Working with Students - Reflections from our Student Advisory Committee

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This February saw our new 2024 cohort of the Student Advisory Committee (SAC) meet for the first time. As staff members, it's always really energising meeting students who are highly engaged and passionate about student mental health - which is exactly what we have with this year's group. We are lucky to have a wide range of lived experiences and representation from all stages of the student journey on our SAC in 2024.

Our February meeting covered our approach to content, including our plans for [Student Space](#), and the upcoming University Mental Health Day. As ever, the group held thoughtful discussions which challenged and supported our work. I'm joined by SAC member Suhaib to run you through some insights from the meeting.

Student Minds Content

We currently host a range of online content, from our websites and social media to our Blog and Student Space, mostly facilitated by our brilliant communications team. We asked the SAC for feedback on the quality of the current student-facing and student-led content we produce.

We were pleased to hear that committee members enjoyed our online content. They emphasised the importance of clinically informed content, such as Student Space, and recognised the accessibility of posts on social media. Members complimented our commitment to sharing student voices and were impressed by our visual content.

The group also challenged us in some areas, including accessibility and navigation of the content. Members proposed that we could make use of subtitles, accessible viewing options of video content, and perhaps personalised pathways for specific support on the website. We are always looking for ways to improve our work - it is an essential function of the SAC that their voices are fed back into the team and help to shape Student Minds going forward.

The discussion also covered the development of [Student Space,](#) a crucial part of Student Minds' work. Student Space is an online student support platform created in 2020 thanks to funding from the Office for Students and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). The website holds an array of psychoeducational content to guide and support students through the many periods and difficulties of life in higher education. Not only is it vital that students have access to free content, but it further helps to share experiences that some may have thought were unique - it's important for those going through them to understand they are not alone. From our internal insights, we can see that articles on

finance, heading home for the Winter Break and loneliness have been some of the most visited over the past couple of months, giving us a quick snapshot into the priorities for student support at any given time. The site also hosts a University directory, meaning students can find information about support at their own institutions if they need it.

As Student Space matures, we are in the midst of reassessing our content development, including expanding our 'student stories' section. Existing stories were recorded during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is crucial for our work that student voices are front and centre, so we are looking to develop these as we continue on our digital revamp journey. Keep an eye out on our social media and website for more student-led content and if you feel you have something to contribute, from a written blog to a video story, don't hesitate to get in touch!

University Mental Health Day
University Mental Health Day (UMHD) is being held on the 14th of March this year, in partnership with UMHAN. UMHD is an annual day to get the nation talking about student mental health by working together to make mental health a university-wide priority. 2023's edition saw an amazing day of stalls, events, content and an online webinar concerning the cost of living, community and belonging, and finding balance. We managed to reach over 20 million people on social media last year and are hoping for another superb day packed with student-led content this year.

Our research has found that 1 in 4 students have a diagnosed mental health issue. Whilst awareness is increasing, a lot more can be done to address the existing gaps in knowledge, mental health literacy and the support available for students. We know that it is a tough time for students and staff, so a day to spotlight these issues is crucial to the work we do. Join us in being part of that change!

Students and staff from across the country hold events at their institutions, both online and offline, to raise awareness and ensure their university and student population are working to improve wellbeing. We are also hosting a Step into Spring challenge and encouraging everyone to get involved on social media by using #UniMentalHealthDay.

Some SAC members were keen to emphasise that, at their institutions, it tended to be the Student's Union team picking up University Mental Health Day rather than the university themselves - we love to see student officers engaged in our work and would encourage everyone employed by a higher education institution to encourage your department or colleagues to get involved. We offer resources such as resource packs, fundraising ideas and social media assets to support you in doing so.

Finally, I would highly recommend that you visit our events page here. We hosted a webinar recently on how to take part in University Mental Health Day which you can find as a recording, and have links to multiple in person and online events. UMHAN are also running a webinar titled ""When does anxiety become a problem?". We know that since the Covid-19 pandemic, students have reported higher levels of anxiety - according to Cibyl's latest research 58% students experience depression and anxiety, rising significantly for groups such as students with a mental health disability or neurodivergence. The webinar will discuss

important questions of when anxiety becomes more than a "normal" response to life, how to manage it, and at what point students should escalate towards accessing support.

Reflecting on the SAC Experience
Suhaib Shaukat
SAC member and International Politics, Law & Economic student at Middlesex University

This meeting marked the formal start of my role as a member of the Student Advisory Committee (SAC). For me, it was an exciting moment, being able to have a platform to discuss and dissect the plans that the organisation will work on in the coming months. Although the meeting was online, the new members of SAC were warmly welcomed by the staff and the existing members of the committee. In life, behind every action there is a motivation, and today I want to give my motivation for joining SAC.

Since starting my university life I have always been advocating for better mental health facilities for students through interacting with my university's Students' Union and other platforms. Last year in November, I got the opportunity to work with the Wellbeing team and that got me thinking of the potential of connecting with other individuals who are working in the same sector. I have always believed in the power of collaboration as it opens the doors to multiple new creative ideas. My motivation for joining Student Minds was to be more informed about the work that was happening in the mental health sector and that too in the higher education sector. I am particularly interested in the policy matters of the mental health sector and being in the SAC will allow me to know more about the policy of the sector and allow me to work with people who are doing amazing work in the sector.

My experience of the first meeting was nothing less than fantastic. The meeting started with an icebreaker where each of the participants introduced themselves. After that, the new members were told about the functions of the SAC and how it serves the objectives of the whole organisation in the broader context. This helped me to understand the role of SAC in a much better way. After this, the participants went to discuss the preparations for UMHD.

The meeting extensively discussed the preparations and communication strategy regarding UMHD. Aaron from the Communications team joined the meeting to discuss the priorities of the team and how SAC members can contribute towards their ideas. There were a lot of exciting ideas for the campaign around the UMHD, it was decided to have a separate meeting to further work on the ideas and come up with a solid communication plan for the day. The conversations about UMHD have prompted me to consider what my university is doing and how the institution can engage with the day.

Being a member of SAC is a privilege but also comes with an enormous responsibility. As 2024 marks an election year, it's imperative to analyse the mental health plans proposed by each major political party for students' mental health. In the coming months, I hope that SAC reflects on plans and suggests policy recommendations for the political party.

In addition, I also hope that the (SAC) addresses the mental health challenges experienced by international students, especially considering the significant adjustments they face when relocating to a new country with limited or no support systems in place. Moving to a new country can be an overwhelming experience. Feelings of isolation, anxiety, and stress among international students are common. Therefore, SAC must recognize and address these unique mental health needs to ensure that all students, regardless of their nationality, receive the necessary support and resources to thrive academically and emotionally.

Learn More

If you'd like to read more about our SAC, [check out our webpage](#) which introduces our members. You can [sign up to our newsletter here](#).