



Aberystwyth University

Student Mental Health & Wellbeing Strategy 2020-2023



Foreword from the Vice-Chancellor

The Aberystwyth University Student Mental Health and Wellbeing strategy has been developed after extensive consultation with the whole of the university community – students and staff and is an excellent example of our partnership working. It has also been developed with key publications from the UUK, HEFCW, and the Welsh Government in mind.

It is a matter of record that there is an increasing incidence of mental health problems among young people in general and those who attend university are similarly affected.

A strategy for Mental Health and Wellbeing is integral to this university. It is important that we all understand how we can promote and protect all aspects of our health and this strategy sets out how that can be achieved as well as the help that will also be provided.

The strategy presented here will be developed and can be used by all of us but of course it is aimed at our students and the whole staff as they provide support and guidance.

Going to university can be a difficult time. It is a time of transition and it is a time of learning. Going to university with a mental health issue can increase the scale of those challenges. Yet university is also a time when life skills can be learned and embedded. I sincerely hope that this strategy will help our students gain the skills and resilience they need for life and I commend it to you.

Thank you for reading



Professor Elizabeth Treasure

Aber SU Foreword

Mental health and wellbeing are something that affects everybody, and with the Wellbeing Officer role usually the most contested role each year it is no surprise how much students care about it and want to help make positive change. Talking over a number of years to students about what they would like to improve about University life, many expressed a desire for improved or larger mental health services. Therefore, when asked to collect student feedback to incorporate into this strategy, I knew it would be a great opportunity to allow students' voices to be heard.

For many students, going to University is their first opportunity to live independently, which can often present its challenges. So, it is important that as a university we have the infrastructure in place to be able to provide guidance and support as our students learn to navigate the world on their own. Obviously, the main reason students go to university is to learn and to obtain a degree, but they are much more likely to achieve this successfully if they are thriving mentally and physically. To support our students' minds academically, we must also support them holistically. University is just as much about learning to look after your mind and body as it is about learning to write essays and ace exams.

To gain feedback from students and find out what they really think is important, we set up a few pop-up stalls with a range of mental health and wellbeing related questions for students to answer. This enabled us to receive suggestions from a range of different students, and it warmed my heart to hear so many students talk passionately on this subject. This collaboration is really important, but what is most important is that we make sure that we keep continuing to shape Aberystwyth University around our students' needs.

The main driver of this strategy is to make every student as happy and healthy as possible and to let all voices be heard. So, the AberSU will continue to work with the University to make sure that this strategy is implemented to improve the quality of our students' lives and to make Aberystwyth University a place that is safe and nurturing to every single student.

Lydia Chilvers,
AberSU Wellbeing Officer, 2019-20







Our Vision

University presents a number of challenges in respect of living and learning in a new and diverse environment and these can have both a positive or negative impact on student mental health and wellbeing.

Working in partnership with our students and staff, the core of this vision and this strategy has been developed in cooperation with the AberSU. As our strategic plan 2018-2023 identifies, a core objective is to:

"Further improve the student experience and to work in close partnership with the Students' Union to keep the student voice at the heart of our activity"

To support our students' positive mental health and wellbeing, our vision is to equip our students with a toolkit of skills that will support them both during and after University and provide them with a range of opportunities to challenge and develop themselves in a supportive environment. We also want our curriculum and assessment methods,

our built environment and key stages of the student journey to have a positive impact on student mental health and wellbeing.

Aberystwyth University has a strong bilingual ethos and a long tradition of supporting teaching and learning through the medium of Welsh. A key objective of our strategic plan 2018-23 states that we are "committed to promoting the language and culture of our country" and that we will "continue to improve and enhance Welsh-medium opportunities for our staff, students and visitors". Therefore, our strategic approach to mental health and wellbeing will take account of the needs of first language Welsh speakers and Welsh learners, recognising that optimal mental health and wellbeing can be compromised by the inability to live, learn and be supported through one's first language.

Leadership, Governance and The Student Voice

Universities UK's document #Stepchange, Mental Health in Higher Education states:

"The cultural and structural changes needed to improve mental health in higher education require strong and engaged leadership at all levels, starting with the vice-chancellor and the board of governors."

Staff and student mental health and wellbeing has already been identified as a key area in our Learning and Teaching Strategy 2019-2022. In that strategy, we recognise that while not separable from other key areas of provision, mental health and wellbeing is of such significance as to warrant a separate focus of its own.

This Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy is built on a whole institution, whole person approach and is based on the premise that students are adults who, with appropriate support and information can contribute in a positive way to their own mental health and wellbeing and that we are all responsible for mental health.

In addition, in discharging our duty of care as an education provider we must be clear about the boundaries of our responsibilities and provision and work closely with key stakeholders and partners to ensure we do our utmost to close gaps to enable students to access the most appropriate support pathway for their needs.

The values identified in the University's Strategic Plan 2018-2023, along with the principles of good practice and objectives outlined in the following documents, guide our Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy:

- UUK Step Change
- UUK Suicide Safer Universities
- Student Minds: The University Mental Health Charter
- Welsh Government/Public Health Wales: Healthy and Sustainable Higher Education/Further Education Framework
- Aberystwyth University's Learning and Teaching Strategy (2019-2022)
- Aberystwyth University's Equality and Diversity Strategy
- Healthy Working Wales: Corporate Health Standard
- The Government's Foresight Project on Mental Capital and Wellbeing: 5 ways to wellbeing
- Welsh Government's Wellbeing of Future Generations Act.



Our Approach and Guiding Principles

The Strategy is based upon four 'P's - Partnership, Promotion, Prevention, Provision.

Working in Partnership with students, the University will aim to Promote positive mental health and wellbeing, Prevent mental ill-health, and Provide appropriate support and development. These four 'P's are underpinned by a detailed Action Plan that focuses upon areas such as physical activities, dignity and respect, financial capability, wellbeing in the curriculum mental health mentoring, support pathways, faith provision and staff/student development.

The Wellbeing Strategy Group will oversee the implementation of our Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, measuring and reviewing it regularly against the principles of good practice outlined in a range of key documents and guidelines published by UUK, HEFCW, and Welsh Government.

The impact of the Covid pandemic on students will be uppermost in the minds of the Wellbeing Strategy Group when implementing these approaches.



Our Approach

Partnership Working

We have already identified students as core partners in developing and implementing our strategy. In formulating our strategy we consulted with students across the University as well as with staff.

Moving forwards towards implementation we will continue to work in partnership with both staff and students, along with key organisations and stakeholders such as:

- Aberystwyth University Students' Union
- Aberystwyth University Trades' Unions
- Hywel Dda Health Board
- Local GP Practices
- Ceredigion County Council
- Third sector organisations such as MIND, New Pathways, Welsh Women's Aid, West Wales Domestic Abuse Service and Dyfed Drug and Alcohol Service
- Parents and supporters
- Faith groups



PARTNERSHIP

PROMOTION

PREVENTION

PROVISION



Our Approach:

Promoting Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing

Physical Activities

Research shows that people who exercise regularly have better mental health and emotional wellbeing, and lower rates of mental illness.

In support of this we have, we have invested in a new Sports Hall floor, refurbished the climbing wall and squash courts, provided new sports equipment for the Netball, Badminton and Volleyball clubs as well as installing a quiet seating space adjacent to the pool – to support mental health and relaxation.

We provide free access to the University Sports Centre as part of our residential offer and free taster sessions during our Big Welcome Week. Students also have access to a range of self-guided walks on Campus.

This academic year, 99% of Wednesday afternoons are free of teaching. On the very rare occasions when there is teaching scheduled, sports events on Wednesday afternoons are now considered an acceptable Special Circumstances reason for absence.

We will continue to review access to physical activities, for example investigating the potential for outdoor physical activity spaces in our residences and expanding free access to sports facilities for other categories of students.



Dignity and Respect

Bullying, harassment and discrimination can have a negative impact on our mental health and wellbeing. Working in partnership with colleagues across campus and with third sector partners, we developed a Student Code on Dignity and Respect, alongside an online reporting tool to encourage students to report concerns and to enable us to monitor trends. We have worked with Welsh Women's Aid to provide Bystander Intervention Training to students and to provide training for staff on how to respond to students who may be experiencing these issues. We have also actively supported the Welsh Government's #ThisIsControl Campaign.

Working with third sector partners and other key stakeholders such as the Students' Union, we will continue to review how best to promote positive behaviours around dignity and respect issues, in particular around consent. We will also continue to support the Students' Union's efforts in running their No Excuses Campaign.

Financial Capability

Recognising the stress that can arise from managing money related issues for the first time we have, over the past two years, piloted Blackbullion, an online financial capability programme for students. In 2018, 167 individuals accessed the programme, rising in 2019 to 379 individuals.

We will continue to invest in this programme and extend this programme further, working with the schools liaison and residences teams and also as part of our efforts in preparing students for life after University.

Student Self-Help Workshops, Presentations and Materials

The Student Wellbeing Service promotes positive mental health through a rolling programme of student workshops/presentations on issues such as:

- Managing Change
- Anxiety and Panic
- Low Mood and Depression
- Mindful Mood Boost
- Regulating Emotions
- Lifestyle at University
- Friendships at University
- Preparing for Exams
- Resilience Skills (in conjunction with Students' Union)
- Suicide Prevention (in conjunction with Students' Union).

In addition, the Service has developed a range of self-help materials which are available via the AberSkills portal and Blackboard.

We will continue to keep under review the frequency of the workshops, and topics delivered and we will also consider the feasibility of introducing personality type dynamics and assertiveness workshops for students along with Mindfulness and meditation sessions.





PROMOTION

PARTNERSHIP

PREVENTION

PROVISION

Our Approach:

Preventing Mental Ill Health

Wellbeing in the Curriculum

Student wellbeing and achievement can be supported or undermined by the curriculum, whether this be through the way we teach, assess and prepare students for study at University or through curriculum content.

Our annual Learning and Teaching Conference will, in 2020 include staff workshops on supporting wellbeing in the curriculum with a view to introducing "What's Working Well?" sessions for students. We will also investigate methods by which we can gather student views of the impact of the curriculum on their wellbeing.

Induction and Transition

Students arrive at University with a variety of skills, competencies, expectations and resiliencies and we have a number of mechanisms in place to support transition into university.

We have expanded on our established peer mentoring scheme Signpost by introducing peers support schemes in several academic departments. Moving forward we will also review how best to use these groups to support social connectedness.

Building on our long standing acclimatisation event for students with social communication issues (many of whom also have mental health issues) we introduced, in 2019, an acclimatisation event specifically for new students who had disclosed mental health issues pre arrival.

Thirteen students attended the mental health acclimatisation event and we will continue to offer both events, reviewing content and format to ensure they continue to meet the needs of attendees. Furthermore, in line with our Learning and Teaching Strategy 2019-22, we intend to undertake a full review of our first year transition and student induction activities (both academic and non-academic) to ensure the needs of students are met. In doing so we will consider the impact on student mental health and wellbeing.

Assessment and Feedback

We already offer a range of reasonable adjustments and alternative assessments to support students with mental health needs and our Students' Union provides an Exam De-stress Programme which offers canine calming and mini pampering sessions.

In response to student feedback we aim where possible to have no exams booked back-to-back on the same day and no Saturday exams. Exam timetables have also been made available on ApAber and on students' personal calendars.

Our Learning and Teaching Strategy 2019-22, has identified assessment and feedback as a key strategic area which requires constant attention and enhancement. The strategy also recognises the potential impact assessment and feedback can have on student mental health and wellbeing and we will take account of this in informing future practice in assessment and feedback.

Early Disclosure

Coping with the rigours of university whilst dealing with the reality of living with mental health issues can be extra challenging. Early disclosure of needs is therefore of vital importance in assisting students to access appropriate support pathways in a timely manner. Our existing disclosure process for applicants was identified as an example of good practice at our Quality Assurance Agency review in 2016.

Moving forwards we will review the effectiveness of our disclosure process for individuals disclosing after arrival.

Mental Health Mentoring

Students with a diagnosed mental health condition may be eligible for Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA) towards a mental health mentor to support them with the academic aspects of their studies. We recognise the importance this support can have on academic progress and retention. While students are waiting to access this funding we provide interim support from our own funds and also provide support for students who do not have an entitlement to DSA due to residency issues etc.

We will continue to provide this interim support for students moving forwards.

Early identification and Access to Support Pathways

Early identification of concerns is vital in order for students to access appropriate support pathways. Students seeking advice or support for mental health concerns are asked to register online (available 24/7) with the Wellbeing Service and registration forms are triaged the next working day and the level of risk assessed. The Wellbeing Service also operates a daily duty system and combined with the registration form and standardised risk assessment processes, this allows for the early identification of those students most at risk.

In response to student feedback the Wellbeing Service also now offers on the day appointments and is also able to refer students directly to community mental health services without the need for the students to access their GP. We will also be introducing a Student of Concern form to better enable colleagues across the institution to flag up students about whose mental health they have concerns.





5 Ways to Wellbeing

The 5 Ways to Wellbeing identifies social connectedness, giving to others and learning new skills as key contributors to positive mental health.

Social connectedness: Opportunities already exist through the Students' Union to join a variety of clubs and societies and to volunteer and those wishing to get their hands dirty can join the Penglais Community garden group. We will work with the Students' Union to review the range of activities on offer, in particular non-alcohol based events such as theatre or cinema performances. We are also mindful of the potential to increase social connectedness through our student induction activities.

Skills development: A selection of our Lifelong Learning modules are available free to all Aberystwyth University undergraduates and postgraduates to facilitate the learning of new skills outside of the chosen degree course.

In addition, we already offer vocational certificated courses on several of our degree schemes. For example, our Psychology undergraduates receive Mental Health First Aid Training and our students studying our Foundation Degree in Agriculture have opportunities to gain certification through recognised national vocational organisations such as LANTRA.

We will continue to support these activities and review how these can be expanded.

After Graduation

We understand the multiple challenges that leaving University (whether on completion of a degree or otherwise) brings and which can impact on an individual's mental health. The Careers Service already develops students' employability skills.

However, we recognise there are further opportunities to support students in adapting to leaving university, e.g. returning home to parents after living independently; managing expectations around graduate employment; moving to a new area without the usual support networks etc. and will focus on developing support in this area in future years.

Physical Environment

The surroundings in which students live and learn can impact on motivation and patterns of interaction.

In recent years, in response to feedback from students, we have refurbished the Iris De Freitas Group Study area of the Hugh Owen library to create extra group study rooms, more vending and extra whiteboards and increased the number of meeting spaces for students in the Students' Union, and installed microwaves for student use.

We have also invested in new teaching spaces on Penglais campus and in response to student feedback installed additional outdoor eating spaces. We will continue to identify and develop additional outdoor social green spaces on campus.

Moving forwards, and taking particular account of students who commute, we will continue to enhance our physical environment in this way; to encourage spaces that support wellbeing and community development. For example, implementing quiet areas on campus where students can access comfortable spaces with basic facilities such as tea and toast.

Our Approach:

Providing Appropriate Support and Development

Partnership Working

Over recent years we have seen a significant increase in the number of students disclosing mental health issues and are proud that students feel able to disclose this to us.

We have worked with Hywel Dda mental health services to introduce a direct referral pathway for students in crisis and have been exploring the potential to bring some primary care mental health services onto campus.

We are committed to ensuring that our students have access to support pathways appropriate to these needs and to this end we will continue to work with partners in both statutory and third sector services and continue to monitor whether the resources available are sufficient and appropriate.

Specific Groups

We are committed to ensuring that our support takes account of the needs of Welsh language speakers and are currently working in partnership with Bangor and Trinity St David's Universities on a HEFCW funded project to develop Welsh medium mental health resources for students.

We are also committed to ensuring that our support takes account of the needs of BME, LGBTQ+ groups and intersectional issues and will focus on these areas in the coming months and years.

We have already introduced single sex toilets and a Red Box scheme providing free access to period products across campus.





University Support

All students at the University have access to a personal tutor and this provision is monitored regularly by our Student Experience Committee. The University also provides a range of professional support services including specialist mentors and peer guides and financial support. We also offer a wide range of reasonable adjustments and alternative assessment methods.

We will keep under review whether the resources and adjustments are sufficient and appropriate. In particular, we will review how we support students with bereavement issues and eating disorders.

Student Wellbeing Service

The Wellbeing Service facilitates support pathways which enable students to access appropriate statutory and other community services. The Service engages with students through self-help materials, workshops and bookable appointments and to provide easier access the Service has, from 2019, offered on the day 121 appointments. Through our Wellbeing Service we are able to directly refer students to the Crisis Resolution and Home Treatment Service.

We will keep under review whether the resources provided are sufficient, appropriate and of good quality to meet the needs of our students, including working with partner organisations to investigate the potential for delivering specialist services, (for example, support for drugs and alcohol issues onto campus) and greater use of digital media such as podcasts.

Faith Provision

We acknowledge the importance staff and students place on faith and spirituality and our open access faith space on Penglais Campus provides a safe and peaceful space for staff and students. We want to enhance our provision in this area, valuing the contribution faith advisers can make to student wellbeing and we are currently exploring a range of options in support of this.

Staff Development

The Wellbeing Service also provides a rolling programme of staff development on issues such as mental health awareness, suicide prevention, supporting students in crisis and maintaining appropriate boundaries.

Moving forwards we plan to encourage all staff to undertake the online mental health training provided by the Charlie Waller Memorial Trust and will review the content of our staff induction programme to ensure new staff are clear about the support available to students. We will also issue to all staff the pocket mental health guides developed by the Wellbeing Service and ensure our Mental Health Flow Chart is more visible on our web pages.

Out of Hours Support






In recognition that our support services only operate during office hours, and in understanding that students may not always wish to speak with someone in person, we have recently introduced the Big White Wall, a 24/7, 365 online mental health platform.

We will monitor usage of this programme with a view to assessing its effectiveness and deciding whether this or other online provision is appropriate and meeting the needs of our students.



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