

# *IncludeAll* – Enhancing Practice

## Students with mental-health problems

### What are the key issues?

Over the past 10 years we have seen an exponential growth in the number of students who declare some form of mental health issue during their time with us. These issues can be short-term and relatively easy to deal with or be enduring and often more challenging.

When a student does declare a mental health issue they are encouraged to take up the support offered by the Student Enabling Centre, often through the effective use of Specialist Student Advisors, Counsellors and Specialist Mentors. Where appropriate, students are encouraged to apply for Disabled Students' Allowances to fund their support.

The key focus of this support is to encourage the student to continue to engage with their learning whilst their circumstances allow them to do that and to help to make alternative arrangements when continuation of study is not possible for a period of time.

Of course, students often receive support both from Academics and from their peers and this can be invaluable in supporting recovery. Ideally, there should be a dialogue between the Faculty and the Student Enabling Centre in how to most effectively support the student.

Sometimes, although very rarely, medical intervention is required when a student is in crisis and there are effective mechanisms in place to support this. We have good relationships with the Early Intervention and Crisis Teams in the Local Authorities and know we can depend on the support of the Paramedic and Police services.

#### What our students say:

*'I cannot thank you enough for all the help and support you have given me the last few months. I was so close to giving up but your support has helped me to see the light at the end of the tunnel.'*

(Student Enabling Centre feedback)

#### What our students say:

*'Just wanted to thank you- I really wasn't expecting the level of support or help that you offered and it was very reassuring.'*

(Student Enabling Centre feedback)

## What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Clearly, mental health issues affect individuals in different ways and developing an understanding of the individual's needs is a key first step in supporting their learning and teaching. Focussing on needs rather than their condition is likely to produce more effective results.

To support this, we regularly run sessions on developing active listening skills that are well attended by Academics. Developing these skills encourages empathy with students rather than sympathy which has more negative connotations.

### **What our students say:**

*'I have completed all my exams now and speaking to you helped a lot because I felt a lot better about myself and I went into those exams with more confidence than before.'*  
(Student Enabling Centre feedback)

From a learning and teaching perspective, it is important to try and keep the student actively engaged in their studies and this should be supported with positive feedback about the work they are undertaking. Using negative feedback may reinforce some of the fears and anxieties that students often experience.

Many students with mental health issues experience difficulty with concentration. This is sometimes due to their own experiences but can sometimes be exacerbated by the side effects of medication or disturbed sleep patterns. The key here is also active engagement, encouraging the student to participate rather than allowing them to withdraw from activity.

Occasionally, a student may display behaviours that are difficult to manage in the learning environment. This can impact negatively on the student's peers and also cause extreme frustration for the teacher. If the behaviour is unchallenged it is likely to persist and we may have to consider the Duty of Care to others, if it is challenged insensitively it may generate further issues for the student.

On these rare occasions it is important to make a judgement of impact and involve the professional support staff in the Student Enabling Centre before things get out of hand. Consideration will then be given to the students' fitness to study at that point in time.

Sometimes it is appropriate for students to withdraw from their studies for a period of time. This shouldn't be viewed negatively and consideration should be given on how to

### **What our students say:**

*'Thank you for taking the time out to see me yesterday, also thank you for listening- it meant a great deal. Also thank you for passing the information onto me. It has given me a clear idea about what steps I need to take.'*  
(Student Enabling Centre feedback)

support the student through this period. It is often sufficient to drop the student a supportive e-mail to check their progress and offer reassurance. This can help the student when they come to re-engage with their studies.

### What works really well?

- A collaborative approach to supporting the student is often the best way of managing a situation where a student has mental health issues. Partnership approaches between the Faculty and the Student Enabling Centre produce good results and demonstrate the commitment we have to our students.
- Flexibility in assessment and an overall plan of action for the student often helps. The Student Enabling Centre and Academic colleagues in Psychology are on hand to offer support in dealing with assessment anxiety without compromising learning outcomes.
- Encouraging all students to be supportive and empathic, especially where group activities and responsibilities are required.
- Developing active listening skills and undertaking any training in mental wellbeing that is offered. This will add to your coping skills.

#### What our students say:

*'I just wanted to thank you for the time you've given me. I haven't felt like I'm taking a step in the right direction for a long time, so thank you.'*

(Student Enabling Centre feedback)

#### What our students say:

*'I seem to be recovering slowly from my illness - feeling that I have achieved something has helped.'*

(Student Enabling Centre feedback)

### Further hints, tips and background reading

- This provides a good overview of the difficulties students with mental health conditions can experience in relation to their time at university:  
[www.rethink.org/living-with-mental-illness/education/difficulties-while-studying](http://www.rethink.org/living-with-mental-illness/education/difficulties-while-studying)
- Understanding Student's Experiences: [www.umhan.com/experiences.html](http://www.umhan.com/experiences.html)
- Student Mental Health:  
[www.nhs.uk/Livewell/studenthealth/Pages/Mentalhealth.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/studenthealth/Pages/Mentalhealth.aspx)
- Mental Health Info and Self-Help

- Understanding Mental Health Problems: [www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/mental-health-problems-general/what-are-mental-health-problems/#.VUH0UCG6e70](http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/mental-health-problems-general/what-are-mental-health-problems/#.VUH0UCG6e70)
- A list of resources to help someone else who is struggling: [www.mind.org.uk/information-support/helping-someone-else/](http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/helping-someone-else/)
- Our Counselling web-pages also have a big list of sources of support that staff can also recommend: [www.staffs.ac.uk/support\\_depts/counselling/support/index.jsp](http://www.staffs.ac.uk/support_depts/counselling/support/index.jsp)

### Checklist for reflection: Mental health



In respect of mental health:

Do you know how many students in your session have mental health issues?	✓
Have you received, checked and actioned their Learning Support Agreements?	
Have you done any work within your group to encourage an awareness of diversity and to produce a supportive and empathic culture?	
Have you liaised with the Student Enabling Centre's Specialist Student Advisors for advice on how to support individual students?	
Have you considered alternative methods of assessment that would be more suited to the needs of individuals with mental health issues?	
Have you considered how to support individuals who may be absent from study because of their issues	
Do you know where to go for extra help, background information and support?	

## Reflection into action



Having reflected on the above, my key priorities for making my teaching more inclusive are:

Changes I would like to introduce	By when	Indicators that it has made my practice more inclusive

This document is part of an inclusive practice 'toolkit' - *IncludeAll*. The whole Toolkit, as one complete document or as separate documents, can be found on the University website at [www.staffs.ac.uk/inclusivepractice](http://www.staffs.ac.uk/inclusivepractice).

It is split into four sections: Core Concepts; Inclusive by Design; Enhancing Practice; Checklists for Self-reflection.

The *IncludeAll* Toolkit has been developed by: **Dr Marjorie Spiller** (Academic Development Unit); **Alison Hunt** (Equality and Diversity Manager); **Dave Allman** (Head of the Student Enabling Centre); **MINDSET Project Team** (Faculty of Arts and Creative Technologies).

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