Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion in Higher Education

Prepared by the Universities UK/GuildHE Committee for the Promotion of Mental Well-being in Higher Education

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1. Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion in Higher Education

This document aims to be a source of guidance for senior managers in Higher Education in developing policies, procedures and activities promoting mental health. The main part of the document outlines some key principles and strategies. This guidance information has been developed by the UUK/GuildHE Committee for the Promotion of Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education, which is developing a range of resources to support institutional initiatives. Further details of the aims and activities of this committee were circulated to all UUK and GuildHE institutions in June 2006.

2. Promotion of Mental Health in H.E.

Effective mental health promotion involves not only attending to the needs of those with mental health difficulties, but also promoting the general mental wellbeing of all staff and students, which will in itself bring significant benefits to the HE institution. Improved general mental wellbeing will impact on institutional reputation, staff and student recruitment and retention, performance in general (1),(2),(3), and on community relations. There is increasing awareness that mental wellbeing can be promoted by attention to, for instance, organizational practices, the general environment, availability of support, lifestyle, attitudes and social inclusion. To be effective, mental health promotion must aim to change behaviour and attitudes, not just provide information (4). This document offers a framework for HE to guide the development of mental health promotional policies, procedures and initiatives. It does not set out to be comprehensive, and institutions may well find a need to address other issues not covered here.

Mental health promotion can be seen as involving:
(i) the establishment of an environment at all levels of the institution to promote mental wellbeing for all through local initiatives, and/or participating in national or international projects such as the Health Promoting University Project (5),
(ii) the promotion of the needs and wellbeing of those individuals experiencing mental health difficulties.

3. Developing Institutional Mental Health Promotion Policies

The list below provides examples of strategic actions and principles that can be helpful in developing an institutional mental health promotion policy.

- Initiate regular research and review of current provision
- Involve both senior staff who can influence strategic others and initiate action, and staff with particular relevant expertise.
- Involve and consult staff and students who have direct experience of the impact of mental health difficulties (cf. the DDA Code of Practice (6)).
- Have a clear statement of aims and outcomes with clear indications of how these will be achieved, measured and evaluated.
- Address, and seek to change where necessary, relevant institutional procedures and practices, including organizational structure.
- Address institutional and individual behaviour and not just the provision of information.
- Link to wider initiatives where possible such as the Health Promoting University Project(5).
- Establish a steering committee at senior level with working groups to implement actions and continuation strategies.
- Embed policies and procedures in institutional structure.
- Make provision for long-term planning, funding and evaluation.

The Committee has also issued a framework for the development of policies and procedures for the support and guidance of higher education students experiencing mental health difficulties (7).
4. Promoting Mental Wellbeing

The aims of mental health promotion and related activities at institutional level might include some of the following:

- Providing a supportive environment that promotes a sense of inclusion amongst members of the institution and the local community, and provides opportunities for social inclusion and interaction.
- Introducing structural changes to reduce unnecessary stressors and increase support for both staff and students (cf (staff): http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/)
- Providing transparency and co-ordination in the workings of the institution that impact on both staff and students.
- Providing clear and widely accessible information about the availability of resources and support
- Strengthening appropriate pastoral care and support services for students and staff
- Promoting a healthy lifestyle and reducing drink and drug abuse
- Creating a pleasant working environment and promoting appropriate interaction through the design and layout of the built environment
- Reviewing course and programme design to reduce unnecessary stress.

5. Mental Health Promotion regarding Students and Staff with Mental Health Difficulties

Additionally, the aims of health promotion strategies in respect of individuals experiencing mental health difficulties might include:

- Promoting awareness of the requirements of relevant legislation (for example, the Disability Discrimination Act^{(6)})
- Challenging any discrimination and stigma directed at those experiencing mental health difficulties, displayed by the institution, individuals and the local community^{(8-13)}
- Making reasonable adjustments to provision to prevent academic disadvantage for students with mental health difficulties, consistent with maintenance of academic standards. Where possible, such adjustments should be made in anticipation through reviews of course design, teaching methods and materials and assessments.
- Developing supportive but robust procedures that allow health-related breaks in study or work with assessment of readiness to return after such a break and facilitation of return to study or work.
- Offering intermediate qualifications at suitable points of a degree
- Promoting equality of opportunity for both staff and students with mental health difficulties in terms of admission and recruitment and academic and career progression
- Promoting and maintaining effective contact and cooperation between the institution and external helping agencies, including the NHS.
- Providing support for staff dealing with students with mental health difficulties
- Making available informed financial and careers counselling when appropriate.
6. Supporting Staff working with Students with Mental Health Difficulties

Staff, particularly those such as personal tutors, academic staff, residential staff, and all those involved in the administration and day-to-day running of the institution may need support and guidance for working with students who are experiencing mental health difficulties. This list covers many of the issues involved, but is not exhaustive. Some examples of possible resources and responses are provided below.

i) Responding to issues affecting student performance:
   i. Raising staff awareness of the stresses of academic life on all students and also on particular groups of students, such as international students
   ii. Raising staff awareness about mental health difficulties and their potential impact on study and other aspects of student life.
   iii. Providing guidance for staff on the design of courses, teaching methods and materials and assessment tasks that facilitate effective learning for all students, including those with mental health difficulties.

ii) Guidance for staff on appropriate responses to students with mental health difficulties might cover:
   i. How to respond to a declaration of disability/mental health and how to provide appropriate opportunities for disclosure
   ii. The implications of the DDA and the principle of reasonable adjustments, including an outline of both personal and institutional liability.
   iii. Sources of support and information for staff dealing with students with mental health difficulties
   iv. The importance of setting appropriate boundaries in staff/student interaction
   v. The importance of early intervention and referral, including sources of specialist help and funding.
   vi. How to identify students who may be experiencing mental health difficulties, including those who may be at risk of suicide.
   vii. Responding to a crisis, including appropriate referral routes
   viii. Supporting the peers of students with mental health difficulties where necessary.