

Dear Colleague,

As the 2021 academic year gets under way with orientation period, across our institutions, it is normal and understandable for students to feel excited to be starting their tertiary education or to be happy to meet their peers. We sympathise with first-year students – this is the time to make new friendships and experiences. But COVID pandemic is a reality, and ours is a youth-centred sector.

While COVID has largely been detrimental for the older population groups, the virus is mutating, and new variants are showing a higher affinity towards young people who can serve as carriers and fasten the spread of infection. Unfortunately, this has the potential to quickly develop into cluster outbreaks, across our campuses and spread across communities, which in return can fire up the third wave.

We have started experiencing pockets of young students becoming positive, as well as few cluster outbreaks, across our institutions, which requires us to be extremely vigilant and exercise all the necessary protocols and control measures that we have adopted to prevent COVID infections, across our campuses. We saw how rapidly South Africa was pushed into the second wave of the pandemic in December following super-spreader school-end events, like the Ballito “rage” party. We fear that with Easter holidays from tomorrow till 6 April, and as much as we are monitoring the positivity rates among our students, with intense screening and testing programmes, we fear that members of our post school system might carry the infection into their own families and communities.

Hence, HIGHER HEALTH is urging students and everyone in the academic sector to respect the health of their families and others in their social circles and to join in a social compact, towards preventing the spread of COVID infections. It means that each of us is protective of themselves and of one another and we can do that by observing the basic COVID protocols.

HIGHER HEALTH has been working closely with all our institutions, the Department of Health, the National Institute of Communicable Diseases and the National Health Laboratory Service and has established cluster outbreak investigation teams. Just in the last fortnight, over 3 000 students and staff have been screened and contact traced, with over 300 individuals tested. Enabling access to early testing, contact tracing and getting quick laboratory results, through our collaborations with the health authorities, helps towards early isolation for those who are suspected to be infected or at high risk and moving the positives to quarantine facilities, assists in breaking the chain of cluster outbreaks. HIGHER HEALTH provincial team and local department of health remain on absolute standby to assist any institution experiencing COVID outbreak, during and after the festive period.

Please also feel free to remind your students and staff to use our tollfree daily digital screening platform available on USSD line *134*832*2#, URL for the webform: healthcheck.higherhealth.ac.za and WhatsApp contacts: 0600 11 0 000 <https://wa.me/27600110000?text=hi>, to assess one’s risk prior to entering campuses or other public places and the HIGHER HEALTH 24-hour tollfree helpline 0800 36 36 36 which can assist with psychosocial counselling and with other mental and physical challenges including GBV.

We sincerely thank all our institutional leadership and management that are working day and night in protecting and saving lives across all our campuses in the post school system. We further salute all our

frontline workers and student volunteers who are selflessly supporting campuses in the fight against COVID.

Wishing you safe Easter observations and success in the academic endeavours.

Yours in good health,

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