

10 December 2020**Dear Colleagues,****RE: SA's Second Wave and our State of Readiness as the PSET System**

As we wind down to the end of this extraordinary year, 2020, foremost on my mind is to express my wholehearted appreciation to you, your Institutional Management and the Academic staff, Student Support Services including Frontline Workers especially Cleaning and Security Staff, Student and Staff COVID Volunteers, Student leadership and Student Communities in the Post Schooling Education Sector, for joining HIGHER HEALTH in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

HIGHER HEALTH, the health, wellness and development implementing agency of the Department of Higher Education and Training, has been **supporting the COVID-19 response** across the Post School Education and Training System (PSET) since the beginning of the pandemic in March within South Africa, the announcement of a national state of disaster, Level Lockdown 5, and up until now.

Working with other experts, scientists and stakeholders, especially WHO, NICD, our sister Department of Health, and other agencies, **HIGHER HEALTH built comprehensive** programmes, systems, controls and infrastructure through the establishment of guidelines, protocols and capacity building that are grounded in science and latest epidemiological data to ensure the staggered and phased re-opening of PSET institutions to safe return of teaching and learning.

HIGHER HEALTH believes it prudent to warn that the second wave of the pandemic is now upon us. Learning from previous pandemics including the **Spanish Flu in 1918**, we recognise subsequent waves of an epidemic are met by exhausted health systems, depleted economies and fatigued people. Let us take this learning to heart as we observe rising infection rates in many parts of South Africa. The holidays will not help in stemming the tide – but observance of proven infection control measures (physical distancing, consistent wearing of masks, hand hygiene) goes a long way to reducing the risk of spread of the virus to everyone.

Improving wellbeing. Inspiring success.

Directors: W de Villiers (Chairperson), A Bawa, M Mabizela, T Mayekiso, SJ Mlotshwa, N Phaswana-Mafuya, A Singh, D Tromp, B Madalane, R Ahluwalia (CEO)

The second wave will have its huge implications on our PSET system, especially when we open towards the beginning of the next year. The enormous gains we have made in controlling the virus in 2020, across our campuses, will now need to be re-emphasised and further strengthened, towards a bigger challenge that awaits us in 2021.

I would like to re-emphasise that HIGHER HEALTH **established various Scientific Technical Task Teams**, that helped towards developing **nine sets of protocols and guidelines** for the management of COVID-19 in PSET institutions and centres. A comprehensive COVID-19 PSET Guidelines were released as early as April this year, via the Honourable Minister, Dr Blade Nzimande, which were followed by specific protocols, checklists, and interventions that dealt with: (i) overall management of COVID-19 within the sector; (ii) screening, testing, contact-tracing, isolation and linkage to care; (iii) managing a positive COVID-19 result; (iv) routine cleaning for infection prevention; (v) mental health and substance abuse in relation to COVID-19; (vi) student volunteers and establishment of screening stations at campuses; (vii) managing cluster outbreaks; (viii) invigilation of tests and exams during COVID-19; ix) managing Gender Based Violence, Stigma and Human Rights, during COVID-19.

In building systems and controls for safe return to teaching and learning; HIGHER HEALTH in partnership with respective Institutions established a **network of capacitated individuals, frontline workers, student and staff volunteers, across all our campuses**, through continuous on-campus trainings, building capacity with staff and management understanding the virus, protocols and guidelines as well as how to manage the effects of the disease in the post-school environment. To this end, **over 32,000 well capacitated staff are working day and night towards** assisting COVID-19 response daily.

HIGHER HEALTH further requests that **daily COVID-19 screening** via the use of **HIGHER HEALTH tollfree digital screening tool “HealthCheck”** be emphasised and continuously deployed as we reopen our sector. The easy-to-use digital tollfree tool and app works on every device and issues the daily **“health passport”** to thousands of student, staff and stakeholders entering our campuses. This significant innovation has assisted in early isolation, prevention as well as reducing congestion at campus entrances during campus peak times, detecting moderate to high-risk individuals, ensuring their referral for appropriate follow-up care and generally bringing services closer to those who need it. The system is available on:

- Download using the URL for the webform: healthcheck.higherhealth.ac.za
- Add to WhatsApp contacts: **0600 11 0 000**
- Dial using USSD line ***134*832*2#**

Keeping in mind the rise of **Mental Health and Gender Based Violence** epidemics among our population, under the COVID-19 pandemic, HIGHER HEALTH further encourages all our institutions to extend our **24-hour TOLL FREE, HIGHER HEALTH Crisis Helpline (0800 363636)** to support thousands of our students in dire need of these services.

This year the sector has experienced a number of confirmed positive COVID-19 cases and lost staff and few students due to COVID-related deaths. The inevitable reality of COVID pandemic and its associated mortality looms around the sector, warranting continuous strengthening of systems, controls, and management of the pandemic, in the sector.

As we re-open in January 2021, it is likely that the toll of the pandemic on South Africa will still be heavy. I urge all members of the PSET community to remember and recommit to implementing the robust measures developed this year; including strengthening response to COVID-19 resurgence and managing the foreseeable **Cluster Outbreaks** of Infections guided by the relevant HIGHER HEALTH Guidelines and Protocols developed for PSET Institutions.

HIGHER HEALTH commits completely to work alongside each institution towards re-capacitating, trainings and implementing all the established interventions with your established COVID-19 task and campus-based implementation teams.

HIGHER HEALTH further requests that your Institution assist in pro-actively building extra capacity for the **COVID-19 Screening Volunteer programme**. HIGHER HEALTH stands prepared to conduct capacity development and skills training for the screening volunteer programme, in addition to providing refresher training sessions to existing student and staff COVID-19 Champions.

Through deliberate efforts in 2020; HIGHER HEALTH & your Institution put in place measures to ensure the gains on pandemics such as, **HIV, TB, Sexual Reproductive Health, Gender Based Violence and Mental Health** of students, realised in the past years were not reversed by COVID-19 associated restrictions by allowing continued & controlled routine trainings, workshops, extramural classes, as well as our on-campus services for testing, treatment, care and support on these pandemics, during this difficult period.

HIGHER HEALTH requests that your efforts in this regard be extended into 2021 and beyond by including, as part of Extramural Classes, popularly known as the **HIGHER HEALTH Second Extramural Curriculum (peer to peer) Capacity Development Programme** for students on HIV, TB, Sexual Reproductive Health including pregnancy and contraception, Gender Based Violence, Mental Health, Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention curricula. In addition, the **HIGHER HEALTH District Health & Wellness Mobile Clinics** will continue to provide testing, linkage to care and psychosocial support, to reduce the risk by routinely screening frontline workers and managing confirmed cases of COVID-19 within the PSET Institutions

Finally, we request that student health and wellness programmes provided by HIGHER HEALTH be included and made available to all **newly enrolling/first year students** and be provided as part of **Student Induction and Orientation**. This is an important first step in ensuring students embarking on their post-schooling education and training journey are aware, capacitated, provided care and supported to ensure that the aim of building graduate competencies is not hindered by issues to do with student health, psychosocial wellbeing and wellness in general.

We are all hopeful that one or more **COVID-19 vaccinations** will soon be approved and become available in South Africa. However, as the World Health Organization has cautioned on numerous occasions, vaccines are part of a holistic national response. It will take some time to mount a massive logistical intervention to deliver vaccines to all. Meanwhile, it is up to all of us in the PSET sector to deal with this reality and work in unity to make the best of proven methods and strategies which have offered much protection during the year. On behalf of all of us at HIGHER HEALTH, I promise we shall stay the course and continue in our efforts to support our sector's and our country's response

to this pandemic. We are also ensuring that the learnings from our experience are put to the best use possible for the health of our students and our communities.

With a handful of days left before we enter 2021, I wish you all and your loved ones a restful and joyful festive break. Stay safe and strong – and see you in January 2021.

Kind Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ramneek Ahluwalia', written in a cursive style.

Dr (Professor) Ramneek Ahluwalia
Chief Executive Officer