



3 April 2020

Dear Staff and Students

We hope you are all well and keeping safe during this difficult time. We are 8 days into the nationwide lockdown and we still have two more weeks to go and perhaps longer, depending on how well we all cooperate with our government and health experts in the efforts to prevent the continuing rapid spread of Covid-19 and “flattening the curve” on the number of new infections.

We are all unsure of what the last day of this nationwide lockdown will hold for us, but it is highly unlikely that things will be back to normal at that time for us to resume our normal academic activities. We are constantly monitoring the situation regarding the spread of the virus, and will take our lead from the COVID-19 National Command Council, Science experts and USAf on the collective sectoral approach to salvage the 2020 academic year.

We remain committed to completing the 2020 academic year within this calendar year. In order to achieve this objective, we will need to review our academic calendar and embrace different and/or alternative approaches to teaching and learning.

1. Return of students to campus

Students are advised not to make travel arrangements to return to the campus for the resumption of academic activities at this stage. Students will be given a fair warning of the commencement of in-contact academic activity.

2. Resumption of the University academic programme

Given the uncertainty regarding the trajectory of the coronavirus pandemic, the Universities SA (USAf) reached a consensus that there would be no formal teaching and learning until 20 April and that the period up to that date would be used by universities to gear up for online teaching and learning. As such, our academics have been hard at work for three weeks, re-designing their course material for online delivery, uploading material on RUconnected and some communicating with their students. All these have been done to test this system which will be used for the first time by many.

We are grateful to the Educational Technologies specialists in CHERTL and Information & Technology Services colleagues, and other staff who have supported online development over the past three weeks to strengthen the skills and competencies of our academics to use online teaching and learning platforms. We are equally appreciative of the many of our academics who have enthusiastically embraced the challenge of reworking their materials for online

delivery.

3. *Online teaching and learning*

As noted above, our academics are gearing up for the use of online teaching and learning systems.

Given the deep levels of inequality and poverty in our society, we are fully cognisant of the challenges of implementing an online teaching and learning system. Some of our students do not have access to the appropriate devices and/or connectivity to participate fully in an online teaching and learning platform. As many parts of the world migrate to online teaching and learning, the global demand for laptops and the like will, in the short-term, create an additional hurdle of availability for us. Given the issues of inequality across our student body, remote access to online learning materials might exacerbate already unequal opportunities. We are working together with Universities SA to find nuanced ways of resourcing students who are not privileged to have the best connectivity and appropriate devices at their disposal.

Successful implementation of online teaching and learning and making learning materials available require ready access to data. One of the efforts at national level in this regard has been through TENET and USAf to ensure cost-free data access to learning and library resources at Rhodes University and other institutions in the sector. Some network providers have already implemented zero-rated data access to these resources, and others are in the process of putting it in place. A communique will go out about which resources at our university are available for cost-free access, as soon as access via all providers is in place.

We are aware that some academics may wish to get ahead and place learning materials on online platforms at this stage. There is nothing untoward in doing so. However, having pointed out the real challenges for some of our students to access online learning materials at this stage, we urge our academics to act with circumspection and necessary sensitivity as this may be perceived as further advantaging those who have means.

- There should be no expectation on the part of academics that when we resume our academic activities all students would have had access to that material. While those who have means will enjoy the advantage of having been exposed to the material, academics will have to treat all students as though they were being exposed to the material for the first time.
- Students should not be required to submit work for formal assessment during the lockdown period. However, students are urged to continue reading and revising their first term work and reading ahead in preparation for the resumption of our academic activities. They should not treat this extended recess as a vacation.
- An online orientation programme aimed at introducing students to remote and online learning is being developed by staff of CHERTL and this will be ready when we resume our academic activities.

4. *Review/Revision of our academic calendar*

The university is committed to working towards the completion of the 2020 academic year within this calendar year, using whatever methods are available to us and within reason. The academic calendar is being reviewed in the light of various scenarios in preparation for reworking it as necessary to complete the academic year in 2020. Whatever adjustments or changes are made, we will endeavour to ensure that the education experience of our students is not compromised.

Next week our Registrar will be participating in a national discussion that will be facilitated by USAf on various scenarios on how our higher education sector can successfully complete the 2020 academic year without causing significant disruptions in future years.

5. *Keeping contact with students*

All academics have a duty of care for their students, and as such are given access to the contact details of students, when they so request. Academics may wish to maintain contact with their students and/or students may wish to ask questions regarding their class materials. It is incumbent on all of our academics to use student contact information with care, and only for legitimate academic purposes. Where discussion and tutorial groups are set up, which expose the contact details of students to others in the group, they should be invited to join and made aware that their contact details will be visible to others. They should also be made aware of the risks and dangers of exposing other people's contact details to others.

6. *We salute all those who are serving our nation in these challenging times*

We acknowledge and applaud the tremendous work being done by our staff and students in our national effort to confront the scourge of this virus, and finding ways to keep the university community productive during this time. Some are making significant contributions at local level, and others at national level. Professors Justin Jonas and Mike Rogan have been called upon to do national service at this time, Professor Jonas as technical adviser to the national task team to produce ventilators for the country, and Prof Rogan as a member of the Presidential Task Team looking into social policy measures to assist informal workers affected by the COVID-19 crisis. We are proud of them for this recognition of their expertise, and wish them well in contributing towards the national effort to save lives and minimize the effects of COVID-19 on the people and economy of South Africa.

Our teams are making masks within our facilities to protect healthcare professionals, and our Faculty of Pharmacy is producing WHO-accredited sanitiser and supplying it to hospitals and other facilities that are caring for the infected. Our Communications and Advancement Division is hard at work informing, educating and raising awareness in our surrounding community, and our Community Engagement Division and the Science Engagement Chair have ensured that messages on responsible and hygienic practices during this period go out in both English and isiXhosa. Some of our education academics are preparing fun exercises for parents to use in home schooling their children, and our colleagues in the Psychology Department have produced guidelines to help us all keep track of our emotional and mental

health during the lockdown. Many others are volunteering in a range of diverse and worthy initiatives and projects in our Municipality, including providing meals and shelter to the homeless, destitute and vulnerable. It is this spirit of human solidarity and *ubuntu* that makes one proud to be part of the Rhodes University community. We urge you to show the same spirit wherever you find yourself in these extraordinary times.

Staff and students are encouraged to visit the RU Covid-19 Webpage where all communication sent out to the University community since the beginning of March can be accessed. As we provide updates on a regular basis, some information in these communiques remains valid and relevant. Let us observe all the regulations intended to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

Warmest wishes and, please keep safe and well.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sizwe Mabizela'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial 'S' and 'M'.

Sizwe Mabizela,
Vice-Chancellor, Rhodes University.