

Working with Students – Reflections from our Student Advisory Committee



*By Dan Thompson
Student Voice Intern at Student Minds*

Our Student Advisory Committee (SAC) met at the beginning of July for the third time this year. Our 20 SAC members provide lived experiences of being students, recent graduates, and sabbatical officers. Their role is to advise the charity on a range of topics, from website design through to policy decisions. They are also our eyes and ears on the ground, relaying what they are seeing at their institutions. They also happen to be highly dedicated and all-round-good-folk, which helps!

If nine months working in higher education has taught me anything, it's that listening to (and co-creating with) students is vital to supporting our community's wellbeing - a value strongly shared across the team. We are aware that most Student Minds staff are not currently students and we could not truly understand the student experience without working alongside them whenever possible. Although we recognise our SAC cannot be representative of the entire student body, we are lucky to hold a diverse range of students in our committee. Their input is invaluable to our work and is an essential part of any higher education charity's organisational structure.

July's session saw [Rosie \(CEO\)](#), [Dom \(Head of Influencing and Communications\)](#), and myself ([Dan, Student Voice Intern](#)), bring three topics to the committee: the next General Election, the UCU's Marking and Assessment Boycott, and our University Mental Health Charter.

General Election

General elections provide both an opportunity and a conundrum for those of us working in the charity sector. As per [charity regulations](#), we cannot align ourselves with any political party, yet the intense press coverage and heightened scrutiny on politics provides an opportunity for us to get student mental health higher on the political agenda. How, then, do we support our students around elections and emphasise the importance of student mental health without involving ourselves in a political tussle?

The first answer is to decide upon policies we would like to see enacted before elections are called, so we can continue to advocate for these regardless of party stances. We therefore asked our SAC which topics may be particularly important to students in the coming years.

They shared issues such as:

- Finances
- Housing
- Sexual health
- Preventative and early intervention policies
- Inequalities relating to modes of study and demographics
- Students experience of voting

Finances is an issue that comes up time and time again when working in higher education, and one which was emphasised by many of our committee members. This unfortunately comes as no surprise; [our November 2022](#) research showed that 97% of students were concerned about the cost of living crisis, with 60% stating it was negatively impacting their wellbeing. SAC members noted that the rising cost of living, and thus university, could price out students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

It is also forcing more students to pick up more work during their studies, which could impact their experience and academic success. [Research from HEPI](#) suggests that the proportion of students in paid employment has risen from 45% to 55% in the past year, with both the average hours worked and the average hours spent undertaking independent study rising as well. This supports SAC's concerns over increased financial pressure on students, and a heavier workload could lead to worsening mental health across the population. Increased workloads could further have implications for our institutions and staff wellbeing as we see some [universities beginning to offer condensed timetables](#) for students to allow for part-time work.

SAC also identified housing as a key issue for students moving forward and one that cannot be ignored at the next election. We have already seen housing crises for students across multiple cities in the UK, including Glasgow, Durham and Bristol, and more must be done to support student housing in terms of affordability, quantity, and quality. Other key topics mentioned included sexual health; preventative and early intervention policies; and inequalities relating to modes of study and demographics.

SAC also encouraged Student Minds to share practical information regarding elections and voting specifically relating to students. Voter ID was referenced multiple times throughout, with SAC calling on us to share resources for students on their rights. Student ID is, for example, not an accepted form of identification. Members also encouraged us to remind students to register to vote and to join up with other charities and sector bodies when doing so. We believe that voting is a fundamental right for students, and it is important that everyone eligible gets their say on how the next government is going to support their mental health and wellbeing.

These sessions with SAC continue to shape our policy aims and goals moving forward, and will inform our approach to the next general election.

Marking and Assessment Boycott

Our second item of this meeting saw SAC discuss the University and College Union (UCU)'s ongoing marking and assessment boycott. The boycott stems from a long dispute regarding pensions, conditions, and pay. Whilst the pension dispute has been settled, the parties are yet to meet an agreement elsewhere ([David Kernohan of WonkHE does a great job of explaining the industrial action](#)).

We have discussed university staff strike action at a couple of our previous committee meetings, but we thought it was necessary to do so again due to the increased impact on students this time around. As a result of final work not being graded, up to a third of UK final year students are [facing delays to graduation](#). This can have serious implications for employment and further study prospects. That being said, Student Minds also recognises that staff wellbeing is essential to a [whole-university approach](#) to improving mental health and wellbeing in higher education.

SAC members were generally supportive of staff due to the root causes of the strike. Many recognised that staff deserve to be treated fairly by their employers and thus believe universities should work to reach a settlement with the UCU. It was further acknowledged that staff do not want to be taking this action - it is seen as a last resort.

There was, however, some discontent within SAC over the type of action being taken. Some members argued that staff should be taking action that is less detrimental to their students. This highlights the core tension of the strike - students we speak to are, for the most part, very supportive of staff and feel they should be treated fairly by employers. However, many are frustrated by the impact on their studies. A student graduating this year will have had at least three years of disrupted study with strikes and the pandemic, and are now facing difficulties even as they try to leave higher education.

Student Minds continues to urge all parties involved to find an agreement to limit the impact on our students.

University Mental Health Charter

Our [University Mental Health Charter](#) programme is now entering its third year, with 61 universities having joined us on the journey to embed a whole-university approach to wellbeing in their communities in 2022-23. It is great to see the [government recognising](#) the importance of the work going on in the Charter, and even more so to see our [last cohort of award winners](#).

The Charter process began in 2018 and is growing as the charity does. With that growth comes challenges and a lot of learning for us, and thus we are always looking for ways to receive more feedback on what we have achieved so far.

Some SAC members are studying at institutions who have been/are going through the Charter process, whilst others are not - giving us a good range of viewpoints. Regardless of engagement with the programme, there was unanimous acceptance amongst the committee that the Charter is a crucial piece of work for our HE community.

SAC did note that awareness of the Charter can be fairly limited within the general student population. This is potentially an issue of communication and one we should strive to improve on. Any university going through the process should be sharing their progress with their students, and providing two-way opportunities for co-creation and learning. One SAC member put it succinctly: "If students know that such a framework exists they can hold their universities accountable. They could play a role in getting universities to engage."

Currently, all universities going through the Charter Award process have to appoint a Student Lead to write a student-led report as part of their self-assessment. We also have Student Assessors on our panels and have co-produced [a guide for students](#) wanting to help their university improve on

mental health and wellbeing. But we are always looking for more ways to involve students in our work, and it is not just students we must work with but entire institutions.

If we continue to work together, then we can create a community which enriches and emboldens our students. I often think of [our research](#) last year, which showed that there is around a three-way split of students whose wellbeing has worsened, stayed the same, and improved whilst at university. We believe it is work like the Charter that will support students to thrive in a new setting, and ultimately sustain or achieve good mental health and wellbeing.

Learn More

If you'd like to read more about our SAC, check out [our webpage](#) which introduces our members. We will be recruiting for next year's SAC towards the end of 2023, so keep an eye on our [newsletter](#) if you think you'd make a great addition.