

Teaching and learning go online as NWU takes education to people

Issued by [North-West University \(NWU\)](#)

31 Mar 2020

The Covid-19 pandemic has fundamentally disrupted teaching-learning activities in South Africa and across the globe. It also challenges how we think about education and assessment, in general.

“Disruptions are opportunities to reflect on assumptions made about teaching, learning and learners,” says Prof. Robert Balfour, the North-West University’s deputy vice-chancellor for teaching and learning.

“The NWU has a long and stable history of multimodal (contact and distance) education. Although the coronavirus has indeed disrupted not only the lives of our students and staff, and the many communities to which we belong, it cannot bring teaching and learning at the North-West University (NWU) to a standstill. Change it and us, yes, but impede our progress or efforts to bring education to people, no.”

He explains that, as teaching-learning is key to the core business of the NWU, the need to support our students is greater than ever. A related need, in enabling access to education for contact and distance students alike, is to ensure NWU staff have the support they need for a smooth transition to online modalities.

Such support for students and staff is commensurate with the ethic of care espoused by the university as part of its core values.

“Troubling times test our values; expectations concerning clarity of communication increase in relation to the measure of anxiety or disruption experienced by members of the university, whether near or far from our campuses. Disruptions might compel a pause and reflection on actions, but they also enable creativity, different thinking and new solutions to come to the fore. The toughest of metals are forged in fire if due care is taken in the process of forging.”

He says the leadership (deans and management teams), as well as the academic and support units of the university, are aware of the need to provide optimal, effective and timely support for the teaching-learning project. “This entails intensive re-planning and reconfiguration of our work. It is important to us that our communities and stakeholders know that these efforts are geared toward the continued success of our students.”

Exciting and accessible online presence

Prof. Balfour says the NWU’s Teaching and Learning portfolio has accelerated its transition into an exciting and accessible online presence.



Prof. Robert Balfour

“Depending on how the situation develops nationally, there is every likelihood that students and staff will engage more intensively with the opportunities presented through the online learning modality.”

From an academic development perspective, this engagement, and the transformation of the curriculum that will flow from it, is being led by the university’s Centre for Teaching and Learning.

Depending on the broader situation in South Africa, the NWU’s formal online programme is scheduled to commence on 16 April 2020.

“This programme will be an exciting way to empower, teach, interact and mentor students,” he says. “During the run-up to the introduction of the formal programme, lecturers already have access to daily online training opportunities to prepare them for a smooth transition.” This includes updated information on how to support students to continue learning for the duration of the crisis, using online technology.

The NWU is well-prepared for the changes because, long before the Covid-19 crisis, its lecturers have long been working with the integration of technology into their lessons, with the learning management system eFundi as the central point of connection. That said, some distance education programmes use printed text.

Students in remote areas included

Prof. Balfour says the crisis has changed the way academics consider assessment for both contact and distance students. This includes the possibility that students living in remote areas, who are not able to access electricity, let alone the internet, can be supported through the distance modality.

“Especially in this time of social distancing, lockdown and self-isolation, students do not have access to physical campus-based resources such as the library, learning spaces, computer labs, internet connectivity and face-to-face support. For this reason, the university must strive to make those resources accessible to both contact and distance students alike,” he says. “In addition, the NWU uses print and online material to offers guidance to students.”

He says the university has taken into account that students have varying levels of data available when accessing the eFundi site from mobile phones and personal computers. “This is why our guiding principles for teaching NWU students online implies that content and activities must be eFundi-based, mobile-friendly, low-tech, low-data or in the distance mode.”

The approach is first to prioritise access to teaching-learning materials for academics and students, in online or distance mode. The university then supports staff to develop adequate online guidance, support and direction for students.

Support for academic and support staff

Prof. Balfour says the NWU supports staff by planning their access to technology and enabling them to work remotely to support student access. The divisions working behind the scenes to accomplish this include Information Technology, the Centre for Teaching and Learning, the university libraries, the Unit for Open Distance-Learning and the Unit for Continuing Education, among others.

The NWU is focusing on using the online mode to give contact students access to the teaching-learning programme. These students will also have access to selected programmes already offered in the online mode for open distance learning (ODL) students.

“This entails ensuring that, as far as is reasonable, learning resources are available online and accessible to students and staff,” Prof. Balfour says. “We will also make sure that teaching resources, guidelines to students, assessments and related resources are available. Students are encouraged to be in touch with the university using whatever technologies are available to them so that the teaching-learning programmes can continue.”

Where online access for students is not possible due to factors such as remote locations or lack of electricity, the NWU will turn to provider services such as post and courier, if available.

Prof. Balfour says the NWU is part of sectoral negotiations with public as well as private mobile providers to assist staff and students residing in South Africa by offering free, or considerably reduced, services associated with online access to specific NWU platforms, including eFundi.

"These are troubled times for all sectors of the economy, and not only for the education sector. However, education remains the single most available resource through which the state can provide opportunities to people to develop themselves and thus to open up possibilities for the development of new solutions for the new challenges of our age," he says.

"The transition for staff and students to online or distance modalities where this becomes the primary form of tuition is not assumed to be an easy one, however. The challenge for both staff and students is to communicate frequently and helpfully until such time that the experience begins to feel seamless and natural. Fortunately, the NWU is blessed with dedicated staff who in times of need and crisis such as this, come to the fore with renewed energy to develop and sustain each other to support students' intellectual and personal growth."

▪ **GoAllOut student chapter breaks Guinness World Record** 17 May 2024

▪ **Seven Eagles to soar at the 2024 Olympic Games in France** 15 May 2024

▪ **Child speech database research project attracts international attention** 7 May 2024

▪ **Siya celebrates Rassie** 7 May 2024

▪ **"Yster" Rassie Erasmus receives honorary doctorate** 7 May 2024

[North-West University \(NWU\)](#)



The North-West University (NWU) is one of South Africa's top five universities; that offers superior academic excellence, cutting-edge research and innovation and teaching and learning. It all starts here.

[Profile](#) | [News](#) | [Contact](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#) | [RSS Feed](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>