

## HEC Policy on COVID-19

The WHO has declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic. Several governments and universities have taken stringent protectionist measures. Some universities, in the US and elsewhere, have closed their campuses and are transitioning to virtual instruction.

In the event that the Government of Pakistan takes such a decision, the universities need to be prepared to act in a manner that will minimize the disruption to the teaching schedule.

To review the situation, HEC convened an emergency meeting of Vice Chancellors from all universities, public as well as private. The meeting decisions are as follows:

1. In case, there is a decision to close teaching institutions, it would be preferable to restrict the closure, initially, to two weeks, which could be extended if needed. This would be least disruptive. It would also give enough time to prepare an alternative plan, as described below, if the closure is extended.
2. In the event of a brief closure, e.g., for two weeks or less, there will be no need for major changes. Universities will accommodate it through increased frequency of lectures, or a slight extension in the length of the semester.
3. If the closure extends beyond two weeks, while accommodate would still be possible, universities will also plan on filling the gaps through online or hybrid courses.
4. Regardless, as soon as a closure is announced, universities will cease on-campus teaching for two weeks. After two weeks, if regular classes are not resumed, classes will be offered online wherever possible.
5. All universities have agreed to start preparing their systems to be able to offer effective online teaching as a substitute for regular classes. The objective is to ensure that teaching continues wherever possible, and that the impact of the necessary disruption on the students' learning is minimized.
6. Universities have also agreed that faculty members and essential staff of universities will continue to work and attend office, unless explicitly forbidden by a governmental directive.
7. It was also agreed that in the event of a closure of the universities, all hostels will be vacated, except for foreign students, who will be placed in quarantine to prevent any exposure to the virus.
8. In order to provide the online option, universities have agreed to establish Learning Management Systems (LMS), identify and catalog potential online content (lectures, reading materials, and testing and evaluation databases), develop new online content if needed, and deploy appropriate dissemination systems.
9. Special consideration will be given to universities in disadvantaged areas in order to ensure that their students get equivalent treatment.
10. To support these decisions, HEC has established three Strategic Oversight Committees to assist universities. These are:
  - a. *Technology Support Committee*: Mr. Asif Shahid Khan, HEC; Dr. Ziaul Qayyum, AIU; Dr. Naeem Tariq, VU; Mr. Rizwan Rashid, HEC; and Dr. Saeed Ghani, Acting Executive Director/Associate Dean, Faculty of Computer Sciences, IBA Karachi. To assist universities in establishing

LMS's and delivery mechanisms. More than 70 universities, which do not have an LMS, will be provided access either in the form of an open-source LMS (e.g. Moodle), or the Virtual University's LMS.

- b. *Content Identification Committee*: Dr. Zulfiqar Gilani, HEC; Dr. Raheel Qamar, COMSATS University; and Dr. Saeedul Hassan Chishti, Sialkot University. To assist universities in identifying, developing, and cataloguing lectures, reading materials, and evaluation materials. HEC is working with Coursera for the provision of courses from their catalogue. HEC will also ensure that the Digital Library content is available for students. The Committee will also examine the option of asking selected universities to take the lead in developing content in the fields of their expertise. Finally, assessment modules will assist universities in establishing evaluation systems.
  - c. *Preventive Measures Committee*: PIMS Islamabad, King Edward Medical University, Khyber Medical University, Aga Khan University, and Bolan Medical University. To assist universities in deploying Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to ensure prevention and protection against the spreading of the disease.
11. Vice Chancellors have agreed to undertake the following actions immediately:
- a. Disseminate information to all faculty, staff, and students.
  - b. In the event that the Government of Pakistan decides to close Universities, notify the two-week vacation as well as the resumption of classes after two weeks.
  - c. Set up crisis teams and appoint focal points within their universities to liaise with the national strategic committees.
  - d. Require students to register on all necessary apps, e.g., Coursera, Skype, WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams, and others, and to update their passwords.
  - e. Get the LMS installed on their own or HEC provided infrastructure.
  - f. Arrange training for their staff in proper use of the required technical solutions.
  - g. Arrange (with support from HEC) the hardware and software needed to implement the required technical solutions.
12. It was agreed **faculty members** will be requested to review the remaining course content in their courses, and develop a strategy for delivering it to the students through other means. The actions include:
- a. *With the support of the Technology Support Committee*, familiarize themselves with the operation of the LMS.
  - b. *With the support of the Content Identification Committee*, select specific lectures from courses available online, e.g., from Coursera, or from local sources, which correspond to the material that remains to be taught in their courses.
  - c. *With the support of the Content Identification Committee*, build a database of test questions and evaluation materials to assess the progress of their students.

- d. If needed and appropriate, record their own lectures, which could be delivered online in real time (i.e., in synchronous mode) and/ or uploaded on the relevant platforms for the benefit of students who are unable to listen to the synchronous lecture.
  - e. Agree with their students on a schedule of classes, and set up automatic alerts for all students in order to ensure attendance.
  - f. Require all students to register and obtain access to available online software, e.g., Skype, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, etc., and collect all necessary contact information and user IDs from their students.
  - g. Create social groups, including on WhatsApp, Skype, and/or Microsoft Teams for each of their classes.
  - h. Identify reading materials and ensure that it is made available the online platform provided by the University.
13. **Learning Management System (LMS):** HEC is arranging the provisioning of a LMS for those Universities that do not have a LMS platform. The HEC IT team will work in parallel with a team from VU to setup VU LMS or an open-source LMS (e.g. Moodle) for universities. Universities are request to contact the HEC and provide a focal-person to work on this initiative with the HEC IT Team.