

LETTER TO ALL UNIVERSITY OF RUHUNA STUDENTS

Dear students,

I am writing this letter not only as your Vice Chancellor but also as a MBBS qualified medical officer, MD qualified specialist Paediatrician, a member of the advisory committee on communicable diseases, (ACCD) chaired by the Director General of Health services (DGHS) deciding on the recommendations to GOSL on vaccination policy. I have had the concurrence of the Secretary /Ministry of Health to make this statement.

We are planning to commence the educational activities in the University of Ruhuna physically, for the entire student population as soon as the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) grants permission to start educational institutions in a large scale. This decision of the GOSL will depend on situation of Covid 19 in the country and the success of the vaccination programme.

The vaccination of young people from the age of the 20 to 30 years is not progressing well as expected despite having an uninterrupted supply of the vaccines. While this is handled by the Ministry of Health, UOR has collected data on our own students. The table below gives the details of the vaccination status of the UOR student population. The UOR administration is worried that only 26% of the total student population is fully immunized having taken both doses of the Covid 19 vaccines. Coverage for the first dose is 21 %. They will complete the second dose at the end of October. This analysis has excluded the Faculty of Medicine which is 99.75% immunized for the both doses.

Table 1: Faculty wise vaccination status as of 04.10.2021

Faculty	1 st Dose only %	Vaccination Completed %
Faculty of Agriculture	12.8%	37.5%
Faculty of Allied Health Sciences	13%	47.6%
Faculty of Engineering	20.4%	31%
Faculty of Fisheries and Marine Sciences & Technology	36.5%	37%
Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences	23.8%	24%
Faculty of Management & Finance	14.3%	14%
Faculty of Medicine	0.25%	All other completed.
Faculty of Science	24.7%	26.7%
Faculty of Technology	24.8%	26.4%

The FOM is functioning smoothly with more batches coming in physically to work in a high risk environment while following health guidelines. Other Faculties have low compliance for the vaccination request. The figure of 21% for one dose is not increasing for the last two weeks. This is assumed to be due to **vaccine hesitancy** among young people. If this remains low like this for the next two weeks, we will not be able to commence in house educational activities the UOR as planned. Even if we do, we will have to take drastic measures to maintain separate bio-bubbles for vaccinated and unvaccinated students and close the UOR with the first case of the Covid 19 among students to prevent a large scale outbreak. This is not possible for any University.

The vaccine hesitancy (refusing the vaccine) among young people is a global problem. This has never happened in this scale for any vaccine before in Sri Lanka and it was attributed to high literacy rate and educational standards. However, a massive amount of false information is circulated in social media

about Covid 19 and the vaccines, misleading the community and preventing the uptake of the vaccine by young people. The biggest is fear of subfertility after the Sinopharm vaccine.

False propaganda is disseminated by people less educated on Covid 19, who are unaware about its impact on the civil society, economy, education and the health system. Some of them have conflicts of interest. **We will only come to know the truth about these people months and years later.** This vaccine hesitancy created by false propaganda is also a political game by people who are not interested in success the country could achieve in managing Covid 19, but are happy with failures of the country, **whatever the government is in power.** My letter intends to address false propaganda among UOR students as a successful vaccination strategy would be the best answer to the current pandemic.

Several vaccines are available in the country namely, Sinopharm, Pfizer, Astrazeneca, Sputnik V and Moderna. Sinopharm is/was the only vaccine available in large quantities for us. We have used this vaccine to achieve high coverage of vaccination (Over 50% of the eligible population for both doses by last week). GOSL is planning to procure large stocks of vaccines to cover the entire population in different stages i.e. to reach at least 80% -90% coverage of the eligible population for the vaccination and to give a third dose if required for high risk population groups. Once that is done, we will be able to reopen the entire country for all the activities safely and gradually with health guidelines. Our lives will not be normal as before Covid 19 for an uncertain period of time. But, we will be able to have many, day to day activities like in house learning physically inside the universities, open schools as we will be confident that large and severe outbreaks with unacceptable number of deaths would not be a risk in the community.

Large outbreaks will disrupt lives, induce fear and anxiety among people and will destroy economy and education. The country is spending a colossal amount of money in billions of rupees to vaccinate and manage Covid 19 among our people. **Refusing the vaccine is therefore a serious issue, as you are at risk of getting the disease and spreading it among others sometimes killing them. It will lead to destruction of the country we love and care, and the very same country that gave us free education and health care. Despite this understanding GOSL cannot force people to take the vaccine.**

Further, with regard to all the vaccine related false propaganda, I would like to inform all my students, as a responsible person educated about Covid 19 and the vaccines, that all vaccines are considered equal for the purpose of prevention of Covid 19 related serious diseases and deaths after emergency use. Today, what we have is a serious health emergency. These vaccines had been studied in research for serious adverse effects from at least around March 2020 up to now. It is monitored by the vaccine industry and health systems in the world very rigorously even today for long term effects. These vaccines have been recommended on the basis of lack of any serious adverse effects following emergency use. For example, if the vaccines are causing deaths than having the disease, it is better to have the disease than having the vaccine. Because, only less than 1% of the people die due to Covid 19. All the vaccines are very safe even in our limited experience after giving it for more than 10 million people in Sri Lanka

Hence, the information about any vaccines causing subfertility, and serious reactions in large numbers related to the vaccine are false. There are rare side effects appearing after millions of doses are administered in a few people and these are highlighted while the benefits to billions of people in the world are ignored in propaganda. Most deaths of people with Covid 19 have occurred in **unvaccinated populations with high risk factors.** Such a large number of deaths have never been proven to be related to the vaccines scientifically to date, on the basis of monitored side effects after vaccinating several hundred million people in the world.

However, research about social media has identified that 80% of the social media posts are factually false. Therefore, I would request all the students of the UOR to get vaccinated and complete it within this month or as soon as possible.

All vaccines are equal. The theoretical arguments about efficacy of different vaccines do not help very much in practical actions. Please understand that, in SL Sinopharm vaccine has helped to reduce the disease burden in addition to lock downs and health guidelines for us to safely live and work as it was the only available vaccine at a critical stage in 2021. I understand that many students wait for Pfizer vaccine believing it is superior and taking the risk of contracting and spreading the disease. This may not happen as we do not have a choice on the vaccine type. It is given on the basis of the availability and only Sinopharm vaccine is available in large quantities for mass vaccination.

AVAILABLE VACCINE IS THE BEST VACCINE. BELIEVE IT. Pfizer vaccine was in short supply and it is prioritized for children between 15 to 19 years with comorbidities. Delaying the vaccination awaiting the Pfizer vaccine will delay the recommencement of educational activities physically in all Universities. At the current rate only 46% of all students except in FOM will complete the vaccination and protected against severe disease and death by the end of October and certainly UOR will not be able to recommence educational activities physically until the vaccination coverage reach 90%. **This attitude is also unfair by those students who obtained the vaccine on our request in order to commence their university education physically.**

Hence, I would appeal to all the UOR students who have not been vaccinated to get whatever the vaccine from any hospital or MOH office as soon as possible.

In the meantime, the UOR is planning to organize several vaccination programmes for university students. The first of it would be held on 12.10.2021 in the FOM Galle for university students resident in Galle district and on 13.10.2021 at Wellamadama for residents of Matara district and Faculty of Agriculture, Kamburupitiya for Hambantota district and those living close to Kamburupitiya in any university. Those who are from Galle, Matara, and Hambantota could come to these places and get the vaccine. Those from other districts could get the vaccine from the nearest University to their home by showing their identity card. Hence, I strongly recommend all the students to get the vaccination completed as soon as possible.

Once, this vaccination programme is completed we will be compelled to make different policies for vaccinated and unvaccinated student populations to commence educational activities physically based on available hostel and laboratory facilities and space.

WE NEED TO LIVE TODAY TO TALK ABOUT TOMMOROW.

Prof. Sujeewa Amarasena MBBS, MD, DCH

Vice Chancellor

University of Ruhuna

08.10.2021