

# The role and benefits of Mental Health Advisers in Higher Education: an exploratory study

## Research Summary

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This summary details the findings of a small-scale research study on the role and impact of Mental Health Advisers (MHAs) in UK Higher Education (HE) undertaken by Dr. Rachel Spacey, Policy and Engagement Officer at UMHAN. The study consisted of a review of the literature, focus groups with MHAs and a survey of students who had received support from a MHA whilst at university.

## Background to the study

UMHAN, the University Mental Health Advisers Network, set up in 2001 by professionals in mental health work and established in the UK as a charity in 2003, has been instrumental in maintaining and improving the professional development and standards of mental health specialists and services in HE. UMHAN's core membership is made up of professionals working in a MHA role (or similar, as job titles vary) or in Specialist Mental Health Mentoring (SMHM). Over 700 members and 150 institutions are represented.

This exploratory research study is considered an important first step, which it is hoped will pave the way to a larger, rigorous and detailed evaluation project in collaboration with academic partners. Such collaboration is essential to access the necessary data on MHA activity and student outcomes within and across HEPs. This study also seeks to increase awareness of MHAs and their work within HE institutions.



# Literature Review

A comprehensive literature search and review was conducted, aiming to identify research gaps and provide context for those unfamiliar with the MHA role in UK HE. A total of 45 relevant sources were reviewed, revealing the historical development of the MHA role, their responsibilities, qualifications, professional experience, and background. Notably, no published evaluative evidence or peer-reviewed research specifically focusing on the MHA role and its impact on students' mental health was found in the public domain. However, a few academic articles did explore students' perspectives of their experiences with MHA support.

The literature highlighted an increase in the number of high-risk students supported by MHAs and a rise in the number of universities employing MHAs. The benefits of the MHA role to students, staff, and HE institutions include improved student retention, completion of studies, and enhanced mental health outcomes.



[Photo by nappy from Pexels.](#)

# Data Collection and Analysis

Primary data collection involved focus group discussions with staff and a survey of students and graduates (within the last five years) who had received MHA support. Three online focus groups were conducted with 15 MHAs, all UMHAN members, in April 2024. A deductive or 'top-down' analysis was performed on the focus group transcripts. An online survey of students was also conducted, receiving five legitimate responses from eligible participants. The survey data was manually analysed by the author.

# Results

MHAs emphasized the importance of being a named contact within the university that students could approach for help and support. Liaison with internal and external services and stakeholders is crucial for effectively supporting students with mental health conditions. MHAs also highlighted their role in assessing student risk and acting as a 'holding bay' for students at risk due to the lack of capacity within the NHS for diagnoses or specialist services. Additionally, MHAs often raise awareness of mental health conditions among university staff.

**'A lot of times, we are the first point of contact for students, some that may not have ever spoken about their mental health to anybody before'.**

The work of MHAs significantly impacts student safety and completion of studies. MHAs expressed satisfaction in seeing students they supported graduate. The impact of MHA support includes students engaging with their studies, returning to the service, not needing it anymore, or making decisions that may, or may not, involve remaining at university.

**'The most important thing is just validating what they're going through and listening to it without any judgement'.**

Students valued being listened to and receiving one-on-one support from MHAs. Survey participants strongly agreed that MHA support helped them complete their courses and work through traumatic experiences.

**'She has provided me with invaluable support and helped me process things at my own pace. She took the time to listen and allowed me to be myself. Her genuine care for me has meant a lot, and I don't know how I would have gotten through my master's without her'.**

Other positive changes reported included increased confidence, better mental health management, decision-making capabilities, goal-setting, and having the right support/adjustments in place. MHA support was deemed essential for staying at university, academic success, and improving the student experience.

**'I would not still be at university without them. They have been my biggest form of support and my biggest advocate. They motivate me and always listen to any problems and help me problem solve. I don't know where I would be without my mental health adviser'.**

# Discussion

The data from MHAs and the limited student survey data largely support the literature review findings. The one-on-one relationship between MHAs and students is central to the MHA role, providing a non-judgmental and supportive environment. The benefits of MHA support align with those suggested in the literature, including improved student retention, completion, and mental health outcomes. Empowering students to support themselves and make decisions was a popular theme among MHAs but was not as prominent in the literature.

The study confirmed a lack of research focused on the MHA role and its impact within the UK HE sector. MHAs also questioned the notion of success and how it is measured, noting that what constitutes success for a student may differ from the outcomes expected by HE regulators or university leaders.

# Conclusions

MHAs perform multiple roles in supporting students and advising other staff on student mental health. Assessing a student's mental health, signposting to relevant services, and making referrals are key responsibilities requiring MHAs' unique skills and knowledge. MHAs are pivotal in helping students manage their mental health and ensuring the appropriate academic environment mechanisms are in place.

The benefits of MHA support are clear: MHAs help de-escalate serious situations, improve students' mental health outcomes, and assist students in continuing and completing their studies. Their support empowers students with mental health conditions to make their own decisions and manage their mental health.

# Recommendations

Future research might consider:

- Students' experiences of MHA support in a longitudinal study across the student lifecycle (from pre-entry to graduation) within and across HE institutions
- The impact of the MHA role in relation to other staff, within and across institutions including the location of MHAs
- Consultation with MHAs regarding their needs and expectations of the measures used to gauge impact among students and within services
- The role of MHAs in empowering students to manage their mental health conditions.

Read the full research paper

<https://www.umhan.com/pages/mha-research-umhan>