

UNIVERSITY STATEMENT

16 April 2020

Dear staff and students

UPDATE ON UNIVERSITY OPERATIONS

Last Thursday, President Cyril Ramaphosa confirmed that the national lockdown will be extended until 30 April 2020. This means that our originally planned resumption of the first semester on 20 April 2020 will also be delayed.

Importantly, it must be noted that the end of the lockdown does not mean the end of the outbreak. Covid-19 is still a very serious pandemic and we must maintain extreme caution to prevent the spread of the virus. Such caution still includes social distancing, thorough washing of our hands and reducing unnecessary contact. We have to accept that these measures will probably still be with us for a long period of time.

Yesterday, at a joint meeting between the Executive Management Committee (EMC), Executive Committee of Senate (SENEX) and the Covid-19 Response Team, a number of important points were discussed, as we work towards finalising the University's operational framework that will be implemented post-lockdown. Within the next two weeks, we will update you on specific decisions that have been taken in relation to the 2020 academic programme. In the interim, please invest a few minutes of your time to read the summary (below) that relates to our University operations, as a result of the implications of the national lockdown.

I. Amended academic calendar

At the 9 April 2020 EMC-Senex meeting, four (4) scenarios were discussed with the assumption that we could resume our academic programme on 20 April and rely on online learning. These scenarios are now not applicable, given the extended lockdown and challenging logistics regarding online learning, as you will read below.

By Tuesday, 21 April, the Academic Executive Management (AEM) team and the Registry will conclude deliberations on the re-opening of the University. These will take into account possible announcements on the conditions that may

be attached to the ending of the national lockdown by the State President, as well as safety precautions that will have to be considered.

At this stage, indications are that the academic year could still be completed, with great sacrifice on all members of our community. Such will include several measures that have to be taken to make up for the teaching and learning time lost through the lockdown. They may also include forfeiting any (or part of) forthcoming vacation periods, as well as extended academic weeks that are likely to stretch to just before Christmas. Consultation with our Unions on these measures will be taking place later today.

Management urges all staff and students to cooperate as we make attempts to complete our academic year. Covid-19 has upended the entire world. Old systems of work and education will have to change, with whatever inconveniences all this brings.

2. Mode of learning and assessment

Given the likelihood that Covid-19 will be with us for some time and the need for social distancing even after lockdown ends, it is envisaged that blended learning will be employed. This will include, amongst others, online learning, supplemental instructional material such as videos, additional notes and other means that are under consideration.

DUT continues to provide training on online teaching and assessment for both the approved university learning management system, Moodle, and for Microsoft Teams. This is being done in preparation for online teaching, learning and assessment, which could happen during and after the lockdown period.

Through the *Technology for Learning* programme, the University provides support to students, to enable them to access learning platforms and to engage effectively in the online learning experience.

We hasten to explain that these approaches to learning do not constitute a panacea for learning under these difficult circumstances. They are only part of a set of strategies DUT could employ to ensure that learning continues.

Given current difficulties in relation to network connectivity, devices and data access, which are beyond DUT's control, a full online learning approach is not possible at this stage. However, in the meantime, we advise all our staff and students to ready themselves to engage in this mode of learning, given the available programmes and assistance referred to just above.

The University Task Team dealing with online teaching and learning will provide you with further details in the weeks ahead.

3. Appropriate learning devices

We are aware that a substantial number of our students may not have requisite devices to engage on the modes of learning suggested above. In particular, with about 66% (about 21 000) of DUT students being NSFAS-supported, procuring appropriate but costly devices for this new approach to learning is a challenge.

At first, there was a thought that book allowances could be used to procure appropriate devices. But, a number of universities including DUT have already disbursed these allowances; which could, therefore, hardly be used for this purpose. In this regard, engagements involving our Deans of Students continue under the auspices of Universities: South Africa (USAf) in partnership with DHET, NSFAS and other stakeholders. There are no resolutions as yet in this regard.

In the meantime, Management really wishes to fully understand the extent of appropriate device ownership by students so we could attempt to align our learning strategies and systems. Some surveys will be run to help us get to the bottom of this. We urge both staff and students to participate in those surveys.

4. Access to data

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), Association of South African Universities Directors of Information Technology (ASAUDIT) and Microsoft (on Cloud-based services) are currently negotiating with Telkom, MTN, Cell C and Vodacom (collectively referred to as Telcos), on behalf of the 26 South African universities, so that data costs for students and staff for access to South African public university systems and websites can be reduced.

There are proposals from the Telcos that have been submitted to DHET and ASAUDIT. Later today, (Thursday, April 16, 2020) three meetings have been scheduled to discuss the proposed options.

DUT is a member of ASAUDIT and we will be receiving updates on the progress of the negotiations. DHET and ASAUDIT have stated that they fully understand the issues related data access and they are working very hard to negotiate a solution that will benefit both students and staff.

5. Autumn Graduation

The University has had to make the difficult decision to cancel the Autumn graduation ceremonies that were planned in April and May. It is acknowledged that many of our graduates were looking forward to this event. However, it has to be understood that this pandemic compels all of us to make sacrifices in many aspects of our lives.

There will be a virtual graduation ceremony which will be conducted online, and the recording of the ceremony will also be available thereafter. All certificates will be couriered to our graduates. Faculty Offices will be in contact with graduates to make the necessary arrangements. Graduates with arrears in fee payments will receive letters confirming their completion of a qualification and the certificate will be issued once the arrear fees have been paid.

Given the serious difficulties we have about how many academic days we could possibly get between now and December to complete the academic programme, it would be foolhardy for Management to promise anything further than the virtual graduation ceremony. Should the situation allow, we will certainly make new decisions and announcements in this regard.

6. Back to University Strategy

Currently, the DUT Covid-19 Response Team is preparing a comprehensive public health programme of action to protect all staff, students and other members of the DUT community. The response will include a focus on prevention and mitigation of the spread of the infection, aggressive health promotion, lifestyle modifications and wellness, spanning physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual health.

The planned programme when we return to the University includes extensive screening of all staff and students, hand washing, disinfection, social distancing and the other measures to reduce the potential spread. This will inevitably require a phased approach to our return as allowing all of our 33 500 or so staff and students back to the University at the same time and without screening could possibly turn DUT into a new epicenter of Covid-19.

The Response Team will be undertaking a survey of any symptoms of Covid-19 infection amongst staff and students. This will be communicated to you in due course. For the safety and health of all of us, we urge everyone to take this seriously and participate as will be requested.

Ultimately, the Response Team seeks to transform DUT into a Health Promoting University (HPU) that makes our physical campuses and residences safe and healthy. This approach will, in turn, enhance the core business of providing a holistic quality education and training for the future generation of leaders and professionals of our nation.

7. Covid-19 screening on campus

A letter has been submitted to the KZN Department of Health to consider DUT as one of the official screening sites. If approved, this will see Covid-19 screening of all staff and students once the semester resumes post-lockdown.

8. Leave arrangements for staff during the national lockdown

Given the Presidential announcement on the extension of the national lockdown period, staff are advised of further implications that this has on the leave facility to assist staff with financial relief (salary payments). The current situation of 'force majeure' that this lockdown is, is something Management and Council carefully considered. Instead of suspending the contracts of employment DUT has with all of us as 'force majeure' suggests; in its wisdom, the Executive Committee of Council made a concession, as explained in the previous communiqué.

Technically, DUT is not obliged to pay anyone whose leave has not been properly debited. Simply, if staff are not in a position to tender their services as 'force majeure' imposes, the University is not obliged to pay. But, to help our staff, as noted above, a concession around leveraging leave is being used to justify why DUT will pay its staff. The University has auditors who will always demand documentation that justifies any payment the University makes.

In short, for all of us to get paid, we have to leverage our leave; which, fortunately for us at DUT, is more than double what legislation provides. With the lockdown extension, this implies a further nine (9) days of not being able to operate in the way we are all accustomed to.

Staff are, therefore, encouraged to help the University justify salary payments by completing their leave applications for the initial period and, now, for the extended period, too. Those colleagues who have not as yet managed to do so for the initial period, must urgently submit their leave applications before the end of this week. Those staff members who do not have access to the DUT website in order to complete their leave submissions, must notify their Line Manager or HR, to facilitate these applications.

Should some staff be working remotely, as duly permitted, their leave will be credited back.

9. Data bundle provisions for staff working remotely

Staff who have obtained the necessary approval to work remotely from their respective Executive Managers and who do not otherwise qualify for data bundles, will be assisted during this period of lockdown. Determination will be made in consultation with the relevant Executive Managers on the duration of their working remotely, envisaged to be in one of three categories:

Category A: Staff that will be working between 10% to 30% be afforded up to a maximum of R200.00 towards data bundles.

Category B: Staff that will be working between 31% to 60% be afforded up to a maximum of R350.00 towards data bundles.

Category C: Staff that will be working between 61% to 100% be afforded up to a maximum of R500.00 towards data bundles.

The following protocol relating to the purchased data bundles during the lockdown as related to remote working will apply:

- a. The relevant Executive must approve the request.
- b. Staff who have purchased the data, will be required to provide proof of purchase of data for reimbursement.
- c. In exceptional cases where the staff member cannot purchase the data bundle, the relevant Executive will purchase the bundles on behalf of those staff, using the university credit card.
- d. In the case where the extent of usage is beyond the specified expected period for remote working, such circumstance will be referred to the relevant Executive for guidance and approval.

10. Postgraduate students and Researchers

Postgraduate students are expected to continue doing their research work and working with their supervisors using online media platforms. Once the lockdown has ended, the University will announce when access to laboratory spaces will be open. Even when we return for the semester, social distancing and preventative measures must to be taken into account. We believe that this time, during the lockdown, should give all of our researchers and postgraduate students, adequate opportunity to focus on their research and theoretical parts, while waiting for the University to reopen. Our Library resources are available online.

11. Student Residences

The re-opening of all student residences and access thereto, are directly linked to the resumption of the University's academic programme. However, management is currently contemplating a phased-in access to residences, in order to mitigate against a potential rapid spread of Covid-19 and thereby putting our student community in these residences at risk. Further details will be shared with you, as soon as the decision to resume contact lectures has been confirmed.

12. Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) post-lockdown

The resumption of WIL students' work placements will depend on the companies/organisations where they are placed. If the companies resume activity as normal, then the students will probably resume WIL at the same time. Several WIL students require DUT residence accommodation either in Durban or PMB campuses. WIL students on campus should resume their training as soon as staff return to work and the various departments are open for the resumption of the

first semester. WIL student placements have been continuing and the Co-operative Education department at DUT has continued to engage, during the lockdown, with those companies requesting students/graduates.

13. DUT's Support and Contributions Through Research and Innovation

DUT has responded to the call made by Government to Universities to assist with the fight against Covid-19. As one of the leading Universities of Technology located in KZN, we are well positioned to partner with our City and Provincial Government, Local Communities, NGOs, Civil Society, Science Councils and other organizations with similar interests, to assist in areas which need joint interventions.

Due to the potential, exceptional impact of the virus on the health care system, DUT will make contributions in various areas. A number of DUT Units, Centres and Faculties have come together to work in five key areas:

1. Analysis of Epidemiological Data to Inform Strategic Planning and Targeted Interventions, in collaboration with the South African Medical Research Council and the KZN Provincial Department of Health.
2. Lessening the Social and Economic Impact of Covid-19 by the DUT Urban Futures Centre, that involves the City, through the Deputy Mayor's Task Team on Homelessness.
3. Photography and Profiling of the work done by the Denis Hurley Centre, by DUT Arts and Design staff and DUT Photography students.
4. 3D Printing Technology by the Accounting & Informatics, Engineering and Health Sciences staff, through the Luban Workshop and Maker Space Equipment, through the Small Enterprise Development Agency (SEDA). Already, over 250 masks have been produced.
5. Drones and Internet of Things Technology by Accounting and Informatics and the Luban Workshop. These could help in the monitoring of the lockdown.

We acknowledge all the staff and student volunteers who have taken up these initiatives to combat Covid-19 under the challenging times we find ourselves in.

Conclusion

The national lockdown is an unprecedented moment in our history. This drastic action was required due to the threats posed by the Covid-19 outbreak.

We urge you to still take the necessary precautions, to limit the spread of the virus and to reduce the infection rates of Covid-19 in South Africa. We know that this virus is highly contagious, so please ensure that you practice strict social distancing.

Please wear a mask to help reduce droplet spread. You can use a cloth mask but please ensure that you wash this daily in hot water and soap/washing detergent. It is important to remember that you should not repeatedly touch the external surface of the mask, whilst you are wearing it.

You must remember to regularly wash your hands with water and soap for a minimum of 20 seconds. You should also use 70% alcohol-based hand sanitizers where possible.

Until further notice, face to face meetings must be avoided and meetings should be held online, using platforms like Microsoft Teams. Kindly remember that travel restrictions for conferences, meetings, functions and events remain in place for all DUT staff and students.

Before the end of next week, we will circulate another update to you *via* our official email communication platforms. We will continue to work with the Department of Higher Education, Science and Technology, with Universities South Africa (USAf) and with other key partners, to ensure that we implement a final plan that works best for our University.

Finally, we thank you for your continued support and understanding as we all work together to beat Covid-19 and to successfully complete our 2020 academic programme.

Sincerely

DUT Management Team

