Higher Education for a Healthy Nation: Student well-being and health
"The benefits of Open University education in prison were immediate. The lessons helped me have a new positive focus on rebuilding my life. The challenging modules helped rebuild my self-confidence."

"When I finally did tell one of my tutors that I was a carer, I was amazed at how much support was given. He explained that I could always contact him if I needed extensions and extra support."

"I was really in a bad way prior to having regular meetings with the mentor, and seriously thinking about walking away from the course. My mentor helped in numerous ways and was supportive practically - arranging meetings with advice shop and drop in centre, using library facilities, and emotionally – giving perspective, prioritising, managing stress levels."

"The benefits of exercising are improved well-being, a healthier lifestyle, more positive attitude, and improved sleep and fitness. I have started to get to know other people and it’s great to feel part of a community, and I just feel generally more positive. Going to the Sports Centre has helped me to not only lose weight, it has improved my mental health and well-being, especially around anxiety and stress in advance of exams."

"It’s so important to talk about mental health and for it to be part of everyday conversation because with one in four people struggling with a mental health problem, it’s more common than you think."

"All my lecturers and student services were very keen for me to take a break rather than give up. When you’re in that head space you feel like giving up, but they persuaded me to take a year off and come back."

"Coming here is giving me confidence for the future. Whatever tools I get from here I know I can carry them on outside."

"If I hadn’t done this work experience then I’d be lost. I’d finish university with a degree and not know where to go. Doing the GO Wales programme has helped me to step into the next journey of my life."

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Introduction

Universities and colleges that invest in the well-being and health of their students are investing in their entire communities, and strengthening the resilience of future generations. The international Okanagan charter for health-promoting universities and colleges recognised that an institution that brings these principles into the core of its operational and academic affairs is a successful one. Furthermore, bringing health and well-being into the mainstream heightens compassion; improves equity and social justice on campus; improves the health of those who learn and work in our institutions; and strengthens the sustainability of our communities and wider society.

Universities and colleges play a unique role in the daily lives of students, and they want to be well-equipped to support their large and diverse student populations. From supporting their academic progress early on, to providing a range of services and advice when they face challenges, interventions can make a real difference to student lives.

We have been making progress in this area for a while. Working with others, we strive to adopt a preventive approach through our policies, and we are acutely aware of our need to contribute to a society that boosts people’s physical and mental well-being. This enables us to progress the goals set out in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, particularly around a healthy Wales and an equal Wales.

The Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Abuse Act aims to support all people in Wales who have been subject to violence and abuse, which impacts on well-being and mental health.

Finally, the Equality Act protects individuals from unfair treatment and promotes a fair and more equal society, and defines some mental illnesses as protected characteristics.

Universities and colleges tend to have a portfolio of well-being and health services available for students to access, including support for mental health. These case studies show some of the ways in which institutions are currently working with students and partners to create inclusive learning environments, to help ensure a healthy and resilient student body.

“For most students, university is a joyous experience where new friendships are forged, careers paths are chosen and lessons are learned, both inside and outside the lecture theatre. But it is also a time of transition which can bring its own challenges, such as living away from home for the first time, managing finances or coping with exam pressures.” Kirsty Williams AM, Education Minister, March 2019

Earlier this year, the Welsh Government announced that it would provide £2 million of new funding to support students’ health and well-being, including mental health, at our universities. I look forward to seeing what this extra funding boost brings and its impact on the lives of students.

We want to go beyond merely complying with legislation. HEFCW is committed to sustaining well-being and health in higher education, and we will continue to work with our student partners, and with universities, colleges and Welsh Government to help realise our aims. Along with representative bodies such as Universities Wales, NUS Wales, and Colleges Wales, and other public bodies, we will play a crucial role in shaping the support networks made available for students in the future.

Gwyneth Sweatman, 2018-19 President of the NUS in Wales, outlined her vision for well-being and health in higher education:

“Wales is the perfect size for universities, students, and the mental health sector to work together to make sure that every student in Wales, no matter where or how they study, is able to access the services and support they need to stay in education.”

This publication shines a light on how universities and colleges foster healthy and thriving higher education environments. We know there is more we can all do: we must challenge structures and processes that create barriers; and continually improve and respond. But we will also continue to work with our partners to champion successes and to promote higher education’s contribution to well-being and health.

David Allen OBE, Chair, HEFCW, June 2019
Mental and emotional health and well-being
Using the Big White Wall to support well-being and health

The University of Wales Trinity Saint David, in partnership with its Students’ Union (TSDSU), subscribes to the Big White Wall initiative, which provides round-the-clock access to online mental health support, and enhances existing campus-based counselling and mental health support for students.

The initiative was launched following feedback from students who needed more support, were struggling to sleep, feeling stressed or having difficulty coping. Big White Wall enables them to get support, take control and feel better.

The service provides 24/7 online peer and professional support, with trained counsellors. Students can access anonymous online support; group courses and discussion on issues like negative thinking and stress; and courses and programmes to help students improve their well-being and health. This safe online space helps students to get things off their chest, explore their feelings and learn how to manage their mental health and well-being. 93% of members felt better as a result of using the service.

"We are delighted that the University supported the Students’ Union’s proposal and that this service is available to all of our students. We know from talking to our students that mental health is extremely important to them. The availability of 24-hour online tools will be a significant step forward in promoting and enabling better student mental health."

Josh Whale, Lampeter President, TSDSU

More:
Dai Rogers, Director of Student Services • d.rogers@uwtsd.ac.uk
Rhys Dart, Chief Executive, TSDSU • r.dart@uwtsd.ac.uk
bigwhitewall.com
Building an inclusive community

Cardiff University is working in partnership with Time to Change Wales and with three mental health charities: Gofal, Hafal and Mind Cymru – on a multi-media campaign to end mental health stigma and discrimination in Wales.

“Following my involvement in the University’s #LetsShare Campaign, I’ve spoken to over 10 friends who wanted advice and now feel comfortable enough to discuss mental health openly”.

Callie, Student

“My advice is to remember you are not alone. Please reach out and talk to someone. The minute you start to open up, the better it gets”.

Emily, Student

“Sharing my story was so rewarding and I have already received feedback from friends who related to my experience and were grateful that somebody had finally spoken out”.

Sophie, Student

“Sharing who you are and how you feel is always okay, and can make things a whole lot better”.

Nicola, Well-being Champion
Stefan’s Socks: Tackling the stigma around mental health

Stefan Osgood was a popular student at Aberystwyth University and a keen member of the Students’ Union Fencing Society. But he was suffering silently from depression and in March 2016, he took his own life.

Aberystwyth University’s Students’ Union launched the Stefan’s Socks campaign in memory of third-year undergraduate Stefan Osgood. It aims to raise awareness and promote better mental health among students.

Stefan always wore a pair of knee-high, bright pink socks during sporting matches. His trademark hosiery led in October 2017 to the launch of Aberystwyth Students’ Union Stefan’s Socks campaign, aimed at ending the stigma around mental health and encouraging students to explore different ways to look after themselves and ensure they stay happy and healthy during their time at university.

A Washing Line of Well-being was created with students asked to write an anonymous comment on mental health on a pink sock and peg it to the line. Sports teams and societies were encouraged to buy a pair of pink socks from the union in memory of Stefan, which raised more than £10,000 for Mind Aberystwyth.

The Stefan’s Socks campaign and bright pink socks have become a common sight on playing fields, in the Sports Centre and on campus.

“Stefan was a much loved student by many in our clubs and societies, and Stefan’s Socks is a brilliant way for our students to open up about their issues and to start changing the stigma surrounding mental health. Not only does our campaign do this, it is also raising money for local charities tied to mental health and supporting our community. Stefan’s Socks have been much more than a symbol for many, but a way to stand up for people who struggle to use their own voices to break down those barriers so people can feel like they have someone to turn to.”

Molly Longfield, Well-being Officer at Aberystwyth University’s Students’ Union

"Stefan was a much loved student by many in our clubs and societies, and Stefan’s Socks is a brilliant way for our students to open up about their issues and to start changing the stigma surrounding mental health. Not only does our campaign do this, it is also raising money for local charities tied to mental health and supporting our community. Stefan’s Socks have been much more than a symbol for many, but a way to stand up for people who struggle to use their own voices to break down those barriers so people can feel like they have someone to turn to.”

Molly Longfield, Well-being Officer at Aberystwyth University’s Students’ Union
Improving student mental health and well-being in secure environments

The Open University (OU) gives students in secure environments the chance to achieve a higher education qualification through tailored adjustment and support which is sensitive to their circumstances and environments. This gives them a sense of hope for the future, and in turn improves their mental health and well-being.

For a number of students, it is their first experience of education in a supportive environment where their academic ability is encouraged, and their self-esteem is developed. It provides a positive focus while serving a prison sentence, and emphasises the education and employment opportunities that could be available to them on their release. In 2017/18, 89 students were studying with the OU in secure environments in Wales. 13 per cent of them declared a disability. The OU works closely with prison education officers in Wales to support students, and to enable HE qualifications to be accessible. This is done through:

- A designated ‘students in secure environments’ team in Wales, who liaise with support agencies working with students.
- Course materials versioned for use in prison, with ‘off line’ packs and alternative formats for courses that normally require online engagement.
- Using the Virtual Campus, a secure intranet system for specific modules where students can access a range of information, communication facilities and other resources that are otherwise available online.
- One-to-one tutorials with a specialist tutor, empathetic to the student’s circumstances and environment.
- Flexibility and understanding by the OU when students are unable to meet module registration or assignment deadlines.
- One-to-one discussions about study requirements or support for students who have disclosed mental health conditions.
- Supporting students through a period of ‘unexpected’ transition (such as transferring prison or being released) to continue with studying, as studying provides a consistent focus when they are unable to control other aspects of their lives.

The OU continues to support students in secure environments and is planning to develop further the ‘through the gate’ support for students on release when they are exceptionally vulnerable.
“I tutor students in prison because I feel privileged to have worked closely with so many hard working and talented students, seeing them blossom. I have enjoyed the relationships that have developed. When they leave, they take with them new skills and a pride in what has been achieved. The OU has made a difference.”

David Hatherley, Maths Tutor

“The benefits of Open University education in prison were immediate. The lessons helped me have a new positive focus on rebuilding my life. The challenging modules helped rebuild my self-confidence.”

Student

“I was made to look at my life differently.”

Student
My story:
Leah Barfield, University of South Wales

Leah Barfield is from Cambridgeshire and is a second year Documentary Photography student at the University of South Wales.

“When I originally moved to university, I lived far away from home and it made it difficult to adjust to my new environment. My support network was small and I found it difficult to connect with peers and others around me.”

Having suffered with clinical depression and generalised anxiety disorder for many years, Leah is now working to raise the profile of mental illness within the student community.

“When within the University, I was lucky enough to receive some mental health mentoring. This support network allows me to have help when it comes to my studies, ensuring that my mental health doesn’t affect my quality of work and focus on my studies.

“USW also provides counselling services which many people I know have accessed and have had great experiences with them, whether it be about their studies or personal aspects of their well-being.”

A former Young Champion for the Time to Change campaign, which works to change the way people act and think about mental health problems, Leah now uses her talent for photography to document important conversations and stories which
some people who suffer with a mental health problem may find difficult to share.

"#INSIDEMYMIND is a collaborative project which I created with Time to Change to help the current Young Champions express themselves. Mental health issues do not discriminate. This project works with individuals of different backgrounds, ages and ethnicities."

The project is an important tool for the fight against discrimination and stigma that people face as they share first hand experiences and the importance of speaking out.

"Most people I meet find me outgoing and bubbly, but this is just one way I choose to hide how I really feel inside.

“My triggers tend to come from social situations or when I don’t know anyone - I tend to stutter and talk randomly. I worry that people are judging me, or don’t want me there and I find it hard not to spiral off into darker thoughts.

“Since being at university, I have forced myself into social situations to try and distract myself from sitting alone and circling my own mind. I’ve also confided in people who are close to me. Now they pick up on when I’m not feeling great and will help me out or arrange to do something to distract me.

"It’s so important to talk about mental health and for it to be part of everyday conversation because with one in four people struggling with a mental health problem, it’s more common than you think.

"Reaching out to the right group of friends or family will help because they’ll be able to notice those indicators and help you through those darker times."

Leah Barfield, University of South Wales
Promoting health and well-being using support from peers

Cardiff University’s Student Support and Well-being department provides a Peer Support Programme. ‘Well-being Champions’ are volunteers who support fellow students to enhance their student life and sense of connectedness at University, while gaining valuable skills and experiences themselves.

Well-being Champions offer advice ‘on the move’, with a regular presence at libraries, halls, cafés, specific school buildings and other University Hotspots. At a Hotspot, students can get to know the Champions, learn tips for improving their well-being, take away self-help resources and receive signposting information.

Well-being Champions offer regular ‘Tea & Talk’ sessions, where students can come along and chat through any difficulties in a relaxed, informal, environment. Students can chat one-to-one or in the wider group with Well-being Champions and other students. Postgraduate Peer Supporters volunteer to help fellow students at regular group meetings throughout the year. Well-being staff supervise trained Well-being Champions, Postgraduate Peer Supporters and LGBT+ Champions during their time in the role. The University hopes to develop the Peer Support Programmes to provide specialist training for LGBT+ Champions and to introduce additional peer support such as Disability Champions.

"Being a Well-being Champion is extremely rewarding and enables you to help fellow students, all while improving important skills that are attractive to future employers, such as communication, listening, and teamwork. I would highly recommend becoming a Champion".

Jasmine, Well-being Champion

"Having used the (Student Support) services at the University myself, this is my way of giving back and helping others. You don’t need to feel alone because we are here to help."

Sum, Well-being Champion and Postgraduate Peer Supporter
Reducing risk, building resilience: supporting suicidal students

A ground-breaking collaboration between Bangor University’s Counselling Service and the North Wales Clinical Psychology Doctorate Programme was shortlisted for a Times Higher Education ‘Outstanding Support for Students’ Award in 2018.

Students are provided with a bespoke course in Emotional Regulation Skills from Dialectical Behaviour Therapy experts, which teaches them a number of skills to help them understand their emotions, alongside strategies to manage the emotions in difficult situations. The courses are led by Dr. Michaela Swales, an international expert in Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), a NICE-recommended treatment for suicidal and self-harming behaviours.

Comparing measures of emotional well-being at the start and at the end of the course has shown significant reductions in the risk of self-harm and suicidality, alongside improvements in emotional regulation skills. Of those that completed the course, there was an 88% demonstrated clinical and reliable improvement rate, with notable decreases in levels of academic distress.

"As the course was delivered in a university setting, and involved university counselling service staff as well as clinical psychology staff, our initiative removed many of the barriers and stigma associated in accessing specialist help. Students often fall between what their university provides, and what is available in their home settings. We have found a way to bring specialised support directly to these students. This intervention has not only been able to significantly reduce risk amongst this group of students, but has also helped to equip them with skills that will support them beyond their life as a student."

Kate Tindle, Head of Bangor University’s Counselling Service

More:
Kate Tindle, Head of the Counselling Service, Bangor University  
k.tindle@bangor.ac.uk
My story:
A student with autism and complex mental health issues at Cardiff Metropolitan University

A student with autism and complex mental health issues moved to Cardiff Metropolitan University having previously struggled to develop the social and communication skills needed for a vocational, people-focused degree.

Cardiff Met helped the student to understand their condition and to approach the aspects of study they found most challenging. The University worked closely with their course and placement to manage expectations and ensure that they were being given the necessary time and support to develop their skills. This helped them to be more confident, taking risks and challenging themselves in an environment in which they felt safe.

As the student developed confidence, their understanding of their situation changed. They recognised that they had been vulnerable as a result of their condition, disclosing that they did not consent to their marriage and did not feel safe in their home. The University worked with the student and Women’s Aid, with a contribution from the university hardship fund and mentoring support, to enable the student to plan for and leave their domestic situation safely. Local charities, their advisor and their mentor gave them additional support to develop the skills necessary for independent living, something they had never done before.

Now a graduate, they feel positive about their future and are continuing to develop the skills necessary for both independent living and working. They feel for the first time in charge of their life and where they are going.

"Coming here is giving me confidence for the future. Whatever tools I get from here I know I can carry them on outside.”

"The support has been really helpful. Every time I seek support, I come in trembling and I leave with my head held high at the end of a session, knowing that there is a solution to my worries and all is not lost.”

More:
Neil Davies – Head of Student Well-being • ddavies@cardiffmet.ac.uk
www.cardiffmet.ac.uk/studentservices
Improving to access to counselling mental health support in Welsh

For many, mental health and well-being support through the medium of Welsh is a key part of a service that meets their needs.

Bangor University is committed to ensuring access to mental health provision for Welsh-speaking students. The Counselling Service, in conjunction with the Students’ Union (Undeb) and the University’s Welsh Language Task Group, has been involved in a number of initiatives:

- The Counselling Service has seen the number of students requesting (and having) counselling in Welsh double. The University’s Welsh-speaking counsellor is now looking at clients’ experiences of having counselling in Welsh, and has met with other local external bodies to promote the importance of the ‘Mae gen i hawl’ campaign, and Welsh-language counselling provision.

- A Welsh-speaking student was appointed to an internship to support the work of the University’s Student Mental Health Strategy Group, to enhance Welsh language provision for student mental health and explore viable external Welsh language resources.

"The steps taken by the counselling service at Bangor University over the last year not only ensures that counselling support is offered in Welsh but also enables a better understanding of the needs of Welsh-speaking service users. Together with our Students’ Union, the counselling service has played an important role in bringing the need to develop mental health services and resources through the medium of Welsh to the forefront of the national debate about this topic."

Dr Lowri Hughes, Head of Policy and Development at Canolfan Bedwyr – Bangor University’s Centre for Welsh Language Services, Research and Technology

Kate Tindle, Head of the Counselling Service, Bangor University
ktindle@bangor.ac.uk
Mindfulness for International Students

The Counselling Service at Bangor University received a grant from UKCISA to pilot a Mindfulness-Based Stress-Reduction (MBSR) course, tailored specifically for international students.

The Service has been providing a variety of psychological services, including mindfulness courses, for all students for many years, but there was less uptake from international students. The new eight-week course offered psychological support to a group of international students, frequently under-represented in one-to-one counselling.

The project also aims to:
- research the effectiveness of this intervention;
- enhance cross-cultural relationships between different International student groups; and
- investigate the appropriateness and effectiveness of providing such group work in a HE institution.

International students are most likely to make use of counselling resources through group programmes. One of the course’s groups was run in the environment of the University’s Faith Centre, familiarising additional international students with this venue as a useful resource at their disposal.

Participants learnt skills that enhanced their personal development and capacity to manage stress and difficulty. Friendships and cross-cultural relationships developed within supportive communities where participants felt safe, free to be themselves and able to understand and support each other. Nearly 70% of participants showed improvement in levels of functioning and well-being.

The University’s Counselling Service will continue to promote its mindfulness programmes to international students, and will work to maintain the positive contact made with International Student Support Office staff.

"The course was a great platform for international students to learn about techniques and tools to manage stressful situations. The fact that it was targeted towards international students made it more engaging for them, but also gave them extra confidence to discuss their thoughts and feelings in their non-native language, knowing everyone was in the same boat. It was a safe space for all and the internationalisation of the course definitely helped in that sense."

Marcel Clusa, International Student Support Officer

More:
Kate Tindle, Head of the Counselling Service, Bangor University
k.tindle@bangor.ac.uk
Aberystwyth University Students’ Union won a National Lottery Community Fund grant to provide Resilience Skills and Suicide Prevention training to staff and to 2,000 students over three years.

A series of three-hour interactive workshops are being held on campus, designed and delivered by an external, specialist training organisation. The workshops explore how emotional resilience can be an effective defence against depression and teach participants how to take practical actions to reduce the risk of suicide.

Students’ Union staff, student academic representatives and Club and Society officers were among the first cohort to receive the training, followed by a series of Train the Trainer courses to enable staff to deliver regular sessions to students.

The training is in addition to the regular workshops and sessions offered by the University’s Student Support Service to support students’ mental health and well-being.

“This training is important because it allows us to give our students and staff ways in which to help each other cope and the skills to deal with the situations that come with being a student.

“We’ll be working closely with the University’s Student Support and Careers Services to ensure students who are in need continue to have access to appropriate well-being support where needed, while ensuring the training complements existing provision. I’m looking forward to rolling this out to our students and staff, particularly our Clubs and Societies who have been asking for additional training in these areas.”

Molly-Jean Longden, Aberystwyth Students’ Union Well-being Officer

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More:

Martin Dodd

• mmd11@aber.ac.uk www.abersu.co.uk
Supporting LGBT+ students’ mental and emotional well-being

Cardiff University’s Student Support and Well-being team has been working to improve access to support for LGBT+ students. The team created a set of activities with the Students’ Union, LGBT+ Society, a Student Focus Group, and in response to evidence published by Student Minds, the UK’s student mental health charity.

A number of new options now support LGBT+ University students, including:

- LGBT+ Champions: fellow LGBT+ students trained by University student support professionals in the essentials of peer support and LGBT+-awareness training, and offer well-being-related and practical peer support.
- Workshops, including café-style, peer-led workshops and workshops based around Coming Out at University.
- A Trans Support Pathway for students transitioning at University. Students can make contact anonymously if they do not wish to identify themselves but would like to share information about being trans at Cardiff University.
- Making a safe space available, regularly at the University and exclusively for students and staff members who identify with the term trans.
- The option for first year students to elect to live in ‘LGBT+ students & Allies’ accommodation.
- Specialist support and information to those who have experienced domestic abuse.
- One-to-one support from the University’s LGBT+ Chaplain for students wishing to explore spirituality.

Additional, specialist training is provided for Student Support and Well-being staff to enable LGBT+ students to feel as supported as possible when accessing support services. Further work with organisations such as Stonewall Cymru and Student Minds and creating an inclusive virtual environment are to come.

“Our work with our LGBT+ student community to improve access to support for them is something we feel is really important. We know from the evidence base of national research that there is a greater vulnerability around LGBT+ people’s mental health. We wanted to work in partnership to improve the support we offer.”

Ben Lewis, Lewis Director Student Support and Well-being
Supporting students to succeed

The OU in Wales works closely with students to discuss disabilities and the help they might need to study. This includes identifying support needs as early as possible; suggesting coping strategies and sources of support; recognising students’ concerns related to study; and signposting support options.

At some point during their studies, many students with mental health conditions will experience anxiety about submitting their assignments or taking examinations. Students in distance-learning environment might also feel isolated and need a regular point of contact. The OU’s Student Support Teams work with tutors and Disabled Students’ Services to identify students who need support and establish the most effective ways to provide this support at a distance.

This might include:
- In-depth conversations with educational advisers to make students aware of available arrangements such as requesting extensions, reporting special circumstances or deferring study.
- Arranging additional support sessions with tutors to focus on a specific assignment or study topic, or revision and exam preparation.
- Encouraging students to apply for a Disabled Students Allowance to access specialist mentoring and study skills support.
- Encouraging students to use peer support, such as Nightline, operated by volunteers from OU Students Association.
- Encouraging students to use OU well-being resources such as the booklet ‘Studying and Staying Mentally Healthy’, relaxation techniques and mindfulness videos.
- Working with students’ Mental Health Support Teams and an OU Mental Health Adviser.
- Promoting equality and diversity values to help students talk about their difficulties and combat any perceptions of stigma.

One student experienced extreme anxiety around assignment submission for over two years. Working with their tutors, Student Support and the Mental Health Team to develop an action plan for managing their anxiety and seeking help, they constructed coping strategies and achieved distinctions in their modules.

"Following years and years of being told that I was the class clown and being dismissed and thrown by the wayside of the education system – the OU began to assist me in finally starting my higher education journey at the age of 38. I was given a disabled students’ allowance, a computer that could read to me, and the correct software to help with my condition. This was the first time in my entire life that anyone had ever helped me in the education system and the OU continued to help me throughout the duration of my degree."

John Spence,
OU Graduate and Wales Adult Learner of the Year 2018
My story:  
Ella Wilkinson, University of Wales Trinity Saint David

When Ella Wilkinson started her final year at university, the anxiety and depression that surfaced during her first year returned with a vengeance. This time it was so bad she left her course for a year.

"The first thing I noticed was a change in my sleeping patterns. I was sleeping very erratically and then my attendance at lectures dropped. That made me more anxious and it spiralled."

When Ella first reported feeling anxious and depressed in her first year she was seen by UWTSD counselling services within a month. She says that and medication from her GP helped her cope.

But when symptoms returned a few weeks into her third year, she told lecturers she wanted to leave. They persuaded her to take a year out rather than quit outright and supported her to do that, she says.

"I managed with medication and weekly appointments near to where I lived from the university counselling service, but when I came back in the third year things began to slip. I played down how bad I was feeling but I think my parents had an idea and my dad came down from home in Leicester to check on me."

Ella believes young people are under pressure to "have the best time of their lives" at university, when the reality is that it can be lonely. She's taken the step to describe her experience hoping it will help break the stigma of mental health and ensure other young people get the rapid support she says her university gave her.

"All my lecturers and student services were very keen for me to take a break rather than give up. When you're in that head space you feel like giving up, but they persuaded me to take a year off and come back."

Ella Wilkinson, University of Wales Trinity Saint David

Extract from:  
'I didn't realise how ill anxiety was making me'  
by Abbie Wightwick Education Editor at WalesOnline/Media Wales. Reproduced with permission.
Physical activity, health and well-being
A Students’ Union fights to end Period Poverty

One in ten girls in the UK has been unable to afford sanitary wear.

The University of South Wales’ Students’ Union (USWSU) has introduced a Period Exchange to provide free sanitary products in all of its facilities. The Period Exchange ensures that a lack of access to sanitary products does not act as a barrier to a student’s ability to fully participate in university life.

The campaign was inspired by the Red Box Project and research conducted by the BBC, which found that free menstrual products helped improve school attendance. USW Students’ Union wanted to send a clear message that: they were committed to tackling this form of gender inequality; they were tired of the tampon tax; and it was unacceptable for students to lack access to essential period products because they couldn’t afford them.

Since the campaign launched, students have reacted positively by contributing items to the exchange and engaging on social media. While The Period Exchange was established as a short-term solution to the larger issue of Period Poverty, the willingness of students to contribute sanitary products to the exchange has created a successful and sustainable solution.

“I am so proud of our students for getting behind this innovative campaign. No woman should have to worry about missing a lecture or class because she cannot afford basic sanitary products.”

Sian Taylor, Chief Executive Officer, USW Students’ Union

“I was elected as a student officer two years ago and this is easily the campaign I am most proud of.”

Liam Powell, Vice President for Education and Welfare.
Promoting physical health and well-being with Couch to 5k

Cardiff Metropolitan Sport has rolled out its own version of Couch to 5K (C25K), which is suitable for all, to students on both of its campuses and the uptake in participation has been positive.

Couch to 5k was set up by the NHS to get people moving. It is aimed at those who have never run and would like to, or those who want to be more active.

Both of Cardiff Metropolitan University’s campuses are surrounded by large and accessible parks, and those who do not want to go outside can complete the programme in the University’s fitness centres.

Students are given a free programme to follow for nine weeks, in sessions with an instructor or on their own. The sessions are a mix of walking and running, gradually improving stamina and fitness in the nine weeks, and completing a 5k run.

Due to the popularity of the C25K, the University runs this event every 12 weeks. This year Cardiff Met is sponsoring the Cardiff 10k, and all students who successfully complete the C25K program will have the opportunity of a free place to run the 10k along with 8,000 runners.

“Starting C25K has made such a difference to my attitude towards exercise. I would never have had the confidence to run on my own, but now in week five I can run for 10 minutes without stopping. I feel so much better and confident since starting, and have now started regularly attending fitness classes within Cardiff Met, something I never thought I would do before.”

Gwenllian Wilson, Business Management student

More:
Allison Jones, Fitness Manager
AGJones@cardiffmet.ac.uk www.cardiffmet.ac.uk/sport
Promoting health, well-being and resilience through physical activity

From free fitness classes to daily swims during exam time, Aberystwyth University is taking positive action to boost the numbers of students using its Sports Centre facilities to improve their mental health and well-being.

While exercise builds resilience for both physical and mental health, many people find the barrier to exercise, either real or perceived, stops them from taking that first step. Overcoming this barrier and encouraging as many students as possible to take up some form of exercise is a priority for the University’s well-being agenda.

Aberystwyth’s flagship initiative gives students who live in university accommodation free and unlimited access to its Sports Centre’s Platinum Pass, offering five different gym areas, more than 60 exercise classes a week, a pool and sauna, a climbing wall and a 400m floodlit running track. The Platinum Pass for non-residential students costs £125 per year. As a result of these initiatives, student footfall through the Sports Centre increased by 25,000 visits in 2017/18 compared to the previous year.

Other measures taken by the University to support access to exercise include:

- A Well-being Pathway to Health for students suffering

“We hope that by allowing students to access the Sports Centre freely, it will encourage more students to participate in sport, health and well-being activities. Working collectively with others, we are keen to understand and address barriers to engagement, and innovate our offer to reach out to those who might not automatically consider sport and active lifestyle is for them, ultimately improving the student’s experience and enjoyment of University life.”

Darren Hathaway, Manager of the Sport Centre at Aberystwyth University
with their health, with a choice of: five sessions with a personal trainer; group exercise for mind and body; or three months’ gym membership with a buddy system.

• Free daily fitness and well-being classes, and swimming during exam periods.

• Short promotions of £1 per day for unlimited Sports Centre use.

The University also offers short courses to inspire those who may otherwise not venture into the Sports Centre including:

• Quiet Inductions for autistic students.

• Discover Aber – Freshers’ Week walking and jogging sessions to familiarise students with the town while exercising.

• Couch Potato to Spring Bean, a four week introduction to exercise for students with high anxiety.

• Dance-Fit Dark (luminous outfits and exercise in the dark with disco lights for those who have body image or co-ordination concerns).

The Sports Centre now opens earlier in the morning across seven days to meet demand. The University continues to support health and well-being through making sport and exercise accessible and attractive to all students.

"The benefits of exercising are improved well-being, a healthier lifestyle, more positive attitude, and improved sleep and fitness. I have started to get to know other people and it’s great to feel part of a community, and I just feel generally more positive. Going to the Sports Centre has helped me to not only lose weight, it has improved my mental health and well-being, especially around anxiety and stress in advance of exams."

Stephen Johnstone, Student
Championing physical activity and mental health

Bridgend College has introduced rugby sessions available to all female students across its two main campuses. This is led by a Professional Graduate Certificate in Education student and qualified rugby coach, who is positive about the impact of sport and physical activity on mental health.

The College is trying to increase the number of students involved in physical activity to improve their confidence, self-esteem and general physical and mental health. The Student Well-being Team reached out to students to find out what they wanted and bring their ideas to fruition.

A significant number of female students requested a female rugby team at the same time as the student offered to coach a rugby team. The support of the new rugby coach made it possible for students who were suffering with poor mental health to try different strategies to try to improve it. The College hopes to further grow the number accessing this opportunity and overcoming the barriers of participation in sport and physical activity.

To develop the team further, the College offers taster sessions to groups of students, and supports students in improving team building skills, communication, physical and mental health, social networks, self-worth and confidence.

"I am currently a professional rugby player with the Ospreys and have recently completed my introduction to counselling course. I have a keen interest in mental health and would like to help in any way possible."

Lloyd Ashley, Student Rugby Coach

More:
Mrs Samantha Gunnarsson (Well-being and Safeguarding Manager)
• SGunnarsson@bridgend.ac.uk • www1.bridgend.ac.uk
Promoting physical health and well-being with coaching

A hands-on Foundation Degree in Rugby Coaching and Development is the result of a partnership between the University of South Wales, the Welsh Rugby Union, Cardiff Blues and the Dragons.

As part of the course, students gain practical coaching skills with Dragons or Cardiff Blues community rugby teams. Students go on to work as coaches within communities, developing and delivering sports initiatives.

The course allows students to study all sub-disciplines of coaching and fitness, and gain industry-recognised qualifications. They learn all aspects of children and youth coaching, rugby coaching, rugby development, social inclusion and sports management skills.

“This partnership is a great example of that investment, with key partners working together for the good of the students and the game.”

Ryan Jones, WRU Head of Rugby Participation

“This is an excellent initiative and the collaboration between the University, WRU and the regions will provide the next generation of community coaches in Wales to support the development of the game at grassroots level. Integral to the course is that students learn about the importance of their own health and fitness as well as that of the children and young people with whom they engage throughout their course.”

Paul Rainer, Head of Sports

More:
Paul Rainer
• paul.rainer@southwales.ac.uk
Promoting physical health and well-being with coaching
Safe environment, personal health, and relationships
Creating safe and inclusive learning environments

Shared respect for one another should be embedded in the university experience. Universities should be inclusive learning and working environments, where all learners and staff are supported, feel respected and can demonstrate their potential.

As part of its induction programme for all new students, the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) has introduced dedicated sessions to create conversations around equality, diversity and respect to the forefront of the students’ experience. These sessions, developed with the Students’ Union, introduce a range of topics including barriers to equality, the impact of inappropriate behaviours, becoming an active bystander, what constitutes sexual harassment, and the importance of consent.

The sessions encourage open discussions across courses and boundaries about these important topics, creating a supportive community and aiming to go beyond raising awareness.

The University plans to introduce a short online course about equality and respect for new students to complete as part of their induction process.

“The Students’ Union welcomes opportunities to open the dialogue surrounding student safety and well-being. By working with the University to deliver these opportunities, we aim to foster a culture of acceptance and respect for all students and staff, and work towards Wales’s goal of being an inclusive and proudly diverse nation.”

Becky Ricketts, President Carmarthen Campus Trinity Saint David Students’ Union

“These sessions have been welcomed by our students, who are fully engaged with the process. We have developed a great partnership with the Students’ Union to ensure that these sessions are embedded across the University.”

Dr Lewis Pearson, Head of Life Design

More:

Lewis Pearson
• Lewis.pearson@uwtsd.ac.uk
Mindfulness programme: a proactive approach to mental health provision

Rising concerns in the higher education sector call for a more proactive approach to student mental health. A cultural shift is needed to move away from reactive problem solving, towards a heightened focus on well-being that is embedded into the student experience. The University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) has responded by offering free mindfulness courses for students as part of a broader offering of self-reflection, life skills development and personal development content.

Mindfulness - the practice of fostering greater awareness of the present moment - can help to manage stress, sleep, focus and concentration. Three introductory sessions and four eight-week mindfulness courses have run across UWTSD campuses since 2018. The student response has been overwhelmingly positive, describing the courses as "a good way to tackle life's problems", by providing a "variety of tools for every situation" and helping to "relax before assignments, exams and deadlines".

"A sense of community is built up in the groups, as sharing practice tends to deepen it. The tendency is to notice those things that resource us, rather than deplete us, and make choices to enhance well-being."

Heather Fish, Mindfulness tutor
Bystander project: working to create safer communities

The #MeToo movement shone a global light on the experiences of those who have experienced sexual harassment, violence or abuse. To help raise awareness of the issues and how witnesses can respond, Aberystwyth University has partnered with Welsh Women’s Aid to offer Bystander Intervention training to students.

150 Aberystwyth University students have so far attended a free “Bystander Intervention” training programme showing them how to recognise and intervene to stop harassment, violence and abuse. The training gives students the skills and confidence to respond appropriately when they are worried someone may be experiencing abuse or sexual violence. It takes a preventative approach, and looks at changing cultural norms that condone sexism and harassment.

The programme is offered twice a year in workshops led by a qualified trainer from Welsh Women’s Aid, with contributions from Aberystwyth University staff. Students cover a range of topics including culture and gender, rape and sexual assault, domestic abuse, and how to develop the skills necessary to safely intervene as a trained Bystander.

“Aberystwyth University has been very successful in promoting the Bystander Intervention with students and staff, and the support for the project has been fantastic. The University has shown a tremendous commitment to addressing violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence on campus.”

Alice Lilley, Welsh Women’s Aid

“The transition from thinking you are a victim to a survivor is one that is long and can be a struggle. Having made this transition myself through various types of abuse, it is important to me to aid others with this transition if they seem stuck. I have also now acquired skills, from the Bystander Intervention, to help prevent someone having to go through this transition at all.”

Charley Rodgers, student

“The Bystander sessions have not only made me more aware of pressing issues in society, particularly those concerning interpersonal violence, but have also taught me how to approach potentially difficult situations in an appropriate manner. These skills are invaluable and I’ll use them throughout my life. Everyone should think about what they can do to be better, this course can help be the first step.”

Emily Winfield, student

More:
Jeremy Newman – 01970 6222516 • jen11@aber.ac.uk
Esther Prytherch 01970 622365 • eip14@aber.ac.uk
In 2018, Bangor University Students’ Union began a University-wide campaign to tackle sexual violence and to promote the University’s Zero-Tolerance approach to all forms of harassment. No Grey Area’s message was simple – that the University takes all incidents of harassment seriously and believes that there is no ambiguity between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

A short video featuring prominent members of the University’s senior staff team and students raised awareness of the negative effects of sexual harassment, driving home the message that it is safe to come forward and that the University will respond.

The week-long campaign included outreach work across Bangor University’s multiple campuses, engaging with students, and promoting the zero-tolerance message. The campaign culminated with a march through the city’s high street to ‘Reclaim the Night’, a national campaign raising awareness of violence against women and demanding justice for rape survivors.

“In the last twelve months, Bangor University has increased its work to prevent and provide support in the area of sexual violence. A member of staff has been appointed to provide specialised support for students and work across the University training staff and leading an institutional strategy on the prevention of harassment, hate crime and sexual violence. Peer-to-peer awareness raising is an important part of any strategy to address sexual violence in universities, and the No Grey Areas campaign has been an important part of this awareness raising.”

Maria Lorenzini, Director of Student Services, Bangor, and member of the Universities UK Taskforce on Harassment, Hate Crime, and Violence Against Women.

More:
Helen Munro, Student Equality and Diversity Officer, Bangor University Students’ Union, h.munro@bangor.ac.uk
Student well-being drop-in sessions

Bridgend College has built a good relationship with local support agencies to increase engagement with students. By running drop-in sessions, students can access simultaneously support from external agencies and College Student Well-being officers.

One student struggling with depression and anxiety also had caring responsibilities within the home while trying to keep up with the academic pressures of her course. The student Well-being team referred her to the Mental Health Matters drop-in to help her self-regulate and address her mental health positively.

In the drop-in sessions, which take place every day on the College’s two main campuses, Student Well-being Officers provide a listening, signposting and safeguarding service. Once a month, external support organisations run their own drop-in sessions alongside these sessions in order to provide specific and professional support. Partners include: Credit Union, which also supports the College’s Keep Calm, Exam Stress initiative; Bridgend County Borough Council Health and Well-being Team; Mental Health Matters; and the Terrence Higgins Trust.

The drop-in model has been used for two academic years, and is starting to fully embed with the external organisations who are providing an additional layer of complex support and accessibility. The College plans to develop Student Ambassadors in Mental Health and a peer support group to develop confidence, self-esteem and coping strategies.

“We trialled the drop in service to see how it would work within the college as mental health and well-being issues are on the rise. The students are on their own ground, around friends and staff they trust.”

Donna Mason,
Mental Health Matters

“Well-being has supported me to remain on my course and made me aware of agencies available to support me. I feel more independent.”

Ellouise Knight,
Student

More:
Samantha Gunnarsson,
Well-being and Safeguarding Manager
• SGunnarsson@bridgend.ac.uk
• www1.bridgend.ac.uk
Creating the culture: addressing violence and abuse affecting students

Cardiff University recognises that harassment, hate crime, sexual violence and assault, relationship violence and other forms of abuse all exist in society, which must include the University community.

Cardiff University’s plan to tackle these issues was developed in partnership with statutory services and third sector organisations, and in consultation with Welsh Government.

Key elements of the plan include:

• Improving prevention education and awareness; campaigning; promoting online resources, social media posts, videos and blogs; and training for staff and students.

• Intervention, including the ‘Bringing in the Bystander’ Initiative.

• The role of a Disclosure Response Team, which responds to all disclosures of violence and abuse and provides support to those affected.

• Collaborative working with internal partners and specialist external services.

The University provides an online tool that allows students and staff to disclose any incidents. A trained team of staff from across the University can respond to incidents of violence and abuse and offer support.

“This work has provided a significant improvement in our understanding of students facing violence and abuse, and critically improved our ability to help them access support either from us or from our partners”.

Staff member
WE KNOW,
violece and abuse affects our students.

WE CAN HELP,
our Disclosure Response Team offer practical support.

IT'S NOT ON,
and we are addressing it.

YOU CAN HELP,
recognise the signs, tell us if you know a student is at risk.
Working together
Raising Awareness of Diabetes

Wales has the highest prevalence of diabetes in the UK, with over seven per cent of the population having the condition.

Cardiff Metropolitan University hosted a “Knowing Your Risk for Diabetes” seminar on World Diabetes Day to help raise awareness of this lifelong condition.

The Diabetes awareness event, hosted by the Cardiff Met Student Science Society, and supported by the Cardiff School of Sport and Health Sciences, and Diabetes UK Cymru, explored the risk factors and issues surrounding diabetes. Through interactive stands attendees learned more about both Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes, including the associated complications as well as the prevention of Type 2 diabetes.

Ahead of the event, Diabetes UK Cymru and Cardiff Met visited schools across Cardiff to raise awareness of the condition with pupils and discuss healthy lifestyles, diabetes prevention and supporting peers who have the condition.

“Diabetes is becoming an increasing health threat in Wales, and as an educational institution it is part of our duty to connect individuals with health scientists, clinicians and politicians to share knowledge and experiences.”

Beirag Nazar, Cardiff Met MSc Biomedical Science student and one of the event organisers.
Arts and health: promoting learning and resilience through commissions

Developing stimulating environments support mental well-being.

The ‘A degree of Responsibility’ (ADOR) project at Wrexham Glyndŵr University saw undergraduate fine art students undertake an artistic commission at an Intensive Care Psychiatric Unit at Glan Clwyd Hospital.

The project partnered students with NHS staff and mental health development agency Unllais to develop artwork for the space at the Intensive Care Psychiatric unit. ADOR supported students to review research about creative environments for people living with a mental illness. NHS staff also collected feedback from patients about their aspirations for the space, which students used to inform their brief.

Three students developed a theme of woodland, and colours were carefully selected to create calming but uplifting pieces of artwork. The brief was complex due to the health and safety specifications of the space. However, students engaged in a rigorous feedback process, including presenting developing ideas to a steering group consisting of NHS staff and external project partners. The outcome of this process provided students with real world work experience and the skills to engage with an external arts commission, as well as how to work in a clinical health care setting.

“Colour and content generate different reactions for different people and it’s something I really had to focus on throughout the whole process. Working on this project has been so fulfilling and I’m incredibly proud of what we’ve produced collaboratively.”

Fine art student and participant

More:
Lucy Jones  •  L.R.Jones@glyndwr.ac.uk
Megan Jones  •  Meganellenwyatt@gmail.com
Delivering mental health and well-being services with local charities

“Just having someone listen to me without fear or judgement and the help I’ve received is amazing.”

The University of South Wales has teamed up with mental health charities to deliver courses and resilience training to students across its campuses in Pontypridd, Cardiff and Newport.

Merthyr and the Valleys Mind, Valleys Steps and Stepiau are just some of the charities working in partnership with the University’s Well-being Service to offer workshops for students coping with mental health issues or concerns.

Two-hour workshops or 6 week courses all draw on the knowledge of the experts from the charitable partners. Students can register for sessions such as ‘Living life to the Full’, ‘Coping with Life’, ‘Managing Anxiety’ or taster courses in mindfulness.

USW’s own Well-being Service helps students who are experiencing mental or emotional distress, offering a range of practical and confidential support through events, courses and workshops. In addition to supporting students directly, the Service promotes an understanding and acceptance of mental health and of psychological and emotional well-being throughout the University.
"I was really in a bad way prior to having regular meetings with the mentor, and seriously thinking about walking away from the course. My mentor helped in numerous ways and was supportive practically – arranging meetings with advice shop and drop in centre, using library facilities, and emotionally – giving perspective, prioritising, managing stress levels."

Student
Improving the health of local communities

“We are keen to offer value to the local communities surrounding us and this will be a mutually beneficial working relationship.”

Cardiff Metropolitan University’s School of Sport and Health Sciences has partnered with Cwm Taf University Health Board Public Health Unit to explore ways to improve the health and well-being of the local population. The strategic alliance will bring together academics, students, and practitioners to develop community-focused projects to address a range local issues.

“We are always looking for opportunities to provide our students with inspiring, interesting and unique learning experiences which can be directly applied to real situations. This alliance will offer a whole range of community-based research projects which directly address real life need in local communities. We will be working closely with healthcare staff at Cwm Taf to develop targeted research and interventions around key issues such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease.”

Dr. Ian Mathieson, Deputy Dean of Cardiff School of Sport and Health Sciences

“This is an incredibly important new partnership that will see many of our practitioners working directly with academic experts and students to help deliver real improvements to people’s lives in terms of their wellbeing. Some of the challenges we face across Merthyr Tydfil County Borough and Rhondda Cynon Taf are specific to our local communities and this joint venture will enable us to develop bespoke interventions and strategies to address some of these issues.”

Professor Kelechi Nnoaham, Public Health Director of Cwm Taf University Health Board
Improving social prescribing in north Wales

People who have a healthy diet, regular physical activity, live in clean and safe homes and have meaningful social connections are less likely to develop ‘non-communicable diseases’ or mental health problems. People who have access to all of these things also live better with existing mental or physical health challenges.

Social prescribing helps link people to local, non-clinical services to improve their health and well-being.

Wrexham Glyndŵr University has worked with the 2025 Movement, who work to end avoidable inequalities in health and housing, to establish a Community of Practice for Social Prescribers, to end avoidable health inequality in north Wales.

The University’s Community of Practice event, connecting north Wales’s social prescribers for support and learning, was attended by range of voluntary groups, public and private sector organisations.

Wrexham Glyndŵr students on the Mental Health and Well Being degree – the social prescribers of the future – are part of the Community of Practice. They are involved in a pilot for a new social prescribing certificate for practitioners who support a new model of health and well-being.

The Community of Practice model connecting practitioners, partners and academia, has been chosen to be a mini ‘Live Lab’ in the Future Generations Commissioner’s Art of the Possible programme, highlighting great work in improving well-being in communities.

The Community of Practice links those delivering social prescribing programmes with partners such as housing associations, health boards, public services and the police. This helps to highlight the hidden work being done in communities. It is developing a long-term approach towards health and well-being, and will continue to work with academics and alongside public bodies to help alleviate and prevent issues in the community through non-clinical services.

“There is excellent work being done in communities across our region to provide social prescribing. Ensuring that work is recognised, structured and rewarded helps to create a resilient collection of social prescribers across north Wales – and that is what this Community of Practice, and our wider academic support programme at Wrexham Glyndŵr University, is all about.”

Nina Ruddle,
Head of Public Policy Engagement at Wrexham Glyndŵr University

More:
Nina Ruddle,
Head of Public Policy Engagement at Wrexham Glyndŵr University.
• Nina.ruddle@glyndwr.ac.uk
• @2025_movement
Improving social prescribing in north Wales

Photo: Improving social prescribing in north Wales
Additional support
Skills for Life: Developing resilience skills and confidence

In a constantly changing environment, having life skills is essential to meet the challenges of everyday life. Swansea University’s Skills for Life programme develops resilience skills and confidence – which impact positively on a student’s mental health and life satisfaction, and on university retention.

While Swansea University offers a range of options to support the ‘academic transition’ of students, the greatest area of unmet demand was for practical ‘life skills’ support in areas such as cooking, and living in shared accommodation.

Skills for life workshops are delivered by a range of individuals including the Welfare Team, the Library, Student Travel Services, St John Ambulance, and students themselves from, for example, Martial Arts Societies, Students’ Union Bar Staff. Student ambassadors are on hand to encourage engagement and feedback, and to signpost students to further learning opportunities and support services.

Since launching, the Welfare Team has delivered 54 workshops to 320 students, covering 28 different skills. Workshops have included: first aid; basic car maintenance; self-defence (with selected classes for females only); money management; communicating across cultures; navigation/orientation; bicycle maintenance; and more.

Student feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, and evaluation data shows a measurable increase in knowledge of the subject and attainment in other skills including practical thinking, communication, critical thinking, confidence, independence and cultural sensitivity.

Consequently, Swansea University has identified further areas of positive change and engagement. As part of the University’s Centenary celebrations, the team is investigating the opportunity for students to deliver a Skills for Life programme in the local community, to include art and crafts, languages, music, poetry, filmmaking, health and well-being, sports and technology.

“I really enjoyed the group aspect of the session – getting lost together, solving problems together and completing it together.”
(Female Self-Defence Session)

“Having women only meant I was more confident during the session.”
(Navigation Session)

“I think it will benefit me in all life scenarios.”
(Confidence Building Session)

More:
Asad Rahman, Head of CampusLife, Swansea University
www.swansea.ac.uk/campuslife/
An inclusive environment promotes better mental health, achievement levels and interpersonal relationships

“When I’m depressed, and my head’s full of negative thoughts, I can’t understand things I’m reading, I struggle to concentrate and be motivated... The support group has had a positive impact upon my emotional well-being”.

The University of Wales Trinity Saint David’s social and communication support group (SoCom) provides students who struggle with social interactions and personal well-being with a regular social group in a supported environment. Here, they learn to develop skills to promote healthy attitudes and behaviours, and an understanding of themselves and others.

The University’s support group is inclusive, encouraging all students struggling with social anxiety, communication difficulties, memory deficit, processing issues, hyperactivity, introversion, anxiety or depression, to attend. This programme has been running for five years, over three campuses for three hours per week. Each group has up to 10 attendees per week. Working with the Students’ Union, student societies and support services encourages ongoing attendance and promotes integration into the wider student community.

The programme’s themes - such as careers, study skills, performance anxiety, relationship guidance, and general life skills - help students understand the difficulties experienced in these situations.

The taught programme is flexible, encouraging group members to raise and discuss any personal issues, while the leader offers support strategies and psychological perspectives on these issues, such as ‘theory of mind’, positivist psychology and mindfulness practices. This helps develop skills to raise future employability, achievement, and self-esteem, and supports sustainable positivity, health and well-being. The group encourages attendance by those who are isolated, and will develop spin-off social gatherings and joint sessions with different groups.

More:
Melanie Long
• m.long@uwtsd.ac.uk
• www.uwtsd.ac.uk
Supporting students who are carers

Around seven per cent of OU students in Wales have identified themselves as carers, who might need additional support if they are to fulfil their goals.

The Open University’s flexible distance learning approach fits around the fluctuating commitments faced by carers. Study can often be something that carers do to support their own mental health and well-being and to make some time for themselves. Recognising the challenges involved in juggling study with caring, the OU encourages students to disclose their carer status and provides extra tailored resources, support and adjustments.

Attendance at regular lectures is not required, and students can study from home, at times that fit around their caring commitments. OU staff have worked with students who have experience of a caring role to develop appropriate support systems, and the OU in Wales now provides:

- Information on the challenges faced by student carers shared with all tutors to help them understand the issues faced by their students.
- A free online personal development course for carers (with Carers Trust Wales).
- Trained frontline registration staff who encourage students to disclose their carer status.
- An information pack for student carers, which includes information about matters of particular concern to carers, study advice from other student carers, and signposts to other sources of support.
- Flexible examination arrangements for student carers, including arranging for them to take an exam in their own home, with breaks built into the exam time to attend to the person they care for.
- Greater understanding and flexibility around caring responsibilities. This can include assignment extensions, deferral of modules if students need to take a break, or some extra telephone support from tutors for ‘catch up’ purposes.

The OU in Wales is committed to continuing to develop support for carers and plans to increase information aimed at carers in its online student portal. They are also working with colleagues across the UK to expand support for carers, with initiatives likely to include carer study bursaries.

Quotes from students who worked on the recent carers project

“I was able to do one of my exams from home, it really helped.”

“It really helped me to have audio versions of my books...enabling me to listen to my work while I did other chores.”

“When I finally did tell one of my tutors that I was a carer, I was amazed at how much support was given. He explained that I could always contact him if I needed extensions and extra support.”

More:
Michelle Matheron • Michelle.Matheron@open.ac.uk
• www.open.ac.uk/wales/carers
Boosting resources for blind students

Kirsty Hill is the first blind Swansea University student to progress from an undergraduate course to being accepted on to a PhD programme at the University.

Providing accessible, alternative formats enables students with print and hearing impairments to study a wide array of subjects and successfully complete years abroad as part of their studies.

Kirsty was just one of the University’s print disabled students to benefit from the services at the Swansea University Transcription Centre (SUTC). SUTC is a free service for Swansea University students who have a cognitive or physical print disability and/or hearing impairment. The Centre has been providing accessible formats to students at Swansea and other higher education institutions for more than 20 years.

The Centre is unique in Wales and one of half a dozen dedicated university transcription centres in the UK. The accessible formats created in the SUTC are made available to students and educators throughout the UK.

The SUTC team works with academic departments, the Disability Office and the Centre for Academic Success (CAS) to provide a holistic, student-centred service. Each student’s Transcription Co-Ordinator works closely with academic staff to provide transcripts of lecture handouts, PowerPoints and other materials in an accessible format. This takes considerable stress out of a student’s academic journey as they don’t have to worry about accessing course resources. A student can focus on their studies while the SUTC deals with the transcriptions.

“The Transcription Centre have been absolutely invaluable in their help and support throughout my studies. Their huge task in making all my work accessible has made me feel on an equal level to my peers and has allowed me to progress this far. I honestly don’t know if or how I would have completed my studies without them.”

Kirsty Hill, Abnormal and Clinical Psychology PhD Student

More:

- m.c.webber@swansea.ac.uk
- www.swansea.ac.uk/library/student-support/transcription-centre
Well-being and health by design

For students, life can often feel like a rollercoaster, like they are not really in control of the direction they’re going. Life Design at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David offers students an opportunity to pause and reflect.

The Life Design programme includes short exercises that provide students with insights about their skills, personality, values and aspirations. These insights empower students to make informed decisions about their future and regain that sense of control.

Life Design workshops have reached more than 3,000 students, providing opportunities for self-reflection and future planning. The resources are now being made available online using a new platform called the Life Design Hub, allowing engagement with non-traditional learners while supporting staff delivery within and outside the University.

The Life Design Hub is developing skills-focused content to help address skills gaps identified by students during workshops, and will include resources for pitching and presentation, making the most of social media, business modelling, and personal branding.

The new Life Design Hub opens up this resource to staff and students at partner institutions, and allows all distance learners to complete the programme under their own direction.

"Brought clarity to my future goals, really gave me direction."

Hub user

"Helps to put things into perspective and look beyond undergraduate."

Hub user

More:
Dr Lewis Pearson • Lewis.pearson@uwtsd.ac.uk & lifedesign@uwtsd.ac.uk
• www.lifedesignhub.co.uk
Substance use and misuse
Supporting a safer attitude to alcohol

Aberystwyth University is working with a range of community partners to champion safe and responsible alcohol consumption within the student population.

The University’s Well-being Service brought together staff and Students’ Union officers with representatives from Dyfed-Powys Police, Ceredigion County Council, Dyfed Drug and Alcohol Service. The group aimed to adopt a whole-campus approach to promoting safe and sensible drinking, and to advise on alcohol-related issues on behalf of the University.

Members of the group take part in alcohol-related work and health promotion activities on campus, and review the University’s Student Alcohol Action Plan and Alcohol Policy. The group runs a number of campaigns during the year, in particular during Freshers’ Week and at Christmas time.

Through the group, the University’s residential student support staff, security officers and estates staff are given training on how to deliver Alcohol Brief Interventions - short structured conversations about alcohol with someone who may be drinking too much. The training has now been extended to all first year Psychology students and the intention is to offer it to all first year students.

“We realise that drinking and socialising is an important part of the university experience for many but we want to ensure that our students do so safely and sensibly, and are made aware of the risks. By working with student representatives, the police and other support agencies, we are able to offer advice across a range of issues and take a holistic approach as we pull together to deliver solutions which work for students.”

Dr Alison Mackiewicz, Chair of Aberystwyth University’s Working Group on Alcohol

More:
Dr Alison Mackiewicz  •  alm53@aber.ac.uk
•  www.aber.ac.uk/en/supporting-staff/work/healthanddisability/health-wellbeing/alcohol
Sustainability and healthy environments
Award-winning module nurtures healthy environments

The University of Wales Trinity Saint David’s anthropology module Interactions with the Environment, recognised by the Green Gown Awards in 2015, continues to help students to change their behaviour and contribute to a resilient Wales.

Students research social waste processes and methods, and collect and display the rubbish they produce from their consumption choices each day. Analysing each piece of litter reveals what can be recycled or reused, and how other items persist in the environment. This information is plotted and recorded alongside research into novel methods of upcycling or reusing what people discard.

Through engaging with their own consumption choices and practices, students are confronted with the extent of their contribution to the problems of plastics and other pollutants. They consider their impact on the environment, and consider alternative consumption solutions that avoid adding to the issue.

Students emerge responsible consumers who contribute to a healthier environment. Students have continued to provoke sustainable action by demanding further change in the community and further afield. As a result, students have ensured that campus food outlets provide recyclable containers and ethical products; have successfully worked as green interns; and are working on dissertations that explore waste systems and recycling in Wales.

“This module seems to have woken up my brain and kick started it. It has been thoroughly interesting from start to finish”.

2018–19 anthropology student

More:
• l.attala@uwtsd.ac.uk
• www.youtube.com/watch?v=dri0N0b_JNo
Creating a sustainable Wales with the single use coffee cup pilot scheme

In the UK, it is estimated that 2.5 billion single-use cups are thrown away each year, with the vast majority – around 99.75% – not recycled. Single-use cups are difficult to recycle because of their plastic inner lining.

Cardiff Metropolitan University recognises that problems with single-use waste affects all environments.

Cardiff Met and Keep Wales Tidy launched a campaign to reduce cup waste and boost recycling on-the-go. With support from the Paper Cup Recycling and Recovery Group (PCRRG), four dedicated cup bins were introduced across the Llandaff campus to encourage tea and coffee-lovers to recycle as they move around the University.

The campaign was part of Cardiff Metropolitan University’s drive to promote sustainability across all its activities, making it easy for students, staff and visitors to recycle with eye-catching cup-shaped bins. The campaign encourages all to switch to re-usable cups and to also make use of the University’s extensive free water refill facilities.

The used cups will be collected and transformed into new products by Simply Cups, a specialist UK-based recycling company, into materials for use in office supplies or picnic benches, and even new reusable cups.

“It’s clear that staff and students want to do the right thing when it comes to caring for the environment. When people don’t have their reusable cups, it’s important that we make it as easy as possible for them to recycle.”

Hanna Jones, Policy Officer, Keep Wales Tidy

“We place a huge focus on sustainability at Cardiff Met. We are very pleased to be the first Welsh university working in partnership with Keep Wales Tidy, PCRRG and Simply Cups on this exciting pilot scheme which we hope will massively reduce the number of disposable cups going into general waste.”

Rachel Roberts, Environmental Performance Manager, Cardiff Met

More:
Rachel Roberts – Environmental Performance Manager
• rroberts@cardiffmet.ac.uk
• www.cardiffmet.ac.uk/sustainability
Creating a sustainable Wales with the single use coffee cup pilot scheme
Building resilience through work placements
Rachel's story – the Open University in Wales

ESF-funded GO Wales: Achieve through Work Experience is tailored to individual needs, and enables students with particular mental health and well-being requirements to access employability support.

The Open University in Wales also provides opportunities for students who are at risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training) after leaving their studies by offering work experience and employability support.

The OU in Wales’s partnership with Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board offers work placements that support students from low-participation backgrounds to enter career pathways.

OU in Wales student Rachel is a parent of a pre-school-age child, and is looking to develop a career in dietetics. Before joining the GO Wales project, Rachel had no previous work experience within her chosen career area, and very low confidence. Rachel’s childcare commitments, in addition to her full-time studies, also restricted her ability to actively seek and participate in work experience opportunities.

The OU in Wales worked with Rachel to establish her career goals and identify the barriers she was facing, and developed personal objectives for a work placement. Rachel’s work taster over seven weeks with the Dietetics Department team at Ysbyty Glan Clwyd enabled her to schedule childcare and academic commitments with minimum disruption.

Rachel worked with career-relevant professionals and members of the public in school, youth and community development settings for the first time, and participated in high-level strategic meetings. The dietetics team, having been impressed with the quality of her support work, invited her to return to work on a specific project in the future. Rachel’s confidence improved during the placement, and she continued as a member of GO Wales: Achieve through Work Experience, accessing further support and opportunities for development.

"Rachel was a real pleasure to have in the department and was prepared to turn her hand to any task we gave her. Rachel is reliable and flexible and would be an asset to any team, particularly working in public health...”

Sian, Community Development Dietitian, Ysbyty Glan Clwyd

“This experience has given me the opportunity to see what being a dietitian is actually like, work on real projects and make great contacts in the sector.”

Rachel, Student & GO-Wales member

More:
Michelle Matheron • Michelle.Matheron@open.ac.uk
• www.open.ac.uk/wales/en/our-work/go-wales
Daisy Dewell, a BA Illustration student at Coleg Sir Gâr, part of the UWTSD Group, has severe dyslexia and dyspraxia and also suffers from exhaustion.

Daisy, 24, from Llanelli was eligible for the pan-Wales GO Wales: Achieve through Work Experience programme as she did not know how to approach employers, and was concerned that emails to them would highlight her disability and therefore they would not consider her for work experience.

She lacked confidence, didn’t know how to articulate her skills, or how knowledge gained in her studies might transfer to the workplace. She also became aware that companies wanting illustration skills were not local to her and she would have to travel to her work placement. The expense and anxiety about travelling, and the fear of being so tired she would not be able to function, became significant barriers.

Daisy signed up to GO Wales to gain relevant work experience, be able to articulate her skills at future interviews, enhance her CV and make contacts, and gain confidence. Knowing that she would be placed with a supportive employer, have access to a mentor and have access to finance to enable her to travel all helped her to take up a placement with Buzz Magazine in Cardiff for a 5-day block, which was subsequently extended for her to complete a project at home.

In order to build her confidence in articulating her skills, she was asked to reflect on her approach to the daily brief provided. To reduce her anxiety about travel, the GO Wales officer accompanied her to Cardiff and she was asked to think about how to overcome potential issues during the journey home. Buzz Magazine offered flexible arrival and departure hours.

Daisy’s confidence increased beyond expectations at the end of the 5-day block. She felt calmer and more confident and was reassured that her employer accepted her disability in a positive way. The experience also made her think about what she needs to consider when looking for a graduate job – distance, transport, cost, employer values – all considerations that will inform the vacancies she applies to in future and which will form her future career plan.

“The student was superb. She will be able to contribute to the magazine from now on as an illustrator, and what we managed to put together looks utterly fantastic. Over the coming weeks we'll be in touch over emails as we finesse the student guide into something more concrete, and I’m really looking forward to see how it turns out.”

Fedor Tot, editor of Buzz Magazine

More:

* www.gowales.co.uk
“Her confidence grew as the placement went on. We would be happy to have the student back”.

GO Wales: Achieve through Work Experience supports students who can face barriers in accessing work experience. Participants include disabled students, those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, and those who live in areas with low HE participation rates or areas of high unemployment.

The GO Wales team works with a student to identify their needs and support for their future goals. Not only does the programme help improve students’ career prospects through valuable work experience, it can positively impact confidence and general well-being.

As a result of some difficult circumstances, a health and social care student lacked the confidence to communicate with potential employers. The student also balanced being a carer alongside her studies at Cardiff Met. She approached GO Wales with an interest in medicine and pharmacy.

GO Wales secured the student a flexible work experience opportunity in a community pharmacy. The student got involved with a variety of activities and improved her understanding of pharmacy as a career option. The employing pharmacist kept in touch with the student with a view to offering further work experience or a part-time employment. The student gained in confidence and developed the ability to identify her strengths and focus on personal areas of improvement, in addition to enjoying the experience.

“If I hadn’t done this work experience then I’d be lost. I’d finish university with a degree and not know where to go. Doing the GO Wales programme has helped me to step into the next journey of my life.”

BSc Health and Social Care student and GO Wales user

More:
Sophie Lloyd – GO Wales Project Co-ordinator • slloyd@cardiffmet.ac.uk
• www.cardiffmet.ac.uk/gowales