

MEDIA STATEMENT

Conference Chair Dr Yogan Pillay and Co-Conference
Chair Ms Andile Mthombeni

HEAIDS Director and Organiser of the Conference, Dr
Ramneek Ahluwalia;

UNFPA Country Director, Dr Esther Muia

South African National Aids Council Deputy Chairperson,
Ms Steve Letsike

Senior Government Officials;

Higher Education Sector Leaders and University
Representatives;

Development Partners and NGOs;

Distinguished Guests and HEAIDS Private and
Government partners;

Youth Leaders and Youth Speakers;

And above all, the young delegates from universities, TVET colleges, schools and out-of-school youth for whom this conference has been organised;

Good Morning.

It is a special honour for me to be opening the HEAIDS National Youth Conference today. As the first of its kind this conference is an important milestone, not only for the Higher Education and Training sector, but for the whole country. Never before have we had the opportunity to bring together youth from schools, universities, colleges and out of school to share their experiences of working in the field of HIV and discuss their challenges and best practices. I am proud to be standing in front of you today and say that it is the Higher Education and Training sector that is putting into practice the vision of bringing our youth together.

Ladies and Gentlemen, students, peer educators, youth members, although we certainly have come a long way as a country, we have to admit that South Africa still has important social problems that we need to address openly and overcome eventually. I am constantly confronted with these in my work in the higher education and training sector and am reminded of the intersectionality of the issues that young people are facing.

The most important challenge is probably the one of poverty. A significant number of students come from impoverished families and communities. Many female students find themselves in financially unstable situations having to balance the fees for their education while finding funds to cover their accommodation and other living expenses. These students often take care of their families, as a large number of our graduates are the first ones in their families to obtain a college or university degree. These pressures do lead our vulnerable students to engage in sex work or relationships with older men that cover their study fees and living expenses. How often have we heard about the so-called “Blessers” or

“Sugardaddies” in the news, but have not taken sufficient time to openly discuss these relationships with young women? The fact that we shy away to talk about the problems in our society, because they make us feel uncomfortable, leaves our female students in relationships of dependence on men that often lead to young women feeling disempowered to negotiate condom use and take care of their own health.

Distinguished guests, we have to acknowledge that the 2016 nationwide student protests on issues of Gender Based Violence in South Africa have called for action and leadership. In October 2016 I had the honour to work with the HEAIDS programme on the establishment of a Technical Task Team to address issues of Gender Based Violence in the higher education sector and develop a policy framework that aims to provide practical guidelines for all universities and colleges on the prevention of Gender Based Violence at all higher education institutions. I am grateful that important members of the Technical Task Team are joining the HAEIDS National Youth Conference 2017 and will be able to engage with

you – our youth – on the important issue of Gender Based Violence. What can we do better? What do you need to feel safe on your campus, or your school? We want to engage on these questions with you.

Colleagues, I would like us to acknowledge that there are also a number of other difficult and important social issues in our sector that we need to address jointly. Besides the mentioned issues of transactional sex, Gender Based Violence and financial struggles of our students, we need to look at the challenges of drug and alcohol abuse, stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV and members of the LGBTI community, as well as the lack of youth friendly services in some of our health care centres and clinics – among many others. These social drivers make our youth enormously vulnerable to HIV, TB and sexually transmitted infections. This is why we need to look at HIV as a social problem and a challenge that needs all of our commitment.

The HEAIDS programme is built on the belief that it is our empowered and educated youth that will bring about the

change in this country when it comes to lowering the rate of new HIV infections. This is why we have taken the decision as a sector to organise this conference as an opportunity to bring together various government departments, academics and youth from all walks of life to build on our experiences and lessons learnt and find new ways to deal with issues of HIV and social drivers of the pandemic.

What makes this conference unique is that it does not only focus on biomedical research and new innovations in the field of HIV testing, treatment and care, but has a specific focus on the social and structural drivers of the pandemic. Our national and international presenters and workshop facilitators will look at emerging good practices in the fields of peer education and community engagement programmes, as well as academic initiatives and curricula, ethics and protection of Human Rights. The HEAIDS National Youth conference specifically look at issues of stigma and discrimination of marginalised groups and the LGBTI community and the use of modern technologies and interactive methodologies, such as

theatre, radio drama and social media to address challenges of human rights and social justice.

The next two and a half days should be a learning curve for all of us – it is our academics and political leaders that should first and foremost LISTEN to our youth, their challenges and the way they want to address the various challenges in our country. But it is also you, our young people, who should have the opportunity to listen and critically engage with the people that have worked hard in their fields of research, health care and governments departments to bring about the change and reduce new HIV infections, so that your children won't have to worry about this epidemic called HIV. I want to remind all of you that the next two and a half days are your chance to raise your voice about the challenges and injustices you face every day, to discuss your dreams, visions and ideas and to question your leaders.

We are grateful that our Honourable Deputy President of South Africa, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa, will be joining us tomorrow and has committed to an open conversation

with our youth. So to all young people who are joining us for the event this weekend, I want to say: This is your opportunity to talk directly to the Deputy President – don't miss this chance – it might be a once in a lifetime opportunity.

I would like to acknowledge the Higher Education and Training HIV/AIDS Programme (HEAIDS), designed to eradicate the impact of HIV/STIs/TB and also aimed at strengthening general health and wellness issues in the higher education sector. As part of an increasingly comprehensive HIV/TB/STIs and other health care and support mitigation programmes in the post schooling sector, HEAIDS currently implements various comprehensive health, wellness and prevention projects and programmes in partnership with a range of strategic public and private role players.

We are incredibly proud of the success of this unique programme that has shown that dedication and leadership can lead to results that are one-of-its-kind in the world. In 2016 alone the HEAIDS First Things First

HIV Counselling, Testing and General Health and Wellness programme offered more than 165,000 students the opportunity to participate in testing and screening for HIV, TB, sexually transmitted Infections and General Health and Wellness. Furthermore over 1,500 academics and university and TVET staff have been trained in the curriculum programme; and 192 campus and community radio station journalists have participated in the unique HEAIDS Future Beats Radio and Social Media programme, reaching more than 720,000 young people in six provinces of South Africa with regular HIV prevention programmes.

It is now 16 years since the Higher Education and Training HIV/AIDS programme (HEAIDS) was established in the Higher Education Sector as South Africa's nationally coordinated, comprehensive and large scale effort designed to develop and strengthen the capacity, the systems, and the structures of all our public universities and – for the past two years – also our public TVET colleges. Being one of South Africa's leading HIV prevention programmes, I believe that HEAIDS is

perfectly equipped to lead this first National Youth Conference.

I wish all of you fruitful and honest discussions and that you come out of this important event with some new and inspiring ideas. I am excited to hear your vision for the future, and in particular of course, the Higher Education and Training sector.

I want to express my sincere gratitude for all of you who took their time to travel to the ICC in Durban, and probably sacrificed time with their friends and family over this weekend to be here and contribute to build this country. Your work will not be unseen and your leadership is highly appreciated.

Ladies and Gentlemen, again, I thank you for this opportunity to be here today and wish you a wonderful HEAIDS National Youth Conference

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Issued by the Ministry of Higher Education and Training

9 June 2017