



The LEARN Network's comment on the HE Mental Health Implementation Taskforce - first stage report

The LEARN Network (TLN) welcomes the first stage of the HEMHIT report and commends all those organisations that have come together to find ways to improve the wellbeing and mental health of HE students. TLN has provided two members of the Taskforce – Lee Fryatt and Mark Shanahan with additional members involved in sub-group discussions as work strands have progressed.

In looking at the report, we pose the questions: Will the Taskforce's actions deliver on the Minister's aims, and in so doing, will these deliverables reduce student deaths by suicide?

For the most part, we are heartened, but retain one key criticism around spreading and implementing best practice consistently across HE providers.

On the positive side, we support the work undertaken around communication with students, development of the compassionate campus through the HE Student commitment and the development of sector-wide best practice in learning from student suicides and near misses, where we appreciate the decision to include contextual evidence from historic cases.

While our aim is to have no student suicides in the future, the National Review of HE student suicides is long overdue, and we will play our part as members of the Review team's advisory group.

We will also bring professional insight and lived experience to developing the student journey so that communication touchpoints between institutions and students are no longer contributors to poor mental health.

Timelines and Measurement

However, there is a significant weakness in the Report which threatens to undermine all the good work proposed, and underway, elsewhere. The Minister has requested the adoption of good practice in supporting good student mental health across the sector. His measure for this signed up to the Student Minds Mental Health Charter or similar. This is, quite simply, the wrong goal. Shouldn't there be a clue to what's really needed in this being an *Implementation* Taskforce?

Signing up to a charter is not a signifier of real change. That change will happen only through clear, transparent, measurable evidence of action on the part of the HEPs accredited by an expert, but independent organisation.

We value highly the work the charity Student Minds has undertaken in developing the Charter and framework for accreditation. However, as a charity reliant on universities for its existence, and insistent on letting institutions work towards accreditation at their own speed without any semblance of transparency. We have a significant fear that too many institutions will deprioritise student mental health and hide their lack of progress behind a weak accreditation regime. There is still no requirement for universities to commit to the Student Minds Charter Award, or even to commit to milestones. They can stay members of the scheme for years, as the majority have. As far as we know, only seven out of 96 have gained the basic Award, and none the higher Awards. The evidence suggests the 'softly softly' approach is not accelerating implementation.

The LEARN Network believes this weakness undermines all significant efforts to ensure effective all-campus mental health provision for students. Without a legal or regulatory basis underpinning accreditation – and thus the sector-wide spread of best practice – we are reliant on voluntary

implementation. Making it happen will remain under the auspices of discretionary spend for HE providers. With university finances stretched to breaking point, good intent may become the victim of budgetary necessities.

Only legislation can give student mental health, through whole-campus action, the support it needs. We believe it is time for the OFS to be the accrediting body, treating student support in the same way it handles REF and TEF. We need accreditation with teeth.

Finally, our goal remains a Statutory Duty of Care for students in HE. While the efforts of the Taskforce will improve the provision of mental health support for students, they are creating a longer, more winding road to progress than necessary. A Statutory Duty of Care will get the whole sector on one straight road towards