

An Overview of Mental Health in the UK University Sector

Alan Percy

Head of Counselling: University of Oxford

Chair of HUCS (Heads of University Counselling Services)

Chair of MWBHE (Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education)

April 2019



Setting the Scene

- Huge increase in students accessing University Counselling and Support Services in the UK. Increased expectations and pressures on those services.
- Increased awareness and promotion of mental health / psychological support for staff and students.
- Greater importance of 'duty of care' towards staff and students in terms of mental health support.

Setting the Scene

- Greater publicity through media and campaigning charities increasing concern over student mental health problems
- Increased parental, institutional and government anxiety about student mental health problems
- Dangers of simplistic explanations and solutions for a complex issue
- Evidence of rates of mental illnesses, self harm and suicide. 2018 ONS report on student suicides.

Improving Student Mental Health in UK universities

- Importance of ‘joined up’ thinking and messages from the Institution as a whole
- Student Mental Health and Wellbeing is responsibility of whole institution not just the ‘Support Services’.
- Realistic messages of the challenges of higher education, transitions and realistic expectations (preparation and information before starting university)

Improving Student Mental Health in UK universities

- Importance of good, targeted, practical welfare training for front line staff across the institution (usually best done ‘in house’)

<http://learning.cwmt.org.uk> - **Charlie Waller Memorial Trust E-Learning package for academic and non-academic staff to support students with mental health problems**

Improving Student Mental Health in UK universities

- Need to recognise that there is a continuum of mental health and stress levels. (Normal distressing life challenges to clinical symptoms/illness)
- Balance of providing support by making ‘reasonable adjustments’ and encouraging emotional resilience and life skills in students
- Be clear about what support services can and cannot do. Explain what different services can do and importance of “active student engagement”

Improving Student Mental Health in UK universities

- Developing innovative evidence-based therapeutic/clinical interventions
- Importance of balancing accessibility with the effectiveness of intervention
- Wide range of provision from preventative psycho-educational to more intensive therapeutic support for students with serious mental illness (often a combination of counselling, disability and medical services)

Challenges of Supporting New Undergraduate Students: Transitions

- Transition to Higher Education
- Developmental challenges for young adults
- Attachment issues, why are people more vulnerable at times of transition?
- Factors influencing young adult mental wellbeing and psychology
- Culture of Anxiety? Students, Parents, Institutions, Media?
- Developmental and Life challenges of mature students

Key Factors and Context Affecting Young Adult Emotional Resilience

- Social media promoting unrealistic life expectations
- Transitional issues: different models of secondary to HE modes of learning
- Pressure on students to immediately get everything 'right'. Real Learning is 'getting things wrong, being confused, struggling, feeling unsettled managing uncertainty until knew knowledge emerges' (Metaphor for becoming a mature adult)
- Transitional issues: Changes in parenting styles often giving mixed messages around separation and independence

Key Factors and Context Affecting Young Adult Emotional Resilience

- ‘Over-medicalising’ normal but distressing life challenges and difficulties
- Rigid expectations (students satisfaction based more on how reality meets their expectations rather than quality of experience itself)
- Increased uncertainty about economic/career future puts greater pressure to succeed academically
- Persecutory/unrealistic perfectionism: key driver for mental health difficulties and serious illness
- Catastrophizing difficulties and failure

Why is Emotional Resilience so Contentious?

- ‘All or nothing thinking’ around student mental health
- ‘Blaming students for their problems’
- Can it be seen as empowering or enabling?
- Many ‘mental health problems’ relating to feels of being overwhelmed by life
- Have young adults got the ‘internal resources’, self confidence and compassion to face life challenges
- Culture always beats strategy!

Post Graduate Students: Specific Mental Health Needs

- Transition to PG education: Different educational and psychological tasks
- Transition from previous background: Life and developmental pressures
- Isolation and need for structure
- Range of projects/initiatives: HEFCE catalyst funding

Key Challenges of Effectively Supporting Student Mental Wellbeing

- Major national initiatives: UUK ‘Steps for Changes’, ‘Suicide Safer’ and OfS ‘Student Charter on Mental Health’
- Mental Health Spectrum: Need for range of provision, services and interventions
- Wellbeing initiatives: Prevention or increase demand?
- Gap in provision between NHS provision and university services for students with complex needs

Evaluation of Student Support Services and Wellbeing Interventions

- Evidence of effectiveness of wellbeing interventions?
Example of 'Fridays @4' Maths Institute OU.
- Satisfaction surveys do not indicate effectiveness
- Examples such as MHFA and risk assessments
- Need for more quality research and data of effectiveness:
clinical measures in counselling
- Linking education progress and functioning as outcome measures?

**Thank you for
Listening**

Any Questions?

alan.percy@admin.ox.ac.uk