

Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation update statement following president Cyril Ramaphosa addressing the Nation on the government response to COVID 19

Good Afternoon

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

We have established a COVID-19 Team comprising of Universities South Africa (USAF), South African College Principals Organisation (SACPO), Higher Health & Health Experts to coordinate sector response and collate institutional case management reports. The team will be led by Deputy Minister Bhuti Manamela.

Work Placement Students from China

Seventy Six (76) students are at the Ranch, having been evacuated from Wuhan.

On Friday, the 20th March 2020, 76 TVET college students returned from China - Wuhan after having being in work placement at Chinese companies arranged through various Sector Education and Training Authorities. On arrival, the students were placed in quarantine at the Birchwood Hotel and Conference Centre in Kempton Park, for 14 days. We are still awaiting their results and we will then reunite them with their families.

Three DHET officials have been deployed to oversee the students over this period. In addition, a circular has been sent to all colleges on the requirement for all students to be placed in a quarantine facility following their return from placements abroad.

We are working with DIRCO to compile a list of all South African students abroad, both publicly and privately funded.

Online Learning

The Department has requested all universities and colleges to complete an updated survey on their IT capability for offering online learning.

Institutions have been requested to complete the survey by Thursday, 26 March 2020. The Department, together with the Tertiary Education and Research Network of South Africa (TENET), will analyse the survey results on the 27th March 2020, and identify any institutions that require immediate assistance to enhance their capability.

In the meantime, the South African Institute for Distance Education has met with Universities South Africa to assist in mapping out the various tools institutions may be able to use to deliver online learning, taking into account the different capabilities that different institutions have and the devices students may have access to. This work will assist in putting plans in place at an institutional level for ensuring continued delivery of programmes after the recess.

As a department we are engaging with all our universities and colleges on pursuing online learning modalities where possible, whilst also looking at the possibility of using readily available study guides for the trimester and semester programmes, and a structured catch-up programme for the annual National Curriculum (Vocational) programmes.

COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND TRAINING (CET) COLLEGES

No incidents in relation to COVID-19 have been reported.

UNIVERSITIES

- All institutions have implemented early recess and gave students until Friday, the 20th March 2020, to vacate residences.
- International students are being treated on a case-by-case basis. All students who cannot return home are being accommodated in residences.

- NSFAS allowances are being paid to students.
- Preparations for short to medium strategies, including online study are underway, at most institutions.
- Research continuity is being put in place at most institutions. Only essential staff are on campus.
- Most academic staff are working from home and only essential service staff are in place on campuses. Support staff are at work on a rotational basis to limit contact and the spread of the virus.
- Some universities are allowing students with exceptional circumstances to stay on campus together with international students who cannot vacate.
- Some universities are assisting students with financial difficulties to get home.
- All universities will assess the situation at the end of the month and make decisions on when students may return to campuses.

National Development of Learnerships, Employment Skills and Labour Assessment (INDLELA)

The following measures have been put in place:

- Suspended all hostel accommodation to all trade test and Assessment and Artisan Recognition of Prior Learning (ARPL) candidates.
- On Monday, 23 March 2020, INDLELA suspended all public activities related to ARPL, Trade Test Registrations and Trade Testing due to insufficient protective equipment and sanitizers. Scheduled trade tests have been postponed.

NATIONAL SKILLS FUND (NSF)

The following measures are being put in place:

- All Skills Development Providers (SDPs) are being informed to stop training activities but to continue paying stipends to the learners for this month of the lockdown.
- Once learning resumes, SDPs will be required to provide additional support in the learning environment to assist in curbing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. This learning support includes the provision of hand washing facilities, sanitizers, facemasks and COVID-19 information material. It will be strongly encouraged that SDPs spend time when learning sessions resume to convey appropriate messages for preventing the spread of COVID-19 virus.
- The NSF through additional allocations to the approved NSF budget will accommodate the budget for the additional support measures indicated above. Expenditure on these support measures will be capped at R1 000.00 per learner per month and evidence of this expenditure will have to be provided for verification.
- The NSF will consider time extensions to the overall implementation period of projects to accommodate any delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- All on-site invoice verifications have been suspended until further notice. SDPs will be requested to submit reports (including supporting documents) via email and NSF project managers will be limited to desktop invoice verification.

HIGHER HEALTH

HIGHER HEALTH has been following the development of the global threat of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), as well as understanding the facts communicated by the World Health Organisation (WHO), the National Department of Health (DOH) and the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD). HIGHER HEALTH is currently liaising very closely with the National Department of Health and National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) towards keeping abreast with the developments in respect to the situation in South Africa and communicates with the Department of Higher Education and Training.

A successful webinar was held on 20 March 2020 with 500 participants from HIGHER HEALTH, NICD, DOH, management, staff and health care workers from all universities and TVET colleges to address the issues, facts and myths around the COVID-19 outbreak.

Parallel, they have worked with a Guidelines Writing Committee from NICD and DOH to develop guidelines for institutions to address the COVID-19 threat. It was presented to the Department on 16 March 2020 for input and finalisation with institutions. However, it is important to note that these guidelines are based on what is currently known about the transmission and severity of COVID-19. Guidelines will be updated as new information emerges.

HIGHER HEALTH is encouraging institutions to check the NICD website (www.nicd.ac.za) and DOH website (www.doh.gov.za) for updated guidance.

HIGHER HEALTH is liaising with University Vice-Chancellors through USAf and TVET college Principals through SACPO to provide information, advice and guidance on the threat so that they can communicate and act consistent to all staff and students about this new global health threat.

Through HIGHER HEALTH, we have a partnership with the NICD and DOH and also have put in place a complete training and capacity development programme on COVID-19 for all PSET healthcare workers and other support staff across all universities and TVET colleges.

Through HIGHER HEALTH, we are also working with existing campus clinics, their Campus Health and Wellness Coordinators and other relevant staff to provide information and support on the growing epidemic so that students who call at the clinics are adequately assisted.

ON SCIENCE AND INNOVATION

Research Process

The following progress has been made on research projects to support COVID-19 interventions:

- **Development of diagnostic tools**

- It has become urgent to locally manufacture reagents for testing kits. These are currently being imported and the lockdown may threaten access to supply. The DST has negotiated the repurposing of various facilities and labs to respond to the outbreak. The entities in line to assist include Biovac, Centres of Excellence in TB research, Centre of Proteomic and Genomic Research (CPGR) and Afrigen Bio. Discussions are on to facilitate accreditation of some of the facilities to produce reagents. The team will be discussing budget requirements this afternoon

- **Therapeutic trails and repurposing of drugs**

- A number of existing drugs are being re-purposed and tested for efficacy of the potential treatment for COVAD 19. Current trials happening internationally coordinated by the WHO are being monitored.
- Preliminary work on the development of vaccines has started with UCT, CSIR and Biovac. Progress is expected in over 18 months.
- SACEMA is currently engaging with other sources of data and modelling groups, refining their assumptions with a view to produce an updated model of the spread of the epidemic over time by Friday.

For the above projects, the DSI has already availed **R12 million** and will redirect an additional R30 million.

Developments with respect to decision support through evidence and data

One of the areas that have emerged where the National System of Innovation (NSI) can make significant impact with respect to the Covid-19 crisis, is to enhance the role of data and evidence in supporting the response to the COVID-19 emergency.

Currently, key decision-making processes including work being done by the Department of Health, the Presidency, as well as the National Command Centre has drawn on the existing data and evidence capabilities of the NSI. However, there is no widespread acknowledgement that current arrangements are limiting as we move into the lockdown phase of managing the crisis. What is required is a major step-change in how things are done.

On the basis of the above, the following has been achieved: -

1. There is now widespread agreement on the need for a central situational awareness platform which will provide a single view of the reality. The technology to rapidly deploy such a situational awareness platform exist at the CSIR (the CMORE system) and is now being customized to service the Covid-19 response. The facility is currently being established at the CSIR but can easily be moved should this be required. Depending on permissions granted to certain users, parts of the data can be accessed remotely. The CMORE team is currently getting a sense of the information requirements of key users, starting with the Department of Health so as to demonstrate how the CMORE system works.

The functionality of the CMORE system is designed to service a wide range of users, whether these are in a decision hierarchy as well as different types of first responders (health workers, police, the army). An immediate functionality requested by the Department of Health for activation is to provide the 3,000 health workers involved in tracking and testing to be able to transmit essential information to a central point via their cell phones.

The CSIR team has been requested to have a facility that can be shown to people in the next 24 hours as this will provide the impetus for decision needs to be codified and share with the team for implementation.

2. Through complementary processes by the DSI and the DOH, the research community specifically the modelling community has been brought together for enhanced cooperation. The researchers are currently splitting into various workstreams bringing together like capabilities taking into account that different models exist. Over the next 48 hours, the nature of the workstreams, what information they provide, to whom, and at what frequency, and how is quality control and peer review managed will be finalised.
3. Finally, the HSRC was alerted to the urgency expressed by the President for an assessment based on data, on the way in which South Africans view current developments. Normal research processes including the need to get ethics clearance resulted in the work only starting

yesterday.

4. However, it was agreed that the team would need to get into a cycle of preparing an update for every NCC meeting, based on the best available data and evidence at that point in time.

One of the areas that is emerging as a priority is data sharing and exchange protocols not only within government but also with a range of private sector players and NGO's. For example, for the situational awareness platform to support decisions with respect to responses, there is a need for data on the availability of health consumables, testing capabilities, etc.

This will require rapid data sharing arrangements with a range of players including retailers, pathology labs, etc. The CSIR (using the capabilities and credibility of the WEF Affiliate Centre) will assist in brokering this at the technical level. However, it may be useful to include the principle of open data in the high-level engagements between the President and key social partners to enable people at the technical level to finalise detailed protocols and arrangements in this regard.