



## University of Exeter Briefing 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 a guidance for current and prospective students, in addition to NHS service staff and University of Exeter Wellbeing Services and Academic staff. This briefing has been prepared in consultation with the University of Exeter Student Health Centre, the University Wellbeing Services and Devon Partnership Trust NHS 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 briefing contains the following:

- 1.) Position Statement on eating disorders
- 2.) Support available at the University of Exeter and within the local area
- 3.) University BMI thresholds in line with HEOPS guidance
- 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, supporting students 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 adequately academically, but at huge expense to their overall wellbeing. 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 has a duty of care to all students and it is intended that this document will offer guidance for Academic Colleges, NHS services, students at the University of Exeter and their families to best know how to seek support.

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

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

### Registering with a GP

All students at the University of Exeter are advised to register with a local GP. Students often spend significant amounts of time at home in between terms and may need to consider an arrangement whereby they keep both their home and university GP involved in their care. 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.

### Consideration of NHS support

The University of Exeter 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 Community Eating Disorder Service (CEDS);

<https://www.dpt.nhs.uk/our-services/eating-disorders/our-services/community-eating-disorder-service>

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 trigger weight loss (HEOPS, 2013).

We would strongly suggest that students and their families consider making links with specialist local eating disorders services. This 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 CAMHS to adult services across the country.

### University of Exeter Wellbeing Services support

For students with an identified eating disorder, it is likely that support from the University of Exeter 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 the University of Exeter Wellbeing Services and request an appointment to see a mental health advisor to consider any reasonable adjustments that can be put into place.
- University of Exeter 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, consideration of whether part-time studying is possible, or reasonable time off from their course to attend outpatient treatment. It is important to acknowledge that for some courses with a professional training requirement and attendance expectations, these adjustments may not be possible.
- The University of Exeter Wellbeing Services offer a non-judgemental space for students to speak about concerns with their eating, weight and shape. There are a limited number of "eating difficulties" appointments available each term. Please note, these appointments are not in lieu of medical treatment for an eating disorder. These appointments aim to signpost students to appropriate support and to provide relevant psycho-education including self-help resources informed by evidence-based practice.

### Guidance for Academic staff members

Academic staff members who have concerns about a student should encourage the student to approach the University of Exeter Wellbeing Services and their GP. If there is an urgent concern about a person's mental health or weight, the academic member of staff should contact University of Exeter Wellbeing Services so they can contact the student to invite them to see the University of Exeter Wellbeing Services and/or the University GP. It should be stressed that this is a supportive appointment and will be carried out in the student's best interests. The University of Exeter Wellbeing Services has also created a booklet called



“[Helping Distressed Students](#)” which provides guidance for academic colleagues on how to best support a student in distress.

### **3.) BMI thresholds suggested by HEOPS (2013)**

Body Mass Index (BMI) is a proxy measurement for medical risk in anorexia nervosa; whilst it is helpful to consider a student’s BMI when considering whether a student is fit to study, this is a guidance value and should not be the only criterion applied when making this decision.

#### **BMI 17+**

If a student has a BMI of 17 or above, HEOPs (2013) guidance indicates that a student may be able to continue with his/her studies. Where a student is managing their illness and keeping their BMI at 17+, reasonable adjustments can be considered to support students to continue with their academic studies. It is recommended that treatment is sought to ensure reduced risk of further damage to health.

#### **BMI 16 to 17**

HEOPs (2013) guidance recommends that students with a BMI range of 16 to 17 will need to demonstrate that they are engaging with on-going medical care with regards to their eating disorder.

#### **BMI <16**

HEOPS guidance recommends that students with a BMI of <16 should take time out of their studies to focus on treatment and recovery. A BMI of 16 and under would indicate that there are significant health risks and there would need to be careful consideration regarding continuation of studies at this point.

### **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 of Exeter’s Health and Wellbeing Support to Study (HWSS) policy, which considers the student’s ability to meet academic, social and behavioural requirements without his or her 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 and manage their health, wellbeing, and current circumstances to the best of their ability, and wherever possible to meet the required learning outcomes and complete their course.

Further information about the HWSS process is available at the following link:

<https://www.exeter.ac.uk/wellbeing/studentwelfare/>



## 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/eating-disorders-pdf-75545662586821> [Accessed 29 January 2019].

## 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.exeterstudenthealthcentre.co.uk/>

**Heavitree GP Practice** - <https://www.theheavitreepractice.co.uk/>