a reception and introduction programme. The details differ from campus to campus, but in essence the objective is to assist first years to feel welcome on campus, to get to know their way around campus quickly, and to understand the possibilities in terms of academic and non-academic participation. The same is true of every residence. These programmes are conceived by the house committee members and the campus SRC's, and are formally approved by campus managements. During this period, a number of tests, such as academic literacy and maths proficiency, are also conducted.

The formally approved reception and introduction programme runs for a number of weeks at the beginning of the year. It differs in duration from campus to campus, with Potch being three weeks, Mafikeng being two weeks and Vaal being one week. The difference in duration has to do with the number of students who have to undergo training or tests, with Potch being the largest campus with 4 000 first years, Mafikeng having 2 400, and Vaal with 1 700.

During these first few weeks, the first-year students are in the care of the house committees and the Campus SRC's and other student structures. The senior students only arrive after this period. The reception and introduction programme is then at an end, and the normal academic activities, as well as sport and cultural events start.

On a different note: the NWU has, from its inception in 2004, accepted integrity, respect, accountability and commitment as core values. It also strongly endorses human rights and is on record for being extremely serious that neither lecturers nor students' human rights are abused. We are the only university with a Human Rights Committee, chaired by an independent legal expert, where students and staff can lodge complaints about possible abuses.

3.1 RECEPTION AND INTRODUCTION PROGRAMME OF THE POTCHEFSTROOM CAMPUS

The Potchefstroom Campus (PC) of the NWU is the largest of the three campuses with 20 000 contact students, 27% of which are black. It has always had a vibrant organised student life, with residences (on campus and off campus) participating in non-academic activities. Residence life is arguably the driver of this dynamic student life, with students in on-campus residences (including first years) generally doing better academically than their counterparts off campus.

As is the case with other universities around the world the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University also has an orientation/welcoming programme. Here it is called the Reception and Introduction programme or (IR). The IR programme is annually evaluated and approved by the Campus Management. The aim with the IR programme is to familiarise all first-year students in an organised and structured way, with the diverse facets of the student and academic life on the Potchefstroom Campus.

By participating in the IR programme students:

- learn about important campus resources available;
 - develop an understanding of our academic expectations;
 - register for courses;
 - become familiar with the University Student Learning and Development Outcomes
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- learn about the university management structures (faculties, deans, schools, finance, administration, student leaders, etc) and the academic system (semesters, curricula, timetable groups, etc.);
- receive counselling and assistance with regard to their choice of study;
- are made aware of the processes and actions required to complete their studies successfully; and
- are introduced to the values of the university and assisted with the process of getting acquainted with organised student life and settling into their respective residences.

The largest portion of the programme (approximately 70%) consists of general and academic activities such as:

- psychometric tests;
- academic literacy tests;
- reading-skill tests;
- a refresher course in Mathematics;
- curriculum control and assistance with registration;
- the submission of applications for bursaries and loans;
- applications for and issuing of university cards and parking discs;
- library information;
- computer introduction; and
- exploring the campus setup.

The Campus Student Representative Council (CSRC) and residence managements are under the direction of the office of the Dean of Student Affairs, involved in the practical execution of certain aspects of the programme.

There is also an IR committee under the direction of the vice-chairperson of the Potchefstroom Campus Student Representative Council, which consists of 26 senior students. The programme was compiled to meet certain educational objectives as well as the values as contained in the Constitution, in particular *human dignity, equality and freedom*.

The rest of the programme is devoted to affording the first-year students the opportunity to participate in healthy activities and recreation such as athletics, sessions with 'sing-songs' and performances by well-known bands, first-years' dinner party, first-years' concert, etc.

During the IR programme provision is made for safety and the physical and emotional wellbeing of the students. This support is provided by, amongst others, the campus' health centre, which includes health workers, emergency services, counsellors, etc. These services are available 24 hours. There is also a so-called 'complaints and ideas' SMS line that first-year students and their parents can use to inform management about any complaints or ideas, which is monitored twice a day and followed up immediately. This SMS line has been in operation for the past few years and is used with great success.

All first-year students are encouraged to participate in the IR programme – also first-year students not staying in campus residences. What they are introduced to during this time regarding sports, culture, residence life and the organised student life are regarded as important elements in the development of the student's personality.

By the end of the programme students who participated in the programme have all the tools they need to start their first semester and make the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University their own.

The R&I programme on the PC has been in existence for many years and had been fine-tuned to address every need of first-year students.

The NWU's management, and specifically the Potchefstroom Campus management, have been active since 2010 to address any abuse and transgressions during the RI. They also focused on what happened after this period, especially between senior students and the first years, and whether house committees play their role properly.

The result was that in 2011, the house committees of two male residences (Veritas and Hombré) were suspended and their positions as house committee members terminated. One house parent's term was ended. In 2013, the positions of three house parents, who did not contribute constructively to the change process, were not renewed.

A 24 hour "complaints and idea" line was established where all students (including first years) could give their views or complaints. The records of the follow-up actions are available.

During the RI a formal research project is undertaken to determine the following (amongst others):

- the existence of any form of intimidation of first year students;
- violation of human rights (including barring of facilities to first years); and
- satisfaction with residence and campus life, etc.

2014's research indicated a 95% positive experience by first years on campus. This will be followed by another survey amongst first years in March.

In 2013, the following actions were undertaken:

- A prestige camp for selected and nominated student leaders took place (for the 3rd year), dealing with all aspects of leadership, including the management of change and transformation.
- Academic debates (ten in total) were hosted by the Potchefstroom Campus SRC on relevant issues, such as media freedom, transformation, etc.
- Once new house committee members were elected in August, they underwent training (led by house parents), dealing with specific themes determined by management. These included discipline in residences, the university's rule with regard to first years and the management of diversity in the residences. In 2014 this will be supplemented by an overarching training session by the dean of students.
- All new house committee members also underwent training in basic human rights and had to sign a document that they will implement the NWU's policies in this regard.
- On the evening that the campus opened for seniors, all senior students in residences were given a lecture on the rights of first-year students.
- Most importantly, all residences had to document all their individual traditions. These were put to two experts on human rights at the Faculty of Law, and vetted (or rejected), before they could be practised.

4. SO-CALLED "INITIATION PRACTICES"

The North-West University forbids any form of initiation practices and it does not form part of any programme of the NWU.

4.1. In the beginning of February 2014, complaints were received from first-year students in two residences, Over de Voor (male residence) and Karlien (female residence). Later that week, similar complaints were received from first-year students in Ratau (male residence). The complaints included verbal abuse by house committee members against first-year students, pushing and shoving of first-years and barring of facilities for use by first-year students (such as lifts and toilets).

4.2 The Potchefstroom Campus management immediately suspended the house committee members and made them vacate the residences, pending an investigation into the above-mentioned allegations. The outcome of the investigation will be known in the next few days,

but there is a strong possibility that the suspension of at least some of them will be made permanent.

- 4.3 The house parent of one of the residences was also suspended, pending an investigation that is still underway.
- 4.4 Once the reports of these investigations are completed, they will be made available to the Council of the university.
- 4.5 The reasons for the suspensions and the investigations were made public to the Potchefstroom Campus community and their assistance was solicited. More than 60 statements were made to the investigation team so far.

5. "PUKKE SALUTE"

The *Beeld* newspaper reports on 21 and 22 February 2014 refer.

On Friday 21 February 2014, *Beeld* published four pages of reports on and allegations against the Potchefstroom Campus of the NWU. The headline on the front page was "Pukke salute 'Heil'". It was accompanied by two photographs of first-year female students who had their right arms first in a horizontal position, and then in an upward position. The tone of the reporting was that this picture (and other instances) was proof that there existed on the Potchefstroom Campus a "Nazi culture" and that it was a breeding ground for National Socialism and racism.

It is true that this gesture has sometimes been used as a greeting by residence students in the past. The Potchefstroom Campus Rector, Prof Herman van Schalkwyk, when it was brought to his attention at the end of 2013 with a photograph from 2011, instructed the Dean of Student Affairs, Prof Rikus Fick, to alert the house committee members and other student leaders to the issue and its sensitivity and to desist from using it at all, in whatever form. This meeting happened on 21 January 2014. The Potchefstroom Campus Rector followed up with another warning about this at a meeting of house parents and other stakeholders.

After these warnings, the gesture did not occur again. The material used in the media predated these meetings and cautions.

Nevertheless, the Campus Rector, and the Potchefstroom Campus SRC president Mr Janco Jordaan publicly issued separate statements on 20 February 2014 in which they distanced themselves from the gesture, and in which they apologised to anyone for whom the gesture caused umbrage. They pointed out that the gesture should in no way be construed as a Nazi salute, but that it was used purely as a way of greeting by a small group of residences, with no ulterior motives whatsoever.

It must also be pointed out that the specific picture on *Beeld's* front page was of a group of first-year female students from Wag-'n-Bietjie residence. The full video clip depicts them singing a greeting to their primaria (the chairperson of the house committee). It contains elements of a number of songs and the words are totally innocent and are about how good a primaria she is. It ends with their arms outstretched for half a second, and then ends with their hands near their knees. It is clear that they enjoy the song and is in no way intimidated or forced to do anything. It is noteworthy that the group contains both white and black students. There is no way in which a rational person can construe the video or the gesture as a "Nazi salute". The Potchefstroom Campus has no Nazi or racist overtones.

Management considered it important that the Ministry of Higher Education and Training (especially those who do not read *Beeld*) is informed of these events as they unfold.

As Vice-Chancellor of the North-West University (and in this I am joined by the Campus Rector), I want to assure the Honourable Minister that there are no overtones of Nazism or racism on the Potchefstroom Campus of the NWU. The Potchefstroom Campus management has in the past

acted against those who transgressed in terms of human rights of first years, and will also do so in the future.

With regard to the gesture that could be construed as a greeting by Nazis, it was never the intention of the students to cause harm. We will ensure that this gesture is eradicated in student life.

The Potchefstroom Campus, as the other campuses of the NWU, is in the first instance a place of learning. This should be enhanced by a constructive student experience in all facets of life. This remains our priority. In addition, there are clear indications that there is harmony between white and black students at Potchefstroom. In no way will we allow anything to disturb this.

6. THE WAY FORWARD

The Potchefstroom Campus management decided to apply a three pronged approach going forward:

- 6.1 To utilise the blog of the Campus Rector (Prof Herman van Schalkwyk) to open up a campus discussion (students and staff) on the practises that are exercised by the students, to raise concerns and to come up with suggestions.
- 6.2 To establish an *ad hoc committee* under the chairmanship of the Campus Rector to discuss the issues and suggestions raised on the blog in 4.1, come up with additional issues and suggestions and to make recommendations to campus management. The other members of the committee will include:
 - The Vice-Rectors of the Potchefstroom Campus;
 - Senior academic representatives of the eight faculties;
 - Student representatives; and
 - The Dean: Student Affairs.
- 6.3 To strengthen the Office of the Dean: Student Affairs with a person that will be tasked specifically to deal with these issues and student discipline in general. Current thinking is that an industrial psychologist with experience in youth matters should be recruited.

The Executive Committee of Council was informed about these issues at its meeting on Thursday 20 February 2014, and had an extraordinary meeting by telephone earlier today. At this meeting, it was decided to call an extraordinary meeting of Council in the next week. I attach the media statement issued after the meeting as Annexure A.

We will keep the Ministry updated as events unfold.

Yours sincerely



THEUNS ELOFF
VICE-CHANCELLOR: NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY

**MEDIA RELEASE****For immediate release****North-West University (NWU) Council will not tolerate infringements of human rights**

Institutional Office – During an extraordinary meeting of the Executive Committee of the NWU Council on Monday 24 February 2014, they reiterated that no infringements of human rights at the NWU will be tolerated.

The Exco of the NWU Council had been informed on Thursday 20 February about the issues that led to the recent articles in the South African media regarding the suspension of two house committees of residences at the Potchefstroom Campus, the alleged saluting by first-year students in Nazi style, and possible infringements of the human rights of first-year students flowing from so-called initiation practices.

During today's meeting, Exco deliberated on the implications of the articles on the reputation of the university, and resolved that it would await the internal disciplinary reports that are being finalised after an internal investigation by the NWU Legal Office.

Exco has called for an extraordinary meeting of the NWU Council that is to be held as soon as possible. They also noted the strategies that have been proposed by the campus management of the Potchefstroom Campus to manage the situation in the meanwhile. These strategies include:

- The establishment of a blog by the campus rector to encourage discussions with internal stakeholders;
- The establishment of a committee chaired by an independent expert and consisting of other relevant role players to discuss the issues and suggestions raised on the blog, to come up with additional issues and suggestions and to make recommendations to campus management, and
- The appointment of an industrial psychologist in the office of the Dean of Students to assist student structures in these issues and student discipline in general.

Issued by Louis Jacobs on behalf of the North-West University Council

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