



MEDIA RELEASE

National campus HIV/AIDS survey will help manage risk to higher education

PRETORIA, South Africa (26 August 2008) – An HIV prevalence survey, which aims to involve 25 000 students and staff members at South Africa’s public institutions of higher education, is currently underway. The study, which includes a survey on knowledge, attitudes, perceptions and behaviour related to HIV/AIDS, is one of the largest yet undertaken in South Africa.

By throwing light on the extent and nature of the HIV/AIDS challenge in higher education, the study will assist leaders in the sector to plan campus HIV/AIDS programmes more effectively.

The study has been commissioned by the Higher Education HIV/AIDS Programme (HEAIDS), which is an initiative of the Department of Education and is implemented on behalf of the department by Higher Education South Africa (HESA), the representative body of vice-chancellors. HEAIDS is funded by the European Union under the European Programme for Reconstruction and Development.

HEAIDS programme director Dr Shaidah Asmall said that the desire to collect sound evidence as the basis for further development of campus programmes on HIV/AIDS was prompted both by concern for the wellbeing of students and staff and by the need to deal pro-actively with the risk posed to the higher education sector by an epidemic that has huge impact on young adults.

“The national HIV prevalence rate is estimated at 10% among young people in the 15 – 24 year age range, rising to 17% among young women of this age,” Dr Asmall pointed out, quoting results from the national household survey published by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 2005.

“If the same HIV rates prevail among students at tertiary institutions, then this seriously compounds the task of producing a sufficient number of highly skilled graduates to fulfil our needs as a developing country undergoing rapid transformation. But the truth is we simply do not know if students at higher education institutions fit the national HIV profile for young people.” said Dr Mvuyo Tom, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Fort Hare.

This was corroborated by Professor Duma Malaza, the CEO of HESA, who highlighted that the collective leadership of higher education was fully behind the study. “The 23 vice-chancellors took a joint decision that the stakes were too high to continue without knowing the size of the problem and endorsed the plan for HEAIDS to conduct a national survey,” he said.

The study commenced at the University of Stellenbosch on August 11 and will continue for the next few months. There are some 750 000 students enrolled at the participating institutions and approximately 50 000 full-time personnel, ranging from academics to administrative and support staff.

“By taking a large sample of students and staff, we are able to get a reliable picture even when we look in more detail at particular sub-groups,” explained Dr Mark Colvin, head of the research team undertaking the study.

The results of the study are expected to be available early in 2009 when a consolidated sector-wide report will be released to the public.

Dr Colvin said that the 25 000 participants had been identified through a process of random sampling. “Of course, participation is voluntary and individuals who fall into the sample can decline to take part. But we are appealing to them to consider the greater good.”

For the purpose of the study, testing is done anonymously and survey participants do not receive their results. However, special HIV counselling and testing services are being offered on campuses during and after the study, so that those who want to establish their status can easily do so.

Dr Asmall emphasised that the “social” aspect of the survey was equally important to the HIV testing component. “It is likely that many assumptions are made about what university students and staff know about HIV/AIDS, how they handle their intimate relationships, and what they feel about HIV/AIDS. The survey will try and establish the reality so that institutional HIV/AIDS programmes can be tailor-made for the unique campus communities they serve.”

Released by HEAIDS through Meropa Communication:

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