

Subject: COVID-19 UPDATE 39 – ASSESSING STAFF WHO MAY BE AT RISK

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From: Shirona Patel on behalf of VCO News

To: VCO News

Dear Colleagues

We trust that you are well.

Over the past few weeks, we have deliberated extensively on the **recalibration of the 2020 academic calendar**, which will serve before Senate, before it is shared with the broader University community in mid-August.

In the interim, the academic programme continues online, although we have seen the return of a limited number of students and staff to our campuses (as per our phased reopening plan) in the safest possible way. We have invested in all the requisite equipment and material as recommended by experts, in line with government regulations, created comprehensive response procedures, and embarked on an education and advocacy campaign to ensure that students and staff are at the least possible risk when on our campuses.

Number of infections

There are 8 staff members who have tested positive for COVID-19 in the last week (24 – 31 July 2020). These include staff members who are working from home. 24 students have tested positive during this period. All affected staff members and students are self-isolating, in line with the University's COVID-19 protocols.

No. of infections	22 Jun – 23 July	24 – 31 Jul	Total
Staff	75	8	83
Students	123	24	147

The data provided in the table is based on the number of infections reported to the OHSE Office and the Campus Health and Wellness Centre. The number of recoveries will be reported as the information becomes available.

Staff living with co-morbidities

We have received several queries from employees and managers regarding staff who may be at risk, including those who may be living with co-morbidities.

The Senior Executive Team (SET) agreed to the following principles regarding staff:

1. Employees who can work remotely should continue to do so,
2. Staff who have to deliver essential services that cannot be conducted from home are required to report for duty, if requested to do so by their line managers,
3. Those who are unable to work during this period should engage with their line managers and respective human resources officers to explore options that may be available to ensure business continuity. These options may include, amongst others, redeployment to other areas or the allocation of work in other units where appropriate, and
4. Staff members over the age of 60 or those living with co-morbidities should, where possible, work from home.

Government regulations require the University to adopt “special measures for employees with known or disclosed health issues or co-morbidities, with any condition which may place such employees at a higher

risk of complications or death if they are infected with COVID-19". These include employees who:

- are 60 years and older,
- have one or more of the underlying commonly encountered chronic medical conditions (of any age) particularly if not well-controlled, including:
 - o chronic lung disease, moderate to severe asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, bronchiectasis, idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, active TB and post-tuberculous lung disease, diabetes with late complications and moderate/severe hypertension with target organ damage;
 - o serious heart conditions including heart failure, coronary artery disease, cardiomyopathies, pulmonary hypertension and congenital heart disease;
 - o chronic kidney disease being treated with dialysis; and
 - o chronic liver disease including cirrhosis.
- may be severely obese (Body Mass Index of 40 or higher);
- have compromised immunity as a result of cancer treatment, bone marrow or organ transplantation, immune deficiencies, poorly controlled HIV/AIDS, prolonged use of corticosteroids and other immune weakening medications; or
- women who are between 28 weeks pregnant and full-term.

Procedure

Staff members who have co-morbidities should voluntarily declare these illnesses to their line manager or provide a valid doctor's letter, or confirmation from their medical aid scheme, that indicates specifically that they have co-morbidities which may place them at a higher risk if they return to campus. Where line managers believe that it is necessary, a second opinion may be obtained from selected healthcare practitioners based at the Wits Donald Gordon Medical Centre (WDGMC), the contact details which can be obtained from your respective human resources officer.

Line managers are reminded to carry out risk assessments in their respective units before staff and students return to campus. Managers must also take special measures to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 for vulnerable employees in line with the guidelines that have been shared with managers.

WDGMC services to staff who may at risk

The WDGMC has appointed selected healthcare practitioners to screen and assess staff who may be at risk and to determine if they have co-morbidities which place them at a higher risk if they return to campus. The details of the co-morbidities will not be disclosed to line managers, only the confirmation of the existence of a co-morbidity. This will assist line managers with planning and managing operations and, where relevant, in making decisions regarding whether and how the employee can safely return to the workplace. For staff members living with co-morbidities who require more detailed assessments, telehealth, or in person consultations, these requests will be assessed on a case by case basis. Please channel your requests via your line manager and human resources officer.

We are in this together

This pandemic impacts on each and every member of the Wits community. We need to take care of our employees and students, we need to complete the academic programme, and protect our livelihoods. We can only do this if we all work together towards these common goals. Take care of yourself and your loved ones, take care of your colleagues and those around you. Together, we will make it through this difficult time.

SENIOR EXECUTIVE TEAM
31 JULY 2020