



29 March 2020

Issued by Dr Hlulani Mabasa, Director: Office of International Affairs, University of Fort Hare

RESPONSE TO THE SRC'S DISTORTION OF FACTS REGARDING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS WHO CHOSE TO REMAIN BEHIND WHEN ALL OTHER STUDENTS RETURNED HOME DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC LOCKDOWN.

Following the first announcement by the State President, Honourable Cyril Ramaphosa about efforts to combat COVID-19 Epidemic in South Africa, the University Management announced, on the 20 March 2020 that the University was going to be closing for an early recess until the 15th April 2020. In the directive issued to all students, they were strongly urged to evacuate residences and return home by no later than Tuesday, the 24 March 2020, because the university does not have the requisite capacity to manage and contain an outbreak of the corona virus should it occur.

Following the second announcement by the President on Monday 23 March 2020 regarding the lockdown to take place from Thursday 26 March 2020 midnight, the University Management issued another directive in the morning of Tuesday 24 March 2020 re-iterating the earlier announcement. It was communicated to all students that they were required to vacate their residences by 15h00 on Tuesday 24 March 2020 as the University was closing down and staff would be released as per the President's decree. The University staff were released from duty on Wednesday, noon, 25 March 2020.

The Office of International Affairs acted on the first University announcement of 20 March 2020 and immediately wrote letters to all embassies of countries where international students comes from, to notify them of the University's decision to close the institution due to the COVID-19 epidemic. Furthermore, they were requested, as embassies, to assist where possible with the transportation of their citizens who are UFH students in South Africa, to return to their home countries.

On the same day of 20 March 2020, the Office of International Affairs also wrote an email to all international students and put pamphlets around the campuses to ensure that as many students as possible were reached and were aware of the announcement of the additional precautionary measures to limit the impact of COVID-19 at UFH by the University management. The notice requested international students who may be having challenges in complying with the University directive to return home, to contact the International Office for further assistance.

From the 20 March 2020 students came to the International Offices for assistance. The office received phone calls and emails from international students indicating various challenges to going home and enquiring of possible solutions. Staff in the International Office assisted international students by contacting airlines for students who wanted to bring their flights ahead of schedule and also booked buses on behalf of international students. All of those students were assisted and they returned home.

Given the large number of international students from Zimbabwe, the International Office also communicated with Prof Abbyssinia Mushunje, who is the institutional representative of the Zimbabwe Government Scholarship programme about the university's decision to close the institution following the COVID-19 outbreak. He was requested to also convey the message to the Zimbabwe Scholarship programme coordinators in Harare that they should make arrangements for their students to go home.

Subsequently the International Office cooperated with the Finance Department for the processing of bus fare allowances for international students under the Zimbabwe scholarship programme to go home. Most of the international students received the bus fare allowance to enable them to go home. There were a few students who said they received these allowance a bit late, still it was a day before the final date of students having to leave the campus.

International students in the East London campus were similarly assisted, hence they managed to go home without any difficulties. For a few international students in East London, allowances were provided for them to find alternative accommodation, which they did.

Members of the University Management met with the SRC on the afternoon of Tuesday, 24 March 2020 to discuss several matters, including the issue of students having to vacate the residences. The SRC President indicated that they supported the decision to vacate residences but requested that the University make buses available to enable remaining students to leave. The Management agreed to consider their request.

On Wednesday, 25 March 2020, the University provided busses for all remaining students who needed transport from the Alice campus to different destinations. International students at the Alice campus who needed transport to East London were also provided with transport so that they were able to connect with transport to go to their home countries.

Late on Wednesday, 25 March 2020, it emerged that about 60 international students refused to vacate University residences on the Alice campus. They were subsequently given temporary accommodation for one more night with the understanding that they would leave the following day. The Dean of Students requested that they move out of this accommodation by Thursday 10h00 in the morning. The students still resisted. The Dean also made an offer of an allowance for alternative temporary accommodation if they did not want to go home and gave them until 14h00 to vacate. At this time, the Dean also received the assistance of a staff from the International Office. All these students were requested to submit their names to established their details and for an allowance to be arranged for them so that they could vacate the university premises. About 30 international students submitted their names, and an allowance was arranged for them, but still they refused to leave. The students were informed that there were no staff or any provisions for them (including protective equipment required for the corona virus) as the University would be closed for the lockdown. Since the majority of students were from Zimbabwe, Prof Mushunje was again approached to assist but was not able to do so. Despite repeated warnings, the students refused to leave or to be assisted to be accommodated elsewhere. It was at this stage that the security personnel were requested to move the students out of the University residences so that they could be closed.

On Friday morning, the 27 March 2020, the International Office were notified of a group of international students who had remained outside the campus in Alice.

Further negotiations were undertaken with these students to find them alternative accommodation, which was secured at Lovedale Heights in the town of Alice. The registration status of the 60 students who claimed to be international students without accommodation was verified, and it was found that only 22 were indeed registered international students of the university in 2020.

The International Office worked with Mr Mtheza Buya, owner and Director of Pulse Property Group (Pty) Ltd a company that owns the Lovedale Heights residence in Alice to provide accommodation to these students. The pre-condition to obtaining a room in this residence was that these students should be registered international students of the University for the year 2020. Of the group of students who were stationed outside the main gate requiring accommodation, only 22 registered international students took up the accommodation that was provided and were transported to Lovedale Heights, which was arranged by the University.

It should be mentioned that the SRC were not present during the events that unfolded on Thursday 26 March and Friday 27 March, 2020.

It has been reported that the SRC President approached the mayor of Amathole district Municipality who interacted with the students at the University gate in Alice and that he was offering to assist the University to acquire a hotel in East London where the students could be placed. However, he did not offer to accommodate them, but just to assist in accommodating them and did not provide any indication of costs and who would incur these.

The SRC President's suggestion to Management for accommodation of these students in East London was declined because the University had already secured a better and reasonable accommodation for the students in the Lovedale heights residence in Alice.

The University is extremely concerned about the statements the SRC President has made regarding these events to which he was not a party and thereby bringing the University into disrepute as well as his reckless social media utterances about what Minister Nzimande reported about the University.

Issued by

Dr Hlulani Mabasa
Director: Office of International Affairs
University of Fort Hare