

Mental Health Strategy for Scotland: 2011 – 2015

AUSA Response

January 2012



About AUSA

Aberdeen University Students' Association (AUSA) is a student led charity that represents the views of 16,000 students who study at the University of Aberdeen. AUSA is also affiliated to the National Union of Students (UK and Scotland). AUSA is independent from the University of Aberdeen but often works closely with the University to improve the experience of students at the University of Aberdeen.

Summary of AUSA response

This consultation response comments on the wide range of proposals put forward in the "Mental Health Strategy for Scotland: 2011 – 2015". However AUSA is concerned that there is limited consideration of student mental health in the strategy for Scotland. Our priorities for the future mental health strategy for Scotland are that it considers:

- the mental health needs of students studying in Scotland
- the need to increase the breadth and methods of supporting the mental health and wellbeing of students
- ensuring that student support services that meet the mental health needs of students are enhanced and protected
- to ensure that local organisations are working together to improve mental health for specific communities

Why does student mental health matter?

With around 16,000 students studying through a variety of methods at the University of Aberdeen there are such a broad range of stressors that students suffer from. Research has shown that students of today are at greater risk of experiencing anxiety and depression than those that came before them. There are a number of reasons that AUSA has identified as to why this change may have occurred. For most students University can be a period of

change, moving away from home, living independently, managing finances and meeting new people. Students have identified many factors that negatively impact upon their mental health such as exams and assessments, career prospects, managing time and deadlines, bullying and discrimination or financial considerations.

The effect of poor student mental health can have a negative effect not only for the individual but also for the institution such as low student retention rates, increased appeals to the University and a high demand for support services at the University. Pulling together all of this information it is clear that student mental health should be a priority in considering the Scotland's mental health strategy for the future.

Tackling Stigma

It is vital to continue to tackle the stigma associated with mental health. Students have cited stigma as a key reason for not talking about mental health with their peers, not coming forward to support services for help and in being embarrassed about having poor mental health.

The Mental Health Strategy for Scotland must also consider the multiple layers of stigma that some students face, particularly taking into account how stigma can affect different groups of students because of their gender, race, disability or sexuality. Being bullied in its self can be something that students are embarrassed to come forward and talk to others about as there is additional stigma attached to being bullied. In addition, AUSA has found that international students may face additional barriers in accessing services as a result of stigma and with around 20% of students at the University of Aberdeen being international students, this of growing concern to AUSA.

Recommendations: AUSA believes that there needs to be work to tackle stigma by the continuation of projects such as See Me and NUS Scotland Think Positive and the creation of projects that consider the multiple layers of stigma that affect various equality strands. Campaigns to tackle stigma should be lead by communities and as such it is necessary to make sure that Universities and Students' Associations are included in tackling the stigma that students face. Additionally there needs to be more resources for students who are being bullied whilst at University or for those in their early twenties as little currently exists.

Supporting Transition

Moving to University is a period of significant change for many students. AUSA believes that there needs to be a further development of CAMHS to consider the student population and in particular the period of change when starting University. Many students find it difficult to cope with the new environment of studying and this has been shown by the increased drop-out rate within the first term at University.

For those students who already are receiving treatment for a mental health problems they can experience many barriers in moving their care. For example there may be discrepancies between the care that was offered in other Health Boards in Scotland. Too many students are suffering as a result of moving to University and as such moving health boards.

Equally due to the transient nature of the student population, for those receiving support for their mental health problem whilst at University, the summer stretch can cause students to have to choose between continuation of support for their mental health or going home to live with their family. There must be a concerted effort to ensure that treatment starts at a time that allows it to flow uninterrupted by examination periods or holidays when the student may not be able to attend.

Recommendation: Scotland needs a better system for Health Boards and organisations to work together to support students, no matter where they are, to ensure continuation of care and to promote recovery.

A co-ordinated approach to improving student mental health

The consultation emphasises the role that a medical model for mental health can follow but in order to more fully support the mental health needs of students in Scotland it is necessary to consider a more co-ordinated approach. This means considering the role that student support services play in helping students with mental health problems.

Whilst students who come forward for support with their mental health may choose to contact their GP problems such as waiting to see a GP and having to be registered pose barriers to those students in accessing help. For certain mental health disorders it is necessary for the student to contact their GP before they can be referred to other services.

this can mean a long wait for students who need help. If a student is then referred onto a service with a waiting list, this should be coordinated to ensure the individuals will be able to attend given term dates.

Similarly within the University of Aberdeen students often face barriers in accessing support services. Waiting lists have to be reduced for students to feel like they can come forward for support without taking the place of another student who might need the help more. The continuation of funding and prioritisation of such services is crucial to ensure that student mental health is being supported.

Ensuring that stakeholders in student mental health are interacting with each other through regular meetings is paramount to delivering a co-ordinated approach. Involving local educational institutions, Students' Associations, NHS and voluntary organisations in discussing and moving forward with student mental health would see a more co-ordinated approach to addressing student mental health problems and ultimately provide a better service for students seeking help.

Recommendations: Student mental health steering groups should be formulated to ensure that resources to support students are being used efficiently. It needs to be easier for people to self refer for further treatment. AUSA believes that funding for support services within Universities needs to be increased and for the services to be enhanced.

A more dynamic system of support for student mental health

Providing staff in key roles in Universities and Students' Associations with training about mental health and how to recognise the signs of mental health disorders will increase the amount of people that students come into contact with will be able to help them. These roles might include academic and non-academic staff who regularly interact with students.

Further support of peer-to-peer mental health support programmes should continue and more consideration should be given to the role that student telephone information and listening services play.

Moving further away from the medical model of mental health, initiatives such as the Healthy Body, Healthy Mind scheme run by Scottish Student Sport and NUS Scotland should

continue to make links between support services and sporting activities. New considerations into other aspects of social activity to improve mental health should be considered and developed such as volunteering links. In addition an environment that promotes positive mental health should be upheld including the up keep of green spaces.

Recommendations:

Training programmes such as Scottish Mental Health First Aid and ASIST should continue to be funded and should be rolled out on a larger scale in the University setting. New ways to support mental health that move away from the medical model and more towards community support should be developed.

Supporting Student Carers

Students often are separated from their family when at University and therefore they may need support in contacting their family and in coping with periods where they will be around their family for a long time. Students often do not want to worry their parents and will not disclose and difficulties that they may be having and therefore may avoid contacting their family. For students living with friends it is important for there to be support available for friends or flatmates, who may often act as carers in the absence of parental support. These friends or flatmates may not know the person particularly well and may need help to identify the best way to support their friend, and in how to consider their own mental health in doing this. Perhaps putting friends/flatmates in touch with other people who have supported friends/family with mental health difficulties may provide a support groups for the supporters.

Recommendation(s): The creation of groups for carers of people with mental health disorders would help to develop a safe community for those who are caring.

Keeping up to date with student mental health

In order to shape future services that should be available the NHS should keep statistics on whether the patient is a student and this can help to shape services at Colleges and Universities that may help to prevent further treatment through NHS Services.

Furthermore there are gaps in our understanding of student mental health and the areas of the prevalence of mental disorders among students, the experience of mental ill health and its associated stigma by students, the outcomes of those students who experience mental ill health whilst at University, economically, academically and socially.

Recommendation(s): To continue to fund research into student mental health.