

Wellbeing Policies and Strategies

Developed by University of Crete Team

For many researchers, higher education is a major transition period with increasing social, academic, and financial demands (Briggs et al. 2012; Richardson et al., 2017). During this period, students are confronted with various developmental challenges including separating from their family, setting up their own social networks, adjusting to new rules and requirements of an organization, stepping into a career path, and building romantic relationships (Giovazolias et al., 2010).

Taking into consideration the aforementioned, engaging in higher education can make a positive contribution to people's mental wellbeing in that it:

- provides a structured and purposeful environment
- provides opportunities for academic and personal achievement leading to a more holistic sense of identity and increased self-esteem
- offers the opportunity to learn to manage multiple demands/tasks and build confidence
- can reduce isolation and provide ample opportunities for new friendships and social interactions
- provides opportunities for exercise, creativity and community involvement and contribution.

However, this period may also pose various difficulties and challenges at the psychological level; indeed, prevalence of mental health difficulties amongst university students are especially common. At times, such challenges may go beyond students' resources and capacity to effectively cope, leading to academic struggles and a decrease in the quality and satisfaction of life (Räsänen, Lappalainen, Muotka, Tolvanen, & Lappalainen, 2016). Due to the fact that students face many stressors and transitional events, they are confronted with potential development of these common mental health issues (Cuijpers et al., 2016; Huang, Nigatu, Smail-Crevier, Zhang, & Wang, 2018). A global survey of about 14,000 students found that 35% of the sample reported at least one DSM-IV mental disorder (Auerbach et al., 2016). Most common psychological difficulties in student population include depression, anxiety, stress, substance use, relational problems, suicidality (Sheldon et al., 2021).

Wellbeing Strategies and Policies

Recently, UK Universities called for universities to transform institutions into “mentally healthy universities” that place the mental health and wellbeing of staff and students as foundational for all aspects of the university system (De Parry & Dicks, 2020)

Many HE Institutions have put a lot of effort in developing strategies and policies in order to promote their students' wellbeing.

Below is graphic representation of what constitutes a Student Wellbeing Policy:

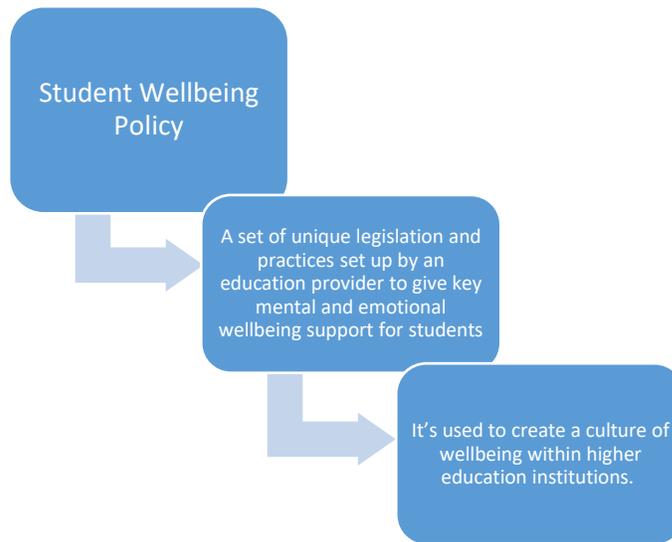


Figure 1. *Student Wellbeing Policy*

So, why is a Student Wellbeing Policy Important?

- A Student Wellbeing Policy helps to cultivate a culture of wellbeing that prioritises the needs of students in Higher Education Institutions. It concerns the creation of an environment where mental health and other related issues (e.g. special needs) are seen as important and are met with the appropriate care and action.
- A culture of wellbeing makes it part of the everyday life for student and staff and it consists of a values-driven culture, the physical work environment and wellness 'programmes' (<https://www.guildhe.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/GuildHE-Wellbeing-in-Higher-Education-WEB.pdf>).
- Such Policies help students get the most out of their academic experience and ensure that they can be provided with the support they need if required.

So what does a Student Wellbeing Policy include?

Usually, a Student Wellbeing Policy includes some of the following aspects (this is an indicative, not exhaustive list):

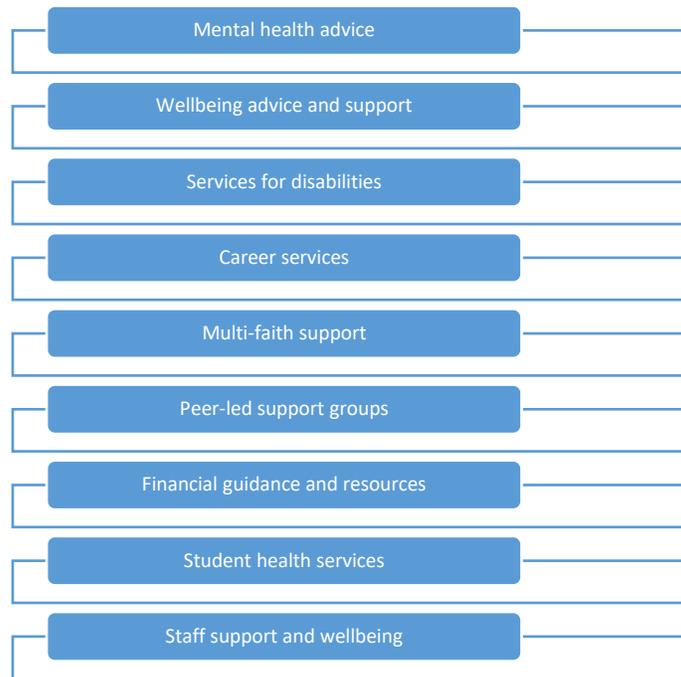


Figure 2. List of aspects of Student Wellbeing Policy

Additionally, according to a relevant research report (GuildHE, 2018) a key part of creating a culture of wellbeing is good signposting to services. It is of high importance that students are aware of the services that are available to them, since it could facilitate them to access appropriate support and de-stigmatizes poor mental health.

Many Universities across Europe have developed specific policies and relevant strategies aiming to foster their students' wellbeing. Some examples are the following:

The University of Nottingham's "Student Health and Wellbeing Strategy" (<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/governance/policy-finder/student-health-and-wellbeing-strategy.aspx>) aims to enhance our students' experience at Nottingham by creating a sustainable, consistent and empowering University culture where integrated, holistic health and wellbeing support helps students to make their own informed choices – developing their confidence, knowledge and resilience so that they can be successful during their studies and continue to thrive post-graduation

The University College London has developed a Student Health and Wellbeing Strategy ([https://www.ucl.ac.uk/students/sites/students/files/ucl student health and wellbeing strategy 2019-2021 final.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/students/sites/students/files/ucl%20student%20health%20and%20wellbeing%20strategy%202019-2021%20final.pdf)), consisting of six main objectives:

1. Establish a whole-university approach to student health and wellbeing
2. Support students in their integration into life at UCL

3. Develop resources to encourage personal awareness of health and wellbeing and facilitate peer support
4. Establish effective links between UCL, the NHS and other services to deliver integrated mental health care and improved risk management
5. Ensure support for disabled students or those affected by health and wellbeing difficulties is personalised and the adjustments are effective
6. Align student and staff wellbeing policies and initiatives to foster an inclusive and supportive community

The University of Jyväskylä has developed a cluster of wellbeing support under the umbrella of the Student Life concept to promote the overall wellbeing of its students inside and outside the classrooms (<https://www.jyu.fi/studentlife/en/wellbeing>) aiming at:

1. enhancing students' wellbeing and promote study, employability, and life skills
2. ensuring that students have easily accessible wellbeing support in any phase of their studies and lives
3. ensuring that students' individual needs are met so that they can pursue their interests and reach their fullest potential
4. helping students find and maintain motivation, vitality, and meaningfulness in times of difficulty and challenge
5. addressing situations in which students experience distress arising from problems adjusting to life on and off-campus.

All students are provided with a basic support (courses, online self-help programs, activities and events), a supplementary one if needed (counselling, coaching and group workshops) and on a third level enhanced support (individual and group enhanced counselling).

The University of Cambridge (<https://www.wellbeing.admin.cam.ac.uk/wellbeing-strategy-and-policy>) has adopted a wellbeing strategy to support the University's mission and core values of freedom of thought and expression, freedom from discrimination and the recognition that the University's staff are its strong asset.

The wellbeing strategy is designed to ensure that:

1. The University provides clear leadership and management in relation to wellbeing
2. There is optimal engagement of all stakeholders and effective partnerships
3. Best use is made of the resources available to optimise the delivery of the strategy

4. Actions lead to long-term, sustainable improvements in the health and wellbeing of the University population.

Also, it aims to represent a commitment to an integrated approach to staff wellbeing that creates:

- A sense of belonging
- An environment and culture based on shared values and trust
- An environment where staff wellbeing is integrated into day-to-day practices
- An environment that recognises skills and encourages personal development

For serving and supporting the above the University has utilized various resources engaging Schools, Departments, staff, staff representatives and other University members delegating different responsibilities such as implementing safe systems of work to safeguard employees' health and wellbeing, reporting stress and ill health to management as early as possible, implementing and monitoring workload in relation to health and work etc.

The University of Crete Student Counselling Centre (SCC) (<https://misuoc02.admin.uoc.gr/skfuoc/index.php/el/>) has developed a set of practices in order to ensure its students' wellbeing, including: Individual and group psychological support; early intervention; crisis management; prevention and raising awareness (e.g. combating stigma); volunteering; support of students with special needs; liaison with community psychiatric and health services; seminars/workshops related to COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. resilience building, zoom-fatigue, social isolation, etc).

Recommendations

1. Institutionalize processes for development and review of mental health policies, targets and indicators related to student mental wellbeing, including data collection and analysis so that policies and actions are based on accurate and appropriate information about students' needs, interests, circumstances and health.
2. Develop and support appropriate working groups, committees and service providers and form strategic partnerships with mental health professionals, services and advocates.
3. Allocate appropriate funding for student mental health promotion, and for support and recognition of academic work in enhancing student mental wellbeing
4. Consideration should be given to making training on mental health awareness and the protocols for reporting concerns available to all relevant staff.

5. Develop an institution-wide understanding of mental health and wellbeing through professional development in mental health 'essentials'. Recognise staff 'mental health literacy' as an important element in supporting student mental health and wellbeing
6. Offer a personalized approach to student health and wellbeing support by making available a range of interventions to meet individual needs
7. Consult and collaborate with students' unions and associations, and particularly with students with mental health difficulties when formulating and implementing student mental health-related policies and procedures and in identifying areas for improvement.
8. Enhance existing and develop new peer support programmes across HEI's to facilitate health and wellbeing-related conversations and activities
9. Institutions should consider the applicability and implications of their student mental health-related policies and procedures in respect of arrangements with collaborative and other partners such as further education colleges, placement providers, and employers.

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