

Level 3 regulations for university students:

Back to campus or staying at home?

by

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From the 1st of May under lockdown level 4 regulations, a controlled return of final year university students in programmes requiring clinical training, starting with medicine and the phasing in of all other programmes, including nursing, dental and veterinary sciences were allowed. All other students were since then supported through remote multimodal teaching, learning and assessments until they can return to campus.

On 23 May, Higher Education and Training Minister, Dr Blade Nzimande announced that at the relaxed level 3 of lockdown to be implemented from 1 June, 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 of Higher Education and Training. This group of returning students will include the following cohorts of students:

- All groups that have already returned during level 4 (i.e. medical and nursing students);
- Students in the final year of their programmes, who are on a path to graduating in 2020;
- Final year students who require access to labs, technical equipment, data, connectivity and access to the residences and private accommodation;
- Students, in all years of study, who require clinical training in their programmes (provided that the clinical training platforms have sufficient space and can accommodate them while adhering to safety protocols); and
- Postgraduate students who require lab equipment and other technical equipment to undertake their studies.

However, the Minister did indicate that universities may also consider the 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 prioritised, and that all safety and logistical requirements are met. Dr Nzimande also confirmed that all university students have zero rated access to online learning systems and that these arrangements have been successfully negotiated with data companies. He warned students that free data should be used for studies only, and not for “wrong things.”

As announced by the President on 24 May, the whole country will move to level 3 from 1 June, but specific hot spots in certain districts will be targeted with additional measures. While only 33% of students can return to campus, it is a requirement that the university has used at least two to three weeks to get the campus ready. In other words, students will get two weeks’ notice to return to campus. The Minister will publish any further directions in terms of the Disaster Management Act to

permit such travel, and the respective universities will issue permits to identified students to allow for their travel back to campus. It is important to emphasise that only the above five categories of students will be allowed to return under level 3. All other students will be supported through remote multimodal teaching learning and assessments until they can return to campus when announced to do so in due course.

The Minister will allow some universities to identify other groups of students in line with their particular contexts. However, any deviation from this criteria must be approved by the Department of Higher Education and Training and must fall within the maximum of 33% of the student population under level 3. Only when a district moves to level 2 of the risk-adjusted strategy, will the reintegration of the next group of students be permitted, and then a maximum of 66% of the student will be allowed to return.

The total student population, i.e. 100% of students will only return at level 1 and that is unlikely to happen anytime soon. Under level 1, the Department of Higher Education and Training will require the strictest enforcement of physical distancing and health protocols. Further details regarding the return of students, the specific criteria and all other arrangements will be published by the Minister in the Government Gazette.

Students throughout South Africa should therefore continue to focus on their studies during lockdown. Here are some guidelines for students:

- Leverage the online learning platform of your university;
- Develop your digital technology skills during this time;
- Prepare for online assessments;
- Follow your university on social media for any announcements within the next few weeks;
- Look out for any emails or announcements from your university;
- Stay in contact with other students via your phone or social media;
- Keep in contact with student societies and student chapters via social media;
- Continue to practise safe hygiene practices at home;
- Prepare yourself for strict safety regulations when you return to campus and your university accommodation later this year.

From the above it is evident that the Department of Higher Education and Training has opted for a dual strategy of saving lives, as well as saving the academic year. It was good to see that the Minister managed to emphasise both these messages in his presentation on Saturday. The Minister highlighted that students are expected to embrace online learning in terms of work readiness, given the fact that under level 3, the majority of students (66%) will still study from home. Thus, it is clear that most students will continue with their studies from home, until further announcements are made which is unlikely to happen within the next two months. The readiness of universities in terms of safety protocols will be assessed, and under no circumstances will the safety of students and staff be compromised. In the interim, university staff and students should continue with online learning, while keeping an eye on any further developments.

Marius Meyer lectures in Strategic HR Management at Stellenbosch University and is Chairperson of the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP). Please note that the foundation of this article is a summary of the Minister's presentation on 23 May 2020. Students will receive official communication from their university management and should respond to any changes or developments as they arise. For more information on the Coronavirus, visit www.sacoronavirus.co.za