

MEDIA RELEASE (DRAFT V3, 23 April 2016)
**Turbulent times for students but also positive progress
across SA campuses**



Pretoria, 24 April 2016 – South African students have seen turbulent times in recent months, yet along with these challenges there has been significant positive change.

While the recent #FeesMustFall campaign, campus unrest at universities around the country and this week's protests against frequent rape at universities have justifiably made news headlines, a campaign to highlight HIV awareness including gender issues, violence, rape and student health and welfare in general has been making significant strides.

This was revealed in Parliament this past week when the Deputy Minister of Higher Education and Training Mduzuli Manana had two special guests during the annual Department of Higher Education and Training budget speech: the house was introduced to two young women, Unathi and Sithokozile, whose moving stories illustrate the accomplishments of the Higher Education and Training HIV/AIDS Programme (HEAIDS), which the Deputy Minister champions.

"I call on HEAIDS to lead our post-school sector and all role players to strengthen protection of women and work to eliminate violence and sexual abuse," Deputy Minister Manana emphasised during his speech.

Despite protests and other challenges, HEAIDS last year worked with hundreds of campuses to successfully host HIV testing and health screening and education activations under the banner of First Things First.

Introduced to the higher education sector in 2011, First Things First has become the vehicle that is mobilising youth to remain healthy and to know their HIV status as the springboard for maintaining their health and completing tertiary education. The programme roots itself in the education sector's mandate to produce competent graduates able to meet the country's development challenges and objectives.

Students sharing their experiences

While studying at the University of Western Cape, Unathi Bheme tested for HIV during a First Things First campus activation and found out she was HIV-positive. Initially this was devastating. Unathi dropped her studies as she was unable to accept her HIV status. Assistance provided through campus counselling and support services enabled her to enrol at Cape Peninsula University of Technology to study towards a Bachelor of Education. Appreciating the help and the opportunity to complete her studies, Unathi has since become a peer educator – and an ambassador – for the First Things First initiative. Unathi mobilises fellow students so they find out their status and manage their health. Living openly with her HIV status has enabled her to contribute to addressing the stigma and discrimination issues in university spaces.

Sithokozile Gcabashe, a student from the Durban University of Technology, is also living positively with HIV – a condition she acquired through sexual abuse. Through the university's



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“Regardless of the outcome of their HIV test, TB or any other ailment, students now in the post-school sector know there are tools and services for them to stay healthy so they can work hard, complete their studies, stand on their own feet in the workplace and society, and nurture their own families,” HEAIDS Director Dr Ramneek Ahluwalia said.

When students know their HIV status, test positively for other STIs or have TB symptoms, they are referred for counselling and treatment which is available either through the campus clinics or via a referral network to other clinics. This is sometimes the first point of help for rape survivors.

HEAIDS programme, Sithokozile received HIV testing, treatment and care, as well as trauma counselling. The assistance empowered her to live openly with HIV, to benefit from treatment, continue with her studies and become an ambassador for the programme by sharing her story with other young people to redress stigma and discrimination. Sithokozile is bravely helping other rape survivors and students who are struggling to manage being HIV-positive.

“Our efforts must be to reach out to every student in the post school sector and we must do everything in our power to prevent what happened at Rhodes from happening again. But looking at the story of Sithokozile who was acknowledged in Parliament by the Deputy Minister; who is a sexual abuse survivor, our education system must be in such a way that our students have easy access to PEP, HIV/AIDS counselling; trauma counselling and help for any other health challenges they may encounter. This would enable them get back into the system and complete their studies,” continued Dr Ahluwalia.

He said HEAIDS’ successes were best borne out by the real-life experiences of students, like Unathi BHEME and Sithokozile Gcabashe.

“Their stories provide qualitative evidence of the potential impact that this programme has on the lives of other 174 000 young students who got tested through the HEAIDS First Things First during 2015.

“Students’ testimonies tell us about them taking their first HIV test and learning their HIV status through First Things First activations on campus and how this enabled them to take control of their lives and health,” said Dr Ahluwalia.

Scrutiny of HEAIDS’s performance should not overlook measurable progress in terms of building capacity among academic staff to develop and deliver HIV content through curricula offered by different faculties and disciplines – many of which had until 2014 never tackled HIV- and health-related issues.

“As HEAIDS, we support wholeheartedly call for gender and sexual violence to be addressed as an urgent national priority. Doing this through the academic programme will give us the reach and sustainability that the grave situation demands,” he urged.

“The fact that these latest protests are led by women students makes it clear that gender relations are a burning issue but also that women are finding their confidence and voice. As partners in student wellness, HEAIDS will use its gender-focused programmes and links with role-players to contribute to solutions,” concluded Dr Ahluwalia.



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Notes for editors regarding other notable milestones reached by HEAIDS during the 2015 academic year:

- HEAIDS programme encompasses 76 institutions which hosted 586 First Things First activations during 2015 – topping the 2014 figure by 58%.
- Similarly the number of students tested for HIV in 2015 was 79% higher than in the previous year. The combined effort of universities and colleges not only exceeded the 100 000-test mark for the first time but did so convincingly with a total of 174 000 tests performed.
- A total of 402 academics participated in curriculum development workshops.
- A record 25 million male condoms were distributed in the higher education sector, mainly as a result of the Department of Health's decision to pilot the introduction of its new coloured, scented condoms in this sector. The 2014 total of 114 650 male condoms distributed seems almost insignificant by comparison.
- Interventions include dedicated gender-focused programmes for men and women, as well as initiatives and referrals relating to substance and alcohol abuse. These help to raise awareness and rectify gender inequality, sexual relations and violence.
- Covering all South African higher education and training institutions across all districts requires resources, energy and above all coordination and collaboration. This is driven and made possible by the high-level buy-in and visible backing HEAIDS enjoys from its top champion the Deputy Minister of Higher Education and Training Mduzisi Manana and the entire Department; from leadership in provincial government and provincial AIDS councils; Universities South Africa and its 26 member universities, and from the South African College Principals Organisation (SACPO) and the 50 colleges they represent.



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