

POLICY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE ON STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

1. Definitions and abbreviations

1.1 Acute mental health difficulty

This refers to mental health symptoms that are:

- short-term or temporary in duration (less than 12 months);
- may or may not meet a full psychiatric diagnosis;
- significantly interfere with academic functioning.

1.2 CUADS – Centre for Universal Access and Disability Support

1.3 HEDSA – Higher Education Disability Services Association

1.4 ITP – Integrated Transformation Plan

1.5 Mental health disability

This refers to a mental health condition that:

- has been diagnosed by a registered mental health practitioner using a recognised psychiatric classification system;
- is of a duration of at least 12 months;
- substantially limits the student's ability to perform academically.

1.6 PHC – Public Health Care

1.7 Psychosocial disorders

According to the HEDSA coding framework and the National Mental Health Framework these disorders include amongst others:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Panic disorder
- Schizophrenia
- Bipolar

1.8 Psycho-educational resources

Resources providing information on various aspects related to mental health

1.9 Reasonable accommodation

Reasonable accommodation means any modification or adjustment to the environment that will enable a student with a disability to have access to or to participate or advance in academia. These measures ensure that persons with disabilities enjoy equal opportunities. For the purposes of the Mental Health Policy, the phrase 'reasonable accommodation' refers to appropriate adjustments to teaching and learning activities to ensure that students with mental health disabilities or acute mental health difficulties are not placed at a substantial disadvantage compared to other students.

1.10 RAP - Reasonable Accommodation Panel

The “Reasonable Accommodation Panel” will be established to adjudicate over all applications for reasonable accommodation. The primary aim of reasonable accommodation is to reduce the impact of a person's impairment on his/her/their ability to perform essential functions as a student in a higher education setting and creating an enabling environment. The Panel will be chaired by CUADS and members of the Panel will include SCD, Faculty Managers and specialists as identified per applicant.

1.11 Specialised support services

Specialised support services refers to SCD and CUADS within the ambit of Student Affairs.

1.12 SCD – Student Counselling & Development

1.13 University of the Free State (UFS)

The UFS encompasses all campuses (Bloemfontein, Qwaqwa and South), students and staff of the University of the Free State.

1.14 WHO – World Health Organisation

2. Background

2.1 Recent years have seen an escalation in the number of students entering higher education who are struggling with significant mental health difficulties. This points to the need for an institutional policy that addresses both the promotion of mental wellbeing amongst the student population and the supporting of students faced with mental health issues. The UFS, furthermore, wishes to align with the National Mental Health Policy Framework and Strategic Plan 2013 – 2020 and the Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013 – 2020 of WHO.

2.2 As per the ITP, the UFS commits itself to the health and wellness of its students. To this effect the UFS has resolved to establish a mental health policy as a way of responding to what appears to be developing mental health challenges on campus and across the Higher Education sector. This Policy is set within the context of national strategies.

2.3 The National Mental Health Policy Framework recognises that:

2.3.1 Until the development of this document, there has been no officially endorsed national Mental Health Policy for South Africa;

2.3.2 Mental health care continues to be under-funded and under-resourced compared to other health priorities in the country, despite the fact that neuropsychiatric disorders are ranked third in their contribution to the burden of disease in South Africa, after HIV&AIDS and other infectious diseases;

2.3.3 There is enormous inequity between provinces in the distribution of mental health services and resources;

2.3.4 There is a lack of public awareness of mental health and widespread stigma against those who suffer from mental illness;

2.3.5 There is a lack of accurate routinely collected data regarding mental health service provision;

2.3.6 Mental health services continue to labour under the legacy of colonial mental health systems, with heavy reliance on psychiatric hospitals; and

- 2.3.7 While the integration of mental health into PHC is enshrined in the White Paper and the Mental Health Care Act, in practice mental health care is usually confined to management of medication for those with severe mental disorders, and does not include detection and treatment of other mental disorders, such as depression and anxiety disorders.
- 2.4 The WHO indicates that by 2020 depression will be the second most costly medical condition in the world. In addition, Higher Education sector institutions are seeing an increase in both the prevalence and severity of mental health issues that students present with. These mental health issues can be triggered by many factors, including stress, life events, past experiences and genetics. Student life exposes individuals to risk factors affecting mental health including debt, periods of transition, substance use, culture shock, and the disconnection from previous support structures. The UFS has a moral and humanitarian responsibility towards students whose mental condition falls within the ambit of this policy.
- 2.5 The Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013 – 2020 (WHO) that committed all United Nations Member States (including South Africa) to address mental health challenges, identified four key objectives:
- 2.5.1 To strengthen effective leadership and governance for mental health;
- 2.5.2 Provide comprehensive, integrated and responsive mental health and social care services in community-based settings;
- 2.5.3 Implement strategies for promotion and prevention in mental health; and
- 2.5.4 Strengthen information systems, evidence and research for mental health.

3. Guiding principles

- 3.1 This Policy will set out how the UFS strives to deliver a coherent institutional approach to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of the UFS student population. A collection of procedures and guidelines will support the implementation of the Policy.
- 3.2 Whilst the UFS is committed to providing a supportive environment, it is important to recognise that there are limits to the extent of the support that can be provided to individual students. It is crucial to note that the support that can be offered to the students will be confined to the existing UFS levels of capacity. In this regard, students should thus always be referred to external resources as appropriate.
- 3.3 This Policy is guided by the Mental Health Care Act 17 of 2002; National Mental Health Policy Framework and Strategic Plan 2013 – 2020; and the Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013 – 2020 of the WHO.
- 3.4 This Policy seeks to redress the inequalities and disadvantages created by prejudice and discrimination against persons with mental health disabilities and difficulties. Hence, clinical definitions of recognised mental health issues are considered unhelpful in terms of an institutional response. It is important to avoid tendencies to label students and, rather, to focus on the issues of response and support. This Policy will thus refer to the two categories of mental health disability and acute mental health difficulty.
- 3.5 The UFS strives to create an environment which promotes and is supportive of mental wellbeing. The expertise of the UFS, however, lies in the provision of higher education and there will thus be limitations to the level of services that can be delivered.

- 3.6 All UFS staff should constantly be aware of their own professional limitations. No member of the UFS should move beyond their professional scope in supporting or advising students with regards to mental health. Where the UFS does not provide a specific service, this should be made clear to students and they should be encouraged to seek out other services available to them. In the context of mental health, this means encouraging students to seek external professional mental health services available within the community.
- 3.7 The UFS recognises that students may be reluctant to declare a mental health difficulty, including the fear of stigma; that confidentiality will not be respected; and that their academic standing will be affected. However, the UFS encourages students to declare these difficulties at an early stage in order for these challenges to be addressed in a timeous manner.
- 3.8 The UFS provides specific guidelines on confidentiality in respect of student health and wellbeing. These embody the general principle that consent should be sought before information is shared, except in situations which are in accordance with legislation and strict professional ethical guidelines. Therefore, any decision to break confidentiality must be made at the appropriate level.
- 3.9 In the application of this Policy, the UFS commits to complying with the relevant legislation and Policy Frameworks.
- 3.10 The UFS recognises the rights of all students registered with the university to:
- study without being subject to prejudice or discrimination as a result of their mental health difficulties or conditions.
 - access support from the UFS with regards to their mental health challenges, taking into consideration the limits of provision the UFS offers.

4. Policy

The Student Mental Health Policy aims to:

- 4.1 Promote awareness, understanding, recognition and destigmatisation of mental health difficulties amongst the student population;
- 4.2 Create an ethos in which confidentiality and dignity are respected;
- 4.3 Comply with national and international best practice guidelines for student mental health, while accommodating the specific contextual needs of the UFS' student body;
- 4.4 Provide consistent and effective support to students experiencing mental health difficulties; and
- 4.5 Provide guidance and training to people involved in the support and care of students.

4.6 Rights and Responsibilities

The implementation of the policy encourages an intersectional approach with shared responsibilities between different stakeholders with respect to addressing student mental health issues. This section covers rights and responsibilities for students and staff at the UFS. The University has a moral duty to respect and respond to the rights and support needs of students with mental health difficulties. However, the University also has to balance the rights of students with mental health challenges with the overall duty of care it has to all of its students and staff.

4.6.1 University of the Free State

- a) The UFS has a responsibility to promote the Mental Health Policy, which envisions creating a campus where mental wellbeing is valued and encouraged based on a holistic approach;
- b) Where a student discloses a mental health disability or difficulty to the UFS they have a responsibility to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made to prevent the student being unduly disadvantaged by this difficulty;
- c) The UFS has a responsibility to students to provide specialised support services;
- d) UFS staff and students are informed about their respective responsibilities arising under this policy;
- e) Reasonable resourcing is made available for the implementation of this policy.

4.6.2 Student Affairs

Student Affairs provides access for students through the following specialist support services:

4.6.2.1 Student Counselling & Development (SCD):

- a) SCD provides a free and confidential service to all registered UFS students.
- b) SCD, to which students can self-refer, provides mainly short-term counselling. Whilst the majority of students are counselled on an individual basis, group therapy, support programmes and workshops are also available.
- c) In addition to its direct work with students, SCD provides a range of psycho-educational resources to all staff and students, advises members of staff who are concerned about an individual student's mental health, and contributes to initiatives that aim to foster student wellbeing.
- d) Provide motivations for reasonable accommodation for students with mental health disabilities or acute mental health difficulties, following a minimum of four consultations, and or where such motivations are deemed clinically necessary by the treating practitioner and where the student has provided written consent for such information to be disclosed.

4.6.2.2 Centre for Universal Access and Disability Support (CUADS):

- a) CUADS promotes inclusive practice and compliance with the legislation and relevant policy frameworks across the UFS in respect of students with disabilities.
- b) The service provides the following to current and prospective students with disabilities:
 - i) Advice and guidance relating to how to get the most from their studies and the best way to overcome any particular barriers that they may experience as a result of their disability.
 - ii) Referral of students to specialists and other service providers where provided (e.g. dyslexia screening and assessment services and healthcare practitioners).
- c) Advise UFS staff regarding the support of students with disabilities (e.g. teaching, assessment, individual discussions and or group training sessions, where particular issues are presented) whilst respecting appropriate confidentiality requirements at all times.
- d) Makes recommendations about institutional reasonable adjustments and accommodations, and collaborates with all parties to support the implementation thereof.

4.6.3 Faculties and Academic Departments

- a) Faculties and academic departments must ensure that appropriate arrangements for student welfare in the departmental context are in place and are communicated to students.
- b) Staff must be alert to indicators of mental health difficulties.
- c) Staff must be able to offer an appropriate response to a student's declaration of such difficulties and be able to refer students to appropriate support, including encouraging the student to seek help from the specialised support services.
- d) Information regarding the procedures for applying for reasonable accommodations on mental health grounds are made available to students.
- e) Familiarise themselves with the UFS Student Mental Health Policy and complying with it;
- f) Be aware of the principles of confidentiality and disclosure. Written, electronic or verbal information, which relates to a student's mental health must be handled in a secure and confidential manner (unless the student's, or any other person's, immediate personal safety is at risk).
- g) All staff should remain aware of the boundaries of their own roles.

4.6.4 Support Services

- a) Staff must be alert to indicators of mental health difficulties.
- b) Staff must be able to offer an appropriate response to a student's declaration of such difficulties and be able to refer students to appropriate support, including encouraging the student to seek help from the specialised support services.
- c) Familiarise themselves with the UFS Student Mental Health Policy and complying with it;
- d) Be aware of the principles of confidentiality and disclosure. Written, electronic or verbal information, which relates to a student's mental health must be handled in a secure and confidential manner (unless the student's, or any other person's, immediate personal safety is at risk).
- e) All staff should remain aware of the boundaries of their own roles.

4.6.5 Individual students and prospective students

- a) Students who are currently experiencing mental health difficulties or conditions should, where possible, inform the UFS of this at the earliest opportunity in order to receive advice and assistance.
- b) All students have a social responsibility to assist the University in working towards a stigma-free environment with regards to mental health difficulties.
- c) All students should endeavour to recognise their own personal limits with regards to any mental health difficulties or conditions they are experiencing and seek advice and assistance from the University's specialised support services, at the earliest possible opportunity.
- d) consider declaring an existing mental health disability on their application form so that the University can prepare to offer the student reasonable accommodations;
- e) Encourage other students experiencing mental health difficulties to seek the appropriate assistance.
- f) Be aware of the policy and supporting documents

- g) Be aware of their own limitations when supporting a fellow student experiencing a mental health difficulty, and use the referral processes available, both internally and externally.

4.7 Reasonable Accommodation

- 4.7.1 The UFS aims to welcome a diverse student body and does not discriminate against persons with any disabilities in its application process.
- 4.7.2 The UFS recognises that students with mental disabilities and acute mental health difficulties should be considered for reasonable accommodation through the RAP chaired by CUADS.

4.8 Conduct and discipline

- 4.8.1 Mental health disabilities or acute mental health difficulties do not exclude students from the requirement to comply with the UFS regulations on conduct and discipline.
- 4.8.2 In situations where a student's ability to participate in disciplinary procedures is affected by mental health disabilities or acute mental health difficulties, the situation will be approached with due sensitivity, ensuring that the student is fit to take part and is appropriately supported by CUADS and or SCD.

5. Implementation of the policy

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Institutional Change, Student Affairs and Engaged Scholarship is responsible for the implementation of this Policy.

6. Purpose of the policy

The UFS aims, in respect of mental health, are to:

- 6.1 Promote and support the mental health and wellbeing amongst the student population.
- 6.2 Destigmatisation of mental health disabilities and difficulties.
- 6.3 Create an institutional philosophy in which confidentiality and human dignity are respected and ensured.
- 6.4 Alignment with mental health legislation and policy frameworks.

7. Scope

This Policy applies to:

- 7.1 All students who are enrolled in a study programme at the UFS;
- 7.2 Registered students on university premises or elsewhere on university business or study activities;
- 7.3 All registered students who have disclosed a mental health disability and or difficulty.

8. Resource consequences of the policy

The UFS commits to provide the following resources in ensuring the successful implementation of this Policy by:

- 8.1 Availing reasonable resourcing;

- 8.2 Establishing a RAP with necessary funding; and
- 8.3 Striving to adhere to the recommended international standard of psychologist student ratio (1:1500). To this effect, it is important to note that an increase in the ratio places the UFS at a high liability risk.

9. Review procedure

- 9.1 This Policy and any associated advice and guidance will be communicated annually by **Department of Communication and Marketing** to the UFS community.
- 9.2 This Policy will be made available in a series of webpages with links to associated procedures and guidance. Copies in alternative formats are available on request.
- 9.3 When statutory law changes, the Policy is held automatically to have been amended by that change and it will be updated as soon as is practically possible.

10. Policy record

Document name Dokumentnaam	
Document number Dokumentnommer	
Coordinating UMC member Koördinerende UBK-lid	
Contact person Kontakpersoon	
Status Status	
Approved by Goedgekeur deur	
Date finally approved Datum van finale goedkeuring	
Date last amended Laaste datum van wysiging	
Date for next review Hersieningsdatum	
Person responsible for review Persoon verantwoordelik vir hersiening	
Monitoring by Monitering deur	
Related documents Verwante dokumente	
Effective date Effektiewe datum	

APPENDICES TO BE ADDED

- ***GUIDELINES FOR SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION FOR TEMPORARY REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS DUE TO ACUTE MENTAL HEALTH DIFFICULTIES***
- ***MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT ON CAMPUS***
- ***PROCEDURE FOR STUDENT PSYCHIATRIC EMERGENCIES IN RESIDENCES OR ON CAMPUS AT UFS***
- ***LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR THE UNIVERSITY'S STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH POLICY***

LEGISLATION, POLICIES, AND FRAMEWORKS FOR THE UFS STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH POLICY
The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (http://www.gov.za/documents/constitution-republic-south-africa-1996)
Employment Equity Act 1998 (http://www.labour.gov.za/DOL/downloads/legislation/acts/employmentequity/eegazette2015.pdf)
General Ethical Rules – Psychology Form 223 Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) (http://www.hpcsa.co.za/Uploads/editor/UserFiles/downloads/conduct_ethics/rules/generic_ethical_rules/ethical_rules_annexure_12.pdf)
Higher Education Act 1997 (http://www.gov.za/sites/www.gov.za/files/a101-97.pdf)
Mental Health Care Act 2002 (http://www.gov.za/sites/www.gov.za/files/a17-02.pdf)
National Health Act 2004 (http://www.chr.up.ac.za/undp/domestic/docs/legislation_55.pdf)
National Mental Health Policy Framework and Strategic Plan 2013-2020 (https://www.health-e.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/National-Mental-Health-Policy-Framework-and-Strategic-Plan-2013-2020.pdf)
Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 2000 (http://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/acts/2000-004.pdf)

Protection of Personal Information Act, 2013
(<http://www.justice.gov.za/infoereg/docs/InfoReqSA-POPIA-act2013-004.pdf>)

UFS Integrated Transformation Plan (ITP) (https://www.ufs.ac.za/docs/default-source/all-documents/the-ufs-integrated-transformation-plan.pdf?sfvrsn=9752a521_0)

UFS Policies (<https://www.ufs.ac.za/about-the-ufs/governance/policy-documents>)

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability
(<http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>)

RELEVANT SOURCE MATERIAL

International Association for Counselling Services, Inc (<http://www.iacsinc.org/staff-to-student-ratios.html>)

Editorial (2014). A New Mental Health Policy for South Africa. *South African Medical Journal*, 104 (2), 115-116. DOI:10.7196/SAMJ.7938

WHO Mental Health Action Plan 2013 -2020
(http://www.who.int/mental_health/action_plan_2013/bw_version.pdf)