

WITS SWITCHES TO REMOTE ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING FROM 20 APRIL 2020

Dear Colleagues and Students

We are living through an unprecedented era which has tremendous implications for humanity and for us as the Wits community.

We know that through our collective efforts we can stave off the coronavirus, and that through physical distancing, testing and quarantining, we can flatten the curve and eventually overcome the disease. But what we do not know, is exactly how long this will take and the exact nature of the resources that will be required.

Our collective challenges

As the Wits community, we are thus left with some difficult options – wait out the pandemic (and potentially lose the 2020 academic year) or switch to emergency remote teaching and learning alongside a range of other contingency and continuity plans. After consultation with our various constituencies, we have opted for the latter.

We are cognisant of the tremendous effort that has been expended by academics and professional and administrative staff in recent weeks, who have tirelessly prepared online material, who have learnt to switch between pedagogies, and who now have a better understanding of our learning management systems.

At the same time, we are acutely aware of the anxiety and uncertainty that this mode of learning presents for both our colleagues and students. The world as we know it is in flux, and it will take our collective courage, dexterity and commitment to fend off the effects of this pandemic and to adapt to new ways of teaching and learning.

We are aware that the playing field is uneven and that whilst many in society and our community enjoy greater levels of privilege, the consequences of the pandemic have illuminated and amplified the existing inequalities in our society – with the poor, marginal, precarious and under-resourced disproportionately experiencing its fallout. We understand that our emergency remote teaching and learning plan has to take into consideration the different learning environments of our students and their access to learning resources, appropriate devices and data.

Our success is dependent on how we respond as a community – our Senior Executive Team members have to be agile enough to ensure that the requisite plans and resources are in place to switch to the emergency remote teaching and learning programme. Our Deans, Heads of School, academics and professional and administrative staff have shown that they are able to adapt to a changing environment and are going beyond the call of duty to ensure student success. Our students will have to exercise their own agency and will have to make an extraordinary effort to adapt to remote online learning with the requisite support from faculties, particularly over the next few months. We acknowledge the importance of the University to provide support but it is also important for our students to develop their own agency to overcome the challenges that confront us today.

Wits re-opens online on 20 April 2020

The next few days (15-19 April 2020) will be used to transition to the online environment with the University officially opening for the second block on 20 April 2020. The almanac has been revised but is dependent on how the crisis unfolds in the months ahead. To be clear, the University is not transitioning to a permanent online modality for all courses, nor are we becoming a correspondence institution. We are instituting an emergency remote teaching and learning programme as one measure that will help us to minimise the time lost in the academic

project.

We are clear that the emergency remote teaching programme will not serve as a comprehensive solution to our current challenges. There are specific disciplines that may be patient-based, laboratory-based, studio-based or involve creative practices that cannot be undertaken online. In these instances, we will have to explore high intensity immersion classes when we resume contact teaching, resequencing the academic year to allow for theory to be taught online upfront followed by the practical and laboratory-based components later in the year, and perhaps even recalibrate the almanac.

Access to devices, data and learning resources

Multiple surveys across the institution have revealed that between 10% and 15% of students do not have access to appropriate computing devices, adequate access to data or conducive learning environments. To this end, we are putting in place the following measures to ensure that the majority of students are able to learn remotely:

1. Wits has established a Mobile Computing Bank which will enable qualifying students who do not have access to appropriate mobile learning devices to loan basic devices from the Bank. These basic computing devices will be suitable for educational purposes and will be pre-loaded with the required learning resources before being delivered via the South African Post Office to students who absolutely need them. The cost of the device will be added to students' fee accounts and will be reversed if the device is returned in good order at the end of the 2020 academic year. The students most in need will be prioritised when devices are allocated.
2. The University has finalised an agreement with four telecommunications service providers: Telkom, MTN, Vodacom and Cell C to zero-rate Wits' library and learning management sites from 15 April 2020. The full list of zero-rated sites is available via this link: <https://www.wits.ac.za/mywits/zero-rated-data-to-students-and-applicants/> We are working through Universities South Africa to reach agreement with telecommunications service providers to ensure that other products and sites like Microsoft Teams, Zoom and other learning sites are either zero-rated or reverse billed to the University. These sites may have to be accessed via the Wits VPN. Negotiations are underway and we will keep the University informed of these matters in the coming days.
3. In cases where students do not have access to any device or data, other options are being explored, including the possibility of using the South African Post Office to deliver paper-based material to our students. Additional support will be made available for students when contact teaching resumes, and particularly for students who will have had difficulty in transitioning to online learning. It may be necessary for face-to-face lectures to be extended through the September and December vacation breaks and for some cohorts, to extend the academic programme into 2021.

Students who have queries related to the academic programme should contact their respective schools. Students who do not have access to adequate mobile computing devices and cannot secure them elsewhere, should contact the following Faculty representatives:

Commerce, Law and Management: Tshepiso.Maleswena@wits.ac.za

Engineering and the Built Environment: FacultyRegistrar.EBE@wits.ac.za

Health Sciences: Henda.VanDerWalt@wits.ac.za or Morne.Greyling@wits.ac.za

Humanities: help.humanities@wits.ac.za

Science: SSSC.Science@wits.ac.za

Postgraduate research

As per the [communique sent to all postgraduate students](#) on the 6th of April 2020, those students pursuing their Masters or PhD degrees should engage directly with their supervisors to ensure that their research continues. A list of the library sites that have been zero-rated has already been shared with all postgraduate students. In cases where patient-based, studio-based or laboratory-based work is required, these matters should be discussed with the supervisor, Head of School and/or Dean of the respective Faculty.

Conclusion

The next few weeks are going to be challenging for us as a country and as a University. We have no choice but to stand strong in order to overcome this common invisible enemy. We should galvanise our resources to achieve one common goal – to see our students succeed and complete the academic year, despite the inequalities that pervade our society. In so doing, we will develop the high level skills to rebuild our country and produce the problem-posers and problem-solvers needed to tackle the complex problems that confront our society.

We will emerge from this crisis – stronger and more resilient than ever. This is a complex challenge that will require multiple responses from all of us. Let us use this time to find each other and to work together towards a common goal for our students, our staff and our common humanity.

Keep healthy and stay safe.

SENIOR EXECUTIVE TEAM

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