

## **Student Mental Health Policy and Guidelines**

### Student Mental Health Policy Statement

This policy is in place to set out the University's commitment to supporting positive mental health and well-being for all students of the University which maximises personal development and academic achievement.

The University strives to provide environments and create communities which:

- Encourage and equip our diverse student body to manage their own well-being and that recognise and support the range of challenges and difficulties students face during their time at University;
- Support students to consider the options available to them and make appropriate choices that have a positive impact on their educational and other outcomes;
- Build confidence and capacity of staff to carry out their roles effectively and direct students to appropriate support as necessary.

The University recognises that good mental health maximises our students' abilities to develop their academic and/or social relationships and ensure that they benefit fully from the opportunities the University provides.

The University is committed to supporting those students facing mental health difficulties, whether temporary or more longstanding, to participate fully in the life of the University community, within the limits of support reasonably available to students.

Whilst the University is committed to providing a supportive environment, it is important to recognise that it is not a mental health facility nor is it a therapeutic community. The policy guidelines recognise that there are limits to the extent of the support which can be provided within the University, and that there are appropriate community-based resources that can be accessed by our students.

The Student Mental Health Policy and associated Guidelines apply to any prospective or current student and relates to decisions and processes relating to the admission of students and provision of services to students including teaching and supervision, assessment and progression, alumni and support services.

The Policy is a University-wide document that sits alongside the Student Disability Policy and Equal and Diversity Policy.

Queen's University will be guided by relevant legislation and regulation: the Special Educational Needs and Disability Order 2005, the QAA Code of Practice: Disabled Students 2010 and Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, Health & Safety at Work Order (1978), Human Rights Act (1998) and Data Protection Act (1998).

## **Implementation Guidelines for the Student Mental Health Policy**

### **1. Purpose of the Policy and Guidelines**

These Guidelines provide a framework for documenting the University's provision for students experiencing mental health difficulties, and will be reviewed on a regular basis based on feedback from students, members of staff, external agencies and other stakeholders.

The University has specific legal responsibilities towards student applicants and students whose mental health difficulty falls within the definition of disability within the law, as well as ethical commitments to equal opportunities. These student applicants and students may need reasonable adjustments to enable their equal participation and access to opportunities at Queen's. Support available to students with disabilities is outlined in the University's Student Disability Policy and Guidelines.

### **2. Underpinning Principles**

- Everyone has a state of mental health. Mental Health describes a sense of wellbeing; the capacity to live in a resourceful and fulfilling manner, having the resilience to deal with the challenges and obstacles which life presents. One role of the mental health policy is to ensure that ways to promote and support good mental health are part of a holistic approach to student development.
- Mental health 'problems' or 'difficulties' may describe temporary reactions to an event, stress or external pressure, and may also be used to describe long-term psychiatric conditions which may have significant effects on an individual's functioning.<sup>1</sup> The policy looks at the needs of students with some form of mental health difficulty which may inhibit their ability to participate fully in higher education without appropriate support. Many of us experience symptoms of mental health difficulties at some point in our lives (e.g. disturbed sleep patterns, lack of motivation, anxiety). As with physical ill health, mental health difficulty can be either temporary or more permanent, and range in severity from mildly disabling to seriously debilitating in either the short or medium to long term.
- Students should be encouraged to take an active part in managing their own well-being, communicating their needs, seeking support from the University and developing skills for coping with challenging personal and professional situations.
- The University's commitment to the promotion of good mental health is shaped by its overriding educational purpose. The University strives to ensure that students with identified mental health difficulty and/or emotional distress receive reasonable support in their goal to undertake and complete their academic studies. This is in the context of available resources and achieving a balance between the needs of individuals and the needs of wider student and staff bodies.
- Queen's aims to procure benefits for the University community as well as Northern Ireland society as a whole through the creation of a non-stigmatising, well-informed community through the promotion and awareness of positive mental health. This approach should underpin all elements of the student experience at Queen's, and the University works to integrate the promotion of positive mental health into institutional strategies, policies and activities, as appropriate.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from AMOSSHE Good Practice Guide, 'Responding to student mental health issues' (2007).

### 3. Confidentiality

All staff must comply with the Data Protection Act 1998 and the University's Data Protection Policy. This includes the handling of sensitive personal data, which includes information on physical or mental health, or if the information has been given in circumstances where the confidant must reasonably have understood that what was said was confidential.

Disclosure of sensitive personal data without consent is permitted only where:

- The person receiving the information considers that the student is a danger to them self or others;
- Anyone under the age of 18 appears to be at risk of abuse;
- The University is called upon in legal circumstances to give information.

A member of staff must make every reasonable effort to gain the student's permission to discuss their concerns with another member of staff, indicating that they are worried about the student and would like to seek advice. This includes contacting the student by means available (e.g. telephone, email, letter if appropriate).

The confidentiality of students attending the Counselling Service or registered with Disability Services is established through professional requirements and law. There is a specific confidentiality framework students are made aware of when they attend these services. In most instances, staff in these areas will not be able to confirm whether a student is using the service if the student has not disclosed this themselves.

The University recognises that under SENDO, if a student discloses their disability to any member of staff at any stage, the University is deemed to be aware of the student's disability. Staff should be proactive and provide opportunities for students to disclose. Disability Services in conjunction with the Data Protection Officer at Queen's is planning to produce guidelines for Schools and Directorates on how to ensure that Disability Services is informed once a student discloses their disability to a member of University staff. The guidelines will also provide advice in the event of a student not wishing to register with the Service.

### 4. Pre-entry, Admission and Induction

#### 4.1 Pre-entry Support

It is recognised that some students with mental health difficulties may find the transition to university life daunting and may have concerns regarding disability provision and living away from home. In order to alleviate these concerns the University can arrange for prospective students to visit the campus before they decide to study at Queen's. Disability Services is happy to meet the individual to discuss their support needs, arrange for them to meet staff from Schools and have a tour of University accommodation.

#### 4.2 Admission

The University's Admissions Policy 2011 explicitly states that the University:

- Encourages applications from suitably qualified applicants, particularly from groups which are currently under-represented in Higher Education.

- Selects on the basis of fair, transparent, reliable and objective criteria, applied equitably and consistently.
- Admits best qualified applicants to courses in line with the University's priorities, the targets agreed in academic plans and within the overall constraints applied by the government and professional bodies.

An individual's state of mental health will not be considered prior to an offer being made. On receipt of an offer from the University, applicants with disabilities will be asked to complete a questionnaire to determine reasonable adjustments, should they be accepted and placed on their chosen course at Queen's.

In certain cases, a risk assessment may be deemed necessary and if so a panel of appropriate experts and School representatives will be established.

In the extremely unlikely event that there are fitness to practise concerns and where reasonable adjustments cannot be made, the University reserves the right to withdraw an offer.

The process for appealing decisions not to implement adjustments requested is set out in Annex 1 of the Student Disability Policy.

#### 4.3 Welcome and Induction

Attending an induction is a key part of successfully settling in to University life, knowing what to expect and where to go for help or support.

All new first year undergraduate students are offered an induction programme prior to the first week of teaching. Attendance at this programme is required; during this time students will complete their enrolment and registration, be given fundamental information about their course and support available to them, and meet key staff and other students on their course.

The Postgraduate Student Centre provides an introduction to key services for Postgraduate Students within its Welcome Week and inducts Postgraduate Research Students in respect of the process and regulations relating to the completion of a research degree at Queen's University.

International Student Support team organises a five-day orientation programme in mid-September, prior to the main Welcome and Induction period. Additionally, a four-day orientation programme for international students is held in late January. These orientation sessions allow students to meet staff from International Student Support, academic staff, Students' Union representatives and fellow students. The programme includes tours of the University's academic and recreational facilities and the city of Belfast. Students will also be given advice on adjusting to university academic study, life in university accommodation, living expenses and local immigration requirements.

University-wide orientation and induction is provided, as well as specific programmes or contacts for mature students, students with disabilities, students with experience of care and students living in Queen's accommodation. Efforts will be made to make students aware of these programmes or contacts prior to or during registration. The University-wide orientation and induction usually takes place the week prior to the start of teaching, and is led by a team of Student Guides who can provide tours, information and host events and activities to help new students meet each other.

## 5. On Course Support

### 5.1 Support for Academic Issues or Concerns

A student's first point of contact and main engagement throughout their time at University is usually their academic School. The School is a student's first port of call for issues or concerns relating to their academic studies. Tutors and other School staff should be aware of professional support services, and access relevant advice and training.

There are two common roles for undergraduate students who may be available to provide support; specific Schools may define other key contacts, such as a School Disability Advisor or Senior Tutor. Students should check their handbooks or ask in the School Office if they are unsure as to who to contact.

**Personal Tutor:** Each undergraduate student is normally assigned a Personal Tutor (this may be called different titles in different academic Schools) whose role it is to be a point of contact and support within your School. We strongly advise you to speak to your Tutor if you have any concerns relating to your time at Queen's, particularly if you think it will affect your progression.

**Advisor of Studies:** Undergraduate students will normally be an Advisor of Studies, an academic who guides students in technical matters relating to academic progress such as module selection, choice of programme and University progress regulations. Advisers of Studies can act in a general advisory capacity and to assist their students, particularly those in their first year, in meeting requirements of a university environment. Where necessary, they advise their students to seek, guidance and assistance from the range of support provided.

### 5.2 Support Services for Students

Students may chose to go directly to a support service for any issue or concern. The University provides a range of Services which have been established to provide support, advice and guidance to students throughout their time at Queen's, some of which may be particularly helpful to students encountering mental ill health or facing academic or personal difficulties. Further information on the range of academic and personal support available is available through the Student Guidance Centre, International and Postgraduate Student Centre and Students' Union.

These include:

- Counselling Service
- Disability Services
- Learning Development Service
- Occupational Health and Safety
- International Student Support
- Postgraduate Student Centre
- Accommodation and Hospitality
- Careers, Employability & Skills
- Students' Union Sabbatical Officers
- Students' Union Advice Centre

It is also recognised that there are valuable sources of support for students outside of the formal University structure. These include the Chaplaincies and University Health Centre, both of which work closely with the University support services.

In some instances, these services are professional and dedicated to student well-being. In other areas, supporting students with mental health difficulties is an important element of the wider service or support being delivered to students. These areas may be a first point of contact for a student in distress, providing signposting to professional support services.

There are instances where the immediate level of concern for a student, or the need for ongoing help or support, extends beyond what the University is able to provide through its support services. The University will endeavour to work with a student to facilitate access to appropriate external support, such as through the NHS or other appropriate organisations. This would include need for personal care, support outside of the academic environment, long-term mental health support and out of hours care.

### 5.3 Accommodation

The policy for the allocation of student accommodation recognises that some students with mental health disabilities may need to live in University accommodation to ensure that their specific needs can be addressed. Applicants are requested to provide details of their individual requirements, which will be discussed with Disability Services to ensure that appropriate arrangements are made.

Applicants to University accommodation and their external support network should be aware that support is offered to all students by the Residential Life team to assist with the transition to University and settling in to communal living. Queen's Accommodation does not provide a therapeutic community or out of hours support. Depending on the nature of the student's situation and availability of rooms, the University may be able to offer short-term accommodation options to a registered student not living in University accommodation at a per night cost.

If a student is experiencing difficulty relating to accommodation in the private sector, the Students' Union Advice Centre can provide support and advice.

### 5.4 Financial Support

The Students' Union Advice Centre offers one-to-one advice and support to students experiencing financial difficulties, as well as information and advice on managing money and debt.

Students experiencing unexpected financial difficulties may be able to apply to the University's Student Support or Hardship funds. Details about this and applications are available at: <http://www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/sqc/finance/StudentSupport/>, at the Income and Student Finance office (Student Guidance Centre) or Students' Union Advice Centre.

### 5.5 Health and Medical Support

Students with a Belfast address, even if they only live there during the week, are strongly encouraged to register with a General Practice (GP) surgery close to the University – although it must be within a 10 mile radius of your address. If you are ill and need a doctor's note relating to your studies, you must see a GP as soon as possible – your School will have a policy indicating the length of time after your absence that a GP note must be submitted. It is also very important to be registered with a local GP surgery if you are suddenly and unexpectedly ill and require GP (non-

emergency) attention. Students from within the United Kingdom can switch back to their 'home' GP during summer break.

## 5.6 Student Care Protocol

The Student Care Protocol sets out a way of working across support areas to:

- (a) Enable early identification of students potentially needing additional support to maximise their academic attainment while at Queen's
- (b) Set out a clear process for responding to concerns raised about students within Schools or service areas, and
- (c) Establish the steps taken when a student is identified as being at risk of harm to self or others.

A key element of the Protocol is the Student Care Team, a group of staff from University support services who meet fortnightly during term time to consider issues students are encountering. With a student's consent, this may include discussing personal or sensitive information about their circumstances, with a view to offering appropriate support in a co-ordinated way.

All Team members are bound by a confidentiality policy, and wherever possible, actions are taken with a student's consent.

Staff can contact members of the Student Care Team for advice and support in handling student concerns.

## 5.7 Students who are reluctant to access help or support

Many people believe that only very disturbed people seek help, so signposting to support services might be interpreted as a comment on the severity of the problem. Highlighting other options for support, particularly the student's GP, may be a more comfortable first step.

Students should be reassured that:

- Problems need not reach crisis proportions to benefit from professional help. In fact, it is much easier to work on problems if they are addressed before they reach crisis level. Normalising the process of seeking help may be especially helpful for students.
- Queen's students can speak with a counsellor or other member of the student support team on a once only basis without making a commitment to ongoing support.
- Any contact and information shared by a student with a professional support person is kept strictly confidential, and will not be disclosed to parents, faculty, or other University departments, except with the student's written permission or where there are serious concerns about risk of harm.

Staff should be clear on the level of support they can provide, and their need to share concerns about a student with someone who can help.

While it is important to care about the emotional well-being of students, we cannot make their decisions for them, and engaging with support is always a personal choice. If the student resists referral and concerns remain, contact a member of the Student Care Team to discuss.

Members of staff can offer a referral to the Student Care Team. The form for doing this is part of the Student Care Protocol. There is a section that allows for a student to refuse referral, indicating that:

“I understand that if the person I have discussed this with believes there to be a serious concern for my own wellbeing or that of others they may feel that they have a duty to disclose personal information to the Head of Student Welfare or designate who may discuss this with the University Health Physician. If this is necessary I will be advised via my student email account.”

### 5.8 Fitness to Study

It is recognised that the University has a responsibility to balance its duty of care for students with its duty towards all other students and staff. The University will make every effort to provide appropriate support or referrals for students experiencing mental health difficulties. However, there may be occasions when it is deemed in the best interest of the student or the University for a student to withdraw from their studies. The University has developed a Fitness to Study policy which can be obtained from <http://www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/media/Media,252961,en.doc>

### 5.9 Fitness to Practice

A disability or medical condition does not preclude applications for courses which lead directly to professions. However students who study these courses are required to comply with fitness to practise policies of the bodies which govern these professions. The University will seek the advice of the Senior Medical Officer and Disability Services to ensure that disabled students have access to appropriate reasonable adjustments. However, where a student’s disability is impacting on their ability to practise, the University will follow the appropriate procedure outlined in the Fitness to Practise policy which can be obtained from <http://www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/media/Media,252957,en.pdf>

### 5.10 Leave of Absence

The University’s regulations for students indicate that students may apply to temporarily withdraw from their programme, subject to consultation with their School. A student may also be directed to temporarily withdraw by their School, Occupational Health or a Fitness to Practice panel.

The cumulative limit on applications for temporary withdrawal is two, after which the person must apply for re-admission.

## 6. Crisis Incidents

It is important to be clear that experiencing a mental health difficulty does not mean that someone is a threat to themselves or others. However, there may be occasions when a student requires immediate support and attention due to threats of harm to themselves or others, or behaviours that cause concern. This may include a student threatening to kill or harm themselves in some way, when a student is extremely agitated and cannot be calmed, or when a student is incoherent or rambling in their speech. A student may also be threatening danger to others, either due to threats or threatening non-verbal behaviours.

Each situation is different and needs to be handled sensitively, with addressing concerns for the wellbeing of all students and staff concerned.

Where there is an immediate concern about harm to a student or others, call University Security, who can contact emergency services as well as respond to the incident. The Security team can engage the University's crisis response procedures as required. Crisis situations off site should be referred to emergency services or GP, as with the general population.

Where concerns are less immediate and there is time to consider the most appropriate intervention, members of the Student Care Team can be called for consultation and assistance. Staff can also contact Carecall Wellbeing with a student, who offer 24 hour telephone counselling support. Students should be encouraged to contact their GP.

Other concerns may be raised from student non-engagement or non-attendance, or from concerns raised by other students or members of a student's family. It is advisable to contact a member of the Student Care Team, particularly through the Student Affairs office, to discuss these concerns and actions to be taken.

## 7. Resources for Staff supporting Students

Protocols for situations around missing students, hospitalisation and student fatality are appended to the Student Care Protocol, and where appropriate refer to the University's Major Incident Protocols. Resources for staff supporting students and links to these documents are available on-line at: *tbc (currently under development)* and through Queen's On-Line under 'University Documents'.

Training sessions relating to supporting students with mental health difficulties and with disabilities are available through the Staff Training and Development Unit programme. If a particular need for training or staff information session / briefing is identified, this can also be accommodated in most situations by contacting the Head of Student Welfare or relevant Disability Officer.

A member of staff who has a concern about a student's mental health or wellbeing is encouraged to contact the Head of Student Welfare or other member of the Student Care Team, as set out in the Student Care Protocol, for information and to discuss the situation.

## 8. Monitoring and Review

The effectiveness of this policy will be kept under review and amended to reflect developments in support for students, legislation, regulation and best practice.

## 9. Complaints

Students who believe they have suffered any form of discrimination, harassment or victimisation are entitled to raise the matter through the Students Complaints Procedure. A copy of this procedure is available at: [www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/AcademicStudentAffairs/Publications/DASAPoliciesandProceduresManual/](http://www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/AcademicStudentAffairs/Publications/DASAPoliciesandProceduresManual/) or in hard copy or alternative formats, such as enlarged print, in Braille, audio technology, on request from Academic Affairs.

Every effort will be made to ensure that any person making a complaint will not be victimised. All complaints of discrimination, harassment or victimisation will be dealt with promptly and confidentially. If on investigation, it is established that discrimination,

victimisation or harassment has occurred, disciplinary action will result and may warrant dismissal/expulsion.