

# Student Mental Health Agreement

2023–25

The Open University in Scotland

The Open University Students Association



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In this document is a comprehensive list of all the resources we offer to support student mental health and wellbeing. These include:

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## Introduction

The Open University (OU) is a world leader in open and distance learning. Our institutional mission is to be open to people, places, methods and ideas.

Learn and Live is the Open University's Strategy for 2022 – 2027 and is underpinned by our mission, vision and values:

### **OUR ENDURING MISSION**

Open to people, places, methods and ideas

### **OUR VISION**

Life-changing learning that enriches society

### **THE VALUES WE LIVE**

Inclusive, innovative, responsive Through the power of learning we aim to transform lives and communities, opening a world of possibilities for everyone. This strategy sets out what we will do over the next five years to progress our mission.

Social justice and equality of opportunity are at the heart of everything we do: widening access to higher education is the ambition on which the University was founded.

We are committed to extending opportunities for educational success to all. We have always operated an open entry policy: our students can study with us at undergraduate level with no requirement for previous qualifications.

We are proud to be the only university that operates across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and we derive significant benefits from being part of the UK's largest higher education institution.

Our students come from a diverse range of backgrounds, and may have many responsibilities and challenges, such as caring, parenting, full or part-time work, low income or disability.

## Working in partnership

The Open University is committed to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of our students and staff.

Our strategic vision is:

**“To promote an inclusive and supportive culture, underpinned by effective and timely support systems and training about mental health and wellbeing that allows our students and staff to maximise their potential and achieve success.”**

[Student and Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#): promoting an institutional approach.

The Student Mental Health Agreement (SMHA) sets out the OU in Scotland and OU Students Association’s commitment to working in partnership to promote the mental wellbeing of all students.

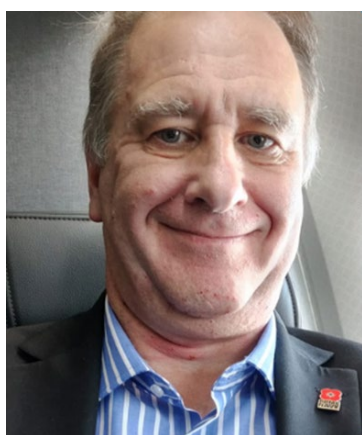
The SMHA has been developed with support from the [NUS Scotland Think Positive Project](#).



The mental health and wellbeing of our students and staff remains of strategic importance to all of us at the Open University in Scotland. This Agreement is the result of our continued partnership with the OU Students Association for the

benefit of all our students. Alongside the OU Staff and Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, it provides a framework for implementation of actions and interventions which appropriately support the wellbeing, ambitions and goals of our students, particularly during this time of continued uncertainty.

Susan Stewart, Director, Open University in Scotland



The Open University Students Association is delighted to have co-created and this Agreement and we look forward to continuing partnership work to improve the experience of Open University students in Scotland. The Association recognises that effective mental health and wellbeing support involves attending to the needs of those experiencing mental health issues and distress as well as promoting good mental health and wellbeing. We are committed to supporting initiatives that enable students to access effective resources that allows them to talk about their mental health without fear of judgement or discrimination.

Mark Walker, Deputy President, Open University Students Association

## **A four nations university**

The Open University (OU) is a world leader in open and distance learning. Our institutional mission is to be open to people, places, methods and ideas.

Social justice and equality of opportunity are at the heart of everything we do: widening access to higher education is the ambition on which the University was founded.

We are committed to extending opportunities for educational success to all. We have always operated an open entry policy: our students can study with us at undergraduate level with no requirement for previous qualifications.

We are proud to be the only university that operates across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and we derive significant benefits from being part of the UK's largest higher education institution.

## **The Open University in Scotland**

Our students come from a diverse range of backgrounds, and may have many responsibilities and challenges, such as caring, parenting, full or part-time work, low income or disability. In Scotland, over half of our students study for free, qualifying for funding support via the [Part-Time Fee Grant](#).

To ensure that we offer our students an environment where they can learn effectively, stay on course and achieve positive outcomes, we will continue to develop innovative methods to engage and support them.

This Agreement sets out the support and services that students can access to support their mental health and wellbeing while studying with the OU and the

actions the Open University in Scotland and the OU Students Association will take to improve support. Some of these actions relate to support on an OU-wide level, while some are specific to students in Scotland.



## **An evidence-based approach**

This agreement is the result of a collaboration between The OU in Scotland and the OU Students Association and is intended to actively reflect the voice of our students. It aligns with the [OU Student and Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#) and our [Outcome Agreement with the Scottish Funding Council](#), as well as other relevant policy and strategy priorities in Scotland and the wider university.

We have developed this Agreement in accordance with Universities UK's [Stepchange Framework](#) (2020), which sees universities as places that promote mental health and wellbeing as a strategic priority. The definitions we have used for mental health and wellbeing are drawn from the Stepchange framework. We have also worked with the OU Students Association and students to gather feedback on our resources and activities.

**'Mental health refers to a spectrum of experience, from good mental health to mental illness and distress.'**

Mental health and wellbeing: a dual continuum.

Source: Stepchange: Mentally Healthy Universities, Universities UK

## Stepchange framework: Enablers

The Stepchange framework suggests five enablers to achieve a whole university approach, and these will inform how we implement this Agreement. The enablers are:

- **Leadership** – strong and visible strategic leadership
- **Co-production** – developing approaches with students and with staff
- **Information sharing** – effective and appropriate sharing within universities, for example between academic tutors and support staff, with the NHS and with family or friends
- **Inclusivity** – recognising and support the diverse needs of students and staff
- **Research & innovation** – taking an evidenced informed approach; evaluating approaches and working across disciplines
- **Implementation** – integrated, organisation-wide approach to achieve significant cultural and structural change

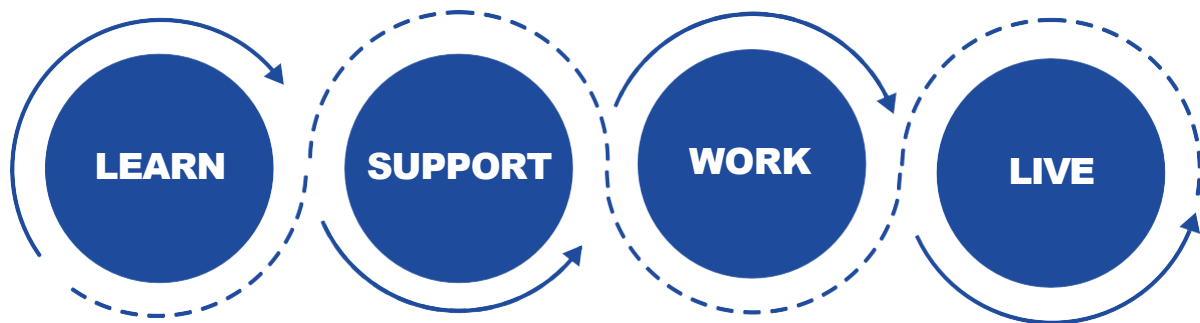
The whole university approach recommends that all aspects of university life promote and support student and staff mental health. This approach:

- recognises the effect of culture and environment, and specific inequalities, on mental health and wellbeing
- seeks to transform the university into a healthy setting

- empowers students and staff to take responsibility for their own wellbeing

## Stepchange framework: Domains

The Stepchange model is formed around four domains: Learn, Support, Work, Live. We have used the four domains to structure the actions in this Agreement.



### Domain 1: Learn

*'It was a good session that gave me the opportunity to get to know other students and faculty. Also, it helps to know that other students are going through similar experiences and you can support each other.'*

Student participant Big Blether – March 2021

Through our open entry policy – whereby our students can study with us at undergraduate level with no requirement for previous qualifications – the OU in Scotland has enabled thousands of people

to transform their lives through learning. Learning can positively impact a person’s mental health and wellbeing over a lifetime. We acknowledge that the way learning is designed and delivered is fundamental to a positive learning experience.

Actions we will undertake to facilitate positive learning experiences include:

1. Continue to offer information and advice on options such as deferring, taking a study break or changing your module or qualification through our Student Support Team.
2. Support student transitions through critical phases in their studies and beyond including induction, on-course support, graduation and careers and employment.
3. Implement targeted initiatives to improve access and participation of underrepresented and disadvantaged student groups, such as care experienced students, carers, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students and disabled students.
4. Continue to provide a named contact and a dedicated email to our care-experienced students and our students who are carers.

5. Develop initiatives to provide devices to students in digital poverty to improve access to education.
6. Contribute to the development of policies, strategies and plans that support our students' wellbeing, learning and success.
7. Work with our central academics to embed mental health into curricula.
8. Involve students, staff and other stakeholders in co-creating accessible services and resources.
9. Provide free learning resources on our OpenLearn platform to support study skills, mental health and inclusion, such as the LGBTQ and Race and Ethnicity Hubs.

## **Domain 2: Support**

*'The online events run by both the Open University and the OU Student Association help make me feel part of the community to a certain degree. I love that we have these opportunities. Student Hub Live might be my favourite, at least at the moment.'*

Student participant Have Your Say Day – November 2023

Demand for mental health support among university students has increased significantly in recent years. The OU in Scotland currently offers support for students experiencing mental health issues and disability. We also provide information, advice and signposting to support student wellbeing.

Actions we will undertake to ensure students are supported include:

1. Raise student and staff awareness of support available through themed events, such as 'Big Blether' events.
2. Review and refresh the OU in Scotland website to create better access to relevant resources including a dedicated Mental Health and Wellbeing page.
3. Develop Scotland-specific information and resources to support students.
4. Provide tailored information for groups of students with particular support needs to help address challenges and promote inclusion on the Student Help Centre and the OU in Scotland website.
5. Signpost students to services and resources through contact with the Student Support Team, and on our website and social media.
6. Encourage students to seek support when they need it and work to eliminate stigma or discrimination associated with mental health, through targeted communications and interventions, such as around exam time.

7. Continue to offer specific support and reasonable adjustments for students with health conditions or disabilities through our specialist disability advisors.

8. Ensure that safeguarding procedures are followed when concerns arise.

9. Increase staff awareness of counselling services to enable student referral.

### **Domain 3: Work**

*'I really enjoyed it. I felt like a member of a bigger family. Sometimes it's hard to remember, between work and studying that there are other students like me. It is really taking my mood up.'*

Student participant Have Your Say Day – November 2023

Good mental health is central to staff engagement, productivity and creativity.

We acknowledge the relationship between staff and student mental health.

Actions we will undertake to support our staff in their mental health and in supporting students include:

1. Provide appropriate staff training relating to student mental health and wellbeing.
2. Raise staff awareness of the Student Mental Health Agreement and its actions.
3. Influence and engage with cross-institution initiatives to support the mental health and wellbeing of our students and staff.
4. Foster collaboration and support between students and staff, such as student-led events and student voice initiatives.
5. Continue to promote opportunities that support staff wellbeing.
6. Promote relevant open educational resources to OU staff and the wider higher education sector to improve their awareness and understanding of underrepresented and disadvantaged student groups.

#### **Domain 4: Live**

*'I enjoyed being online amongst other people from OU and hearing them talk about things I related to. It made me feel motivated and less alone.'*

Student participant Have Your Say Day – November 2023



A holistic approach to mental health requires that the places that people learn, live, work and play are supportive to health and wellbeing. We acknowledge what is distinct about part-time distance study while seeking to promote healthy cultures and environments for our students to learn and live.

Actions we will take to promote healthy cultures and provide safe and supportive communities include:

1. Continue to promote good mental health and wellbeing to students and staff.
2. Engage students meaningfully in the development of healthy cultures and communities through co-creating events and initiatives.
3. Use appropriate and inclusive language across all our platforms and services.
4. Continue to review and simplify processes which might place an administrative burden on students, such as requesting assignment extensions, rest breaks during exams or study breaks.
5. Foster the relationship between the OU in Scotland and the OU Students Association and ensure effective student representation for Scotland.
6. Continue to promote the OU Student Association Peer Support initiative on our Mental Health and Wellbeing webpage.

7. Support events, activities and initiatives for students in Scotland to foster an improved sense of belonging.
8. Continue to offer support to our students for three years after graduation, through our Careers and Employability Services.
9. Develop and maintain relationships with external agencies, such as the NUS and Scottish Association for Mental Health.

## Impact of our actions

The influencers of mental health and wellbeing are complex and highly individual, ranging from social factors, psychological factors, to situational factors, all of which can change over a person's lifetime.

Research has identified a number of contributory factors to students' ability to maintain their mental health and wellbeing, such as financial security, programme of study, social interaction and support, health, resilience. The combinations of influencers and contributory factors can affect the lives of students in a variety of ways.

In order to best respond to changing circumstances and to effectively support our students through their journey, we have identified four types of impact which are central to ensuring the actions we take address the challenges our students are likely to face during their time with us.



## **Financial actions**

A study carried out by NUS Scotland has shown that lack of financial security and financial pressures can cause major stress and significantly impact on students' mental wellbeing. In order to mitigate these, we continue to provide scholarships, bursaries, funds and discretionary funding to support our students to achieve.

## **Environmental actions**

It is widely recognised that our environment and those around us all play an important part in the way we respond to life's challenges. As a distance learning university, our challenge is to create a virtual environment that supports our students' journey. We do this through the language we use in relation to mental health and wellbeing, the timing of communications, our leadership and the policies, plans and strategies we put in place to support our students, particularly those who may be underrepresented and disadvantaged.

## **Resource provision**

As a four-nations university, we benefit from a wealth of academic and research expertise, as well as free open learning resources. As a Scottish university, we recognise the need to provide information relevant to the specific

needs of students' resident in Scotland. We do this by creating nation-specific resources that enable students to seek support in relation to their mental health and wellbeing, and tailored resources for staff working with groups of students who have specific needs.

### **Practical solutions (non-financial)**

The circumstances of our students' lives often demand practical responses in order to mitigate factors that impact their mental health and wellbeing. We recognise the importance of responding appropriately to our students' needs. Our trained educational advisers help students access appropriate support, such as assignment extensions, reasonable adjustments and materials in various formats (print, audio, BSL) for those with additional support needs. We also provide targeted support and interventions for our underrepresented and disadvantaged students.

## How do we monitor our progress?

We recognise that understanding of mental health and wellbeing in higher education is an ever-changing area and although there are still significant gaps in our knowledge, we commit to working collaboratively with colleagues within our own institution, as well as with sector partners and national networks, as well as our students and communities to address these gaps and develop best practices.

Student mental health programmes and support initiatives are primarily developed, monitored and reviewed by the Open University Student Mental Health working group. The group oversees the services and initiatives designed to support student mental health and wellbeing. The group is comprised of members from the four nations and four faculties as well as central student support teams.

Within the Open University in Scotland, we monitor student numbers through the Scottish Student Numbers Group and the Scottish Student Outcomes Group. The Student Mental Health Agreement and other projects relating to student mental health, developing a sense of belonging and student consultation events are developed and monitored in our Access, Participation and Success working group with feeds into the Open University's Access, Participation and Success Steering Group.

This agreement was created in collaboration with the Open University Students Association, and we continue to work with them to monitor and evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the services and initiatives we are delivering to support student mental health and wellbeing.

The services and initiatives are also reviewed annually through the process of submitting our self-evaluation to [NUS Think Positive](#).

## **How do we measure our progress?**

To help achieve our strategic vision, and to make sure this agreement will have its intended impact, we build evaluation into each action. This has helped us ensure that our approaches to the mental health and wellbeing of our students and staff are evidence-based, responsive and effective. We recognise the importance of continuing to improve our evaluation and research.

We will draw on a range of evidence, such as feedback from students; OU Students Association consultations; surveys, such as the annual National Student Survey; evaluations from events and activities; interviews and focus groups; research on mental health and wellbeing conducted by our academic colleagues and experts.

We will work to review resources, content and curricula, collaborate with partners in research studies and undertake post activity evaluation to obtain

relevant qualitative data. We will continue to monitor numbers of staff trained, numbers of students visiting our website, accessing support and obtain quantitative data from our systems. We will use quantitative and qualitative data to help us better understand the wellbeing needs of our students and respond accordingly.



## **Support for students and staff**

Many of the resources available are for staff and students because we recognise that anyone can face mental health challenges, and anyone can require support. In order for our staff to be fully able to support students and their mental health, we need to support staff to maintain their mental health.

We support over 10,000 students that have told us they have a mental health difficulty. You can tell us at any stage in your studies, but we recommend you do so as early as possible so we can make reasonable adjustments and support you to reach your full potential.

You may not consider mental health to be a disability, however, mental health issues are covered under the Equality Act 2010. You could be eligible for Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA), which can finance mental health mentoring support during your studies.

## OU Wellbeing App

The wellbeing app provides **students and staff** with access to a range of wellbeing and study related resources. The app offers tools to start building healthy and positive habits, as well as resources such as podcasts and self-help tools to guide the user towards better mental health and wellbeing. As you interact with the app individual recommendations for tailored self-care are created.

The app has a preventative focus, encouraging positive wellbeing and healthy behaviours. It could help with managing feelings of anxiety and stress and may help to prevent bigger issues that might impact study. It provides resources to support study, and contains features contact at key dates, such as at module start and at the final assessment period.

You can find out more info on the [Help Centre page](#) or scan the QR code below to access the app.



## Shout

[Shout](#) is a free, confidential, anonymous 24/7 text messaging support service for anyone who is struggling to cope. You can text it from wherever you are in the UK. Shout is a de-escalation service. This means they work with people in immediate distress and aim to move them to a calmer state, while empowering them with support and techniques to handle future issues.

Our relationship with Shout provides **students and staff** priority engagement with the service. Shout provides students with an option of somewhere to seek appropriate and immediate support when in distress.

You can use the service immediately and without registration by **sending a text with the word OU to 85258**. This will start a conversation with a trained volunteer who will text you back and forth, sharing only what you feel comfortable with.

You can find out more info on the [Help Centre page](#).



**Feeling low?  
Overwhelmed?  
Anxious?**

**Talk to us.**

**Text OU to 85258**  
for free and confidential support, 24/7

**shout**  
**85258**  
In partnership with  
The Open University

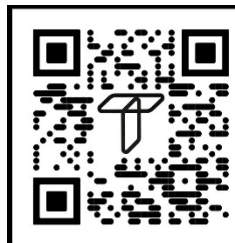
## Support for students



Talk Campus is a global student peer support community that provides easily accessible and ongoing support via the TalkCampus app and web platform. Students are part of a safe, supportive, community combining trained peer supporters and professional staff. A wellbeing centre provides self-directed learning modules based around Cognitive Behavioural Therapy to offer students the opportunity to work on specific feelings and emotions. Further wellbeing resources include articles and support on topics such as relationships and self-care.

Students can join a 'group' based on certain topics, or interests or even start their own group. Students can opt out of certain topics and posts and conversations are moderated.

You can find out more info on the [Help Centre page](#) or scan the QR code below to access the app.



## Mental Health Casework Team

The [Mental Health Casework and Advice Team \(MHCAT\)](#) forms part of Student Additional Support (SAS). Their goal is to complement and enhance support for students whose significant mental health difficulties or psychological distress have become a barrier to positively engaging with any aspect of university life. The team is split into two main sub-services:

- **Mental Health Advice Service:** this service provides consultation and advice to **staff** across the OU who are supporting students with complex mental health needs or have concerns about a student's mental health. They contribute to the development of policy, procedures and resources to ensure the sharing of good practice and a consistent approach to mental health support across the OU.
- **Mental Health Casework Service:** This sub-team consists of Mental Health Advisors (Casework). They provide individualised support to **students** with complex or severe mental health needs to help them manage the impact of these difficulties on their studies. They offer a key point of contact, on an ongoing basis, to manage student's difficulties around their mental health and its effect on their engagement with their studies. Students are usually offered between two and six sessions, that normally occur once a fortnight for up to an hour. They also work closely with other colleagues and external organisations to coordinate support for students who are in crisis and at risk of self-harm. Students do not need to have a mental

health diagnosis, identify as having a mental health condition or have a disability marker to receive support from MHCAT.

## **Student Support Teams**

The circumstances of our students' lives often demand practical responses to mitigate factors that impact their mental health and wellbeing. We recognise the importance of responding appropriately to our students' needs. Our trained Student Recruitment and Support teams help students with a range of issues from planning the right qualification, study intensity and where appropriate accessibility needs. Where students tell us that they will need additional support related to mental health, specialist staff help students develop a support plan including communication needs, access to tutorials, reasonable adjustments related to study materials and assessment. This plan is vital to enable tutors to effectively support our students.

More generally all Student Recruitment and Support staff are trained to support students facing challenging circumstances impacting their wellbeing and their studies, which could be linked to their mental health. Staff will explore support such as focussed additional sessions with a tutor, extensions, special circumstances submissions, signpost to internal and external resources and relevant organisations. We have guidance staff, disability support specialists and our Mental Health Casework Assessment Team (MHCAT) who work collaboratively to support students with most complex needs.

We also provide focussed and timely proactive support and interventions for students, through proactive mailings, outbound calling campaigns and our

Personal Learning Adviser team who use a coaching approach to supporting students who engage with this service.



## **OU Students Association Peer Support Groups**

Run by Open University students and elected for two-year terms (and supported by the Association), these groups are here to offer support and advice, as well as to campaign to the Open University on topics which are important to their members. The groups are a great way to connect with fellow students too.



For more information you can visit <https://www.oustudents.com/get-involved/support-groups/>

For questions or queries, please contact [oustudents-support@open.ac.uk](mailto:oustudents-support@open.ac.uk).

## **OU Students Association Wellbeing Support**

The Open University Student's Association have curated a series of resources where students can find help, advice and support plus links to other organisations offering support. This can be accessed at <https://www.oustudents.com/support-and-advice/wellbeing/>

## **OU in Scotland Staff Training & Development**

Within the Open University in Scotland, we provide appropriate staff training relating to student mental health and wellbeing.

As well as engaging with programmes across the Open University in Scotland, staff within our Student Recruitment & Support teams have ongoing opportunities to engage with training and development to inform and enhance our understanding of student needs and develop our skills and knowledge to offer the most effective support we can. Examples of development sessions are supporting distressed & suicidal students, supporting students with anxiety, supporting students with low mood and working with complex life events. As well as ongoing reflective practice opportunities and support from line manager, staff also have access to a debriefing service should this be required to support staff wellbeing and resilience.

## **Associate Lecturers Training & Development**

Associate Lecturers (ALs) support and guide students through their academic studies and they can often be the person a student has most contact with on their student journey. ALs are provided with a range of resources and tools to support their students' wellbeing and mental health.

There is an AL Toolkit for Supporting Student Mental Health which offers information, advice and guidance on supporting your students who declare or may have mental health difficulty to access their learning with equal opportunity.

There are also AL Mental Health Training webinars which are a series of staff development online events on the subject of supporting students' mental health and wellbeing.

## External online resources

- [Headroom](#) is a new BBC News site that contains numerous articles, tips, podcasts, and tools to help and improve mental health.
- [Mind](#) provides a wealth of information to support and improve mental health.
- [Mental Health UK](#) provides information about improving your physical and mental health.
- [NHS - Every Mind Matters](#) gives advice, information and guidance about looking after your mental health.
- [Rethink Mental Illness](#) provides help and support for people living with mental illness.
- [Think Positive Hub](#)

Signed and agree on 26/06/2024.



Margaret Greenaway  
President  
Open University Students



Susan Stewart  
Director  
Open University in Scotland

