

Students can opt in to mental health warning system

Rosemary Bennett Education Editor

Students' mental health must be treated as seriously as academic studies or authorities risk failing a generation, the universities minister has said.

Institutions that improved their mental health services along with pastoral care would be invited to sign up to a new charter, effectively a kite mark, showing prospective students that they are more likely to be supported and happy there.

In another significant change, for the first time parents could be notified if their child is suffering a mental health crisis at university. Under plans being examined by the government, students would be asked during freshers' week if they would like their parents or another trusted adult to be told if they are struggling.

The system would be on an opt-in basis. The mental health charter will be developed by charities and universities.

Sam Gyimah, the universities minister, will announce the details today at a summit in Bristol to discuss student mental health. He called it a "new deal on mental health for students". Ten students at Bristol University have taken their lives in the past two years, with three deaths this summer alone.

James Murray, whose son Ben died in

May, will be at the summit. Ben had told the university that he was suffering from anxiety and was struggling with his work. His parents say that they would have intervened if the university had told them of their son's problems.

Mr Murray said that students who arrived through clearing were particularly vulnerable and young people who lacked a sense of belonging to their institutions could feel isolated. While the mental health charter will be voluntary, Mr Gyimah is urging institutions to sign up, warning that they are not there to "train minds and nothing else".

"We want mental health support for students to be a top priority for the leadership of all our universities," he said. "Progress can only be achieved with their support. I expect them to get behind this important agenda as we otherwise risk failing an entire generation of students."

The charter, which will set out eight standards that universities must meet on areas such as early intervention providing training for staff at all levels and promoting healthy environments and behaviours. Student Minds, the mental health charity, will lead its development, working with the Office for Students, the National Union of Students, Universities UK and the UPP Foundation.