

THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION STATEMENT ON MEASURES TO COMBAT COVID -19 EPIDEMIC AT THE DEPARTMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING AND THE DEPARTMENT OF SCIENCE AND INNOVATION

16 March 2020

Cluster Ministers

Deputy Minister's present

Government officials

Members of the media

Ladies and gentlemen

Good Morning

Both the Department of Science and Innovation and the Department of Higher Education and Training have been working on measures to combat COVID 19 epidemic.

We have already begun implementing measures to ensure that we respond to the COVID 19 epidemic and in line with the measures as announced by President Ramaphosa yesterday.

DEPARTMENT OF SCIENCE AND INNOVATION

Through my Department of Science and Innovation, we are engaging with the Department of Health, the Medical Research Council, and the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority with a view of mobilising funding, reprioritising research strategies and creating an enabling ethical and regulatory framework to facilitate research on the COVID-19 virus.

The DSI has now redirected R4million from other projects to some of the COVID – 19 related proposed interventions and will be costing the rest and mobilising additional funds going forward.

Given the recent emergence of COVID-19 at a global level and the concomitant lack of adequate information on the epidemiology, therapeutic management or natural history of COVID-19 or vaccine availability, it is important for researchers in South Africa to co-ordinate a response to the outbreak to facilitate its control.

In our continent – Africa, the natural history of COVID-19 has not been established and the risk factors for transmission and clinical outcome is unknown.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to describe the epidemiology of COVID-19 in our country as well as to address diagnostic, therapeutic, host and viral factors that may facilitate transmission or protect against infection.

Currently it appears that there is little mortality in children under 9 years of age. Mortality is the highest in men, increasing with age, smokers and persons with underlying lung and immune disorders.

What remains concerning for government is that South Africa with its high HIV and TB burden of disease, may face a protracted coronavirus outbreak, if these conditions prolong viral shedding.

It therefore becomes important that our local research focus on the following:

surveillance,

therapeutics and

understanding the local epidemiology and natural history.

In this regard, we have established a sub-committee to co-ordinate a national framework for research on COVID-19.

The DSI is looking at availing some funds towards this research. The following research agenda has been proposed:

Clinical/therapeutic research: this includes a focus on the World Health Organisation's (WHO) common protocol and other clinical protocols/research ideas. Strategies for the management of mild, moderate and severe COVID-19 infections will be considered and prioritised for further development, costing and implementation;

Regulatory and Ethics: this includes the review and approval of ethical and regulatory challenges pertaining to clinical research; and

We are also going to priorities Surveillance strategies with the view of funding the top priorities.

DSI INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENTS

We have put contingency measures in place, for example the use of video conferencing, which means that we can appropriately service our international cooperation portfolio in the coming weeks without the need for any outgoing international travel or receiving incoming delegations.

We maintain close contact with our international partners in this regard. All major international meetings we were due to host in the coming weeks have been postponed and we will be able to satisfactorily mitigate against the impact of these postponements.

We are alert to opportunities for international research and innovation partnerships to support the fight against COVID-19 and will facilitate South Africa's participation in such cooperation using our extensive portfolio of international cooperation instruments – South African researchers are for example already involved in relevant projects funded by the European Union.

DEPARTMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The Post Schooling Education and Training System (PSET) consists of ± 2,5 million students & staff.

We have established a COVID-19 Team comprising of Universities South Africa (USAF), South African College Principals Organisation (SACPO), Higher Health & Health Experts to coordinate sector response and collate institutional case management reports.

I would like to outline the critical protocols that we are putting in place to ensure the appropriate response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. We have been in close consultation with the leadership of our public higher education institutions in developing these measures as well as with the Department of Health.

Until this week, institutions had been in discussions as a sector about what protocols should guide higher education institutions during this pandemic. Many institutions had already taken tough decisions in a number of areas, including the cancellation of large events, such as graduations, contact lectures and other ceremonies.

I am aware of the fact that events on the ground are moving fast and that all institutions are making various contingency arrangements regarding their academic programmes where there has been either viral threat detection (like in the case of Wits University and UCT) or where institutions are responding to national directives arising from the Address to the nation by the State President. Some institutions have suspended graduation ceremonies, exams and tests, whilst others have brought forward their end of terms in order to create space for longer-term planning.

I will therefore be meeting with the Universities South Africa (USAf) and the South African College Principals Organisation (SACPO), and the South African Students Union (SAUS) tomorrow, Tuesday 17th March 2020 to agree on a common national Protocol and Management Plan across the sector as the time horizon extends into the future. This meeting will also consider various coping strategies in response to different scenarios regarding the scale and intensity of viral spread, including if necessary, periods of suspension of all activities at our public institutions.

We will also be liaising with other critical stakeholders, including national student representative bodies such as the trade unions SAUS (South African Students Union) to ensure that we move in unison as the sector.

The following guidelines apply to all public post-school institutions with immediate effect:

All international travel should be cancelled or postponed at this point in time. Any students or staff of public institutions who may have a critical reason to travel internationally should consult the relevant authorities at their institution and are required to report their planned travel according to the institutional protocols in place.

All individuals who have travelled internationally within the past three weeks should self-isolate for a period of 14 days. In addition, students or staff members of public institutions are required to report their travel to the institutional authorities before their return, so that their possible return to work/study can be effectively monitored.

Travel within South Africa should be limited to essential travel at the current time. Wherever possible, planned meetings, symposia or conferences should be restricted, and alternative formats explored, including the use of internet and telecommunications technology. Institutions should explore all other possible means to replace face to face meetings, lectures of more than 100 people, and gatherings with other formats where this can be done. Institutions should consider postponing or cancelling all large-scale gatherings, including graduation ceremonies, large conferences and symposia, for at least the next three months.

Every institution needs to have in place a communication strategy to manage regular communication with its community. Public health information is readily available through the NICD and the DOH and the Universities South Africa webpage will also be updated with regular communication to the university community. The Department of Higher Education and Training will also ensure that regular communication channels with the management of institutions is in place, so that information can be cascaded to institutional communities. Every institution has its own context, which will require individual communication plans to be in place.

Student health clinics across post-school institutions have been working with Higher Health (the Higher Education and Training Health, Wellness and Development Centre) to ensure readiness to deal with COVID-19 infections. Higher Health works closely with the Department of Health and the NICD in this regard. It is important that student health services are closely involved in the communications strategies and plans of individual institutions.

There is no immediate plan to shut down our public higher education and training institutions. However, operations and teaching and learning will come under strain at this time. As gatherings of no more than 100 people are allowed, this requires institutions to develop alternative plans for managing teaching and learning during this period. Many undergraduate face to face classes cannot be held with this restriction. Institutions will have to develop alternative mechanisms for teaching and learning, utilising technology wherever possible to support alternative teaching methodologies. Mitigation plans are being put in place at all institutions to limit contact and prevent the spread of the virus. The sectoral bodies of universities and TVET colleges will be working together to develop appropriate responses at individual campuses, based on shared practices and methodologies that have worked in other higher education systems. These will have to take into account the different conditions and contexts at individual institutions.

The majority of public universities and some public TVET colleges are not just teaching and learning spaces, but are also living spaces, which include student residences and staff housing. Each institution will develop a mitigation plan for its residence system, to ensure that protocols and controls are in place to mitigate the spread of the virus and to provide for isolation facilities where necessary.

All students and staff are urged to take the appropriate social distancing protocols very seriously. These include limiting social interaction, keeping appropriate distance from other people (approximately 1.5 meters at all times), not shaking hands or hugging (using an elbow greeting), regular hand-washing (with soap or hand sanitiser for at least 20 seconds), immediate consultation with health services in the event that you develop a fever or cough, and appropriate self-isolation if you fall ill.

The Department of Health's WhatsApp number is 0600123456 and provides additional information about COVID19. The NICD website (www.nicd.ac.za) is a credible source of information on COVID-19. Institutions may provide additional information sources and information

services and all students and staff are urged to take note of formal institutional public communication that relates to COVID-19.

PSET REPORTED CASES ON COVID-19

Last week we were informed of the first suspected case of the virus at one of our universities by the Vice Chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), and that case was confirmed over the weekend. We are working with Wits and the Department of Health to implement protocols to limit the spread of the virus.

The university will stop contact classes and all individuals who have been in contact with the student that tested positively are being contacted and supported to self-isolate for the next two weeks. The University is in consultation with my Department and the Department of Health and will make a decision on its longer-term plan within the next twenty-four hours.

The University of Cape Town has also reported its first confirmed case of the virus. In this instance of a lecturer who has tested positive for the virus. UCT has made a decision in the interests of its staff and students and in the light of the President's statement last night to bring its vacation forward by a week.

The University will communicate with its students and staff regarding their plans for reopening once they have fully assessed the situation with respect to the virus.

INTERNAL ARRANGEMENTS

Both the Departments of Science and Innovation and Higher Education and Training will be finalising the COVID -19 internal response plans for staff and contact clients.

To this extent, both the departments have already implemented some measures to ensure that staff and visitors practice good hygiene thus limiting the risks of infections where there are infected individuals.

We have also made plans for the Institute for the National Development of Leaderships, Employment Skills and Labour Assessment (INDLELA) which in the main interacts with the public on a daily basis. The developed protocols are guided by the national developed interventions.

All parts of our sector where there is limited contact will function normally, and this includes amongst others, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), Council on Higher Education (CHE), the South African Qualifications Authority (SAGA) and all our Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), but within the framework as outlined by the President.

We are in an unprecedented situation that requires all of us to work together for our collective safety and wellbeing. We particularly have a responsibility to those in our society who are vulnerable to the virus. This requires some tough decisions that will hopefully slow the spread of the virus and limit its effect on our population. As others have noted, we must avoid panic and spreading fake news.

I thank the leadership of our institutions for their pragmatism and support in these difficult times and assure you of our commitment to work closely together, and continue to have open channels of communication during this crisis. Universities South Africa (USAf) has established a portal on their website to share communication and information from universities.

I urge everyone in our sector to remain calm, to follow the advice provided in public health announcements, and to utilise the necessary information channels available to all South Africans. Together we can get through this period as a higher education and training community.

Thank you