

"It is OKAY as it is in different area codes"

# STUDENT'S PERCEPTIONS ON SEXUAL CONCURRENCY

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## BACKGROUND

HAICU, in 2009 as part of the HEAIDS (Higher Education Against AIDS) Programme received funding for Southern Hemisphere Consulting to conduct a Risk Behaviour Study with residence students at the University of Cape Town. The study explored sexual concurrency among students as this is a driver of HIV.

## METHODS

The results presented in the study were collected using a mixed method approach, based on a quantitative survey of 598 residence students at UCT, who were selected using a weighted randomised probability sample. The sample was weighted and represented the 5312 residence student population, as at February 2009. This was complimented with 30 qualitative in-depth interviews and 20 focus groups with students who live both in and out of residence. A baseline survey was also conducted with ACEs Peer Educators, the key implementers of the ACEs Programme on campus.

The research aims and objectives included compiling a baseline study of knowledge, attitude and reported behaviour of students.

## RESULTS

The student risk behaviour research focused on students' knowledge, perceptions, attitudes and behaviour related to the prevention, care and transmission of HIV. This included an investigation of their perceptions and experiences of HIV services on campus, stigma, knowledge of students, sexual behaviour of students, relationships, issues around condom use, abstinence, testing, and perceptions of own personal risk.

The results from the study noted that most students encounter their first sexual experience during university years (i.e. between 17-21 years of age), making these years crucial in shaping and influencing decision making around sex. It is also indicated that having multiple and concurrent sexual partners was identified as high risk behaviour by students.

Students in the study had different feelings about the concurrency issue; however, the qualitative data suggests that it appears as if it is a norm on campus. When questioned about reasoning for this behaviour, some participants indicated that they do it because it is convenient as sometimes their partners are not in close proximity to them. Male students, in particular, identified that they do it for recognition or "status" from their friends.

*"There's this thing with guys that they want to be with more than one person so that they can come and brag to friends that they were with this person in the night"*

*"It is not cheating, because it is different area codes"*

Only 2% of the participants openly disclosed that they had more than one sexual partner. This may seem low; however it potentially translates to 102 people, which in turn could suggest 102 different sexual networks which incorporate more individuals. In contrast to those who openly indicated their participation in concurrency, 10.5% of students say that they have started new relationships before ending their previous relationship. Of the participants who indicated they were single, 9% had multiple partners recently. Of those students in relationships, 30% did not know whether their partners were still involved with someone else before starting a relationship with them, and 11% indicated that this had in fact been the case for them.

Data from the in-depth interviews and focus groups indicate that there are varying forms of concurrency with students on campus. According to students, concurrent relationships take 3 main forms on campus: long distance relationships; casual flings and holiday flings.

Where students are in serious long distance relationships, with other concurrent relationships, it has been reported that the serious partner would not know that the other partners exists, however, this is not always the case.

*"...you know he has a girlfriend. You know her very well. You are just the girl on the side that is having sex with him. That is normal. Maybe you have your own boyfriend at home and you don't want to have a straight boyfriend in Cape Town, but you still want to have the sex."*

*"How can I leave my girl up there and I am right here at UCT. I don't know what she is doing up there. You have got to have something moving along right here in Cape Town."*

When it comes to holiday flings, the main partner is on campus and the student has casual flings or other partners when going home for the vacation.

Casual flings can be defined when a student has one serious partner on campus, and other casual partners on campus. This was noted to be more out of the need for variety.

*"Furthermore the ladies - we are just being honest - they don't feel ashamed of sharing a guy. It is like they accept that there is a ratio of 3 to 1. They say 'If he has other girls', I don't mind. As long as he makes time for me and they don't stay in the vicinity. If the one stays at Rochester and other one stays at Woolfsack, the other one stay at Tugwell because it is far away from each other."*

Coupled with this data approximately 30% of students showed that they may be engaging in unsafe sexual practices including having sex with many partners without protection.

## CONCLUSIONS

While the finding, that only 2% of students admitted that they are engaged in sexual relations with more than one partner, may appear low, this equates in terms of numbers to 102 students. Potentially this could be 102 sexual networks. This includes only those students that have identified that they are engaging in this behaviour. Further to this research, UCT's peer educators have helped design interventions which have been piloted with the residence student sector. These results have implications for the country's future leaders. HAICU will continue to investigate this issue.

Reference: Coetzee, L., Lomofsky, D., Wessels – Ziervogel, W. and Tawii, C. (2009) Final Report: ACEs Evaluation and Risk Behaviour Survey

