



The Open  
University

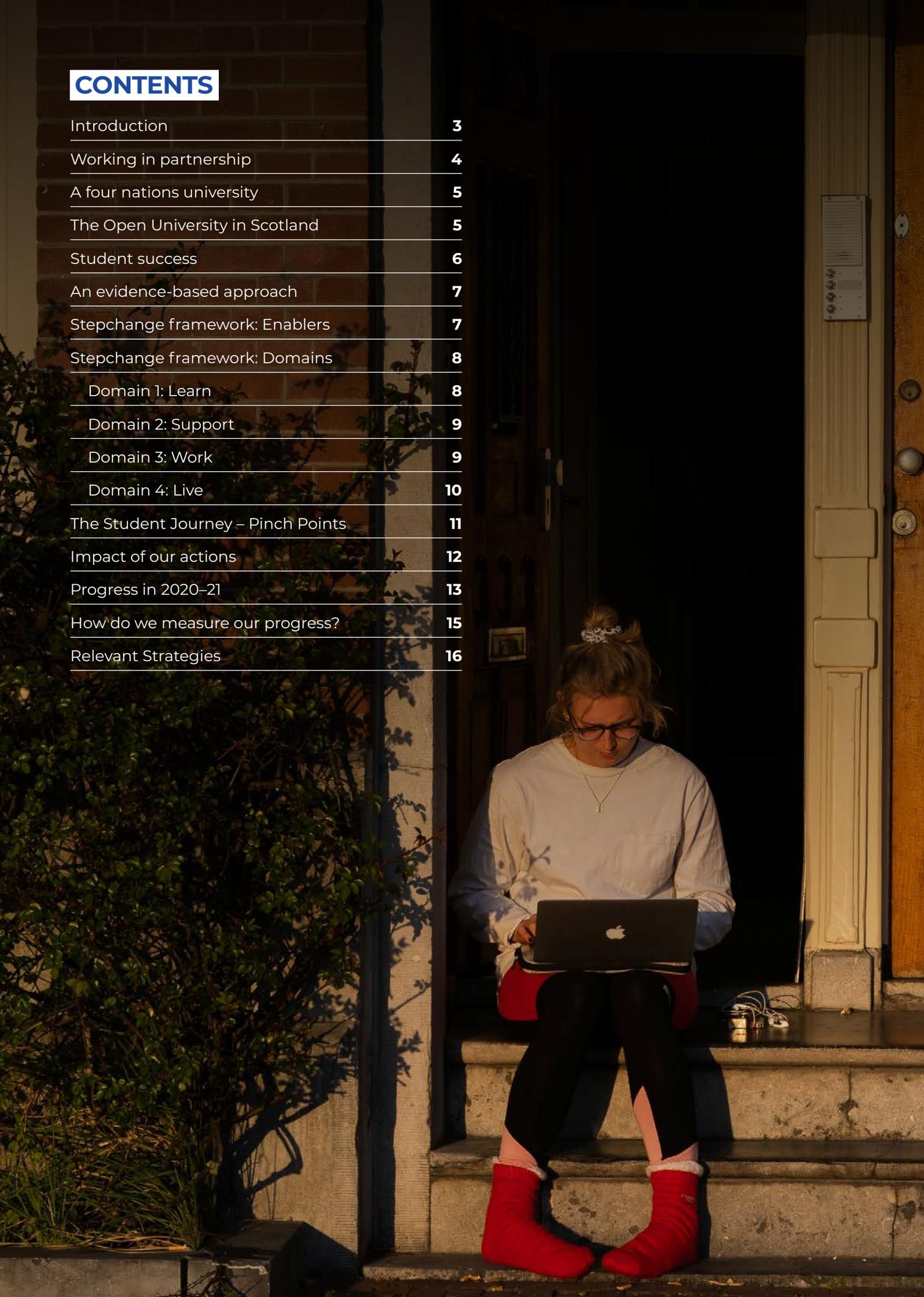
SCOTLAND

# STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AGREEMENT

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

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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, 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 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

# A four nations university

The Open University (OU) 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.

## The Open University in Scotland

Our students come from a diverse range of backgrounds, and may have many responsibilities and challenges, such as caring, parenting, full or part-time work, low income or disability. In Scotland, over half of our students study for free, qualifying for funding support via the [Part-Time Fee Grant](#).

To ensure that we offer our students an environment where they can learn effectively, stay on course and achieve positive outcomes, we will continue to develop innovative methods to engage and support them. This is of particular importance in the context of the current Covid-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, the Open University in Scotland has continued to provide online and distance learning to more than 22,000 students.

To alleviate challenges brought on by the pandemic and to improve digital inclusion, we have disbursed Scottish Government funds, such as the Covid-19 Student Assistance Fund and the Digital Inclusion Fund, and we introduced new bursaries for carers and care-experienced students. These have provided vital help with digital equipment, access to broadband, utilities and food costs, home schooling and other necessities. With support from the Scottish Funding Council, we have also provided opportunities for people facing redundancy and furlough, including micro-credentials (short, accredited courses) and funded places.

Research from [Mind](#) shows that mental health problems for UK students have increased since the beginning of lockdown in March 2020, with nearly three quarters (73%) saying that their mental health had declined. In a recent survey by the Open University, 4 in 10 students said they had been impacted by mental health issues during the pandemic and the same amount by a lack of motivation.

This Agreement sets out the support and services that students can access to support their mental health and wellbeing while studying with the OU and the actions the Open University in Scotland and the OU Students Association will take to improve support. Some of these actions relate to support on an OU-wide level, while some are specific to students in Scotland.



**23% of OU students live in remote or rural areas**



**19% of new undergraduates live in Scotland's 20 most disadvantaged areas**



**24% of OU students in Scotland declare a disability**



**51% of our students work full time**

# Student success



Everything provided so far has been excellent, nice to see how supportive of the students the OU is being even outside of studying.



**OU student on Virtual Wellbeing resources,**  
Summer 2020

The Open University's key strategic priority is **student success**. Support for mental health and wellbeing is essential for our students to effectively participate in learning and to achieve their study goals.

Research by the NUS in Scotland reveals that mental health conditions are the second most common form of disability declared by university students and that low levels of mental wellbeing amongst students have been reported ([Improving Mental Health and Wellbeing support for Scotland's Students Research Report, 2021](#)). In the Open University in Scotland, each year around 10% of students declare a mental health condition. We are participating in Universities Scotland's Thriving Learners research to better understand student mental health.

**Through this Agreement, we commit to providing a range of services and initiatives that support our students to thrive in their studies with us.**



# An evidence-based 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. 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.**

**Mental health and wellbeing: a dual continuum.**

*Source: Stepchange: Mentally Healthy Universities, Universities UK*

## Stepchange framework: Enablers

The Stepchange framework suggests five enablers to achieve a whole university approach, and these will inform how we implement this Agreement. The enablers are:

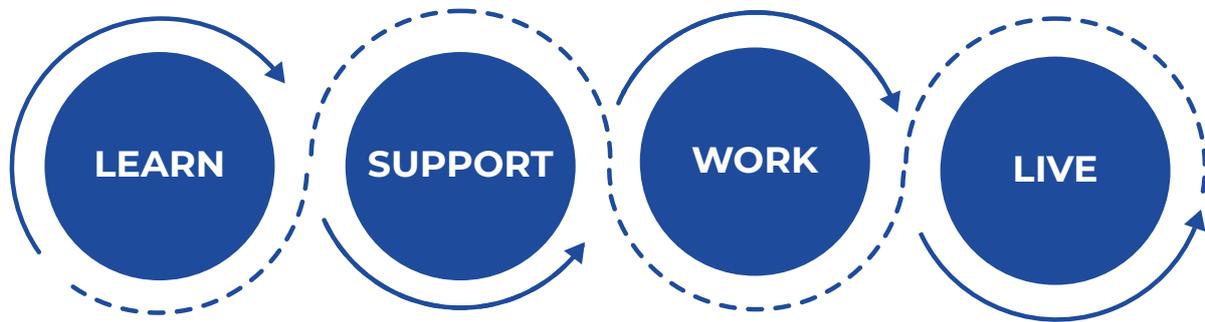
- **Leadership** – strong and visible strategic leadership
- **Co-production** – developing approaches with students and with staff
- **Information sharing** – effective and appropriate sharing within universities, for example between academic tutors and support staff, with the NHS and with family or friends
- **Inclusivity** – recognising and support the diverse needs of students and staff
- **Research & innovation** – taking an evidenced informed approach; evaluating approaches and working across disciplines
- **Implementation** – integrated, organisation-wide approach to achieve significant cultural and structural change

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

# Stepchange framework: Domains

The Stepchange model is formed around 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.

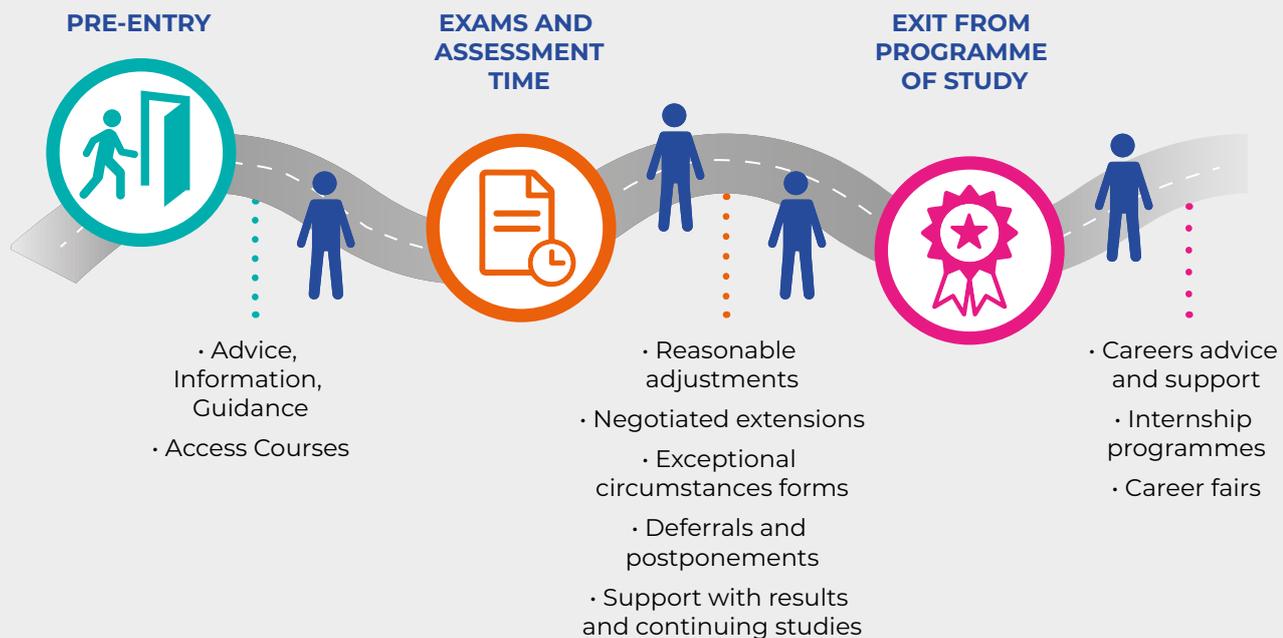
## Domain 4: Live

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.

**Transitions into higher education:** As we are unique in having no entrance requirements, we ensure that our student transitions into higher education are supported and that students start at the level that is right for them. We do this through robust information, advice and guidance we provide at the initial stages and through the provision of access courses, to ensure that students are studying at an appropriate level. As part of their induction, we suggest new students undertake the [Being an OU Student](#) course on OpenLearn. We continue to support our students through their introductory period of learning to ensure that they can progress to the next stage.

**Exams and assessments:** In every academic institution, these are critical points. At the Open University, we spread out our assessments across the modules for easier distribution and to lessen the burden on our students. We provide an overview of each module, as well as detailed assignment and exam information, prior to the start of the course to enable students to plan around their lives and commitments. Additionally, our students are supported by their tutors and educational advisers to access the support they need, such as alternative exam arrangements for carers and disabled students.

Exam and EMA results day can be a stressful time for students, particularly when their results have not met their expectations. We recognise the impact this can have on their wellbeing and our advisors are on hand to provide support and discuss options. We will promote this support at results time through social media and other channels.

**Transitioning out of their programme of study:** In order to support the career, personal and continuing learning goals of our students, we provide a Careers and Employability Service that students can access for three years following the completion of their studies. We also provide career fairs and internship programmes to prepare our students to achieve their future goals.

# Impact of our actions

The **influencers** of mental health and wellbeing are complex and highly individual, ranging from social factors, psychological factors, to situational factors, all of which can change over a person's lifetime.

Research has identified a number of **contributory factors** to students' ability to maintain their mental health and wellbeing, such as financial security, programme of study, social interaction and support, health, resilience. The combinations of influencers and contributory factors can affect the lives of students in a variety of ways.

In order to best respond to changing circumstances and to effectively support our students through their journey, we have identified four types of impact which are central to ensuring the actions we take address the challenges our students are likely to face during their time with us.



- **Financial actions**

A recent study carried out by NUS Scotland has shown that lack of financial security and financial pressures can cause major stress and significantly impact on students' mental wellbeing. In order to mitigate these, we continue to provide scholarships, bursaries, funds and discretionary funding to support our students to achieve.

- **Environmental actions**

It is widely recognised that our environment and those around us all play an important part in the way we respond to life's challenges. As a distance learning university, our challenge is to create a virtual environment that supports our students' journey. We do this through the language we use in relation to mental health and wellbeing, the timing of communications, our leadership and the policies, plans and strategies we put in place to support our students, particularly those who may be underrepresented and disadvantaged.

- **Resource provision**

As a four-nations university, we benefit from a wealth of academic and research expertise, as well as free open learning resources. As a Scottish university, we recognise the need to provide information relevant to the specific needs of students resident in Scotland. We do this by creating nation-specific resources that enable students to seek support in relation to their mental health and wellbeing, and tailored resources for staff working with groups of students who have specific needs.

- **Practical solutions (non-financial)**

The circumstances of our students' lives often demand practical responses in order to mitigate factors that impact their mental health and wellbeing. We recognise the importance of responding appropriately to our students' needs. Our trained educational advisers help students access appropriate support, such as assignment extensions, reasonable adjustments and materials in various formats (print, audio, BSL) for those with additional support needs. We also provide targeted support and interventions for our underrepresented and disadvantaged students, such as Personal Learning Advisors.

## Progress in 2020–21

Throughout 2020, we have 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 SMHA and is the basis of our actions for our SMHA 2021-23.

In early 2020, we formed a working group which included expertise drawn from across the entire University. We had valuable input from colleagues working directly with students to support their learning, mental health and wellbeing, from experts on embedding mental health in the curriculum, from colleagues working with underrepresented and disadvantaged groups. Our first SMHA was launched in October 2020 and it built on a range of initiatives to support student and staff mental health and wellbeing.



As a care-experienced person, I'm aware of how difficult it can be to not only decide to continue education after leaving school but also how to go about it, where to find help and the barriers that can be put in place whilst trying to complete those studies.

Just to see the change that someone's believing in you, someone's got your back, and they're providing opportunities, they're supporting you, they're there to chat whenever you want, I think it makes a big, big difference, because a lot of Care-Experienced individuals will come to college or university or wherever they're transitioning into next, and the relationships have broken down or the trust has broken down. And the trust can't be built back up overnight. I think once you build the relationships up with people and they've got a wee bit of confidence behind them, there's no stopping them.



**OU student, member of Student Reference Group**

The OU has continued to partner with Togetherall (formerly Big White Wall), to provide a free to access, online mental health and wellbeing resource for students, available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Using additional funding from the Scottish Government, The OU in Scotland has been able to extend this partnership with Togetherall to offer a virtual therapy service to our students in Scotland. Students have been 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** for a range of initiatives which deliver on our actions in the SMHA.

During lockdown, we have worked with our Students Association to create a sense of community and reduce isolation through initiatives such as the Virtual Wellbeing Packs, where we sent links to activities and resources to support wellbeing during lockdown to all OU in Scotland students, and the Big Blether series of events for students on mental health and wellbeing themes that allow them to meet and chat to other students and staff.

Both of these projects were part-funded by the NUS Scotland's Think Positive Project.

In order to improve access to our resources, we have been working on refreshing our website, which we launched prior to the start of the new academic year. In addition, with funding from the Scottish Funding Council, we have created a new Student Mental Health Coordinator role, tasked with coordinating, implementing and evaluating activity which supports the mental health and wellbeing of our students at the Open University in Scotland.



“

I find the education section particularly useful and think it would be nice to have more of that; perhaps some lectures if possible.

”

**OU student on Virtual Wellbeing resources,**  
Summer 2020

“

It was a good session that gave me the opportunity to get to know other students and faculty. Also, it helps to know that other students are going through similar experiences and you can support each other.

”

**Student at Big Blether event,**  
Summer 2020

## How do we measure our progress?



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,**  
Summer 2020

To help achieve our strategic vision, and to make sure this agreement will have its intended impact, we build evaluation into each action. The actions we have delivered on in the first cycle of our SMHA have been followed by student feedback, which has informed every subsequent action.

This has helped us ensure that our approaches to the mental health and wellbeing of our students and staff are evidence-based, responsive and effective. We recognise the importance of continuing to improve our evaluation and research.

We will draw on a range of evidence, such as feedback from students; OU Students Association consultations; surveys, such as the annual National Student Survey; evaluations from events and activities; interviews and focus groups; research on mental health and wellbeing conducted by our academic colleagues and experts.

We will work to review resources, content and curricula, collaborate with partners in research studies and undertake post activity evaluation to obtain relevant qualitative data. We will continue to monitor numbers of staff trained, numbers of students visiting our website, accessing support and obtain quantitative data from our systems. We will use quantitative and qualitative data to help us better understand the wellbeing needs of our students and respond accordingly.

In addition to internally gathered evidence, in developing this SMHA, we have relied on data resulting from the 2021 report commissioned by NUS Scotland on Improving Mental Health and Wellbeing support for Scotland's Students Research Report. We continue to collaborate with partners to ensure that our approaches are based on robust evidence. We will reflect on the findings of the Universities Scotland Thriving Learners Study when they are available.

We recognise that understanding of mental health and wellbeing in higher education is an ever-changing area and although there are still significant gaps in our knowledge, we commit to working collaboratively with colleagues within our own institution, as well as with sector partners and national networks, as well as our students 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 \(2021\)](#)

[OU in Scotland Business Plan \(2020-21\)](#)

[Corporate Parenting Plan \(2020\)](#)

[Gender Action Plan \(2019\)](#)

## OU

[OU Strategic Plan \(to 2021/22\)](#)

[Staff and Student 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](#)



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