

Aspiring engineers given a lifeline at CUT

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South Africa continues to experience a shortage of skills in the engineering sector. One avenue of funding available to aspiring engineers who are classified among the 'missing middle' is through a partnership between the Ikusasa Student Financial Aid Programme (ISFAP) and the Central University of Technology (CUT).

Launched in response to the 'missing middle' funding crisis – a crisis that culminated in the country's #FeesMustFall protests in 2016, ISFAP funds students from households that earn R0 – R600,000 per annum and provides them with the full cost of their studies as well as wrap-around support for students studying 11 of the Occupations of High Demand gazetted by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).



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In order to add engineers to its list of funded occupations, CUT piloted the ISFAP wrap-around support programme on 37 Bachelor of Engineering Technology Mechanical Engineering students registered at the institution. Through this programme, qualifying students were funded for their full cost of study, which on the ISFAP programme, includes:

- Tuition
- Accommodation
- Food
- Learning materials
- A living allowance
- Non-academic support in the form of a dedicated programme manager, tutorial support, life support, admin support, life-skills training, staff mentors and more

It's this non-academic support that students on the programme believe makes all the difference.

Says Mr W Sello, an ISFAP student currently studying mechanical engineering at CUT: "Before ISFAP, I was just a student with no ambition, no vision and no dedication. I failed most of my modules because I did not have the kind of support I get from this programme (peer mentorship and being given a platform to talk about the problems concerning students with my bursary manager). From the moment I received the ISFAP bursary, I started doing things differently because of the way this programme is structured. They make sure that no student is left behind. I made friends within the programme, friends with whom we speak the same language. This is one of the extraordinary things one will find on this programme. Because of this programme and its support, I am now an extraordinary student, I am entrepreneurial and I have developed leadership skills. I believe that if other bursary schemes can adopt the ISFAP bursary structure then most students will graduate with the drive to make an impact."

Mr M Matlotlo, another CUT engineering student on the ISFAP programme, adds: "My journey with ISFAP started around April 2019. Since then, my life has been favourably transformed. The assistance I received from them has always made sure I focus primarily on my studies and have an additional motivating force to stay committed to them. They have also contributed to my holistic growth with many programmes, seminars and sessions we attend. I also got to be involved in some volunteer work for the benefit of others. There really is no greater joy than helping other people. It adds purpose to one's life. I am grateful for having been a beneficiary of all the benefits ISFAP provides for students to support and assist them."

Ms D Khesa, who is currently studying engineering at CUT, agrees: “Academic success starts when a student is in class with only the stress of equations not what they will eat or where they will stay. Everyone can rise above their circumstance and achieve success if they are dedicated and passionate about what they do. As a student I must take it upon myself to ensure that I receive the highest education possible so that I can represent South Africa well in the future as a future leader and ISFAP gave me an opportunity of a lifetime.”

Siphe Zenani, CUT's ISFAP programme manager, provides details on some of the additional support CUT's ISFAP students have enjoyed over the past academic year. “As a team, we have hosted a variety of activities and initiatives geared towards student psycho-social. Among the most memorable include a special Engineering Industry Day for ISFAP students, financial literacy workshops, participation in entrepreneurship activities, as well as Coffee Talks with Mo Malele. These holistic support initiatives have yielded positive including improving the employability of our students, reducing the drop-out rate of poor and working-class students as well as enhancing the skills profile of the community and country at large.” To date, ISFAP has on boarded a total of 67 students for its wrap-around support programme at the CUT.

For those who are interested in studying engineering at CUT in 2021, keep an eye on ISFAP's website to find out when applications for next year open. Those interested are also encouraged to apply for ISFAP funding at applyonline.isfap.co.za.

About ISFAP

The Ikusasa Student Financial Aid Programme (ISFAP) was established, through the recommendation of the ministerial task team, to develop a sustainable funding model for the higher education costs of South Africa's missing-middle students. The programme aims to fast track skills development for the 21st century by funding students studying towards a career in scarce skills that have been identified as crucial to South Africa's economic development.

ISFAP provides more than just funding to ensure a student's success. Using a wraparound support model, developed and successfully implemented by the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants' Thuthuka Bursary Fund, ISFAP provides funding for tuition, accommodation, transport, meals, books, equipment and a stipend. The programme also offers additional academic, social and psychological support (such as mentoring and life skills training) to give students support in every area in order to ensure their success and work readiness.

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