

South African Union Of Students (SAUS)

Document Five

Policy On HIV-AIDS

Introduction

Noting the alarmingly high number of students and young people living with HIV-AIDS in South Africa, this policy is an attempt to systematise an approach for SAUS towards combating the epidemic and addressing its consequences. It must be seen as the beginning of the development of policy in SAUS with regard to health more generally. It must also be viewed in the context of the need to develop this broader policy. While HIV-AIDS is a pressing concern, the broader health of students is equally important, and SAUS' research and policy unit should earmark health as an area for proper research and policy formulation.

The high rate of HIV-AIDS amongst young people has resulted in shifting patterns of mortality amongst the young and old that do not bode well for a growing economy and a developing country. Young women are disproportionate amongst the infected. This has resulted in SAUS adopting the following policy statement in September 2007:

In acknowledging the detrimental effects of HIV and AIDS amongst the youth, we as SAUS promote responsible living of students as we entrench awareness and education around the pandemic. We further encourage students and student leaders to play an active role in providing support for those who are affected and infected by HIV-AIDS, while firmly upholding the principle of equal treatment regardless of one's social or economic status in society.

In accepting HIV-AIDS as a national priority, SAUS seeks to develop a policy that is multi-pronged, looking at the roles that individuals, institutions of higher learning, the state, and the private sector can play in addressing the pandemic, and at prioritising both preventive and curative and palliative measures for approaching the problem. It is also important for SAUS to look at ways in which SAUS as an organisation, and its affiliates, can assist in dealing with this important issue.

Prevention

SAUS will explore ways of proactively encouraging prevention of the illness through campaigns and awareness drives at national and institutional levels. Such campaigns could include provocative media, debates and discussions, condom distribution, informative talks, and so on. To this end, partnerships will be explored with institutional managements, government (through the Department of Health), and NGOs. Individual SRCs will be encouraged to initiate their own

preventive campaigns and awareness drives. Campus health services will be encouraged to provide free condoms on all campuses. In addition, all campuses will be encouraged to open voluntary counselling and testing centres for students. And SAUS will actively promote these centres, and encourage students to test through media campaigns and awareness drives. Central to the success of these centres will be a campaign to reduce the stigma attached to the illness. SAUS will find creative ways to deal with this problem.

SAUS will explore the possibility of a national series of workshops to encourage lifestyles and approaches to relationships that help students to deal with the problems that arise and need to be negotiated by young men and women as they learn about sex, sexuality and relationships in the context of the epidemic. These workshops would include ways of encouraging mutual responsibility for contraception, family planning and pregnancy by men and women, and discussions about the power relations that have to be negotiated in relationships between men and women or women and women or men and men.

Treatment, Care, Counselling & Support

As so many students are already living with HIV-AIDS, it is important for SAUS to provide some intervention that speaks to their needs. Here, we are calling for the provision of free anti-retrovirals for all students living with HIV-AIDS. SAUS will undertake campaigns to demand that government, the private sector and institutional managements come together to provide the treatment and care necessary for students living with the illness. Proper care, access to counselling, and support must be made available for sick students. The research and policy unit should explore what the state of existing programmes on campuses are, nationally, to address the illness. Any campaigns or projects directed at institutional managements should be based on the outcomes of this research.

In the engendering of a caring student community, SRCs should facilitate the coming together of students living with HIV-AIDS in support groups at institutional level. At national level, SAUS should facilitate the coming together of student leaders living with HIV-AIDS to share experiences, receive advice and support, and develop collective ways of dealing with the illness. SAUS should also compile informative pamphlets and brochures about the illness and living with it for students and student leaders, to be distributed through SAUS and through SRCs. Such materials could also be sourced and/or developed in partnership with the Department of Health, or NGOs.

Protecting The Rights Of Students Living With HIV-AIDS

In addition to proper treatment, care, counselling and support, students living with HIV-AIDS need certain rights to be protected:

- students living with HIV-AIDS have the legal right to confidentiality about their status.

- no student is under the obligation to inform the institution at which s/he is enrolled of his/her status.
- no student may be denied access to an institution based on his/her positive status.
- HIV-positive students have exactly the same rights as other students and should not be discriminated against negatively because of their illness.

SAUS should ensure that any student facing discrimination or a violation of these rights as a student living with HIV-AIDS should receive the necessary support to lodge a formal complaint and to seek recourse for his/her injuries.

Eliminating The Stigma Attached To HIV-AIDS

SAUS will undertake campaigns that are creative in challenging stereotypes about people living with HIV-AIDS and the stigmatisation that accompanies the illness. Such campaigns will include discussions, debates, pamphlets, comic strips, etc. Attempts will be made to build partnerships with government and NGOs in this regard.

Protecting Students In Situations Of High Risk

Particular groups of students e.g. those in the health sciences (medicine, nursing, etc.) open themselves up at various times in the course of their studies to situations in which they could contract HIV e.g. through needle-stick injuries and other accidents involving the spillage of blood. SAUS should investigate the situation of such students and the appropriateness of the measures currently in place to protect them and to treat them. If lacking, campaigns should be undertaken to improve the conditions under which such students are expected to work. Such campaigns could also serve as ways of drawing students from these academic streams into SAUS, streams that have historically been neglected and known not to get involved in student governance.

Considering HIV-AIDS In Curriculum Change

HIV-AIDS has resulted in a number of changes, both for the ways in which students live and the ways in which they learn and are exposed to knowledge. With HIV-AIDS now an inescapable reality, it is imperative that all knowledge about the illness is imparted to as many as possible. SAUS believes that all undergraduate courses should include a component on HIV-AIDS to meet this growing need.

For many students, particularly in the health fields, HIV-AIDS has brought with it tremendous risks, increasingly difficult learning environments in which death has come to be a constant and defining feature, and enormous ethical problems as the scale of the pandemic has escalated at a pace far beyond the reach of current medical interventions to address the growing number of the dying. While questions of life and death present themselves daily in the learning environments of medical and nursing students, they have not been integrated into the

curricula that are supposed to prepare them for their working lives. SAUS' research and policy unit should spend some time investigating the impact of HIV-AIDS on the experience of learning for medical and nursing students, and propose ways for the curricula to be changed to address these ethical questions that students are presented with as HIV-AIDS persists.

Bringing Medical Students Together

In the interests of further developing this policy and elaborating a more comprehensive approach to health, SAUS undertakes to facilitate the coming together of medical students to discuss their experiences of learning and teaching, and of HIV-AIDS.

Conducting Ongoing Research

SAUS' research and policy unit should undertake research on an ongoing basis into the effects of the HIV-AIDS pandemic on students. This will allow for SAUS to measure how successful interventions at an institutional and national level are in the lives of students. The design of such research will present a challenge with regard to ethical questions, but these should be dealt with in consultation with experts in the field.