

Op-Ed:

# Getting the message across to “save lives and save the academic year”

Since March this year, the world has experienced a rude awakening as countries that were epicentres of commerce in the Marco Polo era became epicentres of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19. In an effort to stop its spread, nation after nation went on to isolate itself and its people from each other – making 2020 a year everyone will remember for its unpredictability, disruption and loss.



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In South Africa, death, job losses in many industries including tourism, and a severe impact on academic programmes, are just some of the many negative results of the virus and associated lockdown, and a constant reminder of how badly the world has been affected by this pandemic.

The global number of positive cases to date is close to 27 million, with nearly a million deaths arising from it. In South Africa, we are approaching 15 000 deaths from over 630 000 infections.

One day, we will talk about how global leadership could have done more to limit the spread of the coronavirus. We will talk about how we could have played our part in coming up with solutions to either prevent its spread or to fight it using our research, and how families could have taken leadership roles to keep the virus away from their homes.

For now, let us talk about the importance of communication during the pandemic. The University stuck to key messages that the WHO had outlined as effective in curbing the spread of COVID-19, namely:

- ◆ Wash or sanitise your hands frequently;
- ◆ Maintain a two-metre social distance; and
- ◆ Wear a mask.



Naturally, change in behaviour takes time – yet there is no time to waste! We are aware of this fact when we communicate, which is why we use multichannel communication strategies to get the message across effectively. One of the focus areas in our communication plans is the people who have contracted the virus off campus, whether at home, in shopping centres or while travelling.

We have not reached a level of perfect communication, but we are doing enough to help our University “to save lives and save the academic year”. This was a clarion call by our Minister for Higher Education and Training, Science and Innovation, the Honourable Blade Nzimande.

In line with our COVID-19 communication plan, we have used our multi-channel communications to repeat the message in different ways to different constituencies, while using story-telling in order to raise awareness and deliver a strong call-to-action with the aim of keeping people safe from COVID-19. As part of this, we used the story of ‘Khovy’ and ‘Mpilo’, a COVID-19 villain and hero.