



DURBAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY
INVUVESI YASETHEKWINI YEZOBUCHWEPHESHE

UNIVERSITY STATEMENT

28 April 2020

Dear staff and students

UPDATE ON DUT OPERATIONS

Last week, President Ramaphosa announced that the national lockdown will be eased, from the current Level 5 to Level 4. Importantly, it must be noted that this easing of the lockdown restrictions from Friday 1 May 2020, is not a return to life before Covid-19. South Africa is still grappling with a vicious Covid-19 pandemic, infections that are increasing daily and sadly, the number of people who are passing on is also escalating. So, we must continue to take the Covid-19 outbreak very seriously and ensure that we follow the guidelines as recommended by the Department of Health.

Earlier today, the Executive Management Committee (EMC), the Executive Committee of Senate (SENEX) and representatives from the DUT Covid-19 Technical Response Team met to review, discuss and plan for several key areas related to University operations.

I. DUT Solidarity Fund

The University launched the DUT Solidarity Fund (*Committed and Compassionate, Caring and Supporting*) last week and we are extremely grateful to those who have already donated money towards our fund. As previously announced, we decided to establish a DUT Solidarity Fund to support members of the DUT community, especially our students, who are most vulnerable and have been negatively affected by the current Covid-19 pandemic. **Commitment** and **compassion** are two of our DUT values and principles that the DUT Covid-19 Solidarity Fund is aimed at demonstrating. In line with the President's Solidarity Fund, its aim is to provide **care** and **support** to the most vulnerable in our DUT community.

Please visit the DUT website www.dut.ac.za to donate to our fund. We truly appreciate your kind and generous support. Remember, every cent that you donate, will go towards the fund and ultimately, benefit those in the University community who have had their lives disrupted due to Covid-19.

2. Phased-in reopening of campus operations

The Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation has not, at the time of writing, announced the sectoral post-lockdown plan for Universities. As a result, we cannot announce a specific date when phased-in University operations will resume. The Premier of KwaZulu-Natal has also publicly intimated that eThekweni's Covid-19 infection rates remain high and that he could retain a Level 5 lockdown status for eThekweni. This will have an impact on our operations in Durban and the Midlands.

Once these decisions have been made and clarified by national and provincial government, our team will then announce the relevant dates for the phased-in return to campus operations. Our DUT Covid-19 Response Task Team and the various divisions and departments are at work finalising plans for a phased return to the University, when an appropriate lockdown level allows it. A lot of preparatory work is required in terms of systems of detection and protection (e.g. screening, testing, cleaning, sanitizing, short-term observation/quarantine facilities, etc.) that DUT has to have ready when our staff and students return so we could secure their health and safety. And, because of the phased approach for our return to the University, the sequencing of groups of students and staff has to be carefully planned and executed without compromising anyone's health and safety.

3. Covid-19 related staff leave

We want to thank all staff members who have abided by the recommendations and applied for annual leave. Out of about 1500 DUT full-time members of staff, only just over 100 of them have, unfortunately, not yet been able to submit their leave applications for various logistical and other reasons. We urge all colleagues who have not applied for their annual leave that takes into account the extended lockdown period, to please urgently contact their line managers and make arrangements to apply for leave.

Some confusion abounds with respect to arguments to the effect that the debiting of leave is equivalent to staff being on vacation. The fact is that even though vacation leave is being used, it is not being used for vacation as none of us could possibly be on vacation during lockdown. Instead, vacation leave is only being used to justify payment of salaries that the *'force majeure'* situation suspends. Thus, arguments that suggest that staff is on leave are false. Simply, they have used their vacation leave to have their salaries continue being paid during lockdown.

As has been announced before, for colleagues who are working remotely and have worked on specific days during the lockdown, these days will be credited to you once we return to campus and normal operations have resumed. You will be required to liaise with your line manager and submit the relevant information/dates to the HR department to

credit. In this respect, we thank so many of our academic staff who have heeded the call to prepare themselves for blended/online learning. A number of them continue to assist and advise our students who should equally be preparing themselves for blended learning. A number of our administrative staff also continue to assist the university by working remotely, online, in various aspects of our work. In so many aspects, our university continues to operate, albeit in a limited fashion.

4. Virtual graduation

Our University will be hosting a virtual graduation ceremony before the end of the first semester. This follows the gazetted, government restrictions on public gatherings in relation to the National State of Disaster. A date and time for the online graduation ceremony will be announced in due course.

5. Devices, data provision and blended learning

The University has undertaken a survey to assess the devices and data environment facing our students. In addition to social media posts and emails sent to our students, a bulk SMS was sent recently to students, asking them to participate in our survey.

To date 16 000 students, which is more than 50% of our students, have responded. Preliminary results point to just too many of our students who may not have appropriate devices to go online. While some universities in the country have 'loaned' a few thousand devices to their students – the highest number of devices loaned so far by one university being 5000 - DUT's challenge is that the need for devices is at least three-fold; something that requires a huge capital outlay from the funders/sponsors of our students. Simply, the University's financial model was never designed to accommodate the supply of devices and data to our over 33 000 students. We applaud the DHET and Universities: South Africa, who continue to engage and seek sustainable solutions to the challenges of devices, data, connectivity and online learning to ensure the sector is as inclusive as possible in these respects. The survey will conclude at the end of this week. These findings will help inform our plans related to implementing a comprehensive solution for data, connectivity and devices for our students in order to facilitate blended learning.

Management is wary of all sorts of solutions that only deal with one of the many aspects of blended learning without providing a turn-key solution. For example, even if the appropriate funders of our students (like NSFAS for those who qualify) could provide them with devices, data may be a problem, especially given the number of months that blended

learning will be in operation. And, even if devices and data were no longer a problem, there could be connectivity problems for a substantial number of our students.

Later this week, the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning, will update you on plans for blended learning at DUT.

6. Face masks

In keeping with the directive from government, it will be mandatory to wear face masks when leaving our places of residence. As a result, until further notice, wearing face masks will be compulsory on campus and in all student residences once University operations resume. Because this requirement starts on Friday, 1 May 2020, we expect all our students and staff to have their masks on when they eventually return to the university.

The Department of Health has recommended reusable, breathable, cloth face masks. The Covid-19 Technical Response Team has advised that when using a cloth face mask:

- Only use a clean, cloth face mask, one that has been washed and ironed.
- Wash/sanitize your hands before putting on the face mask or taking it off.
- The face mask should fit comfortably, completely covering the area of your face from the nose to your chin.
- Only touch the string or elastic band at the back of the face mask when you place it on your face to use, or when you are removing it.
- Please do not touch the front of the mask.
- If you have to touch the outside of your mask at any point, please remember to wash/sanitize your hands after touching the front of your face mask.
- Please wash your cloth face mask daily in warm water with soap/detergent, then dry and iron before use.
- Do not share your face mask with other people.

7. Conclusion

It is very clear from a number of communiqués we have issued that the University, and Management in particular, is facing a mammoth challenge of leading with great circumspect and urgency, but, certainly not with haste.

Without a turn-key solution suited to the DUT environment, we could easily announce that on Monday, 4 May 2020, we will start our blended learning. But, since we know it will invariably involve some aspects of online learning, for which devices, data and connectivity are the conveyors, we have to tread carefully. With not just 1500, 3000 or 5000 that need devices – but, many times over those numbers, we have to ensure that whatever we do could work for most of the members of our community.

We realise that the national lockdown has been extremely unsettling for many people but the reality is that we are dealing with a global pandemic. Covid-19 is highly contagious and it must be viewed very seriously. It has already claimed thousands of lives around the world and we must continue to observe physical distancing, we must abide by the lockdown regulations and guidelines and we must continue to take the necessary precautions to limit the spread of Covid-19 in South Africa.

Stay safe, Stay home. Save lives.

Sincerely

DUT Management Team

