**Update on our plans for the first semester**

16 February 2021

Dear colleagues and students

The Institutional Committee for Business Continuity (ICBC) of Stellenbosch University (SU) met for the second time this year on Monday 15 February 2021.

In line with our previous decision on 18 January, we are still hoping to have as many students as possible back on campus for the start of undergraduate classes on 15 March. To this end, we are putting in place both flexible plans for learning and teaching, as well as extensive health and safety measures.

However, there seem to be some contradictions between the regulations issued after the introduction of the original level-3 restrictions in June last year and a new communique sent to universities after the adjustments announced in December, which need to be resolved.

We have had extensive engagements with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) on the possible amendment of the prevailing directives published on 8 June 2020, and are awaiting urgent feedback. Our proposed return-to-campus plan is in line with the DHET’s communique of 31 December 2020. In addition, we have applied to DHET for permission to deviate from the level-3 directives.

We understand that this uncertainty is disruptive, which is why we are continuing our urgent discussions with the DHET. We will also be joining the rest of the sector in a meeting of Universities South Africa (USAf) on Friday (19 February), where we hope to obtain more clarity.

In the meantime, we have undertaken extensive scenario planning based on the decisions of the DHET, USAf and government with regard to COVID-19 regulations.

**Who will be brought to campus?**

As a university, we are committed to the academic project and confirm our intention to:

* allow for as many newcomer first-year students as possible to be on campus;
* accommodate students on campus who lack a conducive learning environment elsewhere; and
* follow a differentiated approach in faculties to accommodate students who need to be on campus for clinical and other practical work, as well as our postgraduate students who already returned to campus earlier this year.

**Final decision**

The ICBC will meet again on 26 February, when we will take a final decision on returning students to campus, and staff to the workplace. We hope to be able to accommodate as many students as possible on our campuses to enable the transformative student experience and unique university life SU is known for.

However, even if we can accommodate only some of our students on campus, we will make sure that all students have an opportunity to complete the academic year successfully, as we did last year when COVID-19 first struck.

In December 2020, SU celebrated the academic achievements of 5 701 students who graduated despite tremendous obstacles. We are immensely grateful for the hard work and dedication of our students, lecturers and support staff that made this possible.

**Augmented remote teaching, learning and assessment (ARTLA)**

This year, we want to follow a differentiated model of learning and teaching called ARTLA, which will combine contact tuition for smaller groups of students with online elements. Faculties and departments will decide on the exact mix of learning and teaching modes to be followed for each module – including the extent of face-to-face, online or hybrid approaches – depending on the desired module outcomes. This approach allows for flexibility to accommodate the different circumstances of our various academic environments.

**Extended Learning Spaces (ELS) project**

To make ARTLA possible, SU embarked on the Extended Learning Spaces (ELS) project in November last year. This ambitious, complex initiative aims to fast-track the installation of advanced equipment in 183 schedulable venues to enable lecturers to stream and record lectures, as well as interact with students who are not physically present.

We are currently in the contracting and procurement phase, after which the delivery of equipment, the assembly of the units as well as on-site installation will follow. While SU is working with multiple external contractors, the project depends on the availability of stock, and the University also has to follow due process to ensure quality.

To allow for all of this, current estimates are that installation will take place in May. Therefore, the full package will not be available for the start of the academic year on 15 March, but preparatory work is being done in the interim. The information technology and physical infrastructure at the selected venues is being upgraded to ensure that the units can be installed successfully. And training in how to use the units will be rolled out from the end of February, when demonstration units are expected to become available.

In addition, a team from our Division of Learning and Teaching Enhancement, in collaboration with the IT Division, are working on ways to use existing equipment to stream and record lectures. This will allow ARTLA to proceed in the meantime, until the full solution becomes available.

**Health and safety**

SU will not compromise on health and safety. Although we seem to be nearing the end of the second wave of COVID-19 infections in South Africa, the pandemic is by no means over. Vaccines offer some hope, but they are not yet widely available. Therefore, we must remain vigilant.

All protocols to prevent the spread of coronavirus disease will be strictly observed on our campuses, including sanitising, ventilation, physical distancing and the wearing of masks.

**Isolation, quarantine and self-isolation**

On Monday, the ICBC approved a protocol ([click here](http://www.sun.ac.za/english/Documents/2021/Protocol-for-Isolation-Quarantine-and-Self-isolation-in-a-residence.pdf)) for isolation, quarantine and self-isolation.

Students moving into residence and returning to campus will have to prove that they have self-screened for seven consecutive days before their arrival, using Higher Health’s HealthCheck daily risk assessment tool (only available via the URL <https://healthcheck.higherhealth.ac.za>; no longer via SMS or WhatsApp).

Students who show symptoms of COVID-19, have tested positive or have had high-risk contact must self-isolate for ten days. Residences will reserve rooms for this purpose.

**Student activities**

With the Welcoming Programme kicking off in early March, it is important to note that a prohibition on social gatherings will be in place. No student event will be allowed, unless it forms part of a preapproved programme that includes all necessary health protocols. A specific plan for the event must be drawn up, and a COVID-19 compliance officer must supervise. Students will be encouraged to use a suitable outdoor venue for such events, as this lowers the risk of transmission considerably. ([Click here](http://www.sun.ac.za/english/Documents/2021/Booking-of-Venues-Meetings-Events-Level-3.pdf) for more information.)

**Toolkits**

The ICBC also approved an extensive return-to-campus toolkit for staff and students [to be made available as soon as possible], based on regulations, directives and guidelines issued by the authorities. It covers aspects such as personal protective equipment, access control, sanitising, physical distancing, meetings, waste disposal, testing, and readying venues for learning and teaching.

In addition, our Corporate Communication and Marketing Division has compiled a COVID-19 protocol awareness toolkit ([click here](https://eur03.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fstellenbosch.evlink2.net%2Fservlet%2Flink%2F31500%2F138715%2F385550%2F1404529&data=04%7C01%7C%7C33b375863f8c4e4dfa2a08d8cdd2a8c7%7Ca6fa3b030a3c42588433a120dffcd348%7C0%7C0%7C637485651986412526%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&sdata=OfRkSlNxWqX8eQtdserILY4jXpSrheG3MJTRp6Zw0FA%3D&reserved=0)) with printable materials for the SU community. Entities are requested to make use of this SU-branded toolkit only, which includes posters for building entrances, notice boards and restrooms.

**Returning to the workplace**

Staff’s return to the workplace will be managed according to the protocols and directions set out in legislation. Our Human Resources Division will guide us on the necessary processes, including health and safety protocols. To this end, the Employee Relations Office will conduct a workshop for members of the General Managers’ Meeting on 23 February.

**Travel**

Also approved on Monday were updated guidelines and recommendations for international travel. Staff and students must complete a travel registry ([click here](http://www.sun.ac.za/english/SUInternational/current-students/travelregistry)) before travelling abroad. This will provide us with a more accurate record so that we can provide assistance in emergencies.

**COVID-19 webpage**

All the information in this communication is available on a dedicated [COVID-19 page](http://www.sun.ac.za/english/Pages/COVID-19-Coronavirus-Disease-2019.aspx) on the SU website, which includes frequently asked questions (FAQs), as well as a record of all communiques and updates since the start of the pandemic. Staff and students are encouraged to make extensive use of this valuable resource.

**Conclusion**

In the spirit of solidarity, we are closely collaborating with all role-players to limit COVID-19 infections and enable both the University and the towns in which we operate to stay open and functional.

At our meeting on Monday, we decided to broaden the ICBC by extending an invitation to the Students’ Representative Council (SRC) Chair to join our regular meetings. On Thursday, we will also be providing a detailed briefing to all SU personnel at the first staff assembly of the year.

We live in extraordinary times and realise all too well that the current situation, which has been dubbed “VUCA” (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity), is hard on everyone. Nevertheless, we are as committed as ever to act in the best interests of our staff, students and the broader community.

Please take care and stay safe.

**Prof Stan du Plessis
ICBC Chair**