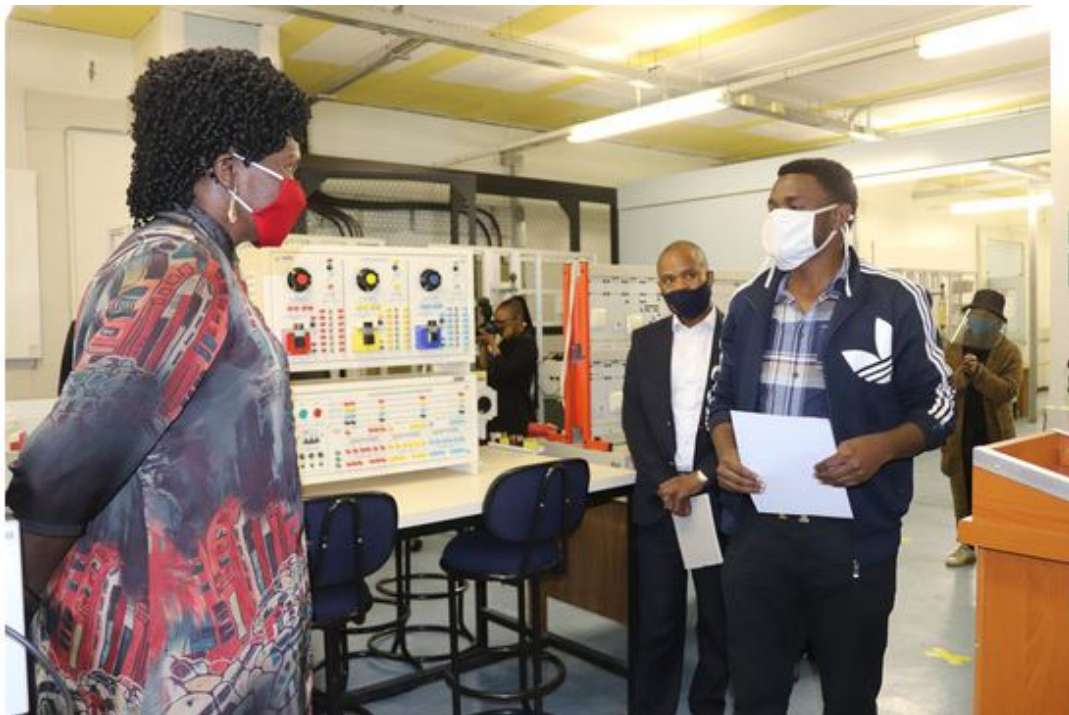


Stringent guidelines instigated

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About 1 496 students have returned to campus, while eight students have dropped out of the Namibia University of Science and Technology over the last five months.

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Justicia Shipena

After the long, unplanned and unforeseen months disruption to the 2020 academic calendar, some students at the Namibia University of Science and Technology (Nust) have returned to campus for face-to-face lessons.

According to Nust acting vice chancellor Andrew Niikondo, during phase one to three of the coronavirus lockdown, Nust implemented remote teaching and learning across all programmes, but due to various reasons, some learners could not participate in remote learning.

“The transition of the country to stage four presented Nust an opportunity to address a major problem for students who could not attend online classes due to challenges ranging from a lack of devices to connectivity limitations,” he said.

Niikondo added that the university has made its campus and 10 regional centres ready to start receiving students for face-to-face classes and laboratory work, however, due to the stringent nature of stage four guidelines and the complexity of timetabling, not all face-to-face sessions kicked off in June.

“We adopted a phased return approach whereby students returned in groups to allow them to cope better. Within this phased returned approach, the next group returned last Monday,” he said.

Option to defer

Delvaline Möwes, acting deputy vice chancellor for academics, said 22% of the student body, which is about 2 800 students, did not have access to data or devices and could not access remote teaching and learning since it resumed in May.

Möwes added that with the approval of council, the institution gave students the option to defer their studies and gave them 75% credit.

“We were very sceptical in this progress and thought what if all students cancel? But our students came to the table and many of them took part in their studies because they did not want to lose out on a year,” she said.

Möwes said this resulted in only 9%, which is 1104 students, cancelling individual subjects, while only eight students dropped out.

Health and safety protocols

Speaking on the health and safety protocols, Morné du Toit, deputy vice chancellor of administration and finance, said apart from maintaining good hygiene and encouraging social distancing, the institution has implemented a monitoring system.

“Monitoring is a vital response plan to ensure that everyone is following directives, hence we put up surveillance equipment on high-risk areas on campus,” he said.

Du Toit said they have also implemented a hierarchy of controls that consists of five pillars, namely elimination, substitution, engineering, administrative controls and personal protective equipment.

“We are close to having an application at the gates whereby student cards will be scanned and that will be the signing of the register instead of the pen and paper currently used,” he said.

Living on campus

Director of student services at Nust, Donovan Zealand, said guidelines are put in place for campus residences that house nearly 300 students.

“We have launched a number of campaigns promoting good hygiene and etiquette in terms of sneezing and coughing including both students and dining hall staff,” he said.

Zealand said the institution has also developed a comprehensive communication plan. “We have established a Nust Covid-19 hotline where students and staff members can report their concerns,” he said.

He added that they have imposed movement restrictions and students signed an agreement which includes prohibition of leaving residences and moving off campus.

“Additionally, we have identified different rooms in residences that will be used for isolation for those students who might fall sick. Strict control has been established and thus non-essential visitors will not be permitted in the residences,” he said.

Zealand further said Hotel Kleines Heim has been identified to be used as a quarantine facility.

Dining halls have been closed down completely and students will have meals on a takeaway basis, he said.

Education pathways post corona

Speaking during the inspection of the campus, higher education minister Itah Kandji-Murangi said universities are now forced into catch-up mode, adding that the government is yet to be informed by the leadership of these streams on what is salvageable and what is not as well as the way forward for next year.

“This we cannot do in silos, but rather a small but inclusive technical committee will be constituted to assess and lead the post-Covid educational pathways response.”

Kandji-Murangi added that the two ministries of education will announce members of these important group, which among many things will look into progression between streams, taking into consideration the impact of Covid-19.

“Whatever proposal they come up with will be presented to Cabinet,” she said.

She applauded the Nust staff for making teaching and learning possible for students during the global pandemic.

“I am happy that you came around and made things happen online for your students. The space you operate in should always be driven by putting the Namibian youth’s educational interests first,” she said.

Kandji-Murangi further added that should there be areas Nust staff members lack capacity in, such as the application of technological devices for teaching or skill gaps in the broader field of e-learning facilitation, the organisation must ensure that those are up-skilled.

“Going forward, we want to see a solid integrated teaching system at our universities where face-to-face and e-learning become truly blended modes of teaching,” she said.

She said the High-Level Inter-Universities Research Taskforce (HLIURTF), which she launched in April for scientists, academics and researchers, will act swiftly and come up with clear responses.

“The nation is eagerly waiting to hear what the outcome of this high-level research team. I urge you to strive to bring out those findings in the near future and provide some solutions to the situations affecting communities.”