

Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce

Learning and Development for non-specialist student support roles – Project Proposal

Introduction

This initiative arose from the “areas for further support” conversations and has been aligned to the Identifying Students at Risk strand. It seeks to improve consistency in the ability of those in roles that are not directly delivering specialist student support services – i.e. academic teaching, course administration and campus services staff – to recognise and respond with empathy and understanding to students exhibiting mental distress and, where necessary, offer a clear pathway for accessing specialist support.

Project Summary

For many students experiencing mental health challenges, their teaching staff, personal tutors, or course administrators are seen as the first point of contact. There are benefits to using this route to identify students who may need support. Students may have greater affinity to their course teams, who may be seen as more accessible and approachable than institution-wide support services. For resident students, accommodation and security teams may also find themselves playing a pastoral role, often on an informal basis. For those students who do not overtly disclose challenges, these staff may still have more frequent opportunities to observe signs of mental distress.

These insights are an important source of intelligence about the mental health of students in any educational setting. For some HEPs, especially those with smaller student cohorts, it may be the preferred or primary route for identifying those at risk.

However, this approach assumes an understanding on behalf of these staff who interact with students daily of how mental distress may manifest and how to help, and an understanding of when to escalate concerns to more specialist forms of support. Some staff may see it as an additional task that is beyond their current remit; in the view of others, it may be beyond what either they are trained for or signed up to do.

Brief

- Reach a broad consensus on the responsibilities and boundaries of non-specialist staff with regard to student wellbeing and mental health;
- Formulate a competency framework that is sufficiently broad to be relevant to HEPs of all sizes and specialisms in the sector;
- Map existing training, development, and guidance materials against the competencies;

- Recommend closest fit or compose composite;
- Identify and seek to embed materials into relevant professional frameworks within the sector; and
- Suggest methods by which future research can refine the competency framework as it becomes available.

Outputs

- High-level competency framework
- Recommended training and resources
- Pathway to competencies being adopted into relevant professional frameworks within the sector

Proposed Timelines

February

- Agree the scope – 2 February
- Negotiate the eventual ownership of the outputs

March

- Update to Taskforce and feedback on direction of travel – 7 March
- Develop competency framework

April

- Paper to Taskforce for review of competency framework – 19 April
- Collate example tools and resources

Proposed Working Group

The project will be led by Jenny Shaw on behalf of the Taskforce secretariat and developed by a Working Group. Members of the Taskforce with specific expertise have already been invited to take part, but the Working Group remains open to other members.

We have also invited representation from:

- AMOSSHE
- Advance HE
- LEARN Network

- CUBO
- SEDA
- Plinth House
- UKAT
- Student Minds

The Working Group will benefit from a seconded L&D specialist who will develop the competency framework under the Group's guidance.