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MENTAL HEALTH CHARTER

Glossary and Entry note

- *Intervention*: it refers to any action or measure taken in the area of promotion, prevention or with the aim of improvement of mental health, always targeting to help someone dealing with mental health problems.
- *Mental health care*: it refers to all services offered to support individuals with mental health problems/disorders, either through a health system or in general.
- *Prevention in mental health*: it refers to all activities preventing poor mental health, which can be done at different intensity levels, depending on the target audience (universal, selective or indicated prevention).
- *Mental Health promotion*: it refers to all actions, activities or strategies promoting or raising awareness of the importance of mental health, maximizing one's well-being through strengthening of protective factors and healthy lifestyle, usually among the general population.
- *Mental health problems/issues or poor mental health* refers to individuals, experiencing abnormal/extraordinary levels of psychological distress, affecting their everyday life and inability to perform at daily activities, however symptoms are still at subclinical level and usually do not last.
- *Mental health illness/disorder* is normally classified within the ICS and refers to a mental health condition, which can immensely impact individual's thoughts, behaviour and feelings, usually lasting longer and preventing one's ability to function fully and successfully in everyday life.
- *Psychoeducation*: it refers to all means of learning about mental health, self-help tools, appropriate terminology and communication, knowledge to recognize different mental health conditions/disorders/illness and information on helplines/sources.

When describing the context or environment of higher education throughout this paper, we are always referring to all stakeholders in higher education (student representatives, higher education institutions, national governments and EU policy makers).

Additionally, we feel the need to emphasize the fact that everyone once in a while throughout their lifetime can experience abnormal, stressful events, which can affect their mental health. However, when these mental health concerns last longer, start to consistently and seriously impact social life, studying, ability to successfully perform at any daily activities, it is time to start acting and preventing any long-term harm or occurrence of serious mental health conditions.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health in higher education and society at large has been for too long a neglected topic and has not gained enough spotlight until recent years. However, it is high time to start actively working, advocating and pushing forward for positive systematic changes that will address the mental health of students and staff on both national and European levels in the academic setting.

This document presents the very first ESU policy paper on mental health of students and will be used for any advocacy work done in the area of mental health, within and outside of higher education. Through active work for a more inclusive and stigma-free environment, higher education can set an example to society on how to tackle a deeply rooted mental health stigma, leading to a much-needed change in our world.

European Students` Union firmly believes in the necessity of mainstreaming mental health in all layers of higher education. As we have already stated in ESU Social Dimension Policy Paper¹, *“good health and wellbeing of a student, whether mental or physical, should not be a luxury but rather a basic human right”*. Undoubtedly, the wellbeing of students is essential to successfully perform at their studies, to overcome any challenges and obstacles on their academic path and develop efficient strategies while dealing with daily stressors, that are a part of the studying process.

Due to the challenging higher education environment, students are at a higher risk to develop mental health problems during their studies², with compounding effects from this period of their lives often being the time for big changes and transition to adulthood. Students

¹ Social Dimension Policy Paper 2019

² American College Health Association, 2018. In: American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment II: Reference Group Executive Summary Fall 2017. Hanover, MD.

who decide to continue to higher education directly after secondary education are in a developmental period, during which they are at the most risk of developing or manifesting many serious mental health issues, not to mention that new situations and environments can only add to the problem³. An environment which is highly competitive and full of expectations, the financial pressures that many unfortunately acutely feel, and high demands from society put many students in difficult situations, leaving them on the edge and at higher risk for development of serious mental health problems. Additionally, in too many cases they are still left to themselves to manage their issues, without access to effective support systems.

Students who do experience either serious or subclinical levels of psychological distress are at higher risk to fail or underachieve in their academic goals or to drop out of higher education completely.⁴ Besides, students who are experiencing mental health issues might consequently study longer and finish their studies later than their peers. This is a big loss not only for the students themselves, but also for the wider society. Another crucial stage to look at is the transition process from high school to higher education, as this is also one of the most important turning points in one's life and can cause a lot of distress that can negatively impact an individual's ability to start the studying process efficiently. Evidence shows that negative initial experiences for new students can negatively impact student participation, their self-confidence, and decrease the sense of belonging.⁵

As declared in the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA⁶, authorities should take into account the creation of achievable policies that would allow and support higher education institutions to offer students sufficient counselling and needed guidance from the early beginnings, even before they enter higher education era, through study years to the very end, when they successfully complete their studies.

Mental health is often seen as an isolated topic that affects few and is restricted to questions of counselling and health care. However, we see it as a wider issue that is connected to other structures and systems within higher education often in combination with other challenges. Consequently, we need to recognize mental health as a vital subject also when talking about

- the inclusion and accessibility of higher education, as social cohesion and accepting environment can heavily impact one's wellbeing, consequently directly connected to their academic performance,

³ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20536969/>

⁴ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/46556128_Mental_Health_and_Academic_Success_in_College

⁵ Hughes, G. & Spanner, L. (2019). The University Mental Health Charter. Leeds: Student Minds

⁶ Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA

- flexibility and quality of higher education, as all of these can determine individual study processes and influence their workload and study experience,
- tuition fees, student debt, transportation and housing as those are important predictors of social and financial stress, especially among marginalized group of students,
- when discussing mobility and scholarships, as both of them are in to many cases still not accessible and inclusive, causing insecurity and limited number of opportunities for a student,
- when designing curricula and developing learning and teaching policies, which can meaningfully shape the atmosphere at university, relations and studying as a whole,
- and when discussing the society at large, as negative public discourse about students can deepen the stigma and indirectly negatively affect wellbeing of students.

It is of the utmost importance to recognise the fact that quality of education is among others one of the most significant and basic tools to tackle mental health in the higher education setting. Thus, mental health in higher education does not only concern the provision of mental health services to students, but should be seen as a whole university approach⁵, which takes into account the individual itself and their traits and background, as well as the whole context of the higher education institution⁷. It is widely recognised that a systematically arranged set of interventions is more efficient than individual interventions⁸.

Mental health is firmly, subtly and deeply associated with all areas within and outside of higher education, therefore ESU is advocating for a well thought-out and holistic approach, through which mental health will be addressed in a comprehensive and mainstreamed way, offering students reliable, adequate and professional support systems that will be freely accessible to all.

1. HIGHER EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT

1.1. Creation of accepting and safe environments

One of the most important goals, when talking about inclusion of mental health as a priority in Higher Education environments, needs to be raising awareness of the importance of supporting the care for mental health. The higher education sphere needs to be open and inclusive, offering all students a safe and welcoming space, where mental health is taken

⁷ <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/107925/E92227.pdf?sequence=1>

⁸ Okanagan Charter. (2015). An International Charter for Health Promoting Universities and Colleges.

seriously and with respect. A student can successfully study and fulfil their required obligations only when they feel safe and accepted, positively impacting their university experience and increasing the chances of successful completion.

Therefore, the creation of awareness campaigns is recommended, through which we can equip students with essential knowledge about how and why they should take care of their well-being during studies, as well as emphasizing its importance to the HEI staff. To encourage empathy and inclusion in the university setting, it is necessary that higher education institutions actively support the creation of the accepting atmosphere through different activities.

Peer to peer support should be boosted and strengthened through organized activities, where students can learn about the proper terminology and tools on how to support their peers with mental health problems. This kind of support can also be provided by students, who are addressing mental health also through their studies.

1.2 The importance of physical environment - safe spaces, prayer, meditation

It is important to create and allow physical environments that can help students feel safe, and where they can find peace and calm when they need to. Some evidence suggests that over 40% of students are experiencing any kind of mental health problems, however the most common are depression, anger and anxiety⁹. Therefore, universities should invest into safe rooms, quiet and life-stance spaces, as not only can these places help students overcome stressing and demanding situations but can also offer adequate places for spiritual expressions. In addition, awareness raising on the importance of proper nutrition, physical activity and reducing sedentary behaviour in the prevention of mental health disorders is also important, as current research is suggesting. HEIs, in collaboration with students unions, should engage in creating environments which offer and enable all students an easy and affordable access to healthy nutrition and to activities and infrastructures fostering physical activity¹⁰⁻¹².

⁹<https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA-II%20SPRING%202016%20US%20REFERENCE%20GROUP%20EXECUTIVE%20SUMMARY.pdf>

¹⁰ Rucklidge JJ, Kaplan BJ. Nutrition and Mental Health. *Clin Psychol Sci*. 2016;4(6):1082–4.

¹¹ Meyer J, Schuch FB. Exercise for the Prevention and Treatment of Depression. *Exerc Interv Ment Illn*. 2018;1–18.

¹² Hallgren M, Nguyen TTD, Owen N, Vancampfort D, Smith L, Dunstan DW, et al. Associations of interruptions to leisure-time sedentary behaviour with symptoms of depression and anxiety. *Transl Psychiatry [Internet]*. 2020;10(1):1–8.

1.3 Mental Health as part of the learning environment

Any kind of systematic change takes time and a lot of effort, thus it is essential to understand how these transitions happen. When debating the holistic approach of students' wellbeing, we need to acknowledge that it is crucial to start at the fundamental level. Starting with spreading awareness and understanding of mental health care, firstly among university staff along with sufficient changes in the university policies.

This is also closely connected with the design of the university curricula, which needs to take into account students dealing with mental health issues. Through training of the teaching staff, it is important to put the focus on the sensitivity and confidentiality of the mental health topic, also equipping them with the basics of mental health first aid.

Teachers and other staff at the university are important gatekeepers when it comes to prevention of mental health problems among students. They are the ones who are in contact with students, who follow their academic path and first to know when things are not going in the right direction. That is why knowledge about the appropriate ways of communication and providing help is the key skill. Hence, the approach to mental health should be seen as an important part of the teacher assessment, as this would secure the sustainability and proper development of the system.

Curricula should be designed in a way to support students' learning processes through appropriate and fitting pedagogical techniques and methods, allowing students to develop learning competencies and self-regulation procedures, boosting their self-confidence, which can all have a positive impact on their mental health. Besides, higher education policies should not directly or indirectly promote or support harmful competition among students, but rather encourage collaborative and accepting relations.

Curricula should also be designed to allow flexibility, offering any needed adaptations for those experiencing mental health problems. Flexible learning pathways should be promoted and supported, in order to create a university experience that is accessible to all.

Study track counselling, where students are guided in shaping their learning pathways, should also always be conducted with mental health in mind, as any forced changes in a study track or reorientation can have a high toll on a student's mental health.

Additionally, the well-being of students should be taken into consideration when planning how to conduct exams, as this is one of the most stressful experiences for students. All of this is important in order to secure their wellbeing during study years and furthermore, to prepare them for any kind of demanding environment they will possibly encounter later in life.

2. ACCESSIBLE MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT SERVICES

2.1. Support services

Mental health support services are one of the most common tools that higher education institutions usually implement in order to offer students needed support during their studies and, even more importantly can monitor students at risk and offer adequate urgent support when needed. This solution might sound simple enough at first, but it is more complicated and nuanced than it is often treated as. Not all services necessarily offer quality and adequate support, and in many cases the information on available services is not well communicated among students.

Therefore higher education institutions need to efficiently communicate information on the available support services which are offered to students. It is also fundamentally important to aim for fully and quickly accessible systems, where excessive bureaucracy or administrative and financial hurdles are not standing in the way of the wellbeing of students¹³. Support services need to be free of charge, with enough professionals in proportion to the student population and must be non-discriminatory, taking into account the diversity of the student body and offering all students regardless of their background full support. Moreover, these services need to be based on confidentiality and no medical evidence should ever be required to benefit from the support they provide.

The counselling should be professional and discrete, respecting all GDPR rules and regulations, always keeping in mind the main goal of helping an individual overcome distress or discomfort and supporting their selfgrowth. Additionally, it is beneficial and mandatory that whenever a higher education institution is reporting any matter on mental health, appropriate destigmatizing terminology should be used.

Besides that, ESU strongly believes that sustainable and adequate funding should be prioritised when setting support systems in place in university environments, as only through consistency and continuity can efficient support and prevention in the area of mental health be achieved. Special attention should be given to international students, securing support services that are multilingual and can help them navigate through new university settings and adapting to new cultural environments. Additionally, the qualifications and proficiency of the staff employed should be considered as one of the biggest predicting factors for quality and efficiency of support services. This is yet another way, how universities can lead positive changes in the area of mental health and set examples also to a wider public. Moreover, governments should provide higher education institutions with specific resources in order to enhance the operation of counselling services.

¹³ Social Dimension Policy Paper 2019

2.2 Promotion and prevention as key elements

Mental health promotion and prevention goes hand in hand with the provision of support systems within universities. It is equally important and crucial compared to any other activities carried out in the field of mental health care. Higher education is by itself a perfect starting point for promotion and prevention programs, since the continuous monitoring of an individual's progress is possible throughout the study years, consequently offering a unique perspective and opportunity for a student's selfgrowth and for the development and revision of prevention programs.¹⁴

Higher education is also a potential entry for suicide prevention among students. Efficient and accessible support systems can serve as gatekeepers for students that might be at higher risk..¹⁵ Therefore, integration of any prevention programs into the HE context should be thoughtfully prepared, considering the guidelines for efficient and effective implementation of prevention activities. Multi-layer approaches should be designed, innovative and sufficient promotion and prevention programs should be explored and used in higher education settings.

There is existing evidence¹⁶ that students who recognize and understand topics concerning mental health, will be more likely to search for help if they themselves experience any mental health problems. Consequently, investing into quality prevention programs offering psychoeducation and other educating interventions, is not only of short -term benefit, but also a sustainable investment into the society at large.

3. THE NEED OF SYSTEMATIC CHANGES

3.1 Nothing About Us, Without Us

Mental health should be a topic seriously treated by higher education institutions, other non-governmental and governmental institutions. Besides close cooperation and inclusive policy making process among all is encouraged in order to achieve desired goals. All stakeholders should take a proactive approach to create an inclusive and accepting higher education across Europe.

¹⁴ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20536969/>

¹⁵ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20669520/>

¹⁶ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17908021/>

Students should be seen as the key stakeholders in higher education, therefore they should be included in all important matters of decision making and policy design, also on the topic of mental health. Representation of students should naturally be seen as crucial also when debating the integration of mental health into university policies and curricula.

Higher education institutions should collect valuable data and feedback directly from students, following a bottom up approach, as this is the only way to organically build a strong system based on respect and acceptance. ESU strongly believes that it is the responsibility of higher education institutions to ensure that the mental health of students is a priority and is being acknowledged on all levels of society, aiming for a national strategy to holistically address the ever-growing problems of mental health.

3.2 Data collection¹⁷

Higher education institutions and governments should strive for continuous collection of valuable data on mental health on student's wellbeing and student's satisfaction with services and HE personnel, as this is crucial in order to monitor the implementation and effects of the prevention programs implemented. Hence, data collection, if being carefully monitored by students and other stakeholders, can identify the leading causes of mental health problems of students, offer general improvement options and prevention ideas to implement holistic approaches.

Governments should secure the finances and guidelines to ensure quality of data collection, this should be done in close cooperation with higher education institutions and mental health professionals. It is important to acknowledge that improvement of mental health of students strongly relies on the collected data and even more importantly, action plans following that, therefore ESU calls all countries within EHEA to prioritize and establish data collection on mental health.

It is crucial, however, to restate that any such data collection needs to be handled with extreme care, confidentiality and sensitivity, treating the issues being studied with the respect they need, maintaining the anonymity and privacy of students, and not using any data for any other purposes than monitoring the wellbeing of the student body. Also, transparency should be prioritized, as students should always be informed about the usage of their data and when required, also give consent.

¹⁷ Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA

In conclusion, ESU demands following systematic changes in higher education environment;

- higher education institutions should create a holistic mental health prevention and promotion strategy to tackle stigma on mental health within HEIs environment, among students and create a safe and accepting atmosphere and physical environment;
- appropriate education and training on mental health should be introduced for teaching and university staff,
- when designing the curricula, mental health and psychoeducation should be taken into account to make sure that the workload is manageable and adequate pedagogical methods and techniques are used to support students' learning,
- accessible, non-discriminatory and free of charge mental health support services should be provided at every higher education institution across EU,
- students should be included at all levels of policy decision making, as any actions in the area of mental health should answer the needs and wishes among students,
- adequate resources should be secured to enable quality and sustainable data collection on mental health of student body,
- the engagement of governments in reducing social stress, and direct and indirect financial burdens that students face. This takes in consideration that creating a stable
- environment for students is a crucial step towards preventing mental health problems in the first place,
- higher education institutions, ideally with the help of any relevant government entity on healthcare or others, should collect data to help provide proper prevention in mental health and measure the success of interventions and protect the data used in this process,
- aggregated statistics should be made publicly available on the national and European level, so that the severity of different mental health problems can be tracked.