

# The invisible frontline: new study identifies challenges academics face supporting student mental health

*New report, 'Student Mental Health: The Role and Experience of Academics', published by Student Minds on the 29th of January 2018, finds that support for student mental health is being provided by untrained staff who are uncertain of their boundaries, creating risk for the student, the academic and the institution.*

For many students experiencing mental health difficulties, **academics are often the first point of contact**. Students turn to academics for advice because they are approachable, accessible and they have a pre-existing relationship. However, research conducted for Student Minds, indicates that academics are struggling to respond effectively to student mental health.

Researchers interviewed 52 academics with diverse experience, at five universities. These academics identified that **responding to student mental health problems is now an inevitable part of the academic role**. However, this crucial frontline role is currently invisible, and the higher education sector does not have the appropriate structures or cultures to assist academics.

## **Academics interviewed felt:**

- The role of the academic in relation to student mental health is ambiguous and unclear
- Unprepared for the inevitable demands of their role in relation to student mental health
- Student Services are often unable to meet student needs due to waiting lists, lack of provision, narrowness of service offer or ineffective support.
- There is a disconnect between academics and Student Services and this creates a gap for students to fall into.
- Addressing the gap between academics and Student Services requires institutional direction and support.
- When Student Services are unable to meet demand, supporting students automatically falls to academics
- Responding to student mental health problems has a significant, negative ongoing cognitive, emotional, relational and practical effects and impact on the wellbeing of academics.

## **Commenting on the research, Rosie Tressler, CEO of Student Minds says:**

'This research throws light on how academics are a vital but often unrecognised part of the support available to students at universities. It's inevitable that students will reach out to whoever they feel comfortable with, so to ensure that student support needs are met, institutions must support academics to have roles with clear boundaries and good relationships with their Student Services, backed on a strategic level through a whole university approach to student mental health and wellbeing.' #InvisibleFrontline

## **Notes for editor:**

The full report can be accessed here: [www.studentminds.org.uk/theroleofanacademic](http://www.studentminds.org.uk/theroleofanacademic)

The report was written by Gareth Hughes, Member of the Student Minds Clinical Advisory Group and Psychotherapist at University of Derby and Dr Nicola Byrom, founding trustee of Student Minds and Lecturer in Psychology at King's College London. The authors were assisted by two student researchers from the Department of Psychology, King's College London, Mehr Panjwani and Priya Tulcidas.

**The report is published by Student Minds.** Student Minds is the UK's student mental health charity. We empower students and members of the university community to develop the knowledge, confidence and skills to look after their own mental health, support others and create change: through training, student-led peer support, as well as research-driven campaigns and workshops. By working collaboratively across sectors, we share best practice and ensure that the student voice influences decisions about student mental health.

