Communication to English members to encourage strong engagement with NHS Sustainability and Transformation Plans [STPs] on student mental health

UUK’s Mental Health in Higher Education programme urges our members to work with staff, students and families to adopt mental health as a strategic priority via a whole university approach\(^1\) to mental health.

An immediate priority is to influence the English NHS, via its new Sustainability and Transformation Plans [STPs], to take account of the mental health needs of students.

This forms part of a wider strand of work in partnership with the NUS, the Royal College of Psychiatrists, the Student Health Association and others to encourage the NHS to work with universities and students to commission and deliver mental health services for university populations (students & staff).

STPs bring together NHS and local councils in 44 areas covering England only to develop proposals to make improvements and/or efficiencies to health and care. These proposals are place-based and built around the needs of the local population. More detail is available here. Strategic plans are now signed off at national level and entering a local phase translating agreed intent into action plans. All the plans including their footprint leads can be viewed here.

UUK strongly suggests that members engage with this phase of planning to emphasise how important it is that STP teams take account of HE student and staff health especially mental health in their footprints. In this recommended local engagement between member universities and STP teams, we suggest the following context, partnerships and lines of content. These will need to be adapted to your particular institutional setting.

As well as contacting the STP lead on this issue, you may also wish to bring it to the attention of the local CCG Mental Health Steering Group and the CEO[s] of your local Mental Health Trust[s]. Many of you will already be engaging with your local STP on, for example, workforce and the training of health professionals or on health research and innovation; it will of course be worth noting this existing relationship.

This is a significant national cohort. 50% of school leavers go to university and the majority live away from home; across England in 2015-16 there were 1.9 million students and 340,000 staff. We suggest that you provide your own

\[^1\] The whole university approach will offer a strategic framework for institutions:
1. to provide timely access to appropriate support and if necessary treatment for those students in mental distress, at risk of harm or becoming mentally unwell.
2. to make wellbeing and good mental health central to their offer – to their performance in student experience and retention, in learning and teaching, in research, in organisational effectiveness and efficiency as well as their commitment to access and widening participation.
local numbers of students and staff, including any additional available detail of
declared mental illness, numbers of students from disadvantaged
together with any other relevant factors.

We also suggest that you may want to involve your Student Union as
partner in this approach. The NUS is encouraging SUs to take part.

Students, especially those from the 18-25yrs age group, from disadvantaged
backgrounds and those living away from their family home, may have
particular vulnerabilities to mental health issues and a significant burden of
illness. STPs will want to commission services that answer the mental health
needs of this population: in particular, anxiety & depression, eating disorders
and substance misuse.

This is a policy priority. PM May’s speech on 9 January indicated children and
young people’s mental health as a particular interest of this government with a
green paper due later this year. The role of education will be an important
aspect of this.

Universities already invest in services to support their students and staff as
well as interventions to combat stigma and encourage early disclosure of
mental distress. We know from HEFCE’s research, that demand for student
support services is increasing rapidly. It is likely that with increasing numbers
comes increasing complexity.

It is important that, in their planning, STP teams take account of and support
effective links and referral between university provided and statutory services,
both primary and secondary care. Providing timely access to appropriate
services reduces barriers to treatment and care, which impacts on the
outcome of mental health disorders, harm reduction and suicide risk. It also
reduces emergency attendances and underpins good quality of care.

We suggest that you provide some indication of your own support
services and wider interventions for wellbeing. In this it will be helpful to
describe how university and local statutory services work together.

Please don’t hesitate to contact me for clarification or discussion: John de
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