

Final year students to return to varsity under Level 3, free data

Final year students and those graduating in 2020 may return to campus under Level 3 lockdown.



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Briefing the media on measures in response to Covid-19, the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, Dr Blade Nzimande, said under Level 3 which is still to be announced, a maximum of 33% of the students will be allowed to return to campuses, delivery sites and residences.

He told the media this is on condition that the tertiary institutions are in line with the health and safety protocols as directed by the department.

Another group of students free to return to university once the country is downgraded from Level 4 include the final year and postgraduate students who require access to laboratories, technical equipment, data, connectivity and access to the residence and private accommodation.

“Students in all years of study that require clinical training in their programmes, provided that the clinical training platforms have sufficient space and can accommodate them while adhering to the safety protocols,” he explained.

He said a two to three weeks period would be given after the Level 3 announcement depending on the readiness and capacity of each institution.

“Should Level 3 be announced to begin on 15 June, then students would be recalled to start two to three weeks thereafter. In other words, a period of two to three weeks will be given to allow students to travel back to their campuses and institutions to ensure that the campuses are effectively prepared for the return.”

The Minister said he would publish guidelines in terms of the Disaster Management Act to permit such travel that will be issued by institutions.

“It is critical that we adhere to these criteria to ensure that campuses are ready for students to safely return, and the effective health screening, cleaning protocols are in place to keep everyone safe.”

President Cyril Ramaphosa is currently in consultations with different stakeholders, as the country gets ready to move from Level 4 to Level 3 of the national lockdown.

Meanwhile, Nzimande said all the other students would be supported through remote multimodal teaching, learning and assessment until they can return to campus.

“It is recognised that some institutions may identify other groups of students in line with their particular contexts. However, any deviation from these criteria must be approved by my department and must fall within a maximum of 33% of the student population.”

He acknowledged Covid-19 has disrupted the 2020 academic year but said they were determined to salvage what is left of it while saving lives.

“I would like to reiterate that our sector’s response to Covid-19 is guided by measures announced by the National Command Council (NCC) and approved by Cabinet,” he added.

Free data for struggling students

Nzimande recognised that the cost of connectivity remains a huge barrier for students who want to use the digital learning mode as part of the multimodal and remote learning.

However, he said they have already struck a deal with all network providers and mobile network operators to have zero-rated educational content sites of the public universities, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and Community Education and Training (CET) Colleges, including Agricultural and Nursing Colleges.

“Zero-rating means that access to institutional websites will be free, although some of the embedded content like YouTube and videos will be charged for,” he explained.

He said they are now working on making “Educational Data Bundles” available to all National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) students in universities and TVET Colleges that they can use to pay for additional content not covered through the zero-rating.

“I am pleased to announce that we have successfully negotiated with all mobile network operators very favourable rates for our NSFAS students, including the Funza Lushaka students who will receive 10GB daytime and 20GB night-time data for three months, starting from 1 June till the end of August, as subsidised by government.”

The department will then give detailed information on how to access these offers.

However, government is currently not in a position to subsidise students who fall within the so-called “missing middle”

category and those who study in private institutions.

“We, however, appeal to mobile network operators to work with institutions to also offer affordable packages to such students. I am however working towards the establishment of an affordable higher education loan scheme involving the private sector.”

He has urged NSFAS and the Funza Lushaka students to register their cellphone numbers with their respective institutions.

“We advise that during this period, they must also not change their sim-cards so as to enable network operators, through their institutions, to load data to their devices.”

Nzimande has also stressed that this data must be only used for educational purposes.

The department has also made free digital content available specifically to TVET College students through the DHET website, the National Open Learning System (NOLS) of the department, institutional websites and other sites, where students can find digital materials which will assist them in their learning and preparation for exams.

“I, therefore, call upon all our TVET students to visit these sites and see for themselves the myriad of content available to assist them.”

He said universities will also be delivering paper-based teaching and learning materials to students who do not have the resources to engage electronically or online.

The department is also working around the clock to ensure NSFAS students have access to laptops.

Level 4 (Started 1 May 2020)

Under level 4, medical students have been returning to clinical training platforms from 11 May, and other final students in other programmes requiring clinical training will begin returning from 1 June 2020.

“All other students are supported through remote multimodal teaching, learning and assessment until they can return to campus.”

Level 2

Nzimande said when a district moves to level 2 of the strategy, then the reintegration of the next group of students to return to contact tuition on campuses located in that district will take place according to the following criteria.

“Once again, a two week period will be given to allow students to travel back to their campuses and for institutions to ensure that the campuses are effectively prepared for the reintegration.”

The department said a maximum of 66% of the student population will return to campus for teaching, learning and assessment in line with the following criteria under this level.

The group will include students in all years of study who require laboratory and technical equipment to complete the academic year, students in all years of study who require practical placements, experiential and workplace-based learning to complete the academic year provided the workplaces and platforms are open and prepared.

First-year students in all undergraduate programmes will also go back.

“Again, institutions may also consider selected return of other categories of students to residences who may face extreme difficulties in their home learning environments provided that the above categories are prioritized, and all safety and

logistical requirements are met.”

Level 1

In the same way, when Level 1 is announced, a two-week period will be given in order for students to travel back to their campuses and for institutions to ensure that the campuses are effectively prepared for the reintegration.

All students should return to campus.

“We are therefore going to require the strictest enforcement of physical distancing and health protocols,” he said, adding that guidelines will be outlined in the Government Gazette.

The department has facilitated the training of almost 17,750 frontline health workers, the leadership and membership of trade unions, and shop stewards on dealing with Covid-19.

TVET Colleges

The department has drawn a tentative academic calendar for TVET Colleges pending any new announcements on the different levels of the lockdown by the President.

In terms of the tentative calendar, the following return dates apply:

NATED Trimester (Engineering) students

- N6 & N3: 10 June
- N5 & N2: 15 June
- N4 & N1: 22 June

NATED Semester (Business Studies) students

- N6: 25 June
- N5: 29 June
- N4: 06 July

NC (V) students

- Level 4: 13 July
- Level 3: 20 July
- Level 2: 27 July

Community education and training

With regards to the CET College system preparation for the return of students and staff to colleges and community learning centres, he said the department continues to engage with a variety of stakeholders including labour and churches to strengthen the capacity of the system.

“Guided by the principle to save lives and the academic year, the CET colleges will spend the rest of May 2020 preparing the central offices and the learning centres to be ready for the safe return of staff and students.”

Subject to the readiness of the colleges and centre, the following are the dates for the return of different categories of staff to their workstations:

- 25 May 2020: Principals, Deputy Principals and Supply Chain Management staff.
- 1 June 2020: Centre managers.
- 8 June 2020: all Lecturers.
- 17 June for students registered for General Education Training Certificate, Senior Certificate as well National Occupational Certificates qualifications or part-qualifications.

The return of Adult Education and Training (AET) Levels 1 to 3 students will be synchronised with the return of learners in the lower grades in the public schools.

“In the unfortunate event that some learning sites are located in districts and metros that remain on lockdown Level 4 such learning sites shall be closed or remain closed.”

He said affected student registered for General Education and Training Certificate, Senior Certificate, National Occupational Certificates shall only get an opportunity to sit for the examination in May/June 2021 to enable them to complete the 2020 academic year.

Sector education and training authorities

Nzimande said SETAs are currently engaging the employers and skills development institutions in public and private regarding the return of learners.

“We are all aware that under Risk-Adjusted Strategy Alert Level 4, there is a limited number of employees who can return to the workplaces, however, I would like to make a call to all employers, both in the public and private sectors even during Alert Level 4, to turn their workplaces into training spaces. This also goes beyond this level,” he pleaded.

Remote multi-modal teaching and learning plans

Nzimande said all public universities have developed detailed strategies for remote multimodal teaching and learning during the period of the current lockdown.

“Institutions have developed their detailed institutional plans, as each institution is unique and we cannot follow a 'one size fits all' approach,” he said.

The department is working with institutions and committed to ensuring that all students are given a fair opportunity to complete the academic year 2020.

“University Teaching, Learning, Assessment and Campus Readiness Plans have been submitted to the department along with a detailed costing of the additional funding required to implement them,” he said, adding that they are currently reviewing them.