



Department
for Education



Department for
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& Industrial Strategy

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Thank you for providing the Regulation 28 report, dated 2 May 2019, in relation to Mr Benjamin James Charles Murray. This response is a joint one from the Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care. We understand that your report was also sent to the University of Bristol, Universities UK, UCAS, Public Health England and Student Minds.

We would like to say first how much the circumstances of Ben Murray's death have become a focus for government officials and colleagues across the higher education sector working on mental health policy, and that this focus has been greatly aided by the courage, drive, and ideas of the Murray family. Those individuals who have been involved with the family in this work are grateful for the contribution of Ben's father, James Murray, to support improvements to mental health guidance and provision for students both in Bristol and further afield.

At the outset, we would like to assure you that mental health, and suicide prevention, are key priorities for this Government. In January, we published the first Cross-Government Suicide Prevention Workplan which sets out an ambitious programme of work to reduce suicides, including actions being taken to improve the mental health of university students:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/suicide-prevention-cross-government-plan>

Under the Equality Act 2010 higher education providers have legal responsibilities to support students with mental health conditions. Through the Department for Education's latest guidance to the Office for Students (OfS) on Student Experience, the Department for Education asked the OfS to continue its work supporting student experience, with a focus on wellbeing and mental health.

Whilst it is for higher education (HE) providers to determine what welfare and counselling services they need to provide to their students, the government is proactive in promoting best practice by the Higher Education sector. The Department for Education is working closely with

Universities UK on embedding the Step Change programme within the sector. Step Change calls on higher education leaders to adopt mental health as a strategic priority throughout the whole institution, and embed good mental health practices beyond student services teams. The OfS has recently announced the award of almost £6 million of funding for ten large-scale projects encouraging higher education providers to find new ways of combating student mental health issues. The projects involve over 60 different universities, colleges and other organisations including NHS services, the police and charities, together contributing an additional £8.5 million in matched-funding taking the investment up to £14.5million.

The projects will address one or more of the following areas:

- Transitions – for all types of students, whether from school or college to higher education, or from there into postgraduate study or employment.
- Early intervention – by providing new forms of mental health awareness training to staff and students; or using data to improve or enhance interventions.
- Improving support – for example by developing links between university or college-level support services and those of local primary care and mental health services.

The University of Bristol is a partner on one of the successful funded projects - the UWE National Learning Collaborative bid. The OfS will communicate the outcomes widely so that students everywhere can benefit from the work undertaken by the programme.

Building on this, in June 2019, the Prime Minister announced an additional £1 million for the OfS funding for digital and innovative proposals that drive improvements in mental health support and early intervention for higher education students. The programme will fund proposals that promote partnership working between the health and higher education sectors.

Further, the University Mental Health Charter announced in June 2018 is backed by the Government and led by the sector, focusing on driving up standards in promoting student and staff mental health and wellbeing. Prospective students and their families will be able to identify providers who have succeeded in achieving the standards of the charter. The government expects providers to engage with the charter.

We will take the opportunity to address the concerns raised in your report in turn:

Concern 1: You ask that consideration be given to sharing the University of Bristol's good practice on suicide prevention throughout the sector. Both the Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care worked with Universities UK, the OfS and other stakeholders within the higher education sector, to develop guidance on measures to help prevent suicide. The guidance was published in September 2018, ahead of the 2018/19 academic year, with every Universities UK member receiving a printed version. The 'Suicide-Safer Universities' guidance can be found here: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/guidance-for-universities-on-preventing-student-suicides.aspx>. We expect all universities to engage actively with the guidance to improve mental health support and reduce suicide risks amongst their student population.

The guidance was informed by the University of Bristol's good practice guide, the 'Suicide Prevention Framework' as well as other HE providers approaches to student mental health. The University of Bristol's Vice-Chancellor, Professor Hugh Brady, chaired the Universities UK-Papyrus Suicide Safer Universities Guidance Working Group. The guidance was launched by Bristol at a Universities UK Members Conference in 2018 at which James Murray, Ben's father, spoke. Papyrus also worked with James Murray to promote take up of the guidance.

We understand that Universities UK plan to re-launch the guidance in July this year, which will include an updated section on 'Postvention', contributed by the Samaritans, and a technology supplement co-authored by James Murray and digital support company, Jisc.

Student accommodation providers also have a role to play in supporting student mental health, particularly to ensure that frontline staff who are in contact with students are appropriately trained to support students. British Property Federation guidance being published on Monday (15/7/19) makes a number of recommendations to ensure that student accommodation providers fulfil their duty of care towards students. This includes guidance on the legal requirements of accommodation providers, mental health policies and procedures, and training for staff. This training should include guidance on recognising the signs of mental distress and responding to a crisis involving student mental health, and how to refer cases to networks of appropriately trained professionals, including NHS mental health services.

Concern 2: You raise the important issue of mental health disclosure to HE providers, students and advisers, either via the UCAS application process or direct to the provider.

UCAS provides a range of information and advice to all audiences in relation to mental health and the support HE providers can offer. HE providers are responsible for their own admissions processes, however the government also has a role to play in promoting an environment in which students feel able to disclose a mental health condition without concern that this may be detrimental to their chances of either securing an offer, or thriving at that place of study.

Disclosure at the point of application is designed to ensure that students are supported from the very start of their journey in higher education; to ensure that they receive the support from the provider right through from the application and interview process through to their time studying. UCAS have recorded a year-on-year increase in mental health disclosures in the admissions process; this is self-declared and optional and students may also declare outside the admissions process.

UCAS is currently reviewing their 'disability and special needs' question in UCAS Apply. This will involve a cross-sector project with the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and others, as well as experts in this area. The current question forms part of the HESA Student Record, therefore any change must be joined up.

It is anticipated that any change would be implemented for the 2021 entry cycle at the very earliest.

UCAS have been working with the student mental health charity, Student Minds, to develop and improve their existing guidance. We understand that they will respond to you separately providing full details of this.

Students can experience pressures in moving from school/college to University. The Education Transitions Network was launched in March by the Department for Education to examine ways to help students deal with the pressures and challenges that may arise when starting university. More information is available on GOV.UK: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-creates-new-student-mental-health-taskforce>.

The taskforce group will develop measures to make a smooth transition into higher education and help students maintain good mental health. The network will explore ways in which to increase disclosure at the point of application to encourage prospective students to declare mental health problems without fear that this will affect their admission offer prospects. This builds on the work already underway across the sector to improve support for student mental health. The network is currently developing its strategic approach to tackling risks to wellbeing which will be centred on embedding quality-assured, good practice initiatives across the sector.

Improving information sharing so that institutions can get better at involving families and friends in supporting students in difficulty is part of the package of measures announced at the Higher Education Mental Health Summit held in June 2018. Universities UK is leading the work – which is being chaired by Brunel Vice Chancellor and incoming Universities UK President [REDACTED] - to develop advice on how higher education providers can get better at involving support networks at an early stage when students are struggling. This work is approaching its final stages and will include a consensus statement and guidance being published before the start of next academic year.

Concern 3: You note that currently the University sector does not carry out an investigation report following the death of a student. We recognise the value of a written report in order to identify lessons learned and develop an action plan to preventing future deaths, as well as the value to the Coroner.

Universities UK's 'Suicide-safer Universities' guidance on postvention, developed in conjunction with our Departments and the Office for Students, recommends carrying out a serious incident review to facilitate research, data collection and monitoring to get to the bottom of what has happened, and the lessons learned. This also includes sharing experiences of best practice and knowledge with others. As referred to above, the guidance was published in September 2018, ahead of the 2018/19 academic year, with every UUK member receiving a printed version. The Universities Minister will work with Universities UK in the forthcoming academic year to remind Higher Education providers of this recommendation in the 2018 Universities UK guidance.

Public Health England is happy to work alongside partners to support the development of a serious incident framework to help ensure incidents are identified correctly, investigated thoroughly and learned from to reduce the reoccurrence of incidents. In 2017, DHSC established a national Learning from Deaths policy framework, providing guidance to NHS providers on how to investigate and learn from deaths, and also, engage meaningfully and sensitively with bereaved families. There may be much that the university sector, working with Public Health England, can take from this policy area to inform the development of any future framework.

Thank you for writing on this important matter.

*Yours sincerely,
Chris Skidmore*

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Jackie Doyle-Price

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