



Education Digest

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The COVID-19 Lockdown and Tertiary Education

The Coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak has forced many nations to take the difficult decision of closing off all contact with the outside world. As a result, many sectors including schools and institutions of higher education learning have been forced to take an early recess.

Early recess

With higher education institutions having hundreds of thousands of students moving around campuses on a daily basis, the Minister of Higher Education, Blade Nzimande, called for an 'early recess' with effect from 18 March to 15 April, after consulting all the relevant stakeholders. This meeting formed part of the government's consultations following President Cyril Ramaphosa's announcement on measures to combat the Covid-19 pandemic by slowing down the spread of the virus through non-pharmaceutical means such as social distancing and self-isolation. All higher learning institutions adhered to the call in the interests of the safety of students, staff and workers.

<https://www.devdiscourse.com/article/education/943332-higher-institutions-to-close-for-early-recess-from-18-march>

<https://citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/news-update/2255382/covid-19-nelson-mandela-university-suspends-classes/>

<https://allafrica.com/stories/202003170563.html>

Online learning (including Skype lessons)

Universities have implemented measures to ensure that institutional activities will continue during this period, including postgraduate and research work. Institutions have implemented digital and online methodologies for teaching and learning to support the academic programme. Some institutional arrangements have also included accommodation arrangements for students and leave arrangements for workers.

<https://mg.co.za/article/2020-03-17-learning-in-the-time-of-covid-19/>

Online graduation ceremonies

The University of the Western Cape conducted its autumn graduation season online and other institutions have sent students digital copies of their degrees to ensure they are not delayed in seeking employment. However, many have argued that graduation ceremonies should rather be postponed until the pandemic has subsided. These occasions are moments of pride and celebration for students

– many of whom are the first to be graduates in their families – and for their relations. The hope is thus that institutions will reconsider having a physical celebration of this memorable occasion in due course.

<https://www.msn.com/en-za/news/national/universities-cancel-graduation-ceremonies-in-response-to-covid-19-pandemic/ar-BB11gJSC>

<https://www.uwc.ac.za/uwconline/COVID-19/News/Pages/UWC%E2%80%99s-pioneering-virtual-graduation.aspx>

Other factors to be considered

This recess has changed the trajectory for those students who would not have gone home for the short first term recess as originally planned. Many who were relying on using the library and campus WiFi to catch up on work and do their assignments will be negatively affected by the lockdown. Lack of access to technology or fast, reliable internet access/connectivity will prevent students from submitting their work and completing online tests. This is especially concerning for students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and who do not have access to laptops or smart phones to complete their online material. To aid in slowing the transmission of Covid-19, hundreds of municipal libraries have temporarily closed their doors as well, increasing the difficulty of keeping up with distance learning.

The lockdown was a necessary step that the country needed to take in order to slow down the spread of the virus. However, many students will suffer when returning to campuses, especially those who were unable to access the internet to continue distance learning during this lockdown. This will in turn affect their mental health and wellness, and may potentially increase the number of students suffering from depression and anxiety. Academic performance and pass rates will likely be affected.

<https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-03-17-covid-19-uct-arranges-student-allowances-as-more-universities-shut/>

<https://www.eafinder.com/za/updates-on-mut-closure-and-opening-dates/>

<https://www.groundup.org.za/article/covid-19-universities-across-country-close/>

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