

RHODES UNIVERSITY

STUDENT BODY MEETING

AN ELECTRONIC MEETING WAS HELD ON MONDAY 20 APRIL 2020

AT 19:00 (FACEBOOK AND WHATSAPP)

AGENDA

I. Call to order

Madam President invited the student body to make submissions to [her post](#) on the “Rhodes SRC” Facebook Group at 7 pm.

2020.M1.1 DISCUSSION POINTS

1.1. Arguments for and against online learning

a) For online learning

- i. It was argued that the online learning system would only be successful if the issues with the amount of data bundles on offer would be resolved
- ii. Academic departments should be lenient with deadlines considering the issues that students are facing.
- iii. The university should look into applying some of UNISA’s learning and teaching methods to improve its plans for online learning.

b) Against online learning

- i. Some students live in remote or rural areas that have weak or no network coverage. As a result, some students are likely not aware of the developments concerning this new system of learning. Many students who have this problem will be significantly disadvantaged in that they will be unable to participate in the online orientation.
- ii. Not everyone owns smart devices that are suitable for learning. Some devices are faulty and often switch on and off.

1. Students indicated on multiple occasions that they chose to study at this university because it provides contact learning, unlike distance learning institutions.
- iii. Not all students have laptops. Typing essays is relatively impossible on smartphones.
- iv. Some home environments are not conducive to studying. Small spaces are often shared with many family members, and amenities such as study desks are not available.
- v. The online learning system, as it stands, is exclusionary and should be canceled.
- vi. Some academic departments have continued to function as normal just before and throughout the lockdown period up until this point.
 1. Students are still expected to submit assignments despite having made it clear on multiple occasions that they are not able to do so.
 2. A question was raised as to whether the Vice-Chancellor's letter was merely a suggestion and not something that all academic departments should abide by. Some departments have claimed that they never closed and will continue as normal even during the orientation period.
 3. The SRC clarified that all academic departments should abide by the VC's letter and encouraged students to inform the Academic Councillor if they are expected to submit any assessments during orientation.
- vii. Online learning should only proceed once all students have been equipped with the necessary resources to participate fully. At the moment, more privileged students are already benefitting from the orientation.

1.2. Accounting for the 2020 academic year if online learning fails

- a) Students should be allowed back onto campus and sacrifice previously calendarized holidays.

- b) It may not be possible to finish the 2020 academic year in this calendar year, given the uncertainty of things. If the lockdown is extended, then the academic calendar should be extended.
 - i. Another concern was raised as to whether the SRC was involved in the amendment of the academic calendar.
 - ii. It was clarified that the SRC is not part of the task team that decides on the academic calendar, but they were given an opportunity to respond the night before it was published.
 - iii. One suggestion was that continuing with the academic calendar should be optional.
- c) A proposed amendment to the academic calendar was as follows:
 - i. After arriving on the 1st of July, learning may continue for six weeks.
 - ii. First semester exams can be written in mid-August until the beginning of September.
 - iii. Term 3 would then start in September for six weeks as usual.
 - iv. This would be followed by the fourth term beginning in mid-October and ending in December.
 - v. Second Semester exams can be written in December

1.3. International students: Data bundles, hard copy notes

- a) A concern was raised that international students are not being catered for.
 - i. An SRC member responded to this, stating that international students have been encouraged to contact the international office for assistance.
 - ii. The SRC has suggested to the university that they courier learning materials to international students who need this assistance.
- b) WhatsApp can be used as a tool for online learning as many students, both local and international, have the app and are reachable there.

1.4. Common areas in communities as conducive study environments

- a) Many students raised the issue that online learning is not possible for them as they are not in situations that are conducive for studying.

- i. They must complete necessary daily chores to sustain themselves and their families, such as fetching firewood and water from the river or stream to use in the home.
 - ii. Students are often physically tired from these activities after these laborious activities, and being productive academically becomes incredibly difficult.
 - iii. Some students share small living spaces with a large number of family members, making it difficult to get the privacy one needs to work productively on their academics.
- b) Establishing community buildings as communal study halls is unrealistic in some parts of South Africa. This would only work in places like Tshwane, where there is public wi-fi available.
- c) An overwhelming number of students said they felt that they should be allowed to return to their residences and off-campus accommodation where they do have conducive study environments. Students felt that this would provide equal opportunity for all students of the university to fully participate in online learning, as all students would have the necessary resources.
- i. It was suggested by some students that social distancing can be effectively practiced in residence rooms. They said this could work, especially if sub-wardens monitor the situation and ensure that students are not visiting each other and disobeying social distancing rules or any other lockdown regulations. Hi-Tec security and CPU can also take part in ensuring students are complying with social distancing rules.
 - ii. It was further suggested that the university should negotiate with the government to make the prior suggestion in (1.4) (c) possible.
 - iii. Students also asked that they still are loaned laptops even when they are on campus to avoid being in the computer labs and to make social distancing possible.
 - iv. Being on campus will, for many students, alleviate the aforementioned problems and allow them to take part in online lectures and tutorials.
 - v. A suggestion was put forward for the university to work with bus companies once more for them to transport students back to the university. Similar to the methods they did when students left in

March. Students could present their proof of registration or any relevant to prove that they are a student at the university before boarding the bus.

- vi. Disinfectants should be provided in computer labs once the lockdown regulations start to become more relaxed. All students should be provided with masks and gloves.
- d) There was a counter-argument to 1.4 (c) in which some students stated that the virus could easily spread through the residences if students return to early. The return to campus should only be from July.
- e) Oppidan students still in Makhanda asked why they were not being allowed to go onto campus.
 - i. The response was that allowing students on campus would require the university to provide students with permits.
 - ii. There was a further query as to whether an infected student would be expected to continue studying. The response from an SRC member was that the university could possibly employ an LOA system for such cases.
 - iii. It was also suggested that the university could provide Oppidan students with sufficient monthly data bundles if they do not have resnet in their private accommodation.

1.5. Increasing data bundles: “How much data is enough?”

- a) The amount of data bundles currently on offer is insufficient as multiple resources are required for exam preparations.
 - i. Some students are auditory and visual learners and find themselves using YouTube, the second largest search engine in the world, to learn.
 - ii. Some of the course material uploaded on RUConnected is in the form of YouTube videos or links to such videos. These videos are of great importance to these courses. Whether these videos are viewed externally or on the RUConnected platform, watching them will quickly deplete the 500MB offered to MTN users.
 - iii. Another issue is that laptops and smartphones consume data bundles differently. Laptops consume more data bundles due to the type of

updates they undergo. This should be taken into consideration when data is being allocated.

- b) Some parents/guardians cannot afford to buy data bundles for their children as the tariffs are incredibly high and constitute an additional household expense alongside essential goods. This further necessitates the need for the data bundles on offer to MTN users to be increased and for students on all networks to receive sufficient data to use resources not available on the university's platforms.
- c) Suggestions were put forward for all students to be provided with 30GB, 40GB, and even 50GB of monthly data.
- d) One idea was that students receive 30 GB of daytime bundles, 20GB nighttime bundles, and 10GB anytime every month. This increase would be especially helpful in seeing that access to the Rhodes University Library is not free. Students also need additional sources to use in their research assignments from platforms such as Google Scholar.
- e) A question was raised regarding the university's response to the SRC's suggestion of the use of the *Rain* network, which provides unlimited data for 4G enabled devices. It was clarified that the university did not respond to this suggestion from the SRC.
 - i. The SRC was asked to research if the *Rain* mobile data only provider has coverage in rural areas in considering its use.

1.6. Online tutoring system

- a) Once all online resources are made available, tutors can create social media groups, send voice notes, and give feedback to their students.
 - i. Academic departments can make the cell phone numbers of tutors available to students for more accessible communication.
- b) What measures are being put in place to ensure additional support for students that faculties have identified as "struggling academically"?

2020.M1.2 PREVAILING ISSUES

2.1 Fee reductions, financial aid, and bursaries

- a) There does not seem to be any consideration that fee rebates or refunds should be made as contact learning, and on-campus accommodation is not and will not be available for an extended period.
- i. Students are only expected to return to their residences in July. This means that they will be paying for accommodation for four months without actually staying there.
 - ii. Many parents/guardians who are fee payers are not earning money due to the lockdown and will not be able to pay fees as they would usually. The university should take this into serious consideration when adjusting the fees for the year 2020.
 - iii. A question was raised as to whether the university had responded to the SRC's request to give students their meal refunds. It was clarified that the university did not respond to this suggestion from the SRC.
 - iv. Students felt it was unfair to be receiving financial statements at this time, indicating outstanding balances for fee payments when they are not even on campus.
 - v. An SRC member added that the fees office had previously stated that they would update students on any changes to the fees.
 - vi. What happens if the fees have already been paid for the whole year in advance?
 - vii. Will students get a refund on their residence fees for the month of April?
- b) A question was asked as to whether students in residence would continue to receive their monthly allowance despite not being on campus.
- i. The response to this question was that students on NSFAS would continue to receive their monthly allowance as promised by the Minister of Higher Education.
 - ii. A query was made by some students as to whether students in residence would receive the same allowance as Oppidans since they are not on campus at the moment.
- c) Bursary providers, third parties offering student loans and financial aid schemes, and the university itself should consider extending their application deadlines.

2.2 Funding for and reception/loan of gadgets

- a) Many students suggested that meal refunds could be used for purchasing extra laptops to supplement the limited stock of laptops currently available for loan.
 - i. Several students suggested that the money they paid to join societies should be redirected to funding the purchase of extra laptops.
 - ii. Since there is a limited stock of laptops, how will the university ensure a fair process in terms of distributing the laptops?
- b) Some students agreed that devices should be provided to students on loan and sent by courier. They also suggested that the university provide them with permits if necessary.
- c) A serious concern was raised as to the retrieval of parcels that will be sent to students.
 - i. Some students live in areas where the mail is delivered far from their homes in places like local schools (which are closed). This is due to the fact that some of these areas do not have street addresses that would make home deliveries possible. Some rural areas don't even have postal services.
 - ii. Going to these places to collect parcels means that students are putting themselves at risk of contracting the virus.
 - iii. A question was raised as to how long students would have to wait to receive their parcels.
 - iv. The parcels may not arrive on time or may get lost in the mail, which will delay or exclude many students from participating in online learning.
- d) Some students suggested that the university approach sponsors to provide laptops.
- e) A question was raised about the origins of the R 30 000 that the SRC had pledged to the university's COVID-19 relief fund.
 - i. The response was the money came from the SRC Ubuntu Fund and portfolio funds.
 - ii. A further query was raised as to what will happen to the remaining SRC funds seeing that most events are canceled. The response was that

students are still expected to be on campus in the second semester, and so not everything can be donated at once.

- f) A concern was raised as to why the student body was not made aware of the alumni fund. Why wasn't the call donations and assistance made out to everyone?
 - i. The SRC responded, stating that they were only made aware of the alumni fund through a forwarded email and were also unaware of the fund before then.
- g) It was clarified that students must ensure that the university has their up-to-date contact number and postal address. This information must be submitted to their Warden. In the case of Oppidan students, they must contact the Wardens from the Oppidan Union.
 - i. An inquiry was as to the possibility of receiving a laptop from the IT shop by charging the item to their student account. The student emailed the shop and had not received a response. They were encouraged to forward the email to the SRC President.
 - ii. An inquiry was made as to the closing date of requesting a loan for a laptop. Several other queries were made about how exactly a student can request a loan. The SRC promised to follow up with this matter.
 - iii. A concern was raised as to the inclusion of students without network coverage in the online meeting. The response was that it was difficult to fully accommodate everyone because of the crisis and that the SRC was hopeful that the solutions that arise from this meeting could accommodate everyone.
- h) Crime is prevalent in South Africa and has continued to be reported despite the entire country observing the lockdown. A concern was raised as to what happens if a student has the loaned device stolen from them.
- i) A further concern was raised that some households don't have electricity and so charging, and therefore using these devices for extended periods will be difficult. The university could explore purchasing electricity for students.

2.3 Mental health

- a) Some students are stressed because some of their family members have contracted the virus and have been hospitalized.
- b) Students should either be provided with sufficient airtime to call the Counselling Centre, and ER24 or the numbers should be made toll free.

2.4 Results of the survey

- a) Many students asked about the results of the survey that was conducted a few weeks ago. They asked why the SRC has not communicated these results. It was clarified that the SRC was not responsible for conducting the survey. The council was yet to receive any communication as to the results of the survey.

2.5 Problems with “zero-rated” educational platforms

- a) Logging onto RUConnected without data has not worked for many students. Others also struggled despite having a small amount of data bundles.
- b) There is a worry from Vodacom users that no communication has gone out from the university as to whether the network provider has confirmed their participation in the zero-rating of the university’s educational platforms. The SRC promised to follow up with this matter.
- c) Some RUConnected content comes in the form of YouTube videos and external links that cannot be accessed because those platforms are not zero-rated.
 - i. The true extent to which course material has been zero-rated needs to be made clear.
 - ii. One student gave the example of the inline orientation video that they watched, which acquired data even though it was necessary for the orientation process.
- d) Learning using the materials on the platforms is difficult as students cannot download the learning material without data bundles.
- e) The RUConnected app is still not available to Apple users.

2.6 Communication from the university and academic departments

- a) It is a problem that everything has been communicated via email thus far as students without data bundles, or adequate network coverage cannot send or receive emails. It would be more appropriate if the university would also send SMSes to students.
 - i. Another concern was raised that in addition to not having network coverage or data bundles, some students do not have access to electricity at home.
 - 1. The inability to charge their smartphones makes it even less likely for them to have received communication from the university since they left campus in March.
 - 2. The student inquired as to whether the university had made any arrangements to deal with such scenarios.
 - 3. A suggestion was made that the university should call the students' emergency contacts if they have not been responding to emails or requests for information related to online learning.
 - ii. The SRC clarified that they had said in previous statements that the university should make use of different platforms to communicate with students.
- b) WhatsApp should also be explored as a means for communicating with students.
- c) Students are also receiving emails from their lecturers who ask them to state their case in terms of their inability to participate in online learning. As much as these efforts are appreciated, they are futile, considering the issue stated in 2.6 (a).
- d) A suggestion was put forward that in order for lecturers to get a true sense of who is or is not able to participate in online learning, they should check the activity on their RUConnected pages.
 - i. Both Teaching Assistants and lecturers can check exactly how many students have been visiting the site and reconcile that with the number of students registered for the course.
 - ii. This information can be used to decide who to courier hard copy course material to.
- e) Some of the letters received from the university are vague, long, and difficult for some students to follow.

2020.M6.3 DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

The date and time of the next student body meeting will be announced closer to the time of such a meeting.

2020.M1.4 ADJOURNMENT

Live interaction between students and SRC stopped at 10 pm. Submissions were allowed until 7 pm the following day at which time Madam President closed the comments section.

Minutes typed and submitted by: Xiletelo Mabasa (SRC Media Councillor)

Minutes approved by: Rhodes University Student Representative Council