

Briefing: Ministerial Announcement of a Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce to oversee package of new measures

On 5 June 2023, the Rt Hon Robert Halfon, Minister of State for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, responded to a debate in Westminster Hall calling for the creation of a statutory duty of care on universities. He did not support this proposal. Instead, he outlined a package of initiatives aimed at improving mental health and suicide prevention across higher education institutions.

In this briefing, I detail as Higher Education Student Support Champion the four key measures that were announced by the Minister, including the role that the new Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce will play.

1. Mental Health Implementation Taskforce

I will chair the new Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce (HEMHIT) which is accountable to the Minister. It comprises bereaved parents, students, mental health experts, related charities, and representatives from further and higher education and health sectors. Professor Steve West, University of West of England V-C, represents UUK.

HEMHIT's role will be to oversee the development and delivery of the measures announced by the Minister. It will publish a report in May 2024 outlining progress in the four areas outlined below. By December 2023, it will produce for the Minister a broader plan for further improvement of mental health support; details of engagement with the sector on this task will follow later in the summer.

I know how seriously HEIs take student mental health. I am approaching the Taskforce in the spirit of helping us all harness and build upon the good practice already in existence across the sector.

2. New Measures

Adoption of Good Practice and the Mental Health Charter

In recent years, significant research, evidence, and specialist input have informed the development of good practice on student mental health and wellbeing. However, adoption of such good practice is optional and not always implemented consistently by HEIs.

Following the debate, the Minister wrote to all universities asking them to sign up to the University Mental Health Charter Programme, administered by Student Minds, by September 2024. The window to sign-up has just opened and runs until August 16th, I encourage all UUK members to do so immediately and make use of the support and advice that Student Minds has available to you in developing you enhance your mental health support for students.

Student Minds is considering the most effective way of moving HEIs from sign up into and through the Mental Health Charter award process. Alongside this discussion, the Taskforce will consider the ways in which Further Education Colleges and specialist and independent HEIs are able to adopt – and demonstrate adoption of – appropriate good practice

Student Suicide Reviews

Each student death is a tragic loss. Where suicide is a possible cause, UUK guidance is explicit that HEIs should review how that student interacted with the institution. This review should evaluate whether changes to policies, procedures, or processes should be made that may reduce future

suicides. They should engage families in these reviews as and when they feel able to participate. Advice on conducting these reviews – and collaborating with the coronial process – is contained in the recent UUK guidance on suicide postvention². I trust that you are implementing this guidance.

There is potentially huge benefit in HEIs learning the collective lessons from these reviews. To this end, the Minister has announced the commissioning of an independent organisation to conduct a national analysis of these local reviews of student suicides. HEIs will be expected to submit their reviews as part of this initiative. This will enable the annual publication of an anonymous meta-analysis of student suicides, focusing on lessons learnt and areas for improvement. We will seek views on methods for and the safeguards around these submissions in collaboration with the selected provider.

University Student Commitment

Many HEIs are reviewing their internal procedures (for example, academic misconduct, fitness to study, and disciplinary processes, or communication of assignment results). They want to ensure they give sufficient consideration to students' mental health and wellbeing and do not exacerbate unnecessarily any personal challenges they may be facing.

To support this, the Minister has announced the development of a University Student Commitment that will embed these compassionate communications within the sector. This Commitment will be drafted with input from a range of perspectives and will include case studies of emerging good practice drawn from HEIs already engaged in rewriting their materials. I am planning a session in October to share and discuss these examples with members of the UUK Student Policy Network. I am exploring also the embedding of the University Student Commitment into the Office of the Independent Adjudicator's Good Practice Framework¹. This will strengthen the ability of students to seek redress if they believe that their HEI has not followed good practice.

Student Analytics

Student analytics are providing HEIs with valuable insights on how students are experiencing their higher education journey. Recent innovations are highlighting the role that analytics might play in identifying students who may be struggling with their mental health and wellbeing.

I urge all HEIs to consider their institutional readiness to adopt student analytics. My recent briefing note with Jisc provides a starting point for HEIs wishing to consider how they can begin to embed student analytics starting with relatively few data points².

3. Closing remarks

I believe these measures reflect a proportionate, robust, and effective response to the concerns articulated by those who propose a statutory duty of care for universities. They will assist HEIs in making the enhancements that we all want to see. I will update the sector regularly on progress on the actions outlined above, as I have done on all my work over the past twelve months.

I hope the gravity of this issue will urge you to support this agenda actively. The Minister has been clear that if the response by HEIs is not satisfactory, the merits of a new registration condition on mental health may be considered by the Office for Students. If you watched the debate in Westminster Hall, you will have seen the cross-party support for action by HEIs that may reduce the number of student suicides. This issue is not going – and should not go – away.

If you would like to follow my work but have not yet communicated with my team a named contact in your institution who we can contact, please email me at HESSC@ntu.ac.uk. There will be regular updates on my website: [add link].

¹ [OIA Good Practice Framework](#)

² [Briefing – Core Specification for Student Analytics – Edward Peck & Jisc](#)