

Covid-19: Inter-university research task force launched

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Institutions of higher learning have united into forming a high-level research coordination task force on Covid-19 meant to assist the ministry of health in its response to the global pandemic.

The University of Namibia vice chancellor Kenneth Matengu said the task force will aim to generate evidence on which sectors of the economy will be most severely hit by the pandemic and make actionable recommendations to government and the private sector.

Sectors to be considered will include tourism, hospitality, long distance transport, construction, manufacturing, non-food retail or wholesalers, self-employed businesses and the informal sector. Matengu said as a higher education sector responsible for research, technology and innovation, the involvement of the task force would be multi-pronged, with a well focused and targeted empirical research geared towards innovative solutions to mitigate against the adverse effects of Covid-19.

On the thematic research areas, Matengu noted the task force will consider ways in which rapid tests and diagnostics for early detection and containment can be enhanced, including mass screening of Covid-19. Furthermore, it aims to carry out research targeting relevant aspects of virus diagnostics. In this regard, two teams have been formed to look at Covid-19 testing or screening.

The task force will also examine how data coding can be used to improve and fast track Covid-19 tracing and better case management. Use of technology or smartphones to track primary cases and assist with tracking suspected cases of unintended exposure would be incorporated.

Equally, Matengu said the committee would analyse and recommend how to communicate information on the pandemic, to lead to behaviour change while considering cultural norms, values and identity.

“It was observed that someone with expertise in medical anthropology and or behaviour change should head this thematic research area. The team will be headed by Dr Rosa Persendt from Unam,” Matengu said.

It will also determine Namibian plant-based natural products based on scientific research and or indigenous knowledge that could be developed to improve people’s immune systems and provide a road map for their development.

The research committee will also determine the relationship between Covid-19 susceptibility or resistance and the A-B-O blood groups or other indicators such as gender and age within the Namibian context and identify possible early warning indicators. Another task is to recommend improved water and sanitary facilities such as hands-free water dispensers and hands-free soap dispensers and protective accessories that can be manufactured locally for use in various communities.

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