

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

09 June 2020

Programme Director;

Deputy Minister Buti Manamela;

Director General's Gwebinkundla Qonde

DDGs;

Members of the media;

Ladies and gentlemen

Good Afternoon

COVID. -19 continues to take a heavy toll not only on the health of our people, but also on our people's ability to earn a living, to feed themselves and their families, to learn and to develop, and to enjoy many of the basic freedoms that we daily take for granted.

Like in all sectors of our lives, this pandemic presents a set of unprecedented challenges, which requires our collective action and responsibility as a society to act and behave in-line with the World Health Organisation (WHO) health guidelines in order to save lives.

This period can be characterised by the poet and writer, — Charles Dickens, as contained in this book A Tale of Two Cities: Charles said

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”

I would like to reiterate that our sector's response to COVID-19 is guided by measures announced by the National Command Council (NCC) and approved by Cabinet.

Our sector has adopted the theme: Save The Academic Year, Save Lives.

This morning I visited the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) to monitor the state of readiness and progress towards the planned phased return of students. TUT is by far the largest contact university not only in South Africa but in Africa. The socio-economic status of the students is 55% NSFAS beneficiaries and predominantly from the rural areas of our country.

My impressions about TUT's readiness is the fact that they have reprioritized funding to cover COVID-19 related measures, and they repurposed one of their chemical engineering laboratories to produce sanitizers and disinfectants for the whole university and also supply surrounding communities. TUT also has a well-developed plan for multi-modal remote learning, which will ensure that it reaches the remotest of their students anywhere in our country for academic support and delivery of learning materials. I am happy with the progress I saw there.

With all the progress that I will be reporting on today, I remain gratified by the support and the exemplary leadership provided by President Ramaphosa and my colleagues at the National Command Council (NCC) in guiding our work at this difficult time.

Within the Post School Education and Training Sector, I am still humbled by the cooperation and commitment of all members of the Ministerial Task Team, chaired by our Deputy Minister Buti Manamela comprising of SACPO, USAf, Trade Unions, SAUS, SAFETSA and quality councils. The task team continues to meet weekly and make inputs into our overall strategy and response to this pandemic. I remain grateful to the comrades and colleagues.

ON HIGHER HEALTH

Let me take this opportunity to congratulate Higher Health for launching HealthCheck – a purpose-built daily screening and monitoring tool using one's cell phone, to be used in all our Post School Education and Training Institutions. It is available in various platforms including USSD, WhatsApp or simple Weebased. One does not need to have a smart-phone. You can use any device to access the HealthCheck.

HealthCheck is secured to use by students and staff entering our campuses daily to self-check their body temperature, and will link such data to the tracking system of the Department of Health.

All students and staff – approximately two million people – will be required to register for HealthCheck and use it every day to assess their own level of risk prior to entering campuses.

Based on the answers entered on the platform, the person receives a message with the low/moderate/high level risk reading. If the risk is low, the individual will receive clearance valid for 24 hours.

The tool allows for early detection, mapping and management of COVID-19 cases within higher education institutions and feeds into the national Department of Health tracking and tracing system.

HIGHER HEALTH has previously provided detailed COVID-19 guidelines on how to deal with prevention and care of physical health of students and staff. However mental health of both staff and students is equally important and appropriate guidelines have also been developed to deal with this. The guidelines also focuses on substance abuse which can be a serious challenge especially in the COVID-19 epidemic.

An overarching Protocol on Routine Cleaning for COVID-19 Prevention guides universities and TVETs on how to continue their functions in a responsible manner.

It addresses the means to prevent the spread of infection (social distancing on campus, cleaning of campuses and other areas, personal hygiene, health promotion, screening booths, and environmental management in areas like hostels and canteens) and how to deal with students and staff who have been exposed to the coronavirus and/or infected (proactive screening and testing, appropriate quarantining and medical care).

Guidelines for the management of and response to mental health and substance abuse related to COVID-19 respond to continued concerns raised by global public health leaders. The United Nations and the World Health Organization have

advocated that mental health and wellbeing of whole societies are severely impacted by COVID-19 and see these as an urgent priority.

These guidelines outline why and how students and staff may be impacted and how to assist individuals that may experience problems. Through this protocol, the universities and colleges are also urged to keep top-of-mind mental health implications of each decision they make during the forthcoming period.

Higher Health has been walking the COVID-19 awareness, prevention and care journey with universities and TVET colleges for several months. The focus now has shifted to shining the Higher Health spotlight on private higher education institutions and community education and training colleges. We want to ensure all students and campus staff have the tools and information necessary to deal with coronavirus.

ON NSFAS

On Friday, the 31st January 2020, I met with the South African Union of Students (SAUS), to further discuss matters raised by the union as well as other matters of common interest.

Amongst the issues that we agreed as critical for further discussion included, amongst others, the issues of the student funding policy that provides for the N+1 and N+2 years of funding to students.

The Department of Higher Education and the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) have been inundated with requests from students to make changes to the N+2 rule, which is part of the core funding policy of the scheme for students registered before 2018.

NSFAS is guided by the Department of Higher Education funding policy in respect of all qualifying students, before any funding is approved. We are not going to change the stipulated number of years within which NSFAS beneficiaries are expected to finish their studies, both in terms of the pre and post 2018 NSFAS requirements.

Following extensive improvements at NSFAS, the application of the rule has become more efficient in 2020, and a significant number of students were found to have exceeded the N+2 rule in terms of their years in the system.

While the N+2 rule for NSFAS students registered prior to 2018 has always been in place, its application has been erratic, due to data gaps, inadequacies and constraints between NSFAS and institutions.

This means that as a direct consequence of the implementation of the rule, several students were unfunded.

After I had requested NSFAS to look into this matter and check if indeed some of the issues raised by the students could have some validity, we discovered that there are cases where the application of the rule may have been applied inappropriately or in an unjust manner.

This we found in the following three areas:

1. Students who may have de-registered in the first semester for prior years of study for financial or other reasons, yet the academic year is counted as time spent in the system;
2. Students whose academic progression has been affected by medical or psychosocial challenges, and where evidence supported by medical certificates and other evidence has been provided as part of the appeals process;
3. Students who have exceeded the N+2 rule based on time in the system, but who are currently in their final year of study and will graduate in 2020.

NSFAS has received approximately 9000 continuing student appeals, many of which relate to the application of the N+2 rule. NSFAS will look at the above three categories of students in considering the appeals, in line with the factors I have mentioned and address all deserving cases appropriately.

However, the mechanisms to addressing the aspects of the N+2 rule that may have been unfair to some of our students will go a long way to ensure that those students who were unjustly excluded are considered.

I would also like to respond to the allegation from the Democratic Alliance (DA) that NSFAS is “writing off the student historic debt of those who were able, but unwilling to pay, and who may never have been forcefully required by NSFAS to pay”.

This is factually incorrect and irresponsible as clearly pointed out by the NSFAS Administrator, Dr. Randall Carrollisen, who clearly stated that the R1.96bn referred to by Prof Bozzoli is actually irregular expenditure that arose when the previous board applied unspent historic debt from 2016 and 2017 to fund NSFAS qualifying students in 2018.

This was a legitimate diversion of funds, however due processes were not followed to get approval from National Treasury. As a result, the AG raised it as irregular expenditure.

This was not a loss to the fiscus but will simply be an adjustment of a book entry with no release of funds or incurrance of any liability. NSFAS is in the process of clearing all irregular expenditure and the AG advised that NSFAS should clear this irregularity as “writing off historic debt”.

I would also like to indicate that the contract of the NSFAS Administrator is still in force until the end of his contract and the finalization of the appointments of vacant senior executive management posts, including the appointment of the Chief Executive Officer.

The terms of reference of the Administrator states that he must ensure a smooth transition between the administration and the new executive staff.

I am also in the process of initiating the appointment of a new Board in terms of Section 5 of the NSFAS Act 56 of 1999.

ZERO-RATING OF LOCAL EDUCATIONAL CONTENT

As stated in our previous media briefing we have successfully negotiated with all mobile network operators very favourable rates for our NSFAS students, including the Funza Lushaka students to receive 10GB daytime and 20GB night-time data for three (3) months, starting from 1 June till end of August, as subsidised by government.

Once more I thank the officials in my Department of Higher Education and Training, my colleagues and officials in the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies and the Electronic Network Providers, including the Mobile Network Operators.

The zero-rating of Departmental and public institutions' sites (universities; and TVET, CET, nursing, and agricultural colleges) is 86% completed as Electronic Communications Service Licensees (Mobile Network Operators, Internet Service Providers) provide access to local educational content websites [as directions issued under Regulation 10(8) of the Disaster Management Act, 2002 (Act No. 57 of 2002) (Government Notice No 417 of 26 March 2020)]. As from 1 June 2020 private HEIs and colleges; and private/publishers' websites are also being implemented.

Zero rating means that access to institutional websites will be free, although some of the embedded content like YouTube and videos may be charged for.

As part of this statement, I have made available a table with information on the percentage of institutions that are 0-rated by the different MNOs and Internet Service Providers.

The total number of sites submitted to the MNOs for zero-rating PSET institutions is now five hundred and eighty-six (586).

The full list of sites that have been 0-rated has been published on the individual institutional and Departmental websites.

We are implementing a hybrid approach combining zero-rating and "educational data bundles". The Departments of Higher Education and Training, and Communications and Digital Technologies, concluded the negotiation on standardisation of pricing and conditions with the MNOs (Telkom Mobile is excluded) on R65 for 10 GB Anytime and 20GB Night Time data for 3 months for NSFAS and Funza Lushaka students and is being implemented in universities and TVET colleges. But these data bundles will be subsidized by government and be free for NSFAS students until end of August 2020.

Funding for university students will be made available through re-prioritisation of existing budgets of universities as discussed and incorporated into each university's

multimodal teaching, learning and assessment plan already submitted to the Department for approval.

The COVID-19 Responsiveness Grant that we are currently working on approving for each university will at the very least cover the data costs of these students.

Universities, after agreement with NSFAS, will get into individual agreements with MNOs and provide MNOs with the necessary information on students.

TVET Colleges will be funded through savings from previous years' student bursary funding held by NSFAS. The provision of data will be part of the full package of the provision of devices to TVET students who are currently NSFAS beneficiaries.

It remains my believe that the current negotiated rates with MNOs will offer affordable packages to the "missing middle" students. I again, would like to appeal to our MNOs to work with institutions to ensure that this happens. On my part, I am still working towards the establishment of an affordable higher education loan scheme involving the private sector.

ELECTRONIC DEVICES

For the past two weeks, the Ministry and the Department have tirelessly been engaging with National Treasury on the procurement of devices for the NSFAS students.

Today I can confirm that by the end of this week, we will be commencing with the central procurement of these devices, particularly laptops, through an open tender system given the nature and the value of the procurement. We have agreed with National Treasury that given the huge amounts involved in the central acquisition of outstanding tablets, it is better to follow proper procedures than take short cuts, even if there is some delay, so as to properly account for spending of taxpayers money. We are also finalizing the process of verifying which NSFAS students already have acquired devices, in order to avoid mistakenly issuing some students with more than one device per student. We urge for patience from both parents, staff and students. As we had said we are still committed that no student will be left behind in our effort to save the academic year.

Interested parties will further get information from the National Treasury on the requirements for bidding.

The NSFAS will be the contracting party on behalf of the Department of Higher Education and Training. They will be using the NSFAS funding policy to ensure that they remain compliant with government policy and priscrpts.

However a number of universities have already and continue to provide gadgets to students. These include the following institutions:

I will make further pronouncements as soon as service provider/s have been appointed and give clear timelines for the commencement of the distribution of outstanding gadgets to all our institutions as per the NSFAS guidelines.

REMOTE MULTI-MODAL TEACHING AND LEARNING PLANS

On the laptop to be provided by institutions, 50% of the institutions already made provision

As I have indicated before, institutions have developed their detailed strategies for remote multi-modal teaching and learning during the period of the current Lockdown and for all the levels. We have emphasized to all the institutions that **NO STUDENT MUST BE LEFT BEHIND.**

As reported before we are trying to find better ways to implement effective multi modal, augmented remote learning systems, by considering the use of Space Science and Earth Observation technologies and platforms in support of our plans to reach to vulnerable students.

We are now working on long term solutions to supporting the digital transmission needs for our PSET system through the launch of a locally-produced communications satellite. We may know that Satellite technology plays a key role in closing the digital divide, largely by bringing distance learning to schools, regardless of geographic location. It will enable schools and students in remote or rural areas to obtain similar educational materials and content ensuring that entire country has a balanced approach to education, and commensurate opportunities.

This project requires R5 billion capital in expenses for the design, manufacture and to operate the satellite mission. The project will break-even within 6 years giving the country data sovereignty, generating profits and much needed income to the national fiscus and GDP.

RISK ADJUSTED STRATEGY FOR PSET SECTOR

As the PSET Sector we remain committed to resume academic activities in line with the national risk-adjusted strategy in dealing with Covid 19. We have published national Directives on the broad parameters and conditions under which each institution must plan for the controlled resumption of all forms and levels of academic activity to complete the 2020 Academic Year.

UNIVERSITIES

Under level 4, which (Started 1 May 2020), we allowed for the controlled return of final year students in programmes requiring clinical training, starting with medicine (MBChB) and the phasing-in of all other programmes, such as Nursing, Dental, Veterinary Sciences, and so on.

I further announced that under level 3, a maximum of 33% of the student population will be allowed to return to campuses, delivery sites and residences on condition that they can be safely accommodated and supported in line with the health and safety protocols as directed by the Department.

This will include the following cohorts:

4. All groups that have already returned during alert level 4.
5. Students in the final year of their programmes, who are on a path to graduating in 2020 may return.
6. Final year students who require access to laboratories, technical equipment, data, connectivity and access to residence and private accommodation should return.
7. Students in all years of study that require clinical training in their programmes (provided that the clinical training platforms have sufficient space and can accommodate them while adhering to the safety protocols).
8. Post Graduate students who require laboratory equipment and other technical equipment to undertake their studies.

We have also made provision that institutions may consider selected return of other categories of students to residences who may face extreme difficulties in their home learning environments provided that the above categories are prioritized, and all safety and logistical requirements are met. I have also published directions that outline the criteria for return to campuses. These were developed in consultation with Universities South Africa (USAF) and the Council on Higher Education (CHE).

It is critical that we adhere to these criteria to ensure that campuses are ready for students to safely return, and the effective health screening, cleaning protocols are in place to keep everyone safe.

All other students will be supported through remote multimodal teaching learning and assessment until they can return to campus.

I would like to emphasise that we recognise that some institutions may identify other groups of students in line with their particular contexts for their return to campus. However, any deviation from this criterion must be approved by my Department and must fall within the maximum of 33% of the student population.

I will continue to make further announcements as the COVID-19 alert level change.

Return to Residences

I would like to urge all our institutions to ensure that at all material times they follow the national guidelines when deciding on the return of students to residences in line with numbers that can be accommodated to enable physical distancing, the handling of communal spaces, hygiene requirements and dining hall arrangements.

In terms of the phase-in plans for level 3, the maximum admissible percentage of students per residence identified is 33%.

I would like to emphasise that all institutions must be adhered to and all health and safety protocols must be in place.

Students who live in private rented accommodation close to campuses may also return provided physical distancing arrangements are in place.

Critically important institutions must also ensure that students identified to reintegrate into campuses must include specific groups of students who are living with disabilities, who are not able to access connectivity where they live, or are living in circumstances where studying is difficult.

TVET COLLEGES

Our phased in TVET Colleges tentative academic calendar remains in force as previously announced. For the level 3 lockdown alert, it provides for the following:

NATED Trimester (ENGINEERING) students

N6 & N3: 10 June

N5 & N2: 15 June

N4 & N1: 22 June

NATED Semester (BUSINESS STUDIES) students

N6: 25 June

N5: 29 June

N4: 06 July

NC(V) STUDENTS

Level 4: 13 July

Level 3: 20 July

Level 2: 27 July

A campus- based approach will be applied where colleges are affected by different lockdown levels.

I urge students to use the developed learning materials, both for TV and radio broadcasts, which are also shared through the DHET website.

Colleges also continue to use textbooks, e-Guides, past question papers, and uploaded YouTube videos to further assist students.

We will also continue to support remotely student until they return to campus according to the phase-in process.

COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND TRAINING

In the media statement of 30 May 2020, I announced that, consistent with the principle to save lives and the academic year, the CET colleges would spend the rest of May 2020 preparing the central offices and learning sites to be ready for the safe return of staff and students.

I further emphasised that, subject to readiness of the colleges and learning sites, the following would be the dates for the return of different categories of staff to their workstations and students to their learning sites:

25 May 2020: Principals, Deputy Principals and Supply Chain Management staff.

1 June 2020: Centre Managers.

8 June 2020: All Lecturers.

17 June 2020: all students registered for General Education Training Certificate, Senior Certificate as well National Occupational Certificates qualifications or part-qualifications.

This would be subject to appropriate social distancing measures put in place by CET colleges. The return of AET Levels 1 to 3 students would be synchronized with the return of learners in the lower Grades in the public schools, and this would be communicated by the Department when it would take place.

Our monitoring the system has revealed that, while the management did return to central offices on 25 May, the centre managers and lecturers did not return to their work station on the dates indicated above. The Principals of the CET colleges had communicated to the centre managers and lecturers that the learning centres were not yet compliant with the COVID 19 Regulations.

Non-compliance stems from the delays in procurement and delivery of COVID 19 essentials such as masks, sanitizers, services for deep-cleaning and fumigation. There has also been delays in the training of centre managers by Higher Health, which is now scheduled for 17 June 2020.

In some CET colleges, centres that are hosted in dilapidated schools, without water and sanitation, have not been allowed by Provincial Departments to open. The CET college staff could not access such centres for the same reason.

Some centre managers and lecturers are in the risky group of 60 years of age and above and for this reason they could not report at their workstations.

It has also come to our attention that some schools particularly in Gauteng and the Western Cape are denying access to our centres, a matter that the Department is to take up with the relevant Provincial Education Departments.

Given the scenario above, it stands to reason that I must give the community colleges the rest of this week and the week of 16-20 June to finalize their preparation of the centres for the safe return of staff and students so that with effect from 23 June 2020 teaching and learning starts for the groups of students identified above.

SETAs

I want to reiterate my agreement with the Chairpersons and CEOs of all our SETAs that during this lockdown period, we must continue to provide stipends to all our SETA learnerships now that we have cleared the misunderstanding where some SETAs stopped the payments of stipends.

I have received some concerns from Skills Development Providers regarding their resumption with the training and skills development activities.

I am currently finalising the Criteria and Guidelines regarding the activities of the Skills Development Providers, as the National Skills Authority ("the NSA") which advises me on skills development matters is looking into the Criteria and Guidelines this week. However, I must emphasise that this process will be managed strictly in accordance with Risk Adjusted Strategy Risk Levels.

As am aware that about 8 million workers will be returning to workplaces under Alert Level 3, since 1 June 2020. This marks almost 50% of the total 16.4 million workforce as previously reported by the StatsSA.

I therefore would like to appeal to employers, both public and private, to also turn their workplaces into training spaces in each and every Alert Level, as it appears that some employers are not prioritising training during their phased in return to economic activities of their respective companies.

In conclusion, I would like to urge all South Africans and our students to protect themselves and others from the spread COVID-19. You all can reduce your chances of being infected or spreading COVID-19 by taking some simple precautions, which includes amongst others by regularly and thoroughly clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand rub or wash them with soap and water and by maintain at least 1 metre (3 feet) distance between yourself and others.

If possible, by avoid to going to crowded places and avoiding touching your eyes, nose and mouth and by wearing a mask.

I would like to take this opportunity to once-more all our stakeholders who we have been consulting throughout this process. Special gratitude also goes to the President, my colleagues in Cabinet and the National Command Council.

Thank you very much

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