

A Competency Framework for Responding to Students in Distress

Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce

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For many students who need practical support or are struggling to cope, their teachers, personal tutors or departmental administrators are seen as the first point of contact. Students may have greater affinity with these members of course teams who may be viewed as more accessible than institution-wide and more specialist support services. For resident students, accommodation and security teams may also find themselves playing a pastoral role, often on an informal basis. For those students who do not disclose their challenges overtly, these staff have more frequent opportunities to observe signs of distress. This Competency Framework provides a common understanding across the sector of the skills, approach, and knowledge that student-facing staff need in order to respond to those students about whom they are becoming concerned in a helpful and safe way.

The document has been developed as an output of the Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce. It offers a practical tool to support higher education providers respond more effectively and consistently to student wellbeing and mental health needs.

The framework is intended as a positive and proactive approach to supporting students and consideration of its local implications should sit within a whole university approach to mental health. The approach it sets out is congruent with the University Mental Health Charter's statement on the purpose of training in mental health for staff who are not in clinical mental health roles.

Most higher education providers understand the importance of providing clear guidance and/or training on supporting student mental health and wellbeing for student-facing staff who are not specialists in mental health. However, until now, there has been no standard framework describing the competencies that staff require if a provider is to achieve this goal. This framework acts, therefore, as an exposition of threshold expectations for all student-facing staff in responding to students in distress. I hope it will be valuable to all higher education providers in England as and when they refresh their staff learning and development programmes.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the contributions of colleagues across the sector, including those who are Taskforce members, who have shared their expertise and experience. My thanks are also extended to Jenny Shaw, part of the Higher Education Student Support Champion Team, who has overseen its compilation.

Professor Edward Peck, Higher Education Student Support Champion and Chair of the Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce

How to approach this framework

Today's students face challenges not commonly encountered by those in previous generations. The legacy of Covid lockdowns is compounded by the impact of social media, financial pressures, changes to family structures and new patterns of socialising. Students may not demonstrate the same levels of self-reliance and independence that we saw ten or twenty years ago and may not have reliable insight into their own level of support need or level of risk. In this context, without guidance or training, it can be difficult for non-specialist staff to know how to respond, and to differentiate between a normal emotional response to a difficult situation and a more serious problem.

Student-facing staff can, and frequently do, provide a helpful and supportive response to students in distress, and this framework seeks to ensure this happens consistently well. It prioritises the development of key interpersonal skills along with the knowledge to be able to signpost effectively and the skills needed to recognise and respond to urgent, specialist or emergency situations.

The approach, skills and knowledge recommended in this document are informed by the understanding that most students who present to non-specialist staff with distress will not require an emergency response. Rather, they can best be supported by an approach that empowers them to draw on their own abilities, resources and networks while at the same time offering information, signposting and a crucial safety net. When students are active in addressing their own distress they are not only more empowered, but more likely to engage with the available support.

The context in which these interactions take place will be varied, reflecting the diversity and complexity of HEPs. Similarly, the nature of the interaction will be different across different job roles: a personal tutor meeting at 2pm is very different from an encounter with security at 2am, yet both may have the same opportunity to respond to a student in distress.

While roles and contexts vary, this framework is designed to help institutions reflect on how they can support all staff to make some basic judgment calls; for example, spotting when someone is actively suicidal and making an appropriate emergency call is something all staff should know how to do. Understanding what distinguishes active suicidality from mentions of suicide or suicidal feelings is something that all colleagues can do with effective training and clear guidance.

Using the Competency Framework with the Student Needs Framework

Both the Competency Framework and the Student Needs Framework serve as valuable tools for addressing student wellbeing in higher education, though they focus on different yet complementary aspects of support. When aligned, they create a holistic approach to addressing student needs, encompassing both individual development and a sense of belonging.

The Competency Framework is structured to provide student-facing staff with the necessary skills, knowledge, and approaches to respond effectively to students in distress. It emphasises compassionate communication, proactive support, and empowering students to build their own resilience. The framework focuses on consistent, institution-wide processes for identifying, supporting, and referring students to appropriate services. Its competency-based structure ensures staff can create safe spaces, manage risk, and collaborate effectively across services, laying the groundwork for optimised student competence and resilience as outlined in the Student Needs Framework.

The Student Needs Framework offers a broader perspective on student support by identifying key elements that underpin students' confidence, resilience, and sense of belonging. Its dual focus on personal development and community engagement aligns with the Competency Framework's emphasis on empowering students and fostering meaningful relationships. For example, the need for clear expectations and accessible information in the Student Needs Framework, resonates with the Competency Framework's call for clarity in institutional protocols and resources.

Used together, these frameworks can drive dialogue and service redesign by guiding institutions to balance the development of student independence with community-building efforts. The frameworks reinforce the necessity of equipping staff with the skills to nurture meaningful peer and staff relationships, while also enabling them to recognise and respond to individual distress. This synergy not only addresses immediate wellbeing needs but also creates a supportive environment where students can thrive academically and socially.

Higher Education Providers can utilise these frameworks collaboratively to design training, shape support systems, and evaluate the impact of interventions on both individual and community outcomes in higher education.

The following organisational processes are recommended to ensure the effectiveness of the competency framework. These processes should be communicated clearly and effectively to all staff, including contract staff and staff who are not desk based, with key information readily available.

Support for Students

While students are the primary audience, staff will benefit from easy access to this information to help them support students effectively.

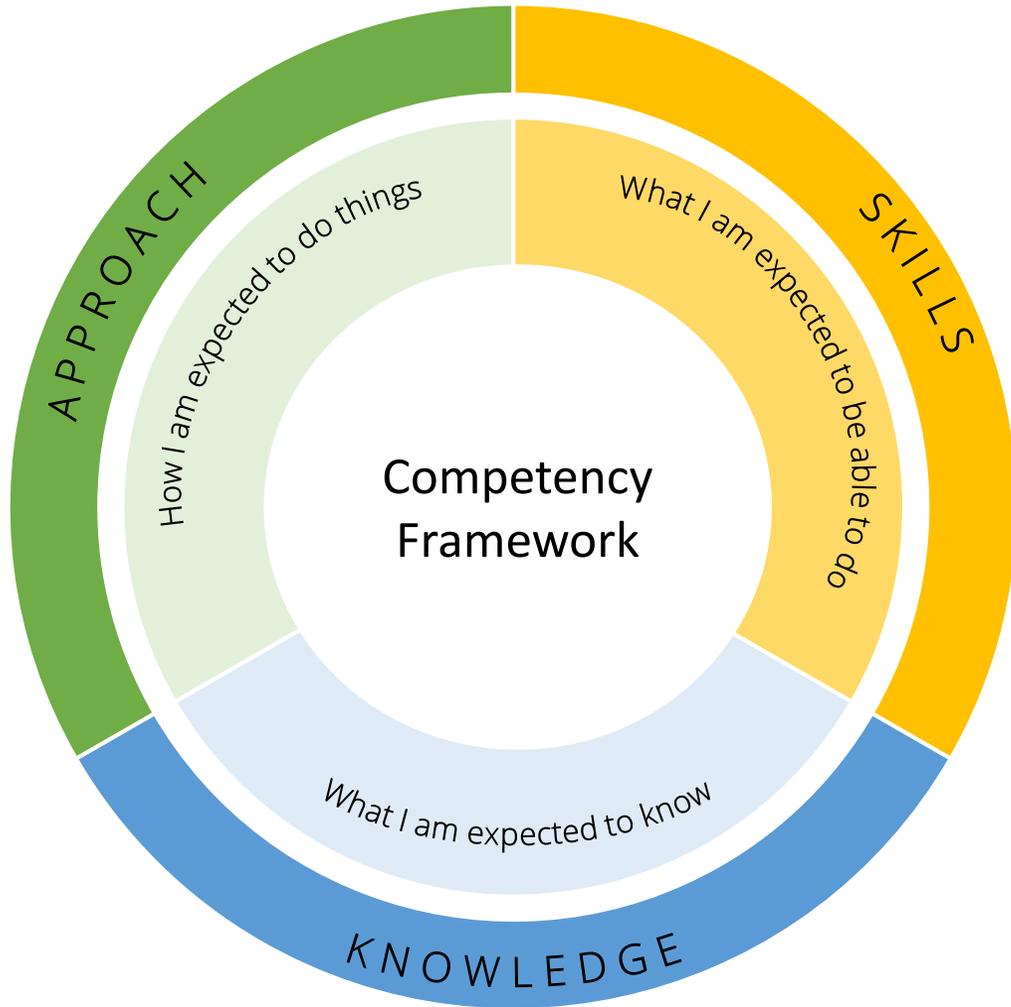
- 1** A clear route for students to register for, or request, mental health support from their higher education provider.
For example, this could be an online registration form which students can complete at any time, or a clear point of contact within a central support team or support function.
- 2** Access to a single source of clear, accessible and up to date information on how a student can access emergency or crisis support services.
This would normally be to external emergency services (999) or external NHS crisis service. Any additional information would be maintained centrally and in a digital format (website, app etc) to ensure that all information is current.

Support for Staff

- 3** A clear route for any staff member concerned about a student to request non-emergency advice.
This does not need to be a 24/7 source of support, however, response times should be appropriately swift and reliable and higher education providers are encouraged to set their own SLAs.
- 4** A clearly articulated and institution-wide protocol for staff to escalate a concern if they are aware of student in an emergency situation or at an imminent life-threatening level of risk.
For example, whether 999 should be called in the first instance or university security, or both.

In addition to these processes, the work can be further supported by the following **good practice recommendations**:

- The provision of pastoral support for students by staff is recognised and appreciated as being important work and is distributed in a fair and equitable way across the organisation.
- Higher education providers should promote management practices that support formal and informal reflection, consultation and development for staff who may encounter difficult or distressing student interactions.
- Higher education providers should have open and regular discussion with staff about the boundaries of their role and how the provider can support them to operate within these boundaries.
- Follow up with students and/or hand over to relevant student support services, keeping records in line with institutional policy.



The Competency Framework is organised into three sections

APPROACH: How I am expected to do things and approach students.

SKILLS: What I am expected to be able to do when interacting with students.

KNOWLEDGE: What I am expected to know to support me with implementing skills and approaches.

APPROACH

- Understand the principles of the [Compassionate Communication Statement](#) and apply them to interactions with distressed students.
- Work collaboratively with the student, seeking to develop their skills and confidence in their ability to overcome difficulties.
- Create a safe space for the student to share their concerns by being a calm, reassuring and containing presence.
- Use active listening to allow the student to disclose all the causes of their distress, recognising that the primary cause of their distress may not be the first thing they disclose.
- Be proactive in helping the student to manage their feelings.
- Assess the level of distress and risk to the student to determine which specialist support services may be appropriate for their needs.
- Where you are concerned that there is an imminent risk, calmly but immediately facilitate a referral to Security and/or emergency services in line with the institution's protocols.
- Provide support to the student through effective collaboration with other relevant teams and services.
- Where relevant, follow institutional procedures in place and any advice received from specialist teams to support the student.
- Document the interaction with the student in accordance with your institution's protocols.

SKILLS

- Discuss the boundaries of your role and manage expectations with the student.
- Ask effective questions and listen actively.
- Demonstrate empathy in your interactions by acknowledging how the student is feeling.
- Communicate effectively, adapting your style and approach to suit the needs of the student.
- Ask questions or provide more directive advice in a respectful and supportive way, and intervene with confidence to offer support when needed.
- Build a sense of shared responsibility and understanding with the student.
- Encourage the student to draw on their own sense of agency when seeking help, where appropriate.
- Consider whether a student may have a long-term mental health condition which would meet the definition of a disability or mean the student would benefit from disability support.
- Recognise a change in behaviour or engagement that might indicate a student is in distress.
- Respond calmly if a student discloses thoughts of suicide or self-harm.
- Be sensitive and understanding of the diversity in cultural perception of mental health and wellbeing that may affect students differently.
- Recognise the impact of distressed states in others on yourself and how this may impact your own response.
- Identify when you need more support or advice after a challenging interaction.

KNOWLEDGE

- The institutional procedures in place to support or refer students who are experiencing a health or wellbeing issue.
- Student support services provision, including specialist counselling and mental health support services, disability support, university teams (e.g. Security) or external services (e.g. emergency services) providing emergency support, and their contact details, so that these can be communicated to a student in a clear way without overloading them with options.
- Related institutional policies and procedures (e.g. Safeguarding, Prevent, Fitness to Study and/or Fitness to Practice) to be ready to make internal referrals, when required.
- Appropriate web resource (often on your institution's website) listing crisis and emergency support services, so that you can provide this to a student who may be at a higher level of risk.
- Understanding about things a student might say that could indicate they are feeling hopeless or potentially considering suicide.
- The role of – and the challenges facing – a university in relation to student mental health and wellbeing.
- Common disabilities among the student body and how they may affect mental health and the wider student experience.
- Who can support you with your own wellbeing and how you can contact them.

This is a non-exhaustive list of resources that may be helpful when activating the framework.

- I. [Suicide-safer universities](#)
- II. [Suicide-safer universities: sharing information with trusted contacts](#)
- III. [How to have difficult conversations about suicide](#)
- IV. [National Occupational Standards for Personal Tutoring](#)
- V. [University Mental Health Charter \(UMHC\)](#)
- VI. [Professional Framework for Advising & Tutoring \(UKAT\)](#)
- VII. [Code of Practice for the Management of Student Housing](#)
- VIII. [Universities UK/Guild HE Code of Practice for the Management of Student Housing \(CUBO\)](#)
- IX. [Code of Practice for the Management of Student Housing](#)
- X. [Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education 2023](#)
- XI. For an example of the level and type of information appropriate for “Information for Students” enabling processes, please [click here](#).

In an emergency situation

Contact the relevant teams (emergency services, university security, etc, in line with your institution’s protocol) when a student indicates they are at an imminent life-threatening level of risk, for example, when they say they feel suicidal and have a plan to act on those feelings. [Guidance on emergencies requiring 999 call](#)