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31 July 2018

UCT statement on students' mental health

The University of Cape Town takes student mental health concerns very seriously and as such frequently promotes and communicates about the work of the Student Wellness Service (SWS) which offers counselling services, among other health and wellness services.

Throughout the academic year the university's social media and digital platforms continually create awareness of all these services that cater for those in distress and urges students to make use of these services when needed.

The SWS has a multidisciplinary team of health professionals who all provide mental health services. The team includes psychiatric nurses, clinical social workers, clinical psychologists, medical practitioners and psychiatrists.

A Mental Health Task Team (MHTT), set up about a year ago, reviewed all relevant UCT policies and advised that the institution should increase services – both preventive and responsive. This has been done that in a number of ways, including:

- A walk-in psychological service has been introduced at the Steve Biko Students Union from Mondays to Fridays between 08:30 and 16:00. Students requiring immediate care can make use of this service.
- A Crisis Intervention Nursing Service, where a psychiatrically qualified and well experienced nurse is available upon call out to respond to students experiencing mental health emergencies in residences, has been put in place. This service is available every night, including during weekends and on public holidays.
- A 24/7 SADAG hotline that students can call for free from a landline anytime they need some support has been introduced. The SADAG UCT Student Careline can be accessed by dialling 0800 24 25 26 free from a Telkom line or sending an SMS to 31393 for a call-me-back. This line offers 24/7 telephonic counselling, advice, referral facilities and general support to students facing any mental health challenges or contemplating suicide. The line is available to offer support and advice to anyone who is concerned about a student who might be in distress.
- The SWS has restructured its service to substantially reduce waiting periods. The waiting list, which was previously weeks, has now been reduced to a day or two.
- A new immediate assessment system enabling student seeking help to arrive at SWS even without an appointment so they can be addressed immediately has been introduced.
- Extra psychologists have been employed in the SWS.

- The newly appointed director of SWS has continued engagements at residences and across campus to create awareness around mental wellness.
- All faculties, except just one, have professional psychologists and social workers that are available for consultation. Faculties, residence staff and other support staff are also approached by students in distress.
- Mental health awareness training / workshops have been conducted at residences and at faculties.
- A Wellness Drive was implemented to promote a holistic wellbeing of students by focusing on healthy lifestyles and mental health. The face to face interactions were attended by over 2 000 students in March 2018. A mental health colloquium was also conducted during the Wellness Drive, where students participated by interacting with subject experts and discussed some possible solutions to address some of the mental health challenges.

The university urges students experiencing mental health difficulties to seek help early and not to wait. We also urge students to speak to someone, even if it means making use of the 24-hour UCT Student Careline Service, booking an appointment at SWS or making use of our walk-in psychological service at the Steve Biko Students Union.

We also encourage all members of the campus community to look out for one another should anyone around them show signs of experiencing any distress. It is through the collective efforts and collective intervention of all that we can address this challenge.

UCT is of the view that more can always be done to support students experiencing mental health challenges. The university regularly assesses the services offered and the support provided with a view to making the necessary improvement where resources permit. For instance, last year the university, via the Development and Alumni Department, secured additional funding of R650 000 from an anonymous donor. The funding was channelled towards SWS.

Mental health challenges are not unique to UCT – these are a national and global issue. The clinical presentation of students at UCT has been reported (by the Mental Health Task Team) as being in line with global trends where 20-25% of students have mental health difficulties significant enough to impair academic and social/relational functioning at times. The most common mental health presentations are depression and anxiety disorders.

The range of support needed by students includes many key role players such as the faculties, the residences, families, peer and personal support system, and support from SWS. The SWS does provide significant support by assessing high risk students, providing therapeutic interventions where needed and facilitating hospital referrals if required. The team conducts approximately 5000 counselling sessions and over 15 000 health-related consultations a year. All students receiving treatment are provided adequate and quality health care from a multidisciplinary team of qualified, skilled and well experienced health practitioners.

We have done a lot and we can no doubt do more. We will continue putting in more preventative measures as and when necessary to strengthen the support offered on mental health.

ENDS

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