

Issued: 19 May 2020

**RE: The SRC's meeting with university management**

Dear fellow students,

On Sunday, 17th May 2020, at 3 pm, the SRC Executive had a Zoom meeting with the Vice-Chancellor, DVC: Academic Student Affairs and the Director: Student Affairs. The agenda was to discuss the concerns the SRC raised with management through our previous communiqué dated 14 May 2020.

Herewith are the responses from management on the demands raised.

**1. Meal refunds for NSFAS students to increase NSFAS living allowance**

Management stated that the Minister of Higher Education said that no refunds should be considered at this stage as there are still plans to complete the academic year. Furthermore, if students were to be refunded, the refunds would have to go to the state, as this has always been.

The SRC urged the University to consider providing a living allowance for NSFAS residence students because as the R207 allowance is for toiletries, students will still require a proper diet to be able to participate in online learning. The university management will consult NSFAS about the living allowance for NSFAS-funded residence students.

**2. Request for management to communicate with Makhanda Rental Agencies about leniency with students and the welcoming of payment plans**

The Division of Student Affairs urges students to negotiate payment plans with their landlords/ rental agencies, and if that fails, students should contact the DSA for assistance.

Management stated that this is difficult because landlords still have bonds and other expenses to pay, but they will try and negotiate with them as there is no harm in trying. They will appeal to rental agencies and landlords for empathy and understanding.

**3. Suspension of the academic programme until a feasible plan has been put in place to accommodate all students.**

Management says the academic year cannot be suspended, but the University will continue to reach out to students who cannot participate. In addition, not all students filled in the survey, and from the results of the survey, only a few students indicated that they have no devices at all. The results of the survey will also be shared with the SRC. Management will also inquire with academic departments to submit their own academic catch-up plans since they may have to differ from department to department.

**4. The University must communicate with students timeously regarding their return to campus.**

Management said the decision for students to return would be made at a national level, and this will be communicated to students on time. There will be a safe, structured approach for students to return to campus.

**5. Postgraduate students return to campus for research purposes as soon as lockdown regulations are relaxed**

Management is entirely in support of this, and they believe researchers and Masters and Ph.D. students should be allowed to return together with the first group of students as soon as lockdown regulations have been relaxed. If the nature of the students' work does not require physical contact, the students should be allowed to return to campus and work from their residences.

**6. Tests/ Exams to be suspended upon our return to campus until a safer way to conduct such assessments is established**

Management stated that there are already discussions with deans/ HODs on how the University can go on about it. The University is also looking into software they can use to maintain the integrity of exams and tests.

**7. Students with devices to work from their rooms upon our return to campus**

Management is in support of this. They stated that they would require full cooperation from students and staff as it will take one positive case for the government to shut down the campus. Even after lockdown regulations are relaxed, those who can work from home should continue to do so, but different options are being considered.

**8. Counselling Centre Chat Option**

Director of Student Affairs spoke to the Manager of Student Wellness and they will look into this suggestion. They will also need the IT department to assist with that. All students need to note that at the moment, any student can set up an appointment with a psychologist by email. The psychologist will then contact the student and give them an option to choose between a Zoom session or a telephonic session. In a case where the student opts for a telephonic session, the psychologist will make the call.

**9. Fee Reduction/ restructuring**

Management stated that there is a misconception that online learning is cheaper. It is premature to talk refunds at this point. They begged our indulgence and understanding in this regard. The University will look into rebates at the end of the academic year.

**10. International students and data allocation**

Management mentioned that the idea was to give students the equivalent of what is being spent on other students for data, which is R99 per month. All international students who had their South African cellphone number on ROSS have had their data sent to them, even those who left the country without changing their cellphone number on ROSS. The University will contact the International Office to look into the possibility of waiving or reducing the international levy. They will also continue to explore ways to assist international students.

### **11. Laptops for NSFAS students as mentioned by the Minister of Higher Education**

Management acknowledged that the Minister of Higher Education indeed made such an undertaking. They went on further to say that the Minister did not supply a plan to the University on how this would happen. In the interim, student accounts will be credited until the government can settle the amount. If not, next year's book allowance will be used to cover the cost of laptops. The most important thing now is for every student to get a laptop. The University assured the SRC that students would not be blocked from registering for not settling the cost of the laptop next year. The payment plan for laptops is over a year, so they are only expected to settle the costs in May next year. So no one will be stopped from registering because they haven't paid for the laptop.

### **12. What are the funds raised through the COVID-19 relief fund go if students have to pay for laptops?**

Management gave an update that so far, the money used to purchase laptops is way more than what the University has raised. It is important to note that students will still face hardships as a result of Covid-19, and these funds will be used to assist them. The qualities we need in leaders at this time are agility, flexibility, and resilience.

### **13. Request for the data bundles to be swapped to 20GB day data and 10GB nighttime data.**

Management said mobile network providers are likely to say no as they also want to make profits during this time, and this provision is the same for all other Universities.

With regards to laptops, management gave an update that from the survey conducted, about 1700 students indicated that they needed laptops. The university management notified us they had bought 1500 laptops so far. The Finance Division sent out emails to 1250 students (NSFAS and middle-class undergraduate students) enquiring if they would like to enter into a loan agreement for a laptop, and only 600 students replied, "yes." They also indicated that they tried to reach some students, but their details on ROSS were not updated (numbers and addresses were wrong), and so those students could not be reached. They will continue trying to reach everyone.

So far, 1900 teaching and learning materials have been prepared and are ready to be dispatched to students. DVC: Academic and Student Affairs also provided clarity that the University is yet to communicate the date of commencement of summative assessments. She also stated that Academics have to be understanding and accommodating. For now, assessments are only for tracking progress, and assessments cannot contribute towards a student's final mark.

The SRC would like to thank all of the students who heeded our call stand in solidarity with their fellow students by supporting #StayOffline campaign, as it has borne us the fruits we sought to achieve. However, as many of our demands have been met (or addressed), we have decided to call off the campaign. The SRC is satisfied that the plans that are currently underway will make online learning more equal.

The SRC is willing and available to assist our fellow students with any challenges you may face while transitioning to online learning. These are trying times for both students and staff, and we urge everyone to practice resilience and work together in realising a smooth transition to online learning.

Yours in leadership  
Rhodes SRC

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