

Mental Health Support in Higher Education (HE)

Briefing paper for the Children, Young People and Education Committee

September 2022

1. Extent of need

The situation with regards to the mental health of students in HE is impacted to a great extent by the mental health of students in FE and school sixth forms who progress into HE. Colleges report an increase in mental health problems (even prior to the pandemic) which subsequently feed through into HE - some colleges report the number of HE students accessing internal college mental health services has increased by as much as 96% between 20/21 and 21/22.

In terms of the effect of Covid-19 on the mental health of HE students include the pressure of attending college whilst trying to home educate children, managing a household and being in employment with limited support due to the lack of contact with the natural support network of friends and family.

Colleges noted the distinction between the needs of students in more traditional HE settings and those studying HE within a Further Education Institution (FEI). Many HE in FE students are typically older, and have work and/or family commitments which need to be taken into account. These students are also usually from low socio-economic backgrounds and financial insecurity is cited as a cause for a number of referrals for anxiety.

Another key issue raised by colleges was the availability and time to attend or access support and mental health services. This can be particularly difficult if learners are engaged with multiple support professionals due to their employment, family and/or curriculum commitments.

The current situation surrounding the cost of living crisis will inevitably impact on mental health, which in turn will see an increase in the mental health support services needed by HE in FE learners.

2. Identification and provision

There are some excellent examples of support provided to HE in FE learners by FE colleges across Wales -

- Some colleges have their own relationships with local mental health services - it would reduce barriers for learners and professionals if the communication between Education and Health was more accessible.

- Some colleges have also used funding to implement triage services to ensure learners receive a robust assessment when a referral is made. Learners will then receive the right support at the right time, while other colleges hold applicant events to identify support needs at an early stage.
- One college has developed a new process with mental health services for transition and data sharing – this is being piloted in 2022/23.
- One college assesses Student Loan funding to support Study Assistants specifically for HE in FE learners.
- Learner voice is well used within HE in FE with Student Union Officers in post in a few colleges who provide regular feedback to senior management teams on the amount of support and quality of the support needed.

Colegau Cymru has worked collaboratively with NUS Wales, Universities Wales and AMOSSHE to develop post-16 mental health policy recommendations for the Welsh Government. These include continued funding for transitions through Renew and Reform, the need for Welsh Government to address the relationship between CAMHS and adult services, and addressing ways universities can work with local post-16 colleges/schools to support learner mental health in advance of the transition to higher education.¹

The transition from child to adult mental health services can also be a significant problem. Support needs to be age appropriate, not at an arbitrary cut off point such as 18, and linked to any other relevant services. It is essential that transition between settings is standardized and that mental health information is shared easily and in a timely manner, not just between support services, but between education providers also. Social signposting, early identification, trauma awareness and resilience training should continue to be a priority for the sector.

3. Welsh Government policy, legislation and funding

Most FE colleges in Wales offer higher education options to their learners. The sector has received funding from the Welsh Government, both pre-and post-Covid, to develop a variety of different projects and resources to support learner mental health which have been shared as examples of best practice across the sector, and which would be available to HE in FE learners as well as FE learners.

The FE sector suggests that funding, new initiatives, and pilot projects be made available for a minimum of two academic years to ensure entire programmes are embedded and to enable effective impact monitoring.

¹ [Post-16 Mental Health Policy \(colleges.wales\)](https://colleges.wales/post-16-mental-health-policy)

The new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research should take a joined up approach to mental health and wellbeing for students across all parts of the post-16 system where there should be expectation of some sort of parity of experience whether for HE in FE students, traditional HE or FE students and apprentices (including higher level or degree apprentices). This can allow for differences between settings but those studying HE in FE should be able to expect to access similar levels of support, for instance. The Commission should ensure that institutions that it funds have a sufficient level of mental health support in place.

4. Recommendations for change

The Committee should consider how any recommendations made apply fairly to those learners studying HE in FE, taking into account the different circumstances of this cohort.

A mental health service for young people 16-25 should be established to support young people through school/college/HE/apprenticeship pathways, rather than the transition from CAMHS to adult services at 18.

Health and Education services to be more aligned to support students / patients holistically.

Increases in the cost of living and childcare have created financial insecurity, which is having a detrimental effect on the wellbeing of students in college HE provision. Assistance is required with the cost of courses or other learning provision, especially at a time when households are facing financial difficulties.

It would also be beneficial to differentiate between settings and unique needs in any future regulatory arrangements.

5. Other

It's important to remember that all those who need access to mental health services should have a Welsh option available to them. This is especially important if Welsh is their first language or the language they feel most comfortable communicating in.

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