

## **February 2024 update from Professor Edward Peck, Higher Education Student Support Champion**

Dear Colleagues,

Welcome to the termly update on progress in my work as Higher Education Student Support Champion and Chair of the Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce. It also sets out my immediate future priorities.

### Mental Health Taskforce

The Department for Education has published the first report of the Taskforce to the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education. I am grateful to all Taskforce members for their commitment and contribution to date. The Taskforce's work is structured around five key strands which I summarise briefly below.

Firstly, the adoption of good practice. The focus has been the pursuit of practical methods of ensuring every HE student is covered by a framework that aligns with the University Mental Health Charter. Student Minds is conducting a light-touch review of its charter, in particular its awards process. Providers not eligible for that process, including FE Colleges and private institutions, have committed to developing their approaches. We will be looking also at how HEPs create and review their plans to improve the mental health and wellbeing of their students.

The second strand considers three ways of identifying students who may be struggling with poor mental health:

- Improving the awareness and confidence of non-specialist colleagues in spotting signs of mental distress and responding appropriately;
- Promoting further the adoption of data analytics which help identify students with declining engagement and wellbeing; and
- Considering with UCAS what additional information might be gathered during the application process.

The next strand – the Student Commitment – will develop guidance, good practice, and worked examples of embedding compassion and sensitivity into HEPs' policies, procedures, and communications. This will be a valuable tool for students, HEPs, and the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA). We are looking for good practice examples of where HEPs have revised policies and procedures and/or changed the content of and context for their communication.

The fourth strand is the National Review of HEPs' internal reports on the circumstances surrounding student suicides and attempted suicides. The Minister has recently announced that the National Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Safety in Mental Health (NCISH) will undertake this review. HEPs are invited to submit their local

investigations to NCISH on a confidential basis. It will provide HEPs with individual feedback and publish an overview of its findings next year.

The fifth strand is built on a wider consultation with the sector through which three additional areas of work have been identified. The first two concern the relationship between HEPs and NHS primary care and secondary care mental health services. The third will explore ways in which HEPs can implement case management systems for students who are the cause of specific concerns.

In his positive response to this first report, the Minister has articulated further areas he would like explored; these include prevention, resilience, and information sharing between schools, colleges and HEPs. These will be picked up either in the strands outlined above or through my broader activities as Student Support Champion.

### Transition to higher education

Moving on to my Student Support Champion role, in August and September 2023 I hosted three roundtables in partnership with Unite Students: the first looking at the experience of schools and colleges of the changing support needs of students; the second exploring how best to share information between schools, colleges and HEPs; and the third on the transition activities implemented by HEPs in response to these needs.

I will publish the findings from these roundtables shortly, in collaboration with Unite Students. This will demonstrate the care and creativity that providers are bringing to the design and delivery of pre-induction, welcome and induction, typically in co-production with their students.

Another theme which has emerged are the potential benefits of a 'student passport', perhaps linked to a 'single student identifier'. This would contain details about students' academic progress, their support needs, and their interactions with services. They would take it with them as they move between secondary and tertiary educational institutions. I propose to examine questions around consent and confidentiality, as well as about the possible platforms, which arise from going down this route.

### Student support service redesign

In October I published the Student Needs Framework with AdvanceHE. We are looking for more case studies from HEPs illustrating uses of the Framework in practice. If you would like to contribute to this work, I would encourage you and your colleagues to engage with the AdvanceHE Connect online community.

AdvanceHE and I will soon begin the next phase of the development of this Framework. This will develop a toolkit to assist HEPs to redesign their student support structures to make them more effective and efficient.