

# News story: Government creates new student mental health taskforce

A new taskforce has been set up by Education Secretary Damian Hinds to support students to deal with the challenges that starting university can include to preserve their mental health.

On University Mental Health Day (7 March), Mr Hinds announced that the new taskforce will look at how students moving from sixth-form or college to university can be better supported in their crucial first year, building on the work already underway across the sector to improve support for student mental health.

It follows work by the Department for Education to identify four key areas of risk that can affect the mental health of people going to university. These are:

- Independent living – including things like managing finances, having realistic expectations of student life, as well as alcohol and drugs misuse.
- Independent learning – helping students to engage with their course, cope with their workload and develop their own learning style and skills.
- Healthy relationships – supporting students with the skills to make positive friendships and engage with diverse groups of people. Other risks can include abusive partners, relationship breakdowns and conflict with others.
- Wellbeing – including loneliness and vulnerability to isolation, social media pressures and 'perfectionism'. Students may also not know how to access support for their wellbeing.

Members of the new taskforce – which will be known as the Education Transitions Network – will include leading sector groups such as UCAS, the National Union of Students, Student Minds, Universities UK, the Association of Colleges and the Office for Students.

The group will develop measures to help people make a smooth transition into higher education and help students maintain good mental health.

Education Secretary Damian Hinds said:

Going to university should be a positive, life-changing experience. Understandably for many young people, the idea of leaving home and starting to live independently can be exciting but also daunting.

Juggling challenges like independent studying or managing finances can be hard enough, but with the added element being in a new place, surrounded by new people it can for some be overwhelming. We need to make sure students have the support they need to thrive at

university and help these really be the best days of their life.

I'm delighted to have the expertise of the sector backing this vision and joining this taskforce. Our universities are world-leading in so many areas and I want them to be the best for mental health support too. Pinpointing these key areas which can affect student mental health is essential to the progress we must make to ensure every student can flourish in higher education.

Research shows that when people face a number of these challenges in student life at the same time it can be stressful and can lead to poor mental health.

The four areas all have the potential to be challenging for young people as they go through substantial change in their lives. The group may look at other areas which can affect student mental health as part of future work, such as challenges students face when moving from education to the world of work.

The Education Transitions Network, includes the Association of Colleges and Sixth Form Colleges Association to ensure schools and colleges play a vital role in preparing students for the new difficulties they can face when they start university.

Rosie Tressler, CEO of Student Minds, said:

We often hear from students and in our research that times of transition can significantly impact student wellbeing throughout their university experience. We therefore welcome the work of the Education Transitions Network, in enabling further collaborations in this space.

On University Mental Health Day, and all year round, we need to ensure that student mental health is a strategic priority at our Universities and for health providers. Together, we can use our voices to improve the futures of millions of people.

Professor Steve West, Vice-Chancellor of UWE Bristol, said:

Universities welcome the Secretary of State's focus on student mental health. It is very much aligned with our core mission to enable students and staff to thrive by ensuring that mental health and wellbeing is a core part of all universities' activities. Universities UK continues to play a leading role in setting out an ambitious vision for the sector and in convening a whole-system response to achieve change.

Across the UK, we are seeing an increase in the number of young adults disclosing mental illness and this is reflected at universities. So we welcome and will play an active role, alongside

schools and colleges, in the government's work on helping young people make the transition into higher education.

Universities, colleges and schools all see mental health as a priority but we cannot address these challenges alone. We are committed to working in close partnership with the NHS, locally and nationally, to improve services for students. It is essential that any future funding regime does not undermine this work to support students and staff to realise their potential.

The network will firstly look at 'what works' to help students handle the challenges of moving into higher education and spread good practice from examples of initiatives, such as the University of Huddersfield's award-winning [Flying Start](#) inductions and the University of Portsmouth's [Welcome Ambassadors](#) project, Student Minds' [Transitions and Know Before You Go](#), as well as measures developed through the Office for Students' [Challenge Competition](#) projects.

Universities Minister Chris Skidmore met with students and staff at Kings College London yesterday to discuss the challenges students can face when they transition to university. This included charities, sector bodies and health experts joining a discussion about how universities can work better with the NHS to improve mental health support for students.

The ambition to create a network was first announced last year by former Universities Minister Sam Gyimah as part of a range of measures to improve student mental health support, including the development of a University Mental Health Charter, led by Student Minds, which will reward institutions that deliver improved student mental health outcomes.

In December, the Education Secretary wrote to the chair of an expert panel convened by Universities UK (UUK) to urge that it did all in its power to help higher education institutions do more to reach out to students' emergency contacts when it is clear this is in the best interests of a student's health.

Following this, Universities UK is currently leading a task group to explore how students' families and friends can be better involved in mental health support and care while ensuring the confidentiality rights of students are fully respected.