



Higher Education & Training: Health, Wellness and Development Centre

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Dear Vice-Chancellor

Re: HIGHER HEALTH 24 HOUR TOLLFREE MENTAL HEALTH HELPLINE

HIGHER HEALTH, as the national agency of the Department of Higher Education and Training, dedicated to student and staff wellbeing, has led a comprehensive post-schooling education sector response to COVID-19. Its latest intervention addresses the mental health needs of over two-million students and staff who make up our sector.

As stated by the United Nations, the World Health Organization and local experts, the mental health and wellbeing of whole societies have been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and is an urgent priority.

Physical and psychological health go hand in hand together. COVID-19 has further exacerbated anxiety, depression, feelings of loneliness and fear due to economic and academic uncertainties. Hence it is imperative that the mental and psychosocial wellbeing of our students and staff be emphasised as a critical enabler for the achievement of our skills development and education goals across all our universities, TVET colleges, CET colleges, skill and work-based learning centres, as well as our private higher education institutions.

Under the guidance of the Department of Higher Education and Training and in support with the SA Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG), HIGHER HEALTH has mapped the mental health and substance abuse priorities related to COVID-19 within the post-schooling sector. A 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. Peer-to-peer counselling is enhanced through mental health self-risk assessments and various communication initiatives. Notably, addressing factors and detrimental psychosocial and physical effects of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) – as a recognised challenge to the post-schooling sector – are part of the same conversations and interventions.

Improving wellbeing. Inspiring success.

Directors: W de Villiers (Chairperson), A Bawa, M Mabizela, T Mayekiso, SJ Mlotshwa, N Phaswana-Mafuya, A Singh, D Tromp, B Madalane, R Ahluwalia (CEO)



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 – or 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 clinical psychologists, across all our provinces, who will provide counselling and refer relevant cases to the appropriate professionals.

The mental health initiative for the HIGHER HEALTH 24-hour student and staff helpline can be accessed as follows:

- **Toll-free call 0800 36 36 36**
- **SMS 43336**

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.

I would appreciate your assistance in helping us spread the information, widely to all our students, staff, and stakeholders, on this important initiative within our sector.

Kind Regards



Dr Ramneek Ahluwalia
Chief Executive Officer