

Supporting university students with a mental health condition



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Introduction

There is an increasing prevalence of university students who need mental health support and university staff benefit from training on this topic. This course explores this phenomenon, drawing on an Open University study on how university staff (tutors) can support students with a mental health condition, and considers both what staff and institutions can do to improve student mental health and wellbeing.



The course is divided into the following four sections:

1. Introduction and background
2. Insights from tutors
3. Insights from students on what they need
4. A whole institution approach to supporting students with a mental health condition

Please note: If you are an Open University student looking for help with your mental health, you can find further information on the [Mental health, wellbeing and keeping safe webpage](#).

Learning outcomes

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- have an insight into the impact having a mental health condition can have on a student's ability to study
- understand what skills are needed by a tutor to support a student with a mental health condition
- understand what support some students who have a mental health condition feel they would benefit from to keep them studying.

1 Introduction and background

There has been an increased focus on student mental health in higher education in recent years, with student mental health suggested to be 'in crisis'. A recent UK parliamentary report stated that student mental health difficulties have increased six-fold since 2010 (Lewis and Bolton, 2023). Recent studies by Lewis and Stiebahl (2025) and Mason *et al.* (2025) suggest that the growing prevalence is a long-term problem and global issue, pre-dating but amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic and cost-of-living crisis. Not only does poor mental health impact students' overall wellbeing, but there also is growing evidence that mental health difficulties have significant negative impacts on students' attainment, progression and study outcomes (Hughes and Spanner, 2019; Office for Students, 2019; Winzer, 2018; Thorley, 2017).



University students are more likely to experience or develop mental health difficulties than similar aged adults, suggesting studying at university is a negative influencing factor (Brown, 2016; Winzer *et al.*, 2018). According to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2025), factors that contribute to students having poor mental health include moving away from home, academic and financial pressures, and the absence of familiar social and emotional support networks. This link, however, is complex as most undergraduate students are at the age when they experience the developmental process of emerging adulthood, when most mental health difficulties develop. The combination of this major developmental adjustment with the challenges of adapting to and coping with university life and study, combine in a way that can trigger or exacerbate mental health difficulties.

Activity 1

What impacts can poor university mental health have on students?

- ☐ (a) reduced wellbeing
 - ☐ (b) lower rates of study continuation
 - ☐ (c) lower rates of attainment
 - ☐ (d) lower rates of progression into skilled workforce or further study
 - ☐ (e) less preparedness for working life
 - ☐ (f) lower future occupational performance
-

Answer

Correct answer: All of the above

Various studies have demonstrated numerous negative impacts for students who report poor mental health (Hughes and Spanner, 2019; Office for Students, 2019; Winzer, 2018; Thorley, 2017).

Since the consequences of mental health difficulties can be far reaching, it's important that students are able to understand what support is available and to access the right support early on to enable them to succeed with their studies. The rest of this course focuses on support for students and how universities can support them. The next section focuses on teaching staff, drawing on evidence from an Open University study on staff experiences of providing support to students with a mental health difficulty (Simons and Macaulay, 2025).

2 Insights from tutors

Academic staff can play a vital role in students' university experience and support networks. To understand this further, a study was conducted with Open University staff who support students with a mental health condition (MHC) (Simons and Macaulay, 2025). This section of the course is based on the part of the study that focused on staff who had direct course-related contact with students. Interviews were conducted with 39 associate lecturers across first year health, education and language curriculum areas. For the purposes of this section, the staff are referred to as 'tutors' but it also recognised that the title of the staff may vary across educational settings.



Two overall themes emerged from the interviews:

1. the needs of students
2. the needs of tutors.

2.1 The needs of students

Tutors reported that students needed to be treated as individuals and needed tutors to be flexible, approachable and available.

‘We need to be approachable and I think we need to be available and have understanding and compassion.’

Tutors explained what students needed from them in relation to communication, which is the focus of the next activity.

Activity 2

List what you think students told us they need their tutors to be. To start you off here are three examples: encouraging, personable, patient.

Can you suggest five more?

Provide your answer...

.....

Discussion

Other responses from students said that they wanted their tutors to be accommodating, understanding, reassuring, supportive, approachable, flexible, practically helpful, intuitive, receptive, non-judgemental, sensitive, empathetic, realistic, to listen and to believe/value what is being said.

2.2 The needs of tutors

For tutors to be able to provide effective support to students with a MHC, tutors explained they needed to be skilful, to maintain boundaries and to have training in mental health support.



One tutor summed up what tutors need to be:

‘I think you need to be, yeah, quite skilful in terms of how you develop that rapport and getting the balance right between using your expertise but using it in quite a sensitive way – relationship building.’

Tutors stated that the following skills were needed to support students with a MHC: counselling skills, coaching skills, communication skills, listening skills and interpersonal skills.

Tutors emphasised the need to make clear that the role of the tutor is to support students in their learning. Some tutors acknowledged that they had not established clear enough boundaries but pointed out that boundaries can often get blurred. Others said that they had needed to contact the **Safeguarding Team** following distressing messages from a student who was experiencing a crisis. When asked where they went for emotional support tutors responded that they most frequently go to their line manager, followed by colleagues, family and friends, as well as external professional colleagues, Student Support Team, Tutor Forum, Togetherall (online Mental Health support service) and in-house training sessions.

Most tutors said that they would welcome more training to be better prepared to support students with a MHC. Training suggestions were:

‘... anxiety, because that is something that I see students commonly reporting.’

And:

‘I think what I would find useful is actually some training on how I write things down (email or feedback) and how that is perceived with students with poor mental health.’

Having heard from tutors their perspectives on providing support for student with a mental health condition, we then spoke to students who had a mental health condition and were studying at The Open University. Their views are the focus of the next section.

3 Insights from students on what they need

The perspectives of students who had declared a mental health difficulty were sought in relation to tutor support (Simons and Macaulay, 2025). Two focus group discussions were undertaken with a total of nine students who had declared a mental health condition, with questions focusing on communication and support. Three themes emerged from the focus groups:

1. communication
2. being treated as an individual
3. availability of support.

3.1 Communication

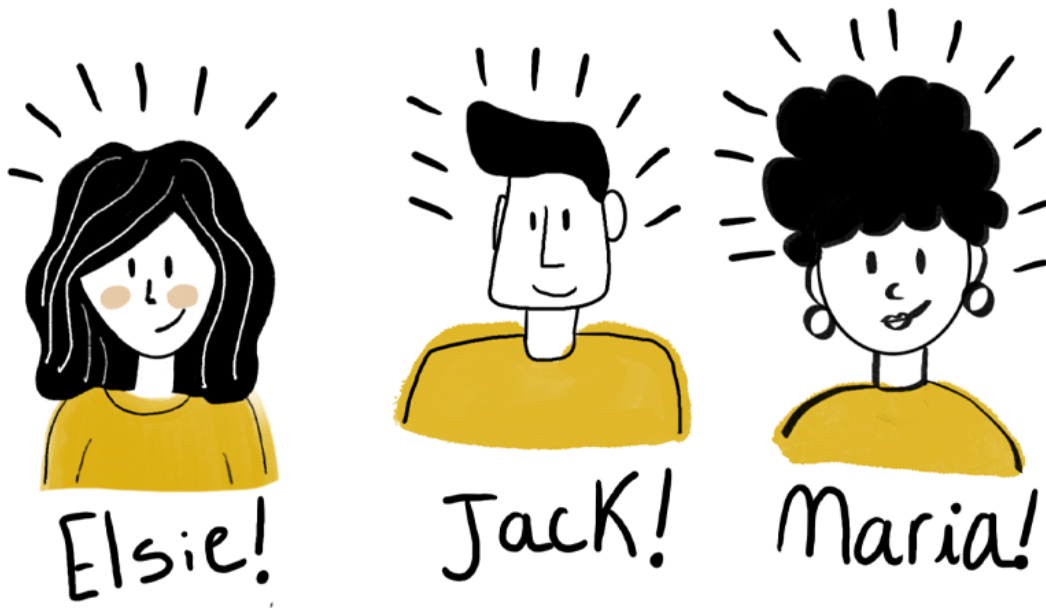
The preferred communication method by the majority of students was email. They felt that this gave them the time and space to consider what to say. However, some students found email to be easy to misconstrue and stressful to deal with. The majority of students found phone calls ineffective and too daunting a prospect. Face-to-face communication was not considered by students as their tuition is online. Also receiving responses to emails in a timely manner and a clear communication of their tutor's working hours was appreciated and reduced over-thinking and the build-up of anxiety.



Keeping communication channels open, especially given that there will be periods when students, on account of their mental health conditions, will be unable to engage, was

considered to be very important. Students reported that closing the communication channels could lead to them becoming paranoid.

3.2 Being treated as an individual



Students reported that having an individualised as opposed to a generic response from staff was considered to be good practice. They felt it facilitated the building of the tutor/student relationship.

Students expected staff to have an understanding of their MHC and then to explore with them how it impacted them personally and in relation to their ability to study.

Activity 3

Students explained to us what they wanted from their tutor in relation to being treated as an individual. Can you guess what students said?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Below are five examples:

1. I want my tutor to know who I am and understand what triggers me.
2. I want a tutor to know what brings me down.
3. I want my tutor to listen.
4. I want my tutor to see me as more of a person than just as a student.

5. I want my tutor to notice a lack of engagement when I'm going through a mental health crisis and reach out proactively to offer support.

3.3 Availability of support

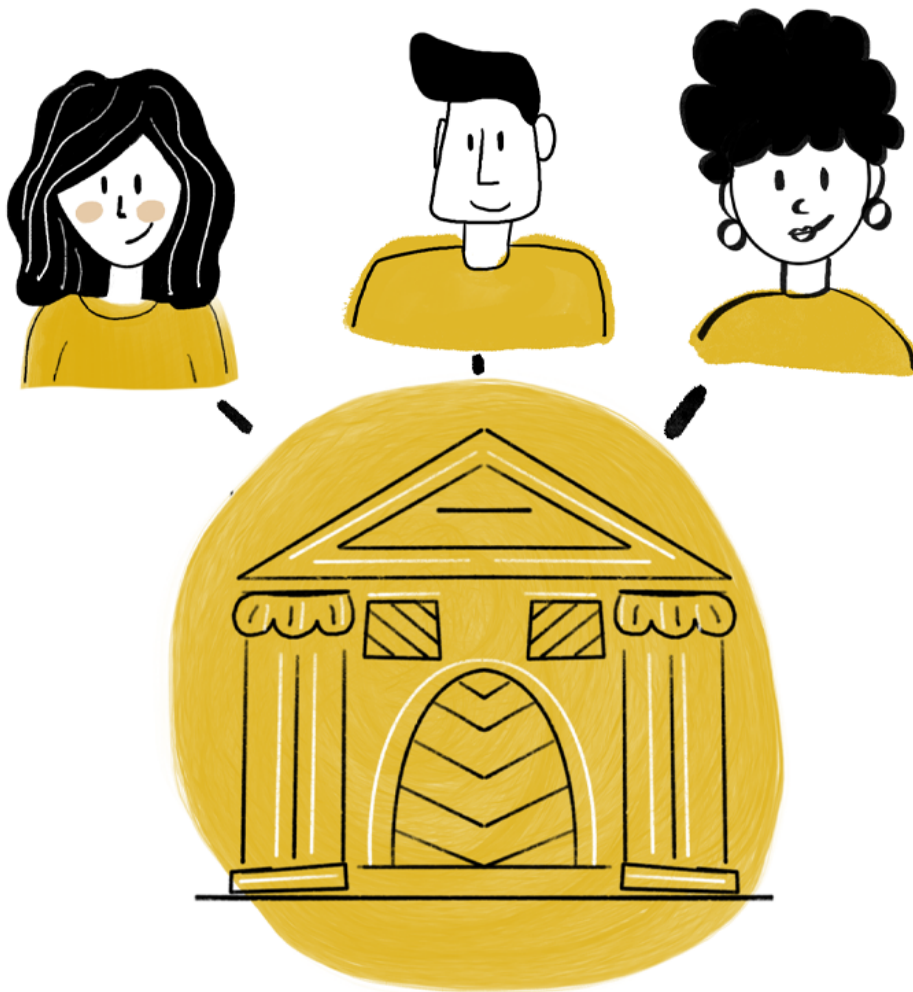
Students reported that regular check-ins, especially around assessment times, were welcomed and would demonstrate that the tutor was 'there and present'. Tutors who complained to students of having other work/commitments which impacted on their availability contributed to students' anxiety and often resulted in students struggling alone rather than seeking support.



So far in this course it is evident that tutors and students are aligned in their perspectives about what is supportive: being treated as an individual and providing flexible, responsive support. The next section will consider how appropriate support can be provided to students with a mental health condition, taking a whole institution perspective.

4 A whole institution approach to supporting students with a mental health condition

This section brings the issues from the previous sections together to consider suggestions for a way forward to enable students with a mental health condition to continue studying successfully. Previous research identified academic teachers and teaching practices as well as student services and support as key to student success (Baik *et al.*, 2019) .



Although the data outlined in the first section demonstrates a high prevalence of students with a mental health condition, Pereira *et al.* (2019) found that up to 50 per cent of students who identified as having mental health challenges did not declare them to their higher education institutions (HEIs). This was also a prevalent view among tutors interviewed in Simons and Macaulay's (2025) study. Additionally, the mental health charity MIND (2022) found that 57 per cent of students surveyed reported poor mental health, while only 27 per cent had a diagnosed mental health condition. This suggests that strategies that are designed to support students with a mental health condition, such as being treated as an individual and providing individual support when needed, should be provided for all students, so that those students who have not declared or shared a mental health condition receive the appropriate support to enable them to continue to study. The

most likely source of support for such students are academic staff. This places an onus on academic staff, among others, to have the necessary skills to provide such support.

Activity 4

Spear *et al.* (2021) surveyed academics across 135 UK universities. Attempt to answer the following questions based on their findings.

Question 1

What percentage of those surveyed reported encountering mental health among their students?

- ☐ 26%
- ☐ 46%
- ☐ 66%
- ☐ 96%

Question 2

What percentage of academics surveyed reported that their institution had adequately prepared them for working with and supporting such students?

- ☐ 81%
- ☐ 51%
- ☐ 31%
- ☐ 21%

Without minimising the contribution of staff support for students, Lister *et al.* (2021) argue that individualistic approaches alone are insufficient. Instead, they suggest universities adopt a holistic approach to mental health, providing the support that students with a mental health condition will benefit from to all students. In this way, there is widespread benefit, and the students who won't declare their condition receive the support they need to continue studying.

Activity 5

Additionally, UCAS (2021) suggests a series of next steps to be taken by the sector to achieve the aim of fostering an environment of positive disclosure, where students can see the benefit of sharing their condition, so that everyone who can benefit from support is able to do so.

As you come to the end of this course, what next steps do you think should be put in place to help reframe students disclosing their mental health condition?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

You may have come up with the following:

- A cross-sector campaign to promote the benefits of declaring one's mental health condition.
- Targeted action in areas where disclosure is low.
- Continued implementation of the [Stepchange framework](#) and [University Mental Health Charter](#).
- Student mental health to be central in admissions reform.

The Office for Students (UK) requires universities to make students with a mental health condition a top priority, suggesting they make changes throughout the whole curriculum starting with induction, as well as support services (Office for Students, 2020).

Conclusion

Considering how to improve students' mental health can bolster student wellbeing and success. This course drew on the findings from a study of tutors and students to consider how to provide support. The approaches suggested are practices that all students would find beneficial, not just those with mental health conditions. Therefore, adopting an institution-wide approach to providing support and promoting student mental wellbeing is useful.

The Open University has developed [Student and Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#) (The Open University, 2020) in line with the

[Universities UK's Stepchange framework for mental health in higher education](#) (UUK 2023) and is working to support tutors with regular in-house training.

You can also find further resources in OpenLearn's [Wellbeing and mental health collection](#).

If you are an educator you might also find the free OpenLearn course [Teaching and learning tricky topics](#) useful.

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Glossary

Safeguarding Team

Safeguarding is the actions taken to promote the welfare of children and vulnerable adults and protect them from harm.