



Dear NAS Student

12 April 2021

On Monday 5 April 2021, the UP executive suspended formal on-campus contact teaching activities to curb the further spread of COVID19 among UP students. NAS had a number of on-campus activities planned, and staff and students had to adjust at short notice to this necessary intervention. This is a temporary suspension and I urge you to remain close to campus, in your current place of residence, so that you can get the maximum benefit when we resume on-campus activities.

This temporary suspension of on-campus activities triggered a continuation of an older conversation. At the end of 2020, when we were doing contingency planning for 2021, it became clear that there were two broad groups of students – those that preferred online interactions for all their studies, and those that wanted more on-campus activities.

From a faculty perspective, we do not try to choose between these two viewpoints, but rather to make sure that the teaching and learning that we offer continues to be of a high quality, relevant, and at the forefront of educational practice. Lecturers go to great lengths to ensure the integrity of assessments. In addition to the efforts of lecturers, there is ongoing testing of digital solutions, and these will be rolled out once they are robust and feasible. One of the main reasons for on-campus activities, are practicals, and after this suspension, we will resume activities and make sure we catch up lost time.

For assessment, I need you to play your part, by being an ethical scientist in training and adhering to the stated conditions of the assessments.

Even before the pandemic, more than 80% of the courses in the faculty already had some online content as part of the module, and this provided the foundations when the pandemic pushed us to become more innovative in our online offering. We are learning from the 2020 experience, through feedback from students and staff, but also more detailed analyses of performance and online behavior. This allows our online capabilities to grow from an emergency pandemic response, to a new mode of teaching and learning with solid pedagogical practice and pedagogical principles at its foundations. There are several ongoing training opportunities for staff, and several communities of practice, within our faculty and within the University, where lecturers share experiences and improve their hybrid teaching skills. Beyond the pandemic, the faculty will continue to be a contact faculty utilizing a hybrid model of teaching and learning.

We also recognize that in addition to the good pedagogical reasons to have some on-campus activities, there are also a number of equally important social reasons to do so. Peer support, peer learning, making networks, personal development and experiencing our beautiful campus are additional important reasons to come to campus when conditions allow for it.

While we are still in the pandemic, the extent to which we can fully explore our newly acquired hybrid capabilities, will be limited by current levels of COVID19 risk. Thus, we are in a transition phase where on the one hand we try to maximize the value of hybrid teaching and learning, but on the other hand, we also use it as a mechanism to complete the academic year while COVID19 is prevalent. The challenge for staff and students alike is that managing COVID19 risk sometimes means we need to change our plans at short notice, and that requires mental energy.

We remain committed to delivering high quality education and to complete a successful academic year in 2021.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'B F N Erasmus', written in a cursive style.

Prof Barend F N Erasmus  
Dean: NAS