



The Open
University

SCOTLAND

STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AGREEMENT

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY IN SCOTLAND
THE OPEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ASSOCIATION
2020/2021

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INTRODUCTION

The Open University (OU) is committed to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of our students and staff.

Our strategic vision is to:



Promote an inclusive and supportive culture that is underpinned by effective and timely support, systems and training about mental health and wellbeing that allows our students and staff to maximise their potential and achieve success.



**Student and Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy:
promoting an institutional approach.**

The **Student Mental Health Agreement (SMHA)** sets out the OU in Scotland and OU Students Association's commitment to working in partnership to promote the mental wellbeing of all students.

The SMHA has been developed with support from the **NUS Scotland Think Positive Project**.



WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

The mental health and wellbeing of our students and staff are enormously important to The Open University in Scotland.



“

I welcome the development of this Agreement, alongside the implementation of the OU Student and Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy. We are committed to working in partnership with the OU Students Association for the benefit of all our students.

”

Susan Stewart
Director, Open University in Scotland



“

The Open University Students Association is delighted to be co-creator of this Agreement and looks forward to continuing to work with staff at the OU in Scotland to improve the experience of OU students in Scotland.

The Association recognises that effective mental health support involves attending to the needs of those experiencing mental health issues and distress as well as promoting good mental health and wellbeing. The Association is committed to supporting initiatives that enable students to access helpful resources and allows them to talk about their mental health without fear of judgement or discrimination.

”

Sarah Jones
President, Open University Students Association

A FOUR NATIONS UNIVERSITY

The Open University is a world leader in open and distance learning. Our institutional mission is to be open to people, places, methods and ideas.

Social justice and equality of opportunity are at the heart of everything we do: widening access to higher education is the ambition on which the University was founded.

We are committed to extending opportunities for educational success to all. We have always operated an open entry policy: our students can study with us at undergraduate level with no requirement for previous qualifications.

We are proud to be the only university that operates across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and we derive significant benefits from being part of the UK's largest higher education institution.

This Agreement sets out the actions that we will take forward in Scotland. Our students will also be positively impacted by a range of initiatives to support mental health and wellbeing at a UK level.



17,075
OU students in
Scotland



168,116
OU students in
the UK



20%
of new undergraduates
join without standard
university entrance
qualifications



75%
of our students are in
full-time or part-time
work



**We promote free
learning resources**

PROGRESS IN 2019/20

The SMHA builds on a range of existing initiatives to support student and staff mental health and wellbeing.

The OU works in partnership with Togetherall (formerly Big White Wall), a free, online mental health and wellbeing resource for students, available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Using additional funding from the Scottish Funding Council, the OU in Scotland has extended this partnership with Togetherall to be able to offer a virtual therapy service to our students in Scotland. Students will be referred by our Educational Advisors for an initial clinical assessment followed by access to up to six counselling sessions.

We employed a graduate intern to support development of our SMHA and were also awarded funding from Think Positive to send out wellbeing boxes to selected groups of students. This project was adapted due to COVID-19, and virtual wellbeing resources were sent to all our students in Scotland.

OU in Scotland staff were also involved in the development of the OU-wide Student and Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy.



OUR APPROACH

This Agreement is the result of a collaboration between the OU in Scotland and the OU Students Association and is intended to actively reflect the voice of our students.

It aligns with the OU **Student and Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy** and our Outcome Agreement with the Scottish Funding Council, as well as other relevant policy and strategy priorities in Scotland and the wider university.

We have developed this Agreement in accordance with **Universities UK's Stepchange Framework** (2020), which sees universities as places that promote mental health and wellbeing as a strategic priority.

It has also been informed by the **University Mental Health Charter developed by Student Minds**. The definitions we have used for mental health and wellbeing are drawn from the Stepchange framework.



Mental health refers to a spectrum of experience, from good mental health to mental illness and distress.

Wellbeing includes wider physical, social and economic experience.



Mental health and wellbeing: a dual continuum. Source: Stepchange: Mentally Healthy Universities, Universities UK



ENABLERS:



Leadership



Co-production



Information



Inclusivity



Scholarship and innovation

STEPCHANGE FRAMEWORK: ENABLERS

The Stepchange: mentally healthy universities framework suggests five enablers - cross-cutting themes to embed a whole university approach.

In line with the enablers, we will achieve our aims by ensuring:

- Strong visible strategic leadership.
- A collaborative approach, working in partnership with staff and students.
- Effective sharing of clear and accessible information.
- Recognition of the range of challenges that unique individuals face to their mental health.
- An evidence-based approach to measure need and impact of our interventions.

STEPCHANGE FRAMEWORK: DOMAINS

The Stepchange model is formed around four domains: Learn, Support, Work, Live.

The whole university approach recommends that all aspects of university life promote and support student and staff mental health.

This approach:

- Recognises the effect of culture and environment, and specific inequalities, on mental health and wellbeing.
- Seeks to transform the university into a healthy setting.
- Empowers students and staff to take responsibility for their own wellbeing.



DOMAIN 1: LEARN

Through our open entry policy, the OU in Scotland has allowed thousands of people to transform their lives through learning.

Learning can positively impact a person's mental health and wellbeing over a lifetime.

We acknowledge that the way learning is designed and delivered is fundamental to a positive learning experience.

Actions we will undertake to facilitate positive learning experiences include:

1. Encourage students to seek support when they need it and work to eliminate stigma or discrimination associated with mental health.
2. Continue to provide reasonable adjustments related to mental health.
3. Address challenges that affect underrepresented and disadvantaged student groups, such as care experienced students, carers, Black, Asian and minority ethnic students, and disabled students.
4. Continue to provide discretionary funding to address barriers to study.
5. Support student transitions through critical phases in their studies and beyond, promoting success and celebrating achievement.

DOMAIN 2: SUPPORT

Demand for mental health support among students and staff has increased significantly.

The OU in Scotland currently offers a wide range of services to support good mental health.

Actions we will undertake to ensure students are supported in their mental health include:

1. Raise students and staff awareness of support available.
2. Ensure signposting to services and resources through appropriate channels.
3. Ensure that safeguarding procedures are followed when concerns arise.
4. Continue our partnership with Togetherall and increase awareness of counselling service to staff to enable referral.
5. Ensure Scotland-specific information and resources are developed to support students.
6. Involve students, staff and other stakeholders in co-creating accessible services and resources.
7. Improve links with external agencies and community-based providers.
8. Provide tailored information for groups of students with particular support needs to help address specific challenges and promote inclusion.

DOMAIN 3: WORK

Good mental health is central to staff engagement, productivity and creativity.

We acknowledge the relationship between staff and student mental health.

Actions we will undertake to support our staff in their mental health and in supporting students include:

1. Provide appropriate staff training relating to student mental health and wellbeing.
2. Support the roll-out of our Mental Health First Aiders network.
3. Influence and engage with cross-institution initiatives to support the mental health and wellbeing of our students and staff.
4. Foster collaboration and support between students and staff.
5. Continue to promote opportunities to support staff wellbeing.

DOMAIN 4: LIVE

A holistic approach to mental health requires that the places that people learn, live, work and play are supportive to health and wellbeing.

We acknowledge what is distinct about part-time distance study while seeking to promote healthy cultures and environments for our students to learn and live.

Actions we will undertake to promote healthy cultures and provide safe and supportive communities include:

1. Maintain strong and visible leadership in promoting good mental health to students and staff.
2. Engage students meaningfully in the development of healthy cultures and communities.
3. Use appropriate and inclusive language across all our platforms and services.
4. Foster the relationship between the OU in Scotland and the OU Students Association and ensure effective student representation for Scotland.
5. Support events, activities and initiatives for students in Scotland to foster an improved sense of belonging.

HOW WILL WE MEASURE OUR PROGRESS?

To help achieve our strategic vision, and to make sure this agreement will have its intended impact, we will build evaluation into each action.

This will help us ensure that our approaches to the mental health and wellbeing of our students and staff are evidence-based, responsive and effective.

We will draw on a range of evidence, such as:

Feedback from students

Students consultations; surveys, such as the annual National Student Survey; evaluations from events and activities; interviews and focus groups.

Qualitative data

Reviews of resources, content and curricula; research studies; staff feedback and reflection; post-training evaluation.

Quantitative data

Numbers of staff trained; students accessing information, support and therapies; analytics from Student Home, the Help Centre and other OU systems.

We recognise that there are still significant gaps in our knowledge of mental health and wellbeing in higher education.

We will work together with sector partners and national networks, as well as within our own institution and communities to address these gaps and develop best practices.

RELEVANT STRATEGIES

OU IN SCOTLAND

OU in Scotland Outcome Agreement (2020-23)

Access, Participation and Success (Scotland) Plan (2020)

OU in Scotland Business Plan (2020-21)

Corporate Parenting Plan (2020)

Gender Action Plan (2018)

OU

OU Strategic Plan (to 21/22)

Student and Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2020-23)

OU Student Charter

Access, Participation and Success Strategy (2020-25)

Access and Participation Plan (2020-25)

OU Equality Scheme (2018-22)

Student Carer Policy (2020)

British Sign Language Plan

FURTHER INFORMATION

Open University Students Association

OU Students Association Support

OU Students Association Community

Stepchange: mentally healthy universities

NUS Scotland Think Positive

Togetherall



The Open
University

SCOTLAND



FIND OUT MORE

Visit www.open.ac.uk/scotland
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