



STATEMENT ON THE TEMPORARY CLOSURE OF THE UNIVESITY OF MALAWI

Management of the University of Malawi (UNIMA) wishes to inform the general public that the University has been closed temporarily from today 2nd November 2022 until further notice. The closure is due to ongoing protests by students against what they find to be an unfair 2022/2023 academic calendar which, among other things, provides for a five-months break after the first semester. The protests have rendered the campus unsafe for both staff and students.

The calendar in question was adopted in April 2022 in order to accommodate two first year cohorts, one selected in 2021 (a total of 1689) and another 2022 students selected in 2022. By April 2022, the 2021 cohort had spent almost a year and half at home after being selected following the closure all academic institutions due to Covid-19. Management considered several options to accommodate the two cohorts including letting the 2022 cohort wait for a year before starting their studies like their 2021 counterparts and bringing the two first year groups as a double cohort. The University finally resolved to stagger the teaching of the two first year cohorts, that is, the two groups would alternate their time on campus. The rationale was that the campus did not have enough teaching space and staff to accommodate the two first year groups at once, especially because first year classes tend to be large due to generic subject combinations. The envisaged plan was that the staggered first year cohorts would merge in the second year where classes get smaller as students beginning to specialize. Meanwhile, Management would also be exploring other ways of expanding teaching space and increasing numbers of teaching staff.

The student body, through the Student Representative Council (SRC) raised concerns on the academic calendar. On 11th August, 2022 Management took heed of the students' concerns and invited the SRC to a roundtable discussion where the SRC presented their concerns.

Management explained that the academic calendar was arrived at after considering several scenarios and the students were invited to submit any additional scenarios that they had for consideration by Senate. In UNIMA, like in any university, Senate is the supreme decision-making body on academic matters of the university. Management continuously engaged the SRC on the issue of the academic calendar through various University established structures.

The SRC's suggestions were not immediately considered by Senate because by that time Senate was being reconstituted alongside other university structures such as schools. The appointment on 1st September, 2022 of Acting Executive Deans who are key members of Senate, meant that Senate would soon be reconstituted. However, on 14th September 2022, some concerned students obtained an injunction from the High Court against the reconstitution of schools and subsequent appointment of Acting Executive Deans (as provided for in the University of Malawi Act No. 18 of 2019). This further delayed the reconstitution of Senate which also meant further delay in the consideration of the SRC's grievances by Senate. The injunction was vacated on 22nd September 2022 and Senate was finally reconstituted. On 20th October, 2022, Senate, which is a statutory organ under the UNIMA Act, met for the first time and the academic calendar was one of the prioritised agenda items that Senate considered. After noting the complex nature of the issue, Senate resolved to appoint a special taskforce to consider all possible scenarios taking into consideration interests of both students and staff. Considering the urgency of the matter, Senate gave the Taskforce until 7th November 2022 to review the calendar options and make recommendations to Senate. It has to be emphasized that the fact that Senate appointed a Taskforce, with strict timelines, is evidence that Senate saw merit in the students' grievances and their calls for the revision of the calendar.

While Management was waiting for the Senate-initiated processes to unfold and be completed, the student body resolved to hold a vigil from 27th October, 2022 to force Management to suspend the calendar. During the said vigil, students blocked all roads leading to campus thereby denying members of staff access to the university campus. Staff, including Management, have had no access to the university campus as well as their offices from the evening of 26th October 2022 to date. This blockade of the campus has disrupted such other core academic activities such as research that staff engage in besides teaching.

On Monday, 31st October, 2022, Management invited key stakeholders in the matter to a roundtable discussion to find an amicable resolution to the matter. The stakeholders included the SRC, Chancellor College Academic Staff Union (CCASU) and University Workers Trade Union (UWTU). During the discussion, the SRC reiterated their request that Management suspends the calendar particularly for the second semester of the 2022/2023 academic year. Management accepted the SRC's request to suspend the calendar and informed the SRC that details of the revised calendar would be communicated once Senate considered and approved the recommendations from the Taskforce within the week beginning 7th November, 2022.

Management then requested SRC to call off the vigil so that normal university business could resume on campus while waiting for Senate to come up with the revised calendar that would accommodate the interests of all stakeholders. To Management's surprise, the SRC presented a new demand that they would only call off the vigil if, apart from suspending the calendar, Management adopted the SRC suggestion that all students including the two cohorts of first years should report for their second semester in January 2023. This would mean a total of 10,043 students on campus posing further challenges with regard to teaching space, teaching staff and other resources. Management informed the SRC that it would be too premature to commit to such an arrangement before the Taskforce makes its recommendations to Senate. Nevertheless, Management acknowledged that the SRC's suggestion would be one of the options to be scrutinized and considered by the Taskforce.

Following what they deemed Management's refusal to endorse the suggestion that all students report for the second semester in January 2023, the SRC declared the meeting had reached a deadlock and that they would, therefore, continue with their vigil which meant continued blockade of the campus.

Management requested the SRC to revisit their response and communicate their decision to Management by Tuesday, 1st November, 2022. At 3:30pm on the said date, SRC wrote Management indicating that they still stuck to their decision and that the vigil would continue indefinitely until the calendar was changed and Management adopted the suggestion that all students enroll for the second semester in January 2023.

The general public must also take note that both CCASU and UWTU indicated their willingness to accommodate the wishes of the students to suspend the academic calendar for the second semester of 2022/2023 academic year while Senate works on modalities of accommodating the interests of all stakeholders.

As things stand, Management accepted the main request of the SRC which is to suspend the calendar for the second semester. The stalemate is over the ancillary issue of what option should be employed in view of the challenges posed by the double cohort of first years.

Cognizant of the fact that the vigils are a security threat to the University community and the general public, and also considering that the University campus is no longer a safe working and learning environment, Management resolved to close the University while waiting for direction from Senate which should come within the week beginning 7th November 2022. Meanwhile, Management would like to assure the general public that it is working tirelessly to resolve the matter and have the students return to campus as soon as possible.



Mary Wasiri (Mrs)
ACTING REGISTRAR
2nd November, 2022