



The All-Party Parliamentary University Group

Michelle Donelan MP, Minister for Universities
Vicky Ford MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families
Nadine Dorries MP, Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health

By email

5 February 2021

Dear Ministers,

On Tuesday 26 January the All-Party Parliamentary University Group (APPUG) held a virtual meeting on the topic of student mental health and wellbeing. The meeting had a strong focus on university-NHS partnerships to improve mental health care for students. By hearing from a range of excellent speakers representing universities, students and the NHS, we identified a number of crucial areas for policy focus. We urge you to take action to ensure students experiencing mental health difficulties get the best possible care.

You will all be well aware of the increasing demand on student support services; the latest figures from 2018 show 16.9% of 17-19 year olds now have a diagnosed mental disorder and around half of which will now enter higher education. Mental distress amongst the student population is likely to be far higher still due to the impact of the pandemic on anxiety and isolation. Universities are set to spend an additional £118 million at least on further mental health support to meet student demand for 2020/21 but are “creaking under the strain”, to quote one vice-chancellor, and need additional government investment.

Both the Welsh and Scottish Governments have allocated significant additional funding to address student financial hardship as well as this increased demand on university mental health services. We welcome the recent announcement of £50 million additional funding for hardship for students in England but note that this does not directly provide for the significant additional burden on mental health support, a burden addressed neither by the £3million allocated to the Student Space platform nor by the £15m Challenge funding for mental health across transitions. As a cross-party group, we are now calling on you to work with Treasury colleagues to agree an additional settlement for student mental health support at English higher education institutions as soon as possible.

APPUG members heard from NHS England Director of Mental Health Claire Murdoch about the commitment to students within the NHS Long Term Plan 0-25 years ambition. We look forward to this national commitment being translated into co-designed, student-facing mental health services. The Department for Health and Social Care, the Department for Education and NHS England should work closely with universities towards a transformation of NHS services to meet the needs of a growing and diverse student population. At our recent meeting, we were given particular insight into the lack of adequate support for international students and BAME students. We would encourage new service models to be co-produced with these student groups.

We were pleased to hear about the Greater Manchester Universities Student Mental Health Service and its initial service outcomes. There may be national lessons to be

learnt from the development of this local partnership, involving four universities and a conservatoire, around the importance of collaboration between primary care, specialist and acute services, HEIs and service users.

We welcomed Claire Murdoch's letter to NHS providers calling for action to enable students to access care where they are living in lockdown away from their term time address. However, we would now like an update from you, as the ministers overseeing different aspects of student mental health support, on what this will look like in practice. It is essential that students are able to access appropriate services where they are living during this particularly challenging time.

During our recent meeting, several vice-chancellors raised the challenge of having a growing number of students enrolling at their institutions with a pre-existing mental health condition. We know that half of chronic mental illness is established by the age of 14 and therefore an integrated approach to young people's mental health across schools, colleges and universities would prevent teenagers falling through gaps in services and better equip universities to support students as they enrol. We are encouraged by the establishment of the new Mental Health in Education Action Group and appointment of a Youth Mental Health Ambassador, and would like further details about the specific aims of the group, timescales for action, and how the higher education sector can get involved with this vitally important work.

We would welcome a response to the questions outlined in this letter from both the Department for Health and Social Care and Department for Education given the importance of a strong cross-departmental approach to improving student mental health and wellbeing. Please also get in touch if you would like the opportunity to address members of the group directly as part of a future virtual meeting.

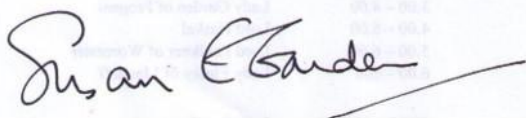
Yours sincerely,



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Chair, APPUG



Chris Skidmore MP
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