

HEAIDS students testing, counselling launched in Durban

20 June 2016 - Deputy Minister of Higher Education and Training, Mr Mduzuzi Manana, MP, has launched the Higher Education and Training HIV/AIDS Programme (HEAIDS) First Things First HIV/TB/STIs and general health & Wellness programme for students in the higher education and training sector at the Thekwini College, Melbourne Campus in Durban.

This is the first activation of First Things First in KZN this year as the programme seeks to reach all provinces and promote HIV testing to about two million students across 429 campuses and 73 institutions of higher education and training.

This initiative will not only benefit close to 10000 students who attend the college – but also their families and the broader community.

Supported by the provincial Health Department and the Higher Education and Training sector, First Things First aims to prevent HIV, TB and STI infections, to provide a mechanism for treatment for those who are found to be infected with any of these, as well as to promote overall good health.

The need for such an initiative is evident. Over half of the world's young population infected with HIV lives in Eastern and Southern Africa. KwaZulu-Natal has the highest new HIV infection rate of the nine provinces in South Africa, and the highest overall prevalence of infection (16.9%). In KZN, 12% of youth in the 15-24 age group are HIV-positive, followed by Mpumalanga (10%) as the second highest; Limpopo's youth in the same age bracket have the lowest prevalence (3.1%). (*Source: SA National HIV Prevalence, Incidence and Behaviour Survey, 2012*)

Worryingly, the same most-at-risk group has also been decreasing the use of condoms – which increases the risk of HIV infection.

Efforts to promote HIV awareness and health-seeking behaviours in the province come at a time when Durban and South Africa get ready to host the 21st International AIDS Conference, AIDS 2016, which takes place in Durban 18-22 July 2016.

Deputy Minister of Higher Education and Training Mduzuzi Manana led the charge for strengthening and combining efforts to prevent HIV, STIs and TB as he made the link between the health of students and the higher education and training sector's throughput of graduates. The Deputy Minister said that "healthy and productive graduates are one of the cornerstones of a healthy economy".

"Universities and colleges provide the ideal environment within which to improve knowledge about HIV, other STIs and TB and to promote testing and other services to protect and care for young people," said Deputy Minister Manana as he interacted with students.

The 2016 First Things First drive is being activated across 429 campuses within all public TVETs and universities, to reach out to a student population of two million.

"As June is Youth month, it is important for us as the future of this country to emulate what the youth of 1976 did. They were faced with a different struggle which they fought and won. Let us pick up from where they left off and fight this HIV scourge and I am sure, together we will win," said Mr Manana.

“Last year, First Things First helped over 174 000 young people learn their HIV status and use this as a stepping stone for protecting their health since they also received screening and if needed treatment for other STIs and TB,” said Dr Ramneek Ahluwalia, director of HEAIDS.

"We have now embarked our journey to align our objectives as First Things First to the Deputy President's led initiative of young women campaign. It is imperative that we as a nation speak as one voice and I assure you that in the coming months, the First Things First campaign will try to reach more young men and women in our universities and colleges through provision of health education and services to look after them;" continued Ahluwalia.

First Things First is one of the initiatives of the Higher Education and Training HIV/AIDS programme (HEAIDS) which is a national collaboration that is devoted to promoting education and awareness of HIV and other related health and social factors that set back progress by young people. Championed by the Department of Higher Education and Training, HEAIDS ensures that information and access to products such as condoms and services for testing, prevention and treatment are available within the higher education and training sector.

“A comprehensive package of health services that also includes contraception, the screening for cancer and other lifestyle diseases will be made available to students. Being part of campus life and building skills and knowledge enable young people to contribute to South Africa's progress and success. It also nurtures a protective and safer environment,” concluded Dr Ahluwalia.