

MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION STATEMENT ON THE MEASURES TO PHASEOUT THE LOCKDOWN AND PHASING IN OF PSET STRATEGIC FUNCTIONS

30 April 2020

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Members of the media

All our stakeholders in the PSET Sector (USAf, SACPO, SAUS, Labour union;

Students and parents

Fellow South Africans

As you know, South Africa has entered into “uncharted territory” in confronting the spectre of the COVID-19 pandemic, but we are drawing on our long history of struggle against adversity to overcome this unprecedented challenge.

Like all the other sectors in our society, we have been forced to take immediate and drastic measures to contain the spread of the virus and ensure our students and staff are protected.

The essence of our challenge can be put thus: We are constrained by the very same challenges we seek to address, poverty inequality and unemployment. The very problems we seek to solve are the obstacles standing on our way.

From the moment the President declared the COVID-19 pandemic to be a national disaster on Sunday 15 March, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, in conjunction with institutions, have put all our post-school educational institutions on early recess, and effectively suspended academic activity.

Today, the Ministry will be announcing measures in the context of the national COVID-19 measures announced by the Command Council on Wednesday, 29 April, 2020. All the measures to be identified herein follow within the strategic logic of the national COVID-19 strategy, and is informed by three (3) overarching considerations, as captured in our thematic focus: #Save the academic year. #Save lives.

Firstly, whatever we do in the PSET sector, our responsibility is to lower the infection curve. Secondly, we must save the 2020 academic year, but not at the expense of lives. Thirdly, our efforts to save the academic year must avoid worsening the infection curve.

We will be implementing a risk adjusted strategy for the entire PSET sector based on the national COVID-19 protocols, and will direct and manage the way institutions carry out their academic mandates at all times within this strategic and policy framework.

2020 Academic Year

Guided by the work and decisions of the National Command Council, we have decided not to resume with campus-based academic activity throughout the PSET sector, including all Universities and TVET Colleges, both public and private, during the Level Four (4) lockdown period.

The only exception will be the controlled return of final year Clinical Training (medical) students, under strict conditions, to also directly assist with the health management campaign of the Department of Health.

The risks of a return to normal campus-based activity for thousands of students and staff are simply too great and cannot function successfully outside of the national context of a general lockdown. Universities and TVET Colleges do not operate in a vacuum, but in a historically-specific context.

Against this background and with the endorsement by the Command Council, we have decided that the current period, from 1 May until South Africa transitions into a lower COVID-19 risk phase, must be used to put a number of critical interventions in place across the PSET system.

This includes:

Developing and implementing effective multi-modal remote learning systems (digital, analogue and physical delivery of learning materials) to provide a reasonable level of academic support to all our students at all institutions to resume academic learning and teaching support. As we are in an unprecedented emergency, we have to use all available tools to reach our students fully cognisant that it will not substitute the need for contact learning when conditions permit. This we will do making sure that No student or institution is left behind;

Securing a universal access deal with the major Mobile Network Operators around data and connectivity to support remote learning; We believe we are close to reaching such a deal

Where physical delivery of learning materials are required and where no immediate digital means are ready, to ensure that students are provided with instructional materials;

Finalizing the procurement and distribution of devices (laptops) for all students and its connectivity into digital remote learning platforms. In this regard, I would like to appeal to all students to ensure that they urgently register their correct numbers with their institutions so that when we finalise the educational rate for data, we can load it to the correct number so that all students can benefit.

Strengthening our remote pedagogic teaching and learning models and sharing this across the TVET and University systems;

Securing possible relief/stimulus/emergency funding to our public institutions in distress, including critical areas of financial support that may be required;

forging a compact for an equitable economic transformation that will ensure the advancement of the economic position of women, youth and persons with disabilities and that which promote localisation and industrialisation of our economy.

Prepare all PSET campuses with deep cleaning and biosafety protocols to ensure readiness for eventual return of students and staff, and employing SMME's and cooperatives, to this task.

Forging strong partnerships with both Departments of Health and Basic Education to coordinate all efforts to successfully and safely implement the 2020 academic year and phasing in of the 2021 academic year.

Our intention as a sector is to use this phase for planning and preparation at all our Universities and TVET Colleges, and the mobilization of resources. Our collective efforts during this period remains that of putting appropriate remote learning support systems in place for all our PSET institutions, using whatever means available, whilst preparing our institutional capacities for eventual return of students and staff once conditions permit such.

HIGHER HEALTH

When students return to campuses, protocols will be in place for the maintenance of physical distance, access to hand sanitisers and protective masks, and continual deep cleaning of facilities.

In addition, reopening will entail the 3600 screening/testing of staff and students, with environmental cleaning of campuses and residences. We are also identifying sites for quarantine facilities in or near our institutions as may be required.

We will also be providing mental health support and other forms of support necessary for staff and students throughout.

In a joint effort, HIGHER HEALTH supported by the Department of Health, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD), USAf, SACPO and other organisations, we have developed a comprehensive and clear set of PSET guidelines on managing Covid-19 in the sector, post lockdown.

I therefore would like to take this opportunity to announce that these guidelines will be distributed formally to all universities, TVET and CET colleges and other sub-sectors for implementation.

NATIONAL STUDENT FINANCIAL AID SCHEME (NSFAS)

NSFAS funding for all students will continue while the academic year is underway.

The likely extension of the academic year will require additional funding to maintain allowances for students while they complete the academic year. As a Department, we are therefore working with NSFAS, in modelling these costs.

Given the fact that all our universities have already disbursed learning materials allowances to their NSFAS supported students, I would like to urge our student who have not as yet utilized their allowance to use their allowances to purchase appropriate electronic learning devices to support their learning during this time.

UNIVERSITIES

The 2020 academic year will be re-organised to enable all our institutions and their students to complete academic requirements, with the prospects of extending into early 2021 depending on the epidemiology and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic threat.

The completion of the academic year 2020 and the start of academic year 2021 will be aligned with the plans of the Department of Basic Education in terms of the completion cycle of the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations, and the release of the NSC results.

Any plans to reopen universities for contact learning over coming months will necessarily have to be calibrated within national COVID-19 health and safety parameters, taking into account issues of physical distancing, biosafety, and other risks.

As a result of highly uncertain and fluid social context imposed by the viral threat on every aspect of South African society, it is not possible to determine with any measure of certainty the dates when physical return to campuses for the bulk of our students will be possible.

Until we reach that point, every effort is now being made to put in place multiple and flexible methods of teaching and learning to support all our institutions and all our students.

Within a national framework currently in place, each university will have to put plans in place to ensure its specific programmes, resources, and capacity are adequate to offer various forms of remote and flexible learning from the beginning of June 2020 until a full return to contact teaching and learning is feasible.

Our institutions will continue to offer training and support to academic staff and students in respect of the necessary technologies and mechanisms required to support teaching and learning.

The Department, assisted by the Centre for Industrial and Scientific Research (CSIR), is working on developing a Geospatial model to map the levels and quality of connectivity, bandwidth and distribution of learning and co-learning centres in various districts throughout South Africa, including municipal and other private facilities that might be used by students during this period. In addition, CSIR is modelling the 'carrying capacity' of our Universities and TVET colleges in the scenario where it would be safe to return certain groups of students, and within the National Command Council COVID-19 regulatory parameters. I have indeed mobilized both my departments to support these efforts.

Once completed, this work should help us to better plan future normalization of activity on our campuses whilst in the current period being able to access, where appropriate, decentralised learning facilities in various districts for study purposes.

As a department we are aware that the COVID-19 pandemic has created new significant financial pressure on universities.

One such aspect which incurred significant losses as a result of the lockdown, is the stalled infrastructure projects on our various campuses, including student residences.

To unblock this, Government has made a provision for controlled relaxation to enable stalled infrastructure projects to be resumed from the 1st May, subject to adherence to strict health protocols. In the interim, we urge our universities to negotiate reduced liability terms with contractors.

TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

For the Technical and Vocational Education and Training sector, the 2020 Academic Year will also be restructured in line with the continuity of the lockdown under Level Four (4) national protocols. This entails the need to restructure national examinations for the trimester, semester and full-year programmes.

To this end, our TVET Colleges will have to reorganize the academic year to enable students to complete trimesters 1 and 2 for Engineering Studies, both semesters for Business Studies, and the full-year NC(V) programmes.

Trimester 3, which should have taken place from August to November 2020, will be deferred to a date to be determined after consultation with stakeholders. This is to ensure that students are adequately prepared for the examinations.

A calendar detailing the commencement and end of classes, the examination sessions, as well as the short recess period will be released.

In acknowledgement of the fact that almost all TVET college students do not have devices to work online, and furthermore do not have access to data, various other support initiatives have been explored to support students remotely, whilst simultaneously working on acquiring devices for all NSFAS students.

Radio and TV broadcasts have already begun in key subjects, and are in the process of being expanded, and will continue for 6 months.

The use of textbooks, e-Guides, past question papers, and uploaded YouTube videos, are strongly advocated and supported through bulk sms-es from colleges and WhatsApp groups set up by lecturers.

All these broadcasts and additional resources are available on the Department of Higher Education and Training website for ready and continuous access by students.

COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Like all our PSET institutions, for the Community Education and Training sector, the resumption of teaching and learning will be staggered in accordance with revised academic calendar.

Priority will be given to students doing the General Education and Training Certificate: Adult Basic Education and Training (GETC: ABET) and the Senior Certificate in preparation for sitting for the October/ November 2020.

The lower level classes, (AET 1-3) will resume on a later date aligned to the phasing in of grades in the school system.

We have postponed the writing of CET May/June General Education and Training Certificate: Adult Basic Education and Training examinations which were supposed to commence on the 20th May 2020, with all the candidates who were supposed to write the examinations to sit for their examinations at the end of the year.

To recoup the number of days lost during lockdown, the number of College holidays will be reduced for June and September 2020.

In this regard, a revised academic calendar will be issued to CET Colleges indicating the increased number of tuition days. We will engage with organised labour in the implementation of these measures.

Given that the majority of centres operate from schools, our CET academic calendar will be aligned with that of Department of Basic Education.

In tandem with the resumption of teaching and learning, I appeal to faith based organisations, churches, traditional leaders, NGOs and community leaders to be open to engagements with the Department and CET colleges on the utilisation of their infrastructure for CET tuition and examinations.

SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

Our Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) working with all these social partners will ensure that during the months of May-June learners are returning to the workplaces and training institutions in line with their gradual opening as per Level 4 guidelines.

I have extended the due date for the submission of the Workplace Skills Plans (“WSP”) Annual Training Reports (“ATR”) by the employers which are submitted on 30 April every year, to 31 May 2020 in the light of the nationwide lockdown.

I have issued a Directive to all Sector Education and Training Authorities to continue with the payment of learner stipends during the nationwide lockdown period.

We are also implementing measures at INDLELA, where our trade tests are conducted, at the main security entrance, to limit the risk of infections to all those who are entering the premises in strict compliance with the COVID-19 protocols and requirements.

In the same vein, the National Skills Fund (NSF) will be engaging the public and private Skills Development Providers (“SDPs”) on the dates and modalities of resuming learning as soon as such decisions are made.

As a department, following a request by NEHAWU and working together with them, the NICD, as well as the Health and Welfare & ETDP SETAs, we are developing a concrete plan on the training of various categories of frontline workers, particularly those working in our health facilities and other industries, as part of the COVID-19 awareness campaign.

In this regard I am happy to announce that funding has been set aside for the training of almost 18 000 (actual figure is 17 750) frontline health workers, the leadership and membership of trade unions, the shop stewards and other workers who are dealing with Occupational Safety and Health (OSH), within the context of COVID-19.

This training will take the form of information sharing sessions, as well as technical sessions, targeted at the above-mentioned groups. All these sessions will be online to ensure maximum coverage and reach.

The training will also cover workers on night duty. In addition, and working with the Department of Social Development, 1210 unemployed social workers will be recruited and placed on a 12-month internship, to work with our communities to tackle social distress and other psycho-social challenges facing households and communities during this difficult period.

CONCLUSION

The extraordinary measures that we are announcing today to ensure a contingency plan is in place during Phase Four (4) lockdown, have been enriched by the extraordinary contributions received from many South Africans, including our sector stakeholders which includes the Universities South Africa (USAf), the South African Principals Organisation, the South African Union of Students, Labour unions, student political formations, political parties, religious formations and non-governmental organisations, academics and scientists. We pay tribute to them.

I would like to thank all of you. Your inputs remain valuable to us and South Africa in general.

As a Ministry and a department we will be constantly communicating with all our stakeholders and the entire nation through multiple platforms of communication on any developments within the sector in an ongoing manner.

I thank you