

Suicide-safer universities: support for placement students



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Introduction

Placements are an essential part of many university degrees and are core to students' learning, self-development, confidence and graduate careers. If universities support placement students to have good mental health and wellbeing, these students will be better prepared to fully participate and succeed on their placement and in their wider studies.

Placements can involve significant change for students, including new settings, new challenges, new colleagues and additional costs. There is inherent risk that this transition negatively affects students' wellbeing and mental health, including their ability to access support.

It's important that universities work with placement providers to:

- quality assure placements in terms of their effect on mental health and wellbeing
- develop and put in place preventative measures to support placement students
- implement timely and effective interventions when there are concerns for a students' wellbeing or welfare

We've developed this checklist from a roundtable discussion chaired by Professor Brian Webster-Henderson, Deputy Vice Chancellor at the University of Cumbria to explore what universities can do, in partnership with placement providers, to better support students in difficulty with their mental health.

We've also worked closely with Isabella De George, who campaigns for [Positive Changes in Placement](#), following the tragic death by suicide in 2020 of her brother Harrison while he was on a teaching placement.

This checklist builds on the approach set out in the UUK–Papyrus [Suicide safer universities](#) guidance. It also includes case studies of good practice across health care, teaching and industry placements.

Universities should use this checklist to inform their approach to supporting students' mental health and wellbeing before, during and after they return from placements. Individual universities may use it as a framework for to adapt to their own institutional settings and contexts. Our guidance applies to higher education placements across health care, teaching and industry that are based within the UK.



Preparing students for placements

Starting a placement can be a significant transition for students, similar to starting a new job.

As well as the practical learning and development challenges, for many students it will also be their first experience of joining a professional workplace and may be a different cultural environment.

Students may often be required move to different accommodation for the duration of the placement into a local area that they are not familiar with. This may distance them from formal and informal networks of support.

Our recommendations

Before students begin their placement, universities should:

Quality assure placements and placement providers in terms of their effect on mental health and wellbeing

This means making sure that universities and placement providers have properly considered wellbeing as well as learning outcomes and that placement settings have cultures that support disclosure and provide clear routes for support.

Normalise conversations around student and employee wellbeing

Working with placement providers, universities should clarify roles and responsibilities for supporting placement student wellbeing, raising awareness of signs of concern and what to do in response.

Universities should also ensure that wellbeing literacy and the quality of student support is consistent, especially for large organisations that take on multiple students.

Ensure placement setting and location are appropriate for each individual

This includes considering personal factors, such as:

- parenting or caring responsibilities
- accessibility to personal support networks
- part-time employment commitments
- protected characteristics
- any other relevant characteristics

Set expectations for students about what their placement will be like

This should include providing a structure or schedule of their first week, with input from the placement provider.

Embed wellbeing in pre-placement briefings, training, and resources

This should include techniques for maintaining a good work-life balance and self-care.

Training activities should be tailored to students' placement settings. For example, healthcare and medicine students may need additional preparation due to the potential for exposure to upsetting or traumatic situations.

Arrange additional individualised support or adjustments that should be in place for students

This should include support for disabled students, those with mental health conditions, or student parents or carers.

Universities should ensure there are multiple opportunities for placement students to share if they have a disability or mental health condition. They should encourage disabled students to disclose their disability to the placement provider and work with students, the university disability service and the placement provider to ensure the placement is fully accessible.

Set out clear routes of contact for placement students with pastoral- and employment-related issues

Universities should also consider any other appropriate contacts for disabled students or those with mental health problems.

Placement handbooks and resources should include signposting to university support services and explicitly state that these are still available to students while they are on placement.

Create peer support networks and communities

Students may feel disconnected from university friends who are not on placements. Universities should encourage and facilitate connections and networks between placement students before they begin their placement can create a supportive environment for individuals in similar circumstances.



Supporting students while on placement

Many of the factors that we know affect students' mental health and wellbeing while they study will still play a part in students' lives while they are on placement, including managing finances, relationships, loneliness, homesickness and juggling multiple responsibilities.

It's therefore vital that students maintain a connection to their university while they are on placement and continue to see themselves as part of their university community.

Our recommendations

While students are on placement, universities should:

Implement a clear check-in and support structure with a key university contact

This contact could be a personal tutor or placement supervisor and a mentor within the placement setting.

Continuity of contact is important. Universities should provide placement students with scheduled check-ins as well as the option for contact outside of these check-ins where necessary. The placement mentor should also have a clear line of communication with the university and placement supervisor.

Implement clear absence reporting processes for students and placement providers

This should include an escalation process in the event of unexplained or unnotified absence to flag concerns for a students' welfare.

Advertise hardship funding

Universities should advertise hardship funding to support students with specific financial needs while on placement. This will help alleviate concerns about travel costs to their placement.

Reaffirm students' ability to access central university support services throughout their placement

Support services available to placement students will include advice and counselling.



Supporting students on different types of placements

Students on different types of placements may need specific support to promote and maintain good mental health and wellbeing.

Our recommendations

Universities should:

Make sure students understand fitness to practise procedures

Universities should work closely with professional regulators, university teaching staff and placement providers to do this. This will address common misconceptions around fitness to practise related to disclosure of mental health problems in the workplace.

Clear support for the mental health and wellbeing of students involved in fitness to practise processes is essential. It's also important for universities to consider reasonable adjustments for students upon their return from their placement to support their mental health and wellbeing.

Make sure that health and care placement supervisors have enough time to support placement students

This includes having mitigating measures in place where workload or clinical demand may affect student support.

Use published data on quality of placements

Data from, for example, [Health Education England](#) and [The National Education and Training Survey](#) can guide improvements in quality.

Make sure that mentors have enough time and are trained to support students

For example, issues like pupil behaviour and discipline are likely to be of particular concern to students on teacher training placements, causing additional anxiety. Mentors need time and training to be able to provide students with tools to deal with poor behaviour.



Supporting students returning to academic study

The transition back into on-campus study after a placement will be a positive experience for many students as they rejoin friends, the local and university communities and familiar settings.

However, it's important that universities provide support to help students adapt and settle back into university life.

Our recommendations

As students return to their studies after a placement, universities should:

Implement check-ins to ask students how they are settling back into university life

Specific check-ins may be beneficial for disabled students, student parents, care experienced or estranged students to ensure any support they had in place before their placement is continuing, or if their circumstances or needs have changed since returning.

Offer academic study skills refresher workshops

Offering or signposting students to workshops or similar support can ensure students feel confident in returning to academic study.

Encourage placement students to keep in touch with one another

This should include continuing any established peer networks. Some sandwich placement students, for example, may return to their studies with a different group of peers on their course.

Case studies

How are universities across the UK already supporting placement students?

University of South Wales

Work placements and practice-based learning are a key part of student life at the University of South Wales (USW), with most students having the opportunity to complete a placement either as part of or alongside their studies.

To get the most out of their experience, students need to be well prepared and in a good place to be able to engage effectively with their placement. This is why during the Covid-19 lockdown USW's placement team developed a suite of guides and learning resources to support students throughout the process.

Alongside developing these resources, USW also developed a placement wellbeing guide. The university took advice from Isabella De George and the university's Student Wellbeing Team. As well as giving some tips and advice for students to maintain their wellbeing whilst on placement, it reminds students that they are still a student whilst on placement and can make use of the university's services and support networks.

The university is now revising its employer guidance to include information on wellbeing for employers hosting work placements, which will include information on supporting students and also remind employers to contact the university should they have any concerns.

During this academic year, USW has been running a voluntary project funded through the Higher Education Funding Council Wales (HEFCW). It aims to support students to gain valuable work experience, but it has also encouraged more students to start volunteering to support their wellbeing.

For more information, please contact Matthew Evans, Careers Team Manager at USW.

Brunel University London

Brunel University London is introducing wellbeing into the placement curriculum in the coming year so that students on placement are aware of the support available to them during their search, as well as while out on placement.

The university has made its policies and procedures clearer so that both employers and students are aware of the support available to them.

Brunel has also updated its absence reporting procedure with the help of Isabella De George so that employers are aware of what needs to be done if a student takes any unauthorised leave. The university has also tried to improve the information offered to students during transition periods, such as before a student looks for a placement, before they begin, and when they return from their placement.

For further information, please contact Mohamed Rahman, Deputy Director (Placements) at Brunel University London.

University of Reading

The University of Reading provides a range of resources and interventions to provide a framework of support for the mental health and wellbeing of its students throughout the placement experience.

Reading's placement agreements request that placement providers inform the university immediately of any unauthorised absences. The agreements for initial teacher trainees also contain an additional clause addressing the expectations for:

- carefully managing placement workload
- providing clear communication channels
- ensuring there is mental health and wellbeing support for each trainee during each placement period

It also makes clear that the university should be contacted immediately if there are any causes for concern over a student's mental health or wellbeing so that the student can be appropriately supported.

Each student is provided with a placement care card before they begin their placement. This provides them with details of the university support services and their named point of contact, should they require assistance at any time during their placement. They also receive a placement handbook with comprehensive information dedicated to supporting their mental health and wellbeing.

All professional placement year students are offered a place at a pre-placement preparatory workshop, which addresses transitions to the workplace and focuses on mental health and wellbeing strategies, and where students can receive support. The university incorporates action learning sets into these workshops so that students can work through simulated scenarios, including some related to their wellbeing on placement, and receive peer and staff support to find suitable solutions.

Placement students can access the university's student welfare team at any point during their placement for remote appointments if they are away, or in person if they are local or able to travel to campus. Students are always provided with a key point of contact for continuity of support.

The university runs events for students who undertake their placements locally to help them combat loneliness and regular online group meet ups for those who are further away.

The university also provides financial support for low-income students who struggle with funding placement costs that they would not ordinarily need to pay.

For further information, please contact Emma Sowden, Head of Placements at the University of Reading.

University of Wolverhampton

PACE is a co-explored and co-created solution to address the mental health difficulties of students who undertake placement learning. The project is a collaboration between:

- University of Wolverhampton
- University of Wolverhampton Students' Union
- Black Country Partnership NHS Trust's Recovery College

It aims to develop, test and deliver an innovative online suite of tools to support students in managing their own mental health.

The two-year project focuses on three groups of students studying nursing, primary education, and engineering degree courses.

The University of Wolverhampton's priority is to look at intersectional considerations based on the profile of the students in its target groups to tailor provision accordingly. Beyond the project, the university will adapt and roll out the tool to other courses and providers. This will create a sustainable resource available across the university and the wider higher education sector.

The project enhances and builds on the university's existing provision for supporting student mental health. The university recognises that students taking part in placement-based learning may experience barriers to support, and this initiative seeks to understand and address some of these barriers at their source.

For further information, please contact [Clare Dickens](#), Mental Health and Wellbeing Academic Lead at the University of Wolverhampton.

Resources

ASET, the Work based and Placement Learning Association (2016), [Good practice guide for supporting students with disabilities on placement](#)

General Medical Council (2015), [Supporting medical students with mental health conditions](#)

Health Education England, [The National Education and Training Survey \(NETS\)](#)

National Education Union, [NQT pocket guide](#)

Health Education England, Supporting AHP (allied health professional) student health and wellbeing [soon to be published]

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Our mission is to create the conditions for UK universities to be the best in the world; maximising their positive impact locally, nationally and globally.

Universities UK acts on behalf of universities, represented by their heads of institution.

Suicide is the biggest killer of young people in the UK. PAPYRUS aims to reduce the number of young people who take their own lives by breaking down the stigma around suicide and equipping people with the skills to recognise and respond to suicidal behaviour.

HOPELINEUK is the charity's confidential helpline service providing practical advice and support to young people with thoughts of suicide and anyone concerned about a young person who may have thoughts of suicide. HOPELINEUK is staffed by trained professionals, offering a telephone, text and email service. For practical, confidential suicide prevention help and advice please contact PAPYRUS HOPELINEUK on 0800 068 4141, text 07860 039967 or email pat@papyrus-uk.org.

Woburn House
20 Tavistock Square
London, WC1H 9HQ

☎ +44 (0)20 7419 4111
✉ info@universitiesuk.ac.uk
🌐 universitiesuk.ac.uk
🐦 [@UniversitiesUK](https://twitter.com/UniversitiesUK)



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