

The Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA) Commenting on the Student Fee Protest

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The Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA) is gravely concerned by the events of the past few days, and especially Wednesday 21 October 2015 when students gathered at Parliament to protest excessive and unaffordable higher education fee increases. As the national Society of psychology professionals that includes university academics and students, we are very aware of the burdensome financial struggles faced by the majority of our students in higher education. We are, therefore, sympathetic to the students' requests for more affordable fee structures so that especially first generation university students from impoverished communities can take their rightful place in the world of work and other arenas. At the same time, we are against the use of violence in any form, in dispute resolution, which is the mindless reaction that seems to plague current-day South Africa.

Media visuals were especially disconcerting revealing the use of force against students that resulted in physical injuries as well as emotional trauma. In addition, the use of tear gas in large crowds is known to cause panic, stampede and secondary injury. Sadly, the scenes were reminiscent of earlier years in the country's history when student protests over legitimate issues were dealt with in a brutal manner.

We believe strongly that, given the legitimate concerns of students and their parents, the large numbers of students gathered, and the tenseness of the situation, Parliament should have adjourned its business and given due recognition to the current crisis confronting the nation. A much earlier recognition of the request to engage with the Higher Education Minister could have prevented much of the stand-off and the use of needless force. By continuing with its business Parliament showed its disconnect with reality and the needs of the thousands of students protesting throughout the country and those gathered outside wishing for decisive leadership. This was inflammatory and Parliament could easily have avoided the ensuing mayhem.

PsySSA urges the government, and especially cabinet ministers, to listen to the students and to urgently re-examine the funding of education in South Africa.

