

The University's Department of Marketing and Communications (MarComms) regarded the shutdown of the University as a challenge to be faced head-on. While away from the University, staff and students still needed to be updated with news on the spread of the virus and how this impacts the University. Mbali Mkhize, Senior Director of the department, said that this kind of work is not always easy.

"Everyone leading a communications division knows that without the relevant information, the stakeholders are vulnerable. They can't take the right decisions. A simple statement such as telling staff and students via an SMS that there is protest action at a particular place and that they must avoid it, can go a long way in saving lives and property. The same is true of the dissemination of messages about the coronavirus," said Mkhize.

The coronavirus situation has been one of the biggest challenges for her division so far. "While others correctly see this situation as a challenge, we consider it as a chance to save lives, and the academic year. My team and I have continued to hold meetings via Microsoft Teams. In these meetings we brainstorm and find out the best ways to take the vital messages to staff, students and the general public. Since the advent of the coronavirus, and the introduction of the country-wide lockdown, my department has added several communication platforms. We are currently sitting at 25 platforms," she said.

Mkhize added that, just as governments have to readjust their budgets when faced with a massive crisis, the University has had to adjust its budget so as to deal with the pandemic. "On a number of occasions my department has met to look at how we could modify our budget so that we can finance the new campaigns. My department now resembles a war time cabinet where so much effort is directed at winning the war. This is war of a different kind," she said.

The campaigns she was referring to are all over the 25 platforms her department has created in the last five months. While its initial focus was on keeping staff and students informed, the department decided to expand its vision to include the general public, particularly that of Umlazi Township where the University is located.

Said Mkhize: "We have always considered ourselves as part of the township and its people. What affects us affects them, and vice versa. Lately we put up a

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– Mbali Mkhize, Senior Director, Marketing and Communications

giant billboard on the side of our Faculty of Natural Sciences building. The board's message is simple – we are asking people to continue taking precautionary measures against the pandemic. Wash your hands thoroughly with soap. Sanitise them when you cannot wash them. Keep the required distance between you and the next person. Wear your mask properly at all times. And only leave home when it is absolutely necessary."

She explained that the billboard was one of the University's ways of dealing with the challenges it was facing under Level 3 of the lockdown. "The University has to continue to remind staff and students of the threat of COVID-19 because it is very easy to revert to old habits. Given that our students had not seen each other since the lockdown, we thought this would pose a challenge to social distancing – but this has not been the case. Our students have responded positively to the health protocols to be followed to keep themselves safe," she said with pride.

As she spoke, the University was getting ready to welcome more students onto campus. "MUT will continue to be guided by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in terms of the phased approach to returning students. The University has taken all the necessary precautions and health protocols to ensure that students come back to a safe campus. MUT is ready to welcome more students should the DHET decide to allow more students back to campus," said Mkhize in closing.