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## PERCEIVED HIV-RELATED STIGMA IN UNIVERSITY AND HOME COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENTS: EVIDENCE FROM SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SCALING UP HIV TESTING

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Perceived stigma has a negative impact across the HIV care cascade. Our understanding about how perceived stigma varies from one environment to another is limited. This study fills an important gap in the literature by assessing how perceived stigma within the home community environment differs from that in the tertiary education environment. We used a self-administered questionnaire to obtain data (n=378) on stigmatising attitudes and perceived stigma from students attending a tertiary education institution in South Africa. Differences in perceived stigma in the university environment compared to the home community environment were assessed. Levels of reported stigmatising attitudes and discrimination were low among students. Gender differences were observed with a significantly larger proportion of males (12%) reporting stigmatising attitudes compared to females (1%,  $p < 0.001$ ). Many students reported perceived stigma in both settings (university: 41%; community: 47%;  $p = 0.09$ ). Among those who reported stigma, the majority perceived it in both the university and community settings. Correlation analysis indicated a positive relationship between the perceived stigma scores from each environment (0.62), with a stronger relationship found among males (0.72). Our results lead to the hypothesis that individual project perceived stigma from one environment to another. This implies that the negative public health impact of perceived stigma could extend beyond the context in which those perceptions develop. Overall, our results stress the importance of efforts to reduce perceived stigma. Such efforts could play an important role in improving the relatively poor rates of HIV testing uptake among younger populations.

### Biography

Firoza Haffejee completed her PhD in 2013 at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. She is currently a senior lecturer in Physiology and Epidemiology at the Durban University of Technology in South Africa. She runs community engagement projects in Kenneth Gardens, a low socio-economic environment in the city of Durban, where she has also worked on research projects in collaboration with members of Virginia Commonwealth University. Her research is currently funded by the National Research Foundation (South Africa).

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