Prifysgolion Cymru Universities Wales

Mental Health support in Higher Education
CYPE Committee consultation

Universities Wales briefing
September 2022

About Universities Wales
Universities Wales represents the interests of universities in Wales and is a National Council of Universities UK. Universities Wales' membership encompasses the Vice Chancellors of all the universities in Wales, and the Director of the Open University in Wales.

Our mission is to support a university education system which transforms lives through the work Welsh universities do with the people and places of Wales and the wider world.

Universities Wales welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Children, Young People and Education Committee's consultation on mental health support in higher education.

This briefing provides an interim response ahead of the oral evidence session on 6 October, and a full written response to be provided to the Committee ahead of the deadline in November 2022 including any follow-up required arising from the oral evidence session.

Extent of need

- The current situation with regard to the mental health of students in higher education, and any particular challenges they face with their mental health and ability to access support.
    - o The IPPR's *Not by Degrees* report published in 2017 found the number of students to disclose a mental health condition on arrival at their institution had increased dramatically over the past 10 years, with variation in rates of disclosure between different groups of students. In 2015/16, 15,395 UK-domiciled first-year students at HEIs in the UK disclosed a mental health condition – almost five times the number in 2006/07. This equates to 2 per cent of first-year students in 2015/16, up from 0.4 per cent in 2006/07.

- o Alongside this, the report found that just under half of students who report experiencing a mental health condition choose not to disclose it to their HEI.
- o UCAS reports that the number of students disclosing mental health conditions increased 450% between 2011 and 2021, with a year-on-year upward trend. 3.7% of all UK applicants now declare a mental health condition – up from 0.7% in 2011.[1] This reporting would be at the point of application before the students have started university.
- o This increase in the number of students presenting with mental health problems (with possibly more opting not to disclose their condition) was pre-pandemic, and Student Minds found that 74% of students reported that Covid-19 had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing.[2]
- o Challenges to accessing support can arise as a result of transitions from school/college to university and shifting support systems. For example, students may move out of home for the first time, be required to register with a new GP, and be transferred out of CAMHS all at the same time.
- o As is outlined elsewhere in this response, Welsh universities have in place a wide range of support for students but there is a need for a holistic approach that involves partners across health and education.

- **Whether there are different challenges with regard to mental health for different groups of students, and if there are any groups of students in higher education who are disproportionately affected by poor mental health.**

  - o In advocating for a 'whole university approach' which recognises the effect of culture and environment, and specific inequalities, on mental health and wellbeing, the UUK Stepchange framework recognises that, as in wider society, individual mental health is determined by a range of interpersonal, community, environmental and structural factors.

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[1] Starting the conversation UCAS report on mental health
[2] Life in a Pandemic - Student Minds
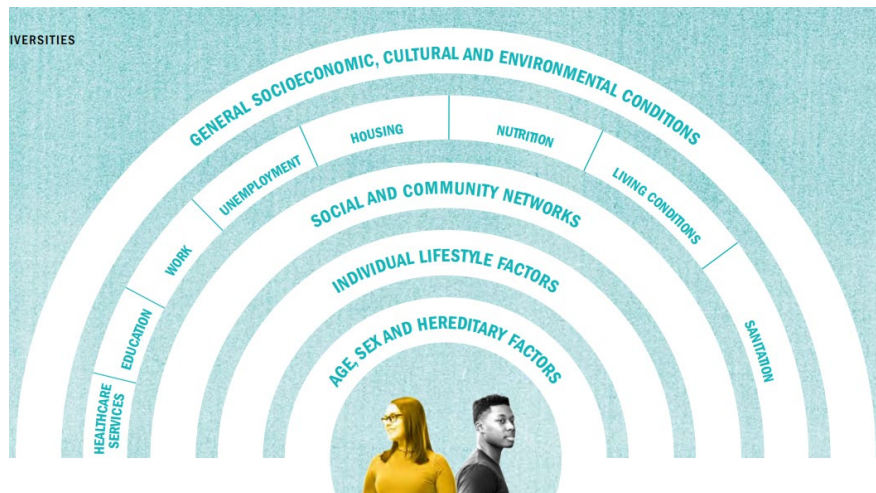
- o Student Minds found that some LGBT+ students are around six times more likely to share a mental health condition, and care experienced students are almost three times as likely – underlining the value of recognising how mental health intersects with other characteristics and support needs[3]

- o International students can also face higher levels of loneliness and are less likely to report a mental health condition to their institution[4]

- **The effect, if any, that Covid-19 had generally on students' mental health and well-being.**

- Student Minds found 74% of students reported that Covid-19 has had a negative impact on their mental health[5]

- Example: Cysylltu/Connect

  - o Connect is a HEFCW-funded partnership between Swansea University, University of Wales Trinity St David, the universities' respective students' unions and FE institutions in South West Wales.
  - o The project aims to reduce loneliness and isolation in students, develop social integration skills and build supportive institutional communities, through peer support, social prescribing, student training and staff upskilling
  - o Volunteers can train to become student connectors to accompany students to events and introduce them to societies and social networks, as well as providing support phone calls

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[3] Starting the conversation UCAS report on mental health
[4] International Students - Student Minds
[5] Life in a Pandemic - Student Minds

- o During the pandemic, support hubs were set up on each campus and support moved online. Support such as grocery deliveries and lifts to/from testing centres were provided through peer support.
- **Example: Cardiff Met**
  - o During the pandemic, Cardiff Met moved all support services online and provided appointments via phone or MS Teams.
  - o Although increasing numbers of students were presenting with mental health problems, they also noticed fewer 'no shows' to appointments and more students feeling comfortable to reach out for help online.
  - o Student services created a resource bank to direct students to self-help and provided additional support to students who tested positive for covid and had to self-isolate, such as support packages and grocery deliveries.

Identification and provision

- **How effectively higher education providers promote an ethos of universal good mental health and well-being to all students, and whether this an integral part of the learning experience and interactions with staff.**
  - o Universities take the mental health of students and staff seriously and have been actively prioritising the provision of support. In response to the IPPR report, Universities UK produced the [Stepchange: mentally healthy universities framework](#), advocating a 'whole university approach' to mental health, and all Welsh universities are signed up to the framework.
    - ▪ The whole university approach:
      - recognises the effect of culture and environment, and specific inequalities, on mental health and wellbeing
      - seeks to transform the university into a healthy setting.
      - empowers students and staff to take responsibility for their own wellbeing
  - o Universities UK's '[suicide safer' guidance](#) has also been adopted by all Welsh universities
  - o Further guidance is due to be published by Universities UK later this year on information sharing

- **How effectively the sector ensures early identification of students who need individual and targeted support.**

- o We will include further information on this area in our evidence session and full written response.

- **How effectively the higher education sector and the NHS work together to deliver the right mental health support for individual students when and where they need it.**

  - o Institutions have identified challenges in information sharing and referral pathways between NHS, police and student services. In May 2022, Universities Wales published a series of policy recommendations for Welsh Government's consideration, including:

  - o **Appropriate information sharing**: Relevant bodies need to share information as appropriate to avoid students "falling through the gaps".
    - Welsh Government to update and provide clear guidance on information sharing between health services and education institutions.
    - Support and require healthcare systems (including primary care, emergency care, secondary and specialised care) to develop effective working relationships with school/college/university support services and third sector provision.
    - Consider a common approach to data sharing between education providers and health boards in Wales

  - o **Clear roles, remits and responsibilities**: A common understanding on what sort of situation is appropriate for response within an education setting, and what should be referred to the statutory health services, is essential to ensuring students receive the support they need.
    - Welsh Government to coordinate work bringing services together to produce guidance detailing accountability of services and where responsibility lies

  - o Exemplar: **South East Wales [Mental Health University Liaison Service](#)**
    - The MHULS is a partnership between Cardiff University, Cardiff Metropolitan University, the University of South Wales, Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, NUS Wales, and NHS Wales
    - The liaison service acts as a bridge between the NHS and universities to break down the data-sharing wall and allow the NHS and student services to collaborate on students' care.

- The service provides the following:
    - Mental health assessment & coordination with 10-day target
    - Completing HEI-NHS safety plans for students with risk factors
    - Onward referral/signposting to other specialist services
    - Chasing referrals and confirming/negotiating waiting list placement
    - Coaching students in the benefits of engaging with services
    - Post-discharge follow-up from secondary/unscheduled care
    - Attending case conferences/MDTs with HEI and NHS staff
- The service is already seeing the benefits, including increased NHS-HEI collaboration and trust and improved access to specialist services within the NHS for students that need them
- Students who have benefited from the service have reported:
    - 'it feels great to have someone fighting for me'
    - 'I've been back and forth with nothing happening until now. Nobody ever understood the whole pictures in the way that you [MHULS] do'

- **Whether there are specific issues with access to NHS mental health support, for example the impact of changing GPs more frequently; that many students are at an age where they are transitioning from CAMHS to adult mental health services; any issues with data sharing.**
    - This is an area that was identified in the work we undertook with partners across the post-16 sector. The group recommended that:
        - Welsh Government explore how best to improve the relationship between CAMHS and adult services with specific consideration given to age boundaries for people under 25 and a possible specific service for 16-25s.
        - Continued support through Renew and Reform for projects supporting transitions including University Ready and equivalents in FE

- **How well the wider post-16 education sector works to promote good mental health, particularly with regard to transitions.**

Universities Wales recognises that education transitions are a crucial time for young people and this is factored into the approach universities take in engaging with and enrolling students. While we are calling for further focus on transitions in Welsh Government policy through our policy recommendations, universities have developed a range of ways to support students in this transition.

- **Exemplar: Bangor University's 'Be Bangor Ready' module**
    - In order to support students entering higher education at Bangor University, an online module 'Be Bangor Ready' was created to provide a full induction throughout the course of a student's first year
    - The module includes 'find your people', 'know your campus', 'get to know your Students' Union' and so on to increase confidence of first years before arriving on campus.

- **Exemplar: University Ready**
    - The [University Ready](#) project is a Welsh Government funded initiative to provide support for A Level and BTEC students in schools and colleges in Wales to help them as they progress to higher education.
    - All nine universities in Wales and the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol are involved
    - The project has produced a suite of online materials and resources from each university to provide guidance on what to expect at university including virtual campus tours, taster lectures, wellbeing tips and practical study skills in the form of videos, podcasts and interactive online courses.
    - The site was launched in 2021, and between May-October 2021 the site received 7,760 unique visitors
    - A steering group are continuing to develop the site to keep it updated and keep content regularly under review

Welsh Government policy, legislation and funding

- How effectively the Welsh Government's policy, funding and regulatory arrangements for the sector support the mental health of students in higher education, and whether there is more that the Welsh Government could do.
    - Universities Wales would welcome a consideration of support for students within the refreshed Together for Mental Health strategy including the policy recommendations set out below under 'recommendations for change'

- o Additional funding provided for student wellbeing during the pandemic was extremely welcome and enabled institutions to provide additional support. However, in the longer-term, sustainable and long-term funding is more effective in allowing universities to develop and maintain their wellbeing and mental health support, ensuring that expectations in this area reflect the appropriate delineation of responsibilities between health services and education providers.

- **In the context of the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Bill, what a whole-system approach to mental health and well-being in post-16 education may look like, and what the role of higher education and healthcare providers would be.**
  - o A whole-system approach on prevention and early intervention would be helpful to tackle the ongoing challenges posed by the number of students experiencing mental health problems upon arrival at university.
  - o The fact that students present mental health problems *before* embarking on their university career suggests more could be done at an earlier point in their educational journey to prevent mental health problems developing.
  - o At the same time, focused support on transitions (as discussed above) would help with a whole-system approach in supporting students that do struggle.
  - o Universities are mainly providers of education and research, this is their mission as registered charities. A consideration of the roles and remit of support that can be provided by academic institutions and healthcare providers would be helpful in any future Welsh Government mental health policy.

- **How the new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research should approach mental health and wellbeing for students in higher education, and in the wider tertiary education sector**
  - o It is important that CTER retains understanding of the regulation and funding of higher education and how support is best leveraged in the interests of students.

Recommendations for change

In May 2022, Universities Wales published a series of policy recommendations for Welsh Government's consideration, developed in partnership with Colleges Wales, NUS Wales and AMOSSHE. These recommendations included:

- **Parity of experience:** Students should be able to access a consistent standard of support regardless of where they live.
  - o Institutions to have a well-being policy for equipping students to exercise self-management and self-care.
  - o Welsh Government considering and including student voices in the development of health policy
  - o Welsh Government review and map mental health services available across Wales for students in post-16 education, in order to identify gaps and to publish information on support available.

- **Appropriate information sharing:** Relevant bodies need to share information as appropriate to avoid students "falling through the gaps".
  - o Welsh Government to update and provide clear guidance on information sharing between health services and education institutions.
  - o Support and require healthcare systems (including primary care, emergency care, secondary and specialised care) to develop effective working relationships with school/college/university support services and third sector provision.
  - o Consider a common approach to data sharing between education providers and health boards in Wales

- **Clear roles, remits and responsibilities:** A common understanding on what sort of situation is appropriate for response within an education setting, and what should be referred to the statutory health services, is essential to ensuring students receive the support they need.
  - o Welsh Government to coordinate work bringing services together to produce guidance detailing accountability of services and where responsibility lies

- **Additional support for transitions:** For some young people, moving through along their educational journey can exacerbate their conditions or create new risks for them.
  - o Welsh Government to address how best to improve the relationship between CAMHS and adult services with specific consideration given to age boundaries for people under 25 and a possible specific service for 16-25s.
  - o Continued support through Renew and Reform for projects supporting transitions including University Ready and equivalents in FE

- **Sustainable funding:** Ad-hoc project-based funding, while helpful, can be less impactful. A multi-year approach to dedicated funding is required to

provide post-16 education providers with the opportunity to create the greatest impact, both on our learners and communities. It would provide the capacity to embed mental health and well-being support in the curriculum and provide sector-appropriate support services which remove barriers to success and help learners to navigate personal crises which impact their studies

- o Welsh Government to take this into account when setting budgets and work with appropriate bodies to embed longer-term approaches for mental health and well-being services across post-16 education