

September 2024 update from Professor Edward Peck, Higher Education Student Support Champion

Dear Colleagues,

I am delighted that the Secretary of State for Education has asked me to continue in my role as the Higher Education Student Support Champion and Chair of the Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce and to maintain my established priorities.

You will recall that the Department for Education published the first report of the Taskforce in January 2024. A second report will be published during the autumn term, outlining progress and timescales for future outputs. Here is a summary of the key strands.

The first priority continues to be ensuring good practice is adopted by HEPs to enable and assure effective mental health support. The Taskforce has championed the principle that all HE students should be covered by a charter that aligns with the University Mental Health Charter (UMHC). More HEPs have now signed up to the UMHCh. The Taskforce continues to work with IndependentHE (IHE) and GuildHE to explore appropriate charter mechanisms for small and specialist providers.

The second strand is establishing ways that HEPs can identify and support students who may be vulnerable to declining mental health when they do not self-disclose. This area has been given added importance following the publication of the revised EHRC advice note for HEPs on the requirements of the Equality Act. The Taskforce has three forthcoming outputs that will support progress in this area:

- Publication of a training framework to support non-specialist staff to develop the knowledge and skills to identify and respond to students exhibiting mental distress.
- Convening of a roundtable to explore the opportunities and barriers around use of data and analytics by HEPS to identify and support students with poor mental health.
- Development of guidance for implementing case management systems which enable effective information sharing and coordinated support within HEPs.

The third priority is embedding within HEPs student-facing policies and procedures that are inclusive and compassionate so as to prevent unnecessary exacerbation of students' personal challenges. This will be outlined and exemplified in a Compassionate Communication document which will be published this autumn under the auspices of Academic Registrars' Council (ARC). It will augment the framework used by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA).

The fourth area has seen the National Confidential Inquiry appointed to complete a national review of HEPs' suicide reviews, alongside evidence submitted by families and loved ones of students who have taken their own lives. A report identifying common themes and key lessons will be published in spring 2025.

The final priority is improving the relationship between HEPs and the NHS. The focus here is on creating formal partnerships to ensure students with serious mental illness receive effective treatment. The Taskforce has reviewed existing collaborative models and with NHS England will seek to understand and disseminate how they could be implemented by HEPs in partnership with local NHS partners.

My broader work on student support produced in May 2024 a report with Unite Students on transition into higher education. The report is derived from the roundtables I held in summer 2023 and research conducted by Unite Students.

I am pursuing exploration of a method for achieving strategic student support redesign within institutions. An advisory group will meet shortly to build on the ideas outlined in the Student Needs Framework I produced with AdvanceHE last year. This will advise me on the evidence and experience that suggests those interventions best suited to meeting the needs of students in the Framework. This will help develop resources to enable HEPs to redesign their student support structures to make them more effective and efficient. If your institution has used the Framework or is transforming student support in other ways, please let me know.

I will soon publish guidance, in collaboration with the National Union of Students (NUS) and AdviceUK, on information sharing between HEPs and Students' Unions (SU) where there are concerns for students' wellbeing. I am currently looking for case studies, so if your local relationship between HEP and SU is achieving this, again please get in touch.

Finally, since August 2023 I have Chaired the Restricting Access to Means Reference Group. The group was convened to develop guidance to reduce the risk of student suicide and to restrict access to means of suicide in higher education. The guidance will be launched in early Autumn and hosted by AMOSSHE.