



HEALTHY UNIVERSITIES: Introduction and Model

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**“A Healthy University aspires to create a learning environment
and organisational culture that enhances the health, well-being
and sustainability of its community and enables people
to achieve their full potential.”**

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper provides an introduction to Healthy Universities and presents a model for applying the healthy settings approach within higher education.

2. HEALTHY UNIVERSITIES: BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

2.1 THE HEALTHY SETTINGS APPROACH

“Health is created and lived by people within the settings of their everyday life; where they learn, work, play and love.” (WHO, 1986)

The healthy settings approach is not just about delivering interventions in a range of contexts – it adopts a whole system perspective and is concerned to make the actual places and social systems in which people spend their time supportive to health.

The rationale for seeking to enhance health through the range of settings within which people live their lives is based on an appreciation:

- that health is largely determined outside of the NHS, which Wanless (2004) has argued is in reality a ‘National Sickness Service’
- that health underpins organisational and societal achievement and productivity and that investment for health can contribute positively to a setting’s performance and the delivery of its core goals (Grossman and Scala, 1993).

2.2 THE HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

With 2.3 million students and 370,000 staff (UUK, 2008; HESA, 2009), the 169 UK higher education institutions (HEIs) offer enormous potential as settings in which and through which to promote public health – serving as:

- centres of learning and development, with roles in education, research, capacity and capability building, and knowledge exchange
- foci for creativity and innovation, developing knowledge and understanding within and across disciplines and applying them to the benefit of society
- places within which students undergo life transition – exploring and experimenting, developing independence and lifeskills, and facing particular health challenges
- workplaces and businesses, concerned with performance and productivity within a competitive marketplace
- contexts that ‘future shape’ students and staff as they clarify values, grow intellectually and develops capabilities that can enhance current and future citizenship within families, communities, workplaces and society as a whole
- a resource for and influential partner and corporate citizen within local, regional, national and global communities.

2.3 HEALTHY UNIVERSITIES: INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL CONTEXTS

Historically, universities have served as settings for the delivery of specific projects on issues such as drugs, alcohol, sexual health, student mental health and staff stress. More recently, however, there has been growing interest in developing a more holistic and strategic ‘whole university’ approach – reflecting the success of other settings initiatives such as Healthy Schools and, more recently, Further Education (Doherty and Dooris, 2006). Drawing on evidence from these initiatives and from research into issues such as obesity, it is increasingly acknowledged that effective

programmes are likely to be complex, multifactorial and involve activity in more than one domain (Stewart-Brown, 2006: 17; Butland et al, 2007).

Nationally, the Government responded to a groundswell of interest and activity relating to Healthy Colleges and Healthy Universities by including reference to further education and higher education sectors in its 2004 White Paper *Choosing Health* (Department of Health, 2004) and expressing a commitment to (p. 72):

“support the initiatives being taken locally by some colleges and universities to develop a strategy for health that integrates health into the organisation’s structure to create healthy working, learning and living environments; increase the profile of health in teaching and research; and develop healthy alliances in the community.”

In 2006, UCLan responded to increasing demand for advice and information by establishing the English National Healthy Universities Network, as a means of facilitating the sharing of experience and practice and providing peer support (Doherty and Dooris, 2006). In 2008, it received funding from the Higher Education Academy Health Sciences and Practice Subject Centre and the Department of Health for a National Research and Development Project on Healthy Universities (Dooris and Doherty, 2009). Building on this, it is (jointly with Manchester Metropolitan University) leading a HEFCE-funded project *Developing Leadership and Governance for Healthy Universities* which aims to strengthen the National Network and develop and disseminate web-based guidance tools and case studies.

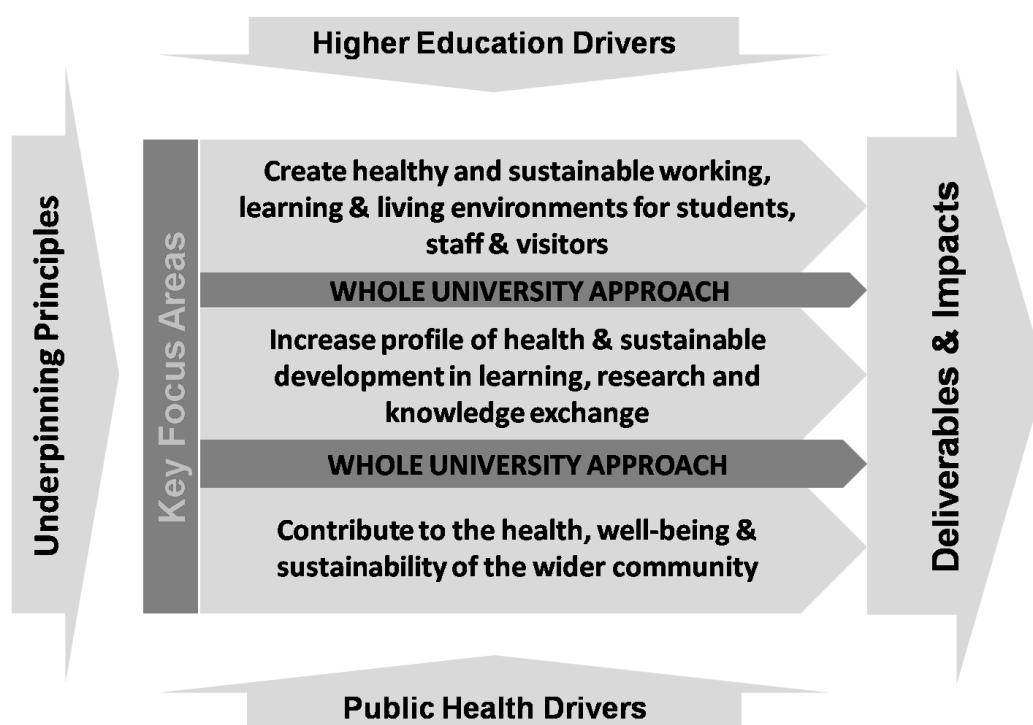
3. HEALTHY UNIVERSITIES: A MODEL FOR APPLYING THE HEALTHY SETTINGS APPROACH WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION

Figure 1 depicts a model for applying healthy settings thinking within higher education – offering a useful means of conceptualising the Healthy University approach, which: “aspires to create a learning environment and organisational culture that enhances the health, well-being and sustainability¹ of its community and enables people to achieve their full potential.” It is structured to show:

- **Underpinning Principles:** The approach is underpinned by the core principles reflecting the values that characterise higher education and public health. These include equality and diversity; participation and empowerment; partnership; sustainability; holistic and whole system health; evidence-informed and innovative practice; and evaluation, learning and knowledge exchange.
- **Drivers:** The Healthy University approach must take account of both higher education and public health drivers. It must therefore be guided by the distinctive culture of universities and show how it can help to deliver key priorities (e.g. student recruitment, retention, experience and achievement; widening participation; and employee performance and organisational productivity) whilst also identifying and responding to relevant public health challenges (e.g. alcohol and substance misuse, mental well-being, obesity, food and physical activity; sexual health; climate change; reduction of inequalities).

¹ A commitment to sustainability is increasingly understood to be intrinsic to both higher education and public health. In addition to being used to highlight the importance of ensuring the durability of initiatives (often beyond a short-term funding period), the term is widely understood to imply a concern to enable all people to satisfy their basic needs and enjoy a better quality of life, without compromising the ecological integrity of the planet or the quality of life of future generations. From a public health perspective, it is this second meaning that has formed an increasing focus for research and policy development, with key public health organisations recognising that the causes and manifestations of both ecologically unsustainable development and poor health are inter-related and frequently pose further interconnected challenges and opportunities (e.g. improved land use planning can reduce carbon emissions, reduce air pollution and increase levels of physical activity).

Figure 1: Healthy Universities: A Model for Conceptualising and Applying the Healthy Settings Approach to Higher Education



- **Whole University Approach:** As explained in 2.1, the healthy settings approach adopts a whole system perspective. A ‘whole university approach’ involves securing high-level commitment and leadership, engaging a wide range of stakeholders, and combining high visibility health-related projects with system-level organisation development and change. It also requires a proactive and systematic process that designates responsibilities and accountabilities; harnesses and connects health-related activities; assesses needs and capacities; sets priorities; agrees, implements and monitors progress against a delivery plan; conducts wider evaluation; and celebrates achievements.
- **Focus Areas:** A whole system approach involves working within and across three key areas of activity – relating to the environment of the setting, the core business of the setting, and connections to the wider community. Applying this thinking to higher education, it is evident that the Healthy University approach aims to:
 - create healthy and sustainable learning, working and living environments
 - integrate health and sustainable development as multi-disciplinary cross-cutting themes in curricula, research and knowledge exchange
 - contribute to the health, well-being and sustainability of local, regional, national and global communities.
- **Deliverables:** The Healthy University approach has the potential to deliver tangible contributions to health, sustainability and core business priorities. These are likely to include:
 - more supportive working and learning contexts
 - higher quality health and welfare services
 - healthy and sustainable food procurement processes and catering services
 - more accessible sports, leisure, social and cultural facilities that are more widely used
 - support for an holistic approach to personal, social and citizenship development
 - increased understanding of, commitment to and sense of personal responsibility for health and sustainable development among students and staff
 - strengthened institution-level commitment to practise corporate responsibility and to lead for health and sustainability in local, regional, national and global partnerships.

- **Impacts:** The approach also has the potential to result in longer-term impacts within, outside and beyond the university, leading to:
 - improved business performance and productivity – thereby enhancing student and staff recruitment, retention and achievement
 - strengthened capacity and capability to contribute to the pursuit of a range of public service agreements²
 - increased positive and reduced negative institutional impacts on health and ecological sustainability
 - a throughput of engaged students and staff exerting a positive influence as local and global citizens within families, communities, workplaces and political processes.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has provided an overview of the healthy setting, outlined the distinctive features of and opportunities offered by higher education as a setting, provided a background to Healthy Universities and presented a conceptual model for informing the development of a National Framework. It is clear that the Healthy University approach has the potential not only to deliver important public health benefits, but also to enhance student and staff experience – contributing to recruitment, retention, performance, achievement and overall organisational productivity.

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² http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/psa_2008-2011_200409.pdf: Public Service Agreements (PSAs) set out the key priority outcomes the Government wants to achieve in the next spending period (2008-2011). The Healthy University approach has the potential to contribute across the range of PSAs: help people and businesses come through the downturn sooner and stronger, supporting long-term economic growth and prosperity; fairness and opportunity for all; a better quality of life; stronger communities; a more secure, fair and environmentally sustainable world.