



The Open  
University

SCOTLAND

# STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AGREEMENT SUMMARY

The Open University in Scotland  
The Open University Students Association  
2021–23



## Introduction

The Open University (OU) is committed to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of our students and staff. We are the only university operating across the four nations of the UK and our key strategic priority is student success. Our students come from a diverse range of backgrounds and may have many responsibilities and challenges. We are committed to supporting them to reach their full potential.

This 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 health and wellbeing of our students. It supports the strategic vision of the OU's [Student and Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#).

The SMHA has been developed with support from the [National Union of Students \(NUS\) Scotland Think Positive Project](#).

**This is a condensed version of the SMHA and the full document can be accessed [here](#).**



# Working in Partnership



The mental health and wellbeing of our students and staff continue to remain of strategic importance to all of us at the Open University in Scotland. This Agreement is the result of our continued partnership with the OU Students Association for the benefit of all our students. Alongside the OU Staff and Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, it provides a framework for implementation of actions and interventions which appropriately support the wellbeing, ambitions and goals of our students, particularly during this time of continued uncertainty.



**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 continued partnership 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. We are committed to supporting initiatives that enable students to access helpful resources that allows them to talk about their mental health without fear of judgement or discrimination.

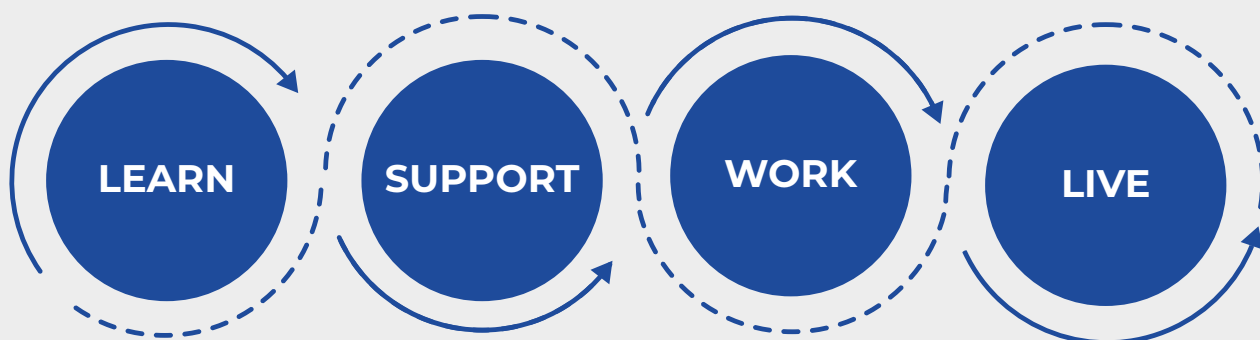


**Sarah Jones**

President, Open University Students Association

# Stepchange Framework: DOMAINS

We have developed this Agreement in accordance with Universities UK's Stepchange Framework (2020). This sees universities as places that promote mental health and wellbeing as a strategic priority. The Stepchange model comprises four domains: **Learn, Support, Work, Live**. We have used the four domains to structure the actions in this Agreement.



## DOMAIN 1: LEARN

Through our open entry policy – whereby our students can study with us at undergraduate level with no requirement for previous qualifications – the OU in Scotland has enabled 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. Continue to offer information and advice on options such as deferring, taking a study break or changing your module or qualification through our Student Support Team.
2. Continue to provide discretionary funding, bursaries and funds to address barriers to study.
3. Support student transitions through critical phases in their studies and beyond including induction, on-course support, graduation and careers and employment.
4. Implement targeted initiatives to improve access and participation of underrepresented and disadvantaged student groups, such as care experienced students, carers, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students, and disabled students.
5. Continue to provide a named contact and a dedicated email to our care-experienced students and our students who are carers.
6. Develop initiatives to provide devices to students in digital poverty to improve access to education.
7. Contribute to the development of policies, strategies and plans that support our students' wellbeing, learning and success.
8. Work with our central academics to embed mental health into curricula.
9. Involve students, staff and other stakeholders in co-creating accessible services and resources.
10. Provide free learning resources on our OpenLearn platform to support study skills, mental health and inclusion, such as the LGBTQ and Race and Ethnicity Hubs.

## DOMAIN 2: SUPPORT

Demand for mental health support among university students has increased significantly in recent years (NUS, 2018). The OU in Scotland currently offers support for students experiencing mental health issues and disability. We also provide information, advice and signposting to support student wellbeing.

### **Actions we will undertake to ensure students are supported include:**

1. Raise student and staff awareness of support available through themed events, such as 'Big Blether' events.
2. Review and refresh the OU in Scotland website to create better access to relevant resources including a dedicated Mental Health and Wellbeing page.
3. Develop Scotland-specific information and resources to support students.
4. Provide tailored information for groups of students with particular support needs to help address challenges and promote inclusion on the [Student Help Centre](#) and the OU in Scotland [website](#).
5. Signpost students to services and resources through contact with the Student Support Team, and on our website and social media.
6. Encourage students to seek support when they need it and work to eliminate stigma or discrimination associated with mental health, through targeted communications and interventions, such as around exam time.
7. Continue to offer specific support and reasonable adjustments for students with health conditions or disabilities through our specialist disability advisors.
8. Ensure that safeguarding procedures are followed when concerns arise.
9. Continue our partnership with the [Togetherall](#) online mental health support service for a minimum of one year, following which we will evaluate provision.
10. Increase staff awareness of counselling services to enable student referral.
11. Provide enhanced student support through our Personal Learning Advisers, in particularly for underrepresented and disadvantaged students.
12. Employ a dedicated Student Mental Health Coordinator in Scotland.
13. Recruit a specialist Mental Health Adviser in Scotland, as part of a UK-wide team, to triage support for students with enduring mental health difficulties and students in crisis and make referrals to our counselling service provided by [Togetherall](#).



## 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. Raise staff awareness of the Student Mental Health Agreement and its actions.
4. Influence and engage with cross-institution initiatives to support the mental health and wellbeing of our students and staff.
5. Foster collaboration and support between students and staff, such as student-led events and student voice initiatives.
6. Continue to promote opportunities that support staff wellbeing.
7. Provide relevant learning and development opportunities for our Personal Learning Advisers to better recognise referral needs relating to mental health and to underrepresented and disadvantaged student groups.
8. Promote relevant open educational resources to OU staff and the wider higher education sector to improve their awareness and understanding of underrepresented and disadvantaged student groups.



## DOMAIN 4: LIVE

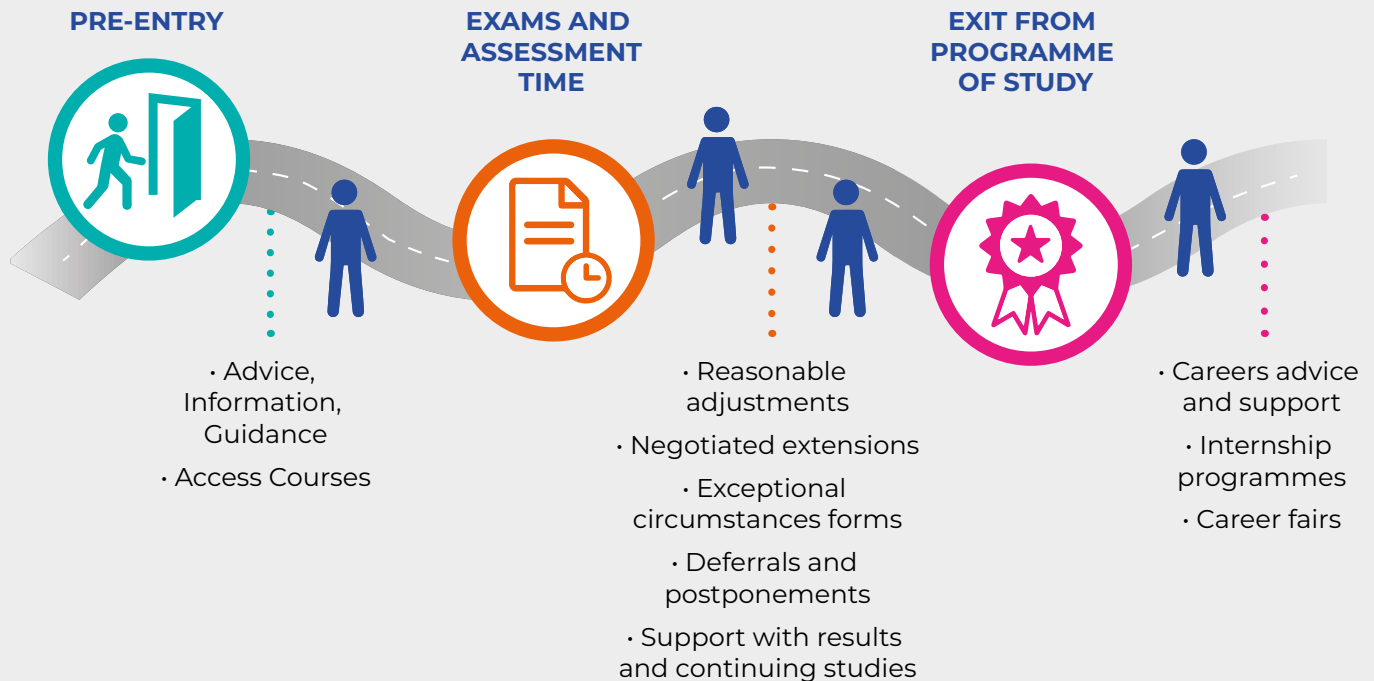
A holistic approach to mental health requires that the places that people learn, live, work and play are supportive to health and wellbeing. We acknowledge what is distinct about part-time distance study while seeking to promote healthy cultures and environments for our students to learn and live.

### **Actions we will take to promote healthy cultures and provide safe and supportive communities include:**

1. Continue to promote good mental health and wellbeing to students and staff.
2. Engage students meaningfully in the development of healthy cultures and communities through co-creating events and initiatives.
3. Use appropriate and inclusive language across all our platforms and services.
4. Continue to promote anti-bullying and harassment policies that encourage kindness and interactions which foster respect and dignity for all.
5. Continue to review and simplify processes which might place an administrative burden on students, such as requesting assignment extensions, rest breaks during exams or study breaks.
6. Foster the relationship between the OU in Scotland and the OU Students Association and ensure effective student representation for Scotland.
7. Continue to promote the [OU Student Association Peer Support](#) initiative on our Mental Health and Wellbeing [webpage](#).
8. Support events, activities and initiatives for students in Scotland to foster an improved sense of belonging.
9. Develop and maintain relationships with external agencies, such as the [NUS](#) and [Scottish Association for Mental Health](#).
10. Promote our students' success and celebrate their achievement, for example through virtual graduations.
11. Continue to offer support to our students for three years after graduation, through our [Careers and Employability Services](#).

# The Student Journey Pinch Points

Recent research findings from the NUS show that certain points during the student learning journey are particularly important to mental health and wellbeing. In attempting to identify the best ways to respond and intervene, we considered which of those 'pinch' points might have a significant effect on our students.



## Progress in 2021

Throughout 2020, we worked hard on reviewing our activities that support the mental health and wellbeing of our students. OU in Scotland staff were involved in the development of the OU-wide [Student and Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#). This informed the development of our first Student Mental Health Agreement and is the basis of our actions for our SMHA 2021-23. The full version of our current SMHA can be found [here](#).

## How do we measure our progress?

To make sure this agreement will have its intended impact, we build evaluation into each action and draw on a range of feedback, such as student voice, annual student consultations and event evaluations. To find out more about how our students continue to inform the development of our SMHA and what they have to say about our activities, read our full [SMHA 2021-23](#).



Due to studying online and at a distance, it is good to have opportunities to connect with other students and staff of the OU - helps to feel connected and part of a community. I'm new to the OU in February, so there were some handy tips and links that have been useful to me.



**Student at Big Blether event**  
Spring 2021





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