Mental Health at Work Commitment

Guide for the Higher Education Sector

Standard two:

Proactively ensure work design and organisational culture drive positive mental health outcomes

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Standard two:
Proactively ensure work design and organisational culture drive positive mental health outcomes.

This standard contains five main actions:

1. Provide staff with good physical workplace conditions.

2. Create opportunities for staff to feedback when work design, culture and conditions are driving poor mental health.

3. Address the impact that a range of activities have on staff, including organisational design and redesign, job design, recruitment, working patterns, email, 'always-on' culture and work-related policies.

4. Give permission to have work/life balance and to work flexibly and agile.

5. Encourage openness during recruitment and throughout employment so appropriate support can be provided.

Organisational policies

Ensure that mental health is at the heart of all your policies. Pay particular attention to policies relating to staff wellbeing like health and safety, working time, sickness absence and return-to-work. Clear and fair policies will promote an open culture and encourage staff to come forward when they're struggling.

Remember that staff with disabilities are protected from discrimination under the Equality Act 2010. This includes mental health, if a person's mental health problem has a substantial and long-term negative effect on their ability to carry out day-to-day activities. This means staff with a mental health problem shouldn't face structural barriers to developing their careers. For example, missing out on promotions and projects because of sickness absences, or because of how performance is measured.

Top tips on creating effective policies

- Offer guidance on how to balance the needs of the individual and the organisation.

- Take account of the way in which mental health interacts with people management policies.

- Review your mental health policy, if you have one in place, to ensure that it outlines how you aim to promote the wellbeing of all staff, the support in place for staff experiencing poor mental health and how you'll address any concerns about mental health.

- Check that mental wellbeing is at the heart of policies relating to staff wellbeing such as people management, diversity and equality, performance management, health and safety, working time, sickness absence and return-to-work.

- Consult with staff and other relevant groups in the development and implementation of policies.

- Establish a clear and continuous policy review process including consulting with staff including those with lived experience of mental health problems.

- Be clear on roles and responsibilities of those involved in delivering the policy including indicative timescales for addressing issues.

- Include case studies in policies to highlight to managers and staff how they work in practice. The people in the case studies could remain anonymous if that is their preference.

Physical workplace conditions

The physical workplace can have a big impact on staff wellbeing. Ask staff how to improve the work environment and take action to ensure it's suitable.

We know many universities operate from heritage buildings, so won't be able to use some of these suggestions. However, you may be able to make changes elsewhere.

Some ways you might explore improving your staff's workplace environment include:

- ensuring staff have access to natural light or improve poor lighting

- ensuring there's good air quality and access to water – improve ventilation if necessary

- offering comfortable workstations which can be adjusted

- ensuring staff can adjust the temperature

- offering a variety of breakout spaces, so staff have space to do both concentrated work as well as group work

- providing quiet rooms for down-time and mindfulness exercises

- providing recreational space for staff separate to student areas

- offering access to an outside space where possible

- consulting staff on workplace redesign and refurbishment

- providing some plants and greenery around the workplace – it can improve staff wellbeing

- having different colours, pictures and paintings around workplaces.

Returning to the campus

During the coronavirus pandemic many university staff will have had to adapt to new ways of working, including teaching remotely. They may now feel anxious about returning to campus, whether related to safety procedures in place on campus or their commute.

Ensure people feel their voices are being heard by asking them to consult and feedback on your plans to reopen the workspace. Send clear messages on return-to-work plans and make sure managers hold one-to-one conversations with their teams. Our return to work guidance stresses one-to-one conversations with all staff before returning to campus.

See our guide on coronavirus on how to support staff both working at home and returning to the workplace.

At UCLAN we have a page on our staff intranet with tips for home/remote working. It features sections such as our flexible working policy and how to get set up while working remotely, as well as some sections that are specific to Covid-19 such as a guide to thriving in isolation. We have offered any staff concerned about returning to campus following lockdown a 30-minute walk around it to reintroduce them and to show them the safety measures that have been put in place.

HR Manager, University of Central Lancashire

Designing better jobs

Research shows that "good work" is where staff have some control over their work, have a say in how the organisation is run and can build social networks.[3] Managers and HR need to make sure staff are confident, well equipped and supported to do their job to a high standard.

Risk assessments, in particular stress risk assessments, are an effective planning tool to help managers and leaders identify what measures could support their staff. Risk assessments should be used as a preventative tool, to stop issues occurring.

We understand that throughout the coronavirus pandemic many universities may have been restricted in carrying out risk assessments. However, despite challenges it remains vital that universities look at how risk assessments can be undertaken.

Find out more about stress risk assessments from the Health and Safety Executive.

You can find more information on what makes good work on page 30 of our guide.

Case study: University of Sheffield

At the University of Sheffield, the pandemic has given us an opportunity to introduce more of a Risk Assessment approach to managing mental health and wellbeing. We developed an institutional level Equality and Wellbeing Risk Assessment and a dedicated version for those staff working from home. Signposting to clear guidance, resources and routes for support were developed and documented to mitigate each risk. For stress specifically, we have a Stress Risk Management Working Group in situ (with our trade union colleagues). This group has worked to produce tools such as the Departmental Stress Risk Assessment & Action Plan and adapted the Mind Wellbeing Assessment Plan to fit our organisational requirements.

As a point of best practice, we recommend to managers at the University that the completed Departmental Stress Risk Assessment and Action Plan is added as a standing item on meeting and committee agendas to enable regular review of progress and updates to be captured.

We have developed a Managers' Toolkit that also includes a series of stress management tools and encourages the opportunity for self-reflection on their own management practice and how this may impact on staff experiences of stress.

HR Manager, Wellbeing, University of Sheffield

Understand the impact of insecure and unstable work

Insecure and unstable work may be a theme throughout many people's careers in the university sector. Many staff are on term-based contracts or insecure contracts based on research and funding cycles. Restructures are also common.

Employers and line managers can and must take action to support staff mental health. Review change management policies, involve staff in the process and get feedback on how it can be improved. During periods of change it's important to check in with people regularly and to signpost to support both inside and outside your organisation.

During redundancy consider the wellbeing of:

• the people you're letting go

• their colleagues who might be staying on without them

• the people making tough choices and leading on these processes.

Understanding your obligations as an employer can help you to feel less anxious about your decisions, and your staff to fully understand their rights. This guide from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) offers advice on providing support for all affected staff members.

Case study: University of Bristol

We run a staff engagement survey every three years at the University of Bristol. The 2018 survey gave strong indications that we needed to examine stress at work, including its causes, in more detail. Precarious contracts were a key theme which came through, therefore we worked with trade unions to develop a working group, with a dedicated HR project officer, to understand the scale of the problem and our reliance on casual staff in more detail. We came up with proposals to better define our fixed-term contract policy so that it was clearer when this type of contract was appropriate, and limited the duration that someone can be on one of these contracts. We converted 130 staff from fixed-term to open-ended contracts. The project focus has created a change in culture towards prioritising more stable contracts.

Head of HR Operations, University of Bristol

Creating positive working practices and promoting a healthy work/life balance

Work/life balance isn't just about rules and permissions. It's important to signal, through our behaviour and the culture we create, that people aren't expected to check emails late at night. That it's OK to have other things going on in your life, and that sometimes these will affect work. That annual leave, lunch breaks and flexible working hours are not only actively encouraged, but a core part of how your organisation thrives.

Long hours might seem manageable in the short term. But over time, constant pressure and a poor work/life balance can quickly lead to stress and burnout. This reduces people's productivity, performance, creativity and morale. So, it's important to support staff to see their career as part of their life, not their whole life.

Your action plan should set out how your university encourages staff to:

- work sensible hours
- take full lunch breaks
- rest and recuperate after busy periods
- avoid working at weekends – especially from home
- take their full annual leave entitlement.

Wherever possible, senior leaders and managers should be role models for healthier work habits and encourage staff by example.

At Leeds Beckett we have put together a staff website to help with work/life balance. There are resources, webinars and online modules focusing on this area which include:

- Working at Pace, Working with Confidence (advice about how to work effectively and confidently in the current situation).

- Managing your Self-Talk (advice on how to manage this to keep a positive outlook).

- Essentialism: How to Focus on What Really Matters (strategies to help manage time and avoid feeling overwhelmed).

- Looking after your Wellbeing (general information and advice).

- Let's talk about Burnout (understanding signs, causes and stages of burnout; self-care tips for prevention).

Catherine Querin, Learning and Organisational Development Adviser, Leeds Beckett University

In response to the pandemic we developed a practical guide 'How to Facilitate Flexibility' which was endorsed by the Vice Chancellor in a video message to all staff. This focused on where, when and how staff work as well as ensuring open discussion around preferences. Enabling flexible working has been acknowledged as one of the biggest mechanisms in which we can support staff in managing their wellbeing.

HR Manager, Wellbeing, University of Sheffield

The University takes an holistic approach to wellbeing, including highlighting the importance of physical health, emphasising the mental health benefits of exercise and that regular exercise can have a profoundly positive impact on depression and anxiety. It also relieves stress, improves memory, helps you sleep better and boosts your overall mood. We launched a webpage taking on James Brown's theme of 'Get Up Offa That Thing' to encourage people to think about not sitting all the time. It highlights lots of activities, online classes, walks and yoga.

Health and Wellbeing Manager, University of Bath

Managing workload

Managing workload is a common challenge for university staff.

The nature of academic and research work can result in long hours. If staff are asked to take on extra roles and responsibilities due to illness or restructures this can make work unmanageable. Overall, there needs to be support for staff to have a healthy work/life balance. This should be underpinned by robust policies around flexible working and organisational culture and expectations.

Support staff in flexible ways. Workload models may work for some academic staff for managing contact and background hours – but won't for others. Try looking at resource support and management rather than workload balancing. Encourage managers to discuss workloads with their teams on a regular basis and work with them to prioritise tasks.

Impact of workload issues

- A University and College Union survey found that on average staff in further education work an extra two days a week unpaid.
- 78 per cent said their workload is unmanageable at least half the time.[4]
- Research by Education Support found that 73 per cent of higher education staff cited workload as a reason for considering leaving their jobs.[5]

Remote working can sometimes lead to an 'always on' feeling. So it's beneficial to create a culture where staff feel comfortable enough to switch off at the end of the workday and take short breaks during it.

You can find more information on how to support staff throughout the pandemic in this guide.

Case study: London School of Economics

We have been focusing on helping and supporting our staff through the lockdown. We've sent messaging to managers to help them have conversations with employees about managing their workload. We're also writing guidance and toolkits to help performance be based on outcomes, rather than activity or time spent working. We're running online workshops for all managers to help work towards output-based objectives. Anecdotal feedback so far has shown it is useful to measure outcomes when analysing someone's work.

Chris Watt, Head of Organisational Learning, London School of Economics

[4] 2016. Workload is an Education Issue. UCU Workload Survey Report. University and College Union
[5] 2019. Staff wellbeing in higher education. Education Support Partnership & YouGov

Case study: University of Bath

Building good relationships between colleagues and managers is essential and often there is a common understanding around hours of work/shifts and responding to emails or MS Teams calls. At times it can be beneficial for these messages to be reinforced, so we encourage staff to add their working pattern to their email signature. The University recognises the need to provide flexible employment options which give staff choice over their working hours subject to the operational needs to deliver services effectively. Requests for flexible working are considered carefully and sympathetically.

Health and Wellbeing Manager, University of Bath

Case Study: Teesside University

At Teesside University we have a policy of not sending emails on bank holidays, weekends or between 7pm and 7am, unless they are essential. We have asked Deans, Directors, and managers to support this by being role models. We've also highlighted this policy in our new and widely publicised and promoted Values and Behaviours Framework.

Human Resources Department, Teesside University

Workplace adjustments

Workplace adjustments for mental health are often quite small, simple, practical and cost-effective changes. They could include everything from offering rooms for quiet work, to starting a buddy system. Often the change isn't physical, but about attitude, expectation or communication.

Remember, once aware that something about work is causing a problem for someone with a disability, employers have a legal duty to make reasonable adjustments. Find out more on page 25 of this guide.

Useful links

- The Mental Health Foundation has some helpful guidance on overcoming barriers to disclosure around mental health problems.

- Look at the People Managers' guide to Mental Health for more information on how to support staff who are experiencing a mental health problem, including how to manage an employee's time off sick and return to work.

- Watch the Mental Health at Work Webinar on Standard 2 featuring Mind and Business in the Community.

- Read the Mind and CIPD guide to Managing and supporting mental health at work: disclosure tools for managers.

- The Universities and Colleges Employers' Association and the sector trade unions jointly developed the Stress and mental wellbeing resources pack for HEIs.

- The UCU stress toolkit provides resources to help branch/LA officers to tackle stress in the workplace.

- The Health and Safety Executive has lots of work related stress tools and templates.

- Mind have worked in partnership with the Society of Occupational Medicine alongside ACAS, BITC and CIPD to produce a Return to Work Toolkit which provides a comprehensive guide on how to approach the return to work process.

- The CIPD and Mind have developed a template health questionnaire which sensitively covers mental health, which you can find on page 15 of this guide.

We're Mind, the mental health charity.

We're here to make sure anyone with a mental health problem has somewhere to turn for advice and support.

mind.org.uk/universities

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