

## **MEDIA STATEMENT**

**DATE: Monday, 27 July 2020**

**TO: All media**

**ATTENTION: News Editors/ Reports**

**For Immediate use:**

### **MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION CONGRATULATES HIGHER HEALTH ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE AND THE LAUNCH OF A 24/7 HELPLINE**

The Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, Dr Blade Nzimande, congratulates HIGHER HEALTH, the national agency of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), on their implementation of a holistic mental health initiative and the launching of the 24/7 student and staff helpline.

This initiative will address the mental health needs of the two-million students and staff who make up the university and college community.

“South Africa must take note of statements by the United Nations, the World Health Organisation and local experts, that the mental health and wellbeing of whole societies have been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and are an urgent priority,” said Minister Nzimande.

Minister Nzimande said that physical and psychological health go together and South Africa is currently learning about how the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting the health of people of different ages, their respiratory, muscular and neurological wellbeing.

“COVID-19 is also intensifying anxiety, depression, feelings of loneliness and fear due to economic and academic uncertainties. So we must support the mental and psychosocial wellbeing of our post school education and training sector in equal measure as we implement measures to prevent and manage COVID-19 within our institutions,” emphasised Minister Nzimande.

Under the guidance of the Department of Higher Education and Training and with the support of the SA Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG), HIGHER HEALTH has mapped up the mental health and substance abuse priorities related to COVID-19 within the post-schooling sector. This tailor-made three-

tier programme considers why and how students and staff may be impacted and how to assist individuals who experience problems.

“At the intervention’s primary level, HIGHER HEALTH’s student-led peer-to-peer programme plays a key role in creating awareness and introducing initiatives to increase psychological resilience, recognise and reduce anxiety, stress and depression and prevent suicide,” the Minister said.

This peer-to-peer counselling is enhanced through mental health self-risk assessments and various communication initiatives.

“Notably, addressing the detrimental psychosocial and physical effects of gender-based violence – as a recognised challenge to the post-schooling sector – are part of the same conversations and interventions,” the Minister explained.

The secondary level entails a HIGHER HEALTH 24-hour toll-free student and staff helpline, in alliance with SADAG which enables the provision of help when needed in 11 official languages. The service will provide free telephonic and SMS counselling, crisis intervention and support, and referrals to mental health professionals and other psychosocial resources to students and staff across all campuses. Where needed, HIGHER HEALTH will assist individual institutions with capacity building and implementation.

At a tertiary level, HIGHER HEALTH is appointing 10 additional clinical psychologists who will work across the country to provide counselling, care and support and linkage to services for relevant cases to the appropriate professionals.

“Essentially, our approach seeks to promote mental health as an integral part of every person’s overall health, prevent mental ill-health and provide support and appropriate services when required,” said Minister Nzimande.

The mental health initiative follows the recent launch of the HIGHER HEALTH “HealthCheck”. This daily screening and monitoring tool is secure to use and transmits data directly to the national COVID-19 tracking system.

All students and staff are asked to use it every day to assess their own level of risk prior to entering campuses. Based on the individual’s responses to the risk assessment on the platform, the person receives a message with a risk reading. If the risk is low, the individual will receive clearance valid for 24 hours, or be advised on follow-up actions in case of raised risk.

“All our programmes and interventions place the needs of students and staff in the post school education and training sector at the centre of our COVID-19 combat strategies. We are confident that the Mental Health Service will go a

long way to helping students and staff cope with the heightened complexities of this academic year, but it is also a valuable investment in the future health and wellness of our students and staff,” Minister Nzimande said.

How to access the HIGHER HEALTH 24-hour student helpline:

- Toll-free call 0800 36 36 36
- SMS 43-33-6

How to access HealthCheck:

- Dial using USSD line (does not require data): \*134\*832\*2#
- Add to WhatsApp contacts: 0600 11 0 000 and say HI: <https://wa.me/27600110000?text=hi>
- Download using the URL for the webform: [healthcheck.higherhealth.ac.za](https://healthcheck.higherhealth.ac.za)

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