



Student Minds University Mental Health Charter

Tuesday 28th January, 1:30-2:30pm,
Committee Room 2, Houses of Parliament, London, SW1A 0AA

Rosie Tressler, CEO, Student Minds noted the range of colleagues from across the sector in the room. She claimed that while there are a lot of issues are taking up attention of parliamentarians but it is Student Minds' view that if this issue is taken seriously it can have a positive impact on the future workforce and research outputs which will go beyond just those studying in HE. While there have been lots of positive developments in this space, such as the Step Change framework and Whole University approach, Rosie stated that the Charter is designed to fill a gap in understanding around what a whole-university approach to improving mental health outcomes of staff and students means in practice.

Rosie mentioned three reasons why she believes the Charter can be so impactful -

1. **Coproduction** – this was at the heart of the charter. Student Minds recognised the need for evidence and engagement with staff and students and consulted with thousands of staff and students across the UK.
2. **Comprehensive and academically rigorous** - It has been through an ethical approval process and involved experienced researchers. The charter emphasises the balance between support for those experiencing mental health problems to understanding that every aspect of a university can have an impact on mental health and wellbeing.
3. **Sector support** - A lot of sector organisations already signed up and it has widespread support.

The next stage for the Charter is to pilot the Award Scheme in four institutions to create real cultural change. She stated that Student Minds will be working with students to co-produce tools for students' unions to hold their institutions to account and are also looking for MPs to publicly support the Charter. Her hope was that in 10 years' time we will be able to look back at the success of the Charter as we now have a framework to challenge the issue.

Eva Crossan Jory, Vice President (Welfare), National Union of Students looked to highlight some of the key issues around student mental health. She claimed that the sharp rise in disclosure is often highlighted as a success due to increased trust, but NUS also believe this is because of increases in students experiencing problems. Two factors that she picked out as causing this rise were increased financial stress and more personal stress and scrutiny, demonstrated by the rise in bullying and online harassment. Eva claimed that all of this has come at a time when the NHS is crumbling. She criticised the prevalence of individual solutions to problems that are not created by students in the first place. Eva spoke of the need to talk about cultural competency and read an extract from a blog piece on the topic. She celebrated some of the work that is being done in the sector, such as in Scotland where NUS Scotland are leading the way with Think Positive. She pointed to the huge focus and investment that the further education sector has attempted to take on the issue, even as their budgets have withered, especially through the Association of Colleges' Mental Health and Wellbeing Charter.

Lubaba Khalid, Vice President of Welfare, University of Westminster Students' Union said that she finds herself in a unique position as Westminster is a majority minority institution where 65% of the student population is BAME yet 100% of senior leaders are white. Therefore, it is difficult to implement best practice from across the sector in to an institution that is so different. She was pleased she had the opportunity to input this perspective into the charter and had held a focus group to give an insight into the experiences of BAME students. In most of the cases discussed the institution has played a part in worsening mental health. This could be through experiencing racist incidents or not decolonising the curriculum. Furthermore, when accessing support, they found that in many cases they had to relive these experiences and yet were still misunderstood. She welcomed that this has been recognised in the Charter but was disappointed that it did not have explicit mention of



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the role of students' unions. However, she was sure that students' unions will be working with Student Minds for the implementation of the charter.

Nabeela Mowlana, Welfare Officer, Sheffield Hallam Students' Union noted that there has been a shift over the last few years in the way mental health has been discussed. Now, more people feel comfortable sharing their experiences. She claimed that the Charter's initiative to define terms in this context was very important. The section on staff mental health was also praised as a very welcome addition. Nabeela spoke of some of the experiences that being a welfare officer entails and stated that this results in becoming acquainted with the full spectrum of human emotions. She said that she was looking forward to seeing how institutions and students' unions engage with the Charter and called on universities to act as a generation of students are now watching how they respond.

In comments from the floor, attendees raised some concerns of the Charter and spoke of wider issues around student mental health. These included –

- How the Charter can be used to hold universities accountable.
- The pressure and funding needed from government to ensure that universities take serious action and are not cutting funding while publishing mental health strategies.
- The adaptability of the Charter and associated work to FE and how it can cover HE students at FE colleges.
- How to support students on placements, especially those living in other cities to their university.
- The effects of financial pressures, cost of living and increasing rents on student mental health.
- Awareness of staff from institutions to the challenges that have arisen and how supportive they are of the aims of the Charter.
- The use of the term 'resilience' to blame individuals for problems they experience.
- Need for buy-in from those at the top of institutions in order for a culture shift.
- The breadth of activities that should count as wellbeing support.

***For further information, please contact the Secretariat, Taidgh Pledger,
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