

Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce

Roundtable Summary: Different Approaches to Identifying Students at Risk of Poor Wellbeing or Mental Health

Chair: Edward Peck, HE Student Support Champion

Date/time: 25 October 2023, 14:30-16:30

Agenda:

Item	Topic	Lead
1	Welcome and introduction	Edward Peck
2	Approach 1: Staff competence and responsibilities	Ben Knocks (Weston College)
3	Approach 2: Pre-enrolment questionnaires	Simon Phillips (UWE)
4	Approach 3: Data analytics	Peter Francis (BCU)
5	Approach 4: Applicant questions and references	Ben Jordan (UCAS)
6	Summary and close	Edward Peck

Welcome and introduction

- Edward Peck began the session by outlining the work of the Taskforce and the motivations behind convening a roundtable to discuss four approaches to identifying students who may be at-risk from poor wellbeing and mental health.

Approach One: Staff Competence and Responsibilities

- Ben Knocks gave an overview of the tiered CPD approach at Weston College, where student support colleagues receive specialist training, whilst non-specialist colleagues receive (or can access) universal training in mental and emotional health. Ben outlined the positive impact of these measures, including more colleagues being able to proactively identify and support students who are struggling. This supported the College to reduce the number of referrals to the mental health intervention team.
- The challenges of how to frame the role, expectations and boundaries of non-specialist staff were raised, as was the need to ensure training is role-appropriate for the type and level of intervention that non-specialist staff are expected to initiate.

- A number of attendees commented that often a friendly and supportive conversation is all that is needed, and therefore staff training should be framed around empowering colleagues to be confident in delivering this, rather than being expected to have clinical knowledge.
- Ensuring staff development is jointly driven by both student services and HR was raised.
- On the topic of Mental Health First Aid (MHFA), it was noted that there is little evidence to suggest that it improves mental health outcomes, although it may support in raising general mental health awareness.

Approach Two: Pre-enrolment Questionnaires

- Simon Phillips gave an overview of the approach to pre-enrolment surveys at the University of the West of England (UWE), which are targeted at applicants who make a UCAS or direct-entry disclosure. These surveys are designed to elicit information about an applicant's fact of behaviour (e.g., previous self-harm or suicide attempts) or interactions with statutory services, rather than their formal diagnosis. These are triaged following completion and enable UWE to put in place proactive reasonable adjustments. Applicants are also encouraged to complete impact statements, which are shared with their course teams to enable greater understanding of potential challenges to their learning and engagement. A number of enhanced pre-entry meetings are also initiated following completion of pre-enrolment surveys, which provide an opportunity for applicants and their families to collaborate with the University to develop an effective and personalised action/safety plan.
- The comparative merits of targeting surveys at those applicants who have disclosed via UCAS vs sharing them with all applicants was raised. It was also noted that many applicants are reluctant to disclose via UCAS, and many applicants do not enter HE via UCAS either.
- Attendees recognised the value of UWE's approach in beginning supportive conversations with applicants and their families early, and setting clear expectations about the support that is available.

Approach Three: Data Analytics

- Peter Francis gave an overview of the innovative mental health analytics project that was completed at Northumbria University through the OfS Mental Health Challenge Competition. Peter provided an overview of the data needed to build the analytical model as well as the nudge mechanic, which utilises the predictive model to connect students with support that is appropriate to their current level of need/risk. The impact of implementing this system at Northumbria included greater identification of students most in-need of support, increased understanding of mental health and the student journey, and an increase in referrals to support (although there was promotion of less resource-intensive services such as online self-help).

- A common challenge raised by attendees was how to improve institutional data governance and maturity to enable devolved systems to deliver these insights.
- It was also recognised that the implementation of analytics has more profound impact on the need for student support redesign.

Approach Four: UCAS Applications

- Ben Jordan outlined the work at UCAS to reform their application service to encourage applicants to disclose a mental health challenge or disability. Particular challenges and barriers to disclosure were discussed, including applicants' concerns about how a disclosure may influence their application. Potential strategies to increase disclosures were also outlined, such as centralising the approach to pre-enrolment surveys and better joined-up communications.
- Ensuring applicants have the confidence to disclose through UCAS was raised by multiple attendees. In particular, ensuring Schools, FECs, advisors and families are aware of the benefits of disclosing was highlighted.
- A broader issue of how we ensure HEPs are utilising UCAS data and insight more effectively was raised.
- Attendees also noted that not all students enter HE via UCAS, and so thought should also be given to how we encourage and support disclosures from these groups of students.

Summary and Close

- Edward Peck closed the discussion by suggesting that each HEP must think carefully about which approaches they adopt to suit their specific needs and characteristics.
- Attendees were encouraged to share any thoughts or suggestions on these four approaches with the HE Student Support Champion team, so that they can inform ongoing discussions in the HE Mental Health Taskforce.