

# Mental Health and Wellbeing

## Our Student Strategy



# Introduction from Sarah Purdy

Pro Vice-Chancellor  
Student Experience



Mental health and wellbeing affects all aspects of university life, and at Bristol we are committed to developing a whole university approach which includes the both the provision of appropriate, accessible services and interventions; and the creation of an environment and culture that enables students and staff to maintain their wellbeing.

We know that being at university is an exciting, rewarding experience and one in which we want all of our students to thrive. However, we know there are times when many will struggle—with the demands of studying, and the other pressures of life. Nationally there is concern about the mental health challenges facing young people, and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has only heightened this. We know that our current and future students have faced increased social isolation, the challenges of adapting to new ways of learning, and the worry and uncertainty caused by the pandemic that we have all experienced.

In this context it is our absolute priority to continue to work together to promote and support positive mental health and wellbeing, and our new Strategy sets out how we will do this.

We launched our first Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy in 2018, in partnership with Bristol SU and our students. I am proud of the progress we have made together since then.

Some of our achievements have been:

- Establishing our whole university approach; with student mental health and wellbeing now part of decision making across the university and supported by effective partnership working.
- **Developing new models of support to meet student needs**, such as establishing the Residential Life Service, creating Wellbeing Access as a single clear route to wellbeing support, and introducing 'one at a time' counselling which has reduced waiting times for therapeutic support.
- **Building each year on our proactive, preventative activity**—growing a range of initiatives to encourage healthy behaviours and support students to manage their own wellbeing. This has included developing a sector-leading harm reduction approach in partnership with Bristol SU; evolving our study skills and online learning support; our sport and physical activity offer; and working with students to review and improve our online content and resources about mental health and wellbeing.
- **Being the first university to launch a Science of Happiness course**, now running as a credit-bearing optional unit.
- **Forming strong collaborative partnerships in the region and nationally**, including being part of the Bristol hub for the Student Mental Health Partnership Project, the aims of which include improving information sharing and local care pathways, and using research and good practice to improve students' experiences.
- **Enhancing our provision for underrepresented groups**, as well as those who need more support, through staff training and partnerships with external organisations—this includes LGBT+ students, Trans students and BAME students.

## Introduction from Sarah Purdy (continued) Pro-Vice Chancellor Student Experience

We know that we have more work to do, and our refreshed Strategy sets out the areas we will focus on over the next three years. This will include, amongst other things, continuing to shape and evolve our support offer and develop an approach to accessing our services which is easy to understand and enables all students to receive timely support.

We'll continue to work with and support our staff to understand their roles and responsibilities, and ensure they have the information and training they need for their role. We'll also continue to focus on our proactive preventative interventions that encourage healthy behaviours and support students to manage their wellbeing. We know too that we need to develop our approach to using data so that we can better support both individual students and make improvements to our overall support offer. In all of this we will continue our strong partnership with Bristol SU, and seek to listen to and be shaped by diverse student voices and experiences in all of our plans.

I am also delighted that as we move into this next phase, we will be supported in our work by being part of the Student Minds University Mental Health Charter Programme. We have aligned this Strategy to the Charter, and will be using it to further reflect on and evolve our approach and provision.

Working together I believe we will continue to make positive progress in the years to come and achieve our vision of creating a university experience which supports and promotes the wellbeing of all members of our community.

# Introduction from Bristol SU Officers

## Your 2020-21 Officer Team

*Ruth, Leah, David, Jason, Roy, Rushab and Julio*

## Your 2021-22 Officer Team

*Ruth, Leah, Seb, Lu, Muazam, Oba and Ifrah*



Everyone in our community has mental health, and as a University and SU, we should be doing all we can to create an environment which is conducive to good mental health and helping those who need it to access timely and appropriate support.

Being at University comes with a variety of stresses which students have to deal with. These include the pressure to succeed academically, worries about career progression after graduation, struggling to feel part of a learning community, marginalisation as a result of identity, and financial hardship coming from both the skyrocketing cost of living and the tuition fees they have to pay.

To respond to challenges our students are facing, the University has grown its mental health provision over the past 3 years, investing in and redesigning services to meet the needs of students. Notably, we have seen the implementation of One At A Time counselling which has cut waiting times; and the introduction of a single point of access to all Wellbeing Services. We have worked together to develop a pioneering Harm Reduction approach towards drugs including alcohol, and providing tailored support particularly for our BAME, LGBT+ and Trans students.

However, there is more to do, and we will continue to work together to make more progress in the coming years.

Overall, we need a system of support which is proactive, cohesive, and easy to navigate. We will work with the University to develop Personal Tutoring so that staff are equipped for their role

and can work with other teams to make sure that students get the support they need. We will continue to emphasise the importance of keeping waiting times low and ensuring that support services are able to meet growing student demand. We will continue to keep liberation at the heart of our work as an SU, and work with the University to ensure services are equipped to support students from historically oppressed groups and our growing international student community. We will continue to collaborate to develop our work around Harm Reduction, as well as doing all we can to develop a preventative approach to sexual violence and fostering a strong culture of consent in our student body.

We are pleased that so many different students and SU Networks were involved in the refresh of this Strategy. Your voices have been heard, and we hope you can see them reflected in what is written here.

This Strategy presents a clear vision of where we want to be and what we need to work together. Below this is an Action Plan which outlines the specific actions we will take as a University and SU to meet the aims that this Strategy outlines. You will be able to see this Action Plan and the progress made, and we encourage you to hold the University, and us as your SU, to account.

We look forward to continuing to work with you and the University to ensure that every student is supported throughout their experience here at the University of Bristol.



# Background Context

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Even before the pandemic, the mental health of university students had been of growing concern both in the UK and globally, with several large international studies showing a worsening trend in student mental health over the last decade (1) (2). These trends reflect an increase in depression, anxiety and self-harm in young people more widely, particularly for teenage girls (3). Recent government research shows increased levels of common mental health disorder for young people in Higher Education in 2018/19 compared to those who are not (4).

The annual University of Bristol Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Survey is now in its fourth year and generates valuable data to directly inform service provision and strategy. The latest findings suggest there has been an increase in the numbers of students with poorer wellbeing and symptoms of anxiety and depression in 2020/2021. Mental health inequalities documented since 2018 still exist, especially for those with a previous mental health issue, but the gap between some minority groups and their peers appears to be closing, e.g., for Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic students, International students and those who are the first generation in their family to go to university. For others, particularly students with disabilities, there is clearly more work to do to ensure they feel better supported (5).

The student population is now larger and more diverse than ever before, and there is growing recognition of the need for an inclusive and intersectional approach. Data from the OFS shows that the challenges of dealing with poor mental health are compounded by other factors, such as ethnicity and sexuality, and that there is a need to understand and address the unique challenges faced by underrepresented groups (6)

We must also acknowledge the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on mental health and wellbeing. Student Minds also recently reported that 74% students have seen a negative impact of the pandemic on their mental health over the last year (7).

Similarly, almost two thirds of students (63%) in our 2020/2021 Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Survey believe their mental health had worsened in the last year, with almost one in four (23%) saying they feel often or always lonely (5).

There is increasing understanding of the wide range of factors that contribute to mental health and wellbeing and the need for a whole university approach which sees it as foundational in all aspects of university life. In recent years there has also been increased recognition of the importance of local partnerships between universities, the NHS and local authorities to improve the design and delivery of services for students. The Universities UK Stepchange framework has been significant in leading this in the sector, and we are using the principles of this to inform our approach at Bristol (8).

(1) Auerbach et al. (2018) [WHO World Mental Health Surveys International College Student Project: Prevalence and distribution of mental disorders](#)

(2) Duffy, Twenge & Joiner (2019) [Trends in Mood and Anxiety Symptoms and Suicide-Related Outcomes Among U.S. Undergraduates, 2007-2018: Evidence From Two National Surveys](#)

(3) Ford, John & Gunnell (2021) [Mental health of children and young people during pandemic](#)

(4) Lewis, McCloud & Callender (2021) [Higher education and mental health: analyses of the LSYPE cohorts](#)

(5) Bennett, J., Linton, M.J. & Gunnell, D.J. [Student Wellbeing Survey Summary 2021](#)

(6) Office for Students (2019) [Mental health: Are all students being properly supported?](#)

(7) Frampton & Smithies (2021) [University Mental Health: Life in a pandemic](#)

(8) Universities UK (2020) [Stepchange: mentally healthy universities](#)

# Our strategy

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Our Strategy sets out our vision for university life at Bristol.

We also have a strategy for our staff—together these will enable us to promote and support the wellbeing of our whole community.

We have aligned our Strategy to the Student Minds University Mental Health Charter Programme and UK's #Stepchange strategic framework and their underpinning principle that we need a whole university approach.

We commit to action across the four domains in the framework: Learn, Support, Work, Live, building on the progress we have made since 2018 in each of our eight strategic themes.



# Cornerstones of our strategy

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## Definitions

'Mental health' and 'wellbeing' can be used with different meanings, and it is important that we are clear about what we mean when we use these words.

[Student Minds University Mental Health Charter](#) provides the following definitions:

**Mental health** “refers to a full spectrum of experience ranging from good mental health to mental illness.”

**Good mental health** “means more than the absence of illness (3). It will refer to a dynamic state of internal equilibrium (4) in which an individual experiences regular enduring positive feelings, thoughts and behaviours, can respond appropriately to normal negative emotions and situations and is able to make a positive contribution to their community.”

**Wellbeing** “will encompass a wider framework, of which mental health is an integral part, but which also includes physical and social wellbeing.” Student wellbeing will adopt the general definition of wellbeing above, recognising that students' engagement with academic learning is a key component part of their experience (6).

## Our Vision

Our vision is of a university where our students can thrive academically and develop personally. We want to create a positive culture where all students can feel a sense of belonging, and their experiences are heard and valued. Everyone is encouraged to access timely and appropriate information, advice or guidance to look after their own wellbeing, and support others to do the same.

## Our commitment

We will:

- Work together as a community of staff and students and with Bristol SU and the NHS.
- Listen to our students to learn from their individual experiences—as we know that different approaches work for different students
- Put respect and inclusion at the heart of what we do, so that our students can feel welcomed, and comfortable accessing our services and participating in all aspects of life in our university community
- Use research and evidence to understand and tackle the underlying causes of poor student mental health, what students need now and what they will need in the future.

# Aims

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## **Leadership**

We will lead our university community to make student mental health and wellbeing a priority in all aspects of university life and strengthen how we work together to ensure that everyone feels listened to and supported.

- a. Educate our staff and students in leadership positions about the importance of mental health and wellbeing in their work; and of the services and support offer available for students.
- b. Partner with students as we develop and deliver our Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, working with Bristol SU to make sure that diverse voices are heard in conversations and decisions about mental health and wellbeing at all levels and through a variety of channels.
- c. Lead our support services, academic schools and faculties to work closely together, by defining roles and responsibilities, sharing information appropriately and improving processes for referral so that students receive joined-up support.
- d. Develop and publish clear annual action plans with measures of success, and regularly communicate our progress to the university community.
- e. Provide sufficient resources for the initiatives and activities which we believe will make a difference to student mental health and wellbeing, striving to continually review our services and support offer to better meet the needs of our students.

## **Transitions**

We will further develop focused support at key points of transition into, during, and out of university; and at all points during the student journey where there may be an increased need.

To do this we will:

- a. Take action to address the sense of isolation caused by Covid-19 by welcoming new and returning students into our community and helping them to develop peer relationships through activities, networks and opportunities to connect with others organised by the University, Bristol SU and as part of academic programmes.
- b. Develop targeted support for students starting university that is tailored to diverse needs and experiences, including first years, mature students, and other under-represented groups.
- c. Provide clear communication early on so that students know from the start of their university experience where to go and who to talk to if they need support.
- d. Grow and strengthen our measures to promote mental health and wellbeing at other key points such as in the transition between years, from undergraduate to postgraduate study, or out of University into employment.
- e. Provide clear information about support available for students after they leave university from other agencies to support their transition out of university, as well as seeking to influence externally to increase the options for continued care for our graduates.



## **Prevention**

We will create an environment and culture that promotes and supports healthy behaviour and wellbeing in all aspects of university life.

To do this we will:

- a. Ensure that student mental health and wellbeing is a key consideration in decisions about the curriculum, assessments and structure of the academic year, embedding our curriculum framework, developing practices which have a positive impact on students and staff.
- b. Work with Bristol SU to provide a range of extra-curricular activities that will build confidence, enable students to build relationships and networks, and support healthy behaviour and wellbeing—including volunteering, societies and social events, community activity in university accommodation and sports clubs and physical activity. Work with Bristol SU, and our Liberation Networks, to identify and remove barriers to engaging in these activities for underrepresented groups.
- c. Work to reduce the impact of financial stress or difficulty on our students' mental health and wellbeing, by promoting and encouraging access to financial support including hardship funding, and budgeting advice.
- d. Encourage students to look after themselves through the proactive provision of information and advice to enable them to understand and manage their own wellbeing.
- e. Continue to provide advice and interventions to reduce harm from using alcohol and other drugs, ensuring there are no barriers to students reaching out and accessing the support they need.
- f. Provide advice and guidance for students who have experienced sexual violence, and work to create a healthy culture of consent on campus through education and clear reporting procedures.

## **Early intervention**

We will work together to quickly identify anyone who might benefit from support with their mental health or wellbeing.

- a. Break down the stigma of accessing mental health support and make it easy for students to speak up if they are struggling through joint proactive campaigns with Bristol SU, identifying and addressing cultural barriers, and further building our open and supportive culture where everyone feels comfortable talking about mental health.
- b. Provide clear, positive communication early and regularly about the range of support available from the university, NHS and other partner organisations for all types of mental health challenges so that everyone knows where to go if they need help.
- c. Train, support and encourage staff to make sure students feel welcome, known and supported, be proactive in showing students where to go for support.
- d. Influence and lobby at a national level to encourage students to disclose mental health difficulties before they come to university, so that we can be prepared and provide support early on.
- e. Appropriately capture and share information about how students are engaging with their studies. We will keep under review the policies, processes and systems that enable us to do this to make sure they are working as well as they can to support students.

## **Support**

Work together well so that appropriate support is available, and students know how to access it.

- a. Communicate clearly and regularly through a range of channels about the support available, so that all students, whether they are struggling themselves or supporting friends or housemates, know where to go and who to speak to for help.
- b. Develop a stepped approach which enables students to access and, where appropriate, move through different types of support and specialist services according to their need(s).
- c. Develop support services that all students can easily access; feel welcome at and comfortable in; and where they receive appropriate support. We will do this by listening to the experiences of underrepresented groups, provide training for our staff and working with external partners to provide culturally appropriate support.
- d. Develop quality peer-support programs, supported by Bristol SU, to empower students to look after their own wellbeing and that of others.
- e. Support students with complex mental health challenges to manage their academic studies, through the provision of appropriate support from the University, and help to access services provided by the NHS or other external partners.
- f. Communicate and work together within and across student support services and academic schools and faculties so that students can access or move between services more easily, and do not have to tell their stories multiple times.
- g. Commit to ensuring that our support services are resilient and flexible to meet demand throughout the year, working with external partners when necessary to increase capacity, so that students receive timely support.

## **Partnerships**

Build and strengthen partnerships with organisations locally and nationally to develop comprehensive support that meets our students' needs.

To do this we will:

- a. Strengthen our existing partnerships by agreeing clear responsibilities and how we will work together. Through this we will continue to improve the pathways between support provided by the University and external services and help students to understand and navigate these.
- b. Share regular and up-to-date information about the external organisations we work with, so everyone understands who these are and why we work with them.
- c. Listen to and work with our students to make informed choices about developing new partnerships so that these strengthen the support available and meet the diverse needs of our community.
- d. Work with external partners to provide training to university staff to build the knowledge and capability of our teams to improve the support we provide to students.

## **Staff**

Train and support our staff so that they are equipped for their role in supporting student mental health and wellbeing.

- a. Clarify roles, responsibilities and boundaries of the different groups of staff—including Personal and Senior Tutors, teaching staff, and those in our student-facing services—and provide accurate information and resources to all so that whoever a student reaches out to they can quickly receive or be directed to appropriate advice and support.
- b. Provide a range of training so that staff develop the level of skills, knowledge, and understanding of our diverse student body, that they need as relevant to their role in ensuring university life supports student wellbeing, reviewing this regularly and prioritising the areas that will make the most difference to students.
- c. Recognise the role that academic staff play in supporting student wellbeing, ensuring that additional responsibilities are given the time and recognition needed.
- d. Look after our staff, through the delivery of our Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, so that they can thrive in their roles and play their part in supporting our students.
- e. Facilitate staff and students recognising shared experiences of mental health and create an open and supportive culture through joint campaigns and activities that promote healthy behaviour and wellbeing.
- f. Build positive and supportive relationships between staff and students in academic schools, through proactive and consistent personal tutoring, collaborative learning experiences, and social and community building activity as part of programmes.

## **Data and research**

Use information and research to develop our support offer and enhance the experience of our students, listening to their needs now and looking ahead to what they might need in the future.

- a. Develop ways of sharing information appropriately across the university, being transparent about what we are sharing and how, so that we can identify students in difficulty, and have a shared view of their needs.
- b. Evaluate and continuously improve our services, capturing and using data to understand the effectiveness and impact of our support and make positive change.
- c. Partner with our students to put their needs at the heart of how we design our services, using a range of channels and methods to understand their experiences and making sure we hear from diverse voices.
- d. Communicate regularly how we are using what students tell us to adapt our plans and make further improvements to the support we provide.
- e. Carry out research into student mental health and wellbeing, that enables us to remain responsive to student needs, and continually improve our services and interventions.