Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce

Notes of 2nd Taskforce meeting held on 22nd September (10:30 – 12:30), virtually via MS Teams

Chair

Higher Education Student Support Champion, Professor Edward Peck.

Members Present

- Professor Louis Appleby - Chair of National Suicide Prevention Strategy Advisory Group
- Mia Brady, Student representative - Student Minds Student Advisory Committee
- Dr Nicola Byrom - Network Leader, SMaRteN
- Prathiba Chitsabesan - National Clinical Director for Children and Young People's Mental Health, NHS England
- Charlotte Corrish – Head of Public Policy, OIA
- Kathryn Cribbin - Student Representative, QAA student panel
- Emma Douthwaite – Safeguarding and Welfare Manager, Office for Students (OfS)
- Lee Fryatt - Co-founder, The LEARN Network
- Angela Halston – Senior Policy and Engagement Officer, Independent HE (IHE)
- Jane Harris - Chair, Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education Expert Group (MWBHE)
- Matt Lee - Head of Children and Young People's Mental Health Policy, Department of Health and Social Care
- Gordon McKenzie – CEO, GuildHE
- Stuart Rimmer - Chief Executive at East Coast College, representing Association of Colleges (AoC)
- Mark Shanahan - Co-founder, The LEARN Network
- Jill Stevenson – Chair, Association of Managers of Student Services In Higher Education (AMOSSHE)

- Dr Dominique Thompson - Clinical Advisor, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) and Student Minds
- Rosie Tressler – CEO, Student Minds
- Professor Steve West - Board member, UUK

Apologies

- Amy Norton - Head of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion, Office for Students (OfS)
- Ben Elger - Chief Executive - The Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA)
- Helen Megarry - Independent Adjudicator - The Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA)

In Attendance

- Sandra Binns - Student Support Champion's team
- Department for Education (DfE) Officials
- Ben McCarthy - Student Support Champion's team
- Jenny Shaw - Student Support Champion's team

Membership update

The Chair opened the Taskforce meeting by confirming that following feedback from the previous meeting, an additional student representative has been appointed to the Taskforce (Kathryn Cribbin). The Chair also confirmed that student representatives would now be paid for their time at taskforce meetings, as well as travel expenses for future in-person sessions.

2a. Adoption of Best Practice - University MH Charter – Uptake / UUK Feedback

The paper on the University Mental Health Charter Programme was presented to members, it sets out:

- Minister Halfon's commitment was for universities to join Charter Programme, there was no explicit target regarding the Award.
- An explanation for why the Charter deploys an approach based on principles, rather than a prescriptive approach.

The following points were discussed by Taskforce members:

- A number of Taskforce members praised the work of Student Minds, the Charter and the increased membership numbers. They noted and welcomed that Student Minds will be undertaking a light touch review of the Charter framework.
- They agreed that ensuring the entire leadership team at every HE provider is well engaged will be key to embedding the Charter Programme.
- Some members were concerned that some universities would join the programme but without making real change. Student Minds is considering what would be a suitable timescale for each member to go through the award process.
- Members raised the question of how providers fund implementation of the Charter award process and the potential impact on university student support budgets. It was noted £15m was allocated by DfE in 2023/2024 to OfS which then in turn is distributed to providers.
- A Member raised concerns about whether Student Minds were adequately funded to meet the target for all universities to join the Programme by September 2024

Action: Student Minds are shortly due to publicly confirm the new total number of members on the Charter Programme, following the recently closed application period.

Action: Student Minds will work with sector membership organisations to review how the Charter Programme translates to other settings, such as small, independent and specialist providers by July 2024, as part of its light touch review.

2b. Adoption of Best Practice - Assessment process for small providers

A summary was provided on a paper which had been circulated Taskforce members, it sets out:

- Options for how small and specialist providers and colleges delivering Higher Education (HE) can adopt charters in a way that is deliverable according to their resources whilst also being robust and transparent.
- A more tailored and appropriate solution for small and specialist providers comprising a commitment to adopt the University Mental Health Charter framework, supported by new guidance/ case studies on the application of the framework to small/ specialist providers, and a commitment by small/ specialist providers to fully engage in a new peer review assessment process.

The following points were raised by Taskforce members:

- Members called for clarity on what providers ineligible for the Charter Programme should be doing, with another member providing feedback from smaller providers that something grounded in the principles of the University Mental Health Charter Programme which recognises resource restrictions would be welcome.

- Several members suggested peer assessment as a way to make this achievable.
- Some members raised concern that peer review is not rigorous, and providers will not be self-critical enough. Other members argued that peer assessment can be rigorous, particularly if the process is transparent and includes student representation.
- Members also considered what provider size this peer assessment should apply. It was agreed that the Taskforce does not need to resolve this issue – either in principle or in relation to size – at this juncture.
- A member argued that the level of support a student can expect should be consistent, regardless of the size of their institution. This was the position that the Taskforce was seeking to achieve.
- A member noted that the AoC charter has been well established, and has strong membership, despite the lack of a compulsory need to join. Work needs to be done to understand how it aligns with the University Mental Health Charter, how assessment might be applied, and how HE students in FE colleges are best supported. The AoC charter will be reviewed during Autumn 2023.

Action: The Taskforce project team will initially engage further with IHE, AoC and GuildHE on a sufficient awards process for small and specialist HE providers. There will be an update on this at the next meeting.

2c. Adoption of Best Practice - Transparency on adoption of wider best practice

A paper was shared with taskforce members that sets out the following:

- Surveys suggest a high overall adoption of good practice. However, it is not clear from these surveys which providers are yet to implement good practice.
- A high-level review of existing good practice suggests existing mental health guidance for HE providers already covers a wide range of topics, but there is work to be done to determine how applicable this good practice is to non-UUK members
- There is opportunity to consolidate good practice and prioritise efforts to support providers to implement existing practice in ways that are transparent and meaningful.
- Work could be undertaken with Guild HE, IHE, and AoC to look at the applicability of UUK guidance to their members, resulting in the development of additional guidance or case studies.
- To improve provider-level accountability, sector bodies could ask their members to each publish a mental health and suicide prevention strategy. Sector bodies could produce a summary annual report on progress made by their members on adoption good practice and membership of charter programmes.

The following points were raised by Taskforce members:

- Many members outlined the importance of institution leadership being held accountable.
- There was strong support amongst members for HEPs publishing an annual mental health report or strategy. This report would outline the commitments and responsibilities of the HEP against which progress could be measured. Many members also highlighted the need for this report – and/or a corresponding action plan - to be publicly available.
- A member said it would be helpful if universities were more transparent about whether they were working towards the Charter Award and what feedback they received.
- One member argued that guidance would need to be provided, with expectations of providers set. They argued is a particular need for the responsibilities of providers and the expectations of the NHS to be clarified.

Action: The Taskforce project team will create a proposal for a template on annual reporting of mental health plans and adoption of best practice at provider level to their governor boards, with a view to this also being publicly available.

3a. Wider work strand updates: Identification of students/ wellbeing analytics

The need for a wider and more inclusive approach to the data used to identify at risk students has been highlighted in consultations with people in the sector over the summer.

An open roundtable exploring methods of identifying students at risk will be held on 25 October.

The following points were raised by Taskforce members:

- In order to utilise analytics to flag at risk students, universities need to be able to organise their data in a very specialised way.
- Another member flagged that crucial information often is not held by the university; for example, it may be held by the NHS and not accessible to the provider.
- Some members raised the limitations of data analytics in identifying at-risk students, as well as the need for human observation in identification of at-risk students. Other members accepted limitations but did not accept that they mean that this work should not be done.
- A member raised the issue of risk assessments, stating that feedback from clinicians is that NICE have changed risk assessment guidelines and now say it is not possible to accurately predict risk. Therefore, it could be argued that providers should be focussing on safety planning for everyone, rather than trying to identify at-risk students, although there may not be a direct read across from one issue to the other.
- Members raised the issue that having data available does not help if university staff

are not engaged in using this data to help their students and that there is a lack of guidance and consistency in the expectations of course tutors.

Action: Develop a clearer plan for this work strand by next Taskforce meeting on 1 November, with this plan to go to Minister Halfon in December.

3b. Wider work strand updates: University Student Commitment

The Taskforce were reminded that the roundtable on this topic is taking place on 3 October.

Action: The Taskforce project team will update on the outcomes of this roundtable in the November Taskforce meeting.

3c. Wider work strand updates: National Review of HE Suicides

DfE aims to appoint a reviewer by end of October. The reviewer should then begin engaging with Taskforce members in November.

The review will initially be just for the 23/24 academic year. Families should already be involved in the postvention templates and the reviewer should work with providers to understand how far case reviews of near misses have been completed.

Action: Convene a sub-group of Taskforce members to liaise with the provider.

3d. Wider work strand updates: Areas for further improvement

Taskforce members were informed that so far 35 in-depth conversations have taken place to identify further areas for work.

A light literature review has also taken place.

Action: Taskforce project team to share a report on the areas highlighted before the 1 November Taskforce meeting.

4. Student Support Champion work

Taskforce members received a presentation on the programme of the HE Student Support Champion (HESSC), their work over the last year, and how this complements the work of the taskforce:

- The work focusses on a systemic approach adopted by HEPs to the support of students across all their activities, it is separate to the agenda for the Taskforce, albeit with one or two direct touchpoints.

- To date this work has encompassed:
  - Information sharing between universities and purpose-build student accommodation (and students' unions in due course)
  - Student analytics
  - Transition to HE from schools and colleges
  - Student support re-design, including further exploration of how HEPs can embed analytics across their organisations and how to make communications more compassionate.

The following point was raised by Taskforce members:

- Some members raised concerns about whether their organisations had been consulted during the Student Needs Framework development.
- The Chair reiterated that the Student Needs Framework and service re-design work has been developed under his HE Student Support Champion remit and developed with the UUK Student Policy Network in consultation with a range of HEPs and a small number of student advisory panels. It is intended to support HEPs at a strategic level to assess and advance their student support activities across all aspects of their institutions.
- Members were welcome to provide feedback on the Student Needs Framework once it was published, recognising its focus and purpose.