

MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION STATEMENT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF MEASURES BY THE POST SCHOOL EDUCATION SECTOR IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19 EPIDEMIC LOCKDOWN LEVEL ONE

30 September 2020

Programme Director;
Deputy Minister Buti Manamela;
Directors General Dr Phil Mjwara and Mr Qwebs Qonde;
Members of the media;
Ladies and gentlemen

Good Day

The Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation has been building comprehensive programmes, systems, controls through establishment of guidelines, protocols, capacity building, at all levels firmly grounded in the growing body of science and latest epidemiological data.

This is the basis that characterises our response since the advent of COVID 19 in our country.

Both my department of Science and Innovation and Higher Education and Training took note of the call by President Cyril Ramaphosa and leading clinical experts that, while the rate of infections has slowed, however with greater liberty in the movement of people, there remains possibilities of community-based and/or regional spikes of COVID-19 in the foreseeable future.

UPDATE ON COVID-19 INTERVENTIONS BY DEPARTMENT OF SCIENCE AND INNOVATION AND ENTITIES

The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) is in the final stages of the preparation for a study to determine the extent of COVID-19 infection in the general population with age-specific prevalence, as determined by seropositivity, meaning giving a positive result in a test of blood serum.

The proposed study will use two waves of cross-sectional population-based household sero-prevalence surveys. The study will be implemented in all the nine provinces. The survey will target all locality types (urban areas, rural formal and rural informal areas).

As a Department of Science and Innovation, we are an active participant in the Health Ministerial Advisory Committee which is looking at the manufacturing of the on COVID Vaccines.

It is envisaged that the first successful vaccines will be delivered in early 2021. However, the upscaling of the manufacturing pipeline for hundreds of millions, or even billions, of doses will also require intense collaboration and needs to be done in such a way that it will not compromise the production of other essential vaccines.

In order for South Africa to be able to secure early access to, and delivery of, safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines and treatments, as soon as they become available, we will be developing and implementing a comprehensive COVID-19 Vaccine Strategy, which amongst others will ensure that there is sufficient supply of a safe and effective vaccine to achieve population immunity to COVID-19.

With limited vaccine manufacturing capacity around the world, South Africa will have to prioritise its own requirements in the interest of securing access to the vaccine as a matter of national security.

We will be expanding the current BIOVAC operations to produce the drug substance required to act against the COVID-19 virus. Biovac, is a public-private-partnership company formed by government and the private sector in 2003 to produce local vaccines in South Africa.

It predominantly operates in the downstream part of the vaccine manufacturing value chain with primary activities geared towards formulation and filling of drug products as well as final product labelling, packaging and distribution.

Through the HSRC and Higher Health we are carrying out a COVID-19 knowledge and attitude study in young people and the results of the online survey are almost complete. We will in due course make the outcomes of this study available to the public.

We have also converted the existing health and demographic surveillance operations at three rural nodes, namely, Bushbuckridge Local Municipality (Mpumalanga) and Capricorn District Municipality (Limpopo), and Umkhanyakude District Municipality (KwaZulu-Natal) to incorporate COVID-19 telephonic surveillance and case finding.

The operations cover 300 000 residents in these areas. The surveillance measures the impact of non-pharmaceutical interventions against COVID-19 on rural households and individual mental health and supports local health authorities in their fight against COVID-19.

We will also be undertaking the Wastewater COVID 19 surveillance work at some Gauteng identified nodal points. This will contribute to an early warning system for COVID-19 resurgence and other emerging pathogens.

We have also ensured that we connect all the 320 plus TVET campuses to the South African National Research Network (SANReN) at 200 Mbps, allowing access to connectivity, optimisation and other services, including post-school infrastructure data accessibility monitoring and provision, particularly useful for working off campus. The work is conducted through the National Integrated Cyberinfrastructure System (NICIS).

The DSI's branding campaign will, among other achievements, will be showcasing its work in response to COVID-19. The department, since its inception and with two White Papers on its journey of developing and coordinating a national system of innovation, will be showcasing some of its achievements – especially the work on COVID interventions and its journey of transformation in the democratic era.

I hope, that through these campaigns, there will be a better appreciation of the impact of science, technology and innovation on our society, and a greater understanding that science saves lives.

This will assist in raising awareness of the impact of science, technology and innovation (STI) on society, and a greater understanding that science saves lives. This will include work to address other diseases and the contribution of STI in helping the economy recovery from the pandemic under the banner the “Making Sure It’s Possible” and hashtags #itspossible and #backedbyscience.

UPDATE ON COVID-19 INTERVENTIONS BY DEPARTMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

DEATHS DUE TO COVID 19

By the 22nd September we had lost 89 members of our public higher education community to deaths from the virus. Of these, 53 are from universities (44 were staff and 9 students), and thirty-six (36) from TVET Colleges, with 11 students and 25 staff members.

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

Ladies and gentlemen

Our sector welcomes the move to Level 1 which will allow for more contact teaching and learning.

I would like to express my gratitude to the exemplary leadership provided by President Ramaphosa and my colleagues at the National Command Council (NCC) in guiding our work during this difficult time.

I also remain humbled by the commitment of all members of the Ministerial Task Team, led by Deputy Minister Buti Manamela comprising of SACPO, USAf, Labour Unions, SAUS and SAFETSA to work collaboratively, as we have, and continue to navigate these uncharted waters presented by the pandemic.

I also would like to acknowledge the role played by the leadership of the various trade unions organizing in our sector, in particular NEHAWU, SADTU, NTEU, PSA, SAPTU and NAPTOSA.

The progress we are about to announce today would not have been possible if all these stakeholders had never cooperated and coordinated our sector’s collective response to this epidemic.

As we speak about cooperation and coordination, I urge my two departments and their entities to play an active role in the Presidential led District Development Model and contribute to its success.

In this way our institutions will therefore play a role in skills development and in our innovation led economic recovery and development.

ON HIGHER HEALTH

HIGHER HEALTH has now capacitated, through continuous onsite trainings, over 13000 frontline staff across our campuses that are working towards assisting COVID-19 response on a daily basis.

Furthermore, over 3200 student and staff volunteers have been trained and capacitated to participate in implementing COVID-19 daily screening, prevention, and education initiatives.

To date, over 12000 individuals have been trained through scientific knowledge to recognise and appropriately manage COVID-19 pandemic within our post school education and training sector.

Through HIGHER HEALTH we have been monitoring the COVID-19 vulnerabilities for the PSET, based on data received through the digital screening mechanism, the HealthCheck, monitoring tools.

We do this through the tracking and tracing system with the Department of Health and NICD, on the positivity rate, incidence rate, infectivity ate, across all our campuses, in the PSET system.

HIGHER HEALTH has also sent out new protocols for managing cluster outbreaks of COVID-19 in educational institutions. These contain five COVID-19 scenarios which PSET administrators might have to manage.

The HIGHER HEALTH daily HealthCheck and the issue of daily “health passport” to every student, staff and stakeholder entering our campuses has assisted our sector with the identification of moderate to high risk individuals and their referral for appropriate follow-up care.

To date, over 5 million HealthCheck screenings have been administered since the launch of HealthCheck.

Over 1,6 million students and staff, across the sector have been using HealthCheck on a routine basis, before entering the campuses.

HIGHER HEALTH has also introduced other innovative measures and solutions, the latest being a 24-hour dedicated TOLL FREE, HIGHER HEALTH student mental health support service, run through a dedicated team of experienced psychologists, social workers, counsellors in support from SA Depression and Anxiety Group.

The service supports all our students and campus communities on mental health challenges, survivors of gender-based violence and other psychosocial health challenges due to COVID-19.

In the last two weeks of its launch HIGHER HEALTH has successfully assisted over 500 individuals with finding solutions and averting serious, often tragic consequences of mental ill health.

I encourage every student to use this toll-free line 0800 36 36 36, anytime during the day or night and they must know they are not alone, in these challenging times.

Two weeks ago, during my District Development Model visit to Zululand District in KwaZulu Natal, I launched 10 fully furnished mobile clinic units to enhance health services at TVET, CET colleges and universities around the country.

The fleet will provide primary healthcare mainly to underserved campuses.

ON 2021 NSFAS APPLICATION CYCLE

The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) opened its 2021 application cycle on the 3rd of August 2020.

Applications are opened for Grade 9 to 12 learners and out-of-school youth who wish to further their studies at any public Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) college or Universities across the country.

By August 31, NSFAS had received more than 160 536 applications since the opening date, which was 20 000 more applications as compared to the same period last year. On average since the opening NSFAS receives over 5500 applications a day.

We are anticipating a high volume in applications leading up to the closing date.

The pattern we have been seeing with regards to applications received per province remains interesting and intriguing as it has been consistent for the past three consecutive years, where, Gauteng, KwaZulu Natal, and Limpopo are leading with the highest applications submitted.

We have also seen some major improvements and positive changes from Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga as well as North West.

To date NSFAS has received over 300 995 applications, this number is extremely overwhelming and encouraging.

In an effort to reach out to students who meet the requirements and who are in need of financial assistance but unable to access NSFAS funding due to lack of internet facilities or application resources in their areas, the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) offices nationwide are open to the public. These offices have been fully operational since September 14, 2020.

Over 15 Department of Basic Education (DBE) National Teacher Centres from various Districts and Provinces have been made available to be utilised by applicants during this application cycle. Applicants can access these facilities during school hours.

ON PROCUREMENT OF DEVICES

Across the sector our monitoring reports show that:

of the students that indicated they required a digital device (laptop/ tablet) 68% of the general student population. As reported earlier, 69% of NSFAS students will be supported to obtain one.

provision of data to university students remains high across the system - on average across the system 94% of undergraduate students are being provided with data. It is expected that data provision will decrease over the next few months as more students return to campus and so have access to campus networks and Wi-Fi.

A tender to supply and deliver Laptops to NSFAS Students was re-advertised on September 04, 2020 and closed on September 21, 2020.

By the closing date, a total of 140 bid proposals had been received. NSFAS is currently evaluating the bid proposals, with the awarding of the tender estimated to be completed by October 31, 2020.

NSFAS has conducted workshops and engagements with institutions and student leadership to spearhead the project, while the tender process is underway. Update project guidelines and Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) will be shared with institutions consensus.

Once a service provider has been appointed, the learning devices will be delivered directly to the student either as per the address provided on the acknowledgment of debt or request for digital learning device form, or to their respective campuses if they have returned to campuses.

Only contact NSFAS students funded under the DHET budget, who are currently registered for the 2020 academic year at universities, and TVET colleges will qualify to receive a device.

NSFAS also welcomed further collaboration with Pre-Funding agencies who wish to opt into the scheme based on the availability of budget and their associated conditions. These Pre-funding agencies must notify NSFAS in writing of their intent to opt into the scheme and confirm budget availability.

All potential recipients of the Digital Learning Devices, as well as the implementing institutions, are subject to the Guidelines and must abide by the rules outlined in the guidelines.

Students and parents are therefore urged to familiarize themselves with these guidelines which are available at the NSFAS website.

ON UNIVERSITIES RISK ADJUSTED STRATEGY

Following the President's announcement that the country would move to Level 1, I am pleased to say that we are now in a position to welcome back 100% of our university students, including all those international students who are currently outside the borders of South Africa.

All universities are implementing their plans to return all students and staff from the 1st October, subject to any restrictions linked to their own risk assessment due to their local context and conditions.

It must however be noted that the prescripts of COGTA regulations will apply. This means that the health and safety protocols in terms of physical distancing (at least 1.5m), wearing masks, washing hands, sanitising and environmental cleaning will be applied.

In addition, we will now be able to move to a 50% occupancy of rooms up to a maximum of 250 persons indoors at a time, with ventilation of rooms remaining critical.

As a sector, we will also allow the hosting of side gatherings up to 500 people at a time.

With respect to international students returning who remain outside our country, they will need to meet the requirements of the COGTA regulations – which includes having a test, not older than 72 hours, showing that they are negative for the virus on arrival in South Africa; if not, they will need to go into quarantine at their own expense for at least 10 days before proceeding to their respective institutions.

As I have indicated in previous briefings, universities have been implementing their own return strategies in line with their teaching and learning and campus readiness plans.

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.

We have maintained regular communication with the sector, working with Universities South Africa (USAf) and individual institutions.

As a department we have also continued to receive monitoring reports on a bi-monthly basis from all universities, and this laid the basis for further engagement with the Department where necessary.

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

In terms of the most recent monitoring report, the 7th such report compiled, as of 17 September 2020:

The total number of positive COVID-19 cases reported by institutions is 1 979. Of these 1 215 are staff, and 764 are students.

245 652 students had been issued with permits to come onto campuses for teaching and learning and research purposes. This amounts to approximately 40% of the contact student population.

Some institutions were still implementing the phased return of the first 66% of students to their campuses when the announcement for the move to Level 1 was made.

On a daily basis 70 815 individual staff and students were screened entering university campuses in the two -period between the 8th and the 22nd of September.

It appears that not all students issued with a permit are returning to campuses, some are still choosing to continue to work remotely from home.

The number of daily screenings is also 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. This is to ensure that the health and safety and physical distancing protocols are adhered to.

In my previous media statement, I indicated that in our monitoring of the system we had implemented a risk dashboard to check the likelihood of institutions effectively completing the academic year while providing all students with a fair opportunity of success.

We therefore colour Red for institutions that are at a high risk, for not completing the academic year effectively, orange for those who are at a medium risk and green for those who are on track to complete.

I'm pleased to say that my Department has held one-on-one engagements with all those institutions who were at high or medium risk of completion and has been providing ongoing support.

As at the 17th September, the picture had moved somewhat, with seven (7) institutions in the medium risk category and nineteen (19) that are at low risk. Currently, no institutions remain at high risk.

For the universities at medium risk, general observations are that they still have some way to go to complete their first semester programme. Summative assessments, where these are required, have yet to begin.

At these institutions a significant number of students seem still not fully engaged in teaching and learning programme.

It is anticipated that as students return to campus with the move to Level1, the teaching and learning programme will advance more rapidly, with catch-up programmes for students who have not been able to engage satisfactorily to be implemented.

In terms of completion of the 2020 academic year, ten (10) universities aim to complete the academic year before the end of the 2020 calendar year, four (4) universities plan to end in January 2021, seven (7) universities plan to complete in February 2021, and five (5) universities plan to complete in March 2021.

This staggered ending of the academic year is linked to the ability to support students and to ensure that all students have been given a reasonable opportunity to succeed.

There were some institutions that were not able to start their academic year effectively before the lockdown was implemented, and that is also reflected in this staggered end to the academic year.

Lastly, we anticipate that the results from the National Senior Certificate examination will be announced on 23 February next year.

As a result, our start of the new academic year for first year students will be staggered between 8 March 2021 and the 12 April 2021.

We will continue to monitor and engage with all institutions in relation to their plans for the completion of the academic year.

RETURN TO RESIDENCES

In terms of return to residences, there were 54 561 students living in university owned residences by 22 September. This is approximately 48% of the residence capacity, with 121 000 beds across the system.

In addition institutions reported that there were a further 49 360 students living in university leased and managed accommodation, 21 022 students living in university accredited private accommodation and 34 594 students living in other forms of private accommodation.

Some institutions have indicated that not all students are taking up their invites to return to campuses, preferring to continue to work remotely.

While we understand and accept this, given the fear that parents and students still have, we want to encourage parents and students to ensure that teaching and learning is not compromised, as we would not like to see a lower pass rate in this academic year, to the extent that we can help it.

TVET COLLEGES

As indicated in my media briefing for lockdown level 2, all TVET students had returned to campuses by 27 July 2020, to resume teaching and learning, practical training, internal assessments and national examinations.

I am pleased to confirm that all of these activities have been undertaken thus far whilst observing the protocols for COVID-19 as set out in the Guidelines for the Management of

COVID-19 in PSET Institutions, developed by Higher Health and approved by the Department.

Colleges have ensured the wearing of masks, maintained physical distancing for the conduct of classes, and made provision for sanitizing and washing of hands.

Referral systems and the management of positive cases have been implemented with support from Higher Health across all campuses nationally.

I am pleased that the recorded infection rates among TVET students has been comparatively low, even during the national peak.

The credit must go to the college management and student themselves who have shown immense keenness to complete the studies for which they had registered since the start of the 2020 academic year.

As at the 28th September 2020, the NATED N1-N6 Engineering students have written their examinations in July. In August, and September these students have registered for Trimester 2. Their examinations will be written in December 2020 as planned.

The NATED N4-N6 Business Studies semester students began their examinations in September, which will be concluded on 23 October 2020, after which they will go into recess until the start of the 2021 academic year.

NC(V) students have been busy with their internal assessments and examinations, and are on track to write their final examinations starting 10 November 2020. for the staff teaching the semester programmes,

I trust that we will use the time from 23 October until the end of the academic year to engage in fruitful and innovative professional activity, such as improving your skills to support students remotely, developing creative and innovative learning materials, and designing high quality student assessments so that we improve the standard and quality of internal assessments.

This is very important to improve our pass and certification rates in TVET colleges.

For the 2020 grade 12 learners who wish to study at TVET colleges in 2021, we have communicated that these learners must apply immediately to the colleges.

As a result of the late release of grade 12 results, which is scheduled for 24 February 2021, new students registering for the N4 NATED programmes will be enrolled either for Trimester 2 for Engineering Studies, which will begin in May 2021, or for Semester 2 for Business Studies, which will begin in July 2021.

This means that the 2021 academic calendar is not altered but at the same time makes adequate provision for both returning and new students to undertake their studies in 2021, within a normal academic cycle.

COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Community Colleges reopened on 24 August 2020 to receive students in all programmes as well as all staff, except for the staff over 60 years of age as well as those with co-morbidities.

In the latter regard, the DPSA has issued a Circular that guides the management of staff with co-morbidities during Lockdown Level 1.

Due to the shared infrastructure utilisation, the Department issued a revised calendar aligned to the academic calendar of the Department of Basic Education that is implemented by the Provincial Departments of Education.

The CET Colleges are implementing the Curriculum Recovery Plan as part of ensuring that students are being prepared for examinations at the end of the year.

This is done in consultation with DBE and PEDs as examinations for the General Education and Training Certificate and the Senior Certificate are administered by them.

SECTOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING AUTHORITIES

Alert Level 1 will ensure increased activities of the skills development in the country, when we published risk adjusted strategy for a phased-in return of skills development activities tomorrow, the 29th June 2020. We directed that a maximum of 100% learner population be allowed to return.

We directed that skills development providers be given two weeks waiting period from the date of announcement by the President, in order to allow the state of readiness to welcome a maximum of 100% learners.

INDLELA have opened electronic application processes for Artisan Recognition of Prior Learning ("ARPL") and trade testing from the 28th September 2020. Onsite applications based on prior appointment for an applicant who does not have the required information technology capacity will be implemented once the cleaning capacity challenge within the Department is resolved.

Currently the SETAs are also involved in an exercise of assessing the number of learners returning for their Workplace based learning programmes (WPBL), with the employers.

In August 2020, I also re-tabled the SETA revised Annual Performance Plans ("APPs") in Parliament due the estimated decline in the skills levy collections from R19.413 billion to R11.291 billion, a reduction of R8.122 billion (42%) incurred as the result of COVID 19 pandemic Tax Relief Measures.

It is against this background that I have called upon employers to open up their workplaces for workplace-based learning programmes and increase investment in skills development.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the entire post school education and the science and innovation sector for their continued contribution and support.

Thank you very much

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