

Working together to support student wellbeing

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The transition to higher education (HE) is a significant milestone in a student's life, often accompanied by the challenge of moving away from home. This period of change, while exciting, can also be fraught with stress, anxiety, and other mental health issues.

Following the Abrahart v University of Bristol decision, universities are increasingly aware of their obligations to identify students' mental health needs and to provide appropriate support, and early intervention and support can be critical in ensuring successful support of students.

Collaboration with healthcare providers

However, in practice, there are limits on the nature and level of support which can be offered by a university, when often professional health support is needed. Recognising this, the collaboration between primary healthcare providers and HE institutions has become increasingly important.

Getting this partnership right will support students' mental and physical well-being, ensuring they have the necessary resources to thrive both academically and personally.

Last year, the Office for Students (OfS) reported on insights drawn from a 10-month action learning set project looking at the challenges faced in joining up health and HE efforts to support student mental health.

It identified five separate, but clearly linked common challenges:

1. Clarifying roles and responsibilities
2. Improving communication and information sharing
3. Addressing the diverse needs of today's students
4. Resources and support
5. Lack of strategic-level approach to collaboration

Clarifying roles and responsibilities

Whilst there is currently no clear government guidance on the extent of HE providers' responsibilities compared to those of other bodies, it's key to focus on working together with maximise opportunities for collaboration and minimise duplication of efforts. Campus wide health campaigns, in conjunction with local primary healthcare providers; use of digital platforms and orientation to signpost appropriate services can demystify healthcare services for students who are living independently for the first time, in new towns and cities, and encourage them to seek help from the correct source when needed.

Improving communication and information sharing

Appropriate, effective and timely information sharing between NHS bodies and higher education providers is critical to the success of collaboration. We have supported clients in preparing appropriate and enabling data sharing protocols to ensure that data can be shared safely to achieve best outcomes.

Addressing the diverse needs of today's students

Universities are in an unparalleled position to have meaningful insight into young people’s wellbeing wishes and needs. Whilst specific information sharing is sometimes necessary, sharing more general information and themes, such as common stressors for student populations, and feedback from students, can also be very effective ways of ensuring that healthcare providers target their resources to the requirements of young people at university.

Resources and support

Some HE providers have seen the benefit of co-funding a shared service between universities and health trusts (the Manchester Model). Whether collaboration is taken this far or not, it is clear that working together to identify opportunities for sharing resources can be effective e.g. with student mentors or mental health first aiders at universities being used for initial low level support. We provide universities with bespoke workshops and training on how to best support disabled students, particularly with mental health related disabilities.

Lack of strategic-level approach to collaboration

Addressing this final challenge would likely unlock a number of the first four challenges. Collaboration with local partners, be they healthcare providers, local authorities or partners in the private sector can result in cost and resource savings as well as maximising the support made available to students.

Through our work supporting a large number of NHS and local authority clients on their integrated care systems, we can advise on how to best achieve valuable outcomes when working together with external partners.

If you would like to discuss any of the themes identified above, please get in touch with our team below.

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Related expertise

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