

## HIGHER HEALTH STATEMENT

### Higher education mourns loss of young lives to linked GBV-mental health epidemics

#### *Focus on institutional infrastructure for implementing programmes and improving access to services*

HIGHER HEALTH, the health, wellness and development centre of the post schooling education and training sector (PSET) is deeply saddened by the tragic, untimely passing of students from the University of Fort Hare – the 23-year old Nosicelo Mtebeni who was brutally murdered by her partner and a final-year law student who died due to a fall from a high-rise building. While the exact details of the second incident are being investigated, it is believed that this may have been a suicide.

“This week, we have lost two bright young South Africans who had so much to contribute to the legal profession which they were about to enter, and to the higher education sector and our entire country. We lost Nosicelo to gender-based violence, and it is likely that we lost her peer to unbearable mental strain,” says Professor (Dr) Ramneek Ahluwalia, the CEO of HIGHER HEALTH.

Under the direction of the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande, HIGHER HEALTH is assisting the University of Fort Hare (UFH) through the deployment of a team of experienced HIGHER HEALTH staff. These include seven psychologists, social workers and counsellors who will provide counselling and care to affected students and staff, community of University of Fort Hare, friends and families of the deceased students, with immediate effect. The team is arriving to Fort Hare this evening (Sunday 22 August 2021).

“We are working closely with Professor Sakhela Buhlungu, the Vice Chancellor of UFH and with the South African Union of Students and appreciate their support for our involvement

HIGHER HEALTH further highlights scaling up of other existing interventions and services to support UFH in this difficult hour:

- The HIGHER HEALTH **toll free- 24-hour student helpline – 0800 36 36 36** – has been scaled up to help the UFH community. We emphasise that this service is totally free and available day and night. Experienced team of psychologists, social workers and counsellors are available to support students, seeking psychosocial support.
- The HIGHER HEALTH District mobile clinic service is on alert and on site to manage health emergencies including mental health counselling and COVID testing and related referrals.

“This dark hour underscores the fact that GBV and mental health are co-epidemics striking at our youth. It is essential that we continue to build infrastructure in all our universities and colleges so they can provide easy access to services and assistance to all students.”

On Friday 27 August, HIGHER HEALTH through the Department of Higher Education and Training will release a set of instruments that will further strengthen the realisation of the sectoral **GBV Policy Framework (launched by Minister Nzimande in July 2020):**

- **Sexual and Gender Related Misconduct Contextual Guidelines.**
- **Procedural Guidelines for the Protection from Sexual and Gender Related Misconduct.**
- **Protocol on the PSET Code of Ethics.**
- **Protocol on Rape and Sexual Assault Cases.**

These instruments were developed by the PSET Gender Based Violence Technical Task Team which is led by HIGHER HEALTH and comprises student leadership, vice chancellors of 26 public universities, rectors of 50 TVET colleges, the Commission of Gender Equality, Department of Women, Youth and People with Disabilities, South African Police Services, Department of Justice, United Nations (UNWOMEN and UNFPA), civil society, the SA Medical Research Council and executive leadership from the Department of Higher Education and Training. These instruments are directives to all our institutions and management to put the necessary infrastructure towards a comprehensive response on cases of sexual and gender misconduct, rape, sexual assaults across all our campuses. The procedural guidelines and protocols on rape, code of ethics ensure that reporting of cases, disciplinary systems, safeguarding evidence, provision of rape kits, psychosocial support services and survivor friendly infrastructure is developed across our campuses, in partnership with judicial and police services, across our country.

Prof Ahluwalia notes that during the COVID pandemic in 2020/21, over 50 000 students accessed GBV support services such as personal risk assessments and referrals to professional health services. Over half a million young people have completed a curriculum on GBV prevention and mitigation. About 20 000 mental health crises were handled by HIGHER HEALTH mental health and psychosocial services.

While these are all significant measures and achievements, Prof Ahluwalia acknowledges that much more needs to be done in terms of strengthening and promoting the services in order to avert violence and prevent deaths due to murder and suicide.

"We honour every individual whom we enable to recognise that they are at risk and whom we empower with knowledge and practical interventions so they become more confident, protected and safer in their place of study and residence.

"Improving the mental health and wellness of our students and staff and protecting them from GBV are battles we must win. We will do so by recognising that mental health is a legitimate concern which must be addressed and by uniting to condemn and stand up against gender-based violence.

"We will also persevere with initiatives that ensure the adoption and rollout of youth-friendly, easily accessible services and programmes across our universities and colleges," concludes Prof Ahluwalia.

*Issued on behalf of HIGHER HEALTH by Anuysha Naidu [anuysha@higherhealth.ac.za](mailto:anuysha@higherhealth.ac.za)*