

Student mental health and wellbeing: a synopsis from recent sectoral reports

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Abstract

Sectoral reports, or 'grey literature' (reports, technical notes, guidance materials, surveys) from key higher education policy bodies and think tanks, have been summarised in the Sector Round-up section of Innovations in Practice since 2016. Ahead of a new mental health charter for UK universities, which is expected to be rolled out in 2019/20, this paper summarises some of the findings and conversations that have taken place on student mental health and wellbeing in recent months.

Keywords

mental health; student wellbeing; policy; welfare; student engagement

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Introduction

Cast your mind back to October 2015, and a report on an Association of Train Operating Companies' study that observed a spike in the use of the 16-25/Student Railcard in the third week of October 2014. This was attributed to 'homesickness' (BBC, 2015). We are all too aware of the anxieties students experience in the initial weeks of a new academic year. Change can exact a heavy toll on any student, particularly when grappling with the prospect of engaging in new methods of learning, cultivating a new network of friends, or contending with leaving home for the first time. In this context homesickness masks a wider set of emotional concerns and issues.

Three years on and the media narrative has a much darker and ominous edge about it. In October 2018 the BBC Shared Data Unit, in a Freedom of Information request to universities across the UK, reported that the number of students seeking mental health support had increased by more than 50 per cent between 2012/13 and 2016/17 (Spitzer-Wong, 2018). The change in emphasis comes in the wake of news reports of tragic cases in UK higher education. In experimental statistics released by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), it was reported that the rate of suicide in the 12 months ending July 2017 for HE students in England and Wales was 4.7 deaths per 100,000 students, equating to 95 suicides. Such evidence invariably emboldened the Universities minister, Sam Gyimah (2018), to advise that there was "no negotiation" on the prioritisation of student mental health services. A call for action has been echoed by other HE leaders. For instance, in a Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) report, one pro vice-chancellor advocated the appointment of a Commissioner for Student Mental Health (cited in Clarke and Beech, 2018). While the recent stories are alarming, sectoral reports on 'psychological

distresses' in HE have been noted prior to these events (cf. Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2011; YouthSight, 2014).



Towards a Mental Health Charter

Sectoral reports, or 'grey literature' (reports, technical notes, guidance materials, surveys), have been summarised in the Sector Round-up section of *Innovations in Practice* since 2016. Before highlighting a few of the insights within these reports, it is worthwhile reflecting briefly on the pronouncements, as well as some of the initiatives developed within the sector, in recent times. Collectively, these conversations have led to the recommendation of a university mental health charter, to be developed by a host of sectoral bodies, which will be released in 2019/20. Being a voluntary award, and recognising exceptional approaches to the promotion and support of mental health and wellbeing of students, a charter has the potential to cement good processes.

When the charter comes into effect, it is highly probable that universities will have more robust data upon which to implement an informed strategic response. In September 2018, UK Research and Innovation (the body established under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017,

and brought together the major research councils and knowledge exchange bodies) announced the creation of eight mental health networks, including the Student Mental Health Research Network. It will therefore sit alongside other practitioner-focused networks, including:

- the University Mental Health Advisors Network (established 2003), which devised University Mental Health Day;
- the UK Healthy Universities Network (established 2006), a signatory to the 2015 Okanagan International Charter for Health Promoting Universities and Colleges; and
- Student Minds (established 2009), a mental health charity set up “to empower students and members of the university community to develop the knowledge, confidence and skills to look after their own mental health...”

In recent years other strategic forums and groups in UK HE have come to the fore, such as Universities UK’s (UUK) Task Group on Student Mental Health, as well as their Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education Working Group. The latter was established as far back as 2003, as an initiative between UUK and Guild HE, and released guidelines in 2015 which was a stimulus to the UUK’s adoption of mental health as a ‘proactive policy priority’ in 2016 (UUK published its #StepChange framework in 2017). At the start of this academic year UUK (2018) issued its *Suicide-Safer Universities* guidance, which acknowledged numerous triggers that may increase mental distress, including: media reporting on student suicides; transitions to and from university; finance (debt, gambling and general money worries); the internet and social media; academic drivers; and social and cultural pressures.

The focus on supporting a preventative approach to mental health, and providing an agenda for change, has been evident in other

sectoral reflections. For example, a HEPI ‘occasional paper’ advocated being more co-ordinated and proactive, rather than “to wait for sufferers to become ill” (Selden and Martin, 2017: 7). The idea of a more strategic, and ‘whole university’, approach was also articulated in a Leadership Foundation for Higher Education-funded study, conducted by the UK Healthy Universities Network (Dooris et al., 2018). There has been a realisation that UK HE has shapeshifted insofar as the student demographic is concerned and any strategies need to be cognisant of this. As the Royal College of Psychiatrists (2011: 7) noted some years earlier:

The numbers of young people in higher education have expanded and they have become more socially and culturally diverse. There have been increasing numbers of students drawn from backgrounds with historically low rates of participation in higher education and growing numbers of international students... The changes that have taken place in the demographics of the student population mean that epidemiological research becomes rapidly obsolete.

Intersectional data (e.g. Female Black Disabled [mental condition]) have been released by Advance HE (2018) and, previous to this, by the Equality Challenge Unit. The Equality Act 2010 extended the number of protected characteristics to cover new areas, including religion and belief, gender reassignment, and sexual orientation, and a more finessed perspective of student mental health and wellbeing is likely to emerge. In addition to statistical data, there have been notable studies on particular social groups. For example, in a report for Student Minds, Smithies and Byrom (2018) examined mental health and wellbeing among LGBTQ+ students. The report highlighted cases of post-traumatic stress, panic and eating disorders. However the

authors advised that the proportion of students reporting mental health difficulties in the survey “could not be used as general prevalence data”.

There have been other reports focused on the general student population, such as the Institute for Public Policy Research’s *Not by Degrees* (Thorley, 2017) which scrutinised Higher Education Statistics Agency figures and showed that 1,180 students with mental health problems dropped out of university in 2015, a rise of 210 per cent compared with 2010. The link between poor mental health and persistence was touched upon in HEPI’s *The Invisible Problem*, penned by undergraduate student Poppy Brown (2016). The student perspective has been an essential feature of the conversations. For instance, the All Party Parliamentary Group on Students (APPGS) discussed student mental health twice, in December 2015 and January 2018. At the meeting in 2015, the National Union of Students (NUS) used the forum to highlight their study which indicated that eight out of ten students had experienced a mental health issue. The NUS has been at the forefront of prominent campaigns, which have been given renewed purpose and direction by its *NUS 100 Manifesto* (NUS, 2016) that pledged to ensure that wellbeing and welfare should be central to the student experience. In Scotland, such was the timeliness and value of NUS Scotland’s ‘Think Positive’ work that The Scottish Government (2017) embedded it in their ten-year mental health strategy, vowing to further refine and develop it. Of the other UK nations, it is worth referencing the NUS-Union of Students in Ireland’s (USI) (2017) research whose data matched closely the evidence provided by the NUS to the APPGS.

The satisfaction conundrum

The wellbeing and mental health narratives contained in other sector reports make for sobering reading. Take, for instance, the Office for the Independent Adjudicator (OIA), a body that reviews student complaints against HE providers in England and Wales. In their *2016 Annual Report*, mental health was pin-pointed as a ‘common theme’ in the complaints received, as the OIA reported, “a significant proportion of students who bring cases... are experiencing mental health difficulties” (OIA, 2017: 17). This prompted the OIA to include two case studies in their latest annual report (one ‘justified’, the other ‘partly justified’) to illustrate concerns in cases involving students with such difficulties (OIA, 2018).

As the sector marches inexorably towards an increasingly marketised state, connecting mental health with complaints and satisfaction has assumed a different resonance. We see this in the 2017 Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey findings which found that those taught postgraduates (PGT) who declared themselves as having a mental health condition had the lowest levels of satisfaction (75 per cent): eight per cent lower than PGTs without a disability. The report observed a starkness in the ‘retention vulnerability’ of PGTs with a mental condition, with 51 per cent of those reporting they had considered leaving or suspending their studies, making them “the most vulnerable student group” (Bradley, 2017: 24). Student accommodation group Unite Students (2016) found similar findings from their study on ‘student resilience’. 21 per cent of those students who declared a mental health condition ‘strongly considered’ dropping out from university compared with just eight per cent of those students with ‘no mental health condition’.

Student satisfaction and wellbeing has also been a feature of the *Times Higher Education* Student Experience Survey. The latest survey results hinted of a correlation between the increasing concerns about welfare support received and overall satisfaction; it was reported that “the ten universities that fell the most on welfare were all research-intensive institutions” (Baker, 2018: 7). It is therefore conceivable that future generations of students could use wellbeing as a criterion when considering their choice of institution.

As far as the HEPI/Higher Education Academy [Advance HE] Student Academic Experience Survey is concerned it is admirable that the study has aspired to be multi-dimensional in respect to wellbeing, as passionately argued by HEPI’s director, Nick Hillman (2017). In recent years the survey has incorporated questions on student wellbeing through the filter of prominent conversations in the sector. Thus, the 2015 survey shed light on wellbeing and gender, and the impact of workload on wellbeing; the 2016 survey on ‘knowledge of access to counselling services’; and the 2017 survey on wellbeing and learning gain, as well as wellbeing by sexual orientation, using the ONS (2017) data as a reference point. (As a footnote, and resonant as the sector becomes focused on outcomes data, using ONS data, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (2017) surmised that graduates tend to be more satisfied with their lives than non-graduates, but also more anxious. The report went on to state that graduates were less likely than non-graduates to experience extremely low wellbeing, or be affected by “negative life circumstances”).

Impact within the university

One cannot lose sight of the effects poor student mental health may have on others

within the university, and Student Minds sought to understand its impact on academics (Hughes et al., 2018). In some emotive accounts, academics recounted responding to students in distress in the evenings and weekends. They also reflected on impacts on sleep and home life, worries about students (that persisted into time away from work), exhaustion, and negative consequences for their own emotional and mental wellbeing.

Overall, academics felt that they were not equipped or supported to respond to student mental health problems, and most participants indicated that they had little or no training in mental health or in how to support students generally.

Conclusion

There is still a way to go before the issue of student wellbeing is fully understood and supported in order to influence positive change.

Neves and Hillman (2018: 51)

In this paper, I have attempted to provide a succinct overview of conversations in the sector, reflected in a few recent sectoral reports. The picture of mental health and wellbeing is complex and there is no simple panacea or quick fix. The reports demonstrate four senses of the debate: first, an urgency to refine and develop effective leadership and governance for mental health; second, an understanding that a multi stakeholder, integrated and responsive process within the university and with the community (e.g. local health services) is paramount; third, a promotion of wellbeing to prevent problems; and, finally, a desire to commission research and to develop existing surveys that track the wellbeing of students. UUK (2015) underlined that universities have a duty of care towards their students, including a duty to ensure the health and welfare of their students. We

must, therefore, redouble our efforts and ensure that students don't just belong, but that they matter too.

- **Virendra Mistry** is Editor of *Innovations in Practice* and compiles the Sector Round-up papers, which has been published in each issue of the journal since 2016.

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