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Roles and responsibilities

As individuals working in a tertiary environment, we need to be aware of our roles and responsibilities when it comes to supporting students with mental health issues. We have a duty of care towards students, teaching and support staff and ourselves, and need to be aware of this duty at all times.

It is important to remember students, teaching and support staff in this equation; they are all important for maintaining the correct balance in our professional roles.

Support by geralt from Pixabay, CC0

You should not try to help:

- when you do not have adequate skills or experience;
- in a way that is inappropriate for your role;
- because it meets your need to feel valued or depended on.'

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Boundaries

There is also the corresponding need to set appropriate boundaries in our dealings with students. This can be challenging in smaller institutions, with small classes, and with taught post-graduate students, when regular on-going contact can establish a closer and sometimes more informal link.

It is important in all circumstances to retain the student/staff relationship; in some rural communities, this can be even more challenging, when the roles can become blurred by mutual friendships, localised professional contact etc.

It is important for all university staff that unless you are specifically qualified to do so that you do not try to offer health advice and or counselling. For example, do not comment on medication; do not give your opinion about therapy or what might work best for them.

White road marking by ikkeaviy from Pixabay, CC0

Team working and information sharing

Overview
It is also important to realise that boundaries include allowing for our own limits of responsibility and recognising when and how to involve others.

Supporting students with any disability issue can benefit at times from appropriate team-working, with teaching staff having confidence and knowledge about when to involve Student Support Services and other appropriate staff, and vice versa.

Any information sharing must be done with the agreement of the student, establishing clear lines about who shares any information and emphasising the requirement of strict

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confidentiality and data protection. You may also have to consider ages of students and parental consent.

The wellbeing of the student and or others

Students are often fine with appropriate knowledge sharing, if it has been explained to them properly, as part of a package of measures which are intended to benefit to them. However, we must never override the student's wishes, unless there are genuine concerns for the [wellbeing of the student and or others](#).

Online students

The principles outlined in Team working and information sharing are the same when dealing with online students. However, the extra dimension of being physically one-step removed adds another dimension to the systems designed to support those in need.

When dealing with online students, the usual visual and non-verbal clues and behaviours are not so easy to pick up. Concerns about a student's welfare may arise from a variety of interactions used in the delivery of their course; use of the virtual learning environment's tools e.g. discussion boards and chat rooms, email or Skype sessions. Any communication method used by the parties may give clues – but they can be harder to spot.

It is also important to recognise that these alternative interactions can either mask or amplify student distress.

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Disclosed mental health issues

Overview

52% of UHI students disclosed a mental health issue in 21/22. It is important to note that disclosing a mental health issue does not automatically mean that a student is in need of extra support. Everyone is an individual: students who disclose asthma, epilepsy or diabetes may not require a Support Plan if their condition is well-controlled by medication, the same is true for mental health issues, but it is good practice for tutors to have an awareness.

However, it is important for the student to understand that **at times** a Support Plan can be a useful tool in prevention. For example a student with anxiety issues, having an extension for assessment submission dates may not be needed all the time but simply knowing it is there can help to reduce anxiety and so enable the student to complete work on time.

Students may not feel that they require any extra support if they have their condition under control. They may take regular medication, see a healthcare professional regularly and have learned strategies which work for them around self-care.

However, if they have disclosed a mental health issue, this could be discussed with the student at application, or more usually at enrolment by Student Services/Disability Services. This is when a support plan would be recommended to the student, to allow for flexibility during the course.

Plan written in scrabble lettering by Wokandapix from Pixabay, CC0

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If a student declines any support at this stage, it would be good practice to inform the PAT of the student's decision, so that they are aware and can use this awareness if the student s situation changes once they are further into their programme of study.

It should also be noted that life challenges that affect us all can have a potentially destabilising effect on someone's mental health, such as:

- changes to medication
- external events such as family illness, or bereavement,
- moving house or changes in employment
- divorce or separation
- debt problems or money worries
- caring responsibilities
- court appearances

These can have detrimental different effects on all students, but we need to be even more aware of the potential additional impact for people with stated mental health issues.

Online students

There is anecdotal evidence that students with mental health issues may be disproportionately attracted to online courses. There are several obvious reasons for this; online study does not require travel, going into an unfamiliar building, can be studied outwith normal working hours, does not require face-to-face contact with others. These reasons can be helpful to some people with mental health issues and can remove barriers to access to study for some.

These very helpful attributes can also works against successful completion for some and behaviours in an online setting can be more erratic – making frequent, repeated contacts at unsocial hours, going wildly off topic in chat rooms or discussion boards, being unreceptive to perceived criticism.

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On programme disclosure of mental health issues

Overview

The sector has done a lot in the last few years to reduce stigma around the disclosure of a mental health issue at application and enrolment. The increase in positive disclosures is proof of the success. However, as professionals working in a tertiary environment, we are all aware that disclosure of all types often occurs further into a course, when initial fears have subsided and trust is beginning to be built between the student and the institution.

Informal disclosure may take place at PAT meetings, or can occur as the deadline for an initial piece of assessed work draws closer. It is also important to note that disclosure might occur to any member of staff the student feels comfortable with; a lecturer, a member of support services, their module tutor etc.

Once this has happened, it is important to explain the benefits to the student of making that disclosure. It can allow a support plan to be put into place, as appropriate, as long as the student can provide evidence from a healthcare professional confirming the issue and, where possible, highlighting why support measures would be appropriate e.g. the effect of medication affecting the student's concentration.

Students may require reassurance around confidentiality issues and data protection.

Online students

There is no difference for online students in this respect, except that if they are referred for a PLSP, this process may be carried out by phone or VC. The mode of participation in the process does not matter, the student's active participation does!

Academic staff

Head of Department

Your role as a Head of Department is a two-fold one, to ensure that your staff have the resourcing and support they need to help their students who have mental health issues and to have a duty of care for the staff you are responsible for.

You can help by ensuring your staff are equipped to manage students with mental health issues. This may involve recommending training, ensuring staff are aware of relevant

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policies and procedures and showing that you have an understanding of the issues they are encountering in their classrooms – virtual or actual – and the impact this can have.

Teaching staff may be dealing with students with complex issues and circumstances. These students may be quite demanding at times and it can be stressful for staff to handle. Your role is to support and equip them so that they can cope better with the demands placed on them, and to help them to understand the limits of their own responsibility too.

Knowing that staff individually have done the best they can and signposted or referred as necessary is important for everyone's professional integrity. Similarly, be aware that staff may be finding it hard to cope with certain student situations and give them a space to talk confidentially about issues of concern.

Personal Academic Tutor/Student Advisors (PATs/SAs)

PATs are the people whose role incorporates maintaining regular contact with the student, primarily relating to academic matters, but they also have a pastoral responsibility. This latter part may be largely for signposting and referral to appropriate specialist information and assistance, as appropriate. The role does not require a PAT to know all the answers, but to be aware of the places, people and resources available to support students. The PAT Resources provided by UHI gives some useful overall guidance on the range and limits of PAT support.

As a PAT, you may be the first person to whom the student first discloses any mental health issue. If so, you need to be sensitive to their feelings but encourage them to consider how the institution can help to support them on their studies. You could suggest referral to the Disability Service, explaining that there are things we may be able to do to help them to manage their studies as well as possible.

Your openness and responsiveness can be one of the key factors in encouraging them to go forward and seek help. Acceptance in a non-judgemental and supportive way can be very important in increasing disclosure.

Online students

PATS may need to prepare more carefully for formal student meetings. It may be useful to look at contributions in group discussions and in chat rooms, or the tone and frequency of

any contacts. If it differs from the usual student pattern, it could be a signal to dig a little deeper the check if there is any underlying issue. Erratic patterns of communication, as well as too much communication or none at all can all be signs that something is wrong. They can also be signs that people are just busy being students!

Module tutors

If you have a student with a Personal Learning Support Plan, the PAT for that student should notify you of the Support Plan and pass on a copy of the Summary of Support. This should tell you about the issues the student faces in relation to studying. All information should be contextualised to ensure it is relevant to the course of study the person is taking and the issues that they have.

Professional Standards

Professional Standards for Lecturers in Scotland's Colleges

[The professional standards for Lecturers in Scotland's Colleges](#) (The Scottish Government 2012) also define the scope and role of the lecturer in relation to guidance and support.

Support staff

Student support services

All institutions have some Student Services. Depending on size, there may also be Disability Services, Learning Support and Wellbeing Services or other local variations.

The people in these departments can be key links in helping to provide appropriate support to students and guidance and support to staff.

In many instances, Student Services may be the first destination for staff and students with queries. Staff can usually signpost to appropriate next steps or other relevant departments, depending on each institutions' own structure.

This remains true for any student with a mental health issue; staff are there to help and will work with the student to find appropriate solutions to issues that individuals may encounter. These could be wide-ranging; financial issues, support plans, counselling or wellbeing interventions, benefits advice or a place to go when they don't know where to go to get an answer.

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Disability staff

Disability staff are usually the people who work with the student to create the Support Plans. They get required medical evidence of disability and diagnostic evidence relating to dyslexia.

They are highly skilled professionals who look at the course of study, the mode of study and the needs of the student on an individual basis in order to tailor a plan to match the needs of the student on their chosen course of study. This means no two plans are the same.

Learning support

This can take the form of specific areas and staffing designed to help students with common issues around academic study – writing essays, referencing etc – and to provide opportunities for one-to-one-support. In many places, staff are also able to provide this type of support for remote or online students, using a variety of means of communication, email, Skype, telephone calls etc.

Wellbeing/Counselling services

These services can provide support to students who are going through personal crises and issues that are not directly related to their academic studies. They are not there to replace the NHS and other statutory bodies, but are to provide an enhancement to the student experience and enable the institution to help the student to carry on with their programme of study , if at all practicable.

Online students

Within UHI there are many well-established online programmes of study. Therefore wherever practicable, our student support systems have been designed to cater for the needs of our online students as well as our face-to-face students. At times, it is not about providing the same service, but providing a realistic equivalence of service that suits the need of the student group.

Other support staff

Within the institution, there are many people working in support staff roles who interact with students in the normal course of work e.g.:

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- Finance
- Registry
- Library
- Refectory

- IT support
- Admissions
- Reception
- Centre Managers

Everyone who has a student-facing role, in its broadest context, needs to be aware of the impact his or her actions may have on any vulnerable student. It is important to raise support staff awareness of the issues faced by students with mental health issues. This helps us all to play our part in becoming a fully inclusive institution.

Staff training and customer service skills can help support staff to provide a positive service for all our students. Sometimes we all need to take a step back and see things from the student's viewpoint. Our concern may be to complete a certain task in a given time, but a request for information, payment or other details that the individual feels comes out of nowhere, may not always meet with the response we hope for.

Support staff may not be aware that a student has a mental health issue. Sometimes support staff can encounter an unexpected reaction from a student- anger, crying, hysteria etc. This can be quite disconcerting. The Charlie Waller Memorial Trust training provides some very good examples of this relating to face-to-face student dealings.

Sometimes, our reasonable request can be the straw that breaks the camel's back, and we need to increase our awareness of this possibility and deal sensitively with students at all times.

Case study

A member of the Finance Team contacts a student about outstanding fees. The student initially responds with an involved tale of reasons why they have not done what was required, but then becomes very upset and hysterical on the phone. Although the staff member handles the call professionally, they are concerned at the distressed state the

student was in at the end of the contact. They contacted the PAT and/or Student Services/Wellbeing Services to report their concerns. PAT and Student Services/Wellbeing Services jointly decide the most appropriate person to establish the wellbeing of the student and to offer support if required. Note kept of referral and outcome.

Policies and procedures we need to include are:

- [Mitigating Circumstances within Academic Regulations](#)
- [PLSP staff guidance](#)
- [Fitness to Study Guidelines](#)
- [Supporting students in crisis](#)

Concerned for a student?

Support staff need to have access to appropriate training and be aware of policies and procedures there for the protection of all parties. If support staff have concerns about a student's welfare, they need to know whom they can refer to – Student Services or Wellbeing Services or to speak to the students' PAT.

Online students

As many online students never physically attend our campuses, it is important to take into account the different nature of online student's interactions with support services. Again these points may have increased significance for someone with a mental health issue.

- They may use email for contact as access during standard office hours may be problematic.
- They can feel that the institution is impersonal and inflexible in administrative matters.
- They are not concerned that we have limited time and personnel, so are not interested in our sudden request or requirement and that we need them to act now.

Personal Learning Support Plans (PLSP)

A Personal Learning Support Plan is completed in consultation and agreement between the student and the Disability Advisor. These plans take a person-centred approach and look at

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the disability the student has disclosed and the effects that it could have on the specific subject they are studying and mode of study e.g. face to face, online, blended.

Therefore two students with apparently the same issue may have different plans, depending on whether their course involves placement, fieldwork, group-work or any other variable. It matches solutions to students on an individual contextualised basis.

[Writing a business plan](#) by StartupStockPhotos from Pixabay, CC0

PLSPs can be updated throughout the year. If in your dealings with the student, they notify you of a change of circumstances that may be relevant to their PLSP, (for example a change in medication), you can ask them to get in touch with their Disability Advisor (the person who drafted their PLSP) to discuss if they need any changes making. With the student's permission, the PAT can pass this information to the Disability Advisor, if the student prefers that. However, the student has to be involved with their support plan and any changes made to it.

PATs role in PLSPs

As a PAT you will be informed if a student has a Personal Learning Support Plan in place and will be able to see the summary of institutional support. You are, as a PAT, responsible for passing that information on to the relevant Module Tutors for each semester. The Summary of Support covers a few key areas. Firstly it details the agreed requirements relating to extensions on coursework submission dates (without penalty) and gives details of the university's agreed alternative assessment arrangements.

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A PLSP may also indicate the information which the student wishes staff to know about their disability. It may also indicate appropriate support for their teaching and learning.

The aim is to help the student to work within an agreed framework and give the tutors enough information that they can understand the context in which help and support may be appropriate.

How do I know if a student has a PLSP?

As a PAT, a PLSP is indicated by a flag in the Student Support column of the PAT student list. You can click on this link to take you to the Students' record and then you can download their summary of support in word format.

As a Module Tutor, the PAT for the student is the person who will notify you that a student has a support plan. They should pass on the Summary of Support to you. This could include an outline of the issue the student has and the way it affects their studies. It should also include modifications to be made in class, details of permitted extension parameters and alternative exam arrangements, where appropriate.

Online students

The PLSP is written and agreed in consultation with the student. The means of communication may differ, telephone, email and/or VC may be used but the outcome is the same. The student has participated in the agreement of the support requirement and has agreed to their part of that equation – namely maintaining an on-going dialogue with the institution regarding their support needs.

Counselling

Counselling is a talking therapy. Most of the academic partners within UHI have access to face-to-face or telephone counselling.

This is only one tool available to staff wishing to help students with mental health issues. Counselling can be a useful and powerful way of helping students to maintain or regain their mental health. However, it is not a panacea for all ills and just because someone has a mental health issue does not automatically mean that they require counselling.

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As with many support services, various support mechanisms are available for the student but we cannot force a student to use them. It has to be their choice. This is also true of counselling. The time has to be right for any individual to feel ready to undertake counselling and benefit from it.

Increasingly we are seeing college and university counselling provision being heavily used, as services available on the NHS are under strain and frequently have long waiting lists. We are not here to replace the NHS and the services it provides, we can however provide a place for people to go to discuss their issues and help them to reduce the impact so that they can stay on their course and learn effectively.

Support phonecall graphic by moosline from Pixabay, CC0

Online students

The recent development of online counselling across UHI is an important development, allowing access to remote and online students wherever they are studying. Referral is self-referral via the green button on the UHI website.

However, some students may prefer face-to-face counselling or the use of telephone counselling. A lot depends on personal preference, location and availability.

UHI Policies

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Mitigating Circumstances

[Mitigating Circumstances within Academic Regulations](#)

Fitness to study guidelines

[Fitness to study policy guidelines](#)

Supporting students in crisis

[Supporting students in crisis](#)

Personal learning support plans

[Personal learning support plans](#)

External links

General

- [Anorexia Bulimia Care](#)
- [B-eat](#)
- [Brain in hand](#)
- [Breathing Space](#)
- [Buddhify App](#)
- [Calm Harm App](#)
- [Calm Zone](#)
- [Childline](#)
- [Choose Life](#)
- [Counselling & Psychotherapy](#)
- [Doc Ready App](#)
- [Find Get Give App](#)
- [Gofal](#)
- [Happify](#)
- [Headspace App](#)
- [Heads Meds](#)
- [Heads Together](#)
- [HelpGuide.Org](#)

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- [In Hand App](#)
- [Keep Your Head](#)
- [Keeping Health in Mind](#)
- [Kooth Online Counselling & Emotional Wellbeing Platform](#)
- [Living Life to the Full](#)
- [Madly in Love](#)
- [Mental Health Foundation](#)
- [MIND](#)
- [MindEd](#)
- [Moodbug App](#)
- [Moodjuice](#)
- [Moodzone](#)
- [MQ Mental Health](#)
- [My Horrid Parent](#)
- [NHS Choices](#)
- [Penumbra](#)
- [People First](#)
- [Place2Be](#)
- [Rethink Mental Illness](#)
- [Samaritans](#)
- [SANE](#)
- [Scottish Association for Mental Health](#)
- [Scottish Patient Safety Programme Mental Health](#)
- [SeeMe](#)
- [Smiling Mind](#)
- [Smiling Mind App](#)
- [St Andrew's Healthcare](#)
- [Stem4](#)
- [Stop, Breathe Think App](#)
- [The Mix](#)
- [Young Minds](#)

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Student specific

- [Expert Self Care: ESC Student](#)
- [Expert Self Care: distrACT](#)
- [Mindfulness for Students](#)
- [National Union of Students](#)
- [NHS Live Well for Students](#)
- [Nightline](#)
- [Students Against Depression](#)
- [Student Minds](#)
- [The Student Room](#)

Mental health training

- [College Development Network](#)
- [Charlie Waller Memorial Trust](#)
- [Mental Health First Aid England](#)
- [Scotland's Mental Health First Aid](#)
- [Wales Mental Health First Aid](#)
- [ASIST](#)