

South Africa

Disaster Management Act, 2002

Directions on a National Framework and Criteria for the Management of the 2021 Academic Year in Public and Private Higher Education Institutions

Government Notice 277 of 2021

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Directions on a National Framework and Criteria for the Management of the 2021 Academic Year in
Public and Private Higher Education Institutions

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Government Notice 277 of 2021

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I, Dr BE Nzimande, MP, Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, in terms of the COVID-19 Regulations of the Disaster Management [Act, No 57 of 2002](#), hereby publish the Directions regarding the national framework and criteria for the management of the 2021 academic year in public and private higher education institutions, as set out in the Schedule.

These Directions come into effect on the date of publication of this Notice in the *Government Gazette*.

Dr BE Nzimande, MP

Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation

1. Definitions

In these Directions, "the Regulations" means the regulations as defined by the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs published by Government Notice No. R. 480 of 29 April 2020, as amended by Government Notices Nos. R 608 of 28 May 2020; R. 714 of 25 June 2020; R. 763 of 12 July 2020; R. 846 of 31 July 2020; R. 891 of 17 August 2020; No. 999 of 18 September 2020; No. 1011 of 20 September 2020; No. 1053 of 1 October 2020; No. 1104 of 21 October 2020; No. 1199 of 11 November 2020; No. 1290 of 3 December 2020; No. 1346 of 15 December 2020; No. 1370 of 17 December 2020; No. 1421 of 24 December 2020; No. 1423 of 29 December 2020; No 1435 of 29 December 2020; No. R 11 of 11 January 2021; No. R. 6 of 1 February 2021, and No. R. 152 of 28 February 2021, as well as future amendments therein.

2. Background and principles

2.1 The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the President declaring a state of disaster in South Africa. Government implemented a national lockdown from 27 March 2020. All post school education and training institutions advanced their recess periods from the 16 March 2020 and subsequently closed their campuses and learning centres and moved to emergency remote teaching, learning and assessment. Directions on the risk-adjusted strategy for public and private higher education institutions to return to campuses during the various levels of the 2020 lockdown were published in the *Government Gazette* on the 8 June 2020. Students and staff were able to return to campuses at different periods of the lockdown as guided by the directions. Public Higher Education Institutions (universities) and Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) successfully completed the 2020 academic year, utilising a range of different teaching and learning methodologies.

- 2.2 The Department supported university responses to the crisis through the allocation of a COVID-19 Responsiveness Grant (CRG) and monitored university responses through reports that were initially submitted fortnightly and then monthly by the universities.
- 2.3 South Africa moved to an Adjusted Risk Alert Level 3 lockdown on 28 December 2020 due to a second "wave" of infections, together with the emergence of a new more transmissible variant of SARS-CoV-2. Following this, the Director-General issued a communique to public higher education institutions on guidelines for completing the 2020 academic year. All institutions provided the Department with their planned dates for the start of the 2021 academic year and their plans for managing activities from January 2021 to March 2021 in line with the communique.
- 2.4 The Adjusted Risk Alert Level 3 lockdown was extended on 13 February 2021 and the Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs published a further set of the Regulations in *Regulation Gazette No. 1017, Regulations No. R 92 of 13 February 2021*. Among others, the Regulations set "exclusions relating to education services as set out in the directions issued by the Cabinet members responsible for education". This means that the Minister "responsible for education" may stipulate exclusions to the Regulations pertaining to the relevant education sector. *The lockdown was changed to Level 1 on 28 February 2021, in terms of Gazette/ No. 151. and Regulation No. 152.*
- 2.5 It is now clear that the 2021 academic year will start under COVID-19 restrictions and that the pandemic will remain with us for some time and will pass through different intensity waves until the vaccination programme has been fully implemented.
- 2.6 These Directions are therefore intended as a national framework to assist institutions with the management of activities for the academic year and should be read together with the Regulations, which may be published from time to time, The Directions stipulate specific exclusions that are applicable to public universities and PHEIs.
- 2.7 The sector recognises that the COVID-19 pandemic will affect daily lives and workplaces for some time to come, and that the lockdown levels will change over time, depending on the trajectory of the pandemic. Eventually it will be necessary to return to normal teaching and learning and work. However, this must be done based on the understanding that the pandemic will be unpredictable; that further spikes of infection may follow; and that geographical differentiation may have to be considered as some areas may be declared hotspots.
- 2.8 Different methodologies will have to be explored to ensure that staff and students at higher education institutions (HEIs) are able to access campuses as safely as possible; that the mitigation of health and safety risks are built into the daily lives and work of all institutions (including living and teaching spaces); and that social solidarity must guide all of us in how we conduct ourselves in relation to others, to ensure that we all do whatever we can as a collective to minimise the spread of the virus. In this way we will be saving lives and ensuring a successful 2021 academic year.
- 2.9 Because of unique circumstances at each institution (locational and spatial arrangements, local lockdown restrictions, capacity issues, actual and variable numbers of students, etc.), a one-size-fits-all approach is not feasible. Therefore each institution must work out its own management plan for the 2021 academic year based on its context within the adjusted national lockdown rules framework, which may be adjusted from time to time.
- 2.10 The pandemic will continue to affect the world for the foreseeable future. It is necessary for institutions to do everything possible to prevent new infections and campus outbreaks that could put lives at risk and further disrupt the completion of the 2020 academic year, as well as the commencement and continuation of the 2021 academic year.
- 2.11 This document constitutes a national framework for institutions to develop plans for the safe integration of students and staff to campuses and student residences for the 2021 academic year and continued safe operations for the academic year.

- 2.12 Plans must be well communicated to staff and students and implemented at an appropriate operational level with oversight and monitoring on an institutional level.
- 2.13 The Department will continue to monitor public universities and provide support to ensure that the 2021 academic year is a success. The Department may also request plans from institutions at specific times to effectively fulfil its oversight and support roles in respect of the higher education system.

3. Social solidarity

- 3.1 The pandemic's current trajectory indicates that the second "wave" is more substantial than the first. There are indications that there will be a third "wave" later in the year. It is therefore necessary to exercise the utmost caution and care. The primary consideration of saving lives while ensuring a successful 2021 academic year must remain foremost in institutional planning. Sufficient care must be taken to build a social compact amongst all members of HEIs communities relating to the responsibilities of each person in ensuring that there are no further outbreaks of COVID-19. Clear communication and protocols must remain in place and a focus on social solidarity, which recognises that all communities remain at risk and require shared responsibility to mitigate the effects of the pandemic.
- 3.2 It is recommended that a social compact be signed between Vice-Chancellors, SRC leadership, and trade union leadership, among others, which foregrounds cooperation in mitigating the risk of spreading the virus.

4. Institutional plans

- 4.1 All higher education institutions must develop plans for the opening of the 2021 academic year and the managed integration of staff and students to campuses and residences.
- 4.2 All institutions must ensure that a COVID-19 Response Task Team or other relevant management committee is in place, comprising all critical stakeholders and in line with health and safety regulations, to ensure responsiveness to ongoing issues relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 Response Task Team or other relevant management committee should monitor the implementation of institutional plans on an ongoing basis. The response teams should remain in place for the duration of the period of national disaster.
- 4.3 The access of staff and students to campus, contact tuition and to residences must be managed within the parameters of the applicable national Risk Alert Level regulations and the relevant Regulations, as published by the Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs from time to time, together with the specific exceptions detailed in these directions. This means that institutional plans will be adapted from time to time in line with any changes announced at the national level.
- 4.4 Each institution must develop and implement a teaching and learning plan to ensure that physical distancing and other health protocols are observed at all times. This implies implementing blended learning methodologies, flipped classrooms, carousel and block contact teaching, and so on. The teaching and learning plan should ensure that all students are afforded the opportunity to participate meaningfully in teaching and learning.
- 4.5 Institutions must take the following key criteria into consideration in developing their plans:
 - 4.5.1 Students and staff who are able to work remotely where reasonably practicable should be encouraged to do so as long as the pandemic is active and in alignment within the Risk Alert Level applicable at the time. In addition they should have the tools to work remotely.
 - 4.5.2 As a principle, restrictions on the size of gatherings (including all classes and events) within indoor venues and outdoor venues must be managed within the terms of the Regulations

published by the Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs from time to time. However, in terms of this direction, and where practically possible, each institution must determine the area of floor space in square metres of each venue and determine the number of students and employees that may be inside the venue, subject to a stipulated limitation of the floor space and subject to strict adherence to all health protocols and social distancing measures. Should the National Risk Alert Level Regulations applicable at the time, allow for utilising more than 50% of the floor space, institutions must follow the Regulations. This means that all universities will need to carefully manage face to face contact activities and continue using blended and remote teaching and learning methodologies, until these restrictions are lifted completely.

- 4.5.3 Events must align with the national Risk Alert Level Regulations applicable at the time.
- 4.5.4 No maximum percentage of students allowed on campuses or in residences is imposed at the national level, as each institution's spatial realities differ. Each institution needs to control access to campuses and residences in line with their respective carrying capacities and circumstances of national and local safety protocols.
- 4.5.5 Each institution should identify students who live in places that are not conducive to studying, or who lack connectivity, and wherever feasible, facilitate their accommodation in residences, whether on or off-campus. These students should be supported to engage in learning through blended learning processes at the institution, and be permitted to access campus when necessary for practical and other teaching/learning requirements, ensuring that strict COVID-19 health and safety protocols are in place. This needs to be managed at the appropriate institutional level with the proviso that such numbers can be safely accommodated in line with the relevant Regulations at that time.
- 4.5.6 Institutions must manage the process around identifying students who may be accommodated in residences and have access to campuses. Institutions must issue each student with a formal approval at the point of first return to access a campus or reside in a residence. This approval should define the conditions of this permission. No student or staff member should be permitted onto a campus or residence without this permission.
- 4.5.7 All institutions should implement strict health and safety protocols with the support of Higher Health. COVID-19 Health and Safety Committees, and other relevant institutional committees, should continue to operate and be vigilant to minimise the risks of super spreading events.
- 4.5.8 All institutional plans must meet the requirements of the health and safety directives published by the Department of Employment and Labour in *Government Gazette* No. 43751 of 01 October 2020, or later amendments that may follow.
- 4.5.9 Management of in-person examinations and assessments needs to be done with specific consideration to health and safety protocols. Higher Health has published protocols in this regard and these must be adhered to at all times. Emphasis needs to be on ensuring:
 - (a) Engineering controls: what can be done to the exam environment to reduce transmission, such as ensuring adequate cross ventilation and sufficient space in the venue.
 - (b) Administrative controls: what can be arranged to reduce transmission, such as COVID-19 screening, hand hygiene, cough etiquette and surface cleaning, disinfection, including environmental cleaning between each exam.
- 4.5.10 Further, the Higher Health protocol details preparation of the exam centre before, during and after the exam. In cases where physical attendance at an examination is necessary and large venues with good ventilation are available, the maximum number of individuals in the venue may be relaxed, provided that:
 - (a) There is at least a 1.5m distance between each examination table;

- (b) All windows and doors remain open throughout;
- (c) All students and staff in the venue wear masks at all times;
- (d) Hand sanitisers are available on entry into the venue and that all individuals entering the venue are screened;
- (e) Not more than 50% of the venue capacity is exceeded;
- (f) After the exam, the invigilator should transport boxes of scripts to a designated secure storage site for quarantine overnight. The scripts can be sent to examiners for marking after a minimum of 12 hours.

4.5.11 All students residing in HEI residences and accommodation should sign an agreement that they commit to safe behaviour and will not participate in off-campus activities that are risky during the time that the Regulations are still in force. There should be a complete ban on all social gatherings at all institutions when Alert Levels 5, 4 and 3 have been declared, either nationally or in specified hotspots. This may be relaxed under Levels 2 and 1 lockdown regulations and aligned with the Risk Alert Level applicable at the time.

4.5.12 Institutions must have clear protocols and alternative work and study arrangements for those staff members and students who may be more vulnerable to the virus because of age and/or comorbidities and are, therefore, unable to attend activities in person.

4.5.13 There may be constraints in accommodating all staff on HEI campuses due to various reasons, including risk related to age and/or comorbidities, shared office spaces and so on. Each HEI should determine which staff need to return based on their academic and operational requirements and, where necessary, consider a range of options such as bringing back staff on rotation and allowing for those who can function remotely to continue to do so.

5. Campus health and safety

- 5.1 All private and public higher education institutions must ensure that their infrastructure and facilities meet the requirements for the safe accommodation of staff and students at the applicable Risk Alert Level.
- 5.2 It is critical that all institutions adhere to the required health and safety protocols defined through the Risk Alert Level Regulations applicable at the time. This includes the need to screen all individuals entering campuses and residences, to ensure that physical distancing is practiced, to supervise the compulsory wearing of masks, ongoing environmental cleaning and so on.
- 5.3 High-risk areas, for example, libraries laboratories and lecture venues in use, must be identified and regularly monitored. Frequent cleaning and sanitising in these areas should be implemented.
- 5.4 Wearing masks in public spaces is mandatory for all staff and students at all times. In terms of the Regulations published in the Government Notice No. R. 480 of 29 April 2020 (as amended) not wearing a mask under Alert Level 3 Regulation is a criminal offence which can lead to arrest.
- 5.5 It is necessary to ensure that all services, including transport and shuttle services, operate with all the required health and safety protocols in place. It is the responsibility of institutions and/or service providers to ensure this is rigorously and consistently enforced. It is essential to communicate the message that whilst the institution must adhere to all the safety regulations that are in place to protect the health and safety of the HEI community, individual staff and students also have an obligation to take personal responsibility for their own health and safety and of those that they will come into contact with.
- 5.6 HIGHER HEALTH'S Guidelines and Protocols for COVID-19 should be utilised. These include:

5.6.1 Guideline on the Management of COVID-19 within PSET Institutions

<https://higherhealth.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Guidelines-for-Post-School-Education-and-Training-PSET-Institutions-for-management-of-and-response-to-the-COVID-19-outbreak.pdf>.

5.6.2 Guideline on Managing Mental Health and Substance Abuse In relation to COVID-19

<http://higherhealth.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/GUIDEL1.pdf>

5.6.3 Protocol for Screening, Testing, Contact Tracing, Self-Isolation, and Linkage to Care for the COVID-19 programme within the Post School Education & Training (PSET) Sector. This protocol among other matters includes: Mass Screening at Campus Entry Points through establishment of Screening Stations and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) Precautions & Prevention for Student Volunteers, front line staff as well as all students and staff.

<https://higherhealth.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/Q6/HIGHER-HEALTH-COVID-19-Protocol-on-Screening-Testing-Linkage-to-Care-for-the-PSET.pdf>

5.6.4 Protocol on Routine Cleaning for COVID-19 Prevention at Post School Education & Training (PSET) institutions.

<https://higherhealth.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/HIGHER-HEALTH-COVID-19-Protocol-on-Routine-Cleaning-at-PSET-institutions.pdf>

5.6.5 Student Volunteer Protocol for the COVID-19 programme within the PSET Sector.

<https://higherhealth.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/HIGHER-HEALTH-COVID-19-Protocol-on-Student-Staff-Volunteer-Programme-for-the-PSET.pdf>

5.6.6 Protocol Post a Positive COVID-19 Result.

<http://higherhealth.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/HIGHER-HEALTH-Protocol-Post-a-COVID19-Positive-Result.pdf>

5.6.7 Protocol on managing cluster outbreaks within PSET institutions. This contains five COVID-19 scenarios which PSET administrators might have to manage. These range from those that occur at an individual level and pose a relatively low risk, to cluster outbreaks of many students and staff becoming positive in a short time-frame that may carry very high risks to the entire campus's health and wellness staff and student community.

<http://higherhealth.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/HIGHER-HEALTH-Protocol-on-Managing-Clusters-of-Outbreak-of-COVID-19-within-the-PSET-Institutions.pdf>

5.7 Daily screening (and COVID-19 testing where symptoms dictate) of all staff and students entering the campus must be put in place. The Higher Health screening tools remain available to all institutions and may be utilised for daily screening.

Higher Health's HealthCheck is considered a suitable tool to assist with the daily screening at HEIs. It is available in the following ways:

- Download using the URL for the webform: healthcheck.higherhealth.ac.za
- Add to WhatsApp contacts: **0600 11 0 000**

<https://wa.me/27600110000?text=hi>

- Dial using USSD line *134*832*2#

- Students and staff are encouraged to conduct a daily HealthCheck through their channel of choice prior leaving their places of residence, alternatively, at the screening stations before

entering campus. Presentation of a HealthCheck passport at entry points allows quick clearance towards entry into campus and minimising queues and reducing risk of transmission at these common areas.

- 5.8 All institutions must identify isolation and quarantine facilities and develop and publicise protocols for any staff or students who present with symptoms or test positive. Testing and contact tracing will be supported by the National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD), the National Department of Health (NDoH) and Provincial Health Departments.
- 5.9 All institutions need to prepare for managing possible cluster outbreaks across campuses, residences and accommodations as per HIGHER HEALTH'S protocol on managing cluster outbreaks. In response to COVID-19 cluster outbreaks, on campuses, institutions are advised to liaise with Higher Health that can assist towards an establishment of COVID-19 Cluster Investigation Teams. The cluster investigation teams comprise COVID-19 chairpersons of the institutions, Department of Health, NICD, WHO, together with National Health Laboratory Service and HIGHER HEALTH. The Cluster Investigation Teams aim to, but are not limited to:
- Early testing and quick results from laboratories on COVID-19
 - Early Isolation of confirmed COVID-19 cases to established health facilities
 - Contact tracing and same day testing of contacts
 - Cleaning and disinfection of all affected residencies and common areas
 - Surveillance Testing through District rapid response teams, and case investigation teams
 - Infection control measures, compliance, and risk monitoring
- 5.10 Guidance for students/staff regarding age vulnerabilities and the prevalence of comorbidities must be in place. Campus Health Clinics, where in place, should be guided by the NICD protocols and the NDoH guidelines to handle cases for referral if they arise and in public institutions will be supported by Higher Health with the necessary training and advice.

6. Student accommodation and residences

- 6.1 Students returning to HEI-owned and managed accommodation and residences should be identified at institutional level, concomitant with numbers that can be accommodated to enable physical distancing, the handling of communal spaces, hygiene requirements and dining hall arrangements.
- 6.2 Institutions must identify the specific students¹ who may return to residences and provide formal approval to validate their return.
- ¹ This implies that some students who may be permitted to return to residences may be supported through remote teaching and learning methodologies and will not return to campus for contact teaching.
- 6.3 Students who live in private rented accommodation may return, but their access to campus may be limited to keep the campus population manageable, consistent with the appropriate Risk Alert Level applicable at the relevant time for mitigation of the spread of the infection.
- 6.4 There is no limit to the maximum percentage of students allowed to return to student accommodation and residences. However, institutional plans must demonstrate how the number of students in a residence will be accommodated safely whilst adhering to all health and safety protocols in place.
- 6.5 It is understood that many student accommodation and residences include shared rooms, and it would be difficult for institutions to return all students that require accommodation without utilising shared room spaces. This requires that careful protocols and rules are put in place and adhered to in order to reduce the risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission. For example, HEIs should

ensure vigilant daily screening protocols are put in place, particularly in rooms accommodating two students, in addition to the normal screening and cleaning protocols that should be in place.

- 6.6 Each HEI must make its own decision and plans about how to manage the integration of students into student accommodation and residences and to do so in a way that ensures health and safety protocols are stringently followed. Permission letters should be issued to enable strict controls for managing access to student accommodation and residences.
- 6.7 Institutions are advised to liaise with HIGHER HEALTH that can provide training and skills transfer to private accommodation managers and staff; in-house residence wardens; support staff and other frontline staff including cleaning and security staff, in COVID-19 prevention, protocols and understanding on infection control in communal areas such as dining halls, cafeterias, including cooking and cleaning spaces and shared accommodations which present areas of heightened risk of exposure and transmission of the virus. Training on routine cleaning is guided by the Higher Health protocol referred to under 5.6.4 above.
- 6.8 Institutions must develop detailed plans for occupancy of student accommodation and residences and provide guidance to approved/accredited private accommodation providers. Strategies should be put in place in dining halls, kitchen facilities and other social spaces to ensure that physical distancing and health strategies are adhered to. Strategies and plans should prioritise vulnerable students and staff.
- 6.9 Students residing in student accommodation and residences should sign an agreement that they will commit to safe behaviour and that they will not, during this time, participate in off campus activities that are risky.

7. Psychosocial assistance for staff and students

- 7.1 Those in need of psychosocial assistance for stress, anxiety, depression, etc., may seek help through the HIGHER HEALTH 24 hour toll free crisis line which is available in all 11 official languages as detailed below:
 - Toll-free call 0800 36 36 36
 - SMS 43-33-6

8. Graduation ceremonies and other events

- 8.1 Physical graduation ceremonies should only be held aligned with the disaster regulations applicable at the time, subject to health and safety protocols and limited numbers. Institutions should also continue to utilise alternative graduation methods, including online graduations and delivery of certificates, particularly at Levels 3, 4 and 5 of the national lockdown.
- 8.2 All physical events such as student parties and other high-risk events should be suspended at all times while Level 5, 4 and 3 regulations are in force. Consideration may be given to specific events taking place during level 2 and 1 of the lockdown.
- 8.3 Conferences, workshops and sports events must be aligned with the Risk Alert Level applicable at the time.
- 8.4 Where there is ambiguity or doubt in the interpretation of these directions, events must align with the national Risk Alert Level Regulations applicable at the time.

9. International students and international travel

- 9.1 International students who return to South Africa for study must follow the protocols put in place by the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) and other relevant authorities when entering the country. This includes bringing along verifiable results of COVID-19

tests that were administered as per the Risk Alert Level Regulations or relevant Directions applicable at the time before arrival in South Africa and the possible need to quarantine which could be at the expense of the traveller. This information should be provided to students before they return.

- 9.2 International students who cannot enter South Africa due to restrictions imposed by their home countries or the South African authorities must be supported through remote teaching and learning where reasonably practicable until they can return.
- 9.3 There are still significant levels of risk attached to international travel, particularly travel to high-risk countries. The list of countries that are considered high-risk is constantly being reviewed by the National Department of Health depending on the pandemic state in those countries. This may result in South African travellers to those countries being stranded abroad. International travel for work, for example, international conferences, should only be permitted under exceptional circumstances. Staff should be encouraged to continue with online international collaboration as much as possible until such restrictions are lifted.

10. PSET vaccination

- 10.1 On 3 January 2021, the Department of Health announced that it aims to procure and vaccinate two-thirds of the country's population by the end of 2021 in order to achieve population immunity. The National Department of Health will coordinate the Vaccine Rollout with all provincial health departments and the private healthcare sector.
- 10.2 HIGHER HEALTH is developing a PSET vaccination strategy with support from the Department of Health, for inclusion of PSET staff and students in the national vaccination programme. The PSET vaccination strategy will be released soon to the sector, after the consultations have concluded.
- 10.3 The phased approach of vaccination to the population will be aligned to the National Department of Health strategy, towards prioritising frontline PSET health care staff, health science students, essential and frontline support staff, staff and students with comorbidities, as well as general staff and students. The phased approach will use a queue system, towards enrolment and registration of the particular sub-set of PSET population, on the national registration system, called the Electronic Vaccination Data System (EVDS).

<https://vaccine.enroll.health.gov.za/#/>

Currently the EVDS system is open for registration of our PSET healthcare staff and health sciences students. For any queries please contact HIGHER HEALTH or nearest provincial department of Health office.

- 10.4 Universities are encouraged to:
 - Develop campus information and communication systems towards authentic and trusted news sources regarding the national COVID-19 vaccination programme.
 - Keep the campus community informed with accurate information and regularly update this as government plans develop on vaccination. This can counter the spread of misinformation. Useful toolkits can be found here:

<https://sacoronavirus.co.za/tag/vaccine-toolkits/>

Information about the different vaccines can be found here:

<https://sacoronavirus.co.za/2021/01/27/overview-of-the-vaccines-slideshow/>