

A framework for the development of policies and procedures for the support and guidance of higher education students experiencing mental health difficulties

Introduction

This document has been produced by the *UUK/SCOP Working Group for the Promotion of Mental Well-being in Higher Education* in response to requests from many UK Higher Education Institutions for guidance on the development of mental health policies and other relevant procedures. There is increasing awareness across the sector of the importance of institutional policies and procedures in ensuring that students who experience mental health difficulties are provided with both the appropriate support and those ‘reasonable adjustments’¹ that will help them to minimise the impact of their difficulties on their ability to achieve their academic and personal goals. The 2006 amendment to the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) requires HEIs to actively promote disability equality rather than merely react in response to individual student requirements².

Mental ill health can have a profound impact on every aspect of a student’s life, necessitating responses that are very broad in scope. The aim of this document is to offer a framework that might guide the development of an institutional mental health policy, drawing attention to those areas and issues that institutions might wish to address, and/or for which protocols, procedures or codes of practice might need to be developed. The framework offered cannot hope to be entirely comprehensive, and institutions are likely to find other issues to address or matters to which they might wish to give consideration. It does not seek to prescribe or to offer ready-made solutions to what can, or perhaps even should, be a challenging task for an institution. The experience of those Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) who have developed effective policies and procedures is that one of the many benefits lies in the very processes required for such development: the bringing together and involvement of staff drawn widely from across an institution and the subsequent collaboration, discussion and debate. Staff awareness and understanding of mental illness and its impact on students’ lives and their academic performance is vital in ensuring that those affected are able to maximize their achievement and progression. Further many of the improvements in institutional practices that can be made, and the resources that can be developed, offer benefits to all students, and not only to those who are unwell.

Writing the policy is of course only the first stage: implementation requires both a comprehensive and ongoing staff development programme, and robust procedures for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the policy. The plans for the future work of the *UUK/SCOP Working Group* have been designed to both guide and support HEIs; these include: a programme of conferences addressing mental well-being for students and staff; the dissemination of strategies for mental health promotion and resources to stimulate and support staff development; and further

¹ The term ‘reasonable adjustment’ makes reference to one of the key elements of the Disability Discrimination legislation which places a requirement on providers of services to make reasonable adjustments to the physical access and layout of premises and to offer appropriate support, facilities and adjustments in order to ensure that disabled persons are not placed at a substantial disadvantage in comparison with persons who are not disabled.

² Further information about, and guidance on, the implications of disability discrimination legislation and the duty to promote disability equality are available from the Disability Rights Commission website (www.drc-gb.org/thelaw/lawsays.asp). Institutions based in Scotland and Northern Ireland should make themselves aware of any country-specific differences in the relevant legislation.

guidance documents. These will be publicised and made available through the Working Group's website (<http://www.mwbhe.com/>). A list of useful resources is included in Appendix C at the end of this document.

A framework

Principles, aims and objectives

Statement of purpose of policies/codes; principles underpinning the support of students with mental health difficulties including roles, responsibilities and potential contributors (institution, staff, students, Students' Unions/Associations, NHS primary and secondary care providers, community and voluntary groups); definitions and terminologies.

Context and legal framework

Higher education and national contexts; understanding of duty of care; liability for negligence; implications of disability discrimination legislation including the duty to promote disability equality; other relevant legislation including those concerning data protection and human rights; reasonable adjustments and reasonable care; breach of statutory duty; judicial review.

Pre-admission and admission

Pre-application visits; information about support available; encouraging declaration; needs assessment; availability of specialist provision; accommodation; additional funding; risk assessment; medical evidence; fitness to practice; feedback on rejection.

Entry and induction

Information about guidance and support services; induction procedures; additional support for students who may be particularly at risk; personal support and mentoring; information requirements.

Accommodation

Procedures for disclosure of relevant information to accommodation staff, including wardens and sub-wardens or equivalents, cleaners and security staff; room allocation; boundaries for acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour; notice to quit; training and guidance for accommodation staff.

On course

Personal tutor arrangements; on-going opportunities for disclosure; guidance for academic, administrative and student services staff; mechanisms for liaison between academic departments and central services; roles of individual student service units; liaison with external agencies; course and assessment requirements and procedures including relevant adjustments or dispensations; fieldwork, year abroad, work placements; special examination arrangements; crisis intervention protocols; at risk procedures including risk assessment for suicide and self-harm; emergency contact protocols; disclosure and confidentiality policies; data protection and record keeping; responsibilities and processes for cross-institutional staff guidance and training.

Interruption of studies and exit prior to completion

Mitigating circumstances procedures; financial and other support for students who interrupt their studies on health grounds; return to study (including return after hospitalisation); liaison with central services; liaison with external bodies.

Preparation for transition and graduation

Specialist careers advice and guidance; opportunities for disclosure to careers staff; guidance on disclosure to prospective employers; referees and references.

Student diversity

Specialist services and support; sensitivity to/understanding of cultural and religious differences in attitudes to mental illness; crisis protocols for international students.

Complaints and disciplinary procedures

Harassment and persistent complaints; complaints from fellow students; duty of care conflicts; responses to unusual, violent (including self-harming) and disruptive behaviour; assessment of possible impact of mental health difficulties prior to disciplinary procedures.

Health promotion, training, support and guidance

Mental health promotion; addressing stigma and ignorance; induction, training, support and guidance for staff; awareness raising, support and guidance for students (including friends, carers and those sharing accommodation).

Monitoring and evaluation

Methods for monitoring the effectiveness and impact of the policies and procedures; quality assurance mechanisms.

Appendices

A: Additional or related policies and procedures that may need to be developed or adapted

- Confidentiality policy (internal communication and communication with parents and external agencies)
- Alcohol Policy
- Drugs Policy
- Equal opportunities policies
- Duty of care for under-18 year olds
- Critical incident management, including procedures for responding to student death
- Examination and assessment procedures for students with mental health difficulties
- Joint working with external bodies (including the NHS and voluntary bodies)

B: Paper or web-based guidance resources

- Guidance for staff (all categories) on helping students in difficulties (including guidance for personal tutors/advisers)
- Guidance for students experiencing particular difficulties
- Guidance for students concerned about their friends
- Outline training programmes for different categories of staff and students

C: Additional resources

AMOSSHE 2001: *'Duty of Care' Responsibilities for Student Services in HE*. Winchester: Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education.

CVCP 2000: *Guidelines on Mental Health Policies and Procedures for HE*. London: Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals.

Disability Rights Commission (undated): *The Duty to Promote Disability Equality: Statutory Code of Practice (England and Wales)*. Retrieved November 14 2006 from www.drc-gb.org/thelaw/publicsectordutycode.asp.

Grant, A. 2005: *Mental Health Policies and Practices in UK Higher Education. A report on the results and implications of a survey undertaken by the UUK/SCOP Committee for the Promotion of Mental Well-being in Higher Education*. London: Universities UK/ Standing Conference of Principals.

QAA 1999: *Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education. Section 3: Students with Disabilities – October 1999*. Gloucester: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

Rana, R., Smith, E. and Walkling, J. 1999: *Degrees of Disturbance – the New Agenda. A Report from the Heads of University Counselling Services*. Rugby: British Association for Counselling.

Royal College of Psychiatrists 2003: *The Mental Health of Students in HE*. Royal College of Psychiatrists Council Report CR112.

Universities UK/Standing Conference of Principals 2002: *Reducing the Risk of Student Suicide*. London: Universities UK/Standing Conference of Principals.

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