

Issued: 16 Apr. 2020

RE: Response to the VC's 13 April Circular

Dear fellow students,

The SRC has noted with grave concern the VC's circular sent out to students on Monday, 13 April 2020, stating that online learning starts this coming Monday, 20 April 2020. This communication has caused much anxiety, panic, and unease amongst the student body.

We have noted all concerns brought forward on various platforms and have also engaged the University's management on these issues. Upon receipt of the VC's Circular on 13 April 2020, the SRC, through the Academic Councillor, sent an email early on 14 April 2020, to the VC and DVC: Academic and Student Affairs expressing our concerns with the commencement of online learning on 20 April 2020. We are yet to receive a response to this email.

The SRC's stance has always been clear; we are against the continuation of the academic programme until a plan that will accommodate all students has been set in motion. As far as we are aware, such a plan has yet to be implemented. When we were first made aware of some academic departments requesting students to make online submissions during this national lockdown, we communicated with the DVC and VC and made it clear that we reject the continuation of academic activities online until a plan that caters for all students is made. This was followed by the issuing of two statements dated [27](#) and [31 March](#) 2020, and we still maintain our stance.

As the SRC, we are not convinced that the University is adequately prepared for the commencement of online learning on Monday, 20 April 2020, as nothing has been done to bridge the apparent inequalities amongst the student body. We have engaged the University

and urged that they provide us with a clear and detailed plan as to how they will support students with little to no resources.

Postponement of the start of term

We call on the University's management to postpone the start of online teaching and learning to May 2020. This is to allow reasonable time to implement the necessary strategies to ensure that all students have the resources to fully and comfortably participate in online learning.

Internet access

The University has made it clear on multiple occasions that students should improve class attendance, which the SRC has always fully supported. We have also noted that MTN users will only be given 500MB for use per month. Furthermore, online lectures were not mentioned as part of the zero-rated educational services. Many lectures will take place on Zoom, which, along with other video chat platforms, is very expensive to use. 500MB is not likely to last more than a day, let alone the whole month that students are expected to use it for. As students, we will be forced to avoid attending online lectures in order to conserve data bundles, which will be to the detriment of our academic performance.

We are confident that to ensure optimum attendance to classes during this time, the data bundles should be increased to 10GB of monthly data. All students in need of data bundles using all service providers should be given this amount. We need to be given a similar level of resources to those available to us on campus if we will be expected to work in the same manner, if not harder.

We call on the University to renegotiate with MTN to increase the data bundles for students to perform their level best. We also strongly encourage the University to engage with Rain, the mobile data-only service provider that offers unlimited data 24/7 for R479 a month on any 4G enabled device. This will ensure that students have greater access to any additional learning material they need that may not be available on the University's platforms.

The SRC is also aware that there are some international students that are currently outside of the country that cannot be accommodated through South African network providers, and we are looking into alternative solutions to assist them. We urge all international students who have this problem to get in contact with us so we can explore the different ways in which we can be of assistance.

DP Removal and Academic Exclusion

This is the first time that many universities nationwide are venturing into online learning. The university environment, with all its resources, is, for many students, the best place to effectively complete their work. Being away from University and being unfamiliar with remote learning is likely to have an adverse effect on students' academic performance. Some academic programs cannot realistically be completed online, particularly those in the sciences. Postgraduate students whose research output is dependent on the results of their lab work should be given an extension from the December 2020 deadline to February 2020. We, therefore, appeal to the University to be cognisant of this and not implement DP removals and academic exclusions at the end of the current academic year.

Adjustment of the Academic year, Graduation and Meal refunds

Seeing that this pandemic is far from over, we call on the University to adjust the academic calendar to allow students to adjust to online learning as this is a new concept for all of us. Meal refunds should be debited to student accounts for students in residence. These funds may also be redirected to pay for the monthly subscription to Rain and to assist in providing gadgets for students in need. The annual graduation ceremonies are a celebration of our academic excellence as students. Arrangements must be made to celebrate our triumphs, especially after what has been so far, and what may continue to be, a trying year. We suggest that the University set aside preliminary dates in December 2020 to host the graduation ceremonies.

Oppidan Accommodation

Seeing that most students are currently at home and not making use of their rented accommodation, we call on the university management to engage Makhanda rental agencies,

to be lenient with their tenants regarding rent payments for the month of May. 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.

As the SRC, we are initiating a project to ensure that every student is adequately equipped to participate in remote learning. We have put forward an amount of R30 000 to kickstart the project. Upon enquiring about the exact details of the University’s strategy to better equip students for online learning, we were made aware this morning through a forwarded email that the University has already started a COVID-19 Relief Fund. We have therefore decided to donate the R30 000 to this fund. The SRC is committing itself to continue fundraising towards this initiative and urges capable alumni, fellow students, and the general public to contribute to the fund by emailing Development@ru.ac.za.

The SRC will continue to engage with students and university management throughout this period to ensure that the plans being implemented are improved where necessary. We call on students and the University’s leadership to understand that these are trying times for everyone, and we will have to meet each other halfway in ensuring that the academic year is successfully completed, with very little or no casualties.

Yours in leadership
Rhodes SRC

Representing Leaders