

Massive hike in university fees

A government decision to increase dramatically tuition fees at Mozambique's higher education institutes sparked off protests in mid-August from some of the newly formed opposition parties.

A diploma signed by Education Minister Aniceto dos Muchangos and Deputy Finance Minister Boaventura Cossa raised tuition fees from a merely symbolic 1,000 meticals to 105,000 meticals for each discipline each semester - an increase of 10,400 per cent (at prevailing official exchange rates there were 1,500 meticals to the US dollar).

Since a university course can include five or six disciplines, this decision could oblige a student to pay over a million meticals a year just in tuition fees. This is on top of an enrolment fee of 100,000 meticals.

Foreign students at Maputo's Eduardo Mondlane University will pay even more - a million meticals for enrolment, and 350,000 meticals for each discipline each semester.

About 40 per cent of those attending the university are full-time students on state scholarships. They are exempt from paying tuition fees, but all other students at the university are expected to pay the new charges.

The minimum industrial wage is currently 32,175 meticals a month, and it was feared that the new fees would severely restrict access to high education.

University rector Narciso Matos moved to calm these fears at a press conference on 16 August, at which he pledged that no student with good academic results would be forced to leave the university because of inability to pay tuition fees.

He said that a system of subsidies and exemption would be used to ensure that students would not be barred from the university simply for financial reasons.

Mr Matos said that, even with the new fees, students would only be paying 30 per cent of the real cost of their training. In 1990, they only paid 0.31 per cent.

The average annual cost to the university per student is about 4.2 million meticals, he said. Currently the university has about 3,000 students, and this figure is set to rise to between 5,500 and 6,000 by 1996. Some 30 per cent of the students are workers who are studying on a part-time basis.

Mr Matos admitted that the university had carried out no studies on the incomes of its students and their families. It therefore did not know how many of the existing students would be able to pay the fees.

The rector said these studies would be carried out over the next few months, in the process of drawing up regulations on exemptions from the new fees.

Exemptions or reductions would be granted on the basis of a combination of good academic results and means testing of the student and his family, but he warned that a brilliant student from a rich family could not expect to be exempted.

Asked whether the bureaucratic process of granting subsidies and exemptions would not prove extremely complicated, Mr Matos said he saw no major difficulties. He pointed out that existing university procedures, such as entrance exams, were much more complex.

The rector argued that the university needed to generate more funds both to pay its existing staff, ensuring that they were not poached by the private sector, and for its development plans, including improvements in libraries, laboratories and lecture theatres.

He insisted that the authorities had no desire to restrict access to higher education, and that government policy remained that the sons and daughters of the poor should have a chance to study.

Boaventura Cossa told the journalists that the purpose of the new fees "is to ensure justice. Those who can pay, should pay".

At a press briefing earlier the same day, Justice Minister Ossumane Ali Dauto disagreed with the suggestion that the new fees are contrary to article 92 of the new Mozambican constitution, which guarantees the right to education, and commits the state to promoting "greater and equal access to the enjoyment of this right by all citizens".

He said that the fees were needed to guarantee the very existence of higher education institutions, and that a system of subsidies could deal with the problem of equal access.

But the way in which the measure was introduced without warning and with no consultation led to considerable student anger. Two of the new opposition parties cashed in on this. The Patriotic Action Front (FAP), which has many supporters at the university, issued a statement describing the measure as "incredible and unacceptable", and "an attempt to prevent ordinary citizens from gaining access to university training".

FAP claimed that the fees "show the government's incapacity to respond to the growing willingness and commitment of honest citizens to raise their level of education".

It accused the government of "a complete loss of sensitivity to the problems of the country".

MONAMO (Mozambique Nationalist Movement) described the new fees as "a blatant breach of Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which enshrines the principle that higher education should be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit".