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Promoting mental well-being in the curriculum

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Overview

Mental well-being is an issue for all staff and students. Further to the stress that can be triggered by any major life-transition (such as entry to Higher Education), young people in general are vulnerable to mental distress and illness (Nuffield Foundation, 2004), and mature students often have additional pressures, responsibilities and vulnerabilities. Some students will have prior experience of mental ill-health (depression or early psychosis, for example); others will experience difficulties whilst studying (Royal College of Psychiatrists 2003). Anxiety is often high at the outset of studies (e.g. about forming new relationships, budgeting and/or meeting academic expectations). Whilst learning in university should entail challenge, it need not entail excessive stress - students will not perform at their best if they are unduly stressed. To promote mental well-being, enhance learning, and to protect those who may be vulnerable to mental illness or distress, curricula should take account of mental well-being. Indeed the principles of the Health Promoting University (Dooris 2001) and requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) (1995, 2005) and the Disability Equality Duty (DED), which came into force in 2006, require that higher education institutions do so.

Key Resources

Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion in Higher Education:

Prepared by the Universities UK/Guild HE Committee for the Promotion of Mental Well-being in Higher Education.

<http://tinyurl.com/student-mh>

Student Mental Health Advisers Network Policy on Examinations:

Considers requirements under the DDA and DED.
<http://tinyurl.com/exam-policy>

Developing an inclusive curriculum for students with mental health difficulties:

Aims to make educators more aware of mental health issues.

<http://tinyurl.com/icp-mental>

Mental health in higher education—student mental health:

Key resources, publications and university initiatives on student mental well-being.

<http://tinyurl.com/mhhe-student-mh>

The first-year experience of higher education in the UK:

A report by Yorke and Longden (2008).

<http://tinyurl.com/yorke-longden>

Key Points

- Avoid undue stress in the design of the curriculum, considering the demands imposed on students through the way the course is structured.
- Provide students with a range of information sources and in different formats to enable them to make informed decisions and organise their time effectively.
- Design inclusive approaches to assessment and create opportunities to rehearse work before it is formally assessed.
- Ensure that students have regular opportunities to meet with tutors or lecturers and peers.
- Incorporate training about mental health awareness and promotion into continuing staff development.
- Learning and teaching that respects the mental health and wellbeing of students is good practice for everyone.

Promoting mental well-being in the curriculum

The design of the curriculum should take account of the structural demands imposed on students and pay attention to the balance of learning opportunities provided for students. The curriculum should consider a range of student entitlements/requirements, and should be sufficiently flexible to meet those changing entitlements/requirements. Spreading opportunities throughout the day and across the week can help avoid undue stress.

Students value prompt feedback on their progress, especially in the first semester or term.

Students benefit from being provided with detailed course information both before and during the course. This should be provided in different formats (e.g. written/verbal; electronic/hard copy; word/Pdf/html) to take account of differing requirements and should be accessible at all times, with clear signposting. Students need to know how the curriculum works and what is expected of them, especially in relation to assessment, and how and when they can expect to get feedback and marks. It is particularly important to provide information well in advance about learning opportunities such as practical work, field visits, clinical or practical learning, to help students prepare and make suitable arrangements to meet their personal requirements (e.g. travel, reasonable adjustments, childcare). It is important not to assume that students have read or have understood all the information provided. Where possible, students should be consulted about the organisation of learning opportunities; an opportunity to ask questions is essential.

Issues around assessment - including the timing, methods and frequency - can be a cause of stress. A range of assessment methods should be used, to enable all students to demonstrate that they have met the learning outcomes. Alternative approaches to more 'public' assessments (such as examinations or presentations) may need to be found (see University Mental Health Advisers Network (UMHAN) Policy on examinations). Students can benefit from having opportunities to rehearse or practice assessment tasks, to help them understand what is expected of them. Stress can be reduced by ensuring that the assignments are spaced out during the semester or term rather than bunched together at the end. This can be particularly important to consider for students undertaking more than one subject as part of their course.

The provision of regular and ongoing opportunities to meet with tutors and peers can be helpful to students. Research has shown that students thrive better within programmes that foster positive personal networks (Yorke and Longden, 2008). Students should have the opportunity to form a relationship early on with a tutor who can respond to queries and provide support. Additionally, building in small group work can enable students to interact with their peers, helping them to build confidence in speaking and learning together and to develop social networks.

Training in mental health awareness and mental health promotion should be incorporated into staff development. This will ensure that tutors are well-informed about mental wellbeing and ill-health and the range of student support services on offer; active links with these services should be maintained. Staff will benefit from training that is tailored to the requirements of their role.

This is one in a series of e-bulletins available online at:
<http://tinyurl.com/inclusion-e-bulletins>

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