

# Student Mental Health: The Role and Experiences of Academics

## Briefing - A report for Student Minds

In 2017 Universities UK published the #StepChange framework, encouraging leadership across the Higher Education sector to take a whole university approach in response to student mental health. For most students, their academics are the key contact point with their university, therefore, progress towards a whole university approach, must ensure that the role of academics in relation to student mental health, is functioning well. However, research conducted for Student Minds, out on the 29th of January 2018, indicates that academics are struggling to respond effectively to student mental health.

### **What is the role of an academic in relation 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. Academics are often the first point of contact for students experiencing difficulties. Students may turn to academics for advice because they are approachable, accessible and have a pre-existing relationship with the student. However, this crucial frontline role is currently invisible, and the sector does not have the appropriate structures or cultures to assist academics.

Most academics are unprepared for the inevitable demands of their role in relation to student mental health, and in the absence of training, support or supervision, draw from personal experience. This creates substantial variability in the skill set that academics bring to the role and means that students cannot be sure of the response they will receive if they turn to an academic for support.

Academics identified that in practice their role in relation to student mental health is ambiguous and unclear. Many academics feel it is impossible to draw a distinction between academic and pastoral support. Whilst most recognise that, in theory, their role requires them to signpost to other services, those who have tried signposting students in distress, find that it is actually a more difficult, complex and nuanced task than might first be assumed. Some academics struggle to be assertive in signposting and continue to provide support for students in distress because they have concerns that "something will go wrong."

When Student Services (e.g., university counselling, mental health advisors or mental wellbeing teams) are unable to meet student need for support, students return to their academic. This means that support is being provided by untrained staff who are uncertain of their boundaries, creating risk for the student, the academic and the institution. Academics suggested that this inability to meet student need on the part of Student Services can be due to waiting lists, lack of provision, narrowness of service offer or ineffective support.

The disconnect between academics and Student Services was a recurring theme in this project and a limited relationship creates gaps into which students can fall. Many academics described a service that they felt detached from and knew little about. Where a good relationship existed, the benefits were clear as academics felt able to reach out to services to access support and advise themselves to help them manage specific student cases. Addressing the gap between academics and Student Services requires institutional direction and support.

Finally, responding to student mental health problems has a significant, negative impact on the wellbeing of academics. Academics identified that the range and complexity of issues around student mental health, has ongoing cognitive, emotional, relational and practical effects. Academics described impacts on sleep and home life, worries about students persisting into time away from work, exhaustion and negative consequences for their own emotional and mental wellbeing.

**Overall, the report calls for a significant culture shift** – This is an opportunity to transform support structures for both academics and students that will improve the wellbeing, academic and research outcomes all members of the university community.

## **Recommendations from the report:**

- 1.** There is a need for the sector to debate and define the role of the academic in responding to student mental health and consider this within a whole university approach.
- 2.** Academics should be proactively supported to understand, maintain and communicate appropriate boundaries to their students, both online and on campus.
- 3.** Universities must recognise the unavoidable role academics are now playing in responding to student mental health, create open spaces for discussion and learning.
- 4.** The time cost of supporting students' needs to be appropriately recognised by universities.
- 5.** Academics should receive more comprehensive support and training to appropriately and effectively signpost students to relevant services.
- 6.** Student Services need to be resourced and supported to provide a comprehensive, effective and diverse service provision for students.
- 7.** Universities must address the gaps that exist between academics and Student Services, developing overlapping interests, principles, culture and language.
- 8.** To ensure regular communication between academics and Student Services, universities must increase opportunities for structured engagement, regular contact and shared sense of purpose.
- 9.** Academics should have clearer, more visible access to support for themselves and assistance to develop skills. Universities should seek to develop open cultures in which the wellbeing of the whole academic community can be positively addressed.
- 10.** Academics need adequate preparation for their role, including training specifically designed for the role academics play and delivered in a range of flexibly accessible formats.
- 11.** Academic managers must be equipped with the skills and resources to be able to support their team to respond to student mental health appropriately and maintain boundaries.
- 12.** Universities should consider the role of curriculum in supporting the development of good student wellbeing and learning.

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

### **Further Information**

The report was written by Gareth Hughes, psychotherapist, University of Derby and Dr Nicola Byrom, founding trustee of Student Minds and Lecturer in Psychology at Kings College London. The authors were assisted by two student researchers from the Department of Psychology, Kings College London, Mehr Panjwani and Priya Tulcidas.

#### **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.

#### **Contact;**

Dr Nicola Byrom – [nicola.byrom@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:nicola.byrom@kcl.ac.uk)  
Gareth Hughes – [g.hughes@derby.ac.uk](mailto:g.hughes@derby.ac.uk)  
Student Minds – [policy@studentminds.org.uk](mailto:policy@studentminds.org.uk)

