Issued: 14 May 2020

RE: Response to DVC's 10 May statement

Dear fellow students,

The SRC was unimpressed by the tone in the recent communique released on behalf of the University by the DVC: Academic & Student Affairs. An SRC instituted campaign has been reduced to mere hooliganism. Following the release of the 3 May letter by the DVC, the SRC released a statement expressing our dissatisfaction with the University's unpreparedness for online learning. As a result, we launched a campaign the following day to encourage more privileged students to stand in solidarity with their underprivileged classmates who cannot access online learning.

We were shocked to learn that the University believed that the #StayOffline campaign was being used to derail the allocation of resources to students. We would like to highlight that specific sentence which reads: "Unfortunately, the negative statements and deliberate attempts by some groups of students and staff to stop online/remote teaching and learning this past week have somewhat delayed our processes and efforts to reach out to students who need Laptops and printed learning materials."

This statement implies that the campaign was directly responsible for delays in distribution when, in fact, this is not the case. This type of language seems to undermine our position as student leaders when we are the legitimate representatives of the entire student body, which we are empowered by the Higher Education Act to represent the constituency that elected us. These claims are a gross misrepresentation of the aims of our campaign, which are to challenge the notion that online learning can take place in the absence of a satisfactory plan to accommodate all students.

At no point did the SRC discourage students from sending their information to relevant university officials in order to acquire resources for online learning. We have been in constant communication with our fellow students about what they need to do to receive resources such as data bundles and laptops.

We have noted that in most of the University's communication, they have expressed that they will embrace a social justice approach that will ensure that "no student will be left behind." Unfortunately, many students have been and will continue to be left behind for the better part of this term (and possibly the year).

We started the campaign because we are not convinced that the University is prepared to implement online learning at this point. Furthermore, we find it irresponsible of the University to start the online academic program while the preparations for its implementation are still taking place. The campaign was also necessitated by the fact that many of our recommendations, which could have improved the situation, were ignored by the University.

We would like to remind the management that much of what they have done so far has gone against some of the principles outlined in the vision and mission of the University. As previously stated, the University's insistence on continuing with the online learning program at such an early stage is detrimental to the quality of education of those students currently without access to it.

The University undertook in their mission, "to acknowledge and be sensitive to the problems created by the legacy of apartheid, to reject all forms of unfair discrimination and to ensure that appropriate corrective measures are employed to redress past imbalances." However, it is now the institution that is cementing the socio-economic privilege of some of its students by continuing with the online learning program despite having admitted that not all students are ready or fully equipped to participate.

On multiple occasions, students have had to perform their poverty to express why the online academic program cannot commence at this point. As underprivileged students have been involuntarily left out of both the orientation and the first week of term, this has created a division within the student population. Students who currently have inadequate resources for online learning will find themselves subjected to a form of second-class learning experience

because they would have been left behind for so long. By continuing with online learning without having concluded plans for it, the University is creating imbalances rather than redressing them.

We firmly believe that if online learning had been slated to start much later, as advised by the Minister of Higher Education, there would have been more time to iron out the details and communicate them on time and effectively to students. We are disappointed by the unpreparedness of the University, and we feel that the institution underrepresented their progress with plans for online learning, leading us to believe that 4 May would be a suitable time to start the program.

The University also undertook "to create a research-based teaching and learning environment that will encourage students to reach their full potential, that is supportive of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and that will produce critical, capable, and skilled graduates who can adapt to changing environments." The whole reason for the campaign is because students from disadvantaged backgrounds haven't been catered for. The University hasn't provided the required support to ensure their involvement in online learning.

We have conveyed the needs of the students in previous statements, and those have largely gone unnoticed. The disadvantaged students who are already behind as it is will now have to overcome more than just their socio-economic condition due to having to catch up with their academics. We appreciate and welcome the information that the Rhodes University Law Faculty has received 16 laptops purchased through the donations made by the law alumni and that they will soon be dispatched to allocated students. Such efforts go a long way in assisting the University in dealing with the challenges of online learning, and we sincerely appreciate the generosity of our alumni. We would also like to encourage other faculties in the University to do the same.

Since plans were implemented to shut down the institution on the 18th March 2020, the SRC has been engaging the university management with some demands we believed would greatly assist the student body in better dealing with challenges that arise from the inconveniences caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. In the continued spirit of proactive leadership, the SRC would like to reflect on the demands we made, which were not

responded to, and to ask for an update on the possibilities or impossibilities of the outstanding demands;

1. Meal refunds should be debited to student accounts for students in residence. We urge the University to use this money to increase the living allowance of NSFAS-funded residence students. As they are not currently in residence and not eating in the dining halls, NSFAS-funded residence students find themselves having to continue their studies on a compromised diet.

2. We urge that the University treat this as a matter of urgency. We call on the university management to engage Makhanda rental agencies, to be lenient with their tenants regarding rent payments for the current month and the coming two months when students will be expected to learn from home. We have noted that there are students who stay off-campus with no bursaries or NSFAS, and they fall within the missing middle category. Some of the guardians of these students are facing "no work no pay" challenges due to the lockdown and cannot pay for their ward's rent; therefore, we ask the University to step in and assist them.

3. The academic program should be suspended until such a time that a feasible plan has been put in place that will accommodate all students. We appreciate the intent behind continuing with the academic program as it is in our best interest as students to finish with the academic year. However, we are not confident that the plans currently in place will assist all of us in achieving this goal.

4. Once the University has decided on a safe and suitable time for students to return, we urge the leadership of the University to communicate effectively with all students via all platforms, including but not limited; email and SMS, at least two weeks before this return date to allow for travel arrangements to be made.

5. Postgraduate students have complained to the SRC about the data allocated to them being insufficient for conducting research and attending classes through video chat. We believe that postgraduate students would do better being on campus would have access to uncapped wi-fi. The few postgraduate residences that are on campus allow students to live in isolation from their fellow students. We would like to appeal to the

University to allow postgraduate students to be part of the first group of students to return to the University.

6. We suggest that once the University reopens tests and exams should be suspended until a practical way can be found to have them written online or done in a class where a small group of students is present at a given time.

7. Once laboratories open, we suggest that students who own or have been allocated laptops work from their rooms instead of going to the Library and Computer Labs. Doing so will reduce the number of students in these facilities and ensure that students without digital devices can use them without risking exposure to the virus.

8. We acknowledge that the Counselling Centre and the Psychology Clinic are now operational during the lockdown. Currently, the Counselling Centre is using tele-counselling as an option, and the clinic is making use of Zoom sessions. We suggest that a live chat (text) option be made available for students to use for sessions at both the Counselling Centre and the clinic as it uses fewer data bundles.

9. As much as the university management has reiterated that Rhodes University remains committed to completing the academic year, our understanding is that Rhodes University fees were calculated to accommodate contact learning and the use of various resources on campus. Since we have currently switched to remote learning for a projected period of three months, we believe that this will see a massive decrease in the University's expenses as far as tuition and residence costs are concerned. We call on the University to update us on a possible fee reduction plan as far as residence and tuition fees are concerned.

10. The SRC has noted that there is a process to assist international students with the amount of up to R99 per month, to be credited to their student fee account, which is being looked into. International students have expressed their dissatisfaction with this, and some have come forward to show us how this amount will not be enough. The SRC proposes that the University have the international fee waivered or reduced to assist international students in covering their data costs.

11. Following the address by the Minister of Higher Education on 3 May 2020 where the Minister stated that all NSFAS funded students will be provided with laptops to assist with online learning, we request the university management to engage the NSFAS office on how this will work and communicate the feedback with all students.

12. Seeing that the Student Fees Office is charging students in need of laptops an amount of R5800 following a payment agreement, the SRC would like to request the University to explain to us what the money raised through the Covid-19 Relief is spent for if it's not spent on providing students with free laptops. We find it to be a social injustice for students who could not afford to purchase laptops in the first place, who probably had to fill in payment plans in order to be allowed to register at Rhodes University this year, to be expected to purchase laptops from the University for a price of R5 800.

13. We propose that the University revisit negotiations with service providers to swap the anytime data and nighttime data bundle allocations. As such, anytime data would then be 20 GB while nighttime data would be 10 GB.

    Many students have complained that the current anytime data allocation of 10 GB, that they use during the day is insufficient. Very few students are likely to stay up during the odd hours of between 12 am to 5 am simply to use the data when much of the educational activity happens during the day. Working during irregular hours can interrupt an individual's sleeping patterns and negatively affect one's mental health. This may have an unfavourable impact on students' overall productivity and increase stress and anxiety, especially considering the amount of work that students are now expected to do.

We have communicated with the University management and urged them to respond to each of these demands. If the event that the University cannot meet these demands, we have requested that they give us reasons why the demands cannot be met and to further communicate this to the student body. The SRC receives many questions from students regarding these issues, and we believe we cannot continue to speak on behalf of the University on decisions made by the University without consultations with the SRC.

The last recommendation was added to the list of demands after council members received numerous queries from the student body. At that point, the letter had already been sent to the university management; the SRC will ensure to urgently communicate this additional recommendation to the University's top leadership.

The SRC will only call off the #StayOffline campaign once the University responds to each of the demand mentioned above and if the University provides the SRC and the student body with a practical and detailed plan for students to catch up with academics or if the University adopts the SRC's recommendations

Yours in leadership
Rhodes SRC