



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

8 April 2020

Dear School Principal

UPDATE ON DEVELOPMENTS AT THE UFS

South Africa is more than halfway through the 21-day national lockdown, which commenced on 26 March 2020. Much has changed and many lives are directly and indirectly affected by the global COVID-19 outbreak. As a valuable stakeholder I am writing to update you on developments at the University of the Free State (UFS) and to inform you of the measures put in place by the university's executive management to manage university operations before and during the national lockdown.

Since the beginning of March 2020, the executive management of the UFS has been monitoring the rapidly changing conditions in our country and the rest of the world, and had to make decisions in the best interest of the health, well-being, and safety of our staff and students on the three campuses. This included the suspension of the academic programme on 17 March 2020; the cancellation of graduation ceremonies scheduled to take place on the campuses in April, May, and June 2020, as well as open days and all official events – residences on the three campuses were vacated and a moratorium was placed on all international travel. Where possible, the UFS assisted students to return to their places of residence – including some of our international students and a number of students who represented the university abroad before the national lockdown.

The university also established the UFS Coronavirus (COVID-19/SARS-COV-2) Task Team. Led by Prof Felicity Burt, a SARChI Research Chair in Vector-borne and Zoonotic Diseases, the team assists and advises the executive management in order to monitor the situation very closely and to share critical and verified information (especially against the background of fake news) as it becomes available. Since the national lockdown commenced on 26 March 2020, the university's operations have continued, with staff working from home. Our campuses are closed, with only a critical number of staff performing essential services.

I am chairing a *Special Executive Group*, which was established to assess the overall impact of COVID-19 on the university. In addition, the following task teams were established to look at various aspects of the university's operations: the Teaching and Learning Management Group (tasked to develop different models of delivering teaching and learning to ensure the continuation of the academic programme in 2020), a Community Engagement Task Team (where certain academic disciplines are interacting with external communities), an Operations Task Team (which focuses on environmental hygiene and the business continuation of the physical and digital plant), a Staff Task Team (to oversee staff working

from home, essential services, and crucial university functions), and a Student Re-integration Task Team (in charge of the development of responsible student integration on the re-opening of the university). The combined aim of these task teams is to forecast and plan the impact of the pandemic on the UFS and the continuation of the academic programme in 2020.

As with other universities in the country, the continuation of the academic programme remains a critical factor. We are looking at the development of low-tech approaches to learning and teaching that are sensitive to the challenges of connectivity, bandwidth, and the type of devices that our students have, realising the deep socio-economic inequalities and digital divide in society. The university has put the *Keep Calm, #UFSLearnOn* campaign for students and *Keep Calm, #UFSTeachOn* campaign for staff in place to provide the best possible support for academic staff and students by adapting existing support and practices that are best suited to the university's new low-tech environment to help move learning and teaching online on 20 April 2020.

I am aware of the challenges facing schools with the closure on 18 March 2020 and the academic time learners – and especially Grade 12 learners – have lost. Although some schools have continued with the curriculum online since 30 March 2020, many are unable to afford learners this option due to their inability to access the appropriate resources from home.

Online applications for undergraduate studies at the UFS in 2021 opened on 1 April 2020. Although we will not have an opportunity to welcome your learners on our campuses for the annual Open Days, we will be presenting Virtual Open Days that we hope your Grade 12 learners will be able to participate in. We also endeavour to assist learners with no or limited access to the internet to complete the application through personal visits and application centres that will be set up by the university's Department of Student Recruitment Services – more information on this will be provided at a later stage.

The COVID-19 pandemic remains a rapidly evolving situation with changes occurring around the clock. I wish you well in the midst of the growing pandemic that is affecting our daily lives, and I believe as partners, we will overcome this pandemic.

Thank you for your continued support to the University of the Free State. I wish you and your staff all the best during this period.

Best regards



Prof. Francis W Petersen

Rector and Vice-Chancellor, University of the Free State
Rektor en Visekanselier, Universiteit van die Vrystaat
Morekoto le Motlatsa Mokanseliri, Yunivesithi ya Freistata
UMphathi kanye neSekelashansela, IYunivesithi yaseFreystata

