

## **Student Mental Health Policy**

*(This PDF version of the Student Mental Health Policy is a placeholder until a series of webpages are developed with complementary case studies.)*

### **Introduction**

1.0 This Policy sets out how the collegiate University seeks to provide a coherent institutional approach to supporting the mental health of Oxford students. This involves co-operation between the University and its legally separate colleges. A range of procedures and guidance support the implementation of the Policy.

1.1 The aims of the collegiate University, in respect of student mental health, are to:

- Promote positive mental health among the whole student population.
- Raise awareness of mental health issues and provision and reduce stigma so that students in difficulty are encouraged to seek help and staff are confident in their response.
- Provide consistent and effective support to students experiencing mental health difficulties, with a co-ordinated approach across colleges, academic departments and central student support services and timely referral to the NHS.
- Create an ethos in which confidentiality and dignity are respected.

1.2 The collegiate University is an educational community and there will be limits to the support that can be offered to individual students, although students should always be signposted to external resources as appropriate. Their needs will always have to be considered in the context of the community as a whole.

1.3 The collegiate University recognises that many of the diverse challenges encountered by its students can be overcome by talking to friends or family or by seeking help from tutors, supervisors or other advisors. However, some students will experience more persistent emotional or psychological difficulties which inhibit their ability to participate fully in higher education without appropriate professional support. These difficulties may take the form of a temporary, but debilitating, condition or reaction or long-term illness, meeting the Equality Act definition of disability.<sup>1</sup> The collegiate University has agreed a Common Framework on Supporting Disabled Students which covers students in the last category.

1.4 The principles and aims of this policy apply to all students at the University of Oxford, but some elements of procedures may not apply to all types of students (for example, visiting students and some part-time students who are not on courses which lead to an award from the University of Oxford).

### **General Principles**

2.0 The University and its colleges want to create an environment which supports good mental health and are committed to taking reasonable steps to ensure the well-being of their student members. However, the expertise of the University and colleges lies in the provision of higher education and there will be certain services that cannot and should not be provided. No member of the University and its colleges should go beyond his or her level of competence in trying to support or advise a student. Where the University and its colleges do not provide a specific service, this should be made clear to students and they should be encouraged to seek out other services available to them. In the context of mental health, this often means encouraging students to seek out their GP or local mental health services.

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<sup>1</sup> The Equality Act defines a mental health disability as a condition which has lasted, or is expected to last, 12 months or more, and which has a substantial impact on day-to-day activities.

## **Colleges**

3.0 The vast majority of students at Oxford belong to a college and for those students colleges have a primary responsibility for pastoral care. Each college makes its own welfare arrangements co-ordinated by its welfare lead, including determining the composition of welfare teams; defining the range of support offered including for urgent cases and out of hours; ensuring appropriate training and support to staff in welfare roles; defining procedures; and communicating all of these arrangements to staff and student members.

3.1 In the case of graduate students, colleges and departments have a joint responsibility.

3.2 Through the Conference of Colleges a Welfare Forum has been established to facilitate the sharing of good practice.

## **Academic Departments**

4.0 Mental health difficulties are likely to affect students' academic work negatively. The primary role of colleges does not exclude departments from pastoral responsibility for students facing mental health difficulties, particularly in relation to graduate students. Departments must ensure that appropriate arrangements for student welfare in the departmental context are in place and are communicated to students.

4.1 Staff in student-facing roles in departments should be alert to indicators of mental health difficulties; be able to offer an appropriate response to a student's declaration of such difficulties and be able to signpost students to appropriate support, including encouraging the student to seek help from their college and university services. Close collaboration with colleges will often be necessary to provide effective support to students.

4.2 Students who do not have a college affiliation can access pastoral support from their departments and (where they are eligible) from university student services.

## **Graduate Accommodation**

5.0 On-site pastoral provision may not be provided in some college or University-owned accommodation. Oxford University's graduate accommodation does not have its own pastoral provision.

5.1 Colleges should ensure that all students are informed that pastoral care is available regardless of whether they live in accommodation off-college, in University owned accommodation, or in private accommodation.

## **Student Welfare and Support Services**

6.0 The University provides two specialist student support services. The Student Counselling Service engages with a broader range of student mental health difficulties than the Disability Advisory Service which focuses on students who meet the Equality Act definition of disability. Besides their role in supporting individual students both services work to:

- improve staff awareness of mental health issues
- engage with the Oxford University Student Union (OUSU) and student-led groups working on mental health and disability.
- develop and maintain relationships with the NHS and other agencies outside the University.

## **Student Welfare and Support Services: Counselling Service**

7.0 The Student Counselling Service, to which students can self-refer, provides mainly short-term counselling, appropriate for most students in the context of short university terms. While the majority of students are seen individually, group therapy and workshops are also

available. The service has counsellors specialising in particular areas including eating disorders and stress relating to academic work and examinations. A medical consultant carries out psychiatric assessments and, where appropriate, refers students to local NHS services. The medical consultant does not provide treatment. The Counselling Service does not operate as a drop in, out of hours, or emergency service.

7.1 In addition to its direct work with students, the Counselling Service provides a range of psycho-educational resources available to all and contributes to initiatives which aim to foster positive health and resilience. It operates the Peer Support Programme, training and supervising students to support fellow students in many colleges and some departments.

7.2 The Counselling Service advises members of staff from across the collegiate university who are concerned about an individual student's mental health via the duty counsellor team in working hours. Each college also has a named link counsellor with whom welfare teams can consult. The Counselling Service contributes to mental health-related staff training and provides supervised reflective practice for staff such as college nurses.

### **Student Welfare and Support Services: Disability Advisory Service**

8.0 The Disability Advisory Service (DAS) promotes inclusive practice and compliance with the legal responsibilities across the collegiate University in respect of students with disabilities. It compiles and maintains the Handbook underpinning the Common Framework on Supporting Disabled students. The DAS provides advice and guidance to current and prospective students with disabilities about study-related matters, makes recommendations about institutional reasonable adjustments, and collaborates with all parties to support implementation. It provides advice and information to staff working with individual disabled students, respecting appropriate confidentiality requirements.

8.1 Disability Advisers assist students with making an application for the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) or equivalent funds, which can be used to cover the costs of support arrangements. Specialist mentoring is the main type of support that students with mental health disabilities may be recommended. The DAS manages a team of specialist mentors comprised of appropriately qualified mental health professionals (including psychologists, counsellors and psychotherapists). The focus of the mentoring work is on enabling students to develop practical strategies for managing their mental health disability in relation to their studies.

### **University Occupational Health Service**

9.0 The University Occupational Health Service provides a specialist assessment and advisory service to the University on the occupational health aspects of student mental health difficulties, for example if there are concerns regarding a student's safety to undertake hazardous work or to complete a course that has vocational standards.

### **OUSU Student Advice Service**

10.0 The OUSU Student Advice Service is a confidential, independent advice and information service available to all students, including those experiencing mental health difficulties.

### **Mental health provision beyond the University**

11.0 All students studying in Oxford are encouraged to register with a local NHS general practice. General practitioners assess and treat students with mental health difficulties and can make specialist referrals to other NHS services and other agencies.

11.1 Many students choose to register with a College Doctor. These are independent NHS general practitioners (GPs) engaged by colleges who are experienced in the care of

university students and familiar with the university system. They are able to provide medical certificates e.g. in respect of examinations and to funding bodies if study is suspended or in support of disability-related funding; and to advise colleges on fitness to study.

11.2 Students are able to self-refer to drug and alcohol services in Oxfordshire provided by Turning Point.

### **Helping students in crisis**

12.0 If a student is considered to be at risk of self-harm the student should be encouraged and supported to contact their college doctor or relevant GP or the 111 service out of hours to ensure the student has access to the medical expertise and knowledge of specialist help that is required in the management of a mental health crisis.

12.1 If risk of serious harm is imminent, for example with someone being violent towards others or placing themselves in a perilous situation, the emergency services should be contacted directly via 999. The College welfare lead should be informed as soon as possible.

12.2 Students with physical injuries resulting from self-harm should present at the Emergency Department, John Radcliffe Hospital where they will be assessed by the Emergency Department Psychiatric Service.

12.3 Guidelines on managing student distress out of hours have been developed by the Oxford Student Mental Health Network.

### **Declaration**

13.0 The collegiate University recognises that students may find it hard to declare a mental health difficulty, possibly because that difficulty affects their insight into their situation and their willingness to seek help. Reluctance to declare can also reflect anxieties about the response to a declaration including the worry that it will affect their academic standing; fear that confidentiality will not be respected; and fear of stigma.

13.1 The collegiate University encourages students to declare any difficulties at an early stage so that the help they may need can be discussed and addressed in a timely manner. This is particularly important if the student's health problems are having an adverse effect on their academic work, or if adjustments need to be made to the student's mode of learning or examination arrangements. A student's right not to declare a mental health difficulty will be respected though this is very likely to make it more difficult for the collegiate University to support them appropriately. In line with GMC guidance, medical students are asked to tell the Medical School if they have a health condition or if they experience significant changes to a stable health condition.

13.2 Where a student declares a long-term difficulty which falls within the Equality Act definition of disability the Disability Advisory Service should be informed, subject to the student's consent.

### **Confidentiality**

14.0 The University provides specific guidelines on confidentiality in respect of student health and welfare. These embody the general principle that consent should be sought before information is shared, with very rare exceptions in the student's vital interests. Any decision to break confidentiality should be made at the appropriate level.

14.1 Students have access to professionals such as doctors, nurses, counsellors and chaplains who are required to observe confidentiality in accordance with strict ethical codes.

14.2 All staff within the collegiate University are bound by Data Protection legislation under which all data related to a person's mental health is regarded as sensitive personal data. There is an obligation to ensure such data is kept securely.

### **Legislation**

15.0 The Mental Capacity Act 2005 is founded on the principle that every adult has the right to make their own decisions and must be assumed to have capacity to make those decisions unless it is determined that they lack the capacity to make a particular decision. An adult will only be deemed to lack capacity to make a particular decision if, because of an impairment of, or a disturbance in the functioning of, the mind or brain they are unable to:

1. Understand the information relevant to the decision;
2. Retain that information;
3. Use or weigh that information as part of the decision-making process; or
4. Communicate the decision.

15.1 If university staff are concerned that a student's mental capacity is impaired they should involve a medical professional to undertake a capacity assessment.

15.2 It is extremely unlikely that students will be considered to lack the capacity to make decisions about their studies unless they are temporarily incapacitated (i.e. unconscious or acutely unwell). However, mental capacity and fitness to study are distinct and involve separate considerations. They should not be conflated.

15.3 The Mental Health Act 1983 allows individuals to be admitted to hospital, detained and treated without their consent, either for their own health and safety, or for the protection of other people. People can be admitted, detained and treated under different sections of the Mental Health Act, depending on the circumstances. If there are concerns that an individual is acutely unwell as a result of a mental health condition, university staff should call the emergency services as set out in this Policy.

### **Admissions**

16.0 Admissions decisions are made on purely academic grounds and the collegiate university welcomes applications from any suitably qualified applicants. Applicants should be made aware that Oxford is an academically selective university. As such, students will find courses challenging and intensive, and should therefore have practical and realistic strategies for meeting those demands.

16.1 The University ensures that prospective students have clear and accurate information on the support services which it provides. Applicants for Medicine and the PGCE are made aware of 'fitness to practise' requirements which involve consideration of the implications of a mental health condition for professional practice.

16.2 Candidates with mental health support needs are encouraged to make these known through the application process, so that appropriate adjustments to the admissions process can be made. Early declaration also assists in the timely provision of support once students commence their courses.

16.3 Specific guidance on handling applications from disabled candidates, including those with mental health disabilities, is available to academic and other staff via the undergraduate and graduate admissions handbooks (Single Sign-on required).

### **Induction**

17.0 Arrival at university, whether for the first time or for a higher level of study, constitutes a significant life transition. The impact of the transition may be greater for some students than others. Advice on managing transition forms part of the collegiate University's induction programmes, along with clear signposting of welfare provision.

## **Studying away from the University**

18.0 Students may study away from Oxford in order to undertake fieldwork, placements, and research; to participate in an exchange scheme; or to complete a year abroad. Departments and faculties are responsible for assessing the risks involved, including those related to a pre-existing mental health condition for which plans can then be made.

18.1 Difficulties may emerge while a student is away from Oxford. As part of the risk assessment process, departments and faculties specify the frequency of the contact they will maintain with their students, providing an opportunity for concerns to be identified. Part of the briefing for all students studying away from the University should include suitable contact details in the event of difficulties.

18.2 Students who have taken out the University's travel insurance have access to the insurer's 24 hour helpline.

18.3 Whilst distance from Oxford imposes some constraints, students studying away from the University are still entitled to access support from the Counselling and Disability Advisory Services. The former is able to offer online counselling.

18.4 Fitness to study away from Oxford is determined by the same processes used in Oxford.

## **Suspension of study**

19.0 If a student is suffering from a serious mental health difficulty, they may seek to take time out to become fit to study again. Different processes for making this request apply to undergraduates and postgraduates and medical conditions may be set regarding fitness to return to study.

19.1 In a limited number of cases the student's behaviour, arising from their medical condition, impacts adversely on the wider student body and on staff. Fitness to Study procedures focus on managing this impact in the least restrictive way possible. This will usually involve discussions with the individual student concerned, regarding the negative effects of their behaviour on others. Staff involved in these discussions should ensure that they are adequately equipped to have such discussions and are sensitive to issues related to mental illness.

19.2 A student's medical condition may be such that they are unable to meet the reasonable academic requirements of the course or programme; and the reasonable social and behavioural requirements of a student member (whether resident in college or not) without their physical, mental, emotional or psychological health or state having an unacceptably deleterious impact upon the health, safety and/or welfare of the student and/or other students and/or University or college staff (notwithstanding adjustments required by law and the support of the collegiate University and local medical services).

19.3 In such cases it may be necessary to request that the student suspend study for a period or to initiate the Fitness to Study procedures, through which suspension may be imposed. Procedures exist at both college and university levels for the suspension of students on the grounds of ill health, and for managing their return to study.

19.4 Suspended students continue to have access to the Counselling Service and DAS is able to offer advice to students, and support them on return, but specialist services, such as mentoring, are not available during the period of suspension.

## **Conduct and Discipline**

20.0 Mental health difficulties do not exclude students from the requirement to comply with the collegiate University's regulations on conduct and Discipline.

20.1 In situations where a student's ability to participate in disciplinary procedures is affected by mental health difficulties, the situation will be approached with due sensitivity, ensuring that the student is fit to take part and is appropriately supported.

## **Academic Assessment and Reasonable Adjustments**

21.0 Students with a mental health disability may be eligible for reasonable adjustments in their university assessments, as detailed in Part 12 of *Examination Regulations*. Both undergraduate and postgraduate students who require adjustments should be encouraged to make an application as soon as possible after matriculation.

21.1 Students who are not considered disabled, but whose examination performance is nevertheless affected by a short-term mental illness can submit evidence using the Factors Affecting Performance process, as detailed in Part 13 of *Examination Regulations*. This type of academic appeal should only be made in exceptional circumstances and is not for use by those who might more appropriately have made an application for a reasonable adjustment. Similarly, if the academic assessment of postgraduate research students is affected by short-term mental illness they can, in addition to suspension of study, seek deferrals of transfer and confirmation of status and extensions of the submission date.

## **Careers and Employment**

22.0 Students who are preparing to leave the University are encouraged to declare any ongoing mental health difficulties when using the Careers Service. They can access Careers Advisers providing specialist support for students who have long term mental and other health conditions. The Service continues to be available following withdrawal or graduation to any student who has matriculated.

22.1 The decision of whether or not to declare a mental health difficulty to a potential employer will remain the preserve of the student. References supplied by the University will not comment on a student's health unless the student has specifically asked for it to be mentioned, e.g. as explanation for a period of absence or poor performance or to illustrate personal qualities, e.g. determination or the ability to overcome adversity.

## **Publication, Review and Oversight**

23.0 This Policy and any associated advice and guidance will be communicated annually to key post holders in departments, colleges and support services. This Policy will be made available in a series of webpages with links to associated procedures and guidance or is available in hard copy from Student Welfare and Support Services (tel. 01865 280012 or email [swss@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:swss@admin.ox.ac.uk)). Copies in alternative formats are available on request.

23.1 This Policy will be subject to regular review by the Student Wellbeing Subcommittee, on behalf of Education Committee, and the Conference of Colleges. When statutory law changes, the Policy is held automatically to have been amended by that change and it will be updated as soon as is practically possible.

23.2 The Student Wellbeing Subcommittee will liaise with colleges through the Welfare Forum in particular to understand student mental health needs; to monitor access to, effectiveness of and satisfaction with support; and to ensure resources and initiatives are in place which conduce to the achievement of the aims set out in section 1.1.

23.4 Responsibility for approval of future changes to the policy: Education Committee (in respect of University provision) and Conference of Colleges (in respect of college provision).

## **Links**

[Admissions – Undergraduate](#)

[Admissions – Postgraduate](#)

[Alternative examination arrangements](#)

[Careers Service](#)

[College Chaplains](#)

[College Doctors and Nurses \(OxFed\)](#)

[College Link Counsellor Programme](#)

[Conduct](#)

[Confidentiality](#)

[Disability Advisory Service](#)

[Eating Disorders](#)

[Fieldwork](#)

[Fitness to Study](#)

[Fitness to Teach](#)

[Health and Fitness to Practice](#)

[Peer Support Programme](#)

[Occupational Health](#)

[Out of Hours Guidelines](#)

[Out of Hours Flowchart](#)

[Oxford Student Mental Health Network \(OSMHN\)](#)

[Specialist Mental Health Services](#)

[Student Advice Service](#)

[Student placements](#)

[Student Wellbeing Subcommittee – Open Papers](#)

[Student Wellbeing Subcommittee – Terms of Reference](#)

[Suspension - Undergraduate](#)

[Suspension – Postgraduate](#)

[Travel insurance](#)

[Turning Point](#)

[University Counselling Service](#)

[Welfare Forum](#)