

Mental Health: Are all students being properly supported?

Introduction and background

Students with mental health conditions have needs and experiences which differ from those found amongst the general population. They may well be living away from home for the first time, and experiencing stress or isolation caused by long hours of study. Those who are balancing study with employment may be anxious about the growing cost of living and about student loans. Some will be negatively affected by discontinuity of care on arriving on campus.

Mental ill health is a longstanding concern for universities and colleges. Many institutions are working on practical steps, both to sustain wellbeing and to provide support when mental ill health arises. Onsite counselling and wellbeing support have been features of campuses for decades. Various campaigns have recently been launched, such as the Universities UK 'step change' framework for mental health in higher education which promotes whole-university approach and seeks to embed mental health considerations into every aspect of a university's work. However, the increased awareness of mental health and wellbeing issues among students, the significant increase of the student population and the year-on-year rise in students seeking support for their mental health, have all put pressure on universities' and colleges' support services and on their staff – waiting times for counselling services have become longer. This brief from the Office for Students (OfS) looks at: effective practice for improving mental health amongst students; the outcomes and needs of specific groups with mental health issues; and the role of universities and colleges in addressing their students' mental health.

Key points

Effective practice for improving mental health among students

- Universities and colleges are linking up with the NHS in a variety of ways in order to provide mental health support. For example, the University of the West of England is leading a partnership which has established 5 regional hubs for collaboration between universities, students' unions and the NHS.
- In other institutions, specialist staff are involved on university committees, including health and wellbeing committees. Such formal intervention also includes forming partnerships with NHS services, having a GP practice on site, or offering drop-in sessions with nurses.
- Through its 2019 Challenge Competition, the OfS has funded 10 large-scale projects aimed at achieving a step change in mental health outcomes. These projects cover a variety of approaches to facilitating better mental health and wellbeing for students. The partnerships which have been established involve more than 50 partners including universities, further education colleges, sixth form colleges, local NHS trusts and charities. Approaches include developing curriculums and pedagogy to enable better mental health; developing better partnerships with local NHS trusts; early intervention; taking a whole university approach; and looking at how technology can be used to match students in need with appropriate health and wellbeing support.

Mental health data

- It is becoming increasingly important to consider how factors such as ethnicity and sexuality are linked to mental health issues among students.
- The OfS has used access and participation data to highlight substantial gaps in student outcomes and areas of concern for universities and colleges. This data makes it possible to explore how the challenges of dealing with a mental health condition are compounded and made more complex by ethnicity and sexuality. This in turn enables identification of some of the particular challenges for these marginalised groups and helps universities and colleges to recognise the best ways to provide equality of opportunity for all.
- The proportion of UK domiciled full-time students studying in England reporting a mental health condition has increased from 1.4 per cent in 2012-13 to 3.5 per cent in 2017-18.²⁰ This figure is almost certainly an underestimate for a number of reasons.
- Firstly, students may worry about being discriminated against if they declare a condition. A 2019 Unite survey showed that, of students with a mental health condition who responded, only 53 per cent had declared it to their university.
- Secondly, disability information (including information about mental health conditions) is recorded by universities and colleges at the student's point of entry to higher education. Universities and colleges returning data to the

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) are advised that this information should be updated annually, but not all do so, meaning that mental health conditions which arise during a student's time in higher education may not be captured in the data.

- Thirdly, 15.8 per cent of students who report a disability declare 'multiple impairments'. It is not possible to know how many of the impairments are related to a mental health issue.
- More students are now reporting mental health issues. Along with this increase, there has been a rise in the number of students using university support and counselling services. Responses to a 2017 survey by the think tank IPPR revealed that 94 per cent of universities' and colleges' counselling services had seen an increase in demand over the previous 5 years, with 61 per cent reporting a rise of over a quarter.

Mental health of specific groups

- Full-time students who described their ethnicity as 'mixed' were most likely to report having a mental health condition (4.5 per cent), with white students having the second highest proportion (4.1 per cent).
- Full-time students who reported a mental health condition have lower continuation, attainment and progression rates than full-time students overall. In 2016-17, 86.8 per cent of full-time students with mental health conditions continued their studies after their first year, compared to 90.2 per cent of all full-time undergraduates. In 2017-18, graduates who had reported a mental health condition were slightly less likely to be awarded a 1st or 2:1.
- Among full-time students who graduated in 2016-17, 69.2 per cent of those with declared mental health conditions progressed into skilled work or further study compared with 73.1 per cent of all undergraduates.
- Black full-time students who report a mental health issue have some of the lowest attainment and continuation rates. Only 77.1 per cent continued to their second year, compared with 85.0 per cent for black full-time students overall. Only 53 per cent of black students studying full-time who reported a mental health condition graduated with a 1st or 2:1. The degree attainment gap between black and white students with a mental health condition is extremely high at 26.8 percentage points.
- Although LGBT+ students are not covered in the dataset, multiple studies show that they are more likely to suffer from mental health issues. The full extent of mental ill health among LGBT+ students is not known because of the way statistics are collected, and their specific needs are not fully understood by support staff. Possible ways forward include: advertising counselling and support services specifically for LGBT+ students; allowing nonbinary and transgender students to self-identify on forms and in person; and encouraging relevant staff to work with LGBT+ groups on campus or local LGBT+ charities to better learn about the views and experiences of LGBT+ students.
- International students face a number of challenges in higher education. They are more likely to be away from their families and support networks. They also face language barriers and cultural differences. Many will be aware of being part of an ethnic minority and of the discrimination which comes with this. Furthermore, universities and colleges report that their international students are less likely to use wellbeing and counselling services.
- Studies suggest a number of ways in which universities and colleges can achieve parity between the proportion of international and home students accessing their

counselling and support services. These include using social media, email or students' union groups to engage the students as soon as they arrive in the UK, or even before; targeted awareness-raising of mental health services specifically for international students; working with students' union groups for international students; and considering translating materials into other languages.

Intersectional practices

- Student identities can intersect and overlap, multiplying the difficulties faced by students with mental health issues. The OfS encourages universities and colleges to use their own data to understand their student population. They could look at where mental health conditions intersect with other characteristics such as ethnicity or LGBT+ status to understand the additional barriers that such students face and how they could best be supported.

Student response

- Students themselves have flagged up a number of issues with mental health provision. Student newspapers have highlighted opaque 'fitness to study' procedures, a lack of flexibility in mitigating circumstances and a lack of counselling staff from ethnic minority groups.
- Perceptions of services can prevent students from seeking support. For example, during consultations by students' unions at the London School of Economics and the University of Chester, many students reported that they were put off using counselling because of reports of long waiting times, because the staff were overworked, and because there was a cap on the number of sessions available to them and they did not want to 'use up' their sessions too early.
- Having well-advertised and effective support can lead to better continuation and disclosure rates. In a recent OfS survey one institution commented that the support it provides has enabled it to reduce the stigma in disclosing mental health conditions, which has in turn resulted in higher disclosure rates and attracted applications from students with mental health conditions.
- A Higher Education Policy Institute survey of current students showed that 15 per cent supported their parents or guardians being made aware of concerns about their mental health under any circumstances, and 66 per cent in extreme circumstances. This follows the recent move by some institutions to ask students to name a parent or guardian who can be informed if there is a mental health issue.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/mental-health-are-all-students-being-properly-supported/>