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HIGHER HEALTH

Higher Health Induction Message for 2026

Dear Sir/Madam

Best wishes from Higher Health for a prosperous 2026.

As we embark on the academic year, we recognize that close to a million students will be attending Post-School Education and Training (PSET) for the first time, with significant challenges faced along the way. For many students, enrolling in tertiary institutes means stepping into uncharted territory, as many of them are the first in their family to do so. Without adequate support, these students experience feelings of isolation, anxiety, and pressure to meet familial expectations while navigating unfamiliar environments.

Furthermore, first-year students leave their homes and communities for the first time, moving into on-campus residences or private off-campus accommodations. Without the support of familiar family structures, they may experience heightened vulnerability as they adjust to independent living in a new environment. Ensuring a safe, supportive, and inclusive atmosphere for these students is essential to help them thrive both academically and personally.

Compounding these pressures are various health risks, as well as social, economic, and psychological challenges that young people in our communities encounter daily. These include high rates of **HIV and Tuberculosis (TB)**, other **Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)**, high instances of sexual and **Gender-Based Violence (GBV)**, and elevated rates of **Drug, Alcohol, Gambling and Substance Abuse and Addiction**. Additionally, the high number of **Unplanned Pregnancies** often leads to academic dropouts. Severe **Mental Health** concerns, including **Academic Stress**, **Financial Strain**, high **Suicide** rates, bereavement, and other forms of **Anxiety and Depression**, are alarmingly prevalent among young South Africans in the post-school education system. Students with **Disabilities** face heightened vulnerability, as they continue to be at risk of all the aforementioned challenges, while also struggling to find reasonable accommodation and work in a safe, inclusive environment. Furthermore, the ongoing threat of emerging pandemics, such as

Climate change significantly impacts university students, affecting their mental health, academic performance, and future outlook (Lancet Planetary Health, 2024). This widespread concern can lead to increased stress and anxiety among students, potentially affecting their academic performance and overall well-being.

The **booklet below** provides some information designed to equip the first-year student to information that shows them what support is available to them, and how they can access support. Please feel free to extract information from this guide for your speeches during induction, or in correspondence with students, staff, parents and guardians, and encourage other academics and staff to do the same. This is our way of ensuring that Higher Health supports all institutions in its endeavour to ensure the safety and well-being of all students.

If you require any further information on inductions, please feel free to contact me or visit our website on:

<https://higherhealth.ac.za/higher-health-induction-message-for-2026/>

Yours sincerely

Dr (Prof) Ramneek Ahluwalia
CEO: HIGHER HEALTH



www.higherhealth.ac.za

HIGHER HEALTH INDUCTION MESSAGE 2026

General Information for inclusion in Institutional induction and a reference document for correspondence with students, staff, parents and guardians



higher education
& training
Department:
Higher Education and Training
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



HIGHER HEALTH

Higher Education & Training: Health, Wellness and Development Centre



NSF
National Skills Fund
FUNDING TO SKILL OUR NATION

Message



Buti Manamela

*Minister of Higher
Education and Training*

2026 Academic Year Induction

As you enter the post-school education and training system in 2026, I warmly welcome you to a new chapter in your life – one that marks your transition from school into adulthood, independence, and active participation in South Africa's future.

For many of you, this is your first step beyond high school, bringing new responsibilities, expectations, and freedoms. Feeling excited, uncertain, or anxious is normal. What matters is that you have chosen to continue learning, develop your skills, and invest in your future.

Our universities, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, Community Education and Training (CET) colleges, private higher education institutions, and skills development institutions offer diverse and equally valuable pathways. There is no single route to success – only the path that enables you to grow, contribute, and build a meaningful life.

By joining the Post-School Education and Training (PSET) system, you become part of a generation carrying the hopes of a skilled, inclusive, and resilient South Africa. Your presence here matters.

The Department of Higher Education and Training remains committed to ensuring that this system is accessible, responsive, and supportive, regardless of background or socio-economic circumstance. I encourage you to familiarise yourselves with academic expectations, institutional rules, and available student support services, and to take full advantage of opportunities for learning and personal development.

As you begin this journey, uphold the constitutional values of non-racialism, non-sexism, human dignity, equality, and freedom. Our campuses must remain safe, inclusive spaces, free from discrimination, harassment, abuse, and all forms of violence.

I also recognise that post-school life can be demanding. Students who experience stress, anxiety, or emotional challenges are encouraged to seek support through the **Higher Health 24-Hour Crisis Helpline on 0800 36 36 36**. Seeking help is a sign of strength.

I wish you focus, resilience, and success as you begin this important journey. Your success contributes not only to your own future, but to that of our country.

Buti Manamela

Minister of Higher Education and Training

CEO's Welcome Message



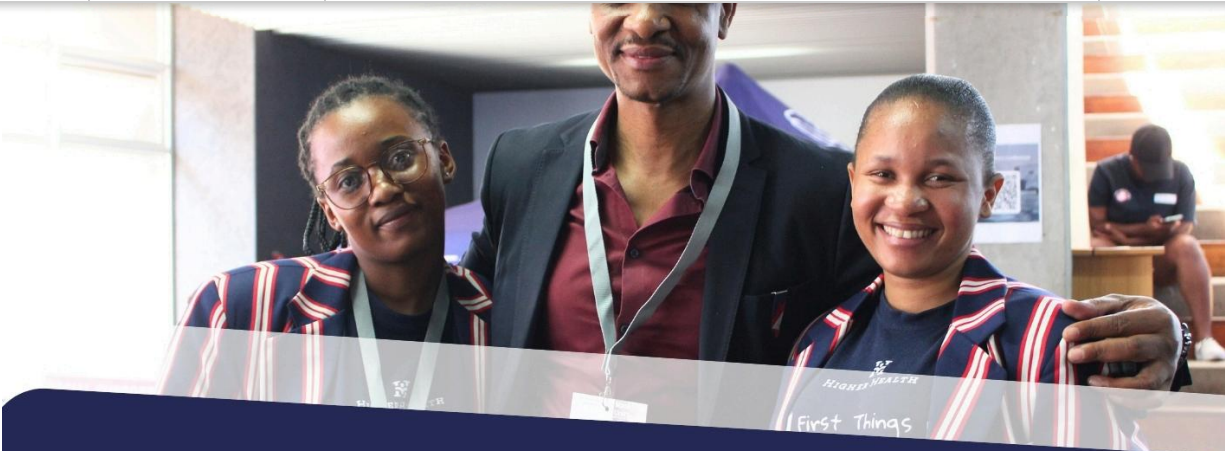
Prof Ramneek Ahluwalia
CEO of Higher Health

As we begin the academic year, we acknowledge that close to a million students will be entering the Post-School Education and Training (PSET) system for the first time. For many, this marks a significant transition into unfamiliar territory, often as the first in their families to pursue tertiary education. While this journey brings excitement and opportunity, it can also present challenges such as anxiety, isolation, and pressure to succeed, particularly as students adjust to new academic environments and independent living away from home.

These transition challenges are often compounded by broader health, social, economic and psychological risks faced by young people today. High rates of HIV, Tuberculosis (TB) and other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), Gender-Based Violence (GBV), drug, alcohol, gambling and substance abuse and addiction, unplanned pregnancies and mental health concerns continue to affect students across the PSET sector. Students with disabilities face additional vulnerabilities, including barriers to reasonable accommodation and safe, inclusive learning environments.

This guide is designed to support first-year students by providing information on the health and psychosocial services offered by Higher Health, as well as guidance on how to access support when needed. PSET staff and Higher Health practitioners are encouraged to use and share this information during induction activities, presentations and engagements with students, parents and guardians.

Through this guide and our ongoing work, Higher Health reaffirms its commitment to creating safe, supportive and inclusive campuses where every student can thrive. We wish all students a successful and fulfilling academic year in 2026.



From School to Campus: A New Chapter

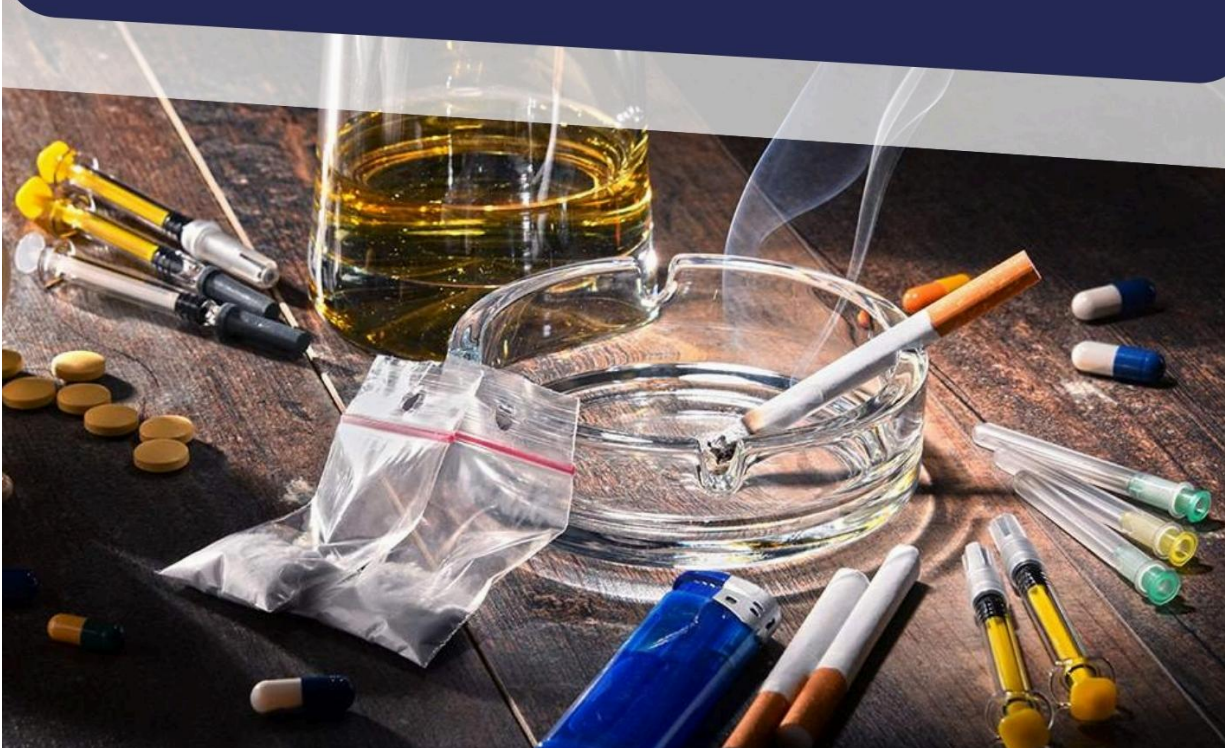
The positive Grade 12 results and the increase in Bachelor passes this year are promising indicators of progress in our education system. However, they also bring new challenges, placing added pressure on tertiary institutions to carefully evaluate and admit students into first-year programmes. The expanding number of qualifying candidates underscores the increasing demand for higher education and reinforces the vital role our 26 public universities, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and Community Education and Training (CET) Colleges play in shaping the future of our nation.

As the academic year begins, it is acknowledged that close to a million students will be entering the Post-School Education and Training (PSET) system for the first time, many of whom will face significant challenges during this transition. For a large number of these students, higher education represents unfamiliar territory, as they are often the first in their families to pursue post-school studies. Furthermore, first-year students leave their homes and communities for the first time, moving into on-campus residences or private off-campus accommodations. Without the support of familiar family structures, they may experience heightened vulnerability as they adjust to independent living in a new environment. Ensuring a safe, supportive, and inclusive atmosphere for these students is essential to help them thrive both academically and personally.

“ For a large number of these students, higher education represents unfamiliar territory, as they are often the first in their families to pursue post-school studies. ”

Compounding these pressures are various health risks, as well as social, economic, and psychological challenges that young people in our communities encounter daily. These include high rates of HIV and Tuberculosis (TB), other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), high instances of sexual and Gender-Based Violence (GBV), and elevated rates of Drugs, Alcohol, Gambling and other Substance Abuse and Addiction. Additionally, the high number of Unplanned Pregnancies often leads to academic dropouts. Severe Mental Health concerns, including Academic Stress, financial strain, high Suicide rates, bereavement, and other forms of Anxiety and Depression, are alarmingly prevalent among young South Africans in the post-school education system. Students with Disabilities face heightened vulnerability, as they continue to be at risk of all the aforementioned challenges, while also struggling to find reasonable accommodation and work in a safe, inclusive environment. Furthermore, the ongoing threat of emerging pandemics, such as COVID-19 and other microorganisms, continues to threaten our survival on the continent.

Climate change significantly impacts our students from higher education institutions, affecting their mental health, academic performance, and future outlook (Lancet Planetary Health, 2024). This widespread concern can lead to increased stress and anxiety among students, potentially affecting their academic performance and overall well-being.





Key Health and Social Challenges Affecting Students:

- One in five young South Africans live with moderate to severe mental health challenges. **Mental Health** issues are affecting young people increasingly, and 75% of these cases happen before the age of 24 (WHO, 2018).
- **Suicide** remains one of the leading causes of death among our young students in the Post-School Education and Training (PSET) sector, originating with multiple mental health issues like anxiety, depression, academic and financial stress, violence, and many other factors.
- A Higher Health/HSRC study showed that more than half of the student population take **Drugs, Alcohol, Gambling and other Substance Abuse** monthly. This age cohort is sensitive to dependence and addiction, which has a ripple effect on educational throughputs, and the health and wellness of students. Similarly, we also note that about six in 10 students and staff have been found to abuse alcohol regularly, according to Higher Health studies.



Key Health and Social Challenges Affecting Students: **continued...**

- Sexual violence, **Gender-Based Violence and Femicide**, and intimate partner violence are amongst the most prevalent forms of GBVF in young women aged 16-25 years (UNICEF, 2023).
- The PSET sector is home to more than 2,1 million youth, with 51% being females. Ten percent (10%) of all reported rape cases originate from young women in the higher education sector. Sadly, Higher Health notes that only one in ten women only report a rape case.
- **Tuberculosis** remains the leading cause of death among the youth, followed by HIV. UNAIDS estimates that approximately 7.7 million South Africans still live with HIV, with the new infections predominantly emerging within young people between 15-24 years of age.
- **Diabetes** is increasing among young people, and about one in five have **Hypertension**.



Key Health and Social Challenges Affecting Students: **continued...**

- **Cervical Cancer** is the leading cause of cancer-related deaths, and the second most common diagnosed cancer among young South African women (CANSAs, 2022). The lifestyle choices and health behaviours of students such as unprotected sexual activity, substance abuse, stress, mental health issues and lack of health education and awareness contribute to the increasing risk of cervical cancer.
- Higher Health studies show a large number of female students become pregnant while on campus, and 75% of these **Unplanned Pregnancies** are leading to high rates of dropouts. Only about 10% of female students return to class post-delivery. Higher Health has a sexual reproductive health programme that addresses these issues by empowering students with information and offering them a range of contraceptive options to suit their needs.
- Approximately 6.0% of the South African population live with a **Disability** (Stats SA, 2022). Very few South Africans disclose disability when in higher education institutions.



Key Health and Social Challenges Affecting Students: **continued...**

- **Climate Change** is a reality and has a huge impact on PSET students. Climate change significantly impacts university students, affecting their mental health, academic performance, and future outlook (Lancet Planetary Health, 2024). This widespread concern can lead to increased stress and anxiety among students, potentially affecting their academic performance and overall well-being. Additionally, climate change-related events, such as extreme weather, can disrupt education, leading to missed classes and increased student debt.

Higher Health, as an implementing arm of the Department of Higher Education and Training, in collaboration with universities, TVET and CET colleges, run various programmes addressing the above challenges together with more than 10 000 trained **Peer Educators** and Frontline Workers such as **Social Workers, Nurses, Psychologists, Counsellors and other Specialised Medical Professionals** are committed to providing students with the support needed to overcome these hurdles and succeed academically and take their rightful places in society.

The information below serves as a guide for first-year students in particular, that can be shared with students during their induction. Please feel free to include some of this information in your speech, and encourage other institution staff to do so as well. This information guides students to accessing essential support services, thus ensuring their well-being and creating a safe and conducive environment.



HIGHER HEALTH's Five-Step development, health, wellness and psycho-social wellbeing Interventions:

1. Civic and Soft Skills Programme (NQF Level 5)

Institutions are encouraged to promote student enrolment into the **QCTO-accredited NQF Level 5** Higher Health Civic and Soft Skills hybrid-learning programme, endorsed by UNESCO, and is available to students, to run alongside their academic programme. With the entry requirement of NQF Level 1 and an exit outcome with NQF Level 5, this unique interactive skills programme helps students and staff to **develop the essential Life and Soft Skills** that have shown to not only **increase academic performance** but also prepares them to be **responsible citizens, competent graduates** and **workplace readiness** towards employers' first choice. The skills programme is divided into nine comprehensive modules, each designed to address different challenges that the youth face today.

The modules are:

- Module 1 – Global Citizenship and Skills for Living;
- Module 2 – Gender Equity and Inclusion;
- Module 3 – Mental and Emotional Intelligence;
- Module 4 – Disability Inclusion and Accessibility;
- Module 5 – Physical and Sexual Health;
- Module 6 – Substance, Gambling, Gaming Abuse and Addiction;
- Module 7 – Financial Literacy;
- Module 8 – Climate Change Education; and
- Module 9 – Digital Literacy and Ethics of AI.



After the successful completion of each module, a student receives a certificate which can be added to his/her Curriculum Vitae (CV) and also shared on his/her professional and social networks such as LinkedIn. Furthermore, this skills programme helps students gain skills that employers are looking for. It supports students in enhancing their employability, builds resilience among young people, and promotes digital citizenship.

The programme also covers the **Top 10 Soft Skills of the Workplace (Graduate Attributes)**, namely:

1. Empathy, Listening and Counselling
2. Civic Responsibility and Peer Education
3. Conflict Resolution
4. Creativity, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving
5. Decision Making
6. Digital Literacy
7. Presentation Skills, Public Speaking and Communication
8. Resilience, Confidence and Self-Motivation
9. Teamwork, Organizational Skills and Leadership Skills
10. Time-Management and Goal-Setting

The Civic and Soft Skills Programme is the only programme on the African continent that covers the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in a manner that is relatable to our students.

We encourage students and staff to seek out our Higher Health's Campus Care Worker (CCW) or any other Higher Health professional based at your institution, to access more information towards enrolment in building their future.



2. Face-to-Face Co-Curriculum (Peer-to-Peer Knowledge Sharing Dialogues)

Higher Health has trained over 100 to 200 Peer Educators per institution, and these unsung heroes empower other students with knowledge that helps them build resilience and know where and how to seek help. Face-to-face classes take place regularly, and more information about these sessions are available from Higher Health's campus care worker, Campus Health Clinic, Gender office, student support services, or peer educators.

We encourage students to enrol and join the Peer to peer Knowledge Sharing Dialogues on HIV, STIs, GBV, Mental Health, Addiction and Abuse, Contraceptive Methods among other social and health challenges.



3. Early Health and Psychosocial Risk Screening and Easy Access to Health Services on Campus:

Students are urged to utilise Higher Health's Early Risk Assessment Tools to screen for their own health, psychosocial and well-being challenges. Utilising the Higher Health early health detection risk-screening programme has shown in preventing youth epidemics as well as increased awareness and health seeking behaviour among young students.

The established **Higher Health early detection risk-screening Tool kit:**

- Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
- Intimate partner violence
- Gender-Based Violence perpetrator screening
- Mental health and psychosocial stress
- HIV
- TB
- STI
- Substance abuse
- Substance Addiction
- Pregnancy and Contraception
- All forms of Disabilities

Institutions should encourage students to easily access comprehensive monthly services for free via the monthly First Things First health and wellness programme camps held on each campus. Services offered range from HIV testing, to **Non-Communicable Diseases like Diabetes, Hypertension, to Dental and Eye Screening.** Further to this, institutions have clinic services. Please encourage young people to use these services and seek professional support in the form of qualified nurses, as early as possible. Further to that Higher Health's mobile clinics routinely visit campuses to further strengthen routine treatment, care and support across our campuses.

Students who require more information may contact Higher Health's campus care worker, Campus Health Clinic, Gender office, student support services, or peer educators.



4. Counselling and Crisis Support Services

Mental Health and GBV pose severe risks to our institutions. Students are encouraged to seek help from campus health professionals, counsellors, and psychologists, and to make use of the **Higher Health 24-Hour Crisis Helpline: 0800 36 36 36**, which provides free, confidential support 24/7 throughout the year. Further to that, Higher Health has a dedicated team of qualified psychologists and counsellors to further assist students. Students who require more information may contact Higher Health's campus care worker, Campus Health Clinic, Gender office, student support services, or peer educators.

Higher Health 24-Hour Crisis Helpline:
0800 36 36 36

provides free, confidential support 24/7 throughout the year.



5. Linkage to Tertiary Level Health and Social Care

Institutions are informed that Higher Health has a partnership with Department of Health, Department of Social Development, National Prosecuting Authority towards treatment, admissions and tertiary level care and support.

Through Higher Health's partnership with the Department of Health students are linked to care and provincial hospitals and local clinics close to them. Higher Health also has a partnership with the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) to refer all GBV survivors to the nearest Thuthuzela Care Centre, for a range of comprehensive services that include physical, legal and psycho-social services. Students who require more information may contact Higher Health's campus care coordinator, Campus Health Clinic, Gender office, student support services, or peer educators.



Addressing Gender-Based Violence (GBV):

Higher Health is actively engaged in initiatives to combat GBV through awareness-raising, capacity building, and policy implementation.

Higher Health has launched several crisis response protocols, approved by the established Technical Task Team to all the institutions in the Post-School Education and Training sector, namely:

- Implementation Guidelines on the Management of cases of GBV on campus
- Guidelines on Code of Ethics
- Protocol on Staff Student Relationships
- Protocol on Safety in Residences
- Protocol on Safety in Private Accommodation
- Protocol on Staff Student Travel
- Protocol on Establishing of Responsible Office and Safe Room
- Protocol on Statement of Complainant
- Protocol on Whistleblowing

Higher Health routinely capacitates per institution all the above protocols through nationwide **roadshows and capacity-building sessions** for frontline teams. This includes residence staff, campus security, SRCs, student support services, and campus health and counselling units.

In addition, **Higher Health through its Peer-to-Peer mobilisation programme** is promoting the safety protocols through structured face-to-face dialogues on campus safety. These ongoing peer-led dialogues will play a vital role in fostering awareness, responsibility, and proactive safety cultures among students across all campuses. Higher Health has already set up **a Crisis Psycho-social Response team** to urgently respond when the tragedy of GBV, femicide and suicide takes place across any institution. The team is dispatched to provide psychosocial support to the affected families, peer students, classmates and staff affected with the incidence of rape, suicide on the campus.

...lessness reporting of cases at Thuthuzela care centres, in line with the Amended Sexual Offences Act that pronounce young women under the age of 25 years old at PSET institutions, as a vulnerable group. The Act also places an obligation on third parties who become aware of incidents of GBV, to report these cases to the police.

It is recommended that every case of reported Gender-Based Violence, Sexual Violence, Sexual Harassment in campuses of the Post-School Education and Training system, to follow a Protocol of Higher Health in partnership with NPA towards linking the young life to both the Criminal justice system as well as for Medical legal support as a first priority before initiating our own internal disciplinary system.

We recommend that after reporting a case of GBV on campus, each institution must ensure that the survivor must be taken to a safe room in the campus and offered an immediate medical legal and psychosocial support. The survivor thereafter must be transferred from the safe room to the nearest Thuthuzela Care Centre or an accredited NPA health facility where the survivor or complainant will be immediately provided access to criminal justice system and provided a comprehensive medical legal and psychosocial support. Once the survivor is stable and referred back to the campus, only thereafter the institution should open their own disciplinary system while the evidence has been secured by the criminal justice system.

We trust that this communiqué will serve as a valuable guide for 2026. We look forward to collaborating with institutions to ensure the success of these innovative programmes, creating a safer and healthier environment for all students. We will continue to provide updates on these initiatives as they evolve.

May I take this opportunity to extend my best wishes for a productive and prosperous year ahead.

Sincerely,

Dr (Prof) Ramneek Ahluwalia
CEO, Higher Health





Get In Touch

Whether you need health and wellness information, psychosocial support, referrals to healthcare services, guidance on wellness and development programmes, or to enrol in the Civic and Soft Skills NQF L5 Programme, our team is here to assist. We encourage you to get in touch with us through the contact details provided for confidential support, timely assistance, and access to our holistic health and development services. Together, we can create safe, supportive, and thriving learning environments.

Contact Us :



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www.higherhealth.ac.za



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