The background features a large, stylized silhouette of a human head in profile, facing left, positioned in the lower right quadrant. Above and to the left of the head is a large, intricate pattern of overlapping leaf and teardrop shapes, some filled with a textured, watercolor-like grey and others as white outlines. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern, with a focus on organic forms and human elements.

**Towards a Mentally
Healthy SRUC
Student Experience
SRUC Student Mental
Health & Wellbeing
Strategy 2023 +**

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Introduction

An Introduction from Professor Jamie Newbold (Provost and Deputy CEO)

Mental health and wellbeing affect all aspects of student life. At SRUC we are committed to developing a whole organisation approach which includes both the provision of appropriate, accessible services and interventions together with the creation of an environment and culture that enables students to maintain their wellbeing.

We know that being at college and university is an exciting, rewarding experience and one in which we want all our students to enjoy and thrive. However, we know there are times when many will struggle with the demands of studying, and the other pressures of life. Recent events during the global pandemic have emphasised the importance of talking openly about mental health issues and having support available.

In producing this strategy, we aim to address the inequalities people can experience in terms of their mental health and value our engagement with students who have lived experience.

This strategy is an accomplishment of co-design with students and staff respecting the need for all characteristics of SRUC student life, to promote and support student mental health and wellbeing.



The SRUC Student Strategy for Mental Health and Wellbeing encompasses:

Prevention: Preventing poor mental health by finding the problems early and ensuring students have access to the information that will increase their skills and self-awareness, self-care and hopefully build resilience.

Communication and Guidance: Investing in a training programme that helps foster a supportive, open, institutional wide culture whilst creating educational resources to help build and enhance student resilience.

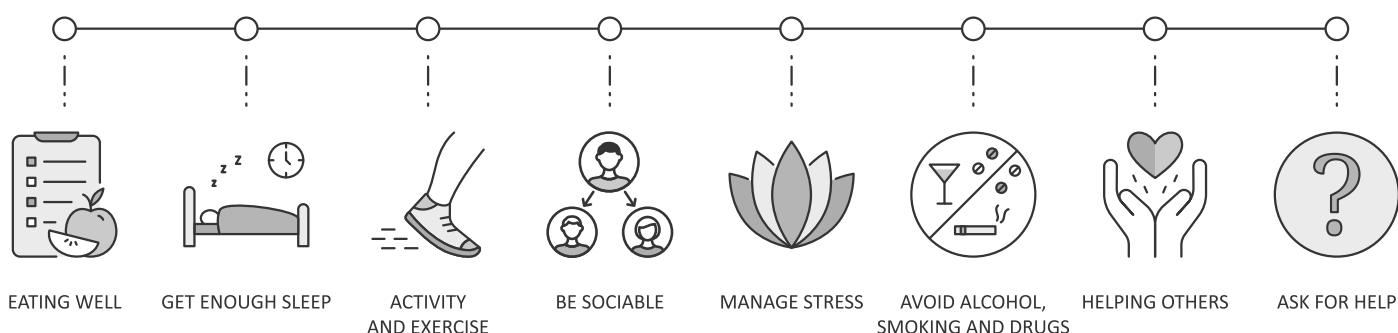
Belonging and Engagement: Fostering a welcoming and friendly institution that values student voice, putting their wellbeing at the heart of the culture and our strategic objectives whilst promoting an environment of belonging.

Data and Evaluation: Making use of our data to evaluate and improve what we offer and explore innovative and inclusive approaches to gaining student insights of their lived experience to remove barriers to partnership and participation.

General and Specialist Support: Recognising the broad aspects of wellbeing and the connected elements of the social, emotional, physical, and environmental factors and the difference between the support on offer.

I thank those involved in the production of the strategy and look forward to working with staff and students on its implementation.

MENTAL HEALTH



An Introduction from your SRUC Students' Association Co-Presidents

For some time, we have known that *there is no health without mental health* (Prince et al., 2007; Department of Health, 2011). Just as we must invest time, care, and attention to achieve a successful harvest or a positive outcome on a conservation or animal-based project, so too must we invest in our **mental health and wellbeing**. Never has there been a time more demanding for SRUC students than the world we live in today. We have survived a global pandemic, are weathering the impact of the Ukrainian war, and enduring the cost-of-living crisis. Underpinning all of these and other local, national, and global stressors is the ongoing threat to our daily lives posed by climate change. It is no wonder that students across the UK, in further education, apprenticeships, and higher education are amid a mental health crisis (Mental Health Foundation Scotland, 2022).

Let's lay bare the facts. Almost two thirds of Scottish college students experience low wellbeing, and a staggering 54% of us experience at least moderate symptoms of depression (Mental Health Foundation Scotland, 2022). Research also tells us that we are at even greater risk of mental health challenges simply because of the subjects we study (Kelly, 2017). Our educational focus on rural, environmental, and land-based disciplines means that during our studies we are exposed more often to the evidence of climate change and the associated impacts on our everyday lives (Clayton, 2018; Wallace, 2020; Klutz, 2020). We must also acknowledge that despite a fondness and deep connection with the countryside where we live and work, rural isolation has long been identified as a contributing factor to poor mental health (Nicholson, 2008). So, if it's not you experiencing mental health difficulties, it will be a friend or family member, a classmate, or a neighbour.

That is why SRUCSA, in collaboration with SRUC, will always work hard to ensure that students have a community of mental health support at their fingertips. We take student mental health very seriously, and we are delighted that this new strategy underpins SRUC's commitment to support and promote positive mental health and wellbeing. For example, this year has seen the roll out of the pioneering SpectrumLife programme. Some of us were involved in the trial team and were encouraged by the holistic approach and novel resources on offer – there's tasty recipes, relaxation techniques, and helpful organisational tools. If you haven't yet tried out SpectrumLife we would strongly encourage you to do so.

At SRUCSA this year we have focused on supporting our members' mental health needs by offering affordable housing guidance, providing opportunities to socialise and connect with others via events, clubs, and societies, and tackling student welfare issues with initiatives such as our Winter Warmer and Gender Based Violence campaigns. We are also excited about the 2023 launch of the Organisation for the Wellbeing of Learners (OWLs) which aims to promote good **mental health and wellbeing** by focusing on our core values through experiences that are fun, inclusive, and meaningful. Collaboration with our BAME, LGBTQI+, and Disability Liberation Officers further feeds into our **mental health and wellbeing** activity by ensuring that we continue to reflect the diversity of the student voice and respond by taking action when needed.

Students are the beating heart of this organisation. Without you there would be no SRUC. We passionately believe that by studying land- and conservation-based programmes we collectively have the knowledge, skills, and values that put us in the best possible place to make a difference. Not only can we contribute to societal issues surrounding effective and compassionate use of the environment, but we can also be at the forefront of enthusiastically promoting public mental health in our places of study and work within our rural communities, our towns, and cities.

We are proud to support and represent the student voice and are excited about our continued working relationship with you and SRUC to ensure that your journey with us is always well supported.

References (as per chronological order in introduction)

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Strategy Development

Context

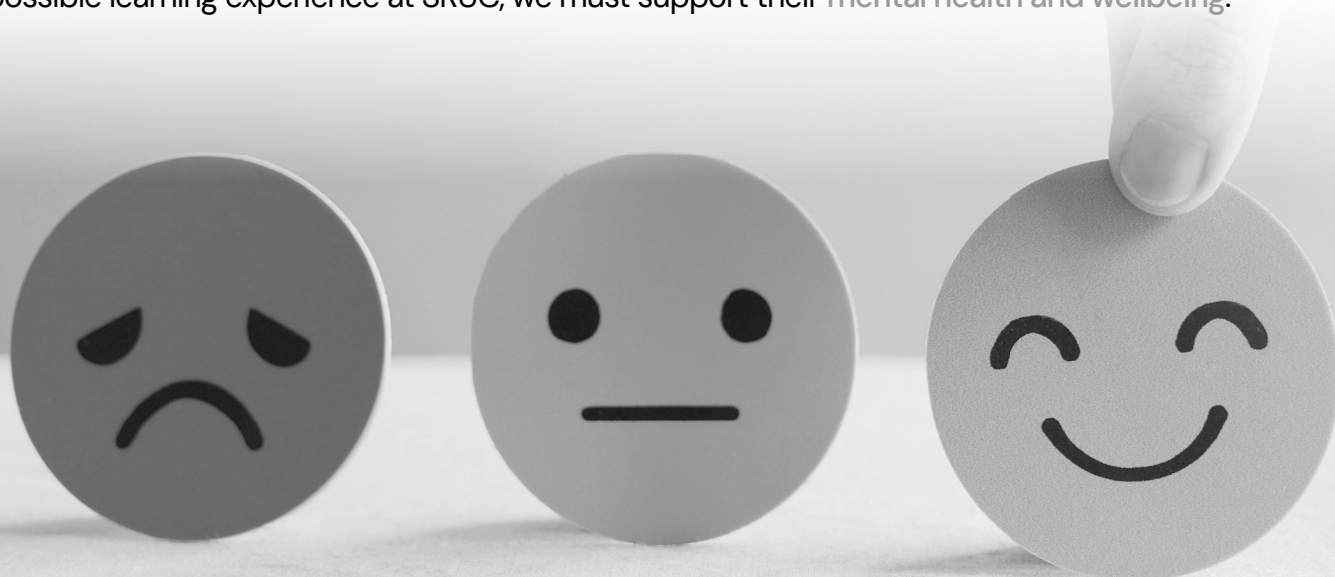
Student mental health and wellbeing is an ever-increasing priority for the UK tertiary education sector. In the latest HESA returns, the number of students disclosing a mental health condition was nearly thirteen times that in 2007/08 (9,675– 121,835 (4.5% of all students) **Advance HE 2022**), and the proportion of students declaring a disability who disclose mental health conditions has quintupled (5.9%–29.4%). This is within a climate of under-disclosure of mental health issues (**Hillman and Smith 2017**).

SRUC is no different, with an average of 5% of our SCQF Level 7+ students declaring a mental health condition over the past 5 years, and with the proportion of students declaring a disability disclosing mental health conditions increasing from 15% in 2017/18 to 26% in 2021/22. This is slightly lower, but no less significant, for our SCQF Level 6– students, with on average 3% of students declaring a mental health condition over the past 5 years, with the proportion of those declaring a disability disclosing a mental health condition holding steady at between 13% and 18%.

Again, this is within a climate of under-disclosure: 37% of students who took part in the SRUC Mental Health and Wellbeing Survey 2022 declared a diagnosed mental health condition or considered themselves having one. Of those only 56% reported having disclosed this information to SRUC staff, with 49% reporting fear of being treated differently as the reason behind non-disclosure.

UK students also report significantly lower levels of mental wellbeing than the general population, with substantial differences in anxiety levels, and this is worsened when crossed with other protected characteristics such as sexuality (**Neves and Hewitt 2021**). Covid-19, the climate emergency and the cost-of-living crisis has only exacerbated this – our students are operating within an uncertain and precarious world.

It is important to recognise these contexts since there is a correlation between wellbeing and learning gain – wellbeing impacts students' ability to learn – and between mental health and dropout rates (**Neves and Hewitt 2021**; Neves and Hillman 2017). If we want our students to have the best possible learning experience at SRUC, we must support their mental health and wellbeing.



SRUC's new Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy purposely covers both areas: mental health and mental wellbeing. Within this, we follow the Mental Health Two Continua Model, whereby mental health (or mental illness) refers to diagnosable conditions. Mental wellbeing, on the other hand, is a much thornier concept that depends on your philosophical and cultural approach (i.e., whether following a hedonic, eudaimonic, social or other approach to wellbeing; cf. Gallagher et al 2009). For SRUC, we see mental wellbeing as a broad umbrella term encompassing general life satisfaction, anxiety levels, resilience, sense of purpose, capacity to effectively manage one's life, social integration, and ability overcome social challenges.

This model recognises that a person with a diagnosed mental health condition can experience a subjectively high level of mental wellbeing (i.e., they are managing their disability well). Conversely, someone who has never received a psychiatric diagnosis might experience poor levels of wellbeing. It recognises that mental health and wellbeing operates on a spectrum often impacted not by extraordinary events, but parts of every day lived experiences. And it recognises that everybody is affected by mental health and wellbeing, not just a subset of learners: every student exists within the continuum.

As such, SRUC's Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy not only recognises that both elements can impact on student learning, but also aims to encompass and impact positively on all our students.

Background

The development of our Strategy has been explicitly cross-institutional, bringing together a range of staff who influence our students' experience, and based solidly within SRUC students' lived experiences. The Strategy's development was co-led by our Academic Enhancement Lead (Student Journey) and Academic Liaison Manager (South and West), bringing academic support and faculty together. It is sponsored by the Provost and Deputy Principal and Head of Learning and Teaching, recognising the impact of students' mental health and wellbeing on their learning. It was overseen by a cross-SRUC advisory group, comprising membership from Registry, SRUCSA, Quality Assurance, Human Resources, and Equality, Diversity & Inclusion, as well as a range of faculty-based staff (research, education and support focused).



This development comprised three stages:

1. A scoping review of existing guidance and strategies, including consultation with external critical friends to identify good practice and common themes. From this activity, Bristol University's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy was recognised as excellent practice, and the team acknowledge our debt to Bristol, as witnessed in our following of their model.
2. Analysis of existing data to better understand students' lived experiences, including relevant student numbers of data, NSS and SSES returns, applications to the 2021 SRUC Mental Health and Wellbeing fund (330 discrete applications with students highlighting their mental health and wellbeing needs), and responses to relevant questions in the 2021 Student Learning Communities survey (214 responses on questions focused on belongingness and support)¹
3. Implementation and analysis of a bespoke SRUC Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Survey 2022, which saw 397 responses across all SRUC's students, and 7 Student Wellbeing Roadmap Workshops bringing together 521 students. These were designed to further understand our students' lived experiences of mental health and wellbeing.

It is these that have shaped and informed the final Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy found below. We recognise, however, that students' lived experiences, and the tertiary education sector, is not fixed. Neither too can this strategy be. Instead, it is anticipated that SRUC's Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy will be an iterative one, revisited and updated on a regular basis so as to reflect our changing students' lives and sector contexts.



¹This latter survey was part of a wider project funded by QAA Scotland as part of the 2020–2023 Enhancement Theme.

Our Strategy

This strategy commits SRUC to demonstrating leadership:

- whilst working to widen access to support of mental health and wellbeing.
- whilst supporting students throughout their studies and transitions at SRUC.
- in promoting positive mental health and wellbeing within our community and in partnership with internal and external specialised professionals.
- in supporting those who experience significant mental health challenges.
- by monitoring and reviewing the impact of the strategy whilst monitoring and responding to changing needs.

The strategy confirms SRUC's commitment to the whole student community's **mental health and wellbeing**. This is an essential part of our wider commitment to providing the necessary resources, support, and environment for everyone in our community to thrive and flourish within our tertiary institution.

This Strategy has been developed by codesign between SRUC, SRUCSA and external organisations to provide a structural approach. This enables the whole institution to support **mental health and wellbeing** whilst seeking to remove structural barriers to mental wellbeing within our environment.

The Strategy references the strategic themes proposed by UK's **#StepChange** framework for mental health in higher education. We will measure the impact of these strategic themes through a range of data sources. The data and feedback from students and staff will be used to produce an annual mental health and wellbeing report, to inform our annual monitoring planning and ensure relevancy in a rolling strategy.



The Step Change Model:

Live

- Whole organisational approach.
- Welcoming and accessible environment.
- Student experience is at the heart of SRUC.
- Thriving communities.
- RISE behaviours (Respect, Innovate, Support, Excel).
- Suicide Aware (safer organisation).

Work

- All areas engaged in promoting student support.
- Ongoing staff development and support.
- Integrated student wellbeing offering.

Learn

- Explore methods of assessment.
- Inclusion and accessibility are central to learning and teaching.
- Support is offered through key points and transition of the student journey.
- All research for mental health is student centred.

Support

- Stigma and discrimination is challenged.
- Positive wellbeing is promoted.
- Early identification and prevention.
- Effective and personalised support.

SRUC believe that our policies should be evidence-based. Where evidence is insufficient, for example in prevention of mental ill-health, we will aim to evaluate the impact and cost-effectiveness of our interventions.

This will ensure that we do the best for our students, making a real difference to their wellbeing, and contributing to improving mental health more widely.

The strategy takes a fully inclusive and intersectional approach to identifying, understanding and addressing the unequal challenges people can face with regard to their mental health. The strategy and its implementation views co-production with students and staff as critical, recognising the need for all aspects of SRUC life to promote and support student mental health.

Strategy themes

Prevention: preventing poor mental health by finding the problems early and ensuring that students have access to the information that will increase their skills and self-awareness, self-care and hopefully build resilience.

Suicide Awareness: there is a need for everybody to be aware and recognise the warning signs of suicide, while minimising escalations and long-term impact.

Research and the data: ensuring our provision is evidence-based.

Communication and guidance: investing in a training program and creating educational resources to support students.

Belonging and engagement: being about how we foster, welcome, and create a friendly institution. It is about, in all learning areas, all social areas, enhancing the student voice and putting their wellbeing at the heart of the culture.

General and specialist support: the broad aspects of wellbeing and the interrelated and interconnected elements of the social, emotional, physical, and environmental factors, and the difference between the supports on offer by student support.

Specific specialised mental health support: that offered by SRUC, as well as outsourced, including the online platform that we have with SpectrumLife. Both general and specialist support must have clear definitions of who to go to and which would be best suited for the students when.

Awareness raising and training: for staff in student mental health and wellbeing. It will include resources and courses SRUC already has on offer, including students in decision making and peer led approaches, whilst working in collaboration with internal and external support services.

Focusing on building relationships and connections within a changing and challenging environment and recognising that it might not always be easy.

This strategy will address these themes through five overarching priority areas of action listed below.

1. Prevention

Preventing poor mental health by finding the problems early and ensuring that students have access to the information that will increase their skills and self-awareness, self-care and hopefully build resilience.

We will:

- (a) Promote the organisation's wellbeing offer and provide support from student enrolment/ induction and throughout the academic year.
- (b) Identify and raise awareness of early indicators of wellbeing support including setting up a system to identify and report early indicators.
- (c) Develop and nurture relationships with partners and local stakeholders including NHS, voluntary sector, SpectrumLife (or equivalent) to maximise opportunities to develop initiatives which enhance the student journey and embed wellbeing into the curriculum.
- (d) Work in collaboration with our Students' Association and staff to promote health and wellbeing campaigns to students throughout the year.
- (e) Explore utilising social prescribing (Small Grant Application) and NHS 5 Ways to Wellbeing and taking an integrated approach to student's health and wellbeing.
- (f) Ensure that Mental Health and Wellbeing is embedded into the curriculum/training materials for all students, including apprenticeship, day release and work-based learning programmes.



3. Belonging and Engagement

Fostering a welcoming and friendly institution that values student voice, putting their wellbeing at the heart of the culture and our strategic objectives whilst promoting an environment of belonging.

We will:

- (a) Work in collaboration with SRUCSA and across SRUC departments to develop and create wellbeing initiatives for students, local authorities/marginalized groups, and school networks in the hope that students declaring mental health issues will feel supported throughout their transition into the organisation.
- (b) Ensure that Student Induction has a strong focus on wellbeing.
- (c) Work in collaboration across teams to ensure a seamless, equitable and joined up approach to the support on offer throughout the student journey.
- (d) Provide targeted support, activities and resources during key transitions, pressure points such as exam stress, work placements, progression etc.
- (e) Continue to sign up to Think Positive, (the Scottish Government-funded student mental health project with the National Union of Students) and work with SRUCSA to develop and regularly review a Student Mental Health Agreement.



4. General & Specialist support

Recognising the broad aspects of wellbeing and the connected elements of the social, emotional, physical, and environmental factors, and the difference between the support on offer.

We will:

- (a) Create high quality mental health and wellbeing digital resources for students to access to understand the value in learning about their wellbeing.
- (b) Create a relational approach and environment where positive attributes, integrity, values, and character are recognised and how they contribute to wellbeing.
- (c) Ensure that marginalised and hard to reach student groups are supported and encouraged to seek support, such as Care-Experienced, BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic), refugees, LGBTQI +, Neurodiverse, male, and disabled students to remove barriers and widen access.
- (d) Clarify which support service to contact when distinguishing between Student Support (Pastoral Mental Health & Wellbeing) and Year Tutors (Mental Wellbeing) and specialised Mental Health (Counselling) support on offer.
- (e) Endeavour to offer a referral to counselling, internal Pastoral, external health guidance and other support within a period of 72 hours by working in collaboration with the local GP's, community support and hospitals.
- (f) Continue to reach out to students who have been adversely affected by suicidal/risky behaviour of peers, friends, and other people whom they know.



