Coddling in an age of outrage

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Every so often, a book arrives on the scene that challenges us to think about the nature of higher education and its purpose. Some generate a lot of attention. *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting up a Generation for Failure*, by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, has had a fair share of the media spotlight. Critiqued by *The Guardian* (Weigel, 2018), one of the co-authors (Jonathan Haidt) was even invited to take part in a discussion-based programme, 'Start of the Week', on BBC Radio 4.

Continuing a thesis developed in Allan Bloom's (1988) *Closing of the American Mind*, in which Bloom asserted that HE had 'failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today's students', Lukianoff and Haidt posit that students in 2018 aren't so much 'closed' but are being 'coddled' to a point that is making them too fragile to encounter challenging ideas. On Radio 4, Haidt (2018) referred to 'protections' being put in place against certain 'microaggressions', with 'Gen Z' students demanding protection from "words, books, speakers and ideas"; in other words "speaking a language of safety". This

is possibly a symptom of smartphone addiction or "paranoid parenting". In a period where HE institutions are becoming more diverse, 'safetyism' could lead to "further misunderstandings" and, more pointedly, students may not have the tools or resilience required to succeed in professional life.

Particularly revealing in Haidt's interview was an admission that, in this 'age of outrage', teaching styles and methods are being altered in many US colleges, so as not to incite the indignation of any students who sensed any bias. He ruminates,

> *I used to be a provocative teacher. I used to use Socratic methods of bringing people to some uncomfortable possible conclusions, and then lead them away. I don't dare do that now, because if I make someone uncomfortable there's a number to call to report me.*

Haidt charted 2011/12 as a point of change. He asserts that things suddenly "go haywire" for teenagers in both the US and the UK. Rates of anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicide appear to "shoot up". Haidt credits Cognitive Behaviour Therapy

as a means to correcting any "cognitive distortions" stemming from the conditions students have upon entering university.

What surprised me wasn't so much the content of the book, but how 'popular' ideas are quickly taken up by others, particularly ministerial or policy leaders. Whilst doing some background research on a paper reported in this issue of *Innovations*, I was struck by the semantic similarities between *Coddling of the American Mind* and the reflections of (former) Universities minister Sam Gyimah, in a BBC news item (reported by Spitzer-Wong, 2018) on mental health services. Consider Gyimah's phrase "university as an assault on the senses" and use of the word "mollycoddling":

> *University is supposed to be an assault on the senses. It should be demanding and disorienting, and with that should come adequate pastoral care for students. This does not mean mollycoddling or cushioning students from the experiences that are part and parcel of university life; it means making sure support services are available if they need them.*

Gyimah's apparent challenge to 'safetyism' followed a freedom of information request, by the BBC Shared Data Unit, which found that £36.6m was spent by institutions in these services in 2015/16, compared to £25.5m in 2012/13 – an increase of 43 per cent. This issue of *Innovations* begins with a Viewpoint piece on student wellbeing and mental health, in which I summarise some of the key conversations that have taken place in the sector in the last three years in particular. The synopsis developed from the grey literature (reports, guidelines, surveys) reported in the Sector Round-up section of the journal. A mental health charter for UK universities is to be *in situ* from 2019/20.

The issues of wellbeing and mental health have featured in many UK media reports. As far as the academic literature is concerned, in a simple search on Scopus, a steady increase after 2012, with a slightly bigger leap from 2014 to 2015, is noticeable:
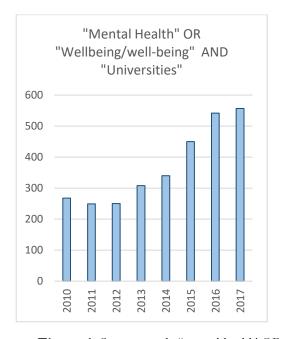
Figure 1: *Scopus search ('mental health' OR 'wellbeing/well-being' AND 'universities')*

I first came across the term 'low threshold applications' whilst working on a collaborative project with US-based The TLT Group in 2000: the President of the group, Steve Gilbert, coined the term. Low threshold applications or technology relates to hardware that is accessible, easy to master, and cheap to use. In Jim Turner's Viewpoint paper, he reflects on the popularity of one piece of technology (I won't reveal here!) that was having a transformative effect on teaching in the classroom. Since the advent of social media and the rapid sophistication of mobile

technology, the past ten years have witnessed a dizzying period of technological development in the classroom. However, teaching practice is relatively stable and, as some have remarked, somewhat regressed owing to the 'death by PowerPoint' syndrome. Jim considers how this technology can unshackle the teacher from the lectern, to explore the space more creatively and, therefore, nurture a different type of relationship with the student.

The third Viewpoint paper is a reflection piece by Amy Whitehead and Ian Sadler on The Power of Sport, a hugely successful student research conference, organised by LJMU's School of Sport, Leisure and Nutrition. We have long recognised that student engagement in any form of research is a valuable experience and can be transformational. In George Kuh's (2018) keynote presentation at LJMU, undergraduate research can be applied in many of the 'high impact practices' (HIPs) that he outlined to us:

o Bring small groups of students with staff on a regular basis in the first year;
o Develop common intellectual experiences, perhaps combining broad themes;
o Nurture learning communities and encourage integration across courses;
o Promote writing-intensive courses;
o Introduce collaborative assignments and projects;
o Provide research experiences for undergraduates (for instance a 'capstone project' – to pursue independent research with guidance from an academic);
o Encourage students to explore other cultures;

o Promote 'experiential learning' in community-based work, or service learning;
o Create internship opportunities.

Whilst there has been much emphasis on nurturing undergraduate research, as argued by Spronken-Smith et al. (2013), there has been little focus on encouraging dissemination, which The Power of Sport addresses.

Robyn Lotto's Research in Practice paper developed from focus groups with postgraduate students (on a nursing programme) who were in the throes of engaging in ethics applications or had just completed their forms. Research ethics is an extremely important part of the research process but, sometimes, it can be (with respect to anyone involved in research governance!) a turgid, difficult and frustrating exercise. Robyn highlights the challenges and difficulties, focusing on three key themes that emerged from the conversations: time and timeliness of the training offered; the value of assessment; and the content and delivery of ethics training.

Finally, the Sector Round-up is an unusually long one thanks, in part, to a glut of reports and papers from the Leadership Foundation in Higher Education (especially from their Small Development Projects Scheme) and Equality Challenge Unit, ahead of the establishment of Advance HE. Further, in contrast to the other years, there was a noticeable rise in the number of reports released by the National Union of Students and Student Minds in 2018.

I hope you enjoy this issue and, if you do wish to submit a paper, or offer a review, please do not hesitate to contact me.

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