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## **USAf rejects unfounded and sensationalist claims of “collapsing” South Africa’s universities**

Universities South Africa (USAf) notes, with serious concern, the recent article published by Daily Investor on 19 April 2026, titled “*South Africa’s biggest universities are collapsing.*”

The article makes sweeping and damaging claims, which, rather than contributing constructively to an informed public discourse, serve to undermine confidence in the public higher education system. Of particular concern is the manner in which the reputations of no fewer than ten public universities are impugned through unsubstantiated insinuations of mismanagement, corruption, institutional dysfunction, and poor governance. In the absence of credible evidence, such assertions are both irresponsible and prejudicial.

It is particularly disappointing that the principal commentary informing this article is attributed to a staff member of one of our public universities—an individual who, by virtue of their academic role, would be expected to appreciate the fundamental importance of evidence-based analysis in substantiating claims of this nature.

USAf underscores that responsible journalism demands rigorous verification, balanced analysis, and the presentation of substantiated facts. This article regrettably fails to meet these standards. The higher education sector plays a critical role in national development, and any critique thereof must be grounded in fact, fairness, and a genuine commitment to strengthening, rather than undermining, public institutions.

### **Universities face challenges, but they are not collapsing**

USAf acknowledges that the sector faces real pressures, with Dr Matutu saying: “We must admit universities are experiencing financial strain, driven by a growing student population without a corresponding increase in State funding. These pressures create operational challenges. But challenges do not imply a collapse of universities. Even under these conditions, it would be a stretch to suggest that institutions are collapsing. The claim lacks merit,” she explains.

Dr Matutu also emphasises that the sector has repeatedly called for increased investment in academic programmes, infrastructure and student support. “We have consistently flagged the need for more funding to match the growing demand for access. But to leap from funding pressures to claims of systemic collapse is irresponsible and misleading.”

### **Universities are autonomous institutions**

She stresses that South African universities are, by law, autonomous institutions. “Universities are independent entities, and neither Vice-Chancellors nor Councils would promote or condone the erosion of governance in the institutions they lead. It is their responsibility to protect the integrity of the academic programme, institutional autonomy and academic freedom, vigorously and without compromise,” she says.

Dr Matutu points out that while universities are not immune to the governance and corruption challenges facing our country, its sectors and institutions, the national system of innovation and the higher education sector have held up well, even in these difficult times. Universities remain stable, governed well and operationally sound,” she says.

### **Competitiveness of South African Universities**

USAf notes that several South African universities continue to be well sought after as international partners globally. “Global benchmarking studies show steady improvement across multiple institutions. That is not the behaviour of a system in collapse; it is evidence of resilience, excellence and continuous improvement,” says Dr Matutu.

She added that South African universities remain among the most respected on the continent and continue to produce graduates who are globally competitive.

USAf welcomes robust debate and evidence-based critique. “We welcome constructive criticism that advances the role of universities in society. What we reject are alarmist, baseless statements that paint the entire academic ecosystem with the same brush, without evidence and without context. Such claims do nothing to solve the real issues we face,” says Dr Matutu.

### **A sector committed to excellence**

Dr Matutu has reaffirmed USAf’s commitment to safeguarding the integrity and public value of South Africa’s universities.

“Our institutions remain pillars of knowledge production, social mobility and national development. They are not collapsing. They are confronting challenges – as universities globally are – and they continue to deliver excellence across teaching, research and innovation,” she said.

“South Africa deserves responsible commentary, which is evidence-based and grounded in an understanding of the complexity of higher education. Anything less misleads the public and undermines the very institutions working tirelessly to serve the nation.”

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