



## University of Exeter Guidance Note on Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are complex conditions that impact upon both mental and physical health and wellbeing. It is important that students with eating disorders are able to access and engage with the most appropriate form of support, to enable engagement with academic studies and wider University life.

This briefing is written as guidance for current and prospective students, in addition to NHS service staff and University of Exeter Wellbeing Services and Academic staff. This guidance has been prepared in consultation with the NHS Student Health Centre, the University Wellbeing Services and Devon Partnership NHS Trust Community Eating Disorders Service (CEDS). It has been written in line with the current University Health and Wellbeing Support to Study (HWSS) Policy and also makes reference to the Higher Education Occupational Physicians Society (HEOPS, 2013) guidance and the current National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidance for eating disorders (NICE, 2018).

The guidance contains the following:

- 1.) Position Statement on eating disorders
- 2.) Support available at the University of Exeter and within the local area
- 3.) University considerations for study
- 4.) Use of Health and Wellbeing Support to Study (HWSS) policy at University of Exeter
- 5.) References and Resources
- 6.) Links to information which may be helpful

### 1.) Position statement

The University of Exeter aims to provide a supportive, stimulating learning environment for all students. The University has a strong commitment to ensuring that students with a range of physical and mental health conditions have the opportunity to realise their academic potential and meet academic requirements associated with their programme of study.

There are various detrimental effects of eating disorders on a students' health and ability to study; anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and related (atypical) eating disorders may have a profound impact upon psychological, social and physical functioning. Eating disorders are likely to affect a students' ability to study and to achieve their academic potential, as well as impacting upon their ability to benefit from the broader aspects of University life. The pressures associated with university study can exacerbate an eating disorder.

In the majority of cases, Wellbeing Services can offer support to students experiencing an eating disorder while at the University to continue with their studies and engage in University life. A small number of students attending University have a particularly severe eating disorder, mostly in the form of anorexia nervosa. These students are usually significantly underweight, physically compromised, and substantially impaired in their psychological and social functioning. Some students may continue to perform well academically, but at huge expense to their overall wellbeing, which is a concern for the University. In some severe cases current evidence would suggest that an interruption to studies be considered to ensure that the health and wellbeing needs of the student are addressed as paramount.

The University is not a statutory provider of care but recognises it has a general duty of care to all students. It is intended that this document will offer guidance for Academic Faculties, NHS services, students at the University of Exeter and their families.

## **2.) Support available at the University of Exeter and within the local area**

Our position at the University will be to support students to engage with their studies and university experience, encouraging autonomy and guiding students towards appropriate support and care for their physical and mental health conditions.

### Registering with a Doctor/GP

Most healthcare in the UK is provided by the National Health Service (NHS). All students at the University of Exeter are advised to register with a local NHS Doctor, usually known as a General Practitioner (GP). Students normally register at either The Student Health Centre, which is located on the University of Exeter Streatham campus, or at The Heavitree Practice, located in the Heavitree area of Exeter, which are both NHS practices and have experience in supporting students with eating disorders.

Students often spend significant amounts of time at home in between terms but it is advised they still register with a GP in Exeter when resident here particularly in the case of eating disorders where physical assessment may be required. If a transfer of care is needed to a GP service near home during vacations this will be advised on and facilitated by the University Doctor/GP involved in their care or the eating disorders service.

### Consideration of NHS support

Wellbeing Services recommend that any students who have been under the care of NHS mental health or specialist eating disorders services in another part of the country discuss support with their current team to see what can be offered locally with Devon Partnership NHS Trust, and to discuss the referral pathway for specialist eating disorder support.

We would suggest that students and their families view information about the local CEDS:

### [Community eating disorder service | DPT](#)

HEOPS guidance suggest considering what support is available locally **pre-arrival** at university with the current treating team or GP. This is to ensure a smooth transition, as continuity of care is important and a change in medical team may exacerbate symptoms (HEOPS, 2013).

Linking in with local CEDS can happen through seeing a GP and requesting referral. At the end of this document there is a web link to information about Devon Partnership Trust NHS Services.

It is important to note that levels of service provision from the NHS varies between localities, and service provision may be different going from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to adult services across the country.

### Students with Private Healthcare Support



We recognise that some students may be accessing private health care for their eating disorder. The University is keen to work with all services to ensure that students have the necessary information and support in place, including consideration of reasonable adjustments to studies. Private providers are encouraged to contact the Wellbeing Services if they have any information to share that will assist a student's support, and students will be asked for consent to liaise with any relevant teams.

### Wellbeing Services

For students with an identified eating disorder, it is likely that support from Wellbeing Services alone will not be sufficient.

- A student with an eating disorder falls under the category of having a disability which is defined under the Equality Act (2010) as a physical or mental impairment that has substantial and long-term effect on the ability to carry out normal day to day activities. Higher Education institutions have a duty to provide reasonable adjustments to support a student who has disclosed their disorder. In line with this, students can declare their mental health condition to Wellbeing Services and request an appointment to see a mental health advisor to consider any reasonable adjustments that can be put into place.
- Wellbeing Services' mental health advisors can support students with a declared disability to create an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) for their time at the University of Exeter, which will outline reasonable adjustments that would be recommended to support the management of mental health and academic studies. In some cases, this will include a discussion around deferment of the student's place whilst the student engages in treatment, [interruption of studies](#), consideration of whether part-time studying is possible, or reasonable time off from their programme to attend treatment. It is important to acknowledge that for some courses with a professional training requirement and/or attendance expectations, these adjustments may not be possible. Unless enrolled in a fully online programme or granted approval for an alternative mode of study, students are expected to be physically present to attend campus during academic terms and participate in all scheduled synchronous learning and teaching activities required by their module and/or programme. The University of Exeter Wellbeing Services offer a non-judgemental space for students to speak about concerns with their eating, weight and shape. Students can access mental health advice to discuss their health, relevant psychoeducation and assistance to access appropriate NHS support.
- As part of your contact with Wellbeing Services, we will seek consent to liaise with relevant services such as the GP, specialist NHS provision or any relevant private healthcare providers in line with our confidentiality policy. Coordination with these external professionals enables Wellbeing Services to better understand any ongoing treatment plans so we can tailor any university support appropriately. This collaboration can help, especially during times of transition or academic pressure, and ensures that students do not have to navigate complex health needs alone. Providing consent promotes continuity, reduces the risk of conflicting advice, and ultimately enhances the effectiveness of the care and support provided.

### Guidance for staff members concerned about a student

Guidance on where to refer or signpost students to according to the urgency of their situation is available in our [Signposting and Referral Routes for Students document](#). University staff members who have concerns about a student should initially encourage the student to approach Wellbeing Services and their GP. If there is an urgent concern about a person's mental health or weight, staff can complete



a Student of Concern referral, and a member of the wellbeing team will be in touch. It should be stressed that the wellbeing service is supportive, and any follow-up will be carried out in the student's best interests. Wellbeing Services has also created a booklet called ["Helping Distressed Students"](#) which provides guidance for colleagues on how to best support a student in distress.

### **3.) University considerations for study**

The Higher Education Occupational Physicians Society (HEOPS) provides guidance to assist universities in supporting students with severe eating disorders, particularly anorexia nervosa. This guidance emphasizes the importance of considering the significant impact eating disorders can have on physical health, cognitive function, and overall academic performance.

HEOPS guidance notes that BMI can be a useful, but limited indicator of risk, and therefore, we will primarily be guided by the professional opinion of any specialist medical practitioners involved in a student's care. The University endeavours to take a flexible and supportive approach where a student's BMI is below the recommend HEOPs threshold students will be expected to demonstrate that they are engaging with the relevant medical treatment and to provide consent to information-sharing between their medical practitioners and Wellbeing Services, when health concerns arise.

### **4.) Use of Health and Wellbeing Support to Study (HWSS) policy**

In certain circumstances it may be necessary or appropriate to support a student through the University's Health and Wellbeing Support to Study (HWSS) procedure, which considers a student's ability to meet academic, social and behavioural requirements without their physical, mental, emotional or psychological health being negatively impacted or that of other students and/or University staff. The aim of HWSS is that students are supported to study alongside managing their health, wellbeing, and current circumstances to the best of their ability, and wherever possible to meet the required learning outcomes and complete their programme. Students are expected to be able to engage sufficiently with their academic work without putting their own health at risk, and where studies do not impact engagement with relevant support and health services.

Where the University has serious and persistent concerns about health and/or welfare concerns, interruption from studies may be considered. In some cases, a student may require inpatient or intensive outpatient treatment, which may necessitate time away from university to focus on recovery. Where there are significant medical complications, concerns for the student's safety, or limited engagement or insight into their condition, the University may consider enforcing a formal interruption of studies. This approach ensures the student can prioritise their health and access appropriate treatment and support within a safe and structured framework. A return to studies after an interruption related to an eating disorder should be carefully planned to support the student's ongoing recovery and ensure a successful transition back into university life. The process typically involves a collaborative approach between the student, relevant healthcare professionals, and Wellbeing Services.

Before returning, the student may be asked to provide medical evidence confirming they are well enough to resume academic activities and manage the demands of university life. This helps ensure that the return is in the best interest of the student's health and wellbeing.

Further information about the HWSS process is available at the following link: [Health, Wellbeing and Support for Study Procedure | Wellbeing Services in Devon | University of Exeter](#)



## 5.) References

Legislation.gov.uk. (2010). *Equality Act 2010*. [online] Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents> [Accessed 29 January 2019].

Higher Education Occupational Physicians Society (2013). [online] Available at:

[http://www.heops.org.uk/uploads/1521730766HEOPS\\_Guidance\\_Fitness\\_to\\_Study\\_with\\_Severe\\_Eating\\_Disorders\\_v2.pdf](http://www.heops.org.uk/uploads/1521730766HEOPS_Guidance_Fitness_to_Study_with_Severe_Eating_Disorders_v2.pdf) [Accessed 29 January 2019].

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2018). [online] *Eating Disorders* (NICE Guideline). Available at: <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/qs175/resources/eatingdisorders-pdf-75545662586821>.

## 6.) Links to information which may be helpful

**BEAT eating disorders charity-** <https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/> **Devon Partnership Trust, NHS -** <https://www.dpt.nhs.uk/our-services> **Student Health Centre -** <https://www.nhs.uk/services/gp-surgery/student-health-centre/L83016002> **Heavitree GP Practice -** <https://www.theheavitreepractice.co.uk/>