



the british
psychological society
promoting excellence in psychology

Mental health and wellbeing in Scotland's higher and further education sector



The mental health of both students and staff in higher (HE) and further (FE) education is a serious concern. The British Psychological Society is joining the growing movement across the sector to call for action to tackle this increasing crisis. Psychology is the second most popular undergraduate degree, with over 50,000 students across the UK beginning courses each year, many of them learning about psychological health and wellbeing in their studies. The Society has an important role in supporting the wellbeing of students and those who work with them. Two thirds of psychology students say they want to work in mental health.

At least 95 university students took their own lives in 2016/17 across the UK.¹ Whilst only one of Scotland's 15 universities records student suicide rates², it is still a serious concern for the sector.

One third of students have experienced a serious psychological issue which required professional help.³

The number of university students in Scotland seeking mental health support increased by 76 per cent over five years between 2012–2017.⁴

The Scottish Government and the sector have rightly made tackling poor student mental health a priority. The government's ten year mental health strategy published in 2017 backed the 'Think Positive' project by the NUS and supported its further development to ensure consistent support for students in further and higher education across Scotland. This Call to Action sets out our analysis of recommended next steps to maintain momentum on this crucial issue.

Our call to the sector

1. All higher and further education institutions should seek to make mental health and wellbeing a strategic priority, implementing a **whole institution approach**.
2. All higher and further education **staff should be given training on how to recognise a student struggling** with mental health difficulties and **how to signpost** the right support. Staff must also have effective support in place themselves.
3. **UCAS must update the university application process** to reduce stigma, removing the need for applicants to disclose mental health conditions as 'disability' and making it clear how disclosures will be used.
4. All institutions should **specifically focus on plans to support students with mental health difficulties**.
5. All higher and further education institutions providing psychological services should apply for the **Accreditation Programme for Psychological Therapies Services (APPTS)** to ensure quality.

Taking a whole institution approach

Universities and colleges should adopt mental health as a strategic priority, implementing a whole institution approach that supports students and staff struggling with their mental health, and also creates a physical, cultural and learning environment that promotes positive mental health and wellbeing. Students and staff must be involved and consulted as part of this process.

A whole institution approach to mental health is not just about the implementation of staff training and providing specific support services. It is also about creating a living, learning and working environment that supports and promotes positive mental health and wellbeing.

This requires consideration of issues such as:

- loneliness and social integration;
- health inequalities;
- intersectionality;
- leadership and strategy;
- staff mental health and wellbeing.

It includes creating a physical environment that encourages inclusivity and relieves stress – for example, in the design of communal working areas and access to green space – and developing a culture that encourages engagement in university life – such as through social events that are not focused on drinking alcohol and access to a range of extra-curricular activities beyond sports.

Support should be visible and reflect each individual provider's context, enabling everyone to know what the approach is, and what positive mental health and wellbeing look like. This should be incorporated across all policies, processes and guidance.

A consistent sector-wide approach to mental health and wellbeing is crucial to ensure all students and staff can access the support they need to have a positive experience of HE or FE. NUS has developed the Scottish Government backed 'Think Positive' initiative which urges all higher education institutions to work with their student associations to create a Student Mental Health Agreement. Each of Scotland's colleges and universities will also be required to publish mental health strategies.

These actions will help universities develop holistic approaches and recognise good practice, covering all aspects of university that can impact mental health.

The BPS endorses 'Think Positive' and the development of mental health strategies for individual institutions. We encourage the whole sector to adopt and implement the goals of the Think Positive initiative as a priority and for each provider to regularly evaluate their approach to ensure it is adapted as needed to provide the best possible support to students and staff.

Supporting staff, and giving them the tools they need to support students

As part of any institution's approach to mental health and wellbeing, it is vital that all student-facing FE and HE staff, including academic as well as support and facilities staff, are given the training and support they require to effectively signpost students directly to the right support. This is also in the best interests of staff, whose own wellbeing can be impacted by helping vulnerable students.

Research from UK mental health charity Student Minds has found that:

Responding to student mental health problems is now an inevitable part of the academic role, but many academics do not feel that the necessary structures and cultures exist to support them in this work.

Signposting is a complex and nuanced task requiring skill, insight and knowledge. These abilities may not come naturally to all academics.

Responding to student mental health problems has a substantive, negative impact on the wellbeing of academics.⁵

Academic staff need the right tools to support students, but a wider conversation about their role in supporting student mental health as well as managing their own wellbeing is needed. The impact of managing student wellbeing on top of existing pressures from workloads and issues like short-term contracts must be recognised and action taken to address these through:

sufficient time allocated for academic work and research;

ensuring a healthy work-life balance;

setting out clear career progression pathways; and

providing support to staff to manage student wellbeing as needed.

Removing stigma from the application process

As the organisation responsible for operating the application process for universities, UCAS has a particular role to ensure potential students with mental health difficulties are given the proper advice and support to make the right decisions for them when applying to university. For those with a mental health condition, there is scope during the application process to identify how their university of choice can ensure the right support is in place before they begin their studies.

The BPS believes the current application form and guidance provided may deter applicants from stating their mental health needs because of a perceived stigma, which ultimately prevents them from accessing the support they require. Only 37 per cent of students with a mental health issue disclose it on their UCAS form or to their university.⁶

Mental health needs are listed in the 'Disability/special needs' section of the UCAS form, where applicants are asked to declare if they have any of a list of disabilities, special needs or medical conditions including 'a mental health condition, such as depression, schizophrenia or anxiety disorder'.

UCAS guidance on disclosing a mental health difficulty suggests disclosure should only be for long-term difficulties (i.e. those that have been present or are likely to be present for more than 12 months).

This approach risks excluding people with mental health difficulties who may not view themselves as having a disability, do not have a formally diagnosed condition, or do not see their difficulties as long-term.

The guidance also includes a section on the benefits of disclosing mental health conditions, in terms of the support that can then be provided, but it should be accompanied by confirmation that disclosure will not impact on the individual's chance of success.

UCAS should reframe questions so applicants do not have to record a mental illness as a 'disability' and be clear that declaring a mental health need will not impact the application process, but is information to be shared with an institution to ensure the right support is in place for each student.

UCAS also has a role in guiding students to carefully consider what they need from an institution to have a positive and valuable university experience and make an informed choice of institution. As such, application forms should encourage students with mental health difficulties to consider the specific support or living and learning environment they might need. This should be reflected in guidance given to young people about university applications as a standard part of their applicant materials, rather than applicants having to seek it.

Effective mental health support

As part of a package of £250 million to support mental health services across Scotland, colleges and universities have received funding to implement additional mental health counsellors. Alongside this, all further and higher education institutions in Scotland should currently be working to produce student mental health agreements with their student associations. These will create strategic and practical plans to improve the mental wellbeing of their student bodies.

To ensure all universities develop effective mental health processes and support, there must be a psychologically informed approach. The Society recommends:

- a specific focus on the transition to university, particularly for underrepresented groups (such as students from lower socioeconomic status groups, BAME students and care leavers);
- a clear process for students to access/be given support for mental health difficulties and recognition that students missing classes due to mental health difficulties must not receive academic sanctions;
- a focus on supporting staff with mental health and wellbeing difficulties;
- recognition of the need to take into account each institution's and person's context when determining the approach to, and support for, mental health and wellbeing; and
- access to a range of psychological therapies to meet the different needs of students and staff.

Assuring quality

The Accreditation Programme for Psychological Therapies Services (APPTS) is a service development, quality improvement and accreditation network for services providing psychological therapy to adults in the UK. It is run by the Royal College of Psychiatrists in partnership with the BPS.

As well as identifying and acknowledging services that have high standards, the accreditation programme shares best practice to facilitate service improvement. As part of a commitment to effective mental health and wellbeing support, all higher and further education institutions providing psychological services should apply for the APPTS as a means of assuring quality and accessing support to develop the service.

At present, the University of St Andrews is the only institution in Scotland to obtain this accreditation.

About the BPS

The British Psychological Society is the representative body for Psychology and Psychologists in the UK. We are responsible for the promotion of excellence and ethical practice in the science, education, and practical applications of psychology. We have over 72,000 members and subscribers across the UK, ranging from students to qualified psychologists.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Office for National Statistics, Estimating suicide among higher education students, England and Wales: Experimental Statistics, 25 June 2018.
- ² The Ferret: Nearly all Scottish universities fail to record student suicides, [Accessed 10 February 2020.] <https://theferret.scot/student-suicides-universities-scotland/>
- ³ The Insight Network, University Student Mental Health Survey 2018, 6 March 2019 (survey of 38,000 students).
- ⁴ National Union of Students Scotland, Demand for Student Mental Health Services Skyrockets, 2018. [Accessed 10 February 2020.] <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/articles/demand-for-student-mental-health-services-skyrockets>.
- ⁵ Student Minds, Student Mental Health: The Role and Experiences of Academics, 29 January 2018.
- ⁶ The Guardian, Coroner calls on universities to destigmatise mental health issues, 2 May 2019.



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