

Issued: 30 Apr. 2020

**RE: Update on engagements on online learning**

Dear fellow students,

We hope this communication finds you well. In these trying and unprecedented times, the SRC has been hearing and noting the concerns that are being raised on various platforms and brought to our attention. As students ourselves, we fully understand your concerns and share many of them with you. We are actively engaging with the management of the university as a matter of urgency, considering that the proposed date for the start of term two is fast approaching.

As mentioned in prior communication, the SRC remains committed to continuing the conversation with regards to the best possible strategies for saving the academic year as well as conversations around remote learning. In this regard, communication has been sent to the Director: Student Affairs, the DVC: Academic and Student Affairs, as well as the Vice-Chancellor of the institution.

We have followed up on an email we sent to them on the 16th of April 2020, requesting management to engage the Makhanda rental agencies to be lenient with students being accommodated on their premises, and to be flexible to negotiate with students for an adjusted payment plan during this period.

We understand and appreciate that students on Financial Aid and other Bursaries continue to receive their monthly allowances, and we do encourage those students to continue paying their rental fees. However, we do have a substantial amount of students who are self-funded or find themselves in exceptional circumstances as the Coronavirus pandemic continues to take its toll on our economy. We are still awaiting feedback from management in this regard.

Another issue raised by the SRC is with regard to Student Fees. As much as the Vice-Chancellor has stated before 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 are moving into remote teaching and learning for a projected period of three months, we do believe that this will see a huge decrease in the university's expenses as far as Tuition and Residence costs are concerned. We have strongly urged the university to address this issue as soon as possible.

The SRC acknowledges the receipt of the communication stating that students will be provided with 10GB of anytime data and 20GB of night owl data, and we believe that this assists greatly in addressing some of the concerns we had with regards to online learning and resources. On that note, we once again express our grave concern with the commencement of online learning, which is scheduled to start on the 4th of May. We are yet to receive an update with regards to laptops being loaned to students who are in need of gadgets, from the university.

When we initially requested for postponement of online learning to the 4th of May, one of the many issues we raised was that it is close to impossible doing school work on a mobile phone. This is because of so many reasons, including the fact that some cell phones are unable to load or view certain formats, and not all students own smart devices. As a result, some students have been unable to participate in the online orientation programme which is scheduled to end today, which raises the concern that they still may not be able to participate in online learning scheduled to start on Monday, the 4th of May 2020.

We have once again called on the university's management to advise us on the developments with regards to the distribution of laptops to students who indicated that they need laptops as well as how online learning will continue on Monday, seeing that some students are still without digital devices.

In addition, the SRC has noted that not much is mentioned about how international students will be catered for during this transition to remote learning. Our International Affairs Councillor is in communication with representatives of international societies to find a solution that will accommodate international students. Seeing that international students have

paid an international fee at the beginning of the year, the SRC will propose to the university to have the international fee waived or reduced. In that way, the money can be used by international students to purchase data and/or devices.

As the SRC, we cannot, in good conscience, allow the online academic program to commence on Monday, 4 May 2020, seeing that not all students have been catered for. We are also currently awaiting responses from the university on all the issues that we have raised, including the minutes of the online student body meeting, which have been sent to management, and they have assured us they are taking the document into consideration as they move forward with their discussions on online learning.

We are currently engaging and deliberating on the issues raised in the address by the Minister of Higher Education, Science, and Technology. In the meantime, we would like to highlight a statement from the Minister's speech in which he mentioned that: “within a national framework currently in place, each university will have to put plans in place to ensure its specific programmes, resources, and capacity are adequate to offer various forms of remote and flexible learning from the beginning of June 2020 until a full return to contact teaching and learning is feasible.”

The university can then use the time between this coming Monday and the beginning of June to make provisions for all students to gain access to all resources instead of forcing the continuation of online learning, which has seen a lot of students being left out before we've even started.

We are aware of the panic and anxiety with regards to what is happening in the world at the moment, but we hope you find comfort in the fact that your student leaders are fighting to ensure equal opportunity for all students.

Yours in leadership  
Rhodes SRC