4 Know your university's HIV Risk

Given the variability of the HIV epidemic in different countries, and in different regions of countries, the first important step in developing your response to HIV is to estimate how badly your university is affected. As already described in chapter 3 there many ways in which HIV can affect your university. However, these impacts are not uniform across the region. There are a number of questions that you need to answer, in order to try to determine how bad the risk to your institution is.

- **What is the prevalence of HIV among your student body?** If the prevalence is high, then you need to consider whether students are being infected before they become part of the university, or after. This is important in designing an HIV prevention programme. You may need to conduct or commission research in order to answer this question.

> Either way, a student body with high (>5%) HIV prevalence needs to be considered as a crisis, and demands a comprehensive response, as discussed in chapter 7.

If the prevalence is low (<1), then HIV is one of a number of conditions the university needs to consider that may affect students. It may well make sense to still focus on condom distribution and promotion, but as much to prevent Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and unwanted pregnancy as to prevent HIV. Institutional responses should not be HIV specific, but focus on general wellness and reproductive health.

- **What is the HIV prevalence among your staff?** Your staff may have a similar HIV profile to your student body, or they may be quite different. If the employees of the university have an HIV prevalence of >5%, the impacts may be quite severe, as discussed in chapter 3. In this case the university needs to have a comprehensive HIV programme in place to mitigate the potential impact of HIV.

If however the HIV prevalence is low (<1%), then the impact of HIV on the university is likely to be low. However, the university should still consider HIV prevention programmes, even if these are embedded in general reproductive health and wellness programmes.

- **Are there other ways that HIV could harm the university?** Even if HIV prevalence is low among students and staff, there could be other impacts to the university. For example, as discussed in chapter 3, revenue could decrease because of the level of HIV in the country as a whole, which could decrease the funds that are made available for tertiary education.

There are significant challenges in determining the HIV risk to your university, especially measuring HIV prevalence. These include logistical, cost and ethical challenges. However, these can be overcome by using a logical step-wise approach as described below.

4.1 HIV revalence in Your Community

The first step in estimating your HIV risk is to determine the HIV prevalence in your country and community. If you are in one of the low prevalence countries, then the chances are that the HIV prevalence among your students and staff will also be low. However, this assumption will only hold true if the students and staff are drawn from the surrounding population. If, for example, you have many students from neighbouring countries with high HIV prevalence, then you will not be able to extrapolate from national or regional figures.

If you are in one of the high prevalence countries it may be more difficult to tell how badly affected your institution is. It will depend on the communities from which your students and staff are drawn, and their risk behaviour before and during their time at the university.

Another way of estimating HIV prevalence, without actually measuring it, is to use some sort of actuarial model. This allows you to adjust for factors like the age and sex profile of students and employees, which have a big impact on HIV infection levels. This should be performed by someone with well experienced in working with these models.

The same potential drawback can apply when using modelling; the models will extrapolate from measured HIV prevalence in the surrounding communities, or from national data. If your students and staff are not drawn from these communities then this modelling can be misleading.

4.2   Measuring HIV Prevalence

The most accurate way of determining HIV prevalence at your university is to go out and measure it. This is really only worthwhile where you suspect that your institution is likely to be different from the surrounding community, or where national or regional HIV prevalence is between 1% and 5%, which makes your response difficult without a clear picture of your situation. HIV prevalence surveys should not be undertaken in low prevalence environments, unless students and staff are coming from high HIV prevalence environments in significant numbers.

If you are intending to conduct an HIV prevalence survey, please bear in mind the following:
• Make sure it is done using a random sample. Using volunteers, or voluntary counselling and testing (VCT) data, gives a very misleading picture of HIV prevalence.
• Be cautious about using oral HIV collection methods. These methods can be misleading in low HIV prevalence environments, because they can give high numbers of "false positives".
• Measure HIV prevalence among students and staff. Otherwise you may get only half the picture.
• Conduct a behavioural questionnaire at the same time as the HIV testing, and preferably link the two, although in an anonymous way. This allows you to see who is most at risk of HIV in the university population.

4.3   Measuring Sexual Behaviour

There is great value in understanding student and staff knowledge, attitudes and sexual behaviour. This helps a great deal when designing an HIV programme. Even in low HIV prevalence settings, STIs are a considerable problem. University students are at an age of increasing sexual activity, and are often living away from home. This provides access to new sexual experiences which have not previously been possible, and for which they may not be adequately prepared.

Although it is possible to use surveys to measure knowledge and behaviour, qualitative methods can also be extremely helpful. You need to consider:
• Are there students or staff who are financially vulnerable? Examples are students receiving late bursaries, staff that need to do practical activities in remote areas, whose salaries take time to be paid.
• Are there people who are required to travel frequently?
• Are there people living apart from families?
• Do students or staff abuse alcohol, and is there a culture of binge drinking?

These are all well-known risk factors for HIV, and may be worth exploring through focus groups or in-depth interviews.

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