



22 October 2020

Public universities to jointly curb COVID-19-risky student behaviour on campuses

The Board of Directors of Universities South Africa (USAf) has noted with grave concern, reports of reckless student behaviour on campuses since South Africa relaxed the national lockdown to Levels 2 and 1, respectively. Noting that COVID-19 remains alive and active in this country, as evidenced by over 1,000 new cases being reported daily, nationally, the vice-chancellors of all 26 public universities have cautioned students at their institutions to keep this in mind in their day-to-day behaviour on campuses and in residences.

At the last ordinary (and virtual) sitting for 2020 on Tuesday, the USAf Board noted with utmost concern, reports of students mingling recklessly; throwing parties within residences and visiting night clubs with not much regard for the safety protocols that their institutions had put in place. In addition to the standards of behaviour adopted by all public universities at the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020, institutions set additional safety protocols and communicated them widely, as they welcomed students back on campuses, recently.

Following the meeting on Tuesday, fresh reports of rising numbers of COVID-19 infections in students on the East London campuses of the University of Fort Hare and Walter Sisulu University in the Eastern Cape have heightened fears in the USAf Board, that students are not heeding the call to uphold the safety protocols widely communicated across the system. The two institutions have confirmed that on the 3rd, 10th and 17th October, some of their students attended parties which were hosted in clubs and taverns in the Quigney neighbourhood in East London. Some students have confirmed that there was non-compliance with Covid-19 health and safety protocols during the events, which were attended by as many as 300 patrons.

It is no surprise, therefore, that within a week of those incidents, Fort Hare recorded 33 cases, mostly among the Nursing Science students. Yesterday, that number increased by 26, this time including students from Law and Management and Commerce faculties. Furthermore, additional other institutions were forced to activate quarantine facilities when students developed symptoms of COVID-19. The vice-chancellors of all 26 public universities take this in serious light.

“How do we prevent our students from turning universities into seed sites for a new wave of COVID-19 outbreaks?” Professor Ahmed Bawa, Chief Executive Officer and a Member of USAf’s Board, asked his peers on Tuesday. The Fort Hare and Walter Sisulu cases have since confirmed a real threat of new COVID-19 outbreaks starting in university residences. The USAf Board expressed concern that students headed home for a mid-term break, shortly, could transfer the virus to unsuspecting family members in their own communities.

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A social compact in development

These reports emerge amidst a joint effort between USAf, the South African Association of Senior Student Professions (SASSAP) Higher Health and the South African Union of Students, to develop a social compact to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 in institutions of higher education. The compact aims to advocate for and reinforce behavioural protocols such as safe hygiene, wearing masks and social distancing that universities have championed since the pandemic broke out in South Africa in March. A draft of this compact will be circulated to all campuses in the near future.

Since August, 2020, universities have been re-admitting controlled student numbers on campuses. While the initial attempt was to enable specific categories of students to catch up with learning, some universities have shifted to a 100% return of students, albeit with serious safety concerns when social distancing cannot be guaranteed. USAf has since engaged the Department of Higher Education and Training on the matter, and further guidelines are awaited in this regard.

“Meanwhile, scientists have been predicting a second wave of COVID-19 that might break out, nationally, from February / March 2021,” Professor Bawa says, further emphasising that students’ reckless behaviour could see that wave advancing even much earlier. Warning that second-wave outbreaks in parts of Europe had proven to be much worse than the initial outbreaks, according to scientific assessments, Professor Bawa said that “every single life lost to COVID-19 has been one life too many. We cannot afford to lose any more teaching and learning days to student recklessness. Neither can we afford to sink South Africa into further loss of precious lives and into further deterioration of our already grim economy.”

Vice-Chancellors reached a consensus to work jointly as a sector in addressing this issue.

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