

White Paper: Improving the support offered to those suffering from a mental health disorder

This Union Notes:

Mental illness is a serious medical issue which should not be marginalised as secondary to physical illness and should not be stigmatised due to lack of knowledge.

Mental health disorders can take many forms and affect a vast amount of individuals among society

- 1 in 4 people will experience some kind of mental health problem in the course of a year
- Mixed anxiety and depression is the most common mental disorder in Britain¹

Students in particular are very vulnerable to developing issues surrounding their mental health due to the pressures facing them at university. Pressures such as exams, coursework, finance and the future can place stress on students and exacerbate existing mental health issues or even contribute to the onset for development of a mental health disorder.

To support the argument for institutional concern with student mental health it may be useful to cite some relevant statistics relating to the incidence of serious mental ill-health in the student body. National studies have demonstrated that students are a vulnerable group in terms of mental health difficulties, for example:

- 63% of universities report an increase in psychological distress among students. (Association of University and College Counselling, 1996/97)
- Schizophrenia is the most common form of severe mental illness, with the first episode typically occurring between the ages of 18 - 30 years and usually induced by stress (IRISS Project, 1994)
- Manic depression commonly begins between the ages of 16 - 25 years, with 1 in every 100 people being diagnosed as suffering from this illness (Manic Depression Fellowship, 1990)
- The largest group of males who attempt suicide are aged between 20 and 24. Suicide, second to accidents, is the largest cause of death in 15 - 24 year old men. 56% of young men who attempt suicide have employment or study problems (The Samaritans, 1990)
- 1 in every 500 women between the ages of 15 and 25 will require extensive treatment for anorexia. Incidence of anorexia has been linked with high academic achievement (Eating Disorders Association, 1997)²

Nevertheless, despite the prevalence of mental health issues among students, the Union website notes that in a recent survey 80% of students say they would not ask for help because of the stigma attached to mental health³, implying that there is a lack of awareness among students around the topic of mental health.

¹ Statistics taken from <http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help-information/mental-health-statistics/>

² Taken from <http://www.studentmentalhealth.org.uk/chap1.htm#c1p14>

³ <http://leicesterunion.com/welfare/welfare>

The waiting list for regular and sustained sessions at the student counselling service is twelve months.

This Union Believes:

The welfare services offered in support of mental health are unsatisfactory.

Information available to both those suffering from a mental health disorder and equally to those around someone with a mental health disorder is not adequately visible and provided.

That current students have had unsatisfactory experiences after seeking help in response to making the enormous step in acknowledging that they are suffering from a mental health disorder.

Early intervention has been shown to reduce the severity of symptoms and drive down relapse rates so it is vital to raise awareness about mental health so it is no longer stigmatised or marginalised and those suffering from it feel they can seek help.

It is also important to raise awareness of mental health so those around those suffering from a mental health disorder know how to respond and offer support while at the same time maintaining their own mental wellbeing.

Mental health should not be marginalised as secondary to physical health.

This Union Resolves:

To mandate the Welfare and International Officer to further investigate the provision of support offered by Freeman's Common Health Centre for those suffering from a mental health disorder.

To mandate the Campaigns and Involvement Officer to work alongside myself to help raise awareness of the issues surrounding mental health as well as improving the visibility of support offered for those suffering from a mental health disorder.

To end the stigmatisation of mental health within the union.
