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**31 December 2020**

**Communiqué to universities on the reintroduction of Level 3 restrictions of the national lockdown**

**Priority: Urgent**

Dear Vice Chancellors

On 28 December 2020 the President of South Africa, His Excellency, Cyril Ramaphosa, announced that the country would move to adjusted Level 3 restrictions. The Department of Higher Education and Training (the Department) has received a range of questions relating to what this means, especially for universities that still have to complete the 2020 academic year (2020 AY) and for preparations for the new academic year. This communiqué serves to provide clarity on some of the questions.

The Department of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs has issued a Government Notice providing Amended Regulations for Alert Level 3. Government Notice No. R 1423 is attached for ease of reference.

The Minister issued national directions on the 8<sup>th</sup> June on the criteria for the return to campuses under the different alert levels in Government Notice No. 652. The circumstances under which those regulations were published has changed considerably and the regulations published on 8 June 2020 no longer apply in their entirety. The Minister is considering publishing new adjusted regulations. In the interim this communication is issued to guide institutions where students are due to return in January 2021 to complete the 2020 AY.

The pandemic has entered a new phase with a second wave of infections together with the emergence of a new more transmissible variant of SARS-CoV-2. It is vitally important to retain a focus on health and safety protocols to protect lives. This will become even more important as we enter the next few weeks and especially for campuses in identified hot spot areas. We have to all work together to minimise the effects of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to prevent our campuses from becoming transmission hotspots.

### **Return of Students and Staff in January 2021**

As you know, under the directions issued on 8 June 2020, institutions were able to return various groups of students and staff back to campus, and eventually under Alert Level 1 return up to 100% of students including all the international students who were outside the borders of South Africa. Across institutions, different groups of students were brought back onto campuses at different times and there were staggered end-of-year schedules for different groups of students at each institution. This means that some institutions who have not completed the 2020 AY as yet may have some groups of students who have completed. Data on the exact number of students who are still to complete at each institution is held at the institutional level.

Because of unique circumstances at each institution (locational and spatial arrangements, local lockdown restrictions, capacity issues, actual and variable numbers of students, etc.), a one-size-fits-all approach is not feasible. It is therefore important that each institution works out its own management plan for the coming period based on its own context within the adjusted national lockdown rules framework.

Each university will therefore need to manage the last period to completion of the 2020 AY (between January and March 2021) in line with their capacity and circumstances, and in adherence to the regulations that govern the adjusted Alert Level 3 of the national Lockdown imposed on the 29 December 2020. The Department will work with each institution to ensure such plans are optimised and remain within national rules, with special focus on institutions that still have some way to go to complete the 2020 AY. The institutions that are still to complete the academic year are requested to provide the Department with their plans for completion of the academic year, including the numbers of students yet to complete. This should be submitted to the Department by Friday 8 January 2020.

The following specific guidelines are provided during this time:

1. In terms of the adjusted regulations (Government Notice No. R 1423) the restrictions on the size of gatherings to a maximum of 50 persons within indoor venues and 100 persons in outdoor venues is re-imposed, provided that in all cases physical distancing of at least 1.5 m between individuals is maintained. This means that all universities will need to continue using blended and remote teaching and learning methodologies for the completion of their academic year.
2. Each university should identify students who need to complete the requirements for the 2020 AY but who are living in places that are not conducive to studying, or who lack connectivity, and to facilitate their return to their residences, whether on or off campus. These students should be supported to engage in learning through blended learning processes at the institution, and be permitted to access campus when necessary for practical and other teaching/learning requirements, ensuring that strict COVID-19 health and safety protocols are in place. This needs to be managed at the institutional level with the proviso that such numbers can be safely accommodated.
3. No maximum percentage of students will be imposed at the national level, as each institution's spatial realities differ and each institution needs to manage access to campuses and residences in line with their specific carrying capacities and circumstances, within national and local safety protocols.
4. All students who are able to complete their 2020 AY requirements while studying off campus should be encouraged to do so. However consideration must be given to data provision for these students to support their success.
5. Institutions must manage the process around identifying students who may return to residences. Institutions must issue each student with a letter/a permit to return to campus/ residence that defines the conditions of this permission.
6. All institutions should implement strict health and safety protocols with the support of Higher Health. More detailed information is provided in the next section of this communiqué. COVID-19 Health and Safety Committees, and other relevant institutional committees, should continue to operate and be vigilant to minimise the risks of a super spreading event.

7. Management of examinations need to be done with specific consideration to health and safety protocols (see <http://higherhealth.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/HIGHER-HEALTH-Protocol-on-Invigilation-During-COVID-19-within-the-PSET-Institutions.pdf> for information). In cases where physical attendance at examination is necessary and large venues with good ventilation are available, the maximum number of individuals in the venue may be relaxed provided that:
  - 7.1. There is at least 2m distance between each examination table
  - 7.2. All windows and doors remain open throughout
  - 7.3. All students and staff in the venue wear masks at all times
  - 7.4. Hand sanitisers are available on entry into the venue and that all individuals entering the venue are screened.
  - 7.5. Not more than 50% of the venue capacity is exceeded.
8. All students returning to residences and campuses should sign an agreement that they will commit to safe behaviour and will not participate in off campus activities that are risky during this time. There should be a complete ban on all social gatherings at all institutions.
9. Institutions are expected to have clear protocols and alternative work and study arrangements for those staff members and students who may be more vulnerable to the virus because of age and/or comorbidities, and are therefore unable to return.
10. There may be constraints in returning all staff onto university campuses due to a variety of reasons, including risk related to age and/or comorbidities, shared office spaces and so on. Each university should determine which staff need to return based on their academic and operational requirements and where necessary consider a range of options such as bringing back staff on rotation and allowing for those who can function remotely to continue to do so.

### **Health and Safety Protocols**

It is critical that institutions continue to adhere to the required health and safety protocols put in place during the period of lockdown and defined through the regulations. This includes the need to screen all individuals entering campuses and residences, to ensure that physical distancing is practised, to supervise the compulsory wearing of masks, and so on.

Wearing masks in public spaces is mandatory for all staff and students at all times.

The pandemic will continue to affect the world for the foreseeable future and it is necessary for institutions to do everything possible to prevent new infections and campus outbreaks that could put lives at risk and further disrupt the 2020 and 2021 academic years.

As has been the case throughout, we recognise that the measures in place will differ from institution to institution, but it is necessary to continue careful planning at this time through the COVID management teams in place, and to ensure that all members of campus communities who are returning in January 2021 understand and adhere to the necessary protocols put in place. Higher Health remains available to assist institutions with advice and support wherever possible.

It is necessary to ensure that all services, including university transport and shuttle services, must operate with all the required health and safety protocols in place. It is the responsibility of institutions to ensure this is rigorously and consistently enforced. It is important to communicate the message that whilst the institution must adhere to all the safety regulations that are in place to protect the health and safety of the university community, individual staff and students also have an obligation to take personal responsibility for their own health and safety and of those that they will come into contact with.

Please refer to HIGHER HEALTH's Guidelines and Protocols for COVID-19 as follows:

- **Guideline on the Management of COVID-19 within PSET Institutions**  
<https://higherhealth.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Guidelines-for-Post-School-Education-and-Training-PSET-Institutions-for-management-of-and-response-to-the-COVID-19-outbreak.pdf>
- **Guideline on Managing Mental Health and Substance Abuse in relation to COVID-19**  
<http://higherhealth.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/GUIDEL1.pdf>
- **Protocol for Screening, Testing, Contact Tracing, Self-Isolation, and Linkage to Care for the COVID-19 programme within the Post School Education & Training (PSET) Sector.** This protocol among other matters includes: Mass Screening at Campus Entry Points through establishment of Screening Stations and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) Precautions & Prevention for Student Volunteers, front line staff as well as all students and staff <https://higherhealth.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/HIGHER-HEALTH-COVID-19-Protocol-on-Screening-Testing-Linkage-to-Care-for-the-PSET.pdf>

- **Protocol on Routine Cleaning for COVID-19 Prevention at Post School Education & Training (PSET) institutions** <https://higherhealth.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/HIGHER-HEALTH-COVID-19-Protocol-on-Routine-Cleaning-at-PSET-institutions.pdf>
- **Student Volunteer Protocol for the COVID-19 programme within the PSET Sector** <https://higherhealth.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/HIGHER-HEALTH-COVID-19-Protocol-on-Student-Staff-Volunteer-Programme-for-the-PSET.pdf>
- **Protocol Post a Positive COVID-19 Result** <http://higherhealth.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/HIGHER-HEALTH-Protocol-Post-a-COVID19-Positive-Result.pdf>
- **Protocol on managing cluster outbreaks within PSET institutions.** It contains five COVID-19 scenarios which PSET administrators might have to manage. These range from those which occur at an individual level and pose a relatively low risk, to cluster outbreaks of many student and staff becoming positive in a short time-frame that may carry very high risks to the health and wellness of the entire campus staff and student community. <http://higherhealth.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/HIGHER-HEALTH-Protocol-on-Managing-Clusters-of-Outbreak-of-COVID-19-within-the-PSET-Institutions.pdf>

Daily COVID-19 screening remains available through HIGHER HEALTH's HealthCheck which is available as follows:

- Download using the URL for the webform: [healthcheck.higherhealth.ac.za](http://healthcheck.higherhealth.ac.za)
- Add to WhatsApp contacts: **0600 11 0 000** <https://wa.me/27600110000?text=hi>
- Dial using USSD line **\*134\*832\*2#**

### **Residences/Student Accommodation**

It is understood that under the adjusted Level 3 regulations, some student residences will include shared rooms, and it may be difficult for some institutions to return all students without utilising shared room spaces. This will require that careful protocols and rules are put in place and adhered to in order to reduce the risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission. For example universities should ensure vigilant daily screening protocols are put in place when accommodating two students in a room in addition to the normal screening and cleaning protocols that should be in place. Each university will have to make its own decision about how to manage the return of students and to do so in a way

that ensures health and safety protocols can be followed. As indicated above, permits should be issued to enable strict controls for managing access to residences and campuses.

It is recommended that institutions develop detailed plans for occupancy of residences and also provide guidance to approved/accredited private accommodation. Wherever possible, strategies should be put in place in dining halls, kitchen facilities and other social spaces to ensure that physical distancing and health strategies are adhered to. As a reminder, strategies and plans must also prioritise vulnerable students and staff. Over and above COVID-19 safety protocols, it may be necessary to introduce temporary rules in order to further restrict the risk of outbreaks and spread of the virus.

As indicated above, students returning to residences should sign an agreement that they will commit to safe behaviour and that they will not, during this time, participate in off campus activities that are risky.

It is recommended that you refer to HIGHER HEALTH's protocol on **Protocol on Routine Cleaning for COVID-19 Prevention at Post School Education & Training (PSET) institutions** for guidance on residences and accommodation.

### **Teaching and learning venues and use of space**

In line with the adjusted regulations, the maximum number of people in a specific indoor venue is limited to 50, with the proviso that not more than 50% of the capacity of the venue is used, and that physical distancing of 1.5m can be maintained. In venues designed for less than 100 seats, numbers will need to be adjusted accordingly. All indoor venues must be well ventilated. This applies across the board to university venues such as lecture rooms, laboratories, libraries and so on. The only exception that can be considered is in terms of planned examinations as described in paragraph 8 above, and repeated in the next section.

Taking into account the advice/direction of the COVID-19 task teams that are in place, the occupancy levels, in line with the above national restrictions, may be determined by venue and buildings depending on the protocols in place at each university. This may mean that not all teaching and learning venues can be utilised to 50% capacity. Universities need to continue to use strategies such as controlling access to campus and facilities, a continued focus on multi-modal teaching, blended learning modalities, online assessments, reducing the size of contact classes,

using rotation systems, and other strategies that have been developed during the lockdown period, where feasible.

The attendance in outdoor venues is limited to a maximum of 100 persons with physical distancing maintained.

## **Examinations**

In cases where physical attendance at examinations is necessary and large venues with good ventilation are available, the maximum number of individuals in the venue may be relaxed provided that:

- There is at least 2m distance between each examination table;
- All windows and doors remain open throughout;
- Not more than 50% of the venue capacity is exceeded; and
- All health and safety protocols are adhered to.

Please refer to HIGHER HEALTH's **Protocol on Invigilation of Tests and Examinations during COVID-19 within the PSET Institutions**. The Protocol focuses on a three-pronged dedicated approach to ensuring safe exam processes:

- ✓ **BEFORE THE EXAM:** Preparation of the exam venue and exam materials; and training of invigilators.
- ✓ **DURING THE EXAM:** Maintaining safety in the exam venue.
- ✓ **AFTER THE EXAM:** Ensuring safe management of exam materials following the exam.

<http://higherhealth.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/HIGHER-HEALTH-Protocol-on-Invigilation-During-COVID-19-within-the-PSET-Institutions.pdf>

## **Graduation ceremonies and other events**

The Department recommends that physical graduation ceremonies should not be held at this time, and that institutions should, wherever possible, continue to utilise alternative graduation methods, including online graduations, delivery of certificates and others. All events such as student parties,



conferences, workshops, sports events, etc. should be suspended. This may be re-visited at the appropriate time.

### **Permits to Return to Campus**

It is suggested that institutions issue permits for return to residences and campuses in order to ensure that protocols are adhered to and to manage the return to campuses under the adjusted Level 3 restrictions.

### **International Students and International Travel**

International students who return must follow the protocols put in place by DIRCO and the relevant authorities when entering the country. This includes bringing along verifiable results of COVID-19 tests that were administered no more than 72 hours before arrival in South Africa and the possible need to quarantine which could be at the expense of the traveler. This information should be provided to students before they return.

There are still significant levels of risk attached to international travel, particularly travel to high risk countries. The list of countries that are considered to be high-risk is constantly being reviewed by the National Department of Health depending on the state of the pandemic in those countries. This may result in South African travelers to those countries being stranded abroad. International travel for work, for example international conferences, should only be permitted under exceptional circumstances. Staff should be encouraged to continue with online international collaboration as much as possible.

### **Social solidarity**

The current trajectory of the pandemic indicates that the second wave will be more substantial than the first. It is therefore necessary to exercise the utmost caution and care. The primary consideration of saving lives while completing the academic year must remain foremost in institutional planning. It is important that sufficient care is taken to build a social compact amongst all members of university communities relating to the responsibilities of each person in ensuring that there are no further outbreaks of COVID-19. Clear communication and protocols will need to remain in place and a focus on social solidarity, which recognises that all communities remain at risk and require shared responsibility to mitigate the effects of the pandemic.

We highly recommend a social compact be signed between vice-chancellors, SRC leadership, and trade union leadership, among others, that foregrounds cooperation in mitigating the risk of spread of the virus. We also call on all universities to continue with the operation of institution-based COVID-19 joint task teams involving all critical stakeholders.

### **Psycho-social assistance**

Those in need of psycho-social assistance for stress, anxiety, depression, etc., may seek help through the HIGHER HEALTH 24 hour toll free crisis line which is available in all 11 official languages as detailed below:

- Toll-free call 0800 36 36 36
- SMS 43-33-6

### **Concluding Remarks on 2020 academic year**

The Department wishes to express its appreciation and thanks to all institutions for their hard work during the 2020 academic year and for their commitment to support the intensive monitoring and engagement that have been required at this time. We must remain vigilant and cautious to ensure that we save lives and save the academic year. The Department is committed to continue supporting institutions to ensure that all students are given a fair opportunity to complete the academic year.

### **Preparation for the 2021 academic year**

All institutions have provided the department with their planned dates of the start of the 2021 AY. We have to assume that the new AY will start under COVID-19 restrictions and therefore consideration must be given to how the system proactively plans for blended/remote teaching and learning. Fortunately the new intakes will be between 8 March and the first week in April 2021, providing the system with some space to plan this process with greater clarity and efficacy.

Consideration should be given to ensuring that all registrations are managed on-line in 2021.

The policy commitment to ensure all NSFAS funded students are supported to own a suitable device through the utilisation of NSFAS allowances should be instituted for all new students in 2021.

Owning a suitable device should also be an expectation for fee paying students.

In addition to planning that all students own electronic devices, consideration must be given to the issue of data provision for students who may be required to study off-campus.

All institutions will need to plan for and manage the orientation of new students in such a way that ensures that all health and safety measures are adhered to at all times.

The Department will engage with universities in the first two weeks of January to plan for the 2021 AY and will communicate continuously with university management as the situation evolves.

The Department will also continue to monitor the situation at universities through the submission of regular monitoring reports by universities. The template for the next monitoring report has been sent to universities and is due for submission on the 18 January 2021.



**Ms LC Mbobo**

**Acting Director-General: Higher Education and Training**

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