

Durham University – preparation for the student minds’ mental health charter

Who we worked with

Durham University

The situation

Mental health problems and diagnosable mental illness have been increasing in children and young people – exacerbated by the pandemic – and it is evident that this increase is likely to continue. There have been corresponding year on year increases in the number of students disclosing a mental health condition on entering higher education, and more broadly in students seeking help for more generalised mental ill health or distress once they arrive at university. Across the sector, there has been an increase in demand for student support and mental health services as well as more students presenting with complex mental health difficulties. This has led to higher risk concerns about the impact on the mental health and wellbeing of other students and of staff supporting the students.

In this changing landscape, sector guidance advises that a ‘whole university approach’ should be taken to mental health and wellbeing support, principally Universities UK’s (UUK) StepChange and Suicide Safer Universities frameworks, and Student Minds’ University Mental Health Charter framework. Most recently, in June 2023, the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education called on all universities to adopt the principles set out in the Mental Health Charter and join the programme.

What happened

Within this context, Durham University commissioned SUMS to conduct an independent review of its existing approach to supporting both staff and student mental health and wellbeing, which we completed in November 2022.

Durham is committed to the health and wellbeing of the whole University community and, as part of this, to achieving the Mental Health Charter.





The SUMS team was tasked with reviewing existing staff and student support at Durham and identifying further opportunities for enhancement as part of the University's preparation for applying for the Charter.

The SUMS team drew on the themes and principles in UUK's StepChange and Student Minds' Charter frameworks for the review, as well as our consultants' expertise and knowledge and experience gained from conducting similar reviews for multiple universities, and extensive comparative research into innovative

and effective practice in the sector. SUMS facilitated a range of reflective conversations with staff, students and leaders across Durham, along with NHS and third sector partners. We also reviewed and assimilated relevant documentation (such as strategies, policies and survey results). Our resulting report included a set of strategic recommendations on priority enhancements which will continue to improve the support for students and staff.

The difference it made
SUMS' review highlighted significant

strengths and progress being made towards developing a 'whole university' approach at Durham. This included the excellent practice of having a clear vision and Health and Wellbeing Strategy covering both staff and students, which is overseen and delivered by an overarching Health and Wellbeing Implementation Group. The Group is co-chaired by the Directors of Student Support & Wellbeing and HR & Organisational Development. Additionally, we found significant good practice in the University's approach to integration and cross sector working with both the NHS (and in particular Increasing Access to Psychological Therapies) and with the third sector.

Our team also identified opportunities for further development at Durham to support the University in its journey to a fully embedded University-wide approach. Our detailed recommendations were designed to drive further improvements, including: greater clarity about support services available for students and where to go with different issues; enhanced communications and information sharing across different parts of the University; enhanced pathways both into and from NHS services; a more strategic

approach to staff training across the University; and more diverse approaches to prevention to encourage a sense of community and belonging for all students.

We presented and discussed our findings with senior colleagues from across the University. The University has been able to use the results of the review to reflect on and adjust its plans as part of the preparation for applying to the Student Minds' Mental Health Charter programme. As part of this, individual staff were identified who had taken part in the SUMS review who could act as the lead for each specific theme. The University then utilised the SUMS report to create an action plan for each area, building on the identified good practice and working on areas where opportunities for enhancement has been recommended.

