



# Together for Students

**Making Student Mental Health  
a Strategic Priority**

**UNIHEADS**

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## **Introduction**

UK universities enrol over 2 million students each year. Amongst the student population, levels of poor mental health have soared to record highs. Students are the unhappiest and least satisfied sub-group within the entire UK population. Student suicide rates continue to rise with tragic consequences that leave families devastated. Too many young lives are being cut short due to poor mental health.

Despite best efforts, student support services within universities are incapable of adequately meeting student mental health needs. Current provision is lacking innovation and highly reactive. The majority of HE institutions rely solely upon reactive intervention-based services such as in-person counselling that come with significant wait-times. Subsequently, the levels of student demand have rapidly outgrown the capacity of support available. In 2017, 71% of higher education institutions in the UK had no clear strategy for reducing student mental health problems and suicide rates <sup>[1]</sup>. Many of those experiencing poor mental health are largely unaware of available support; only 1 in 3 students claimed to be aware of the mental health support systems in place at their university <sup>[2]</sup>.

Universities have a duty of care to their students under the 2010 Equality Act and Consumer Rights Regulations <sup>[3]</sup>. However, institutions face major challenges when attempting to tackle mental health and fulfil this duty. Key issues faced are:

- Student understanding of mental health and knowledge of the support pathways available is low.
- The demands on support resources outweigh the current support capacity.
- Existing proactive services are under-utilised, advertised scarcely and fail to engage students.

As a result, the majority of students who need support with their mental health are either unable to access it at a time when they need it, or in many cases, they simply do not seek help at all.

UNIHEADS was developed with stretched university support services in mind. We aim to help universities solve this problem by making student mental health a strategic, whole university priority. Providing proactive, preventative mental health training for students and staff is proven to yield successful outcomes, which is the principle upon which our next-gen solution is built<sup>[4,5]</sup>.

Our solution delivers:

- Training for every student in the essentials of good mental health & wellbeing and how to support their peers.

- Training for every staff member in how to support a student struggling with their mental health or experiencing crisis.

In the next sections of the paper we will explore the scale of the student mental health problem and detail how our solution not only makes moral and financial sense, but also complies with legislation and best practice guidelines.

## **The Scale of Problem**

### **Impact on students**

The student population is a vulnerable population. With 75% of mental health conditions diagnosed by 24 years of age, students are in the peak zone for condition onset<sup>[1]</sup>. Since 2018, over 57,000 UK students have disclosed a mental health condition<sup>[4]</sup>.

Year on year, students experience declining levels of wellbeing; they score lower on satisfaction, happiness, anxiety and self-worth when compared to the general population of the same age<sup>[5]</sup>. Subsequently, a five-fold increase in mental health problems amongst the student population has been observed over the last decade<sup>[1]</sup>. Amongst students today, 78% indicate that they have experienced mental health problems at some point during their studies<sup>[6,8]</sup> and of those diagnosed with a mental health condition, less than half have disclosed this to their university<sup>[2]</sup>.

Poor mental health does not just impact the quality of life amongst students, it is taking the lives of students. In the most severe cases, students have tragically taken their own lives. Worryingly, levels of student suicide have increased despite a reduction within the general UK population<sup>[1]</sup>. Suicide is now the leading cause of death among young people aged 20-34 years in the UK<sup>[7]</sup>.

### **Student Mental Health Triggers**

Poor mental health is the byproduct of the multi-faceted nature of student mental health and subsequently, creates a complex challenge for HE institutions to address.

- **Financial Burdens** - Students face the stress of unprecedented financial burden from student loans, increased tuition fees and the responsibility to manage personal finances accordingly<sup>[6]</sup>. Living costs were identified as the major financial concern for students. Students also report that they feel that they need better, targeted advice on the financial implications of taking out student loans<sup>[9]</sup>. In addition, students often take up paid work while studying due to financial pressures; a further a risk factor for poor mental health<sup>[4]</sup>.

- **Academic Pressures** - With almost half of the working-age population having attended university at some stage, it is becoming increasingly desirable for students to graduate with higher grades. Fear of academic failure is reported by 77% of students and 63% indicate feeling overwhelmed by the stress to perform [4]. Four of the most commonly cited causes of student stress are triggered by academic pressures [6].
- **Transitional Vulnerabilities** - Students are particularly vulnerable during transitions at university. During this time, many students will be living away from home for the first time and notably absent from their established support networks. Consequently, homesickness, social withdrawal and isolation are common within the student population [4]. The highest levels of loneliness are reported amongst first-year undergraduates, international students and post-graduate students [8]. Equally, amongst graduating students, uncertainty and transition into the workforce population expose vulnerabilities further.
- **Health Behaviours** - Adopting healthy lifestyle behaviours can be challenging for students as they begin to take greater responsibility for their own health. The health benefits of high quality sleep, nutrition, physical activity and socialisation are often taken for granted and replaced with counter-productive behaviours. When faced with times of struggle, 45% of students report to having engaged in excessive alcohol consumption or substance misuse as a coping strategy [8]. Explicit education for students around maintaining positive mental health through addressing health behaviours is now a core component of best practice guidance for HE institutions.
- **Social Climate** - Social integration has been recognised as a key feature of student success and retention [8]. In many cases, students lead busy and fulfilling social lives. However, some students may change their identity in order to fit in, be 'peer pressured' into late nights, substance/alcohol misuse and engage in other high-risk behaviours that have detrimental impacts upon their physical and mental health. Equally, social isolation is very common within this population. Students have less access to their support networks and face challenges when establishing new ones as they acclimatise to university life [8].
- **Social Media** - Social media is a major influence on the mental health of modern-day students. The vast majority of young people are habitual social media users. Concern has been well documented regarding the impact of social media on mental health [10]. Excessive use has been strongly associated with multiple determinants of poor mental health in students [8]. Typically, social isolation, low self-esteem, negative body image, cyberbullying and online harassment are observed alongside the unrestricted access to mental health propaganda portraying young people as a 'snowflake generation' and dangerous language around suicide glamorisation.
- **Equality & Diversity** - More broadly, with respect and tolerance very much a 'work in progress' at a

societal level, consequences are emerging within the student population. In particular, there are groups at significant risk that are crucial sub-populations to address with a university mental health strategy. International students face additional barriers because of differences in culture and language, social isolation and lower awareness of where to seek support [4]. LGBT students are at higher risk of developing poor mental health, reflective of the wider population. They report the lowest quality of life; 55% have experienced suicidal thoughts during their studies compared to 33% of the heterosexual student population [4]. As a result, LGBT students are at higher risk of dropping out of university [8]

## **Impact on Universities**

Student support services in place within universities face insurmountable demand; 94% of UK universities report increases in demand for student support [1] resulting in average counselling access wait times of 43 days for students [11]. Concerningly, only 1 in 3 students have indicated that they are aware of where to access mental health support within their university [4] which suggests that as mental health awareness begins to grow, demand on support services will follow suit. For HE institutions, significant impacts arise from poor mental health within a student population.

- **Retention** - Students with a mental health condition are 68% more likely to drop out of their studies early [12]. Knowing where and how to access support plays an important role in student retention and demonstrates the importance of well-communicated student mental health strategies that can signpost support effectively [2]. Since 2009 there has been a 210% increase in the number of students leaving undergraduate course within the first year [13]. Equally, unaddressed instances of poor mental health issues are also associated with higher drop-out rates [2]. The upper limit for annual undergraduate tuition fees is £9,250 [14]. This equates to direct losses of £27,750 per loss of an undergraduate student. High drop out rates threaten to destabilise higher education institutions financially.
- **Attraction** - Appealing to prospective students and their families is a strategic priority for universities. UK universities are subject to consumer rights regulations and must provide accurate representations to prospective students of the provision for mental health support that will be in place for them throughout their studies [3]. Institutions, failing to offer robust and effective student mental health support diminish their capacity to build trust amongst parents of prospective students and reduce attractiveness. As an indicator of how significant mental health provision is to families, 94% of students and families opted into a voluntary suicide prevention system being pioneered by the University of Bristol in 2019 [15], demonstrating concerns of students and parents alike.

- **Reputation** - Enhanced reputations will not only increase the volume of applications and subsequent student intake numbers, but it will also enhance the calibre of those applicants. Mirroring the trend amongst employees within the working population; applicants are placing a high value upon mental health, well-being and satisfaction. Attracting the highest talent is influenced by being a sector leader in this area; a byproduct of high satisfaction ratings from current/former students.
- **Academic Performance** - Students with poor mental health associate strongly with underperformance in their studies [2]. Learning, memory, concentration, focus, attention, language processing are all influenced significantly by poor mental health [6]. Furthermore, poor mental amongst the student population is typically visible through low attendance and failure to comply with assessment deadlines.
- **Graduate Prospects** - Universities have a duty to support and prepare students for a successful transition into the working population. Increasingly, graduate employers are seeking to recruit for mentally fit and resilient applicants. This has been evidenced by the significant and forward-thinking investment that Goldman Sachs has placed in student mental health through the 'Mentally Healthy Universities Programme' in partnership with the charity, Mind [16]. Universities falling short in this area face reducing their appeal to high calibre students and future investment from employers seeking to recruit their graduates.

## **Current Guidelines & Approaches**

There is an over-reliance on the current deficit model of support within the sector. Reactive intervention strategies are outdated, oversubscribed and in desperate need of new thinking; only 29% of universities enhance their mandatory student support services through explicit mental health and wellbeing strategies<sup>[1]</sup>.

In 2018 new guidance was issued by Universities UK (UUK) [5,17]. The Step Change framework is dedicated to the prevention of student suicide and the promotion of good mental health. Best practice guidance has been developed to assist HE institutions with understanding how they can adopt mental health as a strategic whole university priority and implement effective systems that seek to prevent poor mental health as a first step.

In addition, UUK has developed explicitly guidance asking all higher education leaders to make a commitment to suicide-safer universities<sup>[17]</sup>. The framework aims to mitigate student suicide risk through a focus on prevention. The guidance sets out the steps needed to create a suicide-safer campus community by promoting a preventative focus

within the overarching institutional mental health strategy. The guidance articulates the necessity of engaging students and staff, with a particular emphasis on personal tutors and anyone with a student-facing role.

This has been complemented further by the release of the University Mental Health Charter <sup>[18]</sup> in 2019; created by thousands of staff and students to help support everyone in higher education to thrive. The Charter provides a set of principles to support universities in making mental health a university-wide priority. In 2020 this will be supplemented with the Charter Award Scheme, aimed to recognise and reward universities promoting good mental health and demonstrate good practice. Our solutions are underpinned by this guidance and aim to support universities with achieving best practice in student mental health.

## **Solutions**

The UNIHEADS mission is to educate every student so that they know how to look after their mental health, feel safe to talk openly about it, have the knowledge of where to seek support, and the confidence to ask for it.

Our training has been developed with key stakeholder groups that include world-leading health academics, mental health professionals, students and university staff in order to deliver an engaging and preventative educational tool that rapidly extends the reach and influence that institutions have when strategically integrating whole university mental health provision.

UNIHEADS platforms for students and staff provide university leaders with a simple and scalable digital solution to help build the foundations of a highly effective whole university mental health strategy by supporting all members of the university population in developing their awareness of student mental health and the support systems that they can access.

UNIHEADS platforms are built bespoke to each institution to ensure our partners have the most powerful and accessible resource available to reach their entire audience. In contrast to existing methods, our preventative training educates students and their immediate support networks on campus.

Using our secure e-learning platform, we educate every student on how to maintain their mental health, cope with everyday life and crucially, how to look out for their peers. In addition, we assist the university staff member to develop their understanding of student mental health and how they can effectively support their students in times of need.

## **Benefits**

Our services deliver outcomes for universities, students and parents.

### **Universities**

1. Boost Recruitment & Retention
  - Attracting high calibre students is influenced enormously by your reputation. Raising awareness of your services and supporting student mental health boosts ratings, rankings and appeal.
  - Supporting students with mental wellbeing increases the likelihood of them remaining at university. This saves the university money and protects reputations.
  
2. Reduce Counselling Wait Times
  - Educating students around self care, resilience and mental fitness promotes the maintenance of good mental health and reduces the demands on student support services.
  - Training students how to look out for their friends ensures that peer support becomes a first wave intervention to demands of student services and help to identify high need students.
  
3. Adopt Best Practice Guidelines
  - Get ahead of imminent legislation by directly implementing best practice guidance from:
    - University Mental Health Charter (Details included below)
    - UUK Step Change Framework (Details included below)

### **Students**

- Enhance mental wellbeing
  - Students with good mental health attend regularly, engage in their studies and perform higher academically .
  - Happy, healthy and satisfied students have better university experiences.
  
- Reduce the Risk of Crisis
  - Educating students around key, student-specific mental health influences and effective coping strategies ensures that they are equipped with the knowledge and skills to cope effectively during times of struggle.



- Training students how to spot the warning signs of a friend in crisis, identify the risks and signpost effectively ensures that first wave support arrives at the earliest stage.
- Training for staff ensures that early-wave of support systems are widespread, accessible and knowledge so that students in need are signposted to the right support at the right time.
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## **Parents**

- Peace of Mind
  - Parents can be reassured that their son/daughter are safe, secure and valued whilst at university.
- Smooth Transition
  - Students are educated around how to manage their induction, transitions and progressions through university with confidence, helping reduce homesickness and reduce the risk of poor mental health developing.
- Confidence & Trust
  - Adopting a whole university approach to student mental health and communicating this clearly ensures that parents can place their trust in university prevention and support systems.

## **Best Practice Guidance**

UNIHEADS training is built around best practice guidance. Our services provide a resource that allows you to action the key domains of the Student Mental Health Charter <sup>[18]</sup> and the 6-steps of the UUK Step Change framework <sup>[15]</sup>. Here is how we do it:

### **Student Mental Health Charter (2019)**

#### **Domain 1: Learn**

- “Universities take a whole university approach to transition, embedding measures to support the positive transition of all students across their provision.”
  - **UNIHEADS supports your student induction, transitions, and progressions.**

#### **Domain 2: Support**

- “Universities ensure that support services are appropriately resourced, effective and equally accessible to all students.”
  - **UNIHEADS helps you reduce demands on your support service by educating every student in the mental health essentials and enhancing your digital prevention services.**

### **Domain 3: Work**

- “Universities support staff to develop the confidence and ability to promote positive mental health and respond appropriately to poor mental health, signs of risk, signpost effectively and maintain the safe boundaries of their role.”
  - **UNIHEADS educates all of your student-facing staff (not just academics) in every aspect of supporting student mental health.**

### **Domain 4: Live**

- “Universities promote the mental health of all members of the community through education, proactive interventions to improve wellbeing and taking steps to create a culture in which individuals feel safe and supported to disclose when they are experiencing poor mental health.”
  - **Uniheads gives you the tools to create a proactive and supportive community so that all students can be open about their mental health and compassionate to others.**

### **Enabling Theme: Leadership & Strategy.**

- “Universities have a strategic whole university approach to mental health that is embedded in day to day practice and culture, that is robustly evidence-informed and co-produced with staff and students, seeks to mobilise the whole community and considers mental health across the whole–university”.
  - **UNIHEADS services ensure that you can commit to improving student mental health by adopting a strategic whole university approach.**

### **Enabling Theme: Student Voice & Participation:**

- “ Universities work in partnership with students and staff to create a culture that supports good wellbeing and ensure that peer support interventions are safe, appropriately resourced and well–managed.”

- **UNIHEADS has been co-developed student stakeholders to ensure you have robust peer support networks.**

## **UUK Step Change Framework (2017)**

### **Step 1: Leadership**

- "University leadership should set the character and tone of the whole institution's approach to mental health, characterising it as a strategic priority"
  - **UNIHEADS utilises next-gen digital technologies to remove access barriers and ensure your strategy and support reaches everyone.**

### **Step 2: Data**

- "Universities should address any gaps in provision to ensure the effectiveness of current care/support and deploy evidenced interventions for whole population prevention and to raise awareness "
  - **UNIHEADS has been developed in partnership with world-leading academics, mental health experts, GPs and students, our services are research-driven. We have partnered with Leeds Beckett University to help ensure everything that we do is underpinned by data and grounded in research.**

### **Step 3: Staff**

- "There should be an explicit allocation of resources for the delivery of services and programmes for staff to support student mental health. professional training will need to take place in mental health 'essentials' and aid the development of an organisation-wide understanding of mental health and wellbeing."
  - **UNIHEADS educates all members of university staff in the mental health 'essentials'. Every aspect of our student and staff training platforms are aligned so that when it comes to mental health, your whole university is on the same page.**

### **Step 4: Prevention**

- "Social, physical and digital environments determine every student's social and educational journey and contribute to mental health and wellbeing. Universities should provide learning and tools for self-care, positive mental health and be trained in recognising the signs and knowing the coping strategies."

- **UNIHEADS educate all of your students with the knowledge and skills needed to maintain good mental health. We enhance your digital environments so that you effortlessly raise mental health awareness campus-wide.**

#### **Step 5: Intervention**

- "Higher education institutions should engage every faculty, department and team of the university in understanding the importance of mental health, to reduce stigma and encourage disclosure and appropriate seeking of help. They should provide appropriate professional training for students and staff to increase mental health understanding, awareness, literacy, and compassion."
  - **UNIHEADS will help you build a culture against stigma. We train students and staff so that you reach your entire audience. Our CLASSmates system ensures that every student knows how to look for out for a friend's mental health.**

#### **Step 6: Support**

- "Universities should configure and resource a range of support services that are effective, accessible, and be based on the best available evidence. Clear signposting to the appropriate support services and peer-to-peer initiatives should be in place. This will require effective staff training, including academic staff."
  - **UNIHEADS next-gen platforms to align with your services and meet your student's needs. We seamlessly integrate your entire suite of student support services into our engaging learning platform.**

### **Conclusion**

UNIHEADS aims to help lead the national student mental health conversation through equipping universities to adopt a strategic, whole university approach to mental health prevention and support. Data reported in the University Mental Health Charter has demonstrated that students experiencing poor mental health are more likely to withdraw and underperform academically. They are less likely to secure higher-level employment or go on to postgraduate study, limiting their future prospects and detriment of university reputations. Our services have been designed with this in mind and to assist university leaders in bringing attention, resources, and expertise to the entire university community. UNIHEADS, together for students.

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