Post-16 Mental Health Policy Recommendations

Introduction

In spring 2021, the Cross Party Group on Universities heard from institutions and students' unions on the interventions that have been put in place as a result of increased Welsh Government funding, and the innovative ways in which they are supporting students' mental health and well-being.

A working group[1] was subsequently established to look further at mental health and well-being support for students[2] in post-16 education, in order to develop some principles for Welsh Government to consider embedding in mental health and well-being policy going forward.

A focus on prevention and early intervention is woven throughout these recommendations. The sector should work together to deliver a proactive approach to keeping students mentally healthy. The recommendations are also made in light of the Programme for Government, including prioritising investment in mental health, and service redesign promoting a 'no wrong door' approach to mental health support. Therefore our recommendations recognise that the highest risk presentations may initially emerge within further and higher education settings.

The recommendations fit within the framework of the Well-being of Future Generations Act, working to achieve the seven well-being goals it lays out. Underpinning this work, the Act's five ways of working are followed, with long-term and collaborative principles core to the recommendations.

[1] Working group members listed at the end of this document
[2] We have used the word 'students' throughout these recommendations for simplicity, but the challenges are shared across all levels of the post-16 sector and include students, learners, apprentices and trainees.

Principles

1. Parity of experience

Students should be able to access a consistent standard of support[3], regardless of where they live and study – whilst there may be some divergence in services available across Wales, there should be an agreed minimum expectation of support for any and all students.

Students should be treated on an equitable footing with the wider population, whilst taking account of their specific needs. Particular consideration should be given to the impact on individuals who relocate for shorter periods (e.g. term time).

Recommendations:

- Encouraging institutions to have a well-being policy for equipping students to exercise self-management and self-care. This should be set in a context that does not pathologize all cases where individuals proactively reflect on their well-being.

- Welsh Government considering and including student voices in the development of health policy.

- Require the inclusion of student and staff voices in the design and delivery of local services, and the inclusion of student populations in healthcare planning, especially service users[4].

- Welsh Government review and map mental health services available across Wales for students in post-16 education, in order to identify gaps and to publish a guide on support available from healthcare, institutions themselves, and the third sector.

2. Appropriate and effective information sharing

In order to avoid students 'falling through the gaps' relevant bodies need to be enabled to share information as appropriate where that is in the patient/student's interest.

Recommendations:

- Welsh Government to update and provide clear guidance on information sharing between health services and education institutions in relation to mental health issues for post-16 settings, addressing misconceptions around GDPR and data protection legislation.

- Support and require healthcare systems (including primary care, emergency care, secondary and specialised care) to develop effective working relationships with school/college/university support services and third sector provision.

- Consider a common approach to data sharing between education providers and health boards in Wales, for example by providing students with GP passports.

- Consider cross-border issues affecting information sharing, and how they could be addressed.

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[3] *This may encompass health and social care provision in addition to the support available from education providers*
[4] *Particularly student populations that may change over the course of the academic year – separate term-time addresses/studying away from home/different locality*

3. Clear roles, remits and responsibilities

Students, institutions and public services need to understand and agree on the remit of support provision required from different bodies, and where responsibility lies. For example a common understanding that the role of educational institutions is primarily to support students in undertaking their studies. A common understanding on what sort of situation is appropriate for response within an education setting, and what should be referred to the statutory health services, is essential to ensuring students receive the support they need.

Recommendations:

- Welsh Government to coordinate work bringing services together to produce guidance detailing accountability of services and where responsibility lies – health services, police, educational institutions, placement providers; this may involve modifying referral pathways or better defining the relationships between different bodies and institutions, especially where individuals present in crisis.

4. Additional support for transitions

As young people progress along their educational journey, transitions occur; for example as they move from school to college, college to university, from education to employment, or back into learning as adults. They may also move away from home, and thus away from their support structures and services. This can occur at the same time as being moved from support provided by CAMHS to adult services under the NHS. For learners with long-term conditions, or who are in crisis, this can exacerbate conditions or create new risks.

Recommendations:

- Welsh Government to address how best to improve the relationship between CAMHS and adult services[5] with specific consideration given to age boundaries for people under 25 and a possible specific service for 16-25s.

- Continued funding through Renew and Reform for projects supporting transitions including University Ready and equivalents in FE, including adult learning.

- Consider ways universities can work with local post-16 colleges/schools to support learner mental health in advance of the transition to higher education.
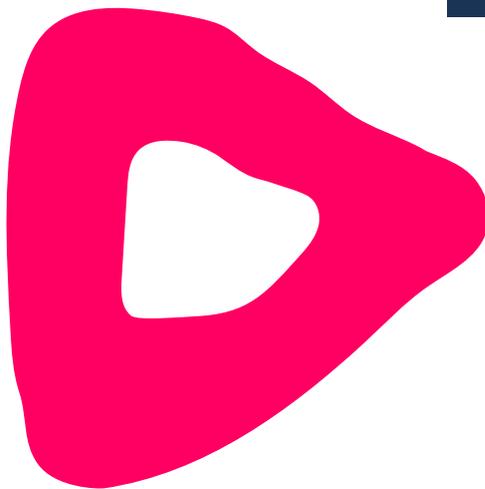
5. Sustainable, long-term funding

Providing effective support for mental health and well-being requires a stable, long-term service offer. Many effective mental health support measures all entail some form of person-to-person interaction. Therefore, ad-hoc, project-based funding, whilst helpful in the short term in encouraging innovation, can be less impactful in this policy space. It affects staff retention in a job market where qualified mental health staff are in high demand and prevents service providers developing consistent support pathways.

A multi-year approach to dedicated funding is required to provide post-16 education providers with the opportunity to create the greatest impact, both on our learners and communities. It would provide the capacity to embed mental health and well-being support in the curriculum and provide sector-appropriate support services which remove barriers to success and help learners to navigate personal crises which impact their studies. It would help institutions to meet the long-term challenges created by the Covid-19 pandemic.

This also speaks to the long-term impact of Covid-19 on society and the need to graduate learners who are mentally well and represent our future work force.

Recommendations:

- Welsh Government to take this into account when setting budgets and work with appropriate bodies (HEFCW and likely at a later date the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research) to embed longer-term funding for mental health and well-being services across post-16 education.
- Welsh Government and sector organisations to consider cost-effective options to create common services, accessible to all learners where this meets local need.

Appendix

Working group membership

- NUS Wales
- ColegauCymru
- Universities Wales
- Wales Mental Health Alliance
- AMOSSHE – The Student Services Organisation
- National Society of Apprentices
- Student Minds

Universities Wales represents the interests of universities in Wales and is a National Council of Universities UK. Universities Wales' membership encompasses the Vice Chancellors of all the universities in Wales, and the Director of the Open University in Wales. Our mission is to support a university education system which transforms lives through the work Welsh universities do with the people and places of Wales and the wider world.

ColegauCymru is a post-compulsory education charity; we promote the public benefit of post-compulsory education and learning. We also convene the further education (FE) Principals' Forum, which represents Further Education colleges and FE institutions (FEIs) in Wales. ColegauCymru also undertakes research, policy development and provides practical support to FE colleges in Wales, including on work-based learning (WBL) which is a key part of FE college activity.

AMOSSHE The Student Services Organisation is a professional membership association for leaders of Student Services in UK higher education. AMOSSHE informs and supports the leaders of Student Services in the UK, and represents, advocates for and promotes the student experience worldwide.

NUS Wales is the representative body of students in Wales. We promote, defend and extend the rights of more than 300,000 college students, university students and apprentices at education institutions across Wales. Working on behalf of our member students' unions, we harness the collective power of students through democratic representation and inclusive campaigning.

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