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Media Statement

For immediate release

23 March 2021

“National Universities shutdown” - Rhodes University Update

Various departments of the University were hard at work over the long weekend in an endeavor to cover accumulated backlogs in critical areas of operation. The backlogs include the registration of some first time entering students (FTENs), processing of students allowances, distribution of laptops for new students and cleaning of students’ residences. The following update relates to some of the work completed and/or in progress:

Allowances

Oppidan students

Allowances to NSFAS Oppidan students (students not living at our residences) were paid out on 15 March. More than 80% of students received payments. Payments to students who have not submitted a lease agreement or who registered after 15 March are still in process. All cleared payments are scheduled for payment this week.

Unregistered Oppidan students are encouraged to register soon and also submit their lease agreements and other required documents to the Financial Aid office at finaid@ru.ac.za. This will enable the relevant departments to attend to their payment requirements.

Living allowances commence in the month that the academic year starts. This year it is March. A double allowance payment, therefore, is/will be made to accommodate required deposits. In terms of the NSFAS, the student is responsible for paying his/her own deposit. It is a Rhodes University practise in good faith to advance students the deposit.

NSFAS-funded students in University residences

Payments of incidental allowances will proceed as soon as staff are able to access their workspaces this week. Payments in this regard will include FTENs who are funded by NSFAS. All qualifying students are encouraged to submit their bank details in order to facilitate these payments.

Book allowances

The official guidelines from NSFAS in this regard have not yet been received. The University is advancing the amount needed for students who need to purchase laptops so that they can continue with their studies by accessing online materials while we await the NSFAS directives. The University expects to receive its first tranche of money from NSFAS only in April. All payments to NSFAS students to date are from the University's own limited resources trusting that NSFAS will release the funds sooner rather than later.

NSFAS & Registration

Students who have not been cleared by NSFAS have had to provide their own payment plans. All students who were in temporary accommodation have had their registration resolved. Two cases that involve extraordinary personal circumstances of the relevant students are not included here.

A number of students whose applications for funding were turned down by NSFAS have submitted appeals. Ultimately, this process involves the student and NSFAS. The University does not make decisions about NSFAS funding. The University is informed of outcomes of appeals by NSFAS once the decision is made.

Accreditation of student accommodation

Accreditation of accommodation is a Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) requirement. It addresses the need for students to be accommodated in spaces that are conducive to living and learning. Accreditation seeks to ensure compliance with specific minimum standards. The University also has a policy that was approved in November 2020 to guide the implementation of the accreditation processes.

Since the accreditation process is still incomplete, students are expected to submit their lease agreements to effect the vetting of the specific accommodation they wish to take up.

Phased return of students to campus

Not all returning students have been invited back to campus. The return of students is being undertaken in a phased approach, with an eye on the numbers of COVID-19 infections and the limited health facilities in Makhanda. Students come to campus only on invitation. Students who choose to use Makhanda as their primary home are, of course, not prevented from doing so but are still subject to the phased return approach to campus.

Academic activities

Online teaching and learning is progressing well. The level of student participation is high. It has been clearly communicated to the Rhodes University community that assessment of learning in the form of assignments and tests that are meant for the purposes of awarding a class mark will not take place or be due until after 26 March. This is to ensure that students who register late are not disadvantaged.

When the University says that ‘no student should be left behind’, this does not mean that every student should be at the same starting point on the first day. It means we should have in place mechanisms to ensure that students are not negatively impacted if they are unable to start on day one through no fault of their own. Students will be assisted by their lecturers and tutors to catch up. With the COVID-19 pandemic still a threat, it is strategic and critical that we make use of every learning opportunity we have to lessen the damage of possible third and fourth waves of the pandemic. It is also the practice at Rhodes University that students are permitted to change courses for up to two weeks after the start of term. This common practice at the University accommodates students to settle into a course. FTENs thus still have the period up to the end of March to be assimilated into courses at the institution. The University will provide academic assistance to all students who, for one reason or another beyond their control, are unable to start the academic year immediately.

Laptops for students’ online connectivity

The University has taken advance delivery of enough laptops for all FTEN students who require them to receive them as soon as their registration is completed. The distribution of laptops could not proceed in the past week due to lack of access to the University by the relevant staff. The distribution of laptops will continue as soon as possible. In the meantime, all registered students have had access to the University network using their existing mobile devices and to the general computer laboratories.

International students

International students who are in the country and who are not invited back to campus at this stage are receiving data bundles for national mobile carriers. Despite many efforts, the same kind of agreements with mobile carriers in other countries proved impossible. As a contingency plan, international students who are outside of the country and unable to provide their own data to access learning materials are being invited back onto the campus, and students from several countries who are in this situation have already received their permits. International students in this situation should contact the International Office. To date, 227 international students have been issued permits to return to the campus.

Cleaning, hygiene and catering services

Housekeeping and Food Service returned to campus over the weekend to clean and sanitise areas in the residences, including bathrooms, toilets, common spaces, and dining halls. All bathrooms, storerooms were topped up with toilet paper, sanitisers and cleaning chemicals.

Normal operations will be restored as soon as possible.

The leadership of the University continues to engage with the SRC on matters of mutual concern.

ENDS

Issued on behalf of Rhodes University by Communications and Advancement Division.