



Social compact for staff members and students to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 at the University of the Free State

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1. PREAMBLE

As staff and students of the University of the Free State (UFS), we acknowledge the need for developing a single, efficient institutional approach to COVID-19, while facilitating an operational framework that provides space for institutional actors to exercise their mandates in an accountable and responsive manner. The Human Project at the UFS, operationalised in the University Culture Work Stream of the Integrated Transformation Plan (ITP), is intentionally embedded in a social justice framework, transformative praxis, and humanising outlook.

The onset of COVID-19 has strengthened a common purpose towards evolving institutional solutions through a coherent and socially inclusive approach. COVID-19 necessitated new approaches to scholarship performativity, including teaching, learning and research, work arrangements, and staff and student health advocacy, embedded in a national regulatory framework of enforcement.

As staff and students of the UFS, we support the re-imagination of university operations in light of COVID-19. We are aware that we require a new social and moral compass to shape the relational futures of employees, students, and other critical stakeholder communities navigating their functions in the context of the pandemic.

As staff and students of the UFS, we support and commit to the operationalisation of this compact in a context of trust, mutual obligations, care, and respect.

This social compact is ratified by key institutional actors and will be implemented on all UFS campuses. In order to support the national COVID-19 agenda, the social compact will have a series of interconnected actions, agendas, and interventions supported by the key actors and stakeholders identified in this document.

2. BACKGROUND

The safety, health, and well-being of staff members and students remain a priority for the UFS, and it is a shared responsibility and commitment that should illustrate the solidarity of the university community in combatting the spread of COVID-19.

The *Social Compact for Staff and Students to Mitigate the Impact of COVID-19 at the UFS (UFS-COVID-19-SC)* formalises the responsibility of staff and students to care for one another through a set of social and moral expectations.

In committing to the UFS-COVID-19-SC, it is important that staff members and students exhibit agency, act in the best interest of their health and that of others, put the university community first, and pledge to do their part to keep each individual healthy and safe. Everyone plays an integral role in creating a safe and healthy learning, living, and working environment, and recognising that we are a diverse community.

It is important for staff and students to bear in mind that their actions, both on and off campus, will impact the entire UFS community.

3. SOCIAL COMPACT OF THE UFS

The UFS-COVID-19-SC is the university community's call to action to recognise shared responsibility for our own health and that of others, informed by science and founded on mutual respect. It also underlines and supports the *Charter for Care and Ethical Conduct* of the university. One of the purposes of the charter is to “promote the well-being of staff, students, and communities who are or should be impacted by the practices and projects of the university”; “uphold and promote attitudes and practices of care in our duties” and “cultivate trust between individuals and the University” in ensuring that we “cultivate a sense of belonging among staff and students”. The charter emphasises the importance of the provision of conditions and access to resources that promote wellness for staff and

students and addresses the matter of individuals taking accountability and ownership for their actions.

The UFS-COVID-19-SC aims to:

- Highlight the important role that each staff member and student plays in the health and well-being of the university community.
- Provide regulatory context.
- Clearly communicate the behavioural expectations of all staff members and students.
- Outline the possible consequences of breaching this compact.

4. PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

In support of the university's vision, the UFS-COVID-19-SC is guided by the following core principles:

- Science (epidemiology of COVID-19)
- Responsible citizenry
- Co-creation
- Social solidarity
- Servant leadership
- Social justice
- Ethical behaviour
- Compassion

The UFS-COVID-19-SC demonstrates the university's commitment to deliver on its vision and goals, and it is critical in informing the university's response to COVID-19.

The UFS social compact will be supported by the following proposed actions:

- To support the reintegration of staff members and students into the university, while specifically focusing on health and safety, enhanced sanitation, and building out for social distancing.
- To leverage wellness as a strategic tool to enhance the holistic well-being of staff and students.
- To update policies and procedures to fit current best praxis.
- To develop, capacitate, and train staff members and students on updated policies and procedures, guidelines, and protocols to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and manage the individual and institutional response to COVID-19 cases (using Blackboard).
- To leverage a recognition platform to promote adherence to policies, procedures and COVID-19 prevention measures.
- To collaborate with the Organisational Development and Employee Wellness Division, Faculty of Health Sciences, and Kopsie Health (Campus Clinics) to provide staff members and students with specialised services for clinical and social support, including the prevention of stigma and violence, and promote their mental well-being to enable them to thrive and be resilient.
- To provide staff members and students with tools to enhance their productivity.
- To develop and implement measures to ensure compliance with the social compact.
- To develop and implement captivating communication and leverage the use of various communication platforms to exchange information and enable feedback from staff members and students.

5. KEY STAKEHOLDERS

The UFS social compact applies to the following stakeholders:

- University management
- Staff members (academic and support services)
- Students (undergraduate and postgraduate – including international students)
- Institutional Student Representative Council (ISRC)
- Unions (NEHAWU and UVPERSU)
- Essential services staff (i.e. University Estates, Clinics, Kopsie Health, Housing and Residence Affairs, internal catering services, ICT Services, Procurement and Stores, Protection Services, Electronics and Instrumentation)
- Visitors
- Contractors/vendors

6. COVID-19 REGULATORY CONTEXT

It remains the university's priority to limit the possible spread of COVID-19 on campuses and other premises owned and operated by the UFS in order to safeguard the health, safety and well-being of staff members and students. The university needs to ensure strict compliance with the Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002 and the Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993 (including all regulations issued in terms of these acts).

This requires a commitment to comply with the basic preventative measures of wearing a mask, maintaining physical distancing and adhering to hygiene requirements. The UFS supports limiting access to university-owned and -operated premises and providing support to staff who can work from home, so as to prevent large groups gathering on the campuses.

In support of the national regulations, the UFS has appointed compliance officers to ensure that all prevention measures have been implemented and are observed in order to ensure staff and student safety. The university has furthermore implemented a penalty system to address non-compliance with national regulations.

7. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SOCIAL COMPACT AT THE UFS

7.1 Commitment and violations

Each staff member and student plays an integral role in supporting and committing to the UFS social compact. Protecting the health and well-being of the university community requires everyone to commit to acting responsibly in ways that demonstrate care and compassion for others. Therefore, the purpose of the social compact is not only to stipulate the university's strategies, activities, and priorities concerning the health, safety, and well-being of the staff members and students, but also to convey what is expected of staff members and students, and who they can approach if they have questions and/or fears.

The social compact can be used as a powerful tool during the COVID-19 pandemic; however, according to Riordan and O'Brien (Harvard Business Review, 2012), leadership cannot mandate a social compact. The staff members and students should collectively share the social compact. Ultimately, management should oversee the implementation of the social compact, model the desired behaviour, and ensure that staff members and students are committed to doing the same.

Furthermore, for the UFS social compact to be successfully implemented, it is important to determine how staff members and students should handle violations and how they will hold each other accountable. Research indicates that formal and informal violations can lead to dissatisfaction, lower trust, and intentions to leave. It is therefore important to develop and implement processes and procedures to provide feedback and address any violations.

7.2 Behaviour outlined in the social compact

The behaviour that should be outlined in the UFS-COVID-19-SC may include positive behaviour that the university would like to encourage; for example, commitment to the well-being of staff members and students, commitment to a safe work environment, and the establishment of forums for the discussion of issues, etc.

Implementation measures may include the compulsory agreement to the social compact by staff members and students as a prerequisite for access to the UFS campuses.

**** The UFS-COVID-19-SC should update the social compact on a regular basis to improve its effectiveness. The process of updating the social compact reinforces the positive behaviour of the staff members and students.**

8. INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

If implemented correctly, the social compact can result in positive outcomes; for example, a sense of control and security for the university community and management team. It can also encourage a sense of accountability, obligation, and trust among staff members and students. The social compact will help the university to foster desirable behaviour and discourage adverse behaviour.

The institution will, in accordance with best practices, gather feedback through frequent pulse surveys. The surveys will be supported by processes for absorbing and acting on feedback from both staff members and students quickly and effectively, in order to measure the success of the social compact.

Moreover, the indicators of success include inclusive accountability. This means that all stakeholders should take responsibility and be accountable for their actions, both on and off campus. Institutionally, the Special Executive Group (SEG) will monitor the

implementation of the social compact. The SEG is the decision-making entity that responds rapidly in a coordinated manner to combat the threats to business continuity. It also identifies opportunities where the intellectual knowledge base of the university could be utilised to positively impact society.

The UFS-COVID-19-SC Task Team will report to the SEG on a regular basis regarding the progress of the implementation process.

9. OUTREACH / COMMUNICATION

Social and behaviour change communication is an important element in the success of the social compact. To achieve this, the continuation of the COVID-19 communication and awareness campaign that launched in 2020 is vital.

In addition to the above, messaging in the 2021 campaign will focus on the value, formulation, and implementation of the UFS-COVID-19-SC. The university's communication platforms – digital marketing methodologies specifically – will be integral to the success of the communication and awareness campaign.

The COVID-19 communication/outreach plan should:

- Include key communication about returning to the workplace and targeted communication for staff members and students; for example, a COVID-19 return-to-work letter or COVID-19 return-to-the-academic-calendar letter.
- Identify possible risks or scenarios within the university that may need to be communicated to staff members and students quickly.
- Identify the communication platforms best suited to staff members and students.
- Leverage the use of, for example, the Intranet or Blackboard to update staff members and students on COVID-19 information, and investigate how graphic elements, such as the university's digital wallpaper, signatures, etc., could be used for visual learners.

- Include guidelines on timeliness to ensure that staff members and students are receiving timeous information straight from the university.
- Consider changes to or updates on policies and procedures; for example, wearing a mask, practicing good hygiene, maintaining social distancing, reporting illnesses, etc.
- Establish protocols for gathering feedback from staff members and students.
- Include a set of frequently asked questions, which can be published on the UFS website and Intranet and updated as needed.

10. CONCLUSION

Welcoming staff members and students back to the university during and after the pandemic may be challenging. However, by adopting the UFS-COVID-19-SC, the university should be able to operate efficiently, while minimising the risk to staff members and students and emphasising the duties and responsibilities of the university community in preventing and slowing the spread of COVID-19.

11. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

The contributions received from the following task team members are acknowledged:

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