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| MEMORANDUM FROM THE PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE |

**NATIONAL ASSEMBLY**

**FOR WRITTEN REPLY**

**QUESTION 2300**

**DATE OF PUBLICATION OF INTERNAL QUESTION PAPER: 16/10/2020**

**INTERNAL QUESTION PAPER NO 38 OF 2020**

**Mr S L Ngcobo (IFP) to ask the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology:**

(1) In view of the series of student deaths that have occurred at the University of Fort Hare (details furnished), which seem to be reflective of broader trends in the higher education sector, what immediate steps has his department taken in response to the tragic state of affairs;

(2) whether there are systems in place to monitor universities and colleges’ level of compliance with legal investigations following the death of a student; if not, what steps does his department intend to take to remedy the situation; if so, what are the relevant details of the monitoring systems?

**NW2872E**

**REPLY:**

1. The University of Fort Hare (UFH) experiences a significant number of student deaths each year. The University keeps a record of all student deaths, although not all deaths occur on campus or while students are at the University. The causes of death include natural causes (illness), car accidents, suicides, and/or violent deaths as a result of stabbing or assault. In 2019, a student drowned in the University pool, which was reported to the Department. The University has provided the following summary of student deaths with causes, during 2019 and 2020:

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| **Cause of Death** | **2019** | **2020** |
| Natural causes (Illness) | 3 | 7 |
| Suicide | 4 | 2 |
| Car accident | 3 | 2 |
| Stabbing | 1 | 4 |
| Assault |  | 1 |
| Hit and run accident |  | 1 |
| Drowning | 1 |  |
| Injuries sustained in a fire | 1 |  |
| **Total** | **13** | **17** |

The University and the Department are deeply concerned about the prevalence of preventable deaths, specifically suicide and assault (including stabbing). The Department engages with the institution regularly and receives reports from the University when a tragic event occurs, particularly if they are on campus.

Last year, the University employed two part-time social workers to work with its psychologists. The Student Affairs Division has also partnered with the Social Work and Psychology Departments to provide support to students in distress, over and above the work done by the Student Counselling Unit. Residences have started the process of replacing Wardens with Residence Student Assistants. The Residence Student Assistants are mainly selected from among senior students from the Psychology and Social Work Departments. In 2019, the Student Affairs Division started a group called Champions Against Gender-Based Violence. These students are mainly selected from Social Work, Psychology and Criminology Departments and they create awareness on campus, support victims, and attend social gatherings. Just before the national lockdown, the Student Affairs Division was in conversation with the Eastern Cape Liquor Board to explore areas of collaboration to curb substance abuse amongst students. The Student Counselling and HIV/Aids Units holds regular information sessions with students in the evenings.

Higher Health has introduced innovative measures and solutions to support the mental health of students at universities, such as the 24-hour toll-free number mental health support service managed by a dedicated team of experienced psychologists, social workers, and counsellors. The service is available to all students within universities, and Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges.

The Department also engages with Universities South Africa on matters relating to the mental health of students, and safety and security on campus on a regular basis.

1. The University cooperates with government agencies tasked with conducting investigations when a death occurs. The University also provides reports to the Department where cases are subject to legal investigations. The Department monitors the implementation of the recommendations of the reports provided and lends further support if requested by the University.