



Higher education mental health implementation taskforce terms of reference

Purpose

The mental health of university students is a priority for government and the higher education sector. The proportion of higher education (HE) students reporting a mental health condition to their university has been increasing over recent years¹. We want to ensure all students are given the support they need to thrive, and all possible action is taken to prevent suicides which have a devastating impact on families, friends and the community.

Progress has been made to tackle this challenge by funding innovative approaches to student mental health and through the provision of additional services including Student Space. Mental health experts and the sector have also worked to produce significant best practice guidance, supported by government, including the University Mental Health Charter run by Student Minds and a range of broader best practice from Universities UK, as well as guidance that applies to colleges. However, there is wide recognition among mental health practitioners, charities, bereaved families and the sector that more could and should be done.

The Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce aims to build on existing best practice and ensure that guidance and key initiatives are implemented in full, with greater clarity on which parts are applicable to different types of institutions, and with clear measures for identifying progress. It also aims to fill gaps in areas where more consistency is needed and where there is the opportunity to roll out innovative practice more widely. Ultimately prospective and current students and their parents and families need to have the confidence that students will feel safe in their higher education setting and be able to access the right support to help meet whatever challenges they may face.

Scope of outputs

The implementation taskforce should consider how to improve mental health and wellbeing for a wide cohort of students across different HE providers. It will be accountable to the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education for delivering on these outputs,

¹ [Table 15 - UK domiciled student enrolments by disability and sex 2014/15 to 2021/22 | HESA](#)

though many of these will be led and maintained by the sector and other bodies beyond the duration of the implementation taskforce.

By December 2023, the implementation taskforce should:

- Draw on a wide range of expertise and experience in student mental health; produce a plan for improvement in mental health support for the minister; set out the roles and responsibilities of different organisations, milestones, and progress measures. This plan should aim to ensure current and emerging best practice is followed widely and rigorously across the higher education sector, with clarity on expectations of different types of institutions. There should be clear accountability through public reporting from the sector on progress.
- In so doing, this plan will prioritise detailing the steps to address the four specific areas set out by the minister for the group:
 - better identification of students in need of support and a clear user journey for accessing that support
 - development of more sensitive policies and communications within a proposed University Student Commitment
 - effective case reviews and engagement with the national review of HE suicides, including generation of insights into mental health services on offer by HE providers and exploration of the methods for achieving greater timeliness and transparency on suicide data
 - adoption of common principles and baselines for approaches across providers, such as through sector led charters

It will identify progress to date in these areas and articulate further areas of potential work.

By May 2024, the implementation taskforce should produce:

- a public document that shows: the ways in which the four areas set out by the minister have been achieved; work still to be completed; and areas where additional interventions by all parties should be considered by the minister and other actors for further improvement

In concluding its work, the implementation taskforce should consider what background documents and further considerations on next steps should be passed on to those who will take forward the work.

The group may, where appropriate, commission other relevant bodies and establish working subgroups to produce certain products, in particular where expert input is necessary to ensure it is well-evidenced. It should also consult with stakeholders beyond the group to ensure its outputs reflect a wide of range of views.

Membership

The implementation taskforce shall be formed of experts in student mental health, representatives from across the higher education sector and relevant government departments and agencies.

The expectation is that members will:

- contribute actively to the taskforce, including by helping shape its workplan, attending all implementation taskforce meetings and participating in relevant events
- use their expertise and experience to progress proposals on the four areas of focus for the taskforce, including by providing evidence and leading on development of papers and proposals where appropriate
- help ensure the interim and final reports are robust and delivered on time by providing relevant content for these reports and commenting in a timely way
- the taskforce will seek to operate on the basis of consensus around evidence and good practice. It will put the interests of students at the centre of its deliberations and look to establish where these lie most in the event of any dissensus. Where members continue to have significant differences with any publications, guidance or advice emanating from the taskforce, these will be recorded

The outputs of the taskforce will report directly to Robert Halfon MP, Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education and he will be invited as appropriate to be updated on its progress.

Confidentiality

There will be a duty of confidentiality imposed on all taskforce members. Members may be exposed to sensitive information as part of discussions. Confidentiality is extremely important and, while it is understood that staff of taskforce members may see some documents connected to the group's work, unnecessary involvement of third parties in handling this material is strongly discouraged.

Conflicts of interest

Members will ensure that there are no conflicts of interest likely to prejudice their independence and objectivity in performing their roles in the group. Where any such possible conflict of interest does arise (either before or during the term of the taskforce) members will declare it. Members and their employers will not use their position on the taskforce or information obtained in the course of that work, to benefit their employer, particularly in gaining advantage in competition to provide services to the Department for Education.

Frequency and duration of meetings

The group should meet formally at least once every 6 weeks.

Sub-groups may be convened to take forward the outputs and these may meet more frequently as required.

The secretariat will be provided by DfE and will aim to:

- circulate papers a minimum of five working days before the meeting
- issue minutes no longer than five working days after the meeting

Papers and materials may be provided by appropriate members of the implementation taskforce, as well as by external bodies and individuals who are supporting its work.

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