

Task team to address Covid-19 response in higher education

Government has established a task team for stakeholders in the post school and education training sector.



Image source: Getty Images

“We have established a Covid-19 Team comprising of Universities South Africa (USAF), South African College Principals Organisation (SACPO), Higher Health and Health Experts to coordinate sector response and collate institutional case management reports,” Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology, Dr Blade Nzimande said.

Addressing a media briefing on Tuesday in Tshwane, the Minister said the team, will be led by Deputy Minister for Higher Education, Science and Technology Buti Manamela.

The department has requested all universities and colleges to complete an updated survey on their information technology capabilities for offering online learning.

“Institutions have been requested to complete the survey by Thursday. The department, together with the Tertiary Education and Research Network of South Africa (TENET), will analyse the survey results on 27 March 2020, and identify any institutions that require immediate assistance to enhance their capability.”

“In the meantime, the South African Institute for Distance Education has met with USAF to assist in mapping out the various tools institutions may be able to use to deliver online learning. [This is] taking into account the different capabilities that different institutions have and the devices students may have access to,” the Minister said.

This work will assist in putting plans in place at an institutional level, for ensuring continued delivery of programmes after the recess that commenced on 18 March 2020.

Earlier this month, Nzimande announced the closure of all higher institutions of learning as part of the country’s bid to combat the spread of Coronavirus (COVID-19).

“As a department we are engaging with all our universities and colleges on pursuing online learning modalities where possible, whilst also looking at the possibility of using readily available study guides for the trimester and semester programmes, and a structured catch-up programme for the annual National Curriculum (vocational) programmes,” said Nzimande at the briefing.

Measures put in place

All institutions of higher learning have implemented an early recess, with students having had to vacate residences by 20 March.

Meanwhile, international students are being treated on a case-by-case basis. However, all students who cannot return home are being accommodated in residences.

“Some universities are allowing students with exceptional circumstances to stay on campus together with international students who cannot vacate. Some universities are assisting students with financial difficulties to get home,” he said.

In addition, National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) allowances are being paid to students.

“Preparations for short to medium strategies, including online study are underway, at most institutions. Research continuity is being put in place at most institutions. Only essential staff are on campus,” the Minister said.

Most academic staff are working from home and only essential service staff are in place on campuses.

Support staff are at work on a rotational basis to limit contact and the spread of the virus.

All universities will assess the situation at the end of the month and make decisions on when students may return to campuses.

Students from China

The Minister further announced that all 76 students who were evacuated from Wuhan in China, have all tested negative for Covid-19.

“They are doing their final tests this weekend, where after they will be reunited with their families,” the Minister said.

The department is working with the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) to compile a list of all South African students abroad who are publicly and privately funded.