



UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE
UNIVERSITEIT VAN DIE VRYSTAAT
YUNIVESITHI YA FREISTATA

Office of the Rector and Vice-Chancellor
Kantoor van die Rektor en Visekanselier
Ofisi ya Morektoro le Motlatsa Mokanseliri
IHhovisi loMphathi neSekelashansela

5 March 2021

Dear Senior Undergraduate Students

UPDATE ON THE 2021 ACADEMIC PROGRAMME

We are well into the first part of 2021 with the University of the Free State's (UFS) academic programme that commenced on 1 March 2021.

This communication aims to provide our senior undergraduate students with information and some clarity on how the university is approaching the start of its academic programme and the progress that has been made. The COVID-19 pandemic has posed many challenges to universities across the country; for instance, to find innovative ways of completing the 2020 academic year without leaving any student behind and, at the same time, keeping safety, health, and well-being a top priority.

The pandemic provided ample opportunities to embrace technology and introduce new innovative learning and teaching approaches in 2020, as well as a first-ever online registration process for all our students in 2021. The higher-education landscape is now being reshaped by rapid advances in technology, and this will require continued commitment from all of us to reimagine communities that were unimaginable just a decade ago.

With this in mind, one needs to emphasise that any substantial change-management process will pose challenges. To date, 64% of our students who have registered, have done so online. This is a sharp increase from the comparable 20% of last year. I would like to take this opportunity to thank our students and staff for embracing this substantial change in our processes.

However, the university is aware that some of our students find it difficult to register for several reasons, and that this is creating unprecedented anxiety levels among staff and students. It is therefore very important that we identify the underlying blockages and find amicable solutions to ensure that those students who have not yet registered, can do so speedily. Furthermore, it is crucial that the digital skills of our students are developed, as this will be the way in which the university will approach the registration process in the future.

The university's blended learning programme for 2021 allows for 34% of students to return during the first semester. Although our country is currently on Level 1 of the national lockdown, the percentage of students who return is not linked to the lockdown level, but to the university's teaching and learning approach and the institution's infrastructure capacity to adhere to physical distancing protocols.

I am aware of the recent comment made by Dr Zweli Mkhize regarding a third wave of COVID-19 post-Easter, as the country continues to roll out its vaccination strategy. Easter is typically a period of family gatherings and the university holidays also follow the Easter weekend. This is yet another reason why the university is exercising caution in its return-to-campus strategy.

To ensure that senior undergraduate students register successfully and can continue with their studies, the following measures have been put into place:

1. The **online registration process is extended until Friday 12 March 2021** to allow students who have not yet registered to do so.
2. **Classes for selected senior undergraduate students that commenced on or before 1 March 2021, will continue. However, students whose registration has been delayed due to the online registration process, will be supported through a differentiated commencement of classes** allowing for a catch-up plan, thus avoiding any student being left behind. Faculties will communicate to these students when online classes will be starting.
3. **Additional capacity will be provided to support faculties and campuses in order to expedite the registration process.** The university management is aware of the high volumes of enquiries and calls received from students, and this intervention will assist with the turnaround time. In extreme circumstances, students who are identified as vulnerable and are still experiencing challenges with registering, will be requested to do so on campus where they will be assisted in a central venue.

These measures have been put in place for the benefit of our students and to ensure that we can all complete the 2021 academic year successfully.

It is understandable that those students who will not return to the campuses will miss campus life and would like their student life to return to the way it was. However, access to the campuses remains restricted to only registered students for face-to-face teaching and identified postgraduate students in possession of valid 2021 campus-access permits. **Permits are being issued centrally and are valid for the period that a student is expected to be on campus.** This measure remains in place to ensure compliance with the national regulations and to mitigate the risk of spreading COVID-19.

The dedication and commitment of staff are commendable; they are working tirelessly to support our students during this time, and I thank them for their supportive spirit. In the end, our collective goal is to ensure that our students succeed this year, and that no student is left behind.

Remember that the pandemic continues to test every aspect of society, and although the infection rate is slowly decreasing and the vaccine is rolled out across the country, we must not underestimate the impact that the pandemic still has on local and global communities. Take care of yourselves and those around you and comply with the national guidelines and regulations.

I would like to encourage you to stay in touch with the university. Visit the UFS website and social-media platforms for regular updates and consult your ufs4life email for communication from the university.

I wish you all the best with your studies during the first term and hope to see you on our campuses soon.

Best regards



Prof. Francis W Petersen

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