

## **News flash: Mitigation strategies during the third wave of COVID-19**

*Received from Lacea Loader*

The National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) has recently reported increasing positive COVID-19 cases, especially in the Free State, Gauteng, Northern Cape, and North West.

The significant rise in positive cases over the past few weeks is a matter of great concern to the management of the University of the Free State (UFS). While attempting to enforce compliance, Protection Services staff, COVID-19 monitors, as well as some managers noted the following on the campuses, among others:

1. Increasing number of students not wearing masks properly, e.g., masks around neck and on chin and not in prescribed position.
2. Groups of students not adhering to physical distancing. This behaviour is also noted in open spaces and off campus.
3. Students and staff in face-to-face (F2F) classes not wearing masks.
4. Laboratory assistants and lecturers allowing students to remove masks when doing practicals in groups.
5. Staff in faculties and support service divisions walking in passages and outside their offices without wearing masks.
6. Face-to-face staff meetings in some instances exceeding the prescribed 50% capacity of the venue.
7. Staff having lunch together in an office or participating in social interaction in tearooms.
8. Staff and students failing to report positive cases or close contacts to Kovsie Health ([johnr@ufs.ac.za](mailto:johnr@ufs.ac.za)).
9. Failure to respond or a slow response to emails or telephone calls from Kovsie Health when following up on positive cases or contacts.
10. Students refusing to quarantine or get tested when experiencing symptoms and, in some instances, attending classes while awaiting COVID-19 test results.
11. Residence committees conducting meetings without masks.
12. Groups socialising in residences.
13. Students crowding in 24/7 study venues.

14. Students intentionally removing or interfering with COVID-19 awareness posters and the outdoor hand-washing facilities on campuses.
15. Students intentionally altering seating arrangements in the lecture rooms.
16. Face-to-face staff meetings taking place without any ventilation (i.e., all windows and doors are closed during the meeting).
17. Students ignoring the national curfew after attending parties/events off-campus.
18. An increase in the use of/or abuse of the campus access permit system.
19. Students failing to comply with isolation and quarantine guidelines.
20. Incorrect/false declarations on the COVID-19 screening questionnaire.

With the colder weather, there is a strong possibility that the university's infection rate could escalate. Currently, hospitals in Bloemfontein have no spare bed capacity, and infected students will not receive appropriate care if they need hospitalisation – this was experienced over the past weekend. Hospitals in other parts of the province are also becoming over-stretched in terms of spare bed capacity.

In addition, the large number of students currently being isolated in the South Campus facility is alarming; the university will soon run out of quarantine space if the current trend continues. It was found that more students who were quarantined after close contact tested positive after a few days, which was not the case before, as appeared to occur in the Wag-'n-Bietjie residence on the Bloemfontein Campus where approximately a third of the students were quarantined or tested positive.

The university's COVID-19 Special Executive Group (SEG) discussed the matter during a meeting on 12 May 2021 and also expressed concern about the escalating statistics. The SEG declared a zero tolerance to non-compliance and has called for harsher measures against those found contravening the protocols.

Therefore, the SEG has approved the following mitigation strategies that will be in place with immediate effect until 26 July 2021 when the second semester will resume, or until otherwise advised:

### **1. Academic programme:**

- 1.1 Where possible, F2F classes should be adjusted to an online mode.
- 1.2 In the case of year modules, F2F laboratory work/practicals that can be deferred to the second semester should be considered.
- 1.3 No lectures should take place in an unprepared lecture room. Lecture rooms are signed off by Occupational Health and Safety – the signed capacity certificate must appear at the door of the venue.
- 1.4 Lecturers should assist in enforcing and checking the number of students as per lecture room capacity requirements.

1.5 Postdoctoral students who have not yet left their home countries must defer it to a later date.

1.6 Stricter access control to the 24/7 study venues.

1.7 The number of students in computer laboratories and libraries should be further reduced.

## **2. Residences:**

2.1 No F2F residence committee meetings will be allowed.

2.2 The current curfew for students returning to campus residences has been adjusted to 22:00.

## **3. Staff:**

3.1 All staff who can work from home should be encouraged to do so, except those academic staff who are expected to be on campus to support students in the academic programme, essential service staff and those support service staff who have been requested by line managers to work on campus. It should be noted that any staff member could be requested at any time by a line manager or higher level manager in the portfolio to report to campus.

3.2 No F2F meetings of more than four persons should be permitted, with proper distancing.

## **4. Events/functions/sport activities**

4.1 No new event(s) and/or function(s) will be approved by the compliance group. Where possible, the presentation of events and/or functions should be deferred until 26 July 2021 when the second semester will resume.

4.2 No new group sport training will be allowed, except for those who have already been approved.

The university's Protection Services and the COVID-19 monitors will strengthen compliance monitoring, which was already initiated as of 10 May 2021.

Staff members, and especially managers and supervisors, must assist with the enforcement of protocols, in addition to the scope of control of Protection Services staff and the COVID-19 monitors.