

King's Mental Health Strategy – Update October 2024

In Summer 2024, a group of staff, faculty and students (who represented 50% of the group) met to discuss the Mental Health Strategy's goals and priorities.

The purpose of the Strategy is to support the University's commitment to improving student mental health, in alignment with the President's Mandate to create "improved access to services, including mental health services, for students" (2017). The Strategic Academic Plan also directs King's to "provide a student experience that includes rich learning, enhanced mental health and a supportive academic environment for all" (2022).

Our activities included:

- A consultation meeting with staff, faculty, student employees and the KSU
- A staff/faculty survey
- A student/alumni/community survey
- Consultation with some department heads (for example, Athletics)

Based on the consultations done to date and research on best practices for postsecondary student mental health, we have drafted the following guiding values and pillars for our strategy. In the development of this Strategy, we have also integrated the recommendations of the National Standard for Postsecondary Student Health and Wellbeing, a document suggesting best practices for the development of postsecondary mental health strategies.

In this document, we will outline the values and pillars, which now form a *draft* of the King's Mental Health Strategy. Throughout Fall 2024, we will be holding consultation groups to gather student, faculty and staff feedback about the Strategy.

This Strategy will be in place for three to five years. When the final Strategy is published, we will include target dates for completion and designate departmental responsibility for each action item. For questions or to provide feedback about any of these values and pillars, or how they were chosen, contact Isaac Wright at isaac.wright@ukings.ca.

Guiding Values

These values have guided our process for creating the Strategy and have also informed our chosen pillars. They will provide direction for how we implement the Strategy at King's.

Holistic mental health

The Strategy will focus on a holistic approach to mental health and wellbeing, including areas of mental health which fall outside the realm of Western, clinical mental health concerns and solutions – such as spirituality and cultural wellbeing. We will reflect on our available data about student food security, housing security, and basic needs, and encourage the development of solutions to meet those needs. The Strategy will focus on all stages of mental health promotion, including prevention and early intervention.

Student-centered

Each working group for the Strategy will be comprised of 50% students in designated roles where they are compensated for this work. Ideas will be student-driven, and we will undertake consultation at all stages of the Strategy's development. We will focus on "just in time" programming based on the student cycle, with a focus on FYP and non-FYP students, as well as day students and residence students.

Improving student experience and retention

Wherever possible we will align our projects and goals with the upcoming King's Enrolment Strategy, ensuring collaboration with university partners to support efforts to increase student recruitment, enrolment and retention. Through this, King's will aim to position itself as a leader in fostering a positive student experience at the post-secondary level, with a focus on mental health and holistic wellness – ensuring our students feel supported and successful during their time at King's and as they move towards their futures.

Indigenization

Wherever possible, we will seek to incorporate Mi'kmaw ways of knowing into the Strategy and consult with campus and community members, including the Indigenous Circle. We will also find ways to specifically consult Indigenous students beyond the Circle.

Supporting diverse student groups

In the Strategy and its goals, we will recognize the strengths of diverse groups, as well as challenges posed by systemic oppression. We will seek to support culturally specific aspects of mental health, including spirituality. We plan to consult the Black Cultural Centre and the Black Student Advising Centre on the draft Strategy and with identity-based student collectives.

Collaborative across services, programs and communities

We will encourage inter-departmental collaboration, and integration of projects across the university. We will increase collaboration with services provided by Dalhousie and strengthen partnerships with community-based services.

Education, awareness and transparency

We will focus on educating students about the resources available to them and on mental health literacy topics. As part of the Strategy, the University will encourage the further development of policies and procedures to support student mental health, and will make these policies and procedures publicly available. We will publish regular updates of the draft Strategy and provide summaries of consultations when requested, as well as being transparent about our process and methods. There will be an open door for communication about the Strategy with the Student Support Advisor, and we will engage students in the Strategy's development.

Pillars

These pillars will form the tangible actions and projects included in the Strategy. Listed here are some examples (non-exhaustive) of projects we may include in the final Strategy. Responsibility for these projects will be clearly delegated, with concrete timelines and targets for completion.

In alignment with our guiding values, we have chosen to integrate equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility efforts throughout these projects, rather than take a siloed approach which may place the responsibility for this work on a single department or a small number of staff members. By doing this, we acknowledge that efforts to support equity-deserving students must be a shared goal across all departments and programs.

Given the University's resources, budget and capacity, we are still determining our focus for each pillar. **We will aim to have 4-6 actions for each pillar**, to take place over the space of three to five years. We are hoping to have input from students and community members to see which actions to prioritize in each pillar.

Facilitating Access to Campus and Community Supports

This pillar will seek to increase students' awareness of and confidence in accessing existing campus services, and where possible, will work towards increased service offerings.

Example actions may include:

- Support the development of increased peer support services
- In alignment with the Strategic Academic Plan, continue to work with Dalhousie to strengthen supports for students with mental health challenges. This includes

advocating for more accessible pathways to services run by Dalhousie, including Student Health and Wellness and the Student Accessibility Centre

- Work with the KSU to increase insurance coverage for counselling services
- Increase partnerships with community-based services, including services provided by the Nova Scotia Health Authority and IWK
- Implement changes to all services to better serve equity-deserving students, including hiring diverse support staff, increasing training on culturally relevant and trans-informed care, and increasing approachability of services; this should include advocating for changes at Dalhousie
- Increase wayfinding supports for mental health services, including improvements to the website and physical resources
- In partnership with the Registrar's Office, investigate options for a self-referral to the Student Support Advisor through the admissions process for all students, based on the successful implementation of a residence self-referral process in previous years
- Offer increased training opportunities for faculty and staff to learn more about services available and making appropriate referrals
- Create a plan for supporting student athletes, including training for coaches and increased access to services for athletes

Advancing Mental Health Awareness on Campus

This pillar will seek to increase mental health awareness on campus and improve students' skills for supporting their own mental health.

Example actions may include:

- Work with Student Health and Wellness and community organizations to increase the number of workshops available related to student mental health literacy, including self-advocacy, executive functioning, suicide response, and skills development
- Improve resources dedicated to 2SLGBTQIA+, Indigenous, disabled, and racialized student mental health education and awareness.
- Improve student, faculty and staff awareness about concussions, including guidelines for accommodations
- Offer mandatory or incentivized training for athletics coaches including mental health literacy, crisis response and resource referrals

- In efforts to improve the mental health of our community, task the Employee Wellness and Benefits Committee to build a strategy for employee wellbeing at King's
- Continue to improve the Residence Suicide Response Guide and training for residence employees

Supporting Student Employees

This goal will aim to improve the mental health supports available to students employed on campus.

Example actions may include:

- Increase access for student employees to access mental health services at Dalhousie
- Conduct consultation about holding a student employee support group for students who work in stressful campus roles, including Junior Dons, Patrol, Peer Advising, Front Desk and Peer Support
- Create training for student employees on managing burnout
- Train supervisors on trauma-informed and mental health-informed supervision and employee support strategies

Increasing Students' Quality of Life

This pillar will aim to increase holistic wellbeing for students at King's and meet students' holistic needs. Example actions include:

- Work with relevant staff to expand off-campus housing supports, including the creation of a working group dedicated to off-campus housing
- Support student initiatives to increase food security for students, such as the King's Food Security Initiative and the Loaded Ladle
- Work with relevant student services to improve access to spiritual care across a diverse range of faiths
- Implement initiatives to encourage students to access local green spaces and nature
- Increase awareness of bursaries and financial aid available to students
- Increase financial aid for racialized students, students with disabilities, and transgender students
- Create frameworks to support 2SLGTBQIA+ students and international students

- Work collaboratively with other strategic plans, such as the Equity Plan, the Accessibility Plan, and the Action Plan for a Culture of Consent & Respect, to support the mental health of BIPOC students, disabled students / students with disabilities, and students who have experienced sexualized violence
- Continue to support access to harm reduction programming across campus

Supporting Students' Academic Success

This pillar will aim to support student mental health in relation to academic wellbeing and success, however that is defined by each individual student.

Example projects may include:

- Increase academic supports for students with disabilities including mental illness and neurodivergence, as suggested in the Strategic Academic Plan (p. 3, 2023)
- In alignment with the Accessibility Plan's commitment to accessible teaching and learning, and a human rights framework, continue to implement accessibility measures to the delivery of academic programs, including FYP
- Increasing awareness of and access to financial supports and technological supports for students with disabilities
- Increasing collaboration between academic programs and Dalhousie services, including the Writing Centre and the Student Accessibility Centre
- Support academic programs to implement the King's Mental Health Strategy

Policy, Communication and Measurement

This pillar will aim to improve the university's policies and procedures related to mental health, including collection of student data and continuous improvement of the Mental Health Strategy.

Example projects may include:

- Collect data on reasons for withdrawal, with particular attention to students withdrawing for disability or mental health reasons
- Create confidentiality, information sharing and record-keeping guidelines for all King's services
- Develop a framework for measuring progress towards the Mental Health Strategy and its integration with other university action plans

- Review all King's policies through a mental health and wellbeing lens, as recommended by the National Standard for Postsecondary Student Health and Wellbeing