

MEDIA STATEMENT

Higher education sector gears up for contribution to new national HIV/AIDS plan

Port Elizabeth, 28 November 2011 – Days before the official launch of South Africa's National Strategic Plan on HIV, STIs and TB (NSP 2012-2016), the 23 institutions of public higher education and other stakeholders are meeting to strategise on how best to strengthen their role in support of the goals of the NSP.

The higher education sector's response to HIV and AIDS is coordinated through the Higher Education HIV/AIDS Programme (HEAIDS), a programme of Higher Education South Africa (HESA) which represents all of South Africa's 23 public higher education institutions.

"The higher education sector has a recognised role in mitigating the impact of HIV and AIDS in South Africa," says Professor Hlengiwe Mkhize, Deputy Minister of Higher Education and Training in a statement read on her behalf by Mahlubi Mabizela, the department's Chief Director for University Policy and Development.

"A critical NSP objective is to address the social and structural drivers of the epidemic – drawing attention to the role of education in mitigating vulnerability to HIV and AIDS.

"Young people with tertiary education are deemed significantly less likely to be HIV positive than those without tertiary education. We have to ensure that more young people complete secondary schooling and that we strengthen access to post-school education," says the Deputy Minister.

The sector will kick-off the new year with the launch of a sector-wide voluntary HIV Counselling and Testing (HCT) campaign, "First Things First". The Deputy Minister says that HCT is basic to the efforts to reduce the spread of HIV and AIDS: "To know one's HIV status is the basis for caring for oneself, loved ones and the broader community."

The 2012 campaign follows a similar and highly successful initiative in 2011, which was activated at 17 universities and tested 22000 students, including 6375 first-years, half of whom had never tested before.

"In 2012, we aim to raise the bar higher," says Deputy Minister Mkhize. "We would like to see the campaign activated across all 23 public higher education institutions and aim to mobilise 35 000 people to test, including students, academics and support staff. The campaign encourages first-year students in particular to take up the offer. Their exposure to new environments at a time of enjoying greater personal independence requires of them to be equipped against HIV risk factors, including unprotected sex and alcohol and substance abuse."

University-based counsellors and testers will be trained through the campaign to conduct pre- and post-test education programmes and facilities will be set up for the testing of large numbers using HIV rapid finger-prick tests.

The campaign is also to be rolled out at Further Education and Training (FET) colleges by the Foundation for Professional Development in association with the Department of Health.

“Looking at its broader mandate, higher education sector’s central contribution to national development is to provide skilled human resources,” explains Dr Ramneek Ahluwalia, head of HEAIDS.

“Our particular sector is made up of over one million students, academics and service and administrative staff. The students, who form part of the age demographic that is most vulnerable to HIV infection, represent the future skills and knowledge base of South Africa. The academics are among the most developed of South Africa’s human resources. Supported by service and administrative staff who facilitate the role and development of these advanced human resources, the higher education community as a whole is vital in the national efforts against HIV/AIDS,” says Dr Ahluwalia.

Prof Brian O’Connell, chairman of the HESA-HEAIDS Strategic Group and Vice Chancellor of the University of the Western Cape says that the HEAIDS summit will focus on five areas through which the goals of the NSP will be promoted by the higher education sector:

- **Mobilising leadership.** Effective responses within the higher education community will not be possible without visible and resolute institutional leadership and leadership by all constituents of the higher education community.
- **Academic curriculum and research.** All aspects of the curriculum need to consider and integrate information about HIV and AIDS in ways that promote engagement with young people and that follow best practices in education.
- **Social, cultural and behaviour change.** Practices that put people at HIV risk are ingrained in social norms which need to be critically examined and addressed in order to introduce positive behavioural changes that promote safe practices.
- **Innovative communication responses.** These need to be based on more nuanced understandings of individual and cultural behaviour change issues and be more effective in message delivery and uptake.
- **Positioning HR as a strategic driver for workplace programmes.** This will require institutional commitment and clear policy frameworks and resources that enable the design, implementation and evaluation of workplace interventions.

“The challenge to HEAIDS is to develop the response and ensure that every institution works comprehensively to support and protect students and staff, and to fulfil its wider obligations to confront HIV/AIDS through teaching, training, research and community service,” concludes Prof O’Connell.

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Additional notes for news editors and journalists:

Arising from public higher education programmes undertaken since 2000, HEAIDS has supported institutions with the development of human rights-based HIV/AIDS policies and programmes including capacity development; advocacy; prevention; voluntary counselling and testing; treatment, care and support; curriculum development; workplace programmes; community outreach; research; and monitoring and evaluation.

The HEAIDS Summit takes place during the bi-annual SAHARA conference (www.sahara.org.za), whose programme focuses on the "social, political and economic landscape of HIV prevention and response".