

THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION: STATEMENT
ON MEASURES TO DEAL WITH THE COVID-19 THREAT IN THE POST-SCHOOL
EDUCATION AND TRAINING SECTOR

17 March 2020

Deputy Minister Buti Manamela

USAF, SACPO, Unions and SAUS representatives

Government officials

Members of the media

Ladies and gentlemen

Good Afternoon

We met today, as the Minister, the Deputy Minister with stakeholders in the post school education sector, amongst others the Universities South Africa (USAf), the South African College Principals Organisation (SACPO), the South African Union of Students (SAUS), and labour unions (NEHAWU, PSA and NTEU).

All parties agreed to work together in solidarity and unity to tackle this epidemic.

Both the Department of Science and Innovation and the Department of Higher Education and Training are implementing immediate measures to ensure that we respond to the COVID 19 epidemic as announced by President Ramaphosa.

Our Post Schooling Education and Training System (PSET) consists of ± 2,5 million students & staff.

These decisions are applicable to all institutions including the CET Colleges, private higher education institutions and colleges, as well as all training colleges which are managed by other ministries, such as Nursing, Agricultural and other Colleges.

As reported yesterday, the DHET had already established a COVID-19 Team comprising of Universities South Africa (USAF), the South African College Principals Organisation (SACPO), Department of Health, and Higher Health to coordinate a sector response and collate institutional case management reports.

With DSI we have already established a research team made up of the Medical Research Council (MRC), Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) to look at scientific research and interventions to combat the epidemic.

Our meeting today agreed to the following immediate measures:

All post-school institutions will be closed for early recess with effect from tomorrow, the 18th March 2020. This includes the normal planned institutional breaks, most of which were planned for the end of this week or the beginning of next week. Some institutions have already made these decisions.

Institutions will plan to return from this break on 15 April 2020, following the Easter weekend, based on the assessment of the course of this virus. Institutional arrangements will also include accommodation arrangement for students and leave arrangements for workers.

Some aspects of institutional activities will continue during this period, such postgraduate and research work. Institutions will, however, be utilising this break period to identify and explore digital and online methodologies for teaching and learning that may need to be put in place to support the academic programme at a later stage. This may be particularly important for contact teaching in a range of programmes at the majority of our colleges and universities. The decision by institutions will be based on scientific evidence and institutional considerations.

As a sector we will continue to meet during this period to assess the situation relating to COVID-19 and so that we can make any decisions on the basis of developments in relation to the virus.

We have also agreed that all our institutions will announce further measures that will be taken to minimise risks to all staff at all our institutions, including both our departments and entities.

We continue to be guided by following guidelines are in place as from yesterday:

All international travel should be cancelled or postponed at this point in time. Any students or staff of public institutions who may have a critical reason to travel internationally should consult the relevant authorities at their institution and are required to report their planned travel according to the institutional protocols in place.

All individuals who have travelled internationally should self-isolate for a period of 14 days. In addition, students or staff members of public institutions are required to report their travel to the institutional authorities before their return, so that their possible return to work/study can be effectively monitored.

Travel within South Africa should be limited to essential travel at the current time. Wherever possible, planned meetings, symposia or conferences should be restricted, and alternative formats explored, including the use of internet and telecommunications technology. Institutions should explore all other possible means to replace face to face meetings and gatherings with other formats where this can be done. Institutions should consider postponing or cancelling all large-scale gatherings, including graduation ceremonies, large conferences and symposia, for at least the next three months.

Every institution needs to have in place a communication strategy to manage regular communication with its community. Public health information is readily available through the NICD and the DOH and the Universities South Africa webpage will also be updated with regular communication to the university community. The Department of Higher Education and Training will also ensure that regular communication channels with the management of institutions is in place, so that information can be cascaded to institutional communities. Every institution has its own context, which will require individual communication plans to be in place.

Student health clinics across post-school institutions have been working with Higher Health (the Higher Education and Training Health, Wellness and Development Centre) to ensure readiness to deal with COVID-19 infections. Higher Health works closely with the Department of Health and the NICD in this regard. It is important that student health services are closely involved in the communications strategies and plans of individual institutions. I am informed that Higher Health has developed sector specific guidelines and capacity development initiatives for COVID-19.

The majority of public universities and some public TVET colleges are not just teaching and learning spaces, but are also living spaces, which include student residences and staff housing. Each institution will develop a mitigation plan for its residence system, to ensure that protocols and controls are in place to mitigate the spread of the virus and to provide for isolation facilities where necessary.

All students and staff are urged to take the appropriate social distancing protocols very seriously. These include limiting social interaction, keeping appropriate distance from other people, not shaking hands or hugging, regular hand-washing, immediate consultation with health services in the event that you develop a fever or cough, and appropriate self-isolation if you fall ill.

SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENTS ABROAD: RESPONSE TO COVID-19

We estimate that there are approximately 12 000 South African students studying abroad. Some of whom may have returned home following the outbreak of COVID-19.

There are approximately 1 500 students in China. We are working, with DIRCO, on putting together a database of all students studying abroad who are on our register and who have registered with the Embassies in foreign countries.

All South African missions abroad are being requested to provide information about South African students who find themselves in distress during this period and provide us with this information.

We have no international students to date that have been diagnosed with the virus that we are aware of.

We call on all our students studying abroad to keep in touch with their nearest South African missions. Any decision on any further evacuation of South African nationals will be taken by Cabinet. To date there has been no Cabinet decision in this regard.

In conclusion I would to urge all South Africas to ensure that they work with our entire Post School Education and Training Sector including the Department of Science and Innovation and its agencies through the guidelines as announced by the President in his statement on interventions to combat COVID-19 epidemic. This also includes the interventions that we will continue to announce in response to this epidemic.

Thank you