STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING STRATEGY
2021 to 2025

Revised August 2021

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

This document presents a revised strategy for student mental health and wellbeing for 2021 to 2025, renewing our commitment to working together as a whole University to promote student well-being; to prevent mental ill-health where possible; to respond to problems early; to ensure that students who experience mental ill-health whilst at the University are well supported, and to minimise the adverse effects of mental ill-health on student life.

We believe that our policies should where possible be evidence-based, and where evidence is insufficient, for example in prevention of mental ill-health, we hope wherever feasible to evaluate the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of our interventions, to ensure that we do the best for our students, making a real difference to their wellbeing, and contributing to improving mental health more widely.

In producing this strategy we commit to a fully inclusive approach, recognising that people face unequal challenges to their mental health, and seeking to identify, understand and address these inequalities. The strategy and its implementation views co-production with students and staff as critical, recognising the need for all aspects of university life to promote and support student mental health.

In refining the strategy we embrace the new Vision for York, and face the new and emerging challenges of the next three years, while building on the work completed under the 2017-20 student mental health strategy. These challenges will include recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, while retaining the capacity to respond effectively and swiftly to the impact of further disruption on student mental health. In creating this document, we have reflected on the outcomes and lessons learned over the last three years, and on the context of the renewed strategy; refining previous aims and identifying new areas of focus.

Our renewed strategy also draws on recent sector guidance, such as the Student Minds University Mental Health Charter and Stepchange: Mentally Healthy Universities (MHU) from Universities UK (UUK). We take the UUK model as our underlying framework (see Appendix) and we will use the associated Self-Assessment Tool as one measure of effectiveness.
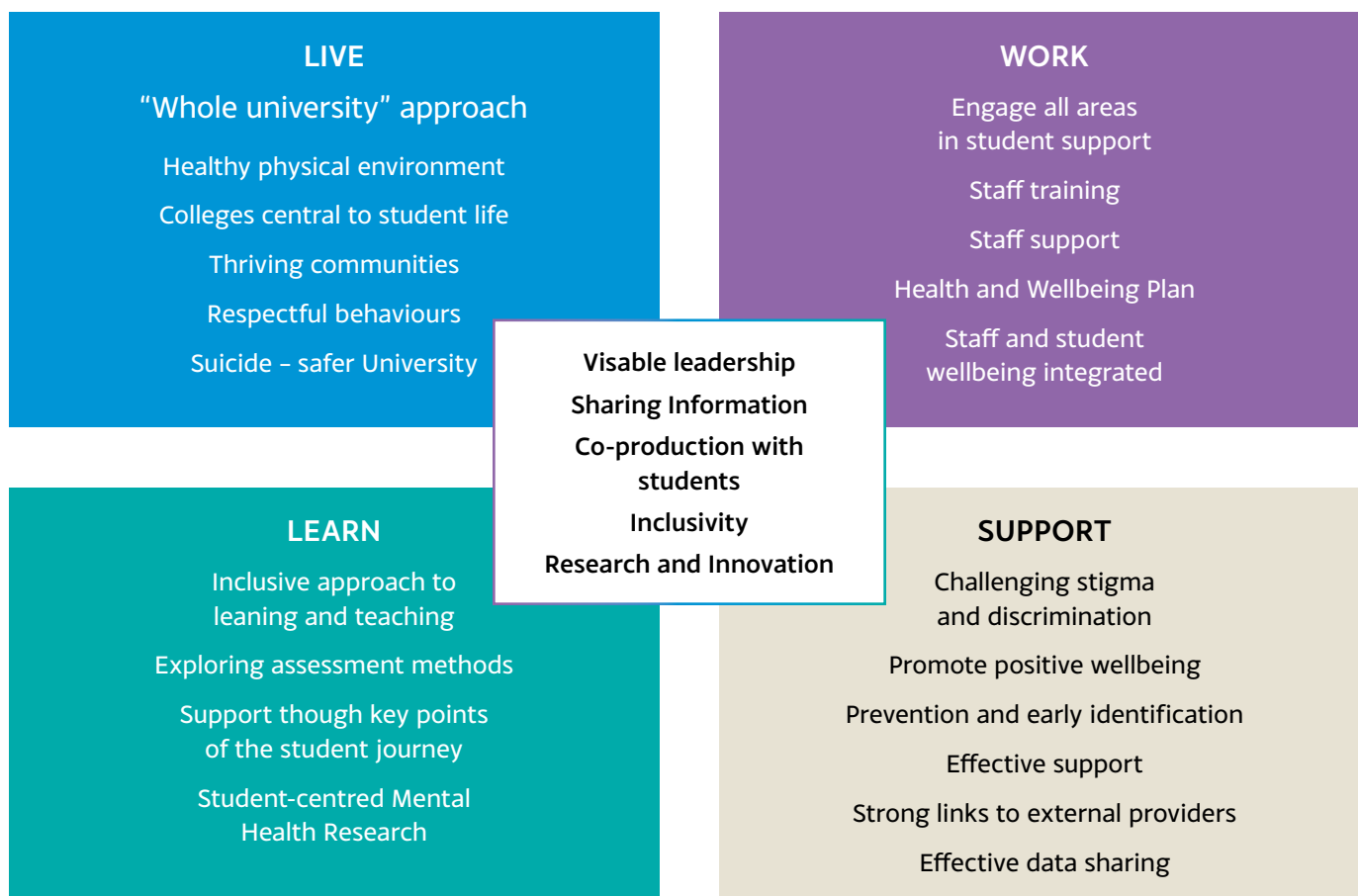
LIVE

"Whole university" approach

Healthy physical environment

Colleges central to student life

Thriving communities

Respectful behaviours

Suicide – safer University

WORK

Engage all areas
in student support

Staff training

Staff support

Health and Wellbeing Plan

Staff and student
wellbeing integrated

Visable leadership

Sharing Information

Co-production with
students

Inclusivity

Research and Innovation

LEARN

Inclusive approach to
leaning and teaching

Exploring assessment methods

Support though key points
of the student journey

Student-centred Mental
Health Research

SUPPORT

Challenging stigma
and discrimination

Promote positive wellbeing

Prevention and early identification

Effective support

Strong links to external providers

Effective data sharing

Figure 1: How this strategy maps to the four domains of Stepchange: Mentally Healthy Universities Framework

1.1 Definitions and terminology

We recognise that there are many different ways of expressing individual experiences of health, particularly mental health and wellbeing. The Mental Health Foundation states that:

"Being mentally healthy doesn't just mean that you don't have a mental health problem. If you're in good mental health, you can:

- make the most of your potential

- cope with life

- play a full part in your family, workplace, community and among friends".

In this document, we think of *mental health* and *wellbeing* in this way.

Mental ill-health affects around one in four people each year, and problems range from common disorders such as depression and anxiety to rarer problems such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

1.2 Recognising a continuum of needs

Mental health problems arise when changes in our emotional state, thinking and behaviour interfere with our sense of wellbeing and day-to-day functioning, including academic and work performance, family and relationships, social and private activities. Such mental health problems exist in a continuum, from emerging and mild common emotional problems to severe, acute or enduring mental illness.

Those students who join the University with pre-existing mental health conditions are offered support through the Open Door and Disability Service, and the wider Student Life and Wellbeing Directorate. They are encouraged to disclose support needs at an early stage to facilitate reasonable adjustments being made to help their transition into university life and throughout their university journey. Some prefer to manage their condition independently of the university, but support is available if required.

We recognise that many of our students are young adults experiencing life transitions and new experiences which can create challenges to wellbeing; only occasionally will these result in mental health problems. Additionally, we recognise that our student body is also made up of many different demographics, including mature students, and we are committed to building communities which enable *all* of our students to thrive and connect with each other.

Most students experience good wellbeing most of the time, but some may at times experience mental health problems and compromised mental wellbeing. Mental health problems may exist prior to joining the University, or may develop during a period of study at the University.

Contextual and environmental factors may increase the risk of mental health problems in students. For many students, these will include:

- living away from home

- isolation

- bullying (including online)

- sexual harassment and assault

- alcohol and drug misuse (e.g. peer pressure to drink too much alcohol/take drugs, or their use as a coping mechanism)

- gambling addiction

- stress resulting from the academic and social demands of studies and assessments.

For some, such as mature students, these factors will be accompanied by working and/or family responsibilities. In addition, individual risk factors can be accentuated in a university setting, such as learning differences (e.g. dyslexia) or neurodiversity (such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or Autism Spectrum Disorders) and approaches to working, such as perfectionism and avoidant coping styles.

In this Strategy we aim to cover the full spectrum of mental health and wellbeing: health promotion; prevention and early identification of ill-health; support, focused intervention and referral to health professionals. We aim to take a graduated, student-centred approach to needs, delivering effective and evidence based interventions to students within the University, and only 'stepping up' to intensive or specialist services when this is clinically required.

Given the variation in needs of different students, student groups (e.g. undergraduate and postgraduate) and for each student over time, a whole university approach is crucial. Rather than focusing on isolated interventions or services this joined-up approach embeds the student mental health agenda across all University policies, curricula and practice, permeating all aspects of its work. This involves collaboration and coordination between academic staff in departments, Health and Safety, Human Resources, the Open Door and Disability Team, Student Services, Security and College staff and the two students' unions, as well as external partners such as the NHS, the City of York and voluntary organisations.

2. VISION AND AIMS 2021 TO 2025 STRATEGY

2.1 Vision

Our vision is to work together as a whole University community to promote student well-being, to minimise risk factors for mental ill-health, to recognise and address early any mental health problems faced by students, to ensure that all students who experience mental ill-health whilst at the University are well supported, and to minimise the adverse effects of mental ill-health on academic life.

As an organisation for learning and research, the University of York aims to ensure that it offers an environment in which students can reach their academic and personal potential. The University's leadership is committed to promoting the wellbeing of our community. This strategy supports that goal.

Mental health is central to our University, and we want to support all our students to thrive.

2.2 Strategic aims

1. To continue to embrace a "whole university" approach, engaging all sections of the University community in advancing the student mental health agenda, and ensuring that student mental health is considered when planning and developing wider university policy.

2. To provide strong, visible leadership to take forward our commitment to mental health as an ongoing strategic priority, continuing to provide an inclusive university environment that:

   ▪ Builds communities in which our students can thrive

   ▪ Is conducive to good mental health

   ▪ Minimises contextual risk factors for mental ill-health

   ▪ Raises awareness of the services provided to support students, and how to access them

   ▪ Reduces the stigma associated with mental ill-health by encouraging a culture of openness.

3. To maintain and strengthen our collaborative links with external agencies (particularly the NHS, City of York Council and voluntary organisations), to promote continuity of support and care across organisational boundaries and ensure that service provision meets the needs of all our students.

4. To ensure effective communication, to link different sources of data on mental health and wellbeing and to share information within the university, and with external agencies as appropriate. This will enable us to create an integrated and cohesive response to promotion of mental health and prevention and treatment of mental ill-health, and to conduct much-needed research to better understand 'what works'. We will work together with students to ensure that information and data linkage and sharing is welcome and supports their wellbeing.

5. To support and empower students, through good quality, timely and accessible information, guidance and access to services, to understand and proactively manage their own wellbeing and mental health, emphasising not just preventing problems and/or seeking help, but promoting positive wellbeing.

6. To identify pre-existing conditions and early signs of distress and mental ill-health and to support students in a timely and proportionate way to access services where appropriate.

7. To seek to identify, understand and address personal, cultural and structural factors that may affect an individual's ability to engage with the university's wellbeing and mental health services; reviewing our processes and structures to remove any barriers to accessing care.

8. To make good use of data, research evidence and feedback from students and staff to evaluate and improve our provision.

9. To conduct high quality student-centred mental health research and use this to better understand the student lived experience and ensure our approach is effective and efficient.

2.3 Monitoring and review

The progress and success of this strategy and implementation plan will be monitored by the Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Forum, chaired by the Director of Student Life and Wellbeing, which will in turn report to the Student Life Committee.

The Implementation Plan may be revised in the light of discussion in all the major fora where the academic and support services in the University are planned and delivered.
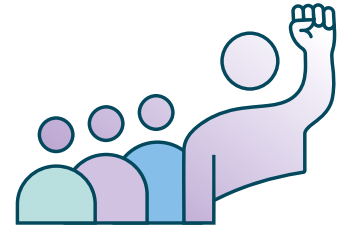
2.4 Further information

Section 3 of this document details the individual objectives associated with each aim listed above. A more detailed operational document, identifying success measures, action owners and timescales for delivery will be used by the Student Mental Health Forum to monitor progress against these objectives. This operational document will bring together all the key related actions required to deliver the strategy to reflect the "whole university" approach.

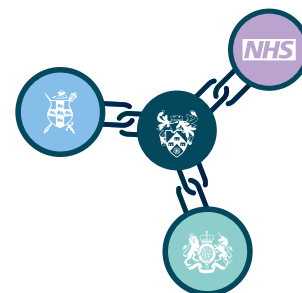# 3. IMPLEMENTATION PLAN 2021 to 2025

This outline implementation plan lists the objectives for delivery of the strategic aims. As detailed above, a more detailed implementation plan, including timescales and action owners, success measures, etc. will provide the basis for managing the ongoing delivery of these objectives, and will be reviewed regularly via Student Mental Health Forum, reporting into the Student Life Committee. It will bring together all the key related actions required to deliver the strategy, and therefore may be revised over the lifetime of the strategy in response to changing needs and priorities.
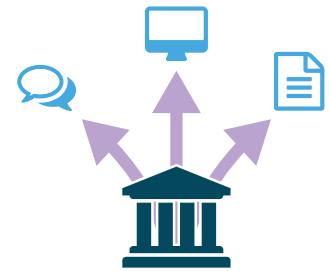
Strategic aim	Implementation action(s)
1.	**To continue to embrace a "whole university" approach to engage all sections of the university community in advancing the student mental health agenda, ensuring that student mental health is considered when planning and developing wider university policy.**
1.1	We will ensure the strategy is embedded at all levels of the University and that professional services in support of student wellbeing are sufficiently resourced.
1.2	We will strengthen training of key staff so they can better support students and refer them to appropriate sources of support.
1.3	We will further develop our inclusive approach to learning and teaching, and explore methods of assessment which reduce stress whilst maintaining academic standards.
1.4	We will work with the University's Conduct and Respect team and our students' unions to promote mutual respect, and discourage harassment and non-consensual contact.
1.5	Recognising the impact financial hardship can have on an individual's mental health and wellbeing, we will explore ways in which we can support students in this area, including investigating the provision of financial support for students who are in mental health difficulties and are in financial hardship.
1.6	Understanding the importance of the physical environment on the mental health of both staff and students, we will place wellbeing and accessibility at the centre of discussions around the use and development of our campuses, including the utilisation of outdoor spaces.
1.7	The University will continue to implement the University Staff Health and Wellbeing Plan, and ensure that it integrates with this strategy.

2.	To provide strong, visible leadership to take forward our commitment to mental health as an ongoing strategic priority, continuing to provide an inclusive university environment (both academic and non-academic) that:
	■ **Builds communities in which our students can thrive**
	■ **Is conducive to good mental health**
	■ **Minimises contextual risk factors for mental ill-health**
	■ **Raises awareness of the services provided to support students, and how to access them**
	■ **Reduces the stigma associated with mental ill-health by encouraging a culture of openness.**
2.1	University leaders will demonstrate their commitment to student mental health, ensuring that this strategy is championed at the highest level and subject to appropriate governance, by University Council and Senate, through the Student Mental Health Forum and Student Life Committee.
2.2	We will develop and strengthen our University communities, including Colleges, societies and other groups, and ensure where possible that the benefits of these networks are extended to students who are not resident on campus, students attending the International Pathway College and those studying online.
2.3.	We will coordinate and support regular mental health and wellbeing awareness-raising campaigns, reducing stigma and encouraging all students to access services as appropriate.
2.4	Working with student representatives, we will continue to develop community-building projects such as Student Connect and Student-led departmental community projects involving Faculty and Community Coordinators.
2.5	We recognise the diversity of our students' circumstances, and will work to ensure that all our students, including those studying overseas or online, have access to appropriate services to support their mental health and wellbeing.
2.6	We will encourage students to engage in all aspects of University life, promoting the wide range of student societies, sports, cultural events and volunteering opportunities open to them.

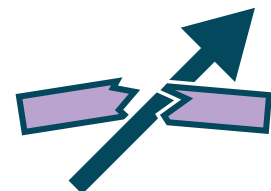| **3.**	**To maintain and strengthen our collaborative links with external agencies (e.g. the NHS, City of York council and voluntary organisations), to share data as appropriate, promote continuity of support and care across organisational boundaries and ensure that the service provision meets the needs of all our students.**
3.1	We will work with NHS partners to ensure that service provision within and outside the University is informed by the needs of the student population living in and around York.
3.2	We will continue to represent student needs by working in partnership with the City of York Council (CYC), through the Student Health Network and the Mental Health Partnerships Board. We will also continue to work with Public Health CYC and Public Health England (or equivalent) on suicide prevention, as part of the York Suicide Safer Community Delivery Group.
3.3	Using the UUK document "Suicide-Safer Universities" as a framework, we will create a suicide safer plan for the University, and ensure that this is consistent with the suicide safer policies of the City of York.
3.4	We will explore opportunities to link with partner Universities and other overseas organisations to support the wellbeing and mental health of students studying remotely.

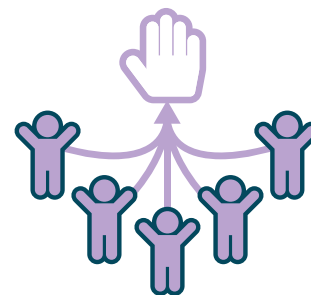| 4.	To ensure effective communication and information sharing within the university, and with external agencies as appropriate, to create an integrated and cohesive response to promotion of mental health and prevention and treatment of mental ill-health. To progress data linkage and information sharing it is crucial to work together with the student body, to ensure that such information is welcome and supports their wellbeing.
4.1	We will identify and seek to link appropriate sources of information from stakeholders within Student Life and Wellbeing, and the University community as a whole, to help recognise early indicators of student wellbeing problems. This will be done in full consultation with student representatives.
4.2	We will explore the use of attendance and engagement data to support and enhance student welfare, including the creation of an engagement "dashboard", aiding the early identification of students who may be experiencing a deterioration in their wellbeing and mental health.
4.3	We will work to promote data sharing agreements with statutory services, such as NHS organisations and North Yorkshire Police.

| 5.	To support and empower students, through timely and accessible good quality information, guidance and access to services, to understand and proactively manage their wellbeing and mental health, emphasising not just preventing problems and/or seeking help, but promoting positive wellbeing.
5.1	We will deliver a Student Wellbeing Programme throughout the academic year, focussing on times of higher risk in the student journey and delivering a range of responses, including workshops, events, campaigns and activities to help students manage that risk and seek support should they need to. This programme will be delivered in partnership with the Students' Unions, Colleges, Departments and external bodies, as appropriate.
5.2	We will support students to take action to promote their own well-being (encouraging healthy behaviours, such as engaging in physical activity) and that of the wider University community, and to create, develop and maintain links with populations outside the University, for example through volunteering activities.
5.3	We will continue to use and develop the Student Mental Health and Wellbeing pages as the central hub of all information, support and service provision, jointly with the student unions and the NHS.
5.4	We will explore using the Student App and self-help tools to facilitate access to mental health and wellbeing services, support and information and evaluate the effects of this change.
5.5	We will identify times of transition within the student journey which may affect wellbeing, i.e. arriving at university, between years, returning from leave of absence, graduating, etc and pilot and evaluate specific targeted information, advice and support at these times.
5.6	We will work with Careers and Placements to embed wellbeing support into their existing mechanisms for supporting students at times of transition

6.	**To identify pre-existing conditions and early signs of distress and mental ill-health and to support students in a timely and proportionate way to access services where appropriate.**
6.1	We will pilot and evaluate approaches to help students manage their own mental wellbeing and provide coping mechanisms for common challenges (while promoting access to help where required)
6.2	We will provide mechanisms for students with pre-existing conditions to disclose their support needs and to seek help when needed.
6.3	We will ensure the effectiveness of the Open Door provision, prioritising on the basis of need, and extend access to evidence-based online resources.
6.4	We will embed the role of Student Wellbeing Officers within departments, and develop this role to provide support (to both staff and students) with student welfare and wellbeing issues.

7.	**To seek to identify, understand and address personal, cultural and structural factors that may affect an individual's ability to engage with the university's wellbeing and mental health services; reviewing our processes and structures to remove any barriers to accessing care.**
7.1	We will use University data sources on service use, student feedback etc. to identify potential personal, cultural and structural barriers to seeking timely support with mental health, while acknowledging the importance of intersectionalities and individual experience.
7.2	We will explore the views, through consultation, surveys, focus groups etc.,of different student groups, to understand and improve inclusivity of, and access to, services and information.
7.3	We will review current provision to ensure that services are inclusive, accessible and comfortable for all members of the student population to use.

8.	To make good use of individual feedback from students, appropriate data, and research evidence to evaluate and improve our service provision. In doing this, we will work together with the student body to ensure that such information is welcome and supports student wellbeing.
8.1	We will take an evidence-based approach to service design and delivery, taking account of research evidence when we introduce or amend our provision, and monitoring service implementation with feedback from students and staff.
8.2	Where evidence is absent or insufficient, for example in relation to prevention and mental health promotion, we will make efforts to evaluate change as robustly as possible.
8.3	We will establish targets for the Open Door Team, such as waiting and referral times, and monitor performance against these indicators, while also actively seeking student feedback to improve service provision.
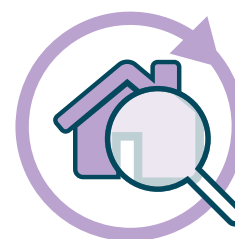
9.	To conduct high quality student-centred mental health research and use this to better understand the student lived experience and ensure our approach is effective and efficient.
9.1	We will develop and expand our student wellbeing cohort, and introduce experimental and quasi-experimental studies within this cohort, contributing to the evidence base for student mental health.
9.2	We will develop a programme of applied mental health research with our students to evaluate the impact of interventions and help inform best practice.

APPENDIX ONE:

Mentally Healthy Universities UUK:

https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/stepchange-mhu

The guidance within MHU will provide a basis of our approach with specific issues, whilst being subject to the overall strategic aims of this strategy.

This Mentally Healthy Universities (MHU) model comprises four domains, namely

LEARN

✓ How learning is designed, structured and provided and its impact on mental health

SUPPORT

✓ Mental health support for students and staff

✓ Suicide-safer universities

LIVE

✓ Making universities healthy settings

WORK

✓ Whole university approach bringing together staff and student mental health and wellbeing

In addition to these domains, it also outlines some underlying principles, termed "enablers", by which the aims of the document can and should be achieved. These are:

✓ Research and Innovation

✓ Leadership

✓ Co-production

✓ Information

✓ Inclusivity

The full Stepchange: Mentally Health Universities document can be found here:

https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2020/uuk-stepchange-mhu.pdf

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