

Notes from Cross-Party Group on Universities – 02.02.22 (Microsoft Teams)

Joint Meeting with the Cross-Party Group on Mental Health

Chaired by Hefin David MS and Ken Skates MS

Attendees as below.

Julie Lydon (Chair, Universities Wales)

Apposite that we brought the two CPGs together. We need to be clear we are talking about student mental health. We've had some great presentation and have heard from university colleagues. We want to build on the conversations we've had and explore proposals for a post-16 mental health strategy for students.

Mental health continues to pose challenges for the whole of society. It's a feature of this last year or so with the pandemic. I really welcome this opportunity to discuss broad terms of the requirements of a post-16 mental health strategy.

Simon Jones (MIND Cymru)

The pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental health of the whole population. In terms of our position, it's important we don't medicalise what students are feeling at this time. It's important we don't rush to suggest people might have a mental illness when what they need is support. Culture and leadership are absolutely critical. We need to make sure students are able to speak to someone and that help is available and accessible.

We also need to normalise the discussion around mental health. Going to university is a significant transition. The next Welsh Government has the opportunity to develop a new mental health strategy, it's a huge responsibility and an opportunity to refresh that and cast a clear eye over it.

Ben Lewis (Cardiff University)

It's very clear that the target in terms of student expectations has been moved and changed. I think there's a definite move towards a misconception that HEIs should fulfil the role of healthcare providers. The role of universities is different in terms of mental health.

Any national approach will have to define university roles and there's an opportunity to do something quite bespoke in Wales.

The gap between the NHS and HE is an issue.

At Cardiff we've developed a new student intervention model which also helps students access health professionals – 300 students have accessed this.

It seems clear that student demand coming to university is going to be affected by some of the issues on youth mental health. It's brilliant that resource and attention is being given to that but it's going to be important that we maintain that going forward.

Becky Ricketts (NUS Wales)

Post-16 mental health strategy is our number one issue. The most important thing the strategy can do is identify the pressure points on student mental health. We need to focus on early intervention, being a student in 2021 is very different to being a student 10-20 years ago.

We need to promote mental health through the entire education system.

The strategy must look to unite portfolios and make sure ministers are pulling in the same direction.

Lynne Neagle (Deputy Minister for Mental Health and Wellbeing)

Mental health on the Children and Young People's Committee has been our number one priority. I'm really keen to try to take forward this work further. WE need to go to the next step for post-16 learners. My only concern is that we get consistency, even if the offer is not the same, it needs to be equally good.

John de Pury (Universities UK)

Universities have made huge efforts to step into the [mental healthcare provision] gap. But we should not be condensing the development of a parallel health service in universities for those severely mentally ill. We do need to ask the NHS to come back and meet those needs.

Universities should not be stepping in to specialist mental health services.

[Addressing the transition point for young people as they enter university is key to the strategy]

Becky Ricketts

These are issues and problems that students are facing every day. There is a definite disconnect between students too sick for universities to deal with and not sick enough for NHS care. Often this because there such a chasm. We lose these people from the university education system. There's a difficulty with students being able to register with GPs. A lot of students aren't registered. There are a few things that are commonplace that students are expected to deal with.

John de Pury

The lived experience of students right now is about dislocation of care. It needs the political will to resolve it. A positive of the pandemic is that we've shown we can move records and care to a digital space. It will not solve all problems bit digital care can step in to some of these geographical challenges.

Kirsty Palmer (Cardiff Metropolitan University)

We need to provide our students with good emotional literacy and understanding of how to manage and how to cope. That is not necessarily about medical care but it's about providing space and time and giving them coping strategies so all communities can thrive.

If it's not happening early in life, it's tough at 18 to start that conversation. We have a structured personal tutoring system at Cardiff Met and there's training on all kinds of things for those tutors. It might be that they need to refer an individual to student services. And we have a lot more work to do in

that area. We need to be looking at how we train and support our national body of academics at university.

Emma Stratton

We've got good practice to build on. It's very much trying to widen that access. GP Registrations is a huge point, particularly in relation to international students. Hopefully that will provide us with a model to go forward with.

Emma Gooding (Samaritans Cymru)

Suicide rates, while men aged 45-49 are the highest rates, there is an increase in under 25s, especially among young women. There is a need to look at that and why that has increased, and it's not just because of COVID.

Prof Maria Henfelaar (Wrexham Glyndwr University)

We're finding that some students are talking to digital services rather than face-to-face meeting. And that's something that will continue to happen post-pandemic.

Ben Lewis

The point around transition of services is something we are developing in Cardiff and which will become a standard student service model. There's an opportunity to create a common language to speak to the NHS and explain what we're doing on student services.

Prof Julie Lydon

We have an opportunity to come back with some strategic principles. We need some clear steers and asks to government. Connection with the NHS is key to that and is something which has come through very clearly.

Hefin David MS

Going forward we can develop a document from this to communicate to the political parties that this is what the future should hold.