

# SOUTH AFRICAN UNION OF STUDENTS

## South African Union of Students statement on Coronavirus and implications for public universities



15 March 2020

The South African Union of Students notes with concern the rapid spread of the deadly coronavirus otherwise referred to as covid19 which is rising in the number of medically confirmed cases across the globe and exponentially increasing at an alarming rate in South Africa. To date, 61 cases of the coronavirus disease have been confirmed in the country and these numbers are anticipated to rise in the days, weeks and months to come.

Regrettably, as a Union we have learnt with great concern that among the 61 confirmed cases, one of them is a student at Witwatersrand University which has since prompted the University management to force 350 other additional students who might have been in contact with the student in their lecture into self-quarantine. This virus, which is anticipated to create a dangerous threat to the entire South African Public, has further led some of our universities such as Stellenbosch, Witwatersrand and Rhodes University to suspend upcoming graduation ceremonies at their respective institutions.

While we applaud the swift action taken by these institutions in an attempt to mitigate the spread of the virus, as a Union we are concerned with the lack of urgency afforded to the higher education sector which present a big risk of exposure and transmission. Moreover, the National Disaster declared by President Cyril Ramaphosa presents a grim picture for the nation and, more importantly, speaks directly to the heart of our universities as a microcosm of society. In addition, with an immediate ban of mass gatherings constituting of more than 100 people, as a Union we are concerned that universities, as institutions that house over 1 million students

exceedingly present a greater risk of exposure, transmission as well as a potential outbreak to which we should all be concerned about and act swiftly to mitigate.

As SAUS we reiterate that while we strive to preserve the academic project, the lives of students should never be placed at risk nor gambled on. As a result, the urgency, concern and danger presented by the President, amongst other things, should find expression in institutions of higher learning as one of the primary national key points that drive and sustain economic development and growth for the country.

Given that the covid19 virus is transmitted through everyday human interaction with risk of exposure presented by common human practices such as coughing, sneezing, hand-shakes etc. from infected people; and which the virus understood to be able to survive some time on objects such as tables, chairs, handles, turnstiles, door knobs etc. the risk of placing millions of students into such health hazards should not be something to be taken lightly.

As a precautionary measure, we encourage ALL students to remain at home and call upon Minister Blade Nzimande to Instruct ALL public institutions of higher learning to suspend formal academic activities, test and upcoming graduations within the next 24 hours indefinitely until such a time a detailed consultative plan to respond to the coronavirus disease on our campuses is put in place that ensures that student's health and the health of our poor communities are taken as a serious priority- take lead from Kenya which has suspended all learning in universities and colleges just after 3 cases alone.

Moreover, we urge institutions to be flexible during this period by utilizing alternative means of teaching and learning that do not involve lecture halls and public gatherings of any sort which will place poor students at risk and at a disadvantage to those with particular resources such as cell phones, laptops, Data and so forth.

As SAUS we call upon Universities to mobilize financial resources to ensure increasing sanitizing utilities in their residences, dining halls and across the respective campuses while ensuring that the workers and cleaners too are not exposed to risk of infection. In historically disadvantaged Universities wherein overcrowding in student residences

is a norm we advise universities to assist with means of transporting students' home where necessary until such a time the conditions in which we find ourselves present favourable conditions to resume as normal

In closing, we are pleased that Minister Blade Nzimande has requested an urgent meeting with

The South African Union of Students this coming Tuesday (17 March) to deliberate on an actionable response plan for the sector. As SAUS we encourage students to remain studying in self isolated spaces and to exercise an exaggerated degree of hygiene by constantly washing hands with soap and warm water and avoid public gathering spaces- including libraries and campus.

**Issued by**  
**The South African Union of Students.**

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