#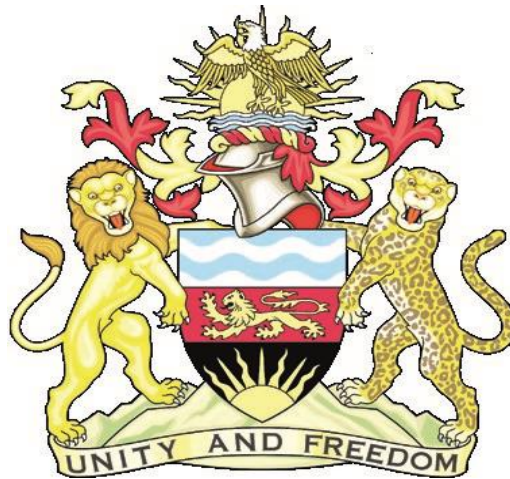 MINISTRY OF EDUCATION NATIONAL PLANNING TASKFORCE ON RE-OPENING OF SCHOOLS, COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES DURING COVID 19 PANDEMIC

GUIDELINES FOR RE-OPENING OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

04 JULY 2020

1.0.   INTRODUCTION

Malawi Government, like many other nations, has developed a National Response Plan of Action and taken several steps to suppress and control the spread of COVID 19 following the declaration made by World Health Organisation (WHO) of COVID 19 (Coronavirus) as a global pandemic. On 20th March 2020, the State President declared a state of disaster and subsequently all public and private schools, colleges and universities were closed on 23rd March 2020. Ministry of Education Science and Technology has developed various distance learning programmes and materials to allow for continuity of learning while schools, colleges and universities are closed; these include radio programmes for primary, online learning materials and non-digital learning sets for secondary.

Recently, the Ministry instituted a National Planning Taskforce to coordinate the safe return to schools, colleges and universities, and management of COVID19 in the education sector. One of the mandates of the Taskforce is to advise the Ministry on the reopening of Basic Education institutions (Pre-Primary. Primary, Secondary Schools, Teacher Training Colleges, Adult Education Institutions and Universities. The Taskforce has since made a proposal to reopen, schools, colleges and universities on 13th July 2020 subject to approval by the Presidential Taskforce on COVID 19.

The guidelines have been developed to assist colleges and universities apply and enforce COVID 19 preventive measures after re-opening.

2.0.   INFORMATION ON COVID 19 AND PREVENTIVE MEASURES

COVID 19, also called Novel Coronavirus belongs to a large family of viruses causing a wide spectrum of illness, ranging from very mild i.e. Common cold to severe illness such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV).

Coronaviruses are zoonotic, meaning they are transmitted between animals and people. The virus is transmitted through direct contact with respiratory droplets of an infected person (generated through coughing and sneezing). Individuals can also be infected from and touching surfaces contaminated with the virus and touching their face (e.g., eyes, nose, mouth). The COVID-19 virus may survive on surfaces for several hours, but simple disinfectants can kill it. The incubation period, that is, the time interval from infection with the virus to onset of symptoms is up to 14 days, but this may be subject to change as the disease evolves and new information is discovered. People are infectious when they are

showing symptoms of the disease and very few cases have been identified in people who have mild symptoms amongst their very close contacts.

The main signs and symptoms of COVID 19 infection include respiratory symptoms, fever, cough, shortness of breath and breathing difficulties. In more severe cases, infection can cause pneumonia, severe acute respiratory syndrome, kidney failure and even death. These symptoms are similar to the flu (influenza) or the common cold, which are a lot more common in Malawi than COVID-19. This is why testing is required to confirm if someone has COVID-19.

Currently, there is no available vaccine for COVID-19. However, many of the symptoms can be treated and getting early care from a healthcare provider can make the disease less dangerous. There are several clinical trials that are being conducted to evaluate potential therapeutics for COVID-19. Most people (about 80%) recover from the disease without needing special treatment and others become infected but don't develop any symptoms and don't feel unwell.

How can one prevent himself or herself from contracting COVID 19? In order to contain the spread of COVID 19, the following are the preventive measures:

- Wash hands thoroughly and regularly with soap;
- Maintain a physical distance of at least 1 metre;
- Do not touch your eyes, nose of mouth with unwashed hands;
- Cover your nose and mouth with your elbow or a tissue when you cough or sneeze and dispose of the tissue in a bin;
- Stay home if you have flu-like symptoms;
- Avoid overcrowded places;
- Proper use of face masks;
- If you have a fever, cough and difficulty breathing call 54747 or 929 toll free for guidance.

3.0. OBJECTIVE OF THE GUIDELINES

The main objective of these guidelines is to ensure that colleges and universities observe basic standards for ensuring safety of students, lecturers and administrative staff as they operate during the COVID 19 era. Adherence to these guidelines is expected to minimize the risk of spread of COVID 19 infections in public and private learning institutions. These

guidelines are applicable to teacher training colleges, technical colleges and vocational education institutions, public and private universities, which provide face to face training.

4.0.   OPERATIONAL PRINCIPLES

These guidelines have been developed in line with the following key principles:

i.   Balance between the right to life and right to education;
ii.   Equity and inclusion in adherence to guidelines for re-opening and safety with special attention to needs of children with special needs, girls, orphans, the needy, and other vulnerable groups.
iii.   Institutional capacity and readiness to enforce preventive measures- a rapid assessment is needed to ascertain the capacity and readiness;
iv.   Use of credible evidence/data for decision making-especially data around sustained downward trend of new infections or deaths, reduction of the risk of severe disease or death, high level of confidence that adjustments would not risk a second peak & evidence suggesting that the health system can cope with large numbers of cases;
v.   Applying lessons from other colleges and universities in Africa and the world.

5.0.   SCOPE OF THE GUIDELINES

These guidelines cover the following key areas that are essential to the operations of higher education learning institutions.

- Pre-conditions for Re-opening colleges and universities
- Planning and Management
- Faculty, Staff and Students
- Classrooms, Laboratories, Common and Conference Rooms
- Teaching and Learning Environment
- College Clinics
- Students Halls of Residents
- Catering Services
- Recreation
- House Keeping
- Research Activity
- Entry into Colleges Premises

The details of each are provided in the following sub-sections.

5.1. Pre-conditions for Re-opening Colleges and Universities

In line with the basic principles outlines in the preceding section, the following pre-conditions are necessary to bear in mind before re-opening:

- Colleges and Universities should re-open after consultations with health officials from the Ministry of Health;
- Colleges and Universities should re-open when credible statistics show a downward trend in the number of positive cases and deaths;
- Institutions that demonstrate higher level of capacity to enforce preventive measures shall be allowed to open and operate. This shall require a rapid institutional assessment prior to re-opening to decide on state of affairs;
- Colleges and Universities should reopen for senior management, lecturers/tutors and support staff first to prepare for the return of learners;
- Colleges and Universities should prepare relevant policies and guidelines to ensure compliance preventive and safety measures when students are on campus.
- Re-opening for students shall be in phases, prioritizing final years and those that closed at the time before writing exams. The other students shall be called on campus after observing the COVID 19 situation and based on the context at the college or university.

5.2. Planning and Management

- The Colleges and Universities must develop a policy and plan to accommodate COVID-19 prevention and management, and enforcement mechanisms, bearing in mind the pre-conditions and principles above.
- The policy and plan should include management activities such as case management of students, faculty and staff with COVID-19 symptoms and /or diagnosis and all persons under quarantine after exposure, including placement in isolation/quarantine housing, psychological support, support for basic needs, and ongoing monitoring while isolated.
- Provide for outbreak management including procedures for closing campuses.
- Set up committees at various levels for managing and enforcing prevention guidelines. The committees should be broad based and ensure all interested groups including students and support staff are integrated. Before discharging their duties, the committees should be trained/oriented in their work and always work hand in hand with Health Personnel.

- Ensure that students with disabilities are included in the planning and management of the COVID 19 pandemic.
- The college and university should popularize and disseminate information about COVID 19 spread, treatment and prevention through various media including leaflets, posters, website, social media, notices on the boards etc.
- All colleges and universities should be thoroughly disinfected before reopening.
- Constantly talk about Covid-19 prevention measures during Colleges student and staff assemblies and frequently invite health personnel to provide brief talks.

5.3. Faculty, Staff and Students

- Student admission/registration- colleges and universities should integrate in their admission policies (if not done so), provision for cushioning students in need in relation to payment of fees. Due to economic challenges posed to parents/guardians in the wake of COVID 19, institution should provide for increased bursaries, loans, and staggered approach to payment of fees for students in need. Consider non-generic (ODeL and non-first-degree program) students for study loans to reduce financial impact incurred as a result of Covid-19.
- Faculty, staff and students' protection and safety are critical to reopening, and measures must be taken to ensure that faculty, staff and students have appropriate protective controls, plans, supplies, and guidance to safely return to work and school respectively.
- The College and University management must ensure that faculty, staff and students are protected, trained and adequately prepared to resume their primary responsibilities as well as their role in reducing transmission of COVID-19.
- The College and University management should provide opportunities for open discussions to reassure faculty and staff that their health and safety are paramount.
- Faculty, staff and students must have access to COVID-19 basic information, formal education/training. The College and University COVID-19 Response Committee in collaboration with Core Management shall recommend the format and frequency of training and develop a system to monitor compliance (if the training is deemed mandatory). The training shall offer the following minimum content:
    - A general overview of COVID-19 including infection prevention and control measures (hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, physical

distancing, cleaning and disinfection), signs and symptoms, testing, transmission, and credible resources.

- College and University -specific policies and practices regarding COVID-19 infection prevention and control, College and University health and safety resources, use of PPE including masks/face coverings and actions if sick.

- All faculty, staff and students, and their visitors shall be screened before entering the College and University premises.

- Faculty, staff and students should follow the following instruction:
  - Minimize teaching contact hours. Limit face to face meetings and stop using break/common rooms and having unnecessary visitors at the College and University. Improve internet network on campus for easy access of online learning.
  - Work towards much lower/subsidized internet, if possible free bundles, so that all students can have full access to e-learning.
  - Teaching should be done using class groups not class as a whole; this will promote social distancing among students and the lecturers.
  - Monitor for presence of COVID-19 symptoms.
  - If symptoms develop, stay where they are and contact the safety officer who will provide further instructions leading to investigations and management.
  - Wear masks or face coverings in all public spaces and spaces used by multiple people, this shall include classrooms.
  - Know where to find local information on COVID-19 and local trends of COVID-19 cases.
  - For clinical placement, students should be provided with adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) before clinical placements. Where risk allowances are being paid for staff, student nurses who are doing clinical practice should have a special funding for risk allowances as their work is similar to that of a qualified nurse.
- Plan for digital and distance learning where possible.

- Core Management, Deans, Head of Departments and Heads of Sections should:
  - Consider phased return of faculty and staff to no more than 30% of the workforce at a time, staggering every 2-4 weeks for full return. In addition, stagger shifts to reduce the number of people at the College at the same time.
  - Consider single occupancy in each office. If it is not possible, ensure that the workstations are two metres apart. Place plexiglass or other barrier in

workspaces where people must face each other or unable to be two metres apart.

- Install plexiglass barrier at high-visited areas such as reception desks.
- Procure sufficient disinfectant products and cleaning supplies so that faculty and staff can frequently clean their own workspaces.
- Conduct meetings electronically, even when working on campus. If meetings cannot be conducted virtually, keep participants to fewer than 10 participants and enforce appropriate physical distancing and wearing of masks or face coverings.
- Encourage those with increased risk of COVID-19 severe illness and death (those aged $\geq$ 60 years and underlying illnesses) to as far as possible: work from home and avoid potential exposures.
- Limit inter-campus teaching to avoid excessive traveling.

5.4. Classrooms, Laboratories, Common and Conference Rooms & Library

- Post maximum occupancy on the door of each room to accommodate appropriate physical distancing.
- Provide sanitizing supplies for individuals to clean their areas before and after use.
- Provide hand wash facilities including running water, soap and/or hand sanitizer at all entrances
- Replace frequently touched items (doors, water dispensers etc) with no touch options.
- Restrict or limit number of users per time in the library to keep social distance and disinfect the library after each group.
- Consider allowing reserved books to be used even outside the library. Strictly set time limit for how long a student must use the library. Introduce a 24 - hour shift in order to serve the students well and adequately.

5.5. Teaching and Learning Environment

- Allow remote teaching and learning as far as possible.
- Create multiple sections or shifts to reduce numbers.
- Ensure that students are provided with adequate PPE for clinical practice.
- Develop simulations of clinical scenarios for students to practice clinical skills.

5.6.   College and University Clinics

- The College and University clinics should plan for containment; stoking up PPE and medical supplies, updating policies and procedures, training staff and addressing the budget.
- Develop processes to limit student contact with the clinics.   Provide consultations through electronically if possible.
- Screen all students and staff for respiratory symptoms and check temperature (ideally with infrared or laser device) before entering the clinic.
- Develop COVID-19 surveillance (symptom-based or lab-based) system targeting all individuals accessing care.
- Require all patients to wear face masks
- Prohibit visitors, children, or guardians from entering the clinic.
- Develop COVID-19 referral mechanisms linking to the local health system.
- Develop a plan for transporting patients with respiratory symptoms to the College and University clinic, hostel/housing or hospital as needed.
- Re-arrange all waiting and other clinic areas to promote physical distancing.
- Implement signage throughout the clinic communicating reasons for physical distancing
- Provide psycho-social support (including counselling) for students who may need it as COVID 19 could have negative impact on student performance. Where possible, there should be allocation of Psychologist in such facilities to be helping such individuals to work on stress management.
- Adhere to Ministry of Health guidelines on COVID-19 infection prevention and control.

5.7.   Students Halls of Residents

- Ensure that physical distancing of 2 metres is maintained between students' beds.
- Ensure that the bathrooms are cleaned with appropriate disinfectants frequently.
- Encourage students to wear face masks in all common places.
- Restrict events and social activities as per current physical distancing guidance.
- Re-arrange seating in common areas to ensure proper physical distancing.
- Establish allowable occupancy and develop plans to monitor and enforce.
- Restrict access by non-resident students, outside guests, non-resident staff and others.

- Widely post information in common areas about COVID-19 prevention.
- Frequent reminders of proper hand hygiene (verbally, posters, videos) with hand sanitizer widely available in common arears and rooms.
- Enhance cleaning of all common areas and high touch surfaces.
- Where students are residing outside campus, they need to adhere to guidelines from local and national authorities.
- College and University authorities should notify all landlords who are privately accommodating students off campus to observe the COVID 19 preventive guidelines.

5.8. Catering Services

- Limit number of people dining in the cafeteria at one time in order to maintain appropriate physical distancing. This can be achieved by the following approaches:
  - Access control: once the target number is reached, patrons are only allowed to enter when another customer leaves.
  - Cohort dining: establishing dining times by admitting a specific group of customers/diners at a time.
  - Physically spaced (2-metres) floor markers for waiting lines outside and inside the cafeteria.
  - Appropriately spaced and limited numbers of tables and chairs per table.
  - Eliminate buffet-style self-serve food or beverage stations and replacing with staff-served meals stations.
  - Extend meals time to reduce congestion in cafeterias
  - Provide take away meals including arranging food delivery to students in isolation or quarantine.
  - Subsidize meals so that students are not forced to go into communities looking for cheaper meals.

5.9. Recreation
  - o Suspend all recreational or sporting activities
  - o Consider a phased return to recreation activities based on potential risk of transmission in each sport.
  - o Schools should have maximum restrictions on outing like going to shops.; Groceries and all necessities should be readily available within College and University campuses through the tuck-shops.

5.10. House Keeping

o Ensure that housekeeping is provided with PPE and guidelines on appropriate techniques for cleaning and disinfecting common, non-clinical spaces.

5.11. Research Activity
o Follow institutional and national IRB COVID-19 Research guidelines.

5.12. Entry into Colleges Premises
o Ensure that all entry points to the College and University campuses have hand hygiene equipment. Everyone entering the College and University premises shall be screened.
o Colleges and Universities should ensure restriction of visitors to campuses. All visitors should be attended to and screened by the gate.
o Chlorinated doormats and/or disinfecting booths placed on designated points.

6.0. Enforcement of the Guidelines

- College and University Senior Management and Special Committees should work hand in hand with student bodies to ensure full compliance to guidelines.
- Policies and plans should provide for penalties against non-compliance.
- The Ministry of Education will provide sanctions for non-compliance including suspension of responsible officers and closure of Colleges and Universities.

7.0. Conclusion

Government of Malawi through various ministries including the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MOEST); Ministry of Labour, Skills and Innovation (MoLSI); Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability, and Social Welfare(MoGCDSW); and Ministry of Health (MoH) will ensure that all citizens are protected from contracting the COVID 19 pandemic. As such during the re-opening of Colleges and Universities it is imperative that all responsible authorities take appropriate measures to make sure all staff, students and lectures/tutors are safe and prevented from contracting the COVID 19. Government will provide policy guidelines and put in place monitoring and inspection teams to ensure that all education institutions particularly those in the tertiary level operate in line with the guidelines contained in this document and guidance provided from time to time by health personnel and other relevant bodies. A checklist produced by the Ministry shall be used to assess compliance during monitoring. The Ministry will also mobilize and allocate resources for the implementation of COVID-19 prevention and control provisions in colleges and universities where necessary.