

Cylchlythyr | Circular

Equality and diversity in higher education: promoting mental health and wellbeing

Date: 10 October 2013
Reference: W13/31HE
To: Heads of higher education institutions in Wales
Principals of directly-funded further education colleges in Wales and other interested parties
Response by: No response required
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This circular provides information and identifies current practice on promoting and supporting mental health and wellbeing in higher education, in line with the Welsh Government's mental health strategy *Together for Mental Health (2012)*.

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Introduction

1. This circular provides information and identifies current practice on promoting and supporting mental health and wellbeing in higher education, in line with the Welsh Government's mental health strategy *Together for Mental Health and Delivery Plan (2012)*.
2. Research undertaken by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) in 2008 found that people with mental health conditions are one of the most discriminated against groups in Wales¹. It is important, therefore, that we recognise that mental health and wellbeing is an issue of equality for institutions' students and employees.

Background and policy context

3. In October 2012 the Welsh Government published its mental health strategy: *Together for Mental Health*². The Strategy sets out the Welsh Government's vision for improving mental health and wellbeing, which contributes to tackling poverty and reducing inequalities. Welsh Government places the Mental Health (Wales) Measure 2010 at the heart of the Strategy.
4. The Strategy is focussed on six high-level outcomes underpinned by delivery outcomes³. The high-level outcomes aim to ensure:
 - The mental health and wellbeing of the whole population is improved;
 - The impact of mental health problems and/or mental illness on individuals of all ages, their families and carers, communities and the economy more widely, is better recognised and reduced;
 - Inequalities, stigma and discrimination suffered by people experiencing mental health problems and mental illness are reduced;
 - Individuals have a better experience of the support and treatment they receive and have an increased feeling of input and control over related decisions;
 - Access to, and the quality of preventative measures, early intervention and treatment services are improved and more people recover as a result;
 - The values, attitudes and skills of those treating or supporting individuals of all ages with mental health problems or mental illness are improved.
5. Actions taken to promote mental health are also incorporated in the Welsh Government's *Child Poverty Action Plan for Wales* and the *Tackling Poverty Action Plan*. HEFCW has a duty to contribute to the *Child Poverty*

¹ [EHRC - Who do you see?](#)

² [Welsh Government - Together for Mental Health - A Strategy for Mental Health and Wellbeing in Wales](#)

³ See the *Together for Mental Health Strategy*, p. 8

Action Plan and we are committed to supporting Welsh Government priorities for tackling poverty more generally.

6. The importance of services working together is emphasised within the Strategy, particularly in relation to the Welsh Government’s substance misuse strategy, *Working Together to Reduce Harm*. It is recognised that substance misuse can lead to extended mental health problems, and it is accepted that staff or students presenting with mental health problems are susceptible to misusing legal or illicit substances.⁴
7. Responding to the Strategy consultation, mental health charities advised the Welsh Government to include specific references to further and higher education. The Strategy recognises, therefore, that in addition to students with existing mental health needs, the impact of moving away from home, adapting to, and/or coping within, an academic environment, may provide particular challenges for some students who may require additional support.
8. In finalising the Strategy, the Welsh Government included a specific action for the higher education sector in the Strategy delivery plan.⁵

Key Actions	How will we do it?		How will we know?
	Planning and Commissioning	Improvement Approach/Training and Development	
To improve support for people with mental health and substance misuse problems in higher education.	Universities to ensure that plans for widening access to higher education include support for learners with mental health/substance misuse problems.	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) to require universities’ tuition fee plans to reflect the principles of <i>Together for Mental Health</i> and include provision of appropriate support services.	Tuition fee plans specify range of mental health support services and levels of investment.

9. HEFCW’s Corporate Strategy 2013-14 – 2015-16, as part of the Widening Access strategic theme, states that *“we will work with Welsh Government and higher education providers to advance equality of opportunity, including through going beyond statutory duties, new fee planning requirements and support arrangements. We will engage with the higher education institutions and other partners to broaden the diversity of the student population, having due regard for the provisions of the Equality Act”*.

⁴ [Welsh Government - Working together to reduce harm - The substance misuse strategy for Wales 2008-2018](#)

⁵ [HEFCW Corporate Strategy 2013-14 - 2015-16](#), p.12

Supporting institutions to promote mental health and wellbeing for staff and students

10. To support the implementation of the Welsh Government's mental health strategy delivery plan, HEFCW's Fee Plan Guidance 2014/15 states that: *'fee plans are expected to reflect the principles of the strategy and include provision of appropriate support services to improve support for people with mental health and substance misuse problems in higher education.'*⁶
11. Following a robust process of assessment, all institutional Fee Plans for 2014/15 were approved by HEFCW in June 2013. The Plans set out institutions' commitment to support equality of opportunity and promote higher education, including supporting mental health and wellbeing, in line with the *Together for Mental Health Strategy*. The Fee Plans demonstrate that institutions are at different stages and have different approaches to supporting and promoting mental health and wellbeing. In making further progress, institutions will want to embed provision to ensure all applicants and students have access to a high quality student experience, offering appropriate support and opportunities.
12. Fee Plans set out some aspects of student support. Institutions will also want to consider their response to the *Together for Mental Health Strategy* in relation to their role as employers to provide healthy and supportive workplaces to employees.

Developing mechanisms for supporting mental health and wellbeing

13. Institutions will want to consider mental health and wellbeing when impact assessing policies and processes impacting on staff or students.
14. The *Together for Mental Health Strategy* identifies the following training opportunities, although this is not an exhaustive list. Universities and Student Unions may wish to consider incorporating these or similar programmes into their staff development programmes in order to better equip staff to identify issues and signpost employees and students to relevant support services:
 - Mental Health First Aid: this is part of the national training programme for Wales, partners include Welsh Government, Health Challenge Wales and Mind Cymru;
 - Applied Suicide Intervention Training: provides practical training seeking to prevent the immediate risk of suicide.
15. In institutional Fee Plans for 2014/15, institutions express a commitment to improving wellbeing and support for people with mental health and substance misuse problems including by:
 - increasing the role of Mental Health Advisers in order to ensure an institutional wide approach;

⁶ [HEFCW Fee Plan Guidance 2014/15, circular W13/11HE](#), p. 3

- cascading Mental Health First Aid training to all staff, promoting positive practice and consistency;
 - coordinating targeted awareness raising campaigns and initiatives across institutions to promote mental health and wellbeing; and,
 - collaborating with partner agencies, such as the NHS and mental health charities, in order to ensure the provision of accurate and effective support and advice within institutions, as well as pathways for referrals.
16. In addition to ensuring effective support services, institutions will want to take appropriate steps to challenge all stigma and discrimination on campus, including in relation to mental health and substance misuse. We are aware that many institutions are already addressing this, and some institutions are working with external agencies and projects providing specialised support. In developing support, institutions might also wish to take account of the following initiatives mentioned within the Strategy to promote provision:
- *Time to Change Wales*; a national programme to end discrimination faced by people with mental health problems, and improve the nation's wellbeing. It is led by Gofal, Hafal and Mind Cymru, to spread the message 'don't be afraid to talk about mental health'. It is funded by Welsh Government, Big Lottery and Comic Relief. Further information is available at www.timetochangewales.org.uk;
 - University Mental Health and Wellbeing Day (19 February 2014); established in 2012 by the University Mental Health Advisers Network as a means of generating discussion around the mental health/wellbeing of those working or studying within the HE sector, and providing an opportunity to raise important issues and create lasting change;
 - World Mental Health Day, 10 October each year.
17. An All Wales Mental Health Promotion Network has been established by Welsh Government to bring together a wide range of organisations across all sectors to share good practice about mental health promotion. Relevant staff might find it useful to make links with the Network to cascade information throughout the institution.
18. The Welsh Government Strategy notes that a lack of physical activity can result in poor mental health and wellbeing, therefore work undertaken by institutions and Student Unions to promote sport and physical activity, along with other targeted health promotion initiatives, can make a strong contribution to addressing some of these issues for students and employees.

Welsh Government's *Healthy Further and Higher Education Scheme*

19. The *Together for Mental Health* Strategy confirms the Welsh Government's intention to develop a '*Healthy Further and Higher Education Scheme*' which will support the mental health and wellbeing of staff and students.

The Scheme is now being developed by the Welsh Government and we are working with them, institutions and other agencies and stand ready to implement the outcomes.

Monitoring institutions' progress and feedback

20. We will monitor institutions' progress in promoting wellbeing, and supporting students with mental health issues through Fee Plan reports submitted in October 2015.
21. We will analyse ECU annual published data for UK and Wales sector staff and review HEIs' equality and diversity annual reports to monitor issues, progress and good practice and we will report progress in this area through HEFCW's Annual Equality Report as information becomes available.

Further information

22. For further information, please contact Gemma Woolfe, Equalities Manager, (tel 029 2068 2218; email gemma.woolfe@hefcw.ac.uk).