

CYPE(6)-24-22 - Paper 1

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10 November 2022

Dear Jayne,

Thank you for the invitation to attend Committee as part of its inquiry into Mental Health Support in Higher Education. Attached is written evidence that we are submitting jointly in advance of our attendance at the 23 November session.

We look forward to discussing this topic in more detail with the Committee.

Yours sincerely,

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

CYPE Evidence Paper: Mental Health Support in Higher Education

We welcome the opportunity to provide information in support of the Committee's inquiry into mental health support in HE. We have addressed each of the Committee's areas of interest below, as set out in the inquiry's terms of Reference, and look forward to discussing these further with the Committee on 23 November.

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.

With record numbers of students entering higher education, combined with the pandemic and cost of living crisis, we might expect to see a rise in the numbers of students declaring that they have a mental health condition. Research, from Universities UK and the Education Policy Institute amongst others, suggests that changing student demographics may lie behind the higher prevalence of mental health issues.

In 2021 UCAS identified an increase of 450% in mental health declarations over the last decade¹, estimating that over 70,000 students with mental health conditions may enter HE each year. Whilst this suggests an increased willingness to declare a condition, 49% of first year students surveyed with a mental health condition chose not to declare it. The UCAS study also identifies an increase in the number of students declaring a mental health condition once they start at university, indicating students remain reluctant to declare a mental health concern at the application stage. This suggests some students still perceive a stigma around poor mental health which needs to be addressed if we are going to be able to provide these students with the support they need whilst at university to help them succeed and realise their potential.

The 2022 Student Academic Survey² also provides an insight into the current mental health and well-being of students and identifies a number of factors that can impact their sense of well-being and health:

- 30% of students reported they had considered leaving their course, and of those 34% the main reason being their mental/emotional health;
- Students have reported significantly lower levels of wellbeing than ONS surveys of the general population, both before and since the pandemic;
- only 14% of students reported 'low anxiety' compared to 37% of the general population in 2021 (ONS); and
- 23% of students report feeling lonely "most or all of the time", compared to only 5% of the general population. The proportions are higher amongst black, LGB+, disabled and trans students³.

¹ [450% increase in student mental health declarations over last decade but progress still needed to address declarations stigma | Undergraduate | UCAS](#)

² [AdvHE HEPI SAES 2022 1654522609.pdf](#)

³ Distinct analysis was conducted on the experiences of students who identify as being trans or have a trans history.

We are also seeing an increase in the numbers entering HE from more deprived areas for whom financial concerns may be more prevalent.

Mental health support for students in higher education is tailored to the needs of this group, reflecting their status as independent adults and recognising the particular pressures they face around living independently, managing their own money and coping with the challenge of independent study.

We recognise the tension this can create where students may nevertheless be dependent on their families for financial and emotional support. We are also very aware of the sensitivities that need to be managed in supporting students with their mental health. We welcome the UUK's publication of guidance⁴ for the sector on how and when institutions should intervene where they have serious concerns about the safety of a student. The tragic cases of student suicides and rising incidence of mental health declarations highlight the need for institutions to be proactive in recognising where students are struggling; for them to ensure their processes and procedures are appropriate and are being followed; and for any barriers to students accessing health services are identified and addressed.

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.

With increased access and growth in the numbers entering HE we must be alert to the potential for higher levels of risk for those who might be the first in their family to go to university, may be returning to education from employment, or from a low participation background. For most learners attending university is an exciting time but it can be an unfamiliar environment for some. Progression to university can be challenging, especially where students are separated from familiar support mechanisms and services. For some young people the move to living independently, whilst also making new friends and settling into their studies are new responsibilities which can be difficult to balance. There are many factors that can affect mental health and some students will experience multiple factors.

In taking forward our student finance reforms we recognised the link between high levels of financial concern and poor student mental health. Our student finance package aims to relieve some of that worry by providing help where it is needed. We provide the highest level of maintenance support of all the UK administrations for undergraduate students. Students receive a guaranteed level of maintenance support, based on the National Living Wage, irrespective of their household income. Other grants are available to eligible students, including grants in connection with a disability and for students with dependents. Additional support may also be available for students in receipt of social security benefits.

The effect, if any, that Covid-19 had generally on students' mental health and well-being and the pandemic's impact on the levels and type of support provided by the higher education sector.

⁴ [Universities to involve trusted contacts when there are serious concerns about a student's safety or mental health \(universitiesuk.ac.uk\)](https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk)

HE in Wales and across the UK was significantly affected by the COVID pandemic: in-person teaching and learning was suspended for significant periods causing disruption to learning and repeated periods of self-isolation and quarantine requirements, travel restrictions and restrictions on socialising all impacted negatively on the wellbeing, physical and mental health of many staff, students and graduates. The impact of repeated periods of lockdown and isolation may have exacerbated a range of mental health issues, in addition to increasing feelings of loneliness, anxiety and lack of belonging contributing to increased levels of poor physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing,

Students faced an enormous challenge during the pandemic to remain at university, to keep themselves and those around them well and to stay engaged with their studies. Recognising these particular difficulties and challenges we allocated additional funding of £50m to HEFCW in 2020-21 to bolster support for students, particularly those facing financial, emotional or mental health difficulties. £10m was provided specifically for student mental health and well-being services and £40m to boost support for students facing financial hardship. A further £27m was also provided to HEFCW to establish a Higher Education Investment and Recovery Fund designed to support the sector in mitigating the effects of the pandemic including maintaining teaching capacity to support continued learning.

HEFCW had been working with our universities and with students prior to the pandemic, to develop a Wales-wide, strategic approach to well-being and health, including mental health. The additional funding enabled HEFCW and the sector to build on this strategic approach and extend the range of measures and interventions offered to students. Institutions were able to increase capacity within their students support services and in student unions to provide advice, support and well-being services. Hardship funding included targeted help for those students who were most in need as a result of the pandemic and facing greatest financial hardship due to ongoing lockdown restrictions. This included support for student mental health and student hardship services, providing food packages, access to resources and digital learning, counselling and bereavement support as well as accommodation costs.

In 2021-22 HE institutions received a further £2.1m via HEFCW to support their response to the impacts of the pandemic: £1.3m was provided to support well-being activities for students aged 25 or under as part of the “Winter of Well-being” to help them to better engage with their learning and wider society. Institutions were required to work collaboratively with their Student Unions in the designing and delivering activities to support and improve the physical, emotional and mental wellbeing of participating young people; and £750k was provided to fund improvements to ventilation in campus buildings to improve air quality and reduce risks associated with the spread of the virus. £600k has been allocated to HEFCW in 2022-23, from the Post-16 and Transition Project under the Renew and Reform Programme, to deliver a package of mentoring support to learners engaged in 16-19 education.

Responding to the pandemic required a huge, sustained and concerted effort across all HE activities. While the challenges were unprecedented, requiring a rapid and urgent response and some very difficult decisions to be made, we also saw great innovation and some positive developments and opportunities that we should

capitalise upon. We need to ensure that progress in these areas is not lost.

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.

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

Our annual, targeted funding has enabled HEFCW to increase the support institutions are able to offer both staff and students. HEFCW has developed a strategic approach to this work. Through the efforts of HEFCW, Universities Wales and NUS Wales working together with leading health charities and other agencies, we have seen significant improvements in recent years in the assistance and support provided to students during their time at university. This is a long-term commitment, firmly embedded within institutions' strategic operations.

HEFCW's 2019 Well-being and Health Policy Statement committed them to ensuring providers' make an ongoing commitment to well-being and health. Since 2019 all Welsh HEIs have had well-being and health, including mental health, strategies in place. HEFCW monitor institutions' strategies and provide feedback and challenge to ensure they remain fit for purpose, they are appropriately ambitious and respond effectively to the needs of staff and students in HE, enabling universities to strengthen their approach, and to share good practice.

In reviewing their strategies, and to inform their further development, HEFCW requires universities to use the [UUK Stepchange self-assessment toolkit](#). The UUK self-assessment tool was developed to encourage universities to plan and implement a whole university approach, as set out in Stepchange: mentally healthy universities.

HEFCW have embedded the Universities UK: Stepchange mentally healthy university and Suicide Safer frameworks into their policy work. From 2019/20, all Wales universities committed to adopt the Universities UK Step change: mentally healthy universities [Stepchange: mentally healthy universities \(sustainabilityexchange.ac.uk\)](#) and Suicide-Safer Universities approaches [Suicide-safer universities \(universitiesuk.ac.uk\)](#). HEFCW has also updated its 2019 guidance on Student Charters, which requires institutions' Charters to include a statement on its commitment to supporting student well-being, including mental health, and signposting to related well-being and health and mental health policies and information. From 2022/23 HEFCW expects institutions to include a commitment to promoting student health and wellbeing and a commitment to supporting suicide-safer approaches from 2022/23.

Whilst we have seen significant progress in recent years we are not complacent in our responsibilities to these young people. The rise in the incidence of students declaring a mental health condition, the tragic occurrence of suicides in the UK student population (in the academic year ended 2020 it is estimated 64 university

students took their own lives in in England and Wales⁵⁾) and increasing numbers of students seeking to access student support services, there is clearly more we must do to support students during their time at university. More innovative and collaborative approaches will be required to ensure support services are able adequately to meet the needs of these students and are tailored to their particular circumstances, as a mobile population.

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.

In 2019, additional WG funding of £2m enabled HEFCW to fund five innovative, collaborative well-being and health projects. The collaborations, led by Welsh universities, aimed to improve the well-being and mental health provision and identify approaches that were sustainable and could be shared across HE in Wales and more widely, to secure whole system change.

The fund provided £600k to support the pilot phase of the Mental Health University Liaison Service, a service developed by the South East Wales Mental Health Partnership, a collaboration between Cardiff University, Cardiff Metropolitan University, the University of South Wales, the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, and delivered in partnership with the NHS through Cardiff and Vale Health Board. This innovative project, which was launched at the Senedd in June, aims to bridge the gap between university Student Support Services and local NHS mental health services by improving access to crucial mental health support in cases where students are presenting as particularly at risk or unwell.

Students and service providers should have a clear and consistent understanding of the roles and responsibilities of different service providers and the extent of the support each service is able to provide. We were pleased to meet with representatives of the Universities Wales led cross-sector working group earlier this year to discuss their policy principles and recommendations. Their work has helped to highlight the particular issues experienced by learners as they progress through different stages of their education and transition between NHS services.

This is everybody's business in which we all have a part to play. The Deputy Minister will be Chairing a new cross-sector policy advisory group focussing on identifying prevention and early intervention measures that will reduce the incidence of poor mental health and improve well-being. The Group will also focus on the interface between health services and tertiary education, examining the barriers that lead to poor or unequitable access to services. We are committed to developing a whole system, whole service approach, framed around the needs of learners.

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.

⁵ [Estimating suicide among higher education students, England and Wales: Experimental Statistics - Office for National Statistics](#)

Improving mental health support is a priority for the Welsh Government and an additional £50m has been allocated for mental health and well-being support in 2022-23.

We are clear the only sustainable way of responding to rising demand and the multifaceted nature of mental health support is to ensure there is good, universal support available and good access to specialised services which is why we are adopting a whole system approach to service provision in Wales.

We have developed the NEST/NYTH Framework as a planning tool for RPBs to implement a Whole System Approach in their areas. We have recently appointed a NEST Implementation Lead who is working across Government, with RPBs and external stakeholders to truly embed NYTH/NEST in children and young people's policy. The NYTH/NEST Framework aims to improve children and young people's mental health and wellbeing through providing a no wrong door approach to accessing support and adopting a preventative approach to mental health.

We have strengthened and expanded our tier 0/1 offer to provide open access to a range of non-clinical mental health support that can be accessed over the phone or online without a referral from a health professional.

This includes the Young Person's Mental Health Toolkit which links young people, aged 11 to 25, to websites, apps, helplines, and more to build resilience across six categories; anxiety, low mood, keeping active and healthy, bereavement, coronavirus information, and crisis support.

Young people and their families in Wales can now access free online mental health therapy through the NHS without needing to be referred by a GP. Following a successful pilot in Powys, SilverCloud Wales online therapy now has a suite of support programmes designed to help young people manage their mental health and wellbeing. Parents and carers can sign up for a free 12-week online therapy programme to help children and young people aged 4-18 with mild-to-moderate anxiety. Teens aged 16-18 can also sign up themselves, without needing adult consent, for support with anxiety or low mood directly via their mobile, tablet or laptop.

We also recognise there are specific challenges in Higher Education settings linked with young people leaving home and travelling to different parts of the UK to visit university. This presents challenges in terms of providing a seamless transfer between health services in different parts of the country with data sharing being a key area of concern when it comes to sharing medical records. From the point the record is received in Wales, the current paper process can take up to 11 days. To make this more efficient and seamless work is underway to transfer medical records digitally within 30 minutes of a patient registering with a GP. We expect this to be rolled out in Wales within the next 12 months.

There is an added complexity for CYP in this age group who will have the dual challenge of transitioning through both the education and care system.

In January 2022 TGP Cymru were contracted by the Welsh Government to engage and deliver a small number of face to face or virtual workshops with young people across Wales who have experienced/are experiencing CAMHS to AMHS transition services in-order to understand and establish what transition support solution they would value.

The report included some helpful insights and recommendations in terms of how the sCAMHS to AMHS transition could be improved by, for example, improving the access to information around transitions and redesigning the young person passport.

Officials are in the process of bringing together the dedicated Mental Health Transition Managers across Wales to consider the recommendations in detail and what can be done to further improve the service across Wales.

This review will consider how HBs in Wales work with universities and HBs across the UK to ensure that geographical transitions between services are also streamlined.

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

We have adopted a whole system approach to health and well-being building on the commitment in Education in Wales: Our National Mission to excellence, equity and well-being in our education system.

The new Curriculum for Wales places greater emphasis on health and well-being, supporting learners to make sense of their experiences and feelings and developing an understanding of where and how to seek help and support. The Curriculum for Wales also emphasises the importance of transition into post 16 education and any effective transition would need to consider learners' health and well-being and the support they had received in school.

The post-16 education and training sector provides several well-established services to support student mental health and wellbeing across universities and colleges:

In higher education, universities have provided a range of services and resources to support student mental health for many years based on a strategic approach, as outlined above.

In further education, Welsh Government has provided over £10m of funding to support the mental health and wellbeing of staff and learners since 2020. This funding has supported the development of mental health and wellbeing strategies within further education colleges and has also enabled the appointment of wellbeing staff, pastoral coaches, counsellors, and mentors.

In the 2021-22 academic year, over £33m of additional funding was issued to FE colleges and school sixth forms to support learner progression. A further £13m was allocated to FE colleges and local authorities to support the transition of learners into and between the post-16 sectors.

In December 2021 funding was allocated to ‘Winter of Wellbeing’ activities aimed at supporting the social, emotional, and physical wellbeing of children and young people up to 25 years of age over the winter months of 2021/22; delivered by universities, FE colleges, local authorities, schools, and national organisations.

Funding has also been provided for the ‘University Ready’ project, a collection of resources from Welsh universities hosted by the Open University’s Open Learn platform, to support learners transitioning to higher education whose learning has been disrupted by the pandemic.

In summer 2021 Welsh Government published the Post-16 and Transitions Plan, setting out a programme of support for learners transitioning through different stages of post-16 education and training during and following the Covid-19 pandemic.

The post-16 and transitions project has been working collaboratively with colleagues in health, local health boards, universities and colleges to consider the challenges, barriers and issues facing post-16 students in education and the staff who support them in our HE and FE institutions on access to mental health and well-being support. This will be used to inform future collaboration programme. The Committee’s review is therefore welcomed as the research, comments and recommendations will be valued and support this work.

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.

In 2010, the Welsh Government introduced the Mental Health Measure which, together with other mental health legislation provides the regulatory context for universal services in Wales. The Measure is a unique piece of legislation designed to provide a legal framework to improve mental health services for Welsh residents. This includes the implementation of Primary Mental Health Services and to ensure people receiving secondary mental health services have a holistic care, a treatment plan and a care co-ordinator.

Financial support for mental health and well-being within HE is predominantly delivered through HEFCW.

In 2018-19, in response to increasing numbers of students declaring a mental health condition and the tragic incidences of suicide amongst the student population, we placed a renewed and raised focus on mental health and well-being in HE. Recognising the link between wellbeing and learner outcomes HEFCW were remitted to work with their stakeholders and partners within Wales and beyond to strengthen its approach to safeguarding, health and well-being by addressing the factors that affect health and well-being, including mental health. Additional funding of £2m was allocated to HEFCW that year to support this work.

We have adopted a broad definition of health and well-being, which encompasses safeguarding, building resilience, tackling domestic and sexual violence, harassment and other factors that can adversely affect the mental health and well-being of staff and students. In 2019-20 £1.5m was allocated via HEFCW to support the improvement of safeguarding and well-being practice and policies including promoting period dignity.

Since 2018-19 funding of around £2m has been ringfenced within HEFCW's budget annually to fund the development and improvement of health and well-being support, including mental health, within HE. Measures have focused primarily on students but support has also been provided for staff working within the sector. Significant additional funding was provided during the pandemic to bolster the support institutions were able to provide to staff and students and to keep campuses and our communities safe.

HEFCW's fee and access plan guidance for new providers and the February 2020 guidance, which provided the underpinnings for the current process (and through which regulated institutions are required to maintain levels of student support) sets out that all providers should take HEFCW's Well-being and Health in Higher Education Policy Statement into account when applying for a plan. Regulated institutions use the student support element of the plans to provide a range of bursaries and hardship funds.

Through ringfenced funding and prioritising activity within HEFCW's remit letter HEFCW are able to use their funding and regulatory powers to engage strategically with the sector and support delivery of our priorities on mental health and well-being and safeguarding.

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.

The Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER), established by the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act, will be responsible for the funding and oversight of universities, colleges, school sixth-forms, apprenticeships, and adult learning provision. CTER will be subject to the well-being duties of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and will have its own duties to promote collaboration and coherence in tertiary education.

A whole-system approach to supporting learner mental health will be a priority for CTER. We expect it to build upon the existing work done by HEFCW, local authorities, schools, and higher and further education providers in this area, including building on lessons learned from the pandemic.

The creation of CTER could also provide opportunities for greater sharing of information, data and best practice between further and higher education providers, aiding support for students who transition between the two sectors.

Welsh Government funding, delivered through HEFCW, has supported the piloting of the new NHS Mental Health University Liaison Service for southeast Wales (referenced above).

Such projects will help the development of new collaborative provision of support services for student mental health and wellbeing that extend to further as well as higher education through the coordination and oversight of CTER. As we move to implementation of the TER Act and establishment of CTER, we intend to work with education providers and health services to identify further opportunities for greater collaboration in service provision.

We welcome the Committee's views on where greater coordination and collaboration, both within the education sector and between education and health providers, can improve support services for mental health and wellbeing of students and learners.

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.

The TER Act requires CTER to ensure that it is satisfied with the effectiveness of the registered tertiary education providers' arrangements for supporting and promoting the welfare of its students and staff. The Commission may also set similar terms and conditions for providers which it funds.

This is the first legal duty of its kind in the UK and will require CTER to set out clear expectations for universities and colleges regarding their policies, services, and processes for supporting student and staff wellbeing, welfare, and safety.

It will ultimately be for CTER, as an arms-length body, to determine its expectations of providers on these matters. We intend to engage with relevant stakeholders during the process of CTER implementation to inform the development of policy and welcome the views of the Committee on this area.

We expect that CTER will develop arrangements for long-term monitoring and oversight of mental health and wellbeing in the sector, for us to assess the impact of different initiatives and aid the planning of future services. CTER will be able to build on the extensive work undertaken in recent years to support mental health and wellbeing in both FE and HE, including collaborative initiatives.
