

THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION, DR BLADE NZIMANDE ADDRESS ON THE OCCASION OF THE HIGHER HEALTH COVID 19 WEBINAR

27 January 2021

Programme Director;
Higher Health CEO, Professor Ramneek Ahluwalia;
Team of Panelists:
South African Public Colleges Organisation (SACPO) President, Mr Sanele Mlotshwa;
Director-General of the National Department of Health, Dr Buthelezi;
CEO of Universities South Africa, Professor Ahmed Bawa;
My Advisors and Ministry Officials;
Leadership representing students, workers;
Distinguished participants representing various stakeholders
Members of the media;
Esteemed guests,
Ladies and gentlemen

Before we proceed with my remarks, I would like to take this moment to pay tribute to my comrade, fellow colleague, Minister Jackson Mthembu, who is among South Africans whose lives has been lost due COVID-19 related complications.

I also take this opportunity to welcome and thank you for setting aside time to join this important webinar today. Let me also thank Higher Health for organising this important initiative.

We are in the second year and the second wave of the dreadful COVID-19 pandemic which is ravaging our society.

As we gather today, we now understand the challenges we face much -better than we did during the inception and the first wave of this pandemic. This has in good part been as a result of our entire government leadership through the Cabinet and NCCC as lead by President Cyril Ramaphosa, and the dedicated leadership from all our stakeholders, including our health, wellness and development agencies, such as HIGHER HEALTH in our PSET sector.

When embarking on the COVID 19 response, HIGHER HEALTH was able to put to good use the knowledge, experience and student and staff networks that took nearly two decades in the PSET sector to address HIV, TB, STIs and other health and wellness challenges within our campuses.

In collaboration with other experts, scientists and stakeholders, especially the World Health Organisation (WHO), the National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD), our sister Department of Health, and other agencies, HIGHER HEALTH formulated comprehensive programmes, systems, controls and infrastructure to respond to COVID 19 through guidelines, protocols and capacity building that are grounded in latest epidemiological data and trends.

HIGHER HEALTH established various Scientific Technical Task Teams, that helped to develop nine sets of protocols and guidelines for the management of COVID-19 in PSET institutions, campuses and learning centres.

Comprehensive COVID-19 PSET Guidelines were released as early as April 2020, which were followed by specific protocols, checklists, and interventions that dealt with:

- overall management of COVID-19 within the sector;
- screening, testing, contact-tracing, isolation and linkage to care services;
- managing a positive COVID-19 case;
- routine cleaning for infection prevention;
- mental health and substance abuse in relation to COVID-19;
- student volunteers and establishment of screening stations at campuses;
- managing cluster outbreaks;
- invigilation of tests and exams during COVID-19; and
- managing Gender Based Violence, Stigma and Human Rights, during COVID-19.

HIGHER HEALTH provided numerous online and contact training sessions and has established a network of 30 000 trained individuals, across all our campuses. These volunteers are given science-based training and understanding of the virus and are able to recognise and appropriately manage COVID-19 cases within campuses, faculties, disciplines and directorates.

These initiatives have played an immense role in helping our institutions to understand their unique risks and needs so they can put in place measures suited to promoting safety and preventing infections at their campuses.

To continue with efforts to eradicate COVID 19 from our sector and country, I also called upon the entire post school education and training sector to join a campaign for a social compact to fight and defeat this invisible enemy.

The call-to-action is intended to unite our community and to lead it towards defeating the pandemic through social cohesion that champions and follows prevention principles where each of individual takes responsibility to stop the spread of the virus and save lives. Together united in one mission, I know we can do this.

As one source of inspiration, let us take courage from the gains made through our behaviour change and our scientific advancements in turning the tide on the HIV epidemic that was ravaging our young people and our sector not so long ago.

Many of our campuses are reopening to conduct examinations to finalise the 2020 academic year in order to commence with the 2021 academic year.

As we have done since the beginning of the pandemic, under the leadership of the HIGHER HEALTH collective, we are reopen our campuses based on clear protocols and guidelines and with concerted capacity-building and new training that will enable us to continue to protect students and staff.

We need to continue to make the best use of innovations including digital tools like the HealthCheck which HIGHER HEALTH developed and implemented last year for COVID 19 screening and triage of students and staff prior to them entering campuses.

The mobile clinic fleet that has helped under-resourced and remote institutions access routine health services and tackle cluster outbreaks will also continue to operate.

I am pleased to report that during lockdown, over 100 000 students, across our campuses continued receiving HIV services, contraceptive support, thousands of young women managed to various services and assistance, including dealing with instances of gender-based violence (GBV).

The HIGHER HEALTH 24 HOUR STUDENT HELPLINE for Mental Health and GBV established in August 2020 has to date managed more than 5 000 crisis calls.

The increasing strain placed on mental health and GBV by the COVID-19 pandemic is undeniable and therefore the helpline remains available to support and save lives.

I would like to restate our call to the urge all students to access this free helpline number at 0800 363636.

Mental wellbeing and ability to manage not only the usual stresses and pressures of student life, but the uncertainty and deepening economic deprivation that COVID 19 caused among most South African families is essential to support productive student lives in our institutions.

In my role as the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, I stand behind all our scientists and our scientific advancement.

In these times of fake news and misinformation, it is our duty to use the PSET system talents, skills, infrastructure and resources to deepen our student and staff understanding of COVID-19 and strengthen our contribution and nation's resolve to fight the COVID 19 pandemic.

As you will hear from our panelists today, we will have our arsenal access to new data on the coronavirus including its mutations and the implications this has for our biomedical and behavioural response.

I have instructed HIGHER HEALTH to create a PSET strategy that is aligned with and supports Department of Health's phased national strategy and coordinate its subsequent roll out.

The strategy will help to ensure access to vaccination for our students and staff, of which priority for inclusion in the Phase 1 of the vaccine rollout programme are our frontline campus healthcare staff and health sciences students, especially the nursing, medicine and other disciplines.

Again, in sync with the Health Department's national vaccine approach, the PSET vaccination strategy will develop a phased road map towards vaccination of all frontline and essential staff, student and staff volunteers, student support structures, as well as staff and students living with comorbidities across all our campuses.

HIGHER HEALTH is also working closely with other sister government departments to build a Health Department-approved training programme for the PSET sector for a science-based awareness and education initiative on the national COVID vaccination drive.

We will train thousands of our peer educators and student volunteers, with support from student leadership and our staff, to render knowledge, education and information to support the massive countrywide vaccination drive.

I urge our institutions and HIGHER HEALTH to mobilise and capacitate our own healthcare workers, staff and final-year health science students to volunteer to be trained and act as extra hands supporting the Department of Health, as it is impossible for 40 million people to be vaccinated by a single department – we need to play our part as a sector.

In tandem we will amplify dialogues to address vaccination hesitancy and tackle other myths aimed to mislead our people, like the untruth that Covid 19 is caused by new technologies such as 5G.

In closing, I would like to remind all of us that the key principles of defeating COVID 19 has not changed. It remains social distancing; minimising personal contact; wearing a mask and sanitising.

These behavioural changes that we had to adopt since the onset of the pandemic remain the most powerful, evidence-based means to eradicate COVID-19.

We know what we need to do to protect ourselves and those around us.

We know what we need to do – as a nation, as a continent and as a global community – to overcome this pandemic.

We need to act with a common purpose, understanding that what we each do is important for ourselves, our families, our communities and our society.

If we work together and if we maintain our resolve, we will realise the new year that we all so dearly hope for.

I thank you