

How to Promote Student Mental Health within UK Universities

AN EXPERT ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION



Chegg

June 2024

Introduction

On the 28th of February 2024, representatives from a student-first online learning platform, Chegg, Student Minds, Mental Health Foundation, and Big Change hosted a roundtable with UK students on how the UK higher education sector can effectively promote students' mental wellbeing. The objective was to facilitate a discussion between students and those working to shape policies around student mental health. The roundtable was held as part of Student Mental Health Week 2024, a global initiative by US edtech company Chegg, in partnership with esteemed non-profits and organisations from around the world. The significance of this roundtable could not be more profound, as [Chegg's Global Student Survey 2023](#) found that 66% of UK students are not sleeping enough, 62% are struggling with daily feelings of anxiety, and over half (56%) are experiencing academic burnout.

Chegg developed this insight report, drawing from the thoughtful and engaging discussions that took place.

Roundtable Participants

Matthew Smith

Moderator
Public Affairs Advisor, Chegg

HRH Princess Beatrice

Co-Founder, Big Change

Caireen Goddard

Senior Director of Impact, Big Change

Aliyah Irabor-York

Youth Advocate, Big Change
Final-year undergraduate student, University of Cambridge

Matthew Ansbro

Chief Commercial Officer (CCO), Busuu

Alexa Knight

Director for England, Mental Health Foundation

Nicola Frampton

Insight Manager, Student Minds

Aneeska Sohal

Trustee, Student Minds

Katie Birditt

Student Advisory Committee member, Student Minds
MPhil student, University of Cambridge

Mahbub Shuhag

Student Advisory Committee member, Student Minds
Recent graduate, Coventry University London

Aglaia Freccero

Student Advisory Committee member, Student Minds
PhD candidate, Imperial College London



Recommendations

In our roundtable, there was a consensus that mental health strategies work best when tailored to meet diverse needs effectively by:

1 Raising awareness and building knowledge

- Promote open discussions about mental health across all educational levels to help break down the stigma associated with it.
- Harness the power of digital and social media to boost student engagement with mental health resources and events available on campus.
- Encourage collaboration among student mental health stakeholders to secure funding for comprehensive research initiatives.

2 Cultivating inclusivity and collaboration

- Invite active and regular contributions from the higher education sector in the evaluation of the Online Safety Act's effectiveness, leveraging their understanding of social media's impact on students.
- Advocate for sustained partnerships with health services to advance wellbeing practices, including the creation of diverse, practical toolkits for students.
- Engage in cross-disciplinary collaborations and the exchange of knowledge among educational institutions, building on the example of the [University Mental Health Charter](#).



3 Offering tailored support

- Support and commission long-view research that evaluates what works with mental health services through systematic data gathering, surveys, and feedback mechanisms.
- Ensure that mental health support is intersectional, culturally aware, and sensitive to the diverse backgrounds of students.
- Prioritise fostering a supportive environment through impactful mentorship, which can lead to increased self-assurance, higher course completion rates, and the pursuit of advanced education.
- Ensure the debate around mental health is human-centred and has a positive tone. Prioritise fostering holistic growth and a supportive environment.

Key Takeaways

1 Encourage social connections

The issue of isolation among students, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, was a focal point among participants. This isolation is more acute at university, where students often find themselves in a new environment away from home and interacting in different social circles for the first time.

To combat this, universities are encouraged to support students in connecting with interest-based societies or forming new groups and clubs. They should also continue to create events and learning opportunities that cater to a plurality of student interests. Katie Birditt, a Student Advisory Committee member at Student Minds, highlighted how the experience of COVID-19 also exposed inequities in support for students - some had more support than others through their social networks and families, which demonstrates the nuance and complexity in understanding the problem. Aneeska Sohal, a Trustee at Student Minds, underscored the crucial role of fostering a sense of community, whether through societies, fitness classes, sports teams, or other groups, in enhancing student wellbeing. Aglaia Freccero, a Student Advisory Committee member at Student Minds, highlighted the correlation between student engagement and mental health and how higher education institutions can embrace the power of data analytics to support those students not fully engaging with opportunities and improve their wellbeing.

2 Positive mentorship

Effective mentorship can significantly enhance students' university experience, offering support to those who lack constructive role models. It is also important to provide guidelines to students and let them know that tutors are there to help. Aglaia Freccero, a Student Advisory Committee member at Student Minds, shared her personal experience and how her academic mentor had a formative role in guiding her and offering advice in the face of uncertainty when enrolling to complete a PhD.

HRH Princess Beatrice, Co-Founder of Big Change, drew parallels from her observations in sports and pointed out the positive impact of coach-like environments in facilitating mentorship and connections through being a part of a team. Matthew Ansbro, Chief Commercial Officer (CCO) at Busuu, shared how Busuu's employer-funded programmes provide users with a personal coach and this has delivered consistently higher programme completion rates. These coaches offer targeted support in the face of motivational problems and practical guidance to overcome difficulties.

3 'No wrong door' approach

Continuously engaging students around their higher education experience is imperative to ensure they feel understood and not isolated in any of their struggles. Higher education institutions must continue cultivating a culture of open communication and support, assuring students that their concerns are taken seriously. Nicola Frampton, Insight Manager at Student Minds, discussed the 'no wrong door' approach, with students having the ability to share their experiences with anyone, whether that be a personal tutor, student leader, or their friend – how it is important not to close the door to the student even if you do not understand what you're being told, but rather direct them to someone who could help.

4 Funding long-view research

There are gaps in evidence in extensive comparative studies when evaluating the best mental health practices educational institutions can implement. We need to understand the problem if we are to solve it. It is therefore important to fund longer studies concerning student mental health, as it will assist in evaluating and implementing solutions that work. Alexa Knight, the Director for England of the Mental Health Foundation, noted how we still do not know what would be ‘the thing’ to roll out in universities based on evidence, and funding these longer studies would gather evidence on what works in practice.

6 The impacts of social media

While higher education institutions can effectively use social media to increase awareness of their mental health provisions, the roundtable conversation also highlighted the negative impact social media can have on student mental health. Universities can play a role in feeding back information to relevant bodies on what they have seen regarding social media’s impact on student life and academic performance. Alexa Knight, the Director for England of the Mental Health Foundation, noted the impact of social media on increasing feelings of helplessness when it comes to seeing global conflicts and events one has no power over, as well as comparison of lifestyles.

5 Increase awareness of mental health support on campus

It’s essential to provide easy access to resources in a relatable manner. Higher education institutions should leverage social media to promote mental health services and keep students informed about campus events, collaborating with student leaders to disseminate information through their networks. This approach includes creating tailored content and events to address the varied needs of different student groups.

Aliyah Irabor-York, the Youth Advocate at Big Change, highlighted Cambridge University’s use of TikTok as a successful strategy to engage with students and disseminate mental health resources. The initiative is effective because it harnesses the powerful peer-to-peer communication that resonates with the youth.

7 A whole system approach

Participants agreed on the need to advocate for higher education institutions to foster an environment where mental health discussions are normalised across all educational tiers. This effort would contribute to eroding the stigma surrounding mental health issues and fostering a culture that values mental wellness. Any approach must also recognise that staff wellbeing is integral to addressing student concerns, and adopting a holistic approach can enhance mental health practices, benefiting both educators and students. Caireen Goddard, a Senior Director of Impact at Big Change, stressed the importance of having open and intergenerational conversations, which can contribute to broadening one’s understanding of the challenges faced by others, as well as shared experiences and understanding.

8 Students co-designing and implementing solutions

It's essential to not only invite students to the table but to partner with them in shaping and executing solutions. Students are the most attuned to the unique challenges they face, making their input invaluable.

Mahbub Shuhag, a Student Advisory Committee member at Student Minds, emphasised the significance of collaborating with university welfare officers. They are attuned to both the general pulse of the university environment and specific concerns from the student community. Mahbub also highlighted the importance of ensuring inclusive dialogues about mental health, acknowledging that the experiences of first-year undergraduates versus PhD candidates, and international versus domestic students may vary significantly.

Aneeska Sohal, a Trustee at Student Minds, pointed out the steps universities could make to better acknowledge and practically respond to racial trauma and underscored the need for services that resonate with the diverse experiences of the student population, creating a safe and supportive space for all to voice their experiences.

9 Conversations at the national level

The significance of maintaining dialogue at a national level, with the aim of inclusivity and representation, cannot be overstated. Aneeska Sohal, a Trustee at Student Minds, highlighted a nationwide initiative launched by Student Minds in 2019, the **University Mental Health Charter**, as a pivotal step in coordinating the discourse on student wellness across the nation. The Charter brings together input from hundreds of students, staff, and researchers from over 200 different universities, student unions, and higher education organisations and is backed by the Office for Students and the Department for Education.

Nicola Frampton, Insight Manager at Student Minds, highlighted the Charter's role as a non-prescriptive framework, offering principles of good practice. Every institution can look at it and understand what it means for its context, depending on finances, student body, or curriculum, with the purpose of having positive approaches to mental health and wellbeing.

10 Reframe the debate toward a more positive tone

Participants discussed the need to reframe the debate around student mental health, advocating for the discussion to be more human, holistic, and positive. Comments were raised for a fundamental look at education and learning as a source of wellbeing and a space where students can grow, thrive, and explore preventative approaches. Caireen Goddard, a Senior Director of Impact at Big Change, highlighted the need for a connection between the educational experience and young people's broader feelings about their identity and a sense of self-agency, with the need for educational institutions to be a vehicle that supports young people to thrive in adulthood.

**Please note that all students' views or opinions are solely their own and do not represent their respective university.*



Background on the participating organisations

Chegg

Chegg is an American edtech company, which helps learners learn with confidence, providing students 24/7 on-demand support no matter the goal, level, or style. In 2023, Chegg established **Student Mental Health Week**, a global initiative which seeks to destigmatise mental health among students, encourage young people to be intentional about looking after themselves, and inspire conversations around what policymakers, education institutions, caregivers, and learners themselves can do to support student mental wellness. Chegg.org, its non-profit research, impact and advocacy arm, publishes in-depth research that sheds light on students' lives, hopes, and concerns, including their mental health. Through its educator-focused Center for Digital Learning, Chegg has commissioned original research to deepen the education community's understanding of the opportunities and challenges in the sector, including its **UK Behaviour Study**, which focused on students' mental health and financial challenges.

BIG CHANGE.

Big Change is the UK's charity focused on transforming education and learning and setting up all young people, regardless of their background, to thrive in life. Big Change supports and funds projects that deliver innovative approaches and are at the frontline of change. They run the **Big Education Challenge**, which was launched in 2023 to find and support ideas that can transform education in the UK, and they have also backed the **Big Education Conversation**, an intergenerational project mobilising various educational stakeholders and supporting communities to take steps to transform education for the better. They have worked on various publications, including: **'Out of Kilter: How to rebalance our school system to work for people, economy and society'**, by the Institute for Public Policy Research, which features hundreds of conversations from the Big Education Conversation, with one of the key four strands of the report looking at young people's mental health.



Mental Health Foundation is the UK's mental health charity with a mission to build a society where everybody can thrive. They provide information, carry out research and campaigns and develop better ways to support good mental health in every community. Some of their leading programmes aimed at young people include the **Becoming a Man (BAM) programme**, which supports young men's personal development by taking into account their lived experiences; and the **UOK? programme**, targeted towards young people aged 16 to 25, delivering training to enable students to take the lead in supporting their peers and themselves.



Student Minds is the UK's mental health charity, with a clear vision that no student should be held back by their mental health. Through creating and curating resources, stories and tools, Student Minds empowers students to build their own mental health toolkits to support themselves and others through university life and beyond. They have developed the **University Mental Health Charter**, a framework outlining principles through which higher education institutions can improve student mental health, built and delivered in partnership with various stakeholders, including the Department for Education. They run a free digital platform, **Student Space**, which provides dedicated support services for students and assists students in finding support available at their institution.

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