

For immediate release
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MEDIA RELEASE
Post-schooling sector gears up for 2021 academic year and COVID vaccine

Guidelines and protocols are being updated and institutional and campus-based COVID-19 task teams, frontline workers and student and staff volunteers are being re-trained by HIGHER HEALTH on the latest pandemic developments – including preparations to support the vaccine rollout – as the post-school education and training (PSET) sector gets ready to reopen under lockdown level 3.

HIGHER HEALTH, the health and wellness agency of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), has led the PSET system’s COVID-19 strategies and activities since the beginning of the pandemic.

“We end the 2020 and begin the 2021 academic year as South Africa experiences a second wave of COVID-19. Shortly, students and staff will return to campuses to write exams and resume teaching. Last year, we conducted exams for all TVETs and many universities in the middle of the pandemic and we did so effectively due to stringent, evidence-based protocols and controls. We can do this again,” explains Prof Ramneek Ahluwalia, the CEO of HIGHER HEALTH.

“In response to a mandate from Dr Blade Nzimande, the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology, HIGHER HEALTH is now working with the Department of Health to build and lead the implementation of a vaccine strategy for the PSET sector which aligns with and supports the rollout of the national strategy for the COVID-19 vaccine,” says Prof Ahluwalia.

While the details are still being worked on, the strategy will help ensure phased access to vaccination for students and staff, with priority being given to frontline campus healthcare staff and students in health sciences, including nursing, medicine and related disciplines.

“Our strategy will be backed by a health department-approved and equally science-based awareness and education initiative. With support from student leadership, management and academia, we would like to formulate a social compact where whether as staff or students, we take accountability to ensure each other’s safety. This is a critical first step to prevent new infections across campuses. We will train thousands of peer educators and student volunteers and amplify dialogues in order to render knowledge and accurate information to our two million-strong student population.

“Educated students will play a vital role in protecting South Africans not just because when vaccinated, they will reduce the spread of the virus, but also because of the positive role they have as activists for change within families and communities. They will help address myths and misinformation and allay hesitancy about the vaccine within our society,” says Prof Ahluwalia.

Dr Ahluwalia highlights 2020 investments which saw the agency work with the Health Department, the NICD, WHO and other experts to produce protocols, guidelines and training programmes, which were implemented across all PSET institutions.

“We have established institutional COVID-19 task teams across all institutions of higher learning and COVID-implementing teams across all campus in the sector. To date, we have built capacity of over 30 000 frontline individuals (both staff and student volunteers) who are assisting with running screening stations, and educational programmes and other support services around campuses and

residences. Among them are resident officers, management, student support services, campus security and cleaning staff,” says Prof Ahluwalia.

These in-person resources are supported by the HIGHER HEALTH self-administered digital screening tool, HealthCheck, which decreases congestion at security gates by providing a daily clearance to campuses for individuals deemed to be low-risk, and refers middle and high-risk people to appropriate services. Since the HealthCheck launch in June 2020, nearly eight million screenings have been done by over 1.6 million students and staff.

From mid-2020, HIGHER HEALTH’s mobile clinic fleet boosted health services in institutions located in remote and underserved areas. The fleet provided considerable assistance to campuses that experienced cluster outbreaks.

Prof Ahluwalia stresses that all the while, HIGHER HEALTH continued to provide services on other student health and wellness needs and challenges, including mental health, gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health and HIV. It was crucial for HIGHER HEALTH to retain and deepen gains made in addressing these existent and persistent epidemics which did not take a break because of COVID-19.

The pandemic undeniably increased the strain on mental health and GBV. Since going live in August 2020, the HIGHER HEALTH 24-hour, toll-free student helpline on mental health and GBV (0800-363-363) answered calls for help from 5 000 students.

“As HIGHER HEALTH, in partnership with key organisations across our sector – not least institutions themselves, we are doing all we can to ensure that leadership, information and resources are available to protect students and staff and support academic successes.

“So I call on students and staff to remember the basics as our educational institutions reopen – social distancing, wearing a face mask, sanitising. The fight has not yet been won – together we can protect ourselves and our future,” concludes Prof Ahluwalia.

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How to access the HIGHER HEALTH 24-hour student helpline:

- Toll-free call 0800 36 36 36
- SMS 43-33-6

How to access HealthCheck:

- Dial using USSD line (does not require data): *134*832*2#
- Add to WhatsApp contacts: 0600 11 0 000 and say HI: <https://wa.me/27600110000?text=hi>
- Download using the URL for the webform: healthcheck.higherhealth.ac.za

**To learn more visit: www.higherhealth.ac.za
www.sacoronavirus.co.za
emergency hotline 0800 029 999**

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