

Strengthening provision for students with Mental Health Difficulties

SAS proposal for new posts

For a few years now, the complexities of nurturing student wellbeing and tackling mental health difficulties at university has required an increase in government funding¹, generated a considerable amount of scholarly articles² and attracted media attention.³ Mental health sits on a continuum and the difficulty for HEIs is to cater for the diverse support needs of all students at any given time in their studies, wherever they are placed on that continuum.

This required a linking up between academic and professional services and a holistic student support provision. Please find below the SAS proposal for strengthening the provision for students with mental health difficulties or mental health diagnoses.

Provision for students who have a declared mental health-related disability: the role of Specialist Mentors

A number of students come to the university with an existing mental health conditions or develop one in the course of their studies. When these mental health conditions have been diagnosed as a substantial and lasting impact on the student's day-to-day activities, they are considered as disabilities under the Equality Act and therefore require reasonable adjustments and extra support. This support is organised by the Disability Learning Support Team.

Below are the posts necessary to provide appropriate support for this student group. These roles already exists. We currently have 2 mentors, employed as consultants on a part-time hours within the Counselling Service. Changes in HMRC regulations means that we are unable to continue with the current model of provision. We propose that these be made University roles and be moved within the Disability Learning Support Team. Funding is already secured for these posts.

Their role is to provide specialist, specifically tailored one-to-one support which helps students address the barriers to learning created by their Mental Health Condition (i.e. anxiety-provoking tasks, dealing with concentration difficulties, time management, creating a suitable work-life balance, working around one's symptoms...). Specialist mentors are not working as counsellors with students although they may use therapeutic tools and approaches as

¹ <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2017/201707/>

² To take but one example: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0165032706002230?via%3Dihub>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/series/mental-health-a-university-crisis>

appropriate. Their role is to help students recognise the barriers to learning created by their condition and support them in developing strategies to address these barriers, particularly at times of transition (starting university, dealing with final year dissertation, planning for post-degree life...). For some students this support will be ongoing whilst for others it may be gradually phased out or only required at certain points in the course.

We would like to increase the team of mentors to 4 FTE posts, supported by a coordinator:

- 2 FTE mentors (NG6) – permanent roles, funded by the student's individual Disabled Students' Allowance (funding already available).
- 2FTE mentors (NG6) – fixed term roles (2 years), funded by QHT projects "Widening Access to Mentoring to Students who are not in receipt of the DSA" (funding secured for the duration of the project).
- 0.6 FTE Mentoring coordinator NG3 – permanent: the main difficulty with this student group is sustained engagement with the support. The coordinator's role would be to ensure that most of the students who have been recommended mentoring are seen. The coordinator would also be involved in the yearly DSA audit for accreditation of the service (this post would also be funded out of the DSA funding stream)

Provision for support for students with moderate to severe and/or enduring mental health difficulties to support them effectively during their time at University.

At present, there is no officer dedicated to systematically identify and help students with moderate to severe mental health difficulties who may need ongoing support; who are in crisis; whose mental health difficulty is not yet diagnosed and are not linked into appropriate internal or external support; or whose wellbeing is deteriorating quickly. We have started to address this with the creation of the Student of Concern Group who meets to discuss the support to be put in place for the students we know about but we believe we need somebody whose sole role is to take a more proactive approach and who can act as a point of initial referral.

This officer would sit within the Counselling Service and their tasks could include:

- Manage a caseload of students enduring mental health difficulties (often working closely with DLS, who would organise reasonable adjustments and mentoring support)
- Provide flexible support including outreach work and flexible working hours as needed, particularly in crisis situations
- Act as care coordinator including when a student's health is significantly impacting on their ability to study e.g. interruption of study
- Respond to complex situations/incidents where mental health may be a contributing factor
- See to the appropriate use of the Fitness to Study Policy
- Provide expert input to the Student of Concern Group
- Help to identify early warnings signs of relapse , and work with staff to supporting students appropriately
- Work with students with declared mental health conditions prior to commencement of their studies to assess and co-ordinate support (often working closely with DLS, who would organise reasonable adjustments and mentoring support)
- Work with students and staff regarding planning for a student's return to study after a period of interruption.
- Assess risk of suicide and self-harm and ensure students access support as needed.
- Develop and maintain links with community mental health teams and agencies such as the NHS, social services.

We propose 2 FTE Mental Health Advisors (within the Counselling Service), permanent posts on NG7.

These 7 posts have the potential to revolutionise wellbeing and mental health support at the University and lead to better progression and attainment rate as well as an improved student experience.