

SOUTH AFRICAN UNION OF STUDENTS



09th of April 2020

COVID-19 Response Strategy to Rescue the 2020 Academic Year

1. Introduction

The widespread outbreak of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in the world generally and in South Africa particularly, has had significant negative impact on the global economy and specifically the higher education and training sector. The 2020 academic year is under threat as evidenced by amongst other things that: the first semester graduation ceremonies are suspended, teaching and learning stopped, field research discontinued, university residences are closed for majority of the students and travel for international research conferences is banned amongst other challenges. The Minister issued an announcement that universities are to be closed for early recess for contact classes from the 26th of March to the 15th of April 2020. It is indeed business unusual; stakeholders are discussing ways of ensuring the continuation of teaching and learning whilst complying with the national regulations issued by the COVID-19 National Command Council. The South African Union of Students engaged, on a nationwide consultation, with students and student leaders with the use of technology to solicit their views on what can be done to rescue the 2020 academic year. The World Health Organization (WHO) indicated that the number of infected people surpassed one million now and the number of deaths are just above 85 000 globally and the virus has spread to more than 100 countries including South Africa with cases above 1800 infections & 18 deaths. It is uncertain what will happen and the only three possibilities in the next weeks are that; 1) the possibility of a best case situation wherein the virus will be fully contained successfully; 2) the possibility of a moderate situation wherein the status quo remains or 3) the possibility of a worst case scenario

wherein the situations will worsen to uncontrollable levels such as that of Italy. This discussion document constitutes the response strategy from the perspective of the students and forms the basis of our engagement with all the stakeholders in the higher education sector on how to rescue the 2020 academic year. The submissions start with scenarios identified as available options to choose and explore in addressing the problem

2. Scenarios expressed by the students, Student Representative Councils and other relevant organized student organizations within the sector

During the nationwide consultation, students raised issues ranging from the methodology and structure of contact institutions, pricing, realignment of the academic calendar, digital migration/adoption, the integrity of the academic program in the spirit of social justice and rescuing the 2020 academic year. The following are the scenarios suggested by various students' representative councils and the general student body; as such, we are incorporating these options as a basis for starting a discussion;

2.1 Re-opening the 2020 Academic Year on the 20th of April 2020.

This is within the time frame and in line with the announcement made by the Minister that the institution of higher learning closes on the 26th of March and Re-open on the 15th of April. Subsequently President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that the lockdown starts on the 26th of March and ends on the 16th of April 2020. Some of the student political organizations suggested the 20th of April as a suitable and most reasonable date for reopening just after the lockdown.

2.2 Introduction of the E-Learning Strategy

Some of the student representative councils suggested the online route because it is the only sensible method that can be used when students are staff are not allowed to be in contact. The lockdown regulations instruct that social distancing be practiced as well as restricted movement of people. This will involve submission of assignments

online, e-learning assessment of students and utilising blackboards, Moodle system and university sites to access learning materials.

2.3 Reconfiguring the Academic Calendar to start in August

The reconfiguring of the academic calendar is being suggested by post-graduate students in line with the Northern hemisphere approach wherein their academic year starts in August. This option is ideal because it gives the government and universities enough time to prepare for new methodologies of delivering education and coordinate with department of basic education (DoBE) to not compromise potential freshmen. It is anticipated that by that time in August the pandemic of coronavirus would have been properly controlled and managed.

2.4 Adopting a Blended Learning Approach of Online Learning and Contact Learning.

Majority of the students suggested a combination of the two approaches. This approach of hybrid education delivery strategy involves both classroom education and online education. To avoid a mass presence of students in campuses universities introduce online education for those courses that can be taught online and only have a small number of students whose disciplines can only be delivered through contact learning.

2.5 Manipulation of Recess

In an event that the president pronounces an extension of the lockdown a suggestion was made that the number of days consumed be subtracted from the recesses that are made available periodically on the academic calendar. This would imply that should all recess days for the year be consumed and things normalise thereafter, then the university calendar will have to operate without breaks to its finalisation.

2.6 The Main Emphasis

The mandate given to SAUS by students is that any method decided upon to salvage the academic year must be guided as to avoid a situation that will give rise to a perpetuation of the existing inequality in the sector. It must demonstrate understanding, compassion and accommodation of those that come from households where social

structures don't allow for a student to participate adequately in academic responsibilities. The main emphasis is accessibility, equal education, justice and fairness.

3. Practical Implications for Universities

- Whilst few institutions will be able to adopt the E-Learning strategy, majority of universities do not have the capacity to immediately implement or switch into the E-learning strategy.
- Immediate return of students back to residences now will be in contravention of the lockdown regulation that restrict the movement of people, the guidelines says;
 - (i) *every person is confined to his or her place of residence, unless strictly for the purpose of performing an essential service, obtaining an essential good or service, collecting a social grant, pension or seeking emergency, life-saving, or chronic medical attention;*
 - (ii) *every gathering, as defined in regulation 1 is hereby prohibited, except for a funeral as provided for in sub-regulation (8); and*
 - (iii) *movement between provinces and between metropolitan and district areas is prohibited*
- Not returning students back to residences means that students who have already paid must be re-funded by universities and private landlords for the months of no occupation, as there was no services rendered, for the prepaid expense.
- The cost structure of online education model is not the same as that of the contact education model and universities might have to consider revising their fee structure for students taking into consideration the short run, long run and once fully implemented - economies of scale.
- Some of the students stay in deep remote villages with no electricity and network coverage, worsening access to online platforms;
- Final year students are left with few months to conclude their studies and graduate ,and failure to allow them to complete will affect the enrolment of freshmen for the 2021 academic year;
- Students indicated in majority that they do not have ICT devices (compatible gadgets), such as laptops and their economic constraints

make it difficult to afford the purchase of data and thus access to internet resources;

- A rapid radical shift in the teaching and learning methodology without proper planning and revision of strategy will compromise the prestige and credibility of certain qualifications, students and the contact university community.
- Pushing students and staff to E-Learning, rapid digital adoption, without preparing them on usability will lead to high failure percentages ,drastic drop in the throughput rate, which will translate into both academic and NSFAS financial exclusion, a strain to the system.
- Some of the disciplines and courses cannot be digitised or digitalised, because students must be physically present in laboratories, workstations and sites of trade.
- The idea of waiting for August is risky & uncertain because the COVID-19 situation might get worse that time than now, hence utilising this time when the environment still allows can be a better exploration whilst control measures are still in place.
- Figure 3.1 below outlines a combination of factors to rescue the 2020 academic year.

3.1 Academic Rescue Model

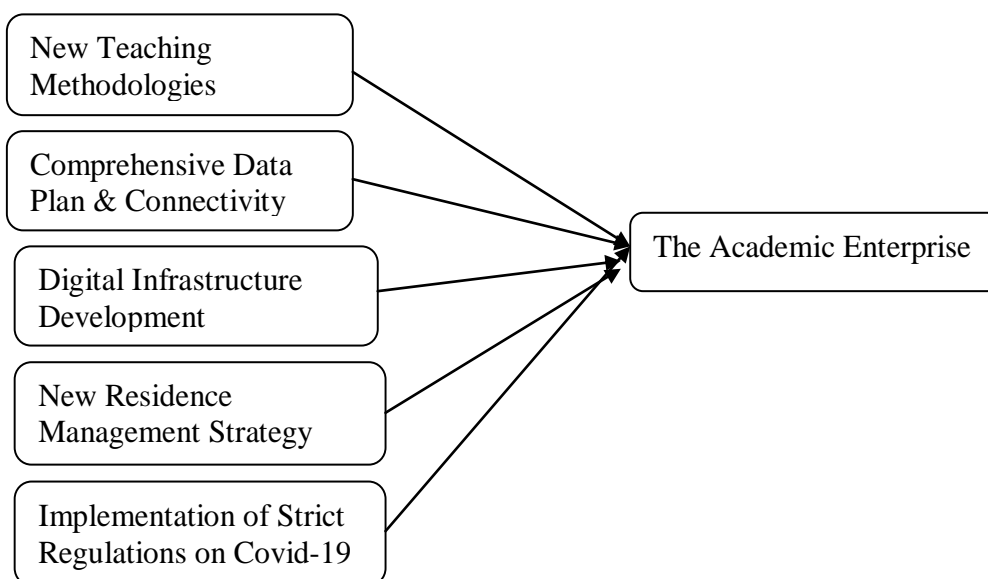


Figure 3.1

3.1 The adoption of the E-learning platform

The South African Union of Students discovered that whilst the discussion on methods of delivery is underway, some universities are already implementing the online learning strategy. This has strained many of our students who have been submitting a lot of complains to us, of being discriminated by their universities on the basis of their socio-economic background and geographic location which makes it impossible for them to explore the new learning methods. SAUS believes that it is not only unfair but wrong for universities to just start using the new methods without consulting student leadership to give input. For university management to implement the online system without engaging student representatives is high level of arrogance, inconsiderate of the vulnerable students and a disaster waiting to explode. Furthermore, it is a clear undermine of the Ministerial task team on COVID-19 being chaired by the Deputy Minister. The South African Union of Students will only support online education when the following minimum requirements and non-negotiable conditions are met;

- All students must be provided with Computers/PDAs/Laptops or any necessary device.
- Students must be granted sufficient data for performing assessments and accessing the internet or alternatively engage providers such as MTN, Vodacom, Telkom and Cell C to make available zero-rated data and access to university sites for scholarly and academic usage
- Orientation of students on ways of accessing E-Learning equipment and teaching of students on how to operate computer devices and submit on such E-Learning tools especially first year students.
- Proper training and capacity development of academic staff on virtual learning.
- Student leadership and faculty councils must be properly informed and be involved in the establishment of E-Learning.
- A proper monitoring and evaluation is done after two months of implementation if students are performing or not able to cope with the e-learning.
- E-learning must go hand in hand with a condition that tests and examinations be written online too since we have high possibility of the extension of the lockdown.

- Students are allowed to move from villages to better locations with proper network coverage and connectivity.
- Students are allowed to move back to their respective residences wherein access to WIFI, library and computer labs is possible.

4. Lessons from Literature and other Parts of the World

The following comprises lessons from other parts of the world, that is from Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America as well as some scholarly work regarding response strategy to covid-19, traditional methods of learning and E-learning approaches;

- 4.1 A study by Joseph Crawford et al (2020) titled “Covid-19 higher education intra-period digital pedagogy responses for 20 countries” showed that developed countries such as Australia, Germany, Italy, Ireland, and UK closed campuses due to COVID-19, did not extend their semester break and all are moving to online instructions except the USA. The spread of Covid-19 is very high in all these countries.
- 4.2 There is no country-wide policy on closures for Canada, Brazil, Singapore, Greenland, and Russia hence universities are not closed in these countries. Contact classes are continuing under strict hygiene measures of avoiding hand-shake, washing hands and wearing masks. The spread of Covid-19 is still moderate (Crawford et al, 2020)
- 4.3 Developing countries such as China, India, Korea, and Nigeria have digital strategy for higher education for most of their universities. (Crawford et al, 2020)
- 4.4 A study by Annika Anderson & Ake Gronlund (2009) titled “a conceptual framework for E-Learning in developing countries: a critical review of research challenges”, identified challenges associated with e-learning namely course challenges, challenges pertinent to individual characteristic of students and teachers, technical challenges and contextual challenges.

- 4.5 A study by Islam Y.M & Doyle K.O (2008) titled “ distance education via technology in rural Bangladesh” established that computer skills and technical know-how is a good predictor of student success or failure in e-learning courses and first years do not have this requisite knowledge to operate computer devices.
- 4.6 Migrating from traditional learning to fully virtual learning and online delivery strategy will not happen overnight because its associated with many challenges such as lack of home office infrastructure for academic staff, lack of online access infrastructure for students from remote areas, internet restrictions by government and lack of general skillsets needed to professionally design and offer virtual education (UNESCO, 2020).
- 4.7 Malaysia Ministry of Higher Education prohibited all digital learning activities on the 17th of March 2020 citing reasons such as inequality and lockdown restrictions (Asia Pacific University of Technology & Innovation, 2020).
- 4.8 A study done by Ozili & Arun (2020) titled “Impact of Covid-19 on the global economy”, shows that coronavirus disrupted the \$600 billion higher education industry worldwide, 44 countries in 4 continents closed campuses and Covid-19 disrupted the education of 290 million students globally.
- 4.9 Moody’s credit rating agency downgraded the United States of America’s higher education from stable to negative because 30% of their universities and colleges had weak operating performance due to the impact of COVID-19 (Ozili & Arun, 2020).
- 4.10 Few schools in USA and Canada had the capacity to arrange a distance learning program for students, 15 % in the USA and 13% in Canada (Islam & Doyle, 2020)

4.11 The Northern Ireland suspended all semester tests and examinations due to COVID-19 outbreak (Andersson & Gronlund, 2020)

5. Recommendations for Implementation

- a) The South African Union of Students proposes a mixed methodology of teaching and learning. This will involve both E-Learning and contact learning after the lockdown. This will require thorough screening; testing and social distancing measures to be established.
- b) SAUS recommends the return of students in residences immediately after the lockdown, with restricted movement of students from one residence to another, sanitization of residences, quarantined in their rooms for a period of 21 days before allowed in campus, social distancing and provision of masks to staff and students. We have many students who remained in residences and they are safer than students who stay in overcrowded homes.
- c) Students who prefer to study from home must not be obliged to return to campus as long as they are able to do their school work from the comfort of their homes.
- d) Universities must establish a structured catch-up program in consultation with student leadership to rescue the 2020 academic year while ensuring its integrity;
- e) The Department of Higher Education, Science and Innovation must develop standard agreed e-learning guidelines for the sector in line with what has been provided in 3.2 above.
- f) We recommend the reopening of registration for undergraduate and postgraduate students as there are a number of universities who had not exhausted this process due to various reasons;
- g) The PSET Covid-19 task team must do a risk assessment in line with the spirit of rescuing the 2020 academic year;
- h) We recommend that students are refunded for the period they did not stay in both private and university owned residences;
- i) In order to have a one single and coordinated higher education we discourage universities that are implementing their own approaches outside the pronouncement of the Minister because we are all under

disaster management act, We also encourage the Minister to help with revision of post-school regulations the same way other Ministers such as Transport and small businesses relaxed regulations to ensure higher the 2020 academic year is rescued in line with all the recommendations submitted by students in this document.

- j) Compulsory screening of students upon their return into residences.
- k) Universities must adopt virtual graduation methods for students who are due for the May graduation to graduate at least before end of June.
- l) NSFAS allowances must continue to be paid to students until the conclusion of the academic year.
- m) Cancellation of June examinations to allow universities to adapt to the new conditions and develop a systemic way of virtual assessment criteria and innovative assessment models. However special regulations must be put in place for those who are completing their qualification in June.
- n) Once the Covid-19 pandemic subsided, consider extended learning hours including weekend learning, cancel all remaining recess days, extend academic year to December and introduce summer schools in January and February across all institutions.
- o) Scrapping of academic exclusion for this year so that all students are automatically re-admitted in 2021.

6. Conclusion

The South African Union of Students expresses willingness and commitment to continuous engagement with all stakeholders with an intention to find solution for the higher education sector. It is highly unlikely that the outbreak of COVID-19 would lead to a radical shift from classroom education to online education, but conditions created support the idea of putting systems in place for a future higher education wherein virtual learning is the order of the day. We encourage all students to continue practicing social distancing, avoid handshake, wash your hands with soap, use sanitizers, stay at home, and comply with all the regulations as announced by the National Command Council to reduce the spread of Covid-19. Together we will rescue the 2020 academic year whilst defeating this deadly virus.



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