

Planning For a Sustainable Future:

the importance of university mental health in uncertain times

An initiative by
**student
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Introduction

The responses of universities to the Covid-19 pandemic have been nothing short of extraordinary. In the rapid shifting of learning and services online, the continuing support for students in university accommodation, increases in hardship funding and the cancelling of accommodation fees, institutions have demonstrated that the wellbeing of their students is truly at the heart of their thinking. Actions like these have had real impacts on the wellbeing of our students, for that Student Minds would like to thank our university leaders, staff and Students' Unions.

As we move beyond the initial response and into planning for the next phase, it is vital that the wellbeing of our university communities remains at the heart of all decision making and practice. Since the outbreak began, Student Minds has been engaged in ongoing listening and evidence gathering exercises, so we can better inform and provide guidance to the sector, based on the experiences of staff and students.

What we know so far

The evidence available so far is, of course, partial. More work needs to be done to establish how our university communities have been experiencing lock down and the short and long-term impact on their wellbeing and mental health. However, some key headlines are now emerging from the evidence gathered so far:

1. Emotional responses of stress and fear in the face of a pandemic are normal and expected. Equally, we have seen evidence of staff and students demonstrating incredible resilience and support for one another during the pandemic.¹
2. However, prolonged periods of stress and uncertainty can have

a significant impact on mental health and wellbeing.² Students, in particular, have been more likely to feel anxious, hopeless, experience suicidal thoughts, and self-harm during the pandemic.³

3. Many students and young adults are experiencing increased social isolation and loneliness.⁴
4. While students are very appreciative of the efforts of their universities to transfer learning and services online, many have found it difficult to successfully engage with online delivery, extract learning and maintain motivation.⁵ There are also indications that some students do not have private space they can use for study or to engage with support services, such as online counselling.
5. Many students and young adults are experiencing increased anxiety about their future. This includes concerns about their ability to be successful at university, the future of the university sector and their long term employment prospects.⁶
6. Many university staff are feeling unprepared and fearful about the future.⁷
7. The impact of Covid-19 is being felt differently across the university community. Both the pandemic and the transition to emergency remote teaching has served to magnify a range of health, social and educational inequalities. Low-income, female,⁸ those with pre-existing mental health conditions, living in overcrowded households, living in urban areas, living with children,⁹ those from lower socioeconomic groups,¹⁰ nurses,¹¹ carers,¹² care leavers and estranged students¹³ are just some of the populations whose mental health has been disproportionately impacted during

lockdown. The unique challenges experienced by students with disabilities, international students, placement students, year abroad students, postgraduate research students, early career researchers, key workers, staff and students in clinical practice, BAME communities and those experiencing domestic violence, abuse and race-related hate crime have also been highlighted consistently in our listening.

8. The actions of universities appear to have a strong effect on wellbeing and levels of mental distress for staff and students. For example, in Smarten's study of research staff and PhD students, there is a strong correlation between how well staff and students feel their university, supervisors and managers have supported them and their wellbeing and mental health. Good clear communication from university staff also appears to have a positive impact on students' sense of social connectedness and loneliness.¹⁴

Planning for the future

The vision we set out in the [University Mental Health Charter](#) is that every university becomes a place that promotes the mental health and wellbeing of all members of the university community. This is even more important now, as our higher education communities continue to play a central role in society's recovery from the pandemic, supplying our healthcare workforce and providing educational opportunity in a time of economic instability.

It is clear that the responses of universities and the sector have had both positive and negative impacts on the mental health and wellbeing of our communities. It is vital that mental health and

wellbeing are central to planning for next year and beyond. If we keep this at the forefront of our thinking we can support the learning, retention and success of our students, and ensure a sustainable future for our universities. If we neglect to take it into account, we may exacerbate poor mental health, see an increase in student disengagement and withdrawal and staff burn out.

The University Mental Health Charter and the revised StepChange: Mentally Health Universities provide a structure for this planning.¹⁵ In this document, we have outlined seven principles universities should consider in supporting mental health and wellbeing of their communities in a Covid-19 context. They cover the four domains of the Charter – Learn, Support, Work and Live.

These are:

1. Supporting new and continuing students to transition into a new learning environment, address gaps and engage in meaningful learning.
2. Ensuring support services are safe, effective, accessible to all, appropriately resourced, relevant to local context and well-governed.
3. Ensuring staff can support themselves and students to transition into and thrive within a new learning environment.
4. Actively promoting social integration, community-building and a sense of belonging.
5. Supporting students in accommodation.
6. Coproduction with staff and students.
7. Ensuring decisions are inclusive.



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Learn

Supporting new and continuing students to transition into a new learning environment, address gaps and engage in meaningful learning.

A positive learning experience, including successful transition into university and between years of study, can promote good mental health and wellbeing.¹⁶ Conversely, disruptions to study and a negative transition experience can increase the risk of mental distress.¹⁷ Both new and continuing students face a difficult transition into an unfamiliar learning environment, and the move to emergency remote teaching may have left them with learning and confidence gaps. Following the principles of transition pedagogy, all students must be supported to adapt to their learning environments (online and on campus). This includes explicit support within the curriculum to help students develop the skills to use learning platforms and to learn effectively online.

Curriculum design must include scaffolding that addresses learning gaps caused by the pandemic. This will be particularly important for students who have experienced significant disruption to their learning, such as those on workplace placements, studying abroad, international students, postgraduate research students, health and social care students, those with caring responsibilities and those who have been absent through illness or bereavement.

It is equally important that the curriculum design and delivery considers those students who may face barriers to engaging with online and blended learning, such as students with disabilities, students with limited access to internet or technology, students based in different time-zones and students who rely on public transport to access campus, amongst others. This phase of transition does not end in Autumn, but continues as students are welcomed back onto campus full-time.

Support

Ensuring support services are safe, effective, accessible to all, appropriately resourced, relevant to local context and well-governed.

Students' need for support for their mental health and wellbeing is unlikely to decline during this period and may very well increase. Equally, NHS and external mental health services may be less able to meet demand.¹⁸ It is vital that Universities continue to provide well resourced, effective, accessible services that are subject to appropriate clinical governance.¹⁹ In the current climate, we understand universities may have to make difficult financial choices. However, we would strongly urge that services that support the mental health of students and staff are at least maintained at current levels.

We are aware that many university support services have responded with admirable speed, providing ongoing support via online platforms and via telephone. This agility will be crucial in continuing to provide effective support. Given current feedback from staff and students, we must also think about how we reach those students who do not have the private space to engage with the support on offer. We also need to continually consider the additional practical barriers and problems that can impact on wellbeing, such as housing, financial hardship and social isolation.

It may be more difficult to identify staff and students who are disengaging or struggling with their mental health through blended or online learning. It is also necessary to ensure processes for identifying at-risk staff and students are appropriate and effective as universities transition to new modes of delivery.

Work

Ensuring staff can support themselves and students to transition into and thrive within a new learning environment.

University staff have worked miracles throughout this period and are to be congratulated on their amazing work. However, evidence is now emerging that many staff are feeling the strain of these incredibly challenging circumstances.²⁰ Staff wellbeing is important in and of itself. However, it should also be noted that in responding to the pandemic, universities will be increasingly reliant on their staff to adapt to and implement changes and support their students.

The human relationship between staff and students is still the key factor in the student experience and in supporting student mental health and wellbeing.²¹ How staff are supported becomes an important consideration. This, of course, means having access to well-resourced and effective support for their mental health. It also means providing practical support, e.g. to simplify processes and reduce the burden on staff tasked with rethinking the curriculum for online delivery. Staff may also need to have their role in supporting student mental health clarified within new modes of delivery.

Actively promoting social integration, community-building and a sense of belonging.

Social integration and a sense of belonging has a significant impact on our wellbeing.²² There is also evidence that young people and students have been experiencing loneliness more intensely than the general population during the pandemic.²³ Whereas social connection might happen organically through on-campus and in-person education, ongoing physical distancing measures and a move to increasingly online modes of delivery means universities will need to take active steps to promote social connection within their communities. This is particularly important for those who may need to continue to self-isolate, as physical distancing measures are eased, due to underlying health conditions.

It may be easy to assume that students will create their own social groups online or via popular apps. However, this carries real risks as not all students are familiar with, or have access to, the same applications- for example, mature or international students. Given this, it may be helpful for universities and Students' Unions to work together to create formal and informal online social spaces and to explicitly ensure social interaction during online classes. To ensure this is effective, students need the opportunity to learn to use these spaces effectively and their use should be actively encouraged through the curriculum.

Supporting students in accommodation.

Our living environments are important to our sense of safety and belonging and can have a significant impact on our physical and mental health and wellbeing. Many students have experienced significant disruption to their living environment and financial situation during Covid-19, and this may continue into the next academic year.²⁴

Not all students have homes to go to without student accommodation, some will face travel restrictions and many are not welcome, safe and supported in their homes. It is important that universities and their accommodation partners provide residential accommodation where needed and ensure that students who are living in residential accommodation feel safe, can meet their basic needs and access mental health support.

Enabling themes

Co-production with staff and students

Given that there is much about the experiences of our university communities during the pandemic that we still don't know and understand, co-production with students and staff becomes ever more important. Working in partnership with staff, students and Students' Unions, universities can better understand the diverse needs and experiences of their communities, predict and navigate current and future challenges and ensure that decisions are effective, inclusive and successfully implemented.

Our listening has also highlighted the importance of clear, compassionate and timely communications to students and staff, to lessen the impact on mental health caused by uncertainty and disruption around their work and education.

Ensuring decisions are inclusive

Given that the impacts of the pandemic and the responses of universities will not be felt equally by all, it is essential that universities take action to understand the diverse needs and experiences of their communities and ensure their plans address any existing or emerging barriers to education and mental health.

Conclusion

We have been overwhelmed by the commitment demonstrated by universities to respond swiftly to the pandemic and prioritise the safety and wellbeing of their staff and students, in extraordinary circumstances. Our universities are now facing a very challenging and uncertain future. If we can be sure of one thing, it is that universities cannot afford to ignore the mental health and wellbeing of staff and students if they are to ensure their sustainability.

Together, we can shape a future in which everyone in higher education can thrive.

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