

Media release

COVID-19 study shows the pandemic's impact on students in post school education: Results to inform ongoing response and support for students, strengthen sector in case of other health emergencies

As part of commemorations of Youth Month, the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, Dr Blade Nzimande, today visited the Cape Peninsula University of Technology and has released the results of a study on the impact of COVID-19 on youth and students in the post school education system (PSET).

Over 13 000 students who are in some form of higher education and training volunteered to participate in the research which gathered data in mid-2020 – the university sub-sector was understandably more represented, with about 10% of respondents being in the TVET sub-sector. The survey explored young people's experiences and knowledge, attitudes and perceptions (KAP) regarding COVID-19, understanding and modifying potential maladaptive and self-destructive behaviours, and the impact of COVID-19 on education and learning.

“Our information will help government, institutions and other partners in the development of evidence-based interventions directed towards the challenges faced by PSET youth as COVID-19 continues to disrupt most of the normal ways of learning and living. The lessons will get us closer to the end of this pandemic – and become stronger when a similar serious public health emergency happens in the future,” says Prof (Dr) Ramneek Ahluwalia, the CEO of HIGHER HEALTH.

HIGHER HEALTH and HSRC conducted the study, which covered all universities, TVET and CET colleges. Other collaborating partners were the Department of Science and Innovation and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

The results confirmed the extent of the lockdown on factors crucial to student ability to follow education and training, including internet connectivity; access to devices, data and study material; reduced amount of study time; ability to pay rent; financial struggles; food security and hunger; loss of social contact; loss of family members; access to transport, medical care and chronic medication.

Significantly, the survey also reminded us of the complexity of the TVET sub-sector, which provides on-the-job vocational training with courses like agriculture or plumbing relying on contact teaching. In some cases, institutions were simply not in a practical position to teach online. Keeping these campuses safe through behavioural and hygiene practices is essential within this environment.

Most students report receiving support from their institutions in the areas of online learning, provision of data bundles and data-free access to online learning platforms and institutional websites.

Results show that frequently used sources of information on COVID-19 accessed by students were government sites, news websites/apps and social media.

- Knowledge of COVID-19 symptoms and prevention was high. In terms of personal risk perception, 53% of students thought they were at low risk of contracting COVID-19 and 15% perceived themselves as high risk. This emphasises the need for institutions and HIGHER HEALTH to remain sources of correct and consistent information, so that students are empowered with knowledge. It will improve students' understanding that they can be asymptomatic but carry the virus which increases the risk of transmission to parents and the elderly.

HIGHER HEALTH will support the institutions in efforts to continually raise awareness among students to help them practice basic prevention methods for COVID-19. Platforms for this include the digital health passport HealthCheck which enables data-free daily self-assessment of COVID risk and through on-campus peer education and various digital channels.

- 42% of students thought they would be able to cope with their workload after lockdown, with older students being more confident than younger ones. The majority (79%) felt that students should get routine counselling support during the pandemic.

It was for this reason that on the instruction of Minister Nzimande, HIGHER HEALTH established the 24-hour tollfree student helpline (0800 36 36 36). This psychosocial support should be used by students for counselling for personal problems including study motivation, as well as for anxiety, depression, suicide-prevention and help in cases of gender-based violence.

- Other significant results include:
 - 40% of PSET students moved back home during the lockdown.
 - 41% were not able to purchase their own food during lockdown, of which 10% relied on food donations and 15% went hungry on some days.
 - Over 80% of university students received institutional support in the form of data bundles, data-free access to websites, and accessing online learning platforms, while in the vocational and training sub-sector, 38% of students reported that their colleges offered virtual learning.
 - Half the students reported difficulty communicating with their institutions during lockdown, with more difficulty reported by TVET students.

As the health and wellness agency of the Department of Higher Education and Training, HIGHER HEALTH's mandate now also entails support for the higher education and training sector's participation in the national COVID-19 vaccination initiative.

Says Prof Ahluwalia: "Minister Nzimande has tasked HIGHER HEALTH with creating and coordinating the implementation of a sectoral vaccine strategy and he called on the PSET institutions to support and play an active part in the vaccine rollout. The strategy is aligned with and supports Department of Health's phased national strategy and has helped us to ensure access to vaccination for our students and staff – especially those working on the frontlines like campus healthcare staff and health sciences students and then student and staff volunteers, student support structures, as well as staff and students living with comorbidities and in residences.

"We are proud that CPUT, and so far also the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University and the University of the Western Cape have worked hard to meet the requirements and be accredited as official national vaccination sites."

During today's visit to CPUT, Minister Nzimande also met with and recognised the COVID-19 student warriors, who volunteer daily at campus screening stations, assist with contact tracing and educate their peers and other campus communities on COVID-19. With the advent of vaccinations both within PSET and across the country more broadly, these student warriors will play a key role in promoting the national vaccination campaign.

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