

Resumption of Classes

To: Faculty Members

Dear Colleagues,

This has not been an easy start to the year, to say the least. As the number of confirmed 2019-nCoV cases crosses 40,000, with more than 1,000 fatalities, we cannot but be deeply concerned. Will the epidemic stabilize by the end of this month? Even then, according to one model at least, the number of infected persons may reach half a million. Will community transmission take hold in Hong Kong? Will the 2019-nCoV spread globally, causing waves after waves of infection?

There are many unanswered questions, but three things are clear. First, our priority must be to safeguard the health and wellbeing of our students, staff, and faculty. Second, every effort must be made to mitigate the chances of an outbreak on campus—even a small cluster of cases will have serious consequences. Quarantine and social distancing in general will help lower the speed of transmission. Third, we must ensure that the learning outcomes of every single course are delivered fully, initially through our e-learning platforms.

The University's Emergency Response Group chaired by the Vice-Chancellor, the Committee on Health Promotion and Protection, the Faculty and Graduate School Deans, and the Heads/Masters of Colleges have been monitoring the situation closely and providing appropriate responses as the epidemic develops. The novel coronavirus FAQ page is updated regularly, to ensure clear and timely communication.

Please let me elaborate briefly on two points: e-learning and graduate research.

Online teaching will begin from next Monday. E-learning is not necessarily inferior to conventional modes of teaching and learning. It does require, however, that we do more to reach out to students and cultivate an intellectually vibrant online learning environment. As we all know, teaching is not simply giving out information. Motivating and guiding our students to develop a keen sense of curiosity, to find joy in learning, and to form the discipline and habits of mind for self-directed and lifelong learning remain critical to our core mission in education. Lab-based and studio-based modules will require even greater effort, as effective virtual labs/studios or simulations take time to build. Still, at this critical time, it is paramount that we all go the extra mile to ensure that standards are not compromised, and our students receive the kind of quality education that they both expect and deserve.

The University has significantly enhanced its online teaching and learning capacity, thanks to the tremendous effort of our ITSC colleagues and the Office of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Education. Both synchronous and asynchronous teaching functionalities are available with the cloud-based Zoom platform. Indeed, some faculty members have reported an increase in student interaction using Zoom, though it would require some effort to monitor the incoming chats while lecturing. With additional online consultations

for individual students and video recording of lectures, we should be able to provide an enriching learning experience for our students.

Laptop computers will be available on loan for needy students. Bandwidth has been increased. These measures will help, but in the final analysis the success of any technology-enhanced learning (TEL) depends on the effort of the teachers. I do believe that CUHK can be a world leader in TEL, and we will provide full support for the development of innovative teaching and learning. This is a herculean task, and many technical issues will crop up. Please test things out well in advance and let us know if you encounter any difficulty.

There will be disruptions to our research, and to the work of our graduate students. Nevertheless, to reduce the chances of infection, we ask that our students do not return to campus, undergo a 14-day quarantine if they are returning from the Mainland, which is now required by law, and not to return to their labs unless it is critical.

Lab access deemed essential—e.g., to maintain specialized equipment—requires prior approval of the student's supervisor, Department Chair/School Director, and Faculty Dean. Justification for lab or common study space access should be provided, as well as measures such as rotation or shifts to avoid overcrowding. Access must be carefully monitored, in case contact tracing becomes necessary.

This is not an easy call to make, but in the interest of student health and wellbeing, and indeed public health at large, we must bite the bullet and tough it out over the next couple of weeks. Disciplinary action can result if the above guidelines are breached. I seek your help in explaining to students why it is necessary from an infectious disease control perspective to limit access and providing alternative supervision during this period. For students under quarantine, breaking the quarantine stipulations is now a criminal offence. There are allegations circulating on the internet to the effect that some graduate students feel pressured by their supervisors to return to their labs. Leaving aside their veracity, as a matter of principle this is unethical and cannot be condoned. Such complaints, if lodged formally, will be investigated thoroughly.

I apologize for this long message. I didn't quite expect that my first month at CUHK would be so, shall we say, eventful. I would like to close by thanking all of you for your dedication under these trying circumstances. Please also join me in thanking all our administrative and professional staff, especially those who provide essential services on campus.

It could be the worst of times, but it could also be the best of times, to paraphrase Dickens, if we work together to overcome any obstacles that stand in the way of excellence. I do hope that I can visit you in your Faculty soon. I would like very much to discuss with you then ways for the University to scale even greater heights in education, research, and service.

Yours sincerely,
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