

Wits students stage 'sleepover' protests

By Jabulile Mbatha

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The university says it has made 530 emergency beds available and has reopened applications to on-campus residences.



Students at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) have been sleeping on the AMIC Deck of the Braamfontein Campus in solidarity with the many students who are still looking for accommodation. Photo: Jabulile Mbatha

About 50 students have been staging sleepovers on the AMIC Deck of the University of Witwatersrand's (Wits) Braamfontein Campus in solidarity with the many students who are still looking for accommodation.

We joined a group of students over the weekend who sat in a circle with their luggage and wearing pyjamas. Some covered themselves with blankets while others sat with their laptops, studying.

Among them was Lerato Sestiba, a final-year computer science student. Sestsiba, from Zebediela in Limpopo, said he has been dragging his luggage around between lectures to highlight the struggles faced by unhoused students.

While Sestiba has found accommodation, he said he is aware of many other students who are still looking for affordable options. “We have been seeing students sleeping in the toilets, libraries, and in the computer labs. That is why we are taking a stand. Many of the homeless students are afraid to join the sleep-in because they are embarrassed by their situation,” he said.

He said that budget cuts at the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) had left many students out in the cold during the first quarter of this academic year.

A second-year mining student, who asked not to be named, said she only received accommodation on 29 February. She told *GroundUp* she had been squatting in one of the university’s residences “out of desperation” for the past three weeks.

“I’m from the Eastern Cape and I don’t have family here. If I don’t come to class then I will fail but how do I get to classes when home is 14 hours away?” she asked.

Wits student representative council deputy president Simphiwe Mntungwa said: “Many [student] bursaries are awarded late in the academic year, leaving many students without a means to get accommodation.”

Wits spokesperson Shirona Patel told *GroundUp* that the university had about 5,700 beds at on-campus residences, which were at 90% occupancy.

“As far as requests for emergency accommodation are concerned, Wits accommodated 530 students with emergency beds. Applications to Wits residences were re-opened a few weeks ago. Students still seeking accommodation are encouraged to apply,” said Patel.

She urged struggling students to apply to the Hardship Fund which has a budget of about R28m for 2024.

“The fund seeks to assist students with 50% of the historic debt fee to a maximum of R50,000. The fund is also used to assist students struggling with deposits to access Wits residences. Private service providers and donors have also allocated or sponsored 40 beds,” she said.

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