

## MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT SERVICE FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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### SUMMARY

**Service:** The Mental Health Support Service provides substantial one to one practical support for students to enable them to manage their mental health and study to provide coordinated support and ensure compliance with the Equality Act 2010.

**Resources:** The service consists of a full time Mental Health Advisor and a part time Support Worker and is available all year round. Supervision is received from a Consultant Psychiatrist.

**Roles:** To liaise with students and professionals when a student is admitted to hospital/Crisis Teams. Close communication with other services such as Student Engagement, the International Office, the Chaplain and academics.

**National Trends:** Data from the Office of National Statistics between 2007 and 2011 have shown an increase in the number of student suicides since the start of the recession.

**Survey Feedback:** Feedback highlights that students benefit from the support and value the professional and welcoming attitude of the team.

**Conclusion:** The service continues to provide good quality support to those who access it. Student feedback shows that they believe the support has helped them to stay at university and complete their degree.

**Key words:** students - mental health - Support Service

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### INTRODUCTION

The University of Bedfordshire Mental Health Support Service provides substantial one to one practical support for students to enable them to manage their mental health and study. This can involve interacting regularly with colleagues in Student Support and academics to provide coordinated support and ensure compliance with the Equality Act 2010.

The aim of this paper is to review the functioning of the service and assess the benefits to university students over the year in 2014.

### RESOURCES

The service consists of a full time Mental Health Advisor and a part time Support Worker (3 days a week) and is available all year round. During the summer it supports Masters Students, students with referral work and appeals, provides continuity for vulnerable students and meets prospective students in preparation for starting their course. Policies and procedures are updated and preparation for mental health promotion is undertaken.

The Mental Health Advisor receives clinical supervision from a Consultant Psychiatrist in order to discuss interventions with individual students, the impact of changes in treatments and medication and managing risk. The Mental Health Advisor provides supervision to the Support Worker.

### ROLES

An important part of the Mental Health Advisor role is to liaise with students and professionals when a student is admitted to hospital or supported by the local Mental Health Crisis Teams. Close communication with other services such as Student Engagement, the International Office, the Chaplain and academics is necessary in order to ensure resumption and continuation of studies once the student has recovered.

The Support Worker continues to work with the immediate needs of students with low level mental health issues such as home sickness, anxiety, low mood and relationship breakdown. These students are more likely to withdraw or fail without prompt short term intervention. The Support Worker also provides mentoring to students awaiting DSA funding and students who are not eligible for DSA. Work with individual students includes stress management strategies to motivate and empower them to create achievable goals that meet course work deadlines and support retention. The support worker will also see students in crisis in the absence of the Mental Health Advisor. The process for managing risk, seeking guidance and referral has been established in these situations.

### TRENDS

The service has been available to students for the past eight years and there has been an incremental

increase year on year of students accessing the service. Support is available on the Luton and Bedford Campus with telephone support to Aylesbury and Milton Keynes. There is full use of the service on the Luton Campus. However, student engagement on the Bedford Campus is low, both for one to one appointments and workshops/events. It is unclear what is preventing students accessing the service.

At the beginning of the academic year, the leaflet on homesickness seemed to disappear off the display stands. As in previous years, a number of students who were not adjusting to university life, after the first few weeks, presented to the service and were offered timely intervention. This included orientation to the campus and helping students to link with peers and societies. Vincent Tinto, *Research and Practice of Student Retention: What next? 2006*, suggests that the first year is critical to retaining students.

There has been an increase in the number of Sports Therapy students using the service. The rationale for this is unclear. It could be due to the supportive nature of the discipline which allows students to be proactive in seeking help. A meeting was arranged with tutors to advise them of the service and the support available to students.

Throughout the year, a number of students have been supported when hospitalised in local mental health acute units. Three students have presented in crisis on campus. Sometimes a student's mental health has a major impact on their ability to study. The service has had successes from difficult beginnings. An international student who was admitted to hospital at the beginning of the previous academic year, due to severe mental health difficulties, has completed the first year and can progress.

A closer working relationship has developed with Campus Living student accommodation. This has been precipitated by an increased in number of students who have been identified as self-harming and have made suicide attempts. Several referrals have been received from the local Mental Health Crisis Team. Discussion with the Crisis Team Manager has improved liaison which ensures a holistic approach to managing student's mental health and study. Referrals have also been received from the Luton University GPs.

In the third term, a number of students have presented to the service in their final year. The increased pressure of a dissertation, or final major project, can precipitate a crisis for students with mental health diagnoses, who have up to this point managed without support. Some students seem to lose motivation partly because of uncertainty about a future career and job prospects. Others struggle to envisage adjusting to returning home to difficult family situations.

## **NATIONAL TRENDS**

The mental health of students remains a concern for universities and mental health services. The Royal

College of Psychiatrists Report CR166, September 2011 'The Mental Health of Students in Higher Education' expressed increasing concerns about the growth of mental health problems amongst students stating: 'since the previous report in 2003, the concerns highlighted there have shown no signs of abating and in many respects have become more pressing'.

Data from the Office of National Statistics between 2007 and 2011 have shown an increase in the number of student suicides since the start of the recession. In this time female suicides almost doubled. As the numbers are small, it is difficult to draw any specific conclusions for the increase.

Recent newspaper articles suggest students continue to struggle with mental health difficulties. Demand for university counselling services has risen by a third since 2008. A survey by Time To Change found 66% student respondents said they had a mental health problem. However, only 0.3% declare a mental illness as a disability, on their application form, nationwide.

## **ACTIVITIES**

The Mental Health Advisor has delivered Mental Health Awareness training to Campus Living staff, and University Reception staff. A follow up training slot was provided to psychiatrists from South Essex Partnership Trust to inform them of the role of the Mental Health Advisor and advise on trends in student mental health. This is a yearly commitment to working together with local psychiatrists. One outcome of this interaction has been an approach by the Consultant Psychiatrist & Core Training Programme Director in SEPT to undertake some joint research on student mental health. In collaboration with the Bedford Chaplain, awareness training was delivered in January to a mixed faith group of University Chaplains during their yearly retreat.

The Support Worker developed and delivered three workshops on motivation, positive thinking and stress management to students in conjunction with PAD during October and February. Although the workshops related to study they also offered transferable life skills. The October sessions attracted around 30 participants for each session on the Luton Campus. The February session was less well attended. Unfortunately the sessions were not attended on the Bedford Campus. The marketing strategy and the manner of delivery will be reviewed with the Head of PAD.

During Fresher's Week, the Support Worker worked on the Student Support stand promoting student support services. In order to raise awareness of mental health issues for students the service ran a Smile Day on the Luton Campus for Student Mental Health Day in February. The background research and leaflet was produced by the Support Worker.

The service collaborated with the Chaplain, SU welfare and the Counsellor, on the Bedford Campus, to

provide week of activities for Mental Health Awareness Week in May. One outcome has been regular group meetings to plan further awareness events (See Appendix)

Two new leaflets are being produced by the service. One will address the increasing stresses faced by third year students in the second term. The other will be aimed at parents; to enable students who may be at risk of failing or withdrawing due to personal circumstances to be signposted to Student Support. The report, 'WhatWorks? Student Retention and Success 2012' notes that students are more likely to seek advice from family and friends than professional services. A leaflet for parents is one way of alerting students to services available to help improve retention. Peer mentoring, such as that provided by PAL and contact with personal tutors is also a way to reach students requiring support. The service is exploring how to increase links with these groups.

A group of media students approached the service for guidance with their final major project on student mental health and student support services. The Mental Health Advisor was featured in the final film. The students gave agreement for their video to be made available on the university website to signpost our services for students.

## SERVICE USE

A total of 228 students were seen by the service this year. Total appointments offered were 921. 626 were kept with 151 DNAs, 99 cancelled by the student and 33 cancelled by the service due to illness. The overall DNA rate was 16% which is slightly higher than last year at 14%. 166 students were female and 62 male. This is in line with national statistics on mental illness gender ratios in the general public. The number of students seen this year was almost identical to last year. Total appointments were around 50 lower but other figures were very similar. The service in Luton appears to be working at almost full capacity. However, there is not full use of the service provision in Bedford. In general it appears to be more difficult to engage students at Bedford.

Although the service is confidential, students can find it difficult to discuss their mental health concerns. It is possible that this may account for some DNAs over the year. During March and April, when the service was at full capacity in Luton, students were waiting up to two weeks for a first appointment. As the service has limited staffing, illness can also impact on waiting times and affect the student experience of the provision.

The recent proposed changes to Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA) may impact on students with mild to moderate mental health conditions who may no longer be able to access DSA. This could increase service use as these students may seek alternative support.

It appears, from the numbers over the last two years, that the service could be almost at fully capacity in Luton. An increase in numbers accessing help could affect the frequency of individual student appointments. This could impact on students who are in crisis and at risk of dropping out. There is the possibility that the service may become self-limiting as students may choose not to access support if the waiting list is too long.

## SERVICE FEEDBACK

The following is individual feedback from students using the service over the past year.

*"Just wanted to say a massive thank you for your support, I don't know if I'd have got through without it!"*

*"I wanted to write to you to say thank you for all the support you gave me during my time at the university. Shortly after our last meeting I was informed by my tutor that my dissertation, which I was convinced was the worst piece of writing I had ever produced, had actually been awarded an A grade. I am thrilled to say that in July I was able to graduate with the rest of my classmates, but I am even more delighted to tell you that I graduated with a First Class degree, and surprising as it may seem, I appear to be the only person in my group to have done so. I know I would not have been able to accomplish all that I did had I not had the support and advice you gave me, and so once again I want to say thank you and let you know how much I appreciate all that you did."*

*"Thank you for all you have done for me during my time at university. Without your help and support I wouldn't be where I am today."*

*"Just wanted to say that my presentation went really well and I came 2nd out of the 6 presentations. I have got my provisional grades back and I managed to get an A- in my dissertation unit also I'm on the 2:1/1st borderline. This would not be possible without your help and I thank you for all of it."*

*"Thank you for seeing me this afternoon and thank you for the advices, it's really helpful. I am much calmer after speaking to you as I wasn't able to talk to anyone about it."*

*"It was great meeting you today; I'm much calmer and relaxed now. The email is good and it explains my situation, you've got my approval. I really appreciate your support and I don't know how to thank you for everything"*

*"I never forget your help and kindness in my life even though it is your job"*

*"You are the only hopeful person in the University to me"*

*"Anyway, thank you for all of your help this past year!"*

## SURVEY FEEDBACK

We had 31 responses to the yearly online survey sent to students regarding the service. (See the Summary Report 08 August 2014)

The feedback highlights that on the whole students benefit from the support and value the professional and welcoming attitude of the team. They indicate that the service has helped them continue with study and also improve their coping strategies and general well-being.

## CONCLUSION

The service continues to provide good quality support to those who access it. More work is needed in Bedford to ensure students and staff know the service is available. Anecdotal evidence suggests that tutors are seeing more students exhibiting mental health difficulties and are requesting advice on how to support these students. This has prompted a request to provide some training to academics on 'Dealing with students with mental health issues' as part of a CPD program. Hopefully this will also increase knowledge of the

service so we can reach more students. As in past years student feedback shows that they believe the support has helped them to stay at university and complete their degree.

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## References

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