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UNIVERSITIES SA CONDEMNS INCIDENTS OF ARSON AT PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

Universities South Africa (USAf), the representative association of the 26 public universities in South Africa, condemns with the utmost contempt the rampant arson attacks being perpetrated at our universities in the past week. The attempted burning of the Council Chamber at Rhodes University; the actual burning of a residential building at the Vaal University of Technology and the burning of the main auditorium at the University of Johannesburg are the latest cases in point. These point to a continuation of acts of arson witnessed at the University of Cape Town and at the University of the Witwatersrand, culminating in the burning down of an administrative building at the North-West University's Mafikeng Campus since late 2015. All of these acts are totally despicable.

It has taken many years to develop infrastructure at public institutions. That infrastructure contributed to the development of thousands of graduates who exited our university system over the years and have made a significant contribution to our country's development. "That anyone can even contemplate the reckless and criminal deeds that are becoming commonplace in our institutions is unthinkable. These can never, under any circumstances, be condoned," says Dr Ahmed Bawa, USAf's new Chief Executive Officer.

He says at the very minimum the R100 million loss incurred by the University of Johannesburg means that a new 285-bed residence could have been developed or 1390 additional students could have been assisted by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme for one year.

Professor Bawa stated that "any act of sabotage meted at any university is an attack on the national academic project with its strong contribution to the national social justice agenda and the economy. It exacerbates the dire financial situation in which the university sector currently finds itself. While we recognise the legitimacy of #FeesMustFall and acknowledge the transformational merits advanced on the campaign to insource workers, only constructive engagement, not destruction of university property, can yield meaningful and lasting solutions for everyone concerned. As institutions grapple with the consequences of no fee increases this year, further damage to university infrastructure is a direct attack on the higher education enterprise, and therefore a direct threat aimed at the very being of our universities.

"The sustainability of South Africa's university sector is at risk. The nation cannot afford to continue to look the other way because all of us stand to lose, when universities are destroyed. These acts of arson therefore deserve utmost condemnation, not just by USAf, but also by every sector of society that cherishes the value of education in any nation, regardless of its socio-economic status. For these reasons, we appeal to all social formations including political parties in South Africa, and to our Government, to take a decisive stand in this regard. Any further complacency can only well and truly annihilate what is a national project of great importance. No country can ever afford that."

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