



THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION, DR BLADE NZIMANDE'S, STATEMENT ON COVID-19 ALERT LEVEL 2 MEASURES IN THE POST SCHOOL EDUCATION AND TRAINING SECTOR

26 August 2020

Programme Director;
Deputy Minister Buti Manamela;
Director-General Gwebinkundla Qonde
DDGs;
Members of the media;
Ladies and gentlemen

Good afternoon

On 8 June 2020 in Government Gazette No. 43414 I released directions in terms of the Disaster Management Act for criteria to return to public and private higher education campuses as part of a risk-adjusted strategy for a phased-in return from Level 3 of the national COVID-19 lockdown.

These criteria were developed in consultation with the sector, including representatives from Universities South Africa (USAf), the South African

College Principals' Organisation (SACPO) Labour unions, the South Africa Student Union (SAUS) and the Council on Higher Education.

Institutions have been implementing their own student return strategies in line with their teaching and learning and campus readiness plans, and under Level 3 up to 33% of students have been returning to campus.

Each institution has taken a different approach to the risk-adjusted, phased-in return, dependent on their context and readiness, and in line with their own detailed institutional plans and strategies.

As a department we have maintained regular communication with the sector, working with USAf, the SACPO and individual institutions.

We have also put in place a bi-monthly monitoring process, through which all public institutions are reporting, and which lays the basis for further engagement with the Department where necessary.

I am grateful for the support of our institutions that have agreed to this process, and that have been submitting regular reports and responding to requests for information.

This is an important part of our national effort to contain the spread of the virus, keep our students and staff as safe as possible, and work in solidarity to do everything possible to save the academic year and ensure that all students are given a fair opportunity to complete the academic year.

However, we must remain vigilant about the necessary physical distancing, safety and cleaning protocols to ensure that we continue to save lives while we work towards saving the academic year.

On a sad note I must report that we have lost 80 members of our public higher education community to deaths from the virus. Of these, 35 were staff and nine students from universities and 36 from TVET Colleges, with 11 students and 25 staff members.

We mourn these losses of staff and students in our universities and colleges and send our condolences to the families, friends and colleagues of those who have succumbed to this illness.

ON UNIVERSITIES: REPORTS

In terms of the most recent monitoring report as of 6 August 2020:

- The total number of positive COVID-19 cases reported by institutions is **1 552**. Of these **975** are staff, and **577** are students.
- **115 555** students had been issued with permits to come onto campuses for teaching and learning and research purposes. This amounts to approximately **20%** of the contact student population. Some institutions are still implementing the phased return of the first 33% of students to their campuses.
- On a daily basis only **29 624** staff and students are screened entering university campuses. It is assumed that not all students issued with a permit are returning to campuses (some may be

choosing to continue to work remotely from home). The relatively low number of daily screenings may also be linked to the management of activity on campuses, in that students are not all arriving on campus every day, but are attending campus when it is necessary.

In terms of return to residences, there were **33 985** students living in university owned residences by 6 August 2020.

This is approximately **28%** of the residence capacity (**121 000** beds across the system). In addition institutions reported that there were a further **27 177** students living in university leased and managed accommodation, **12 474** students living in university accredited accommodation, and **9 899** students living in private accommodation that had been vetted by universities.

Our latest monitoring reports show that while challenges do remain in the system, all universities have made significant progress in their teaching and learning strategies and campus safety strategies, which have included implementing various methods for remote learning, distributing devices and data to students, distributing learning materials in other forms directly to students, training staff, communicating regularly with staff and students, and adhering to protocols that keep staff and students safe on campuses and in residences.

ON COVID-19 HEALTH AND SAFETY

All institutions have prepared their campuses in line with the HigherHealth protocols and Health & Safety Committees at all campuses are compulsory and must be actively engaged. All institutions which have not as yet established these institutions are directed to do so immediately and importantly, to ensure that they are all appropriately resourced and fully functional.

Institutions will need to continue to be vigilant and prioritise health and safety of staff and students, while at the same time ensure continued and more intense support for teaching and learning to ensure that the academic year is saved.

In addition:

- Number of staff and students quarantined (cumulative from start of Level 3) = 2 040;
- Number of staff and students requested to self -isolate (cumulative from start of Level 3) = 2 076;
- Number of reported deaths (from start of lockdown): staff = 35; students = 9; and
- Number of students issued permits to access campuses (for teaching and learning/research) = 115 555, i.e. approximately 18% of the total contact student population.

ON UNIVERSITY LEVEL 2 PLANS

All universities have plans in place for remote multimodal teaching and learning and the controlled return of students to campus-based tuition in line with the criteria published in the Government Gazette (Vol 660, No 43414 on 8 June 2020).

According to the criteria developed, I am happy to report that under Level 2 of the lockdown, it will be possible for us to allow for up to a maximum of 66% of students to return to university campuses.

This will be done in terms of the detailed COVID-19 management plans in place across the sector, and to ensure the continued safety of students and staff, while allowing for greater access to campus teaching and learning for more students.

In terms of the criteria, the following categories of students will be able to return under Level 2:

- All groups that had been prioritised to return in Level 3, but couldn't be accommodated due the maximum campus carrying capacity having been reached;
- Students in all years of study who require laboratory and technical equipment to complete the academic year;
- Students in all years of study who require practical placements/ experiential learning/ work place-based learning to complete the

academic year (provided the work places and platforms are open and prepared);

- First year students in all undergraduate programmes.

All other students will continue to be supported through remote multimodal teaching learning and assessment until they can return to campus.

It is recognised that each institution will determine the implementation of these criteria in terms of their own academic programme plans and strategies.

I am aware that there have been different approaches and strategies for completion across the system, and some institutions have faced difficulties in implementing their teaching and learning plans effectively.

However, we have been doing everything possible to ensure that we support institutions to respond in the best possible way to the many challenges that have arisen during the pandemic. This has included the re-prioritisation of funds to support the COVID-19 response at our public universities.

ON RISK ASSESSMENT OF THE PERIOD

Each institution has its own Operational Plan based on a risk assessment linked to its operating conditions, location and context.

Institutions submitted their plans to the Department on their 33% return of students to campus and have been requested to submit updated plans for

the 66% return yesterday, 25 August 2020. The Department also receives status reports on a wide number of readiness and operational indicators from all institutions on a fortnightly basis.

According to the latest report:

- 14 Universities deemed to be at low risk: *Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), Nelson Mandela University (NMU), North-West University (NWU), Rhodes University (RU), Sol Plaatje (SPU), University of Cape Town (UCT), University of Johannesburg (UJ), University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN), University of Pretoria (UP), University of South Africa (UNISA), Stellenbosch University (SU), University of the Western Cape (UWC), University of the Witwatersrand (WITS) and University of Zululand (UNIZULU).*
- Six Universities deemed to be at medium risk: *Durban University of Technology (DUT), Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), University of Limpopo (UL), University of Mpumalanga (UMP), University of the Free State (UFS) and University of Venda (UNIVEN).*
- Six Universities deemed to be at high risk: *Central University of Technology (CUT), Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), Sefako Makgatho University (SMU), University of Fort-Hare (UFH), Vaal University of Technology (VUT) and the Walter Sisulu University (WSU).*

Some Universities have not adequately resumed academic teaching & learning for a significant proportion of their student populations since March when the recess period started.

This poses a serious risk. The Department is currently engaging with all Medium and High Risk institutions identified above to secure commitments and actions to lower risks and expedite operational capabilities to ensure successful completion of the 2020 Academic Year. Special support measures will be put in place to ensure academic activities resume at an accelerated pace at these universities.

ON DIFERENTIATED RESPONSIVENESS OF UNIVERSITIES: END DATES FOR THE ACADEMIC YEAR

In this regard, institutions have reported differential levels of responsiveness in terms of their progress in completing the requirements for the 2020 academic year and readiness for the onset of the 2021 programme. I have been concerned about the wide range of variation in respect of these two aspects given that they have various kinds of negative implications for the system.

We need to strike the right balance between the imperative of enabling all institutions to complete the requirements for the 2020 academic year in order to give all students a fair chance, and the need to ensure the start of the 2021 academic year in ways that do not render the system unmanageable or impairing the principle of equity of access across the system.

For this reason, I have met with both the COVID-19 Ministerial Task Team and Vice-Chancellors in the last week to impress upon the principle to agree on a fixed period within which all institutions must complete the current academic year and a fixed period of starting dates for the opening of the 2021 academic year.

As it stands, we are targeting all institutions to complete the 2020 academic year by the end of February 2021, with starting dates for the new 2021 academic year ranging from 15 March to 15 April 2021. All efforts will be made to ensure that outlier institutions get up to speed to meet this requirement.

The detailed management of these two processes across the system will be communicated by the Department once all the necessary consultations have been completed.

OUR DIRECTIVES

- The Protocol governing the staggered return of students to campuses must hold. Any uncontrolled return would be highly irresponsible and place lives of students and staff at risk. We met with stakeholders in the COVID-19 Task Team chaired by Deputy Minister Buti Manamela on Friday (21 August 2020) to secure stakeholder support for this broad strategy;
- The return of students up to 66% as per Return Protocol announced in March will now proceed under specific conditions to be laid out by DHET to all institutions;

- Institutions submitted their updated plans yesterday, 25 August 2020, and are expected to begin reintegrating further groups of students up to the 66% from 1 September 2020. This will also allow for return of students facing severe difficulties to continue with remote learning due to family circumstance, connectivity problems or other circumstances ;
- All students that cannot be safely reintegrated, will continue to be supported through remote multimodal teaching learning and assessment until they can return to campus;
- International students studying at SA universities currently outside SA will only be able to return to their campuses during Level 1 once international travel resumes. Priority may have to be given to Registrars and senior Medical Students in this category should international travel be permitted under Level 2;
- This will allow broad alignment with the Department of Basic Education's (DBE) planning on the release of the National Senior Certificate (NSC) results due for release on 23 February 2021.

ON DIGITAL LEARNING DEVICES

I had tasked NSFAS with the procurement process of the digital learning devices for NSFAS funded students currently registered at universities and TVET colleges.

Although, as mentioned in a previous media briefing, the provision of such devices is extremely urgent as part of the government's response to

COVID-19, a formal, transparent, competitive tender process was followed.

We adopted this route instead of an emergency tender process to avoid any deviation from the normal competitive procurement process. The reason for this was our serious concern that the process must be beyond reproach given recent experiences of reported corrupt practices experienced around COVID-19 procurement of PPEs.

The Administrator of NSFAS has informed me on Tuesday, 25 August 2020 that none of the bids competing for the supply of learning devices as specified in the bid process had achieved the mandatory requirements as required in the bid document. For this reason, no tender was awarded.

This is of course unfortunate and regrettable only in the sense that the procurement of learning devices will not take place right now. However, we are also quite clear that the rules of good governance and due process must be followed to ensure a judicious outcome in the public interest.

The Ministry is well aware of a campaign driven by some commercial interests, using false flag accusations about supposed 'sabotage' and undue interference by the Department to mask their own interests in trying to gang-press NSFAS into making shoddy decisions. This will not be allowed to take root in the post-school education and training system.

For this reason, NSFAS will have to start the process from afresh and follow the letter of the law. Government policy is clear that our procurement process must promote an inclusive economy with diverse players, with specific priority given to credible broad-based black economic enterprises to ensure we that broaden the base of our economy.

Although this puts us back in terms of the quest to access sufficient learning devices, we will stay within the law and due administrative process. The results of this process will be open for public scrutiny once the process is independently and fairly completed.

Let me also add that, in the same vein of transparency, I have also instructed that all institutions falling under my two departments, should publish the full list of all companies that have benefited from procurement that was initiated in response to COVID-19.

Once a service provider has been appointed, the learning devices will be delivered directly to the student as per address provided on the acknowledgement of debt or request for digital learning device form.

NSFAS has issued guidelines to outline process to be followed to enable students to receive these laptops.

The following are the guidelines on who qualifies, and terms and conditions for digital learning devices:

- Only contact NSFAS funded students who are currently registered at universities and TVET colleges will qualify to receive a device.
- NSFAS funding policy makes provision for NSFAS funded students studying at universities to receive a learning material allowance annually, which covers the cost of necessary learning material (books or learning device).

- NSFAS funding policy does not make provision for NSFAS funded students studying at TVET colleges to receive a learning material allowance. I have therefore signed a once off policy deviation which will allow TVET college students to receive digital devices for the 2020 academic year. At this point the policy deviation will only apply for this specific academic year 2020.
- University students who are not funded in the DHET scheme do not qualify, e.g. Funza Lushaka, Department of Social Development, Rural Education Access Programme (REAP) and SETAs (pre-funders) do not qualify for the devices under the Covid-19 digital learning device scheme. Pre-Funding agencies (all funding administered by NSFAS outside of the DHET budget) indicated that there is no additional funding set aside to purchase and procure devices. Funding for digital devices and associated costs must be sourced from the available 2020 funding budget.
- Trimester 1 and Semester 1 students at TVET colleges will not qualify to receive the learning devices, as these students have already written their final examinations. These learning devices are meant to assist students in completing their 2020 academic year. However, Trimester 1 and Semester 1 students who will be enrolling for Trimester 2 and Semester 2 will qualify to receive the devices.
- Students will have an option to accept or decline the offer of a digital learning device.

University students who have opted to receive the learning device will receive them on a loan-to-buy basis.

The cost of the device would be added to the student fee account and the student will have an option to:

1. Purchase it, by settling the cost with the institution,
2. Purchase it, by providing consent to NSFAS to withhold the learning material allowance in future academic years, or
3. Return it in good working order to the institution.
4. Students who will exit the higher education system at the end of the 2020 academic year must return the device in a good condition or purchase the device at a price agreed with the institution. Failure to comply will result in the student's fee account having a positive balance. This include students that will graduate, students that may exit because of academic progression or N+ rule violations, or students that may opt not to come back in 2021.

ON 2021 NSFAS APPLICATION CYCLE

The NSFAS 2021 Application cycle opened on the 3rd of August 2020. To date, NSFAS has received over **89 547** applications.

Given current extreme circumstance as a direct result of Covid-19, we are anticipating an influx of applications by the closing date of applications by 30 November 2020, with predictions of a higher number of applications compared to the previous years. It is still early days though, so we will have a better picture in a month or two.

ON NSFAS BENEFICIARIES WHO PROVIDED INCORRECT INFORMATION

The National Student Financial Aid Scheme has recently removed from their list a total of **5000** students who were incorrectly funded on the basis of providing incorrect information for the 2020 academic year on the basis of inaccurate information supplied in the original applications.

This decision by NSFAS was due to recent financial information obtained from South African Revenue Services (SARS) which revealed that there were discrepancies on the total household income declared by the students and verified household income as per SARS data.

The data from SARS showed that these students came from families who had household income that exceeded the maximum threshold of R350 000 per annum. It was therefore this decision that led NSFAS to stop funding these students.

NSFAS has issued communique to all affected students notifying them of termination of their funding status, and the process to follow if they dispute the findings.

The affected students will have 14 days from the date they received the SMS communication to petition this decision by submitting proof of family income or change of income to NSFAS for review. These documents need to be submitted to NSFAS via email at IncomeReview@nsfas.org.za.

At this point, we must raise the strongest concern and objection to any students who have deliberately submitted false information to 'game' or con the system. This is clearly a case of unethical and corrupt behavior.

Where proven, legal action will be taken against these culprits and NSFAS will recoup funds from students who were attempting to defraud the scheme by misrepresenting their financial status. Corruption must be fought wherever it occurs irrespective who is involved.

We are aware of financial pressures on many students from family households above the NSFAS threshold during these difficult economic times, and appeal to the private and philanthropic sectors to raise levels of assistance to other categories of financially-needy students falling outside of the government funding policy.

ON THE TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING SECTOR

TVET college students returned to campuses in a staggered approach, from 10 June 2020. The last cohort of students returned on 27 July 2020, as per the approved revised academic calendar for the 2020 academic year.

Although all students returned to campuses in a staggered approach, from 10 June 2020, the last cohort of students will returned yesterday, 25 August 2020, as per the approved revised academic calendar for the 2020 academic year.

Since the return of students to campuses, colleges have successfully run classes in compliance with COVID-19 requirements, including providing for physical distancing through the splitting of classes.

In addition, the national examinations for the Engineering Studies students was successfully conducted and concluded in July 2020. Umalusi has since reported that it is satisfied with the conduct of the examinations, which adhered to the protocols set out for COVID -19.

The remainder of the academic year will see decreasing pressure on TVET colleges as Semester students will write exams next month and go into recess for the remainder of the year.

Colleges will open registrations for trimester 2 students as soon as trimester 1 results are released, following the standardisation process which was scheduled for 24th August 2020.

Examination activities have thus far been conducted in compliance with the revised Academic Calendar for 2020, and will continue until the completion of the NC(V) exams on 11 December 2020.

Based on the above, the move to Level 2 will not adversely affect operations in TVET colleges, if the compulsion for physical distancing, the

compulsory wearing of masks and provision of sanitization/washing of hands remain firmly in place.

Having said that I would like to report that the highest number of student positive Covid-19 cases were reported in the Northern Cape, Western Cape, with Free State (62), GP (54) and KZN (31) respectively.

The highest number of deaths were reported in the FS (5) GP(4) , EC (2) respectively.

The highest number of recoveries were reported in the Northern Cape, Western Cape, Free State and Gauteng, with Mpumalanga (61), North West (57) and KwaZulu-Natal (11).

With regards to staff, the highest number of positive cases were reported in the FS/GP, KZN and EC regions with 127, 95 and 62 respectively.

The highest number of deaths was reported in the EC, FS/GP and MP/NW regions with 22, 2 and 1 respectively.

The highest number of recoveries was reported in the FS/GP, EC and MP/NW regions with 126, 49 and 39 respectively.

The situation as it obtains had an impact on students attendance where less than 50% of students accessed Learning Management Systems. However, 67% of students are accessing campus-based activities such as attending class on a rotation basis.

16 660 Students in total missed their Internal Continuous Assessment (ICASS) which constitutes 5% of the total enrolments. This means these students will not be eligible for the examinations.

Non-teaching staff attendance remains at 85% high. It appears that comorbidities and age have had limited impact on staff attendance over 60, at 2% and 3% respectively. Comorbidities also had limited impact on staff attendance for under 60s, which is 5%.

ON COMMUNITY EDUCATION TEACHING CENTRES (CETs)

The calendar of the CET colleges is aligned to that of the Department of Basic Education as CET college learning sites use the infrastructure of the public-school system.

The resumption of the academic programmes means that all students registered reported to community learning centres and satellites on the 24th August 2020.

To provide guidance for the rest of the academic year, the Department will issue a revised academic calendar and to recover the lost tuition time, the Department will issue a Curriculum Recovery Plan with an Implementation Plan which will be supervised by the CET college executive management and centre management.

The Health and Welfare SETA (HWSETA) has offered to assist with 1 800 interns to be deployed as screeners at Community Learning Centres and Central offices.

As a department we are also looking at different of options to appoint cleaners for the learning sites.

ON SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

The Alert Level 2 brings about more opportunities regarding workplace-based learning programmes.

The Department on an ongoing basis surveys SETAs to determine the quantum of learners returning to workplaces. The latest report indicates that learners entering/enrolling in various learning programmes (returning to the workplaces) can be categorized as follows:

- Learnerships: 22 875
- Artisans: 11 845
- Internships: 8 160
- TVET college placements: 8 240
- University placements: 2 650

These numbers are falling short of the Department's revised Annual Performance Plan targets.

The estimated decline in the skills levy collections from **R19.413 billion to R11.291 billion**, a reduction of **R8.122 billion (42%)**, has huge implications on various learning programmes. We are engaging with the social partners at NEDLAC and SITAs to mitigate against this decline in the skills levy collections.

With the four months exemption in the skills development levy from 1 May 2020 to August 2020 regarding COVID-19 tax relief measures, it is expected that employers will now prioritise skills development under Level 2.

The easing-down provisions, will also enable the greater restoration of artisan development activities to a level of approximately 70%.

The WorldSkills South Africa unit will also be able to coordinate the provincial and national competitions in preparation for South Africa participation in the international competition in China, Shanghai during October 2021, within strict COVID-19 protocols and requirements.

IN CONCLUSION

I would like to acknowledge the significant support that has been provided by HigherHealth to the university system at this time.

The many forms of support offered by HigherHealth to institutions including advice, guidelines and protocols, training, and support for mental health have been critical to our institutions at this difficult time.

We have alerted all stakeholders to the risk of new infection outbreaks during the implementation of Lockdown Level 2 measures as a result of the concentration of larger numbers.

For this reason, all institutions have been requested to update and increase their health response protocols and support systems, including on-campus behavior management, sanitation and cleaning, testing,

diagnostic, isolation and quarantine facilities located in and outside of campuses, to cope with this risk.

I know that this has been a challenging time for many students: a time of uncertainty and anxiety for all.

We have been forced into this situation by a global pandemic, and students have had to grapple with self-study, often in difficult circumstances.

I applaud the many students who have adapted to these difficult circumstances, and developed new ways of learning and of coping.

I must also acknowledge that this has been a challenging time for the academic staff of our institutions, who have had to adapt rapidly to new forms of teaching and student support, and who have shown commitment to learning themselves and supporting students, often across multiple different platforms.

I commend this work, as well as the work of institutional managers, administrators and support staff who have worked hard to adapt to the necessary changes.

Let me also take this opportunity to express my most sincere appreciation, in particular to the ordinary frontline workers such as security guards, cleaning and administrative staff, whose crucial role in the fight against the spread of the virus is often not properly recognised. These workers have, and continue to play a very important role in ensuring that as people

move about and enter different work and other spaces, they do not spread the virus, or expose themselves and others.

As the former British Labour Party Leader and Member of Parliament Jeremy Corbyn has underlined, COVID-19 has made a very important revelation in our lives. That revelation is to finally awaken the world to the important roles these workers play in society, being to secure everybody's health and life.

I have also observed how this pandemic has turned things upside down. Who could have thought that an ordinary security guard would ever be the one to take the temperature of a medical professional, as they enter any health or other facility? To the extent that some in our country and the world did, we should indeed never look down upon these workers again.

I also thank the staff union leaders and student leaders who have contributed to planning and support at institutional level.

Thank you