

Mental Health at Work Commitment

Guide for the Higher Education Sector

Standard one:

Prioritise mental health in the workplace by developing and delivering a systematic programme of activity

Mentally
Healthy
Universities

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Prioritise mental health in the workplace by developing and delivering a systematic programme of activity.

This standard contains four main actions:

- 1 Produce, implement and communicate a mental health at work plan, drawing from best practice and representing the views of staff across the organisation, specifically exploring feedback from people with mental health problems.
- 2 Demonstrate senior ownership and drive board-level accountability, underpinned by a clear governance structure for reporting.
- 3 Routinely monitor staff health and wellbeing using available data.
- 4 Seek feedback from your staff and create clear opportunities to make improvements based on it.

Developing your mental health at work plan

A mental health at work plan shows everyone how you support staff. Developing yours is a great way to take a structured approach to supporting your university.

You may already have lots of initiatives in place such as an Employee Assistance Programme or Mental Health Champions. The plan should formalise your approach and bring these initiatives together in one place.

Please see the action plan template in the [Useful Links](#) section.

In the development of your mental health at work plan you should consider:

- setting up a cross-organisational group, including representation from senior leadership, to take the plan forward
- reflecting on what you already have in place using the questions in the action plan template
- gathering staff input through staff surveys and focus groups. Find out how aware staff are of the support that exists, how supportive they find the university and what else they think the university can be doing to support staff
- making sure to link staff and student wellbeing agendas for a whole university approach
- allowing up to six months to develop and launch your plan. Ensure that staff can always easily access it.

Involving your staff

Why it's important

Design your plan with input from staff across your university including people with lived experience of mental health problems. This boosts buy-in and gives you a clearer idea of the support people need.

Academic, administrative, facilities and support staff will have different needs and experiences, as will staff from under-represented groups. Set up a formal communication and consultation process with your staff networks, such as Black and Minority Ethnic, LGBTQ+, and mental health networks, if you have them.

If you don't have any staff networks in place, consider establishing these groups. Engage with a wide range of staff who have different experiences. This will boost engagement and build mutual trust.

Consider how best to gather input from part-time and contract staff. Caterers, cleaning and security staff may be employed by third party contractors but can have a lot of contact with students. It's important they can manage their own mental health and are confident in signposting students who may be experiencing poor mental health. Include them in the conversation and create ways for them to feedback to ensure a whole university approach.

Continue the conversation

The conversation doesn't end when your plan's finished. It should be a living document which is regularly reviewed and continuously updated and refreshed. Set up regular communication, so you can keep asking staff what works, what can be improved, and assess what's effective. It's important to communicate changes made as a result of staff feedback. Also consider asking other universities for best practice.

It's important to make sure staff still get the chance to feedback during the pandemic – [our guide can help](#).

Case study: University of Bristol

At the start of our mental health journey, we set up a taskforce across the institution to address both staff and student wellbeing. This involved an expert advisory group with representation from Universities UK, a south-west region health champion, the Vice Chancellors of both the University of the West of England and our own university, and an academic with research interest in the area. We also worked with our trade unions who fed into the action plan. We felt it was important to discuss both staff and student wellbeing together to ensure staff wellbeing had focus and didn't get forgotten. It is important to recognise the impact that staff can have on student wellbeing if they themselves have positive mental health.

We also run a staff engagement survey every three years. The 2018 survey led us to examine stress at work more closely and the causes in more detail. This led to a separate focused survey on wellbeing to give us more information on what we should and shouldn't include in a staff mental health and wellbeing strategy. This led to the development of a clear strategy implementation plan.

It is important to ensure you factor in all staff groups in your university when formulating your action or implementation plan. Initially, we didn't specifically factor in technical staff. However, we realised as these staff were often the first port-of-call for students in distress, it was important that their needs were identified and included. We now have technical staff who are Staff Mental Health Champions.

Head of HR Operations, University of Bristol

The role of senior leaders

Senior buy-in is vital to send a clear message that staff wellbeing is a priority. Appointing a board-level lead, such as your Vice Chancellor or a Director, helps ensure that it's given proper attention and accountability for the long-term. It also shows that wellbeing is a core part of how you work, not a distraction or add-on.

Case study: Teesside University

At Teesside, our Executive Director of HR is a Staff Mental Health Champion, and our Pro Vice Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) is our Mental Health Lead for Students. Both of these roles sit on the University Executive Team. Staff wellbeing is also reported through the Health and Safety Groups to the University Executive Team, ensuring it is discussed at the highest level.

Human Resources Department, Teesside University

Consider including an objective on supporting staff mental health as part of senior leaders' annual performance objectives. Make them accountable for adopting the mental health at work plan. For example, their performance review could include measurements like sickness absence, people survey results, take-up of Employee Assistance Programmes or Occupational Health Services.

Senior leaders should promote staff wellbeing by:

- speaking out about mental health and how it's a priority for the university. This could include sharing their own mental health experiences, where they feel able to do so, or how they handle stress
- role modelling healthy workplace behaviours such as working sensible hours, taking breaks and annual leave
- supporting a campaign to encourage healthy work behaviours
- signing the Time to Change Wales Organisational Pledge, for universities in Wales
- publicly signing the Mental Health at Work Commitment
- attending mental health awareness training and wellbeing events
- including mental health and wellbeing in senior level meeting agendas
- endorsing, promoting, and celebrating the work of Champions.

Case study: University of Greenwich

Our Vice Chancellor at the University of Greenwich promotes wellbeing by being open and using her weekly forum message to share wellbeing tips.

During the annual appraisal training cycle, the Deputy Vice Chancellor and Chief Operating Officer have encouraged the setting of a personal wellbeing objective in appraisals with a link to Mind's [Wellness Action Plan](#) tool.

Our Director for Student and Academic Services and Pro-Vice Chancellor for the Faculty of Health and Human Sciences jointly lead the strategic direction for health and wellbeing at the university, frequently delivering key note talks at our wellbeing events, and advocating health and wellbeing initiatives among the wider leadership.

**Laleh Williams, Head of Organisation and People Development,
University of Greenwich**

Monitoring staff mental health and wellbeing

Routinely monitoring your staff's mental health helps you understand what affects it and how well you're supporting them. It also lets you assess whether your approach is effective and makes it easier for you to plan further improvements.

You've probably got a lot of this information already. Especially if you already ask your staff about their experiences, perceptions and wellbeing formally or informally. Putting relevant questions into existing tools such as staff surveys, HR monitoring forms or appraisals will help you build a comprehensive picture, without creating extra work.

Using different types of data

HR data:

Use absenteeism data, staff turnover and exit interviews to gather information on wellbeing. You could also look at retention/return to work rates for people with diagnosed mental health problems to understand whether staff feel supported. Just because staff don't give mental health problems as the reason for being absent doesn't mean they don't exist. It could be that people just don't feel comfortable sharing problems because they're afraid of the reaction they'll get.

Some staff may not report absence. Or there may be high levels of presenteeism where people are at work but significantly less productive due to poor mental health. Remember, routinely asking staff how they are helps build people's confidence to speak up so they get the help they need sooner.

You can find more information about taking stock in our guide.

Staff surveys:

Your staff survey (or staff satisfaction survey) can be a great tool to capture information about wellbeing. You may already ask staff about their workload, leadership and management, opportunities for personal development and internal communication. However, you may not make the links between these issues and the impact on staff wellbeing. Think about how you can integrate mental health into the existing survey, or run a specific survey on mental health. It's important to ensure confidentiality. Make sure you don't ask any questions which might identify someone such as name, address or email. Create strict policies around confidentiality and emphasise the survey is anonymous, so you collect genuine experience and honest feedback. For information on data protection see the Information Commissioner's Office.

Team mental health audits:

It's important managers regularly take stock of the mental health of their staff, the types of pressures they're under and how to alleviate them. Carry out a regular mental health audit which allows staff to share their challenges and work together to identify solutions. See this resource from Bupa on taking stock.

Case study: London School of Economics

At the London School of Economics, we hold staff voice workshops. They act like a focus group, as they are drop-in sessions focusing on different topics that are highlighted in staff surveys. We then write a report based on the session and share this with senior management. These sessions have had good engagement in comparison to surveys, as we find staff are 'survey fatigued'.

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

Case study: University of Bath

We developed a Departmental Wellbeing Action Plan process that enables us to work closely with the diverse areas within the University and engage employees in developing their Wellbeing Action Plans. The process begins with a survey that incorporates the Health and Safety Executive 35-question Management Standards, the Office for National Statistics 4 as well as questions on support and disclosure. The surveys are followed up with focus groups to get qualitative feedback from staff, understand what is going well and what can be changed, together with ideas for action.

Health and Wellbeing Manager, University of Bath

Useful links

- [Mental Health at Work Webinar on Standard One, featuring Mind and CIPD](#)
- Please see the Mental Health at Work Commitment [Action Plan template](#). This template can help you get started with your approach to mental health in your university if you are at the beginning of your journey, or it can help to formalise your approach.

Questions to include in your staff survey

Do you know how many of your staff have a mental health problem?

A staff survey question can be a good way of capturing this data, reinforced by the message that your organisation will respond supportively. When you ask people about their mental health, it's vital to keep information confidential. Emphasise that surveys are anonymous, so feedback is honest.

Sample questions:

- Qs 1.** How would you describe your mental health currently?
(Scale: Very Good, Good, Moderate, Poor, Very Poor)
- Qs 2.** "I feel comfortable talking about my mental health at work with other colleagues." (Scale: strongly disagree, neutral, strongly agree)
- Qs 3.** How could [our university] better promote the wellbeing of all our staff?
You can provide up to three ideas.

For more guidance on what questions you could include, look at:

- [The Warwick-Edinburgh Wellbeing Scale](#): This 14-item scale has five response categories, added up to provide a single score. It's been used across the world for monitoring and evaluation.
- [The HSE Management Standards](#): These cover six key areas of work design that, if not properly managed, are associated with poor health, lower productivity and increased accident and sickness absence rates.

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

We're a registered charity in England (no. 219830)

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