



The All-Party Parliamentary University Group

All-Party Parliamentary University Group Meeting
Student Mental Health and Wellbeing
Tuesday 26 January
17:00-18:30

Speakers

- Professor Steve West, Vice-Chancellor, University of the West of England
- Claire Murdoch, National Director of Mental Health, NHS England
- Professor Sandeep Ranote, Mental Health Lead, Greater Manchester Health & Social Care Partnership
- Tahmina Choudhury, Vice President, Middlesex Students' Union

All-Party Parliamentary University Group Co-Chair Chris Skidmore MP opened the meeting by explaining the importance of students being recognised as a clear voice within the health community, adding that the group had written to Health Secretary Matt Hancock in the summer to outline this point.

Professor Steve West gave an overview of the changing volume and severity of student demand for mental health services throughout the pandemic to date. He noted that mental ill health and low morale were also affecting staff, particularly as lockdown restrictions went on, and that this clearly had an impact of staff interaction with students.

Noting the particular wellbeing issues faced by BAME staff and students, he told attendees his university had partnered with a local charity Nilaari which focused on culturally appropriate programmes for mental health.

In terms of the root of mental distress, Steve spoke about student concerns around assessment, no detriment policies and financial hardship, in part brought about by the lack of part-time work in the retail and hospitality sectors. He noted that the severity of mental distress amongst students seeking help had increased, including self-harm and suicide attempts.

He told attendees about the range of programmes and initiatives the University of the West of England (UWE) had introduced to support students, including a 24/7 digital and in-person crisis support service as well as blogs to promote wellbeing, welfare check calls and care package for those isolating. Steve concluded by saying although universities had swiftly and successfully moved services online many were now creaking under the weight of student demand.

Claire Murdoch thanked Universities UK for the collaborative work that had been undertaken to better understand students' mental health needs and plan services. She turned to the NHS Long Term Plan which had committed an additional £2.3 billion per year in real terms by 2023 to expand mental health services, noting that addressing gaps in services for 18-25 year olds was a priority.

Dementia assessments had been the only area of mental health support which was paused when the pandemic set in and these were only paused for a few weeks she said. She explained there had been an initial drop off in mental health referrals due to people's reluctance to access health services at the start of the pandemic. During April and May 2020 the NHS had sped up existing plans to roll out crisis helplines, and digital therapies- which were popular with young people- had also seen a quicker roll out. She had asked all parts of the NHS to ensure help is offered to students where they were based and noted there should be no barriers to receiving care due to location of GP or registration.

She referred to constructive work with Mind, Young Minds, Universities UK and other partners to address student mental health needs and spoke about the jointly funded pilots focused on bringing together NHS and universities more successfully.

Claire said the NHS was working hard on suicide prevention, noting it could only successfully be done in partnership with universities, local authorities, the police and employers. She said she was regularly asked whether there had been an increase in Covid-related suicides, but said it was too early to tell, however, there had been an increase in deliberate self-harm. Finally, she outlined that NHS England and NHS Improvement are working with Public Health England to relaunch Every Mind Matters.

Tahmina Choudhrey spoke about the demographic of Middlesex University students- over half had been eligible for free school meals and over 70% BAME- and the need for well-designed and appropriate mental health and wellbeing services. She also noted a large proportion were training for key public sector jobs, and had therefore been called on to step up to the front line during the pandemic.

She stated the lack of understanding about BAME communities had led to students falling through gaps and thought this could in part be tackled by introducing culturally competent training delivered to staff beyond basic unconscious bias training. She acknowledged the funding challenges facing university mental health services, and thought it was important to manage students' expectations of university support services compared with those offered by the NHS.

Tahmina reminded attendees that international students, as well as those from a BAME background, were often overlooked when establishing preventative measures and support services, and it was therefore important for institutions to co-design services with local community groups and student union cultural groups to ensure they are impactful for all students.

Sandeep Ranote referred to the Universities UK publications StepChange and Minding our Future, and the finding that 94% of universities had reported a significant increase in demand for counselling services in recent years. Some progress had been made to overcome the stigma around mental ill health but a problem still remained she said, referring to the huge discrepancy between the number of students self-reporting a mental health condition in surveys compared with those that declared a condition on university application forms.

Acknowledging that every suicide was a tragedy, Sandeep reminded attendees that the suicide rate among students was lower than that of the general population while stressing that additional work was needed between the NUS and universities to reduce numbers. Graduates regularly reported significantly higher positive wellbeing

than non-graduates and therefore focus on supporting students to finish their courses.

She turned to the establishment of the Greater Manchester Universities Student Mental Health Service which was designed to support the students of four universities and a conservatorium, including 19,000 international students. After initial issues with industry funding caused by the pandemic, she told attendees £1.75million had been dedicated to the two year pilot which aimed to provide services to all students, without the need for a GP referral, and was designed to avoid confusion and students 'getting lost'.

The Greater Manchester pilot had already produced positive results for the student population, including an 18.6% decrease in A&E attendance and positive student retention rates for the universities involved. There had also been positive signs for the service reaching students in BAME communities that had historically been less likely to access traditional mental health support services.

Finally, Sandeep spoke about the positive impact of digital enablers to broaden services' reach, but stressed that a balance needed to be struck between digital and in-person services to meet the needs of all students.