

student  
minds

# The Student Mental Health Manifesto

Our vision for a future where every student can thrive



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# Overview of

# recommendations

## Healthcare

**All students should have access to quality and timely mental health support.**

### Urgent support

- » Commit to increases in funding for the NHS to:
  - increase the availability of mental health support
  - reduce waiting times
  - eliminate thresholds for care which see many people unable to access treatment due to being too ill for primary care, but not ill enough for secondary care.
- » Commit to improving pay and working conditions for NHS staff, including healthcare students.
- » Commit to improving mental health and wellbeing support for healthcare students on placement, by requiring universities and the NHS to take a joined-up approach to providing support. This should be clear, accessible, inclusive, and consistent, with effective information sharing where appropriate.
- » Introduce free prescriptions, dental care, and sight tests for all higher education students by default.

### Long-term commitment

- » The Department of Health and Social Care to develop a long-term strategy and funding plan which enables the sustainability and improvement of mental health services, ensuring they are accessible, safe, and effective for all.
- » Recruit and retain NHS staff- particularly in mental health roles- enabling a reduced caseload at primary and secondary services.
- » Introduce specific, consistent, and specialist student healthcare support pathways including student mental health teams within secondary care, similar to those available to veterans and in perinatal care.
- » Enable greater collaboration and communication between universities and mental health services, allowing for a consistent, cohesive, and joined-up approach to care. This requires NHS support and university support to be recognised as part of the same student support system, with improved information sharing.
- » Improve the support available to young people aged 18-25 who transition from Children and Young People's Mental Health Services to adult mental health services, for instance, by developing specialist support for this transition, and by working with higher education providers to support young people who choose to go to university. This would require enhanced information sharing and a collaborative approach to achieving a strong and consistent continuation of care.

# Financial hardship

All students should have enough money to support them through their studies.

## Urgent support

- » Introduce a winter fuel allowance for student households.
- » Increase Minimum Wage in line with the Real Living Wage for all individuals aged 18 and above, removing staggered wage increases based on age.
- » Work with transport providers to subsidise public transport for students, making travel more accessible and affordable.
- » Introduce bursaries or wage payments for healthcare students on placement.

## Long-term commitment

- » Commit to a transparent and robust review of the student funding model, with a focus on increasing maintenance support and reducing the long-term financial burden of going to university. This includes:
  - Raising maintenance loan entitlements in England to account for inflation since 2016, reversing almost a decade of real-terms cuts
  - Raising thresholds for means-tested maintenance loans to account for inflation since 2016
  - Introducing maintenance support for all part-time students to ensure equitable access to financial assistance
  - Explore the re-introduction of maintenance grants
- » Reviewing the repayment model to ensure payments are proportional, fair, and manageable for all graduates
- » Commit to a restructure of the funding model for postgraduate taught students by introducing maintenance funding and ensuring all postgraduate students receive sufficient funding to cover their tuition costs.
- » Require that specific provisions are made for students whenever policy is created to alleviate cost of living pressures (such as council tax rebates).



# Higher education

**Our higher education institutions need improved support and investment.**

## Urgent support

- » Commit to a continuation of financial and political support for the [University Mental Health Charter](#) Framework, Programme, and Award, developed and delivered by Student Minds.
- » Introduce clear guidance on the roles and responsibilities of universities and statutory health services in relation to mental health.

## Long-term commitment

- » Commit to a review of higher education funding models to improve the sustainability of the sector without placing additional burdens on staff or students.
- » Commit to demonstrating a more positive narrative for universities and students generally, recognising the immense value that higher education providers and students contribute to our society.

The University Mental Health Charter, published by Student Minds, consists of a framework document which provides evidence-informed principles to support universities to adopt a whole-university approach to mental health and wellbeing. 96 higher education providers are currently members of the University Mental Health Charter Programme, which supports universities to embed a whole-university approach to mental health, through events, communities of practice, and annual journey reviews.

The Manifesto shares the Charter's approach to student mental health and wellbeing, recognising that we must take a holistic understanding of the issues facing students. That being said, this document focuses primarily on the role of the government, rather than of individual institutions. This distinction was made clear to participants throughout our research. We hope that this project can work in tandem with the Charter to develop the healthy, happy, and thriving university communities that our student and staff populations deserve.



# Inclusive healthcare and education

**All students should have access to inclusive education and healthcare without facing barriers.**

## Urgent support

- » Improved healthcare for the trans community, including reforming gender recognition and improving access to gender affirming care.
- » Champion academic freedom in our universities while protecting students and staff from discrimination and hate speech.
  - Provide clear guidance as to the role of universities and students' unions surrounding academic freedom, "de-platforming", and hate speech, keeping student safety and wellbeing at the forefront.
  - Reject sensationalised debates that falsely juxtapose student safety with freedom of speech, and engage in constructive discussions which recognise both principles as integral to universities.
- » Improve support and guidance for international students accessing NHS mental healthcare, for example by co-creating clear and accessible information about how to access care,
- » Commit to a transparent and robust review of Student Visas for international students:
  - Remove the term-time cap on hours worked in part-time employment
  - Remove the Immigrant Healthcare Surcharge for international students
  - Remove the application fee for the student visa
  - Reverse legislation preventing international students from bringing their families to the UK whilst studying
- » Urgently intervene to address disruption to Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) processes due to changes in service models. This includes committing to providing enough capacity and funding for all eligible students to successfully access DSA.
- » Reform the outdated Mental Health Act, which is currently not fit for purpose, as a matter of urgency.

## Long-term commitment

- » Build a truly inclusive education system, supporting efforts to embed inclusive practice throughout every stage of education. This includes ensuring education institutions are working to deliver teaching, learning and assessment which is inclusive by design, and at a minimum are fulfilling their responsibilities as outlined within the Equality Act (2010).
- » Build a truly inclusive healthcare system, ensuring individuals can confidently access effective and appropriate care and support, regardless of their identity or background. This includes identifying and dismantling cultural, social, and physical barriers to accessing care, and working with marginalised communities to co-create initiatives and interventions which promote inclusion in healthcare.
- » Commit to developing and introducing training (including cultural competency training), effective reporting processes and accessible support to improve knowledge and understanding of equality, diversity and inclusion practices and to ensure there are clear and accessible routes to report issues and receive support.

# A mentally healthier nation

**We must move towards a holistic approach to the mental health and wellbeing of the nation, improving support, prevention, and equality.**

## Urgent support

- » Introduce policy and legislation that protects and improves the rights of student tenants and limits rent hikes.
- » Improve the quality of private rented accommodation, tackling rogue student landlords and enforcing stricter legal accountability for landlords if standards are not met.
  - In particular, focus on improving regulation around disabled students' access to housing.
- » All devolved nations to ban no fault evictions ('Section 21' evictions in England).
- » Change legislation around instalment prescribing, bringing this in line with Scotland, to better manage risk around death by suicide.

## Long-term commitment

- » Embed mental health support within all education institutions and within the community, ensuring all young people have access to specialist support if they need it through their school, college, sixth form, or through local community support hubs.
- » Commit to working with education providers such as schools, colleges, sixth forms and universities to embed whole-institution approaches to mental health and wellbeing, through adequate funding and guidance.
- » Invest in research to improve understanding of mental health and what works to improve mental health and prevent or protect against mental health issues. This includes specific funding for research into student mental health.
- » Commit to funding and implementing cross-sector suicide prevention strategies.
- » Ensure every student has a safe place to live - before, during and after their studies - through a large scale house building project.
- » Commit to reaching net zero by 2030, while also determining and mitigating the effects of climate change on student mental health.



# A message from our student Steering Group

## Students deserve better.

Our mental health has declined, exacerbated by funding cuts, the cost of living crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, and an increasingly hostile environment for already marginalised communities. For too long, we have been ignored by governments who have prioritised pedalling false and harmful narratives about higher education students over supporting us and investing in our futures.

## Students are tomorrow's leaders.

Improving our wellbeing and equipping us to improve the wellbeing of others can help transform the wellbeing of the nation. All students deserve to experience the best of higher education, enjoying a liberating, inclusive, exciting, stimulating, and fulfilling experience. But right now, for many, this is not the case.

## We need urgent support.

The government must urgently intervene to support students and universities through the cost of living crisis. Students need urgent financial relief, improved access to healthcare, and more affordable, good-quality housing. The funding of higher education must be reviewed, to ensure the long-term stability of the sector, and to ensure students are not unfairly disadvantaged by our student status.

## We need long-term commitment.

To support students to thrive in our education, we are calling for a holistic, cross-government approach to student mental health. The government must shift from understanding mental health support solely as a response to mental illness, and recognise the equal importance of proactive, preventative support and early interventions. This means investing in creating a mentally healthier nation, building inclusive healthcare and education systems, taking action on climate change, and taking a unified, national approach to dismantling social, cultural, and physical barriers to good mental health and wellbeing.

We hope you will join our efforts to ensure no student is held back by their mental health.

**Aglaia Freccero**



**Nandini Aggarwal**



**Beth Martin**



**Rachel Lawrence**



**Ellis Ewin**



**Raul Szekely**



**Helena Kudiabor**



**Richard**



**Lauren Byrne**



# Introduction

The Student Mental Health Manifesto (“the Manifesto”) outlines our vision for student mental health under the next government. Within, you will find key recommendations across diverse sectors. Our aim is not just to alleviate poor mental health, or prevent it in the first place, but to go further and make university a place where everyone can thrive.

In the last five years, great strides have been made to shift sector and public attitudes towards student mental health. Universities are showing a commitment to change as well as developing pockets of excellent practice. We are constantly motivated and inspired by the fantastic work of researchers, student leaders, campaigners and staff in this area. We are grateful to not only have received funding from the Office for Students and HEFCW to deliver Student Space, our digital mental health support platform, but also additional funds to accelerate the delivery of the University Mental Health Charter (“the Charter”), along with crucial ministerial backing in recent years.

Despite this progress, evidence suggests that in many ways, student mental health is deteriorating. Up to 40 percent of students may now meet the criteria for a diagnosable mental health problem, and students report worse levels of mental wellbeing than their non-student peers. While our Charter outlines our vision for universities’ role, the higher education sector cannot address this challenge in isolation. Failing to address the wider determinants of poor mental health will mean missing a key part of the puzzle. Students are citizens and it is crucial that public policy accounts for them, rather than leaving them to the exclusive concern of their higher education provider.

## A crisis of imagination?

The higher education sector has come under considerable scrutiny in recent years. The discourse around “value for money” found new relevance following the pandemic, as the shift to remote learning and alternative delivery methods raised fundamental questions about the purpose of a

university education. Balancing academic freedom with protection from hate speech has become a topic of public interest, creating a paternalistic discourse that focuses less on students’ desires and more on the expectations of external parties. The conversation surrounding a statutory duty of care has also led to discussion around the responsibilities and duties of universities.

Simultaneously, the sector has been failed by years of inadequate funding, open hostility from political commentators, contradictory and contrived interventions from governing bodies, and a failure to envision a positive role for universities in our society. We can, and should, be proud of the fantastic research, teaching, professional training, and community our institutions offer.

While this goes on, the wider political landscape has become remarkably volatile. Global temperature records are broken month-on-month with little indication of progress towards tackling climate change, all while world leaders fail to act. Policy measures to alleviate the pressures of the cost of living crisis consistently fail to account for students’ unique circumstances. Graduates are entering a depressed economy marked by wage stagnation, inflation, poor job prospects, and unaffordable house prices. The echoes of the pandemic still impact our students on a social, financial and physical level. All too often, policy responses have been uninspiring and unambitious in the face of these challenges. Is it any wonder students are resigned to hardship when we face such a crisis of imagination?

## About the Manifesto

The Student Mental Health Manifesto draws on evidence from students, clinicians within and beyond the higher education sector, academics, students’ union staff, charity allies and more, to present an ambitious and holistic vision for how the government can improve mental health in our universities.

We have co-created this work with a student-led Steering Group and consulted hundreds of students through online communities, alongside our research partner Alterline. If you would like to know more about our research, please read the methodology on page 39.

This work is further bolstered by over a decade of listening work and research from ourselves at Student Minds. Development of our Manifesto has been overseen throughout by a student Steering Group from a wide range of backgrounds, academic disciplines, levels of study, and institutions. We're delighted to present this Manifesto alongside that of numerous allies at the Centre for Mental Health, National Union of Students (NUS), the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition (CYPMHC), the UPP Foundation, and more.

We explore not just the role of the university, but social determinants of health, and wider policy issues that affect students as citizens, not just learners. We hope the Manifesto will serve as a valuable tool to anybody interested in student life - but particularly, we challenge politicians and policymakers to be ambitious in adopting these recommendations. We'll hold up our end of the bargain, working with the higher education sector to advocate for students at every stage of their university journey. It's time for the government to hold up theirs.

We've broken down our recommendations into two categories, "Urgent Support" and "Long-term Commitments". The former are a set of recommendations which we believe are tangible, targeted changes that will make an immediate impact on the lives of our students. The latter concerns more structural, cultural change that will require deeper consideration and work to implement properly. We believe both approaches are necessary to deliver the changes our university communities deserve.

## Devolved policy

A particular challenge we faced in developing recommendations throughout the Manifesto is the fact that several areas of our focus are devolved

policy issues, such as healthcare, education, housing and financial support for students. We are aware that as a result, these issues may be experienced and addressed differently across the UK. We recognise that in instances, there are areas where some nations are working in a successful, positive way that other nations could learn from. We have reflected this in our discussion and recommendations wherever possible, and call on relevant stakeholders to work collaboratively to create policy that suits the circumstances of students across all nations of the UK.

## Definitions

Taken from the University Mental Health Charter:

- **Mental Health** – a full spectrum of experience ranging from good mental health to mental illness.
- **Mental illness** – a condition and experience, involving thoughts, feelings, symptoms and/ or behaviours, that causes distress and reduces functioning, impacting negatively on an individual's day to day experience, and which may receive or be eligible to receive a clinical diagnosis.
- **Mental health problems/issues or poor mental health** – a broader range of individuals experiencing levels of emotional and/ or psychological distress beyond normal experience and beyond their current ability to effectively manage. It will include those who are experiencing mental illness and those whose experiences fall below this threshold, but whose mental health is not good.
- **Wellbeing** – a wider framework, of which mental health is an integral part, but which also includes physical and social wellbeing. This uses a model provided by Richard Kraut (2009), in which optimum wellbeing is defined by the ability of an individual to fully exercise their cognitive, emotional, physical and social powers, leading to flourishing.



## About Student Minds

Student Minds empowers students to look after their own mental health to support themselves and their peers through university life and beyond. We challenge the higher education sector, health sector, and government to make student mental health a priority.

Together, we're improving university communities so that no student is held back by their mental health.

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## Lauren's perspective

"From when I began my degree in 2018 to now, having served as a Sabbatical Officer for two years, it has been shocking to witness the higher education sector become increasingly hostile and unsustainable for students.

**Government support has a critical role to play in addressing the escalating student mental health crisis within the higher education sector.**

During this election season, I hope to see politicians commit to addressing student mental health at its core, with a dedication to funding mental health support, within the NHS to reduce waiting times, and within higher education institutions (HEIs) through funding support for in-house wellbeing and counselling services.

However, the government's role is much broader than just addressing support for students who are already struggling.

**This is a critical juncture for addressing other factors within higher education that contribute to mental ill-health, such as funding, housing, and support for marginalised communities.**

With maintenance loans still not keeping pace with inflation and cuts to funding for university counsellors in Scotland, the likelihood of students succeeding is diminishing by the day. The current model of the sector relies heavily on international students coming to the UK, funding universities, and leaving shortly after- an approach that has a significant impact on international students' welfare.

Moreover, we continue to witness students excluded from rent freezes and becoming trapped in unaffordable tenancies. Meanwhile, students are working precarious jobs on top of full-time degrees just to make ends meet. Without meaningful inclusion of students in policies and a commitment to reviewing the funding model of the higher education sector, student mental health remains at an unacceptable risk- one that I sincerely hope our next government will work to address."

*Lauren Byrne, Student Mental Health Manifesto Steering Group Member, Vice President Welfare at Edinburgh Students' Association*

# Theme 1: Healthcare

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# Healthcare

Unsurprisingly, healthcare was a key focus of our research and was frequently discussed by participants who identified how current systems could be improved to better support student populations. This theme was also identified as the most important by a group of 100 students, who reviewed a range of policy recommendations and themes as part of the Manifesto's development.

We also recognise the importance of inclusivity within healthcare, and explore this further in the section 'Inclusive Healthcare and Education'.

## Support for the NHS

The NHS represents a central pillar in mental health support, offering a range of interventions which students can access throughout their time at university (and their lives). However, the NHS is currently facing a number of challenges, making it difficult to meet the support needs of those experiencing poor mental health. Students, healthcare professionals, and staff working in higher education all highlighted the importance of increasing funding for the NHS- particularly mental health services. Without more funding, waiting lists will continue to grow as demand for support increases, and pressure on already-overwhelmed services will continue to build.

*"If the government gets stuff right around CAMHS, and gets stuff right around support, generally, for mental health services, obviously students will benefit from that... So I think, general improvements and investments to mental health support for young people, but also to the NHS, will definitely have knock on effects."*

- Evidence session participant

In supporting the NHS, the government must recognise the immense value of staff, by improving pay and working conditions for those working in the healthcare sector. For too long, healthcare staff and students have been exposed to working conditions not conducive to good wellbeing, leading to staff burning out and leaving the healthcare sector. These conditions have a

clear impact on healthcare students' wellbeing throughout their time at university, as they manage the impacts of such experiences with the pressures of challenging academic study and exams.

*"Things are pretty bleak for medical students, especially at the moment... we're paying a fortune to be in debt most of our lives; we are working our asses off in order to pass difficult exams (and will continue to for much of our career); we are seeing significant striking in our future career due to the conditions and poor pay that we are going to get when we qualify; student loans and NHS bursary gives us the bare minimum support - we have current financial stressors; we often hear of devastating cases of doctors who have ended up taking their own lives. Passionate as we are about medicine, we are often perfectionists heading to burnout... No wonder prevalence of depression and anxiety in med students is higher than the general population... I still love medicine and being a medical student but let's not forget the significant stressors affecting medical (and other healthcare) students right now."*

- Ju, a medical student via X (Twitter)

By taking action to improve pay and working conditions, the government can improve staff wellbeing, in turn improving staff recruitment and retention, which will have knock-on impacts in reducing caseloads and wait times. Better staff wellbeing can also have positive effects on the quality of care provided, potentially reducing demand for services in the longer-term.

*“Having worked in the NHS, I really do see the burnout of all the staff and the wait lists are ever increasing.”*

*- Evidence session participant*

*“Hospitals are staffed by overworked and underpaid employees in ageing facilities, with exponential job creep. Improving the NHS as a place to work will 1. retain staff; 2. attract already qualified staff; and 3. attract people to qualifications that enable them to work in the NHS.”*

*- Student via online community*

The government must also support NHS trusts to develop and maintain strong relationships with universities, allowing for improved, joined-up support for student populations. By establishing partnership working which enables effective information sharing, referral routes, and communication, students with high or complex support needs will be better supported, and risk can be better managed.

This approach requires commitment and investment from the government, and should not take away from existing or future support for other groups who also need targeted care. We recognise that students are not the only group who need improved support, and our position is not that student mental health should be prioritised over and above those with similar or greater needs. Rather, we believe everybody should have access to effective and well-resourced services at the point that they need them.

*“I’d love to see more of a focus on resourcing the NHS more broadly across the entire scale, but certainly when it comes to thinking about provision and the way that NHS services join up with universities, and the way we work together, to recognise our own strengths, our own limitations, our own boundaries, and our own levels of expertise. I think for me, that is a really, really, really live issue at the moment.”*

*- Evidence session participant*



## Removing barriers to students accessing support

The NHS must function to serve the entire population. Unfortunately for many students, accessing support can be challenging due to a range of cultural, social, geographical and physical barriers, such as living between multiple locations throughout the academic year. It can be difficult to navigate the variety of support options available through different support providers in different locations, whilst also adjusting to new academic challenges and, for many students, independent living for the first time. These challenges are further exacerbated for some groups, such as international students, disabled students, and racialised students, who may face additional barriers such as greater stigma relating to mental health, or difficulty accessing treatment that meets their needs. As such, it's vital that all barriers to accessing support be identified and dismantled to ensure that everybody can access the care they deserve.

We are therefore calling for students to be recognised as a unique demographic with unique needs, through the development of specific student healthcare pathways which include specialist student mental health teams- similar to those which already exist for veterans and in perinatal care. Such pathways should improve flexibility for students to access support in multiple locations, ensuring continuity of care across support providers, as well as ensuring students are not disadvantaged by their student status. This approach will require greater collaboration and communication between universities and mental health services, allowing for a cohesive, joined-up approach to providing support for students as part of the same system.

*"I'd suggest every NHS trust has 2-5 people that are specifically responsible for and looking after students in that area. The NHS doesn't have the headspace and funding to do this - but I think it's just moving [money] around. There are things that could be done that don't involve new money."*

- Evidence session participant

*"I know there's individual NHS services that are great and they work really closely with universities but I think that needs to be broader. We need a better plan."*

- Evidence session participant

The transition between Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CYPMHS) and adult services can also present a barrier to students accessing effective support, given this population often also transition into higher education during a similar timeframe. We therefore urge the government to improve the support available to young people aged 18-25 who transition between mental health services. This could include developing specialist support for this transition, and by working with higher education providers to support young people who choose to go to university.

Finally, the cost of prescriptions represents a real, significant barrier to many students in England who rely on medication to manage a mental health condition. To ensure that all students can access the support they need, the government must make prescriptions free for all higher education students by default without the administrative burden of completing and processing HC2 forms.

*"Eat, heat, live. Start with basics. Deal with food poverty ... into that I'd include prescription costs. That blocks some people from getting the help they need. We should never have got to a point where people are choosing between medication they need and other essentials."*

- Evidence session participant



## Recommendations

### Urgent support

- » Commit to increases in funding for the NHS to:
  - increase the availability of mental health support
  - reduce waiting times
  - eliminate thresholds for care which see many people unable to access treatment due to being deemed too ill for primary care, but not ill enough for secondary care
- » Commit to improving pay and working conditions for NHS staff, including healthcare students.
- » Commit to improving mental health and wellbeing support for healthcare students on placement, by requiring universities and the NHS to take a joined-up approach to providing support, ensuring this is clear, accessible, inclusive, and consistent, with effective information sharing where appropriate.
- » Introduce free prescriptions, dental care, and sight tests for all higher education students by default.

### Long-term commitment

- » The Department of Health and Social Care to develop a long-term strategy and funding plan which ensures the sustainability and improvement of mental health services, ensuring they are accessible, safe, and effective for all.
- » Recruit and retain NHS staff- particularly in mental health roles, enabling a reduced caseload at primary and secondary services.
- » Introduce specific, consistent, and specialist student healthcare support pathways including student mental health teams within secondary care, similar to those available to veterans and in perinatal care.
- » Enable greater collaboration and communication between universities and mental health services, allowing for a consistent, cohesive, and joined-up approach to care. This requires NHS support and university support to be recognised as part of the same student support system, with improved information sharing.
- » Improve the support available to young people aged 18-25 who transition between Children and Young People's Mental Health Services to adult mental health services, for instance by developing specialist support for this transition, and by working with higher education providers to support young people who choose to go to university. This would require enhanced information sharing and a collaborative approach to achieving a strong and consistent continuation of care.

# Theme 2: Financial hardship

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# Financial hardship

It is no surprise that finances and the cost of living ranked as a top priority area for the Manifesto, as judged by our student steering group and in online student communities. Students with financial difficulties show an increased risk of experiencing anxiety, depression, and psychosis. Financial difficulties can also adversely affect physical health and academic performance which in turn contribute to poorer mental health. Additionally, students in financial hardship are less likely to partake in social activities, purchase necessary course materials, and attend non-mandatory teaching. Only 3 percent of students report having enough money. On average, students have a monthly budget shortfall of £621. It's evident that urgent financial relief is central to any serious agenda to support student mental health.

## Student finance

The entire student funding system requires a comprehensive overhaul and there are several key areas where improvements can be made. Within the higher education sector, maintenance loans in England have decreased in real terms every year since 2016. This decline applies to both the maximum entitlement, and the thresholds which determine how much students are awarded on a means-tested basis. Particularly this previous year, a paltry 2.4 percent increase, against a backdrop of inflation over 10 percent, baked in a significant cut to allowances for students in England. Maintenance loan entitlements and household income thresholds should be retrospectively increased in line with or above inflation, backdated to the 2016-17 academic year.

*“Applications to our hardship funds are through the roof. Students are accessing emergency funds daily. We’re really seeing that students can’t cope with the level of funding that they’re receiving.”*

*- Evidence session participant*

Student loan repayments are regressively structured so that the highest earners pay their debt off much faster, thus paying much less due to a lack of accumulated interest. We propose replacing the existing repayment system with a progressive graduate tax to alleviate the disproportionate debt burden on those with lower incomes. While the introduction of the postgraduate taught (PGT) loan is a positive step,

the absence of a fees cap for courses often leaves the lump payment insufficient to cover tuition expenses, let alone maintenance. The government should explore the feasibility of introducing separate maintenance and tuition payments, and to provide sufficient funding to cover the tuition cost of any postgraduate taught course.

## Cost of living

Policy developed to alleviate the cost of living crisis must accommodate the unique financial circumstances faced by students. Previous financial relief measures have repeatedly failed to take students into account. In 2022, council tax rebates to tackle soaring energy costs were not available to full-time students, given they are exempt from paying council tax. Despite this, students still had energy bills to pay and, given their full time educational commitments, had less flexibility in taking up part-time work to make up the difference. Similarly, the National Insurance cut announced in the 2024 Spring Budget was of little help to the majority of students, who do not earn enough to pay into the system in the first place but still have suffered the consequences of two years of surging inflation.

*“We’ve got one son at University, and he tells a lot of stories about students deciding between eating and heating, especially when the weather’s cold, it’s really a struggle; many students are accessing food banks”*

*- Evidence session participant*

To correct for these previous oversights and recognise both the lower average income and poor housing conditions of many students, we support the development of a winter energy allowance for students. No student should have to choose between heating and eating. In a similar vein, greater public transport subsidies for students will improve attendance rates and relieve the financial pressures of travelling to university. This is especially pertinent for commuter students who, on average, find themselves in even greater financial difficulty than their residential peers.

*“The consequences are [poor] mental health ... but the source is that people don’t have enough money to make the choices they want in life, and not choices that are between a Ferrari and a Lamborghini, but between eating and heating ... these are not luxury choices, these are important basic needs choices, which I think is a really important point to make... if students are working in jobs, those jobs should pay decently”*  
- Evidence session participant

## Balancing work and study

While we think no student should be forced to work when they’re already studying full-time, we recognise many are. Students should be paid fairly for their time and effort. We advocate for the implementation of the Real Living Wage for all individuals aged 18 and above. This measure will enable working students to achieve a healthier work-study-life balance, in turn supporting better academic outcomes and mental wellbeing. Going further, we recognise that students on healthcare placements have an especially limited ability to gain extra income due to the high time commitment their training requires. To recognise their contribution to our healthcare system we recommend healthcare students are paid wages or bursaries to cover their placements.

*“I think it’s robbery that currently healthcare students are literally paying for themselves to do multiple 12-hour shifts during each placement week. With this system in place, working a job alongside these shifts (especially if they’re night shifts) is practically impossible meaning to bring extra money in is difficult.”*  
- Student via online community



## Recommendations

### Urgent support

- » Introduce a winter fuel allowance for student households.
- » Increase Minimum Wage in-line with the Real Living Wage for all individuals aged 18 and above, removing staggered wage increases based on age.
- » Work with transport providers to subsidise public transport for students, making commuting more accessible and affordable.
- » Introduce bursaries or wage payments for healthcare students on placement.

### Long-term commitment

- » Commit to a transparent and robust review of the student funding model, with a focus on increasing maintenance support and reducing the long-term financial burden of going to university. This includes:
  - Raising maintenance loan entitlements in England to account for inflation since 2016, reversing almost a decade of real-terms cuts
  - Raising thresholds for means-tested maintenance loans to account for inflation since 2016
  - Introducing maintenance support for all part-time students to ensure equitable access to financial assistance
- » Reviewing the repayment model to ensure payments are proportional, fair, and manageable for all graduates
- » Explore the re-introduction of maintenance grants.
- » Commit to a restructure of the funding model for postgraduate taught students by introducing maintenance funding and ensuring all postgraduate students receive sufficient loans to cover their tuition costs.
- » Require that specific provisions are made for students whenever policy is made to alleviate cost of living pressures (such as council tax rebates).

# Theme 3: Higher education

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# Higher education

We cannot speak to how the government supports student mental health without acknowledging the role they must play in uplifting the higher education sector. Universities can and should be beneficial spaces for the wellbeing of their entire community. University students are tomorrow's leaders and influencers- improving their wellbeing and equipping them to improve the wellbeing of others can help to transform the wellbeing of the nation. Student mental health, staff mental health, and the sustainability of our higher education institutions (HEIs) are now critical to national policy.

We also recognise the importance of inclusivity within education- particularly in regards to inclusive teaching practice and how we value international students, and explore this further in the section 'Inclusive Healthcare and Education'.

## What is the purpose of a university?

At their core, higher education institutions are hubs of knowledge and innovation. It's through research, teaching, and learning that we advance education and wisdom for the good of society. In a world that's facing many existential challenges, we need to be reassured in knowing that universities exist to solve complex problems- and that they're being supported to do so.

Over many decades the purpose, or expectation, of universities has evolved. We've shifted from universities being solely academic institutions to instead being microcosms of society- a bubble that concerns itself with housing, healthcare, civic engagement and education all within a tight-knit campus community. What students, their families, and wider society wants, needs and expects from universities has significantly changed- and we have to start by acknowledging this fact. Over the last few decades, perceptions around the purpose of higher education have evolved and shifted significantly, especially since the introduction of fees and in the wake of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis. For most students, universities aren't just about the degree- and they shouldn't be. They are their homes, their communities, their support network. Despite all the challenges with student mental health that we're facing, we do know that there is something protective and positive about being a student.

*"There's still a prevailing attitude that higher education really is about the education. And I know that sounds silly, and that they are there to learn and get a degree. But realistically, particularly for young adults coming straight from college, or even after a year out, it isn't just their degree."*

- Evidence session participant

*"Universities should be clear about the mental health services they provide. While it's great that student unions provide these services, it shouldn't just be on them- they're already underfunded. The tuition fees should not just go towards teaching but mental health services as well."*

- Student via online community

## The need for investment

All of the issues highlighted throughout the Manifesto are surmountable and our higher education institutions can, and should, play a huge role in helping to address them. Through our work on the University Mental Health Charter, we know that many institutions are making tremendous efforts to address some of the challenges through improving learning, teaching and assessment, support services, hardship funding, clinical interventions, considering wellbeing in the physical environment, working to create more inclusive communities, and social belonging and research.

Like many sectors across the UK, our institutions are stretched and burnt out from being expected to do more with less. Our HEIs are investing their time and efforts into teaching, developing, growing, supporting, and training future generations- and in return need to be invested in. Students have told us that they want to see the government properly fund higher education and to commit to a narrative that's supportive of both the sector and students, recognising the value they bring to our country- not just economically, but culturally and socially too. Critically, within this investment would be the goal to end the model in which the sector is dependent on international students' fees. Furthermore, we must also provide recognition for the immense value that students, particularly international students, bring to our country. International students are paying more than home students for their experience despite being a community that are at the highest risk of being isolated, undersupported, and undervalued.

*"The government bit of that is to make sure they're resourcing universities properly, make sure the universities have got the money that they need to be able to resource mental wellbeing properly."*

*- Evidence session participant*

*"I do think this culture-war framing and relentless attack on university students is just not helpful... Even the stuff around Mickey Mouse courses... kind of implies these foolish 18 year olds are making bad choices in their lives... and are fragile and have exaggerated mental health issues, or they're super woke... It would be nice to have less of that. A bit more positive framing about the value of universities and of students... I guess that's not really a policy as such, but it is a bit of shifting the mood on the value of higher education, on the contributions and what we can learn from the younger generation."*

*- Evidence session participant*

*"You can track how much it costs to conduct research, and universities get about 60p in the pound for the research they conduct. That means they are losing a lot of money on every research project they undertake. That is now increasingly also the case in domestic teaching. The fact that both domestic teaching and domestic research in all four nations of the UK are now, on average, loss-making activities, and increasingly so, is leading to a situation where the income from international students is no longer providing an additionality that allows us to invest over and above what we would be able to do with just domestic sources of income. Instead of being the cherry on the cake, it is becoming the flour. I think the UK has a strategic issue. We need to ask ourselves the question of whether that is smart in the long term."*

*- Vivienne Stern giving evidence to MPs in 2023*

## Teaching, learning and the job market

We know that quality teaching, learning, and assessment can be incredibly contributive to great academic success but also to positive mental health. However, over the last few decades we have seen pedagogical shifts in primary and secondary education that have moved away from prioritising learning to instead prioritising outcomes. We need to value the role higher education plays in giving students the space to focus on their course, find the passion and embrace deep learning. To support this, we need to facilitate a paradigm shift that changes the culture across all of our teaching institutions where teaching and learning practice supports mental health. Additionally, we need to equip our young people with the skills to engage in independent learning and research in a way that will be nourishing for them as individuals, but also valuable for our future workforce.

Universities have an important role to play in equipping students to be prepared for the next steps beyond their courses, but the government also has a crucial role to play in ensuring we have the roles for graduates and that employers have the capacity to invest in their professional learning and development. There's clear evidence that the very valid worries about the job market negatively contribute to mental health.

There are clear relationships between the sustainability of universities, the wellbeing of staff, the wellbeing of students and the quality of research, teaching and learning that take place within universities. None of these things can be viewed in isolation from the others.





## Recommendations

### Urgent support

- » Commit to a continuation of financial and political support for the [University Mental Health Charter](#) Framework, Programme, and Award, developed and delivered by Student Minds.
- » Introduce clear guidance on the roles and responsibilities of universities and statutory health services in relation to mental health.

### Long-term commitment

- » Commit to a review of higher education funding models to improve the sustainability of the sector without placing additional burdens on staff or students.
- » Commit to demonstrating a more positive narrative for universities and students generally, recognising the immense value that higher education providers and students contribute to our society.



## Beth's perspective

"For students, transitions are often an integral part of their lives. This can include transitions between home and university during the year, between children and adult mental health services, and from higher education (HE) to employment.

As someone who was the first in my family to go to university, the move was terrifying. I had no idea what to expect, and neither did the people closest to me.

I'm sure that this is a common experience, and one that can be made much more stressful when you don't have guaranteed support available from the moment you arrive at university. During this time, communication between secondary schools and universities is vital. For example, communication between Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CYPMHS) and university mental health services would allow a student to go to university knowing support is available as soon as they arrive.

In addition to this, improved communication between NHS services and university mental health

services could allow students to access cohesive support both at home and whilst at university. Some students, like myself, will have summer holidays that are three or four months long before they arrive back for the next academic year. During this time, students could potentially need further support from services at home, but are often subjected to long wait times. On top of this, when a student leaves HE, and therefore cannot access university mental health services, they could be put at the bottom of a waiting list once again.

If communication was made a priority and students had support readily available during these transitional periods, their university experience would have the potential to be much more positive.

In general, the move between each part of life (from secondary school, to university, to employment) would be made much less stressful for any individual who needs mental health support."

*Beth Martin, Student Steering Group Member*

# Theme 4: Inclusive healthcare and education

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# Inclusive healthcare and education

Throughout our research, the pervasive impact of inequality within our education and healthcare systems was frequently highlighted as an issue which must be addressed at a government level. In developing this section of the Manifesto, we have focused on the barriers to healthcare and education most commonly highlighted in our research. We recognise the need to be intersectional in our approach, and are aware that many other inequalities and barriers exist in our society, healthcare, and education systems which may not be addressed by our Manifesto. We want to be clear in our support for all efforts to address and dismantle these systemic barriers and inequalities.

Fundamentally, underpinning the many issues highlighted throughout our research is the need for healthcare and education systems which are inclusive by design. This not only means tackling discrimination through improved reporting processes and training opportunities, but intentionally building healthcare and education systems which are inclusive and accessible to everybody. This must involve working with marginalised communities to understand how this can be achieved, as well as investing in the development of services and initiatives which support communities with diverse needs.

## Inclusive education

We're calling for education to be reformed, with the aim of improving mental health and wellbeing through learning. This involves embedding inclusive practice at every stage of education, and working to ensure that education is truly inclusive by design. Currently, the Equality Act (2010) protects students with disabilities by ensuring reasonable adjustments are made to support access and engagement in higher education. However, for too long universities have viewed reasonable adjustments as add-ons which attempt to mitigate deeply-ingrained inequalities, rather than seizing the opportunity to develop truly inclusive teaching, learning and assessment practices. This impacts the whole student population, but particularly disabled students, who have had to wait too long for higher education to foster truly inclusive environments.

We are therefore calling on the government to urgently address this, by working closely with the higher education sector to ensure universities are meeting their legal obligations, as set out in the Equality Act (2010). We are also calling

for the government to address current issues related to the accessibility of Disabled Students Allowance (DSA). We're aware that, at present, the process associated with accessing DSA is complex and difficult to navigate, and recent changes to the service model in England and Wales have exacerbated barriers to receiving needs assessments and assistive technology. The government must therefore urgently intervene to ensure there is enough capacity and funding available for all eligible students to successfully access DSA.

*"I want Disabled Students Allowance to be more accessible and available to students with long term mental health conditions. A lot of people don't even know that they can access disability support for mental health. If a student pays for private therapy, where does that fit?"*

*- Evidence session participant*

The UK government must also make concerted efforts to reverse and remove policies which negatively impact the wellbeing of international students. This includes reversing legislation which prevents international students from bringing their families to the UK whilst studying, and reviewing the student visa to remove the Immigrant Healthcare Surcharge and the student visa application fee. In addition, although we do not believe that any student should have to undertake paid work whilst in full-time education, we recognise that the current economic climate necessitates this for some students, including international students. We therefore support calls to remove the cap on hours worked in part-time employment during term-time.

*“Tackling inequalities for international students is at the heart of what I do at my university. They pay more in fees for what seems to be a lesser experience to their home student peers, and with less financial aid. Some have come to UK universities for a more robust education, and some have fled their home countries for a better life. However, with language barriers, cultural differences that aren’t represented in their universities, and a significant lack of linguistic support for international students, I believe they are paying over the odds for a sub-par experience which needs to be addressed on a national scale.”*

*- Student via online community*

## Inclusive healthcare

With regard to healthcare, we recognise the deep-rooted inequalities which impact access to safe and effective support, and the ways in which these disproportionately affect student communities such as international and racialised students, as well as trans and non-binary students. We’re calling on the government to address these inequalities by committing to build a healthcare system where every student can confidently access effective and appropriate support, regardless of their identity or background. This includes equipping healthcare professionals with the skills and knowledge they need to offer culturally competent and inclusive care, through continuous

training and development. The government must also invest in providing improved support and guidance to student communities, ensuring all students have the knowledge, confidence and skills they need to access healthcare if they need it. This includes co-creating tailored guidance for international students, who may not have interacted with NHS services before, ensuring information about healthcare in the UK is clear, accessible, inclusive, and user-friendly.

Student Minds urges the government to urgently improve the support available to trans and non-binary students, who consistently report high rates of mental health issues and poor wellbeing. This includes ensuring healthcare services are accessible and inclusive for trans and non-binary individuals, improving access to gender-affirming care, and reforming gender recognition.

*“One thing that we’re really finding in [x university]... we have a thriving population of trans and non-binary students who are really struggling with the government’s current rhetoric around being extremely anti-trans and non-binary people in general.”*

*- Evidence session participant*

We continue to support calls for the outdated Mental Health Act, which is not fit for purpose, to be reformed as a matter of urgency. For more information, visit [Rethink Mental Illness’ campaign webpage](#).

# Recommendations

## Urgent support

- » Improved healthcare for the trans community, including reforming gender recognition and improving access to gender affirming care.
- » Champion academic freedom in our universities while protecting students and staff from discrimination and hate speech.
  - Provide clear guidance as to the role of universities and students' unions surrounding academic freedom, "de-platforming", and hate speech, keeping student safety and wellbeing at the forefront.
  - Reject sensationalised debates that falsely juxtapose student safety with freedom of speech, and engage in constructive discussions which recognise both principles as integral to universities.
- » Improve support and guidance for international students accessing NHS mental healthcare, for example by co-creating clear and accessible information about how to access care, medications etc.
- » Commit to a transparent and robust review of Student Visas for international students:
  - Remove the term-time cap on hours worked in part-time employment
  - Remove the Immigrant Healthcare Surcharge for international students
  - Remove the application fee for the student visa
  - Reverse legislation preventing international students from bringing their families to the UK whilst studying
- » Urgently intervene to address disruption to DSA processes due to changes in service models. This includes committing to providing enough capacity and funding for all eligible students to successfully access DSA.
- » Reform the outdated Mental Health Act, which is currently not fit for purpose, as a matter of urgency.

## Long-term commitment

- » Build a truly inclusive education system, supporting efforts to embed inclusive practice throughout every stage of education. This includes ensuring education institutions are delivering teaching, learning and assessment which is inclusive by design, and at a minimum are fulfilling their responsibilities as outlined within the Equality Act (2010).
- » Build a truly inclusive healthcare system, ensuring individuals can confidently access effective and appropriate care and support, regardless of their identity or background. This includes identifying and dismantling cultural, social, and physical barriers to accessing care, and working with marginalised communities to co-create initiatives and interventions which promote inclusion in healthcare.
- » Commit to developing and introducing training (including cultural competency training), effective reporting processes, and accessible support, to improve knowledge and understanding of equality, diversity and inclusion practices and to ensure there are clear and accessible routes to report issues and receive support.





## Aglaia's perspective

"As a teenager, I hung a tube map in my room, a symbol of my dream to study in the UK.

When I got accepted, I thought university would be "the best time of my life", but along with the excitement of a new chapter came my first struggles with mental illness.

My transition into university was very challenging. I suffered from imposter syndrome, and as an international student, I felt personally and academically challenged by the new environment while other students around me seemed to navigate their studies with relative ease. As my mental health declined, I witnessed the inadequate mental health support available for students and had no choice but to interrupt my studies.

Had I received quality and timely support at university, I would not have risked missing out on realising my full academic potential. Being aware of the unique challenges students face when entering and leaving university, it is important to develop targeted support and guidance to enable smoother transitions, as well as intervene early when issues

arise. Ultimately, I believe universities should adopt a student-centred approach to student mental health and co-produce early intervention strategies that meet the needs of a diverse student community, especially in vulnerable moments such as transitions.

Throughout my journey to recovery, I developed a new sense of purpose. Being involved with Student Minds allows me to make a difference in the lives of other students and change public opinion and attitudes towards students' mental health.

I had to fight a lonely battle not to give up on my education, and I urge the adoption of a national approach to student mental health.

At Student Minds, we aim to change this narrative for the next generations of students. Every student should be allowed to thrive and fulfil their dream education."

*Aglaia Freccero - Student Mental Health Manifesto Steering Group Member, PhD student at Imperial College London*

# Theme 5: A mentally healthier nation

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# A mentally healthier nation

Student Minds takes a holistic approach to mental health and wellbeing, recognising that all aspects of life and society can have an impact, both positively and negatively, on students' mental health. The specific issues discussed in this section do not address all contributory factors to a mentally healthy society, but were frequently highlighted in our research and provide focus areas in which policymakers can commit to providing students with access to healthy social, cultural, and natural environments. We echo the [Centre for Mental Health's](#) call for a cross-government plan directly addressing prevention, equality, and support, to work towards a mentally healthier nation.

## Invest in preventative approaches and early interventions

The majority of mental health conditions are diagnosed by the age of 24. Investing in our student populations from an early age will produce markedly improved outcomes in healthcare, productivity, and the quality of life of our communities. A preventative approach will not only provide significant benefits for the student community, but will ease pressure on NHS and university services, saving considerable costs and reducing wait times for mental health support.

The government should improve prevention by providing funding and support for education institutions to empower students to maintain their own mental health and wellbeing, and develop the necessary skills to support others in their life. This would ensure students who access higher education as a young adult have a strong personal understanding of mental health and wellbeing, supporting the transition into higher education through nurturing healthy and happy individuals.

Children and young people must also have timely and culturally appropriate access to support. We believe that the next government should commit to extra funding for specialist support services which reflect the diversity of the population. University support provisions, while vital,

cannot become stopgaps for underfunded and understaffed statutory services.

*“At the moment higher education staff are seeing university mental health services being expected to mop up and fill in the gaps for young people who haven't had access to the services that they needed when they were at school age”*  
- Evidence session participant

Suicide prevention is a key pillar to ensuring the safety of children and young people, especially amidst increasing wait times for support and the growing rates at which mental health conditions are diagnosed. We welcome the development of suicide prevention strategies across all four nations, and urge policymakers to commit to funding the implementation of these strategies, working together to share learnings and improve support available to those affected by deaths by suicide.

We further encourage the government to continue to invest in mental health research to become innovators in whole-institution strategies to support good mental health and wellbeing outcomes. This includes introducing further funding to research student mental health specifically, building on the excellent work of [SMaRteN](#), the Student Mental Health Research Network. The UK should continue to

be a world leader in identifying the risk factors for poor mental health and wellbeing for student populations, and the solutions to mitigate them.

Above all, investing in preventative approaches and early interventions to support positive mental health in all young people in the UK is a smart investment in a healthy society for current and future generations.

## Housing

Student accommodation is a key determinant for good mental health and wellbeing. This relationship is bi-directional; unfit housing can lead to worsening mental health which can, in turn, precipitate poor housing outcomes.

*“We have an emotional relationship with the spaces in which we live, that impacts on our identity, sense of belonging, security and wellbeing”*  
- University Mental Health Charter (2019)

It is therefore vital that all students have access to safe, affordable, and good quality accommodation during their time at university. Factors including security, warmth, space, and access to campus have significant benefits for a student’s mental health. Despite this, the sector is increasingly seeing and acknowledging a housing crisis that is threatening the wellbeing of our student populations.

*“There’s a massive shortage of student accommodation and not enough pipeline coming through. That increases poor mental health and a lot of anxiety for many, many students and actually may hold them back from going to the university that they want to go to.”*  
- Evidence session participant

The cost of renting has risen sharply over the past decade and the increase in student numbers is exacerbating the shortage of available properties. Research suggests that the average student is left with 50p a week after paying for accommodation using their maintenance loan. The financial implications of an expensive and limited housing

stock are numerous, having severe knock-on impacts on a student’s social life and wellbeing in the context of a cost of living crisis.

*“I had to commute to university for nearly 2 hours due to the shortage of accommodation. I was unable to socialise as much as I wanted with both friends from my city and new people in university.”*  
- Student via online community

Without timely action to tackle the housing crisis we will continue to see a negative impact on student mental health. Through our evidence sessions and online communities, we found that students and professionals emphasised the drastic need for government policy to support access to affordable, good quality accommodation in the UK. This includes tackling unrestrained costs, securing and improving tenants’ rights, and a commitment to building more homes.

## The physical environment

Access to a thriving physical environment is another factor which can build positive mental health for students. The government has a significant role to play, both in the short term and long term, over the protection of natural space and green environments in the UK. [Our report on climate change](#) and student mental health highlights the impact that a poorly maintained physical environment can have on our students. Through vital sustainable policy, the government should commit to protecting our green spaces and climate future.



## Recommendations

### Urgent support

- » Introduce policy and legislation that protects and improves the rights of student tenants and limits rent hikes.
- » Improve the quality of private rented accommodation, tackling rogue student landlords and enforcing stricter legal accountability for landlords if standards are not met.
  - In particular, focus on improving regulation around disabled students' access to housing.
- » All devolved nations to ban no fault evictions ('Section 21' evictions in England).
- » Change legislation around instalment prescribing, bringing this in line with Scotland, to better manage risk around death by suicide.

### Long-term commitment

- » Ensuring all young people have access to specialist support if they need it through their school, college, Sixth Form, or through local community support hubs.
- » Commit to working with education providers such as schools, colleges, Sixth Forms and universities to embed whole-institution approaches to mental health and wellbeing, through adequate funding and guidance
- » Invest in mental health research to improve understanding of mental health and what works to improve mental health and prevent or protect against mental health issues. This includes specific funding for research into student mental health.
- » Commit to funding and implementing cross-sector suicide prevention strategies.
- » Ensure every student has a safe place to live- before, during and after their studies- through a large scale house building project.

- We echo Shelter and the [Nation Housing Federation's call](#) for the government to invest in a 10-year Affordable Homes Programme to deliver at least 90,000 social homes a year.

- » Commit to reaching net zero by 2030, while also determining and mitigating the effects of climate change on student mental health.

# Conclusion

Students and young people are our future. Investing in the institutions that educate and support them is an investment in our society's future.

Committing to improve the mental health of our nation isn't just a moral imperative, it's an economic necessity. And, given that pollsters are reporting mental health is a priority issue for voters under 40, it's also a political imperative.

We at Student Minds know all too well that many of the challenges we face in improving mental health are incredibly complex. But the solutions can be simple. We know that there are key commonalities across all of the sections within this Manifesto- the importance of supporting students through transitions, fixing the common points of failure in our systems, the need for cross-sector collaboration, and the importance and value of utilising student voice and lived experience.

**Our ask, our plea, our challenge to politicians is: are you going to prioritise student mental health?**

Are you going to invest in our students and our institutions? Amidst turbulent times domestically and abroad, are you going to paint a picture for the future that's hopeful, ambitious, and exciting?

This Manifesto has set out a vision that outlines the urgent support and long-term commitments we believe are required to get to a point where students can and will thrive.

**Are you up to the challenge?**

**Can you deliver it?**

**Will you see it through?**



# Acknowledgements

The Student Mental Health Manifesto was developed and written by: Nicola Frampton, Jenny Smith, Dom Smithies and Dan Thompson. We wish to extend our thanks to the following:

## Student Mental Health Manifesto Steering Group

Our incredible student Steering Group led the way in developing this ambitious and holistic Manifesto, which captures students' needs at its heart and challenges the next government to be better. We are so grateful for the group's insight, challenge, candour, ambition and enthusiasm throughout the project.

Our thanks go to: Aglaia Freccero, Beth Martin, Ellis Ewin, Helena Kudiabor, Lauren Byrne, Nandini Aggarwal, Rachel Lawrence, Raul Szekely, and Richard.

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## Student Minds

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Particular thanks to Yeme Onoabhagbe, Gareth Hughes, Kate Mitchell, Emily Millard, Charlotte Mee, Suhaib Shaukat, Ari Pascual, Samantha Buss, Dominique Thompson, Alice Wilson and Jonathan Gibb for taking the time to support our research, review the Manifesto and provide feedback on its content and structure.

## Alterline

We have worked with Alterline for several years now on a number of research projects relating to student mental health. In developing the Manifesto's recommendations, Alterline ran two online student communities to help us embed student voice into this work, and provided great insight and expertise throughout. We're grateful for the Alterline team's continued support and partnership.

## Research participants

Throughout this project, and in the many previous research projects which have helped inform this Manifesto, we have engaged thousands of students, higher education staff, and healthcare professionals. Every individual has shaped this Manifesto in some way, and we are grateful to all participants for their time, insight, and expertise. Particular thanks go to the 43 people who attended one of our evidence sessions, and to the 165 students who participated in our online communities, informing and testing our policy recommendations to ensure they were relevant and important to students.

## Design and Illustration

Enormous thanks to Krishna Lad for designing this Manifesto and bringing our ideas to life, Vania Campos for designing the brilliant illustrations used throughout and Sanghamitra Vijay Anand for the front page photography.

# Methodology

## Our approach

This Manifesto is the result of over a decade of listening, researching, and co-producing with students in the higher education sector. Alongside our Student Steering Group, we have spent the last nine months carrying out qualitative research to uncover the political priorities for students and stakeholders in healthcare and education, with a specific focus on mental health and wellbeing. We have combined this research alongside a wealth of quantitative data available to us, including both internal and external research. We would like to extend our thanks to colleagues at Alterline, Blackbullion, Cibyl, National Union of Students (NUS), the Office for National Statistics, and many others who have produced invaluable data for our sector.

At Student Minds we believe that the best way to understand the issues facing students, and thus propose solutions to them, is to work directly with our student population. We therefore made a commitment to centre student voices throughout the development of the Manifesto.

## Student Steering Group

Our Student Steering Group was appointed following an interview process in September 2023, and consisted of two sabbatical officers and eight current students. The group has guided our work throughout the past nine months, advising on a range of topics including (but not limited to) policy ideas, priorities for student mental health, research methodology, and design briefs.

The contributions of the group have been crucial to the development of the Manifesto, ensuring our work is shaped and led by students with a current (or recent) lived experience of the benefits and challenges within higher education in relation to mental health and wellbeing.

## Student communities

In partnership with [Alterline](#), Student Minds ran two online student communities; one in December 2023 and one in February 2024, comprising of a total of 165 students. The student communities were made up of individuals from a range of study levels, and was recruited to be a reflective sample of today's current student population. Our first community asked participants to highlight priority areas for supporting student mental health and suggest some actionable solutions. The results of this group were then embedded into the structure of our evidence sessions, allowing our research to be guided by student voices. In the second wave the students were asked to confirm the priorities and recommendations pulled from our research.

## Evidence sessions

We carried out nine group evidence sessions and three one-to-one interviews, with a total of 43 participants. The sessions were co-facilitated alongside Student Steering Group members. Participants held a range of roles, experiences and views across higher education and healthcare, many with a specific focus on mental health. These expert insights have helped to shape both our research, accompanying narrative, and policy recommendations.

Participants were split into five broad groups as follows:

- Students' union staff or student representatives
- Higher education staff (clinical roles)
- Higher education staff (non-clinical roles)
- Healthcare sector staff
- Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector staff

The sessions were carried out in a semi-structured format- participants were invited to share their initial thoughts on political priorities for student mental health, which facilitators used as discussion prompts. This allowed participants to shape the conversation and limit the bias of the facilitators where possible. Where conversations were guided by facilitators, this was done using the themes produced by the Student Steering Group and our first online student community. Participants' details have been anonymised throughout the Manifesto.

## Written consultation

The final piece of qualitative research carried out for this project was a written consultation form, open for two months from January to March 2024. The consultation consisted of optional, open-ended questions about the government's relationship to student mental health and wellbeing, and what future governments can do to support students. The form was open to anyone with an interest in student mental health, including students, and received 15 responses. These responses have further shaped our narrative and recommendations.

## Relationship with the University Mental Health Charter

The University Mental Health Charter (Hughes and Spanner, 2019), published by Student Minds, consists of a framework document which provides evidence-informed principles to support universities to adopt a whole-university approach to mental health and wellbeing.

96 higher education providers are currently members of the University Mental Health Charter Programme, which supports universities to embed a whole-university approach to mental health, through events, communities of practice, and annual journey reviews.

This Manifesto shares the Charter's approach to student mental health and wellbeing, recognising that we must take a holistic understanding of the issues facing students. That being said, this document focuses primarily on the role of the government, rather than of individual institutions. This distinction was made clear to participants throughout our research.

We hope that this project can work in tandem with the Charter to develop the healthy, happy, and thriving university communities that our student and staff populations deserve.

## Limitations

Despite our best efforts to include diverse student voices in the project, we recognise that there are 2.8 million students in UK higher education, each with their own needs, preferences, and interests. We have attempted to showcase the priorities identified throughout our research and as a staff team, and hope that our efforts will provide direction and inspiration to deliver the change students deserve. Policy must take input from as broad a range of students as possible into account at every stage of development.

# References and further reading

For more detailed information about the references used throughout the Manifesto, visit our webpage via [www.studentminds.org.uk](http://www.studentminds.org.uk).

## General

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