

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i ymchwiliad y [Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg i gymorth iechyd meddwl mewn addysg uwch](#)

This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee inquiry into Mental Health support in Higher Education](#)

**MHHE 12**

**Ymateb gan: UNSIAN**

**Response from: UNISON**

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### **About UNISON Cymru Wales**

UNISON is the UK's largest trade union organising and representing 1.3 million public sector workers UK wide, including 100,000 public sector workers across Wales.

Our members, 85 per cent of whom are women, work in the delivery of public services through direct public sector provision, private and voluntary contractors providing public services, and in the essential utilities. They include frontline staff and managers working full or part-time in public administration, local authorities, health and social care, the police and justice service, universities, colleges and schools, the electricity, gas, environment and water industries, transport, and in the voluntary and community sectors.

Across Welsh Higher Education Institutions, UNISON Cymru Wales represents thousands of members in the following departments: administrative (both support and managerial); domestic and housekeeping; maintenance; security; estates; academic; catering and coffee shops; sport; students' unions and nurseries.

This submission paper is shaped by their experience.

### **Summary of UNISON position**

The Committee is right to investigate worsening mental health in students at Welsh universities; how they might be best supported and how their mental health problems can be alleviated.

As the main trade union representing Higher Education support staff, we know that mental health issues do not just affect the students of the institutions, but the employees as well. Being a support staff worker in a Welsh university over the last ten years has been increasingly challenging. This group of workers have been the most vulnerable to mass job cuts as the financial model universities are based on has changed, along with other pressures including, of course, the pandemic. Their pensions have been regularly threatened and benefits reduced in some HEIs. UNISON Cymru Wales has campaigned against the outsourcing of employees as a way for the employer to absolve itself of its pension obligations and other employment terms.

We have been active in supporting our members in confronting threats to privatise university services they might work in or use, such as creches and cleaning services.

There is a predominance of low pay and a growth in the use of zero hours and casual contracts along with a reliance on agency staff. At the same time, support staff will have contrasted their depressing experiences with the extravagant six figure salaries and extremely favourable pensions of Vice Chancellors.

Placing yourself in the position of a low paid employee in Higher Education, it is easy to understand why they feel unappreciated and undervalued.

Looking in more detail at the last three years, morale at Welsh universities has been badly undermined by a series of below-inflation pay awards. Support staff know their contribution to the whole student experience, including their academic attainment, is crucial, but repeated poor pay rises have left them questioning whether they want to work in this sector.

University support staff, unsurprisingly, have been negatively affected by working through the covid pandemic and the current cost of living crisis, something they and their families would have been in a stronger position to face had they received fair pay rises over the last few years.

Their mental health is further affected by the practice of leaving support staff vacancies unfilled and general understaffing of departments. Asking employees to do much more with less, over a sustained period of years, is a common theme across Wales and can only damage their wellbeing.

Understandably, the weight of these combined pressures, has caused some in the sector to consider leaving for more rewarding work. Employees leaving in any number would compound the current understaffing problem. To counter this, Welsh universities need to urgently consider how they can be more attractive, rewarding and compassionate places to work.

There is a duty of care on employers to look after their employees, yet our very recent survey reveals Welsh universities are not providing the mental health support their staff urgently require. Staff not being properly supported with their own mental health, which will in turn have an adverse effect on students, negatively impacting their support and experience in their university life.

Support staff are dedicated professionals and the first point of contact of students outside their lecture rooms, they want to be as well-trained as possible to support those young people experiencing mental health difficulties. Many support staff have told us, they feel ill-equipped to help people struggling in those very serious situations, where they may be self-harming or considering suicide, because they lack training and the resources to provide support. Our members are those who are dealing head on with issues in their roles such as security, residence management and cleaning.

A world class education system will drive Wales's economic growth, it can help deliver a fairer society providing equal opportunity for all and unlocking people's potential. Unfortunately, the complete failure to invest in Higher Education support staff in all aspects of their employment and wellbeing means this cannot be achieved.

### **UNISON Cymru Wales survey**

We wanted to support the Committee's investigations by providing detailed feedback on how support staff feel about these issues.

We launched a survey of UNISON H.E. support staff on 4 October 2022 which closes on 17 October, after this written submission has been made, so an update can be provided in our oral evidence. To date 166 members have completed our survey. A link to the full survey findings (minus personal testimonies which could identify individuals) can be found at the end of this submission. The key findings are summarised below.

## **Key survey data**

*Q1. On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your current mental health? 10 being perfect and 1 that you are experiencing real difficulties*

- 30.9% had a score of 4 or below
- A further 12.7% had a score of 5

*Q2. Has your mental health changed in the last 3 years?*

- 68.5% worse or much worse (49.7% worse, 18.8% much worse)

People who responded with 'worse' or 'much worse', were then asked: *Have you spoken to anyone about your mental health?*

- 53.1% yes
- 46.9% no

People who responded with 'yes', were then asked who they had spoken to (and more than one may apply):

- 61.7% to a GP
- 36.7% to a counsellor
- 15% to a mental health professional
- 16.7% to employee assistance
- 58.3% to a family member
- 46.7% to a manager
- 45% to a colleague
- 65% to a friend
- 15% to a trade union rep

Those who had used employee assistance were asked to mark the scheme, 10 being excellent and 1 being completely inadequate.

- 87.1% marked the scheme as 1.

Those answering 'no' to Q2. Were then asked: *Do you know how to access advice and support in the workplace if you were experiencing mental health issues?*

- 35.8% said no

Those answering 'yes' or 'no' to this question were asked: *Would you feel comfortable speaking to your manager about worsening mental health?*

- 64.2% said no

Q9. Has pressure at work negatively affected your quality of life?

- 84.2% said Yes, a lot or a little (40.6% said Yes, a lot, 43.6% said Yes, a little)

Respondents were then given the opportunity to tell us about the pressures they have experienced at work if they wished. Only a sample is given below. Each bullet-point denotes a different respondent.

- *Too much work and too little time*
- Lack of managerial support
- *My manager brings a lot of stress with micromanaging*
- Excessive amounts of work due to a vague job description. Tension with colleagues due to cutbacks and job insecurity. Extremely short notice for changes in workplans
- *Significantly high workload and expectation to be available at all times. No real way to alleviate this. Mentally, I feel I lost a sense of myself from working so much.*
- Workload, lack of resources, asked to do more with less. Colleagues often working until 10/11pm regularly. Constant breaking of EU working hours regulation. Manual and archaic systems not functional for expansion an increased pressure on admin services. Increased student expectation.
- *I had a bullying boss for years who would hound me out of hours, sending emails at 6.30am and expect me to be online picking them up. If I didn't answer immediately, she would contact me on my personal mobile*
- Team too small for workload
- *Being expected to do more with less resource*
- More workload with no financial gain
- *Being short-staffed quite often*
- Too much work resulting in very long hours. Unpaid and never ending. Poor recruitment rates resulting in staff gaps we are expected to cover. Poor support from top management makes me feel undervalued and unimportant.
- *Not feeling supported by managers at times.*
- Last minute deadlines given without warning and with no thought of personal wellbeing
- *Senior management are expecting more from us all the time. The level of mental health and safeguarding support the learners require is increasing and therefore increasing the workload.*

- (Senior person) where I work does not believe in breaks away from your desk including to make a hot drink. X shames individuals about sickness absence and childcare issues. This leaves me upset and anxious.
- *Students needing more support with their own wellbeing due to covid and the cost of living crisis.*
- Unclear structure and expectations
- *Under pressure from management*
- There is too much work and not enough paid staff
- *Overworked*
- Workload is excessive. I work hundreds more hours a year than I should. Returning from leave is very difficult and I have a sick feeling for a few days before I do, as I know the deluge of work I will face on my return
- *High workload not enough staff on the ground. We are constantly inundated with calls to a point we cannot cope*
- We are severely understaffed and expected to pick up the workload of multiple people by ourselves. I feel our compassion for the students is preyed upon to get us to do work over and above what we have capacity for.
- *Workload and lack of reserve staff for specialised tasks*
- Busy start of term - big case load of students, not enough staff to cope
- *The team has been cut by half, but the workload has increased. I feel anxiety and despair knowing I am behind in my work, and not able to catch up.*
- Workload too high, volume of students to staff to support them is overwhelming and affecting us - having to work overtime all the time just to try and make a dent. 10-12 hr days and weekends. It's been like this since pre-covid and now students are back face to face in such numbers the university is happy to take the money but not use some of that to increase resources
- *Under-resourcing of service, unrealistic expectations of senior management feeling undervalued, frequent changes, internal recruitment promoting inexperienced staff into management roles*
- Short staffed and greatly increased workload.
- *My workload has increased over the last 2 years, doing two jobs at the same time with little and inconsistent support.*
- Too few staff. Staff leaving and not being replaced. Being undermined. New managers coming in. Constant change.
- *We are not being listened to by management. They schedule in work with stupid deadlines and don't allow us enough time to deal with housekeeping meaning that we are stressed, sometimes having to work until the late hours or coming on our days off to sort things out.*

- Covering the work of others/vacant posts makes it difficult to get my work done.
- *During the last three years. I have been carrying out the work of two people. This has recently changed with an additional colleague now employed. So hopefully things will now improve.*
- Ever increasing workload
- *I was made to work way above my level for no extra pay and the environment is very toxic.*
- Lack of staff and pressure to take on more work meaning night times and weekends are spent recovering from exhaustion
- *More work piled on - less staff*
- Not enough staff
- *Too much work, not enough help and when we do get extra staff it is more management and not those on the ground*
- Deadlines, doing more with fewer people. Uncertainty everywhere.
- *Less time to spend with family due to workload and time spent working. 35-hour contract and regularly work 45 to 55 hours per week. No real work/life balance. Unable to take all my leave due to chronic under-staffing. Our department is at breaking point with some colleagues just permanently burnt out.*

Q.11 To what extent to you agree with the following statement:

Below inflation pay awards over the last few years have negatively impacted my mental health

- 62.4% agree or strongly agree (24.2% strongly agree, 38.2% agree)

Q12. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Understaffing in my department has negatively impacted my mental health

- 73.4% agree or strongly agree (37% strongly agree, 36.4% agree)

Q13. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Working through covid has negatively impacted my mental health

- 55.7% agree or strongly agree (24.2% strongly agree, 31.5% agree)

Q14. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The cost-of-living crisis has negatively impacted my mental health

- 77.6% (35.8% strongly agree, 41.8% agree)

Q15. Are you considering leaving the Higher Education sector because of the impact on your mental health

- 16.4% said Yes, I am actively looking for a different job
- 32.1% said Yes, I am considering leaving HE

Q16. Have you experienced or witnessed incidents which have been the result of a student/s with poor mental health?

- 45.5% said Yes

Respondents were then given the opportunity to tell us about incidents experienced or witnessed. Only a sample is given below. Each bullet-point denotes a different respondent.

- Incidents of students self-harming on site have increased significantly- we have had to put measures in place within my department (art) due to easy access of tools/sharps that can be used for this. Students suffering from anxiety and having panic attacks are now so frequent that mental health first aiding is used far more often than physical first aiding. I have had to be trained in both.
- *I work as a student counsellor so see students with poor mental health frequently.*
- Deal with more than 50% cases with student with mental health concerns
- *Students expressing their wish to end their lives, sitting with them for 5 hours after we are supposed to go home waiting for ambulances that never turn up.*
- Learners are reporting feelings of completing suicide.
- *I manage students and many have experience of mental health issues during lockdown and after.*
- Too many to mention. We have had suicides, students who don't know how to deal with stressors, there is regular abuse from students to staff and I'm sure that this is due to frustration.
- *I work in student disability so am in contact with students with poor mental health daily.*



- It is saddening seeing young people who feel there is nobody there for them and then don't reach out when in need of help. Issues caught early are easily solved.
- *Student went out lunchtime bought paracetamol from various places and overdosed*
- I work in well-being services so work with students who have poor mental health. We have seen a huge rise in suicidal ideation recently, as well as homelessness
- *I deal with international student's they are usually not equipped financially to be in UK and a lot of them are struggling - they are only allowed to work 20hrs a week. Lack of available affordable accommodation is a huge issue. This all trickles down to the student facing staff.*
- I am a Mental Health Adviser, so I deal with these incidents every day. Increase in students with suicidal ideation, increase in students with low levels of resilience, increase in students with anxiety
- *I briefly worked in the advice zone and came into contact with many students in mental health crises. I have also heard many stories from other staff members about students in crisis or behaving in a way as a result of poor mental health*
- Student shouting and screaming in room next to me. He was threatening to kill himself.
- *I work with mature students who have really struggled to cope as they have a lot of other responsibilities as well as their studies*
- I have witnessed self-harming in students. And also, unfortunately I witnessed a student death and also a major medical Incident which led to a student having life-saving surgery.
- *Self-harm. Sectioning. Substance misuse. Knife crime. Drug dealing.*
- Students with psychosis who have severe mental health conditions such as schizophrenia or similar disorders. Self-harm (frequently). Attempted suicide. Drug induced psychosis.
- *Numerous breakdowns*
- Even students with high mental health resilience express concerns with their mental health.
- *Students reaching crisis point, very often exacerbated by insufficient preparation for the new term by the University and malfunctioning university systems with little priority, given to fixing the issues and problems becoming long-term. Students are finding themselves in immediate difficulties through no fault of their own, in particular international students.*

- Students stressed due to not having their queries resolved in reasonable timeframes, with many waiting weeks.
- *Studying from home has impacted on normal student life and relationships*
- Violence and frustration towards staff

Q18. Do you feel equipped with the necessary training in Mental Health Awareness to provide support/signposting for students you come into contact with?

- 53.3% said No

Respondents were then asked what training they would like to receive to better equip them with incidents/concerns. Only a sample is given below. Each bullet-point denotes a different respondent.

- Not directly student facing but could benefit from spotting issues with colleagues and effective signposting
- *Not in my current role but would have been really useful if my placement role where I had direct contact with students.*
- Despite having already done mental health first aiding, I feel I could use further training. Also, I am the only staff member to have undertaken this training in my department so far, so it would better if more staff had access to these courses.
- *Mental Health Awareness*
- No- the university offers mental health first aid training and courses to support this. It's not about training- it's about the need for support for students being increased and increased support for coping strategies in HE. Students need support and training
- *I received Mental Health First Aid training for students in Sept 19, but that has now run out. The university has changed so much during COVID, with so many people leaving due to restructure and retirement, it's now no longer relevant. Also, critical incident teams, especially out of hours, are very understaffed, I believe refresher training would be useful, so I know where to signpost the students both inside and outside of the university.*
- Suicide prevention course
- *Yes, internal training*
- Any mental health training would be good
- *I had signed up to a Mental Health training course offered by the University, but this was cancelled due to covid and has never been re-arranged.*

- Clear sign posting for support available to them and to me as witness/person dealing with issues/concern
- *I would like to attend Suicide Awareness Training. I have completed the Mental Health First Aid course.*
- I feel that the training sessions should be advertised better.
- *I don't have time to train for anything we are constantly firefighting the workload with too few staff.*
- Mental health first aid for all staff
- *Refresher courses on mental health awareness please*
- Mental health training and break away techniques
- *Yes, however not all staff are eligible for the training at the university I work for.*
- Training would be good but additional resources to support these students would be better
- *In-person mental health training*
- Online training has been provided but face to face training for such things could be better.
- *Training on substance misuse would be beneficial as we see more of it.*
- Suicide awareness/first aid training
- *No, I have attended my university's crisis training which was very thorough and exceptional*
- Due to the high volume of the work I need to process I don't have any time left for trainings
- *An online training session. Information on where to signpost people in an emergency. Contact numbers for staff to phone for advice.*
- I have not had any training so something would be helpful
- *Unsure of what options are available*
- I do not have contact with students, but I do think mental health training is useful for all staff - for example, to help with colleagues or even ways to manage our own mental health. Maybe it should be a mandatory thing, as even if I wanted to opt into training right now, I feel like I don't have the time during work hours to do this.
- *Training in being able to easily identify common behaviours from students who may/are experiencing mental health difficulties would be helpful, so that they could then be told about and signposted to support services.*
- More training would be useful and would also, hopefully, raise the profile of mental illness among employers.
- *Yes - training on student mental health for quality of life and good study skills / self-care. Recent training is for suicide prevention which is a bit last resort.*

**This is a link to the full survey summary findings in chart and graph form.  
Personal testimonies have been omitted.**

[https://reporting.alchemer.eu/r/90022134\\_63494981ceafe0.15557173](https://reporting.alchemer.eu/r/90022134_63494981ceafe0.15557173)