

UNIVERSITY STATEMENT

03 September 2020

Dear staff and students

RETURN OF STAFF AND STUDENTS: ALERT LEVEL 2 OF THE RISK ADJUSTED STRATEGY

In line with the regulations for the Level 2 return of staff and students, at most 66% (about 21 814) of our student body will be permitted to return to the university.

General protocols and criteria for the return of staff and students:

The return of staff and students does not necessarily mean that all of our students and staff will be in full contact, face-to-face mode of teaching and learning. This is due to the fact that COVID-19 related health and safety regulations - like restrictions on the number of people in a gathering to a maximum of 50 people and social/physical distancing - are still in place. As such, DUT would have to be careful not to overwhelm its campuses, resources, facilities and our staff with contact-based tuition for which logistics are complex and expensive.

Management wishes staff and students to understand that return in Lockdown Level 2, means return in a restricted manner. We need to prevent turning DUT into a COVID-19 hotspot. We have plans and will develop more related to logistics that will be implemented incrementally, depending on the COVID-19 risks identified at institutional and national levels.

Stringent protocols and criteria have been developed and more will be developed to guide many aspects of the return of staff and students: be it on the number of venues that will be available for use; what system will be in place to ensure that health and safety protocols are implemented and monitored; under what conditions some contact learning, when absolutely necessary, will be conducted; and so forth.

Return of students in residence:

Students in residence (and private accommodation) will be allowed to return to their accommodation venues, with all health and safety protocols being followed, with effect from tomorrow, 4 September 2020 and onwards, ideally up to

6 September 2020. But, seeing how late it is as we publish this communiqué, further announcements will be made in this regard by Student Services.

As noted above, return to residences does not amount to a wholesale return to contact lectures, the use of laboratories and access to our libraries – as we need to ensure and maintain compliance with the public health regulations.

Physical engagements for teaching and learning and for work:

We have noted that since the beginning of June, when the first 33% of staff and students returned under Lockdown Level 3, attendance at contact lectures has been extremely low. Instead, online lectures have proven to be subscribed to appreciably during Lockdown Level 3. Online attendance at DUT currently stands at about 90% for students, with almost maximum attendance in many modules offered online. Further, with respect to University structures and engagements/meetings, we have also witnessed record attendance levels that we have never witnessed before.

Therefore, we have reason to anticipate a similar scenario when the next 33% of students return under Lockdown Level 2. More and more students at their residences and on campuses will have access to the WiFi network. In this regard, the University will be installing an additional 300 WiFi points in total at its campuses, so students and staff could have better access.

Management also understands how risky it would be to open up all of its venues and meeting rooms willy-nilly and on demand. The fact is that all of us are potential COVID-19 carriers. If a carrier were to be allowed to go from venue to venue the entire day, we could potentially have an uncontrollable spread of this deadly virus.

For all the reasons stated above, the default position for DUT is, thus, that we will continue with blended/online learning, with online provision of services, and with MS Teams based staff meetings as we started doing during Lockdown Level 3. Contact teaching and learning and physical meetings are discouraged under the current circumstances, when various restrictions are still in place.

Management fully understands that there will be some staff who might still require physical meetings where online MS Teams based meetings would not be feasible. Such physical staff engagements will be exceptions, rather than the rule. In these rare cases, stringent criteria will be developed to give permission for physical meetings and the use of venues. Management simply wants to mitigate the risks and prevent potential coronavirus exposure to our staff and students. As a result, blended/online learning and remote work will continue until further notice.

As pointed out above, it is only when we have all the necessary protocols, plans, resources, facilities and adequate personnel in place that we could start to have more and more contact-based learning for students and engagements among staff. Equally, this does not mean that when a contact session is absolutely necessary, it will not take place. But, when it does, we would know we could provide adequate support for all the health and safety protocols required for the venues to be used for such sessions.

Access to facilities and services:

Until lockdown restrictions are relaxed more and all the Level 2 protocols are in place, access to facilities like the library, laboratories and counselling services, for example, will be limited.

The various service areas will soon publish protocols relevant to their fields.

Devices and data provision:

DHET and NSFAS continue to work hard to procure devices for NSFAS-funded students on a loan-to-buy basis, based on student allowances and NSFAS regulations. This is a project managed at national level. Management hopes that sooner rather than later, the devices will be delivered to NSFAS-funded students. Self-funded and sponsored students should have, by now, procured relevant devices.

With the return of students to residences and access to facilities, albeit limited, WiFi will be available for blended/online learning. In fact, plans are afoot to increase the number of WiFi hotspots by 300 across the University.

As such, with effect from 7 September 2020, there is no longer a need to provide data to the 66% students who have permission to return since they will have access to WiFi. Self-funding students who are in private accommodation may be assisted, but within the limited COVID-19 Solidarity Fund that Management established in April. It should be noted, though, that this demonstration of commitment and compassion, must never be misconstrued as an obligation on the University. The funds available are limited. Self-funding or sponsored students have to continue in that mode.

Staff who will continue to work online will continue to be provided with data support. The system used for this support might change soon. Relevant notices will be published in this regard by the relevant department or section.

We urge all students and staff to please remember to follow and adhere to the public health protocols:

- Wear a face mask – this is compulsory on campus and in communal spaces in residence.
- Observe physical and social distancing, a minimum 2 metre space between people.

- Do not gather in groups.
- Wash your hands regularly with soap and water.
- Use a 70% alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Disinfect frequently touched surface areas.

In conclusion, we remind all staff and students that South Africa is still in a “State of Disaster” and whilst the lockdown levels may have eased, COVID-19 is still a pandemic that must be taken seriously. Please stay safe and let’s continue to work together to protect the health and safety of our university community.

Sincerely

DUT Management team



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