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In-depth topic: The mental health and wellbeing challenge in FE and HE

The rise in mental health disorders is one of the greatest health challenges facing society today and it is one that is affecting the education sector particularly acutely, with a steep increase in the number of young people experiencing mental health difficulties.

These manifest across a broad continuum, from mild anxiety or discomfort that may be a natural response to a challenging event through to extreme mental illness. Mental health forms part of a more general wellbeing and resilience challenge that the education sector needs to address.
An overview of the challenge we face

In a 2015 survey (https://ji.sc/mental_health_survey) by the National Union of Students, 78% of students said they had experienced mental health issues in the last year and 33% said they had had suicidal thoughts.

In 2017 the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) reported (https://ji.sc/not_by_degrees) that there had been a fivefold increase in the number of students who had disclosed a mental health condition to their college or university over the past decade. In the 2015/16 academic year, 15,395 UK first-year university students in Britain reported a mental health condition.

Student suicides have fluctuated (https://ji.sc/suicide_fluctuation) with a steady increase from 108 in 2001 to 134 in 2015 but a 15-year low in 2007 of 75 and 95 recorded suicides in 2017 (which is lower than for the general population of similar ages). The figures do not include suicides among learners at further education colleges.

Association of College (AoC) surveys (https://ji.sc/aoc_surveys) of colleges in 2014 and 2016 found that 66% said that the number of FE students experiencing mental health difficulties had 'significantly increased' in the past three years while 75% felt there were significant numbers of students who had undeclared mental health difficulties.

The mental health of college and university staff is also coming under the spotlight due to increased workload, funding cuts in FE and the constant pressure to do more with less. As student numbers and expectations grow (including around mental health support), so do pressures on staff and the corresponding implications for their mental health and wellbeing. The extent of workplace bullying, harassment and intimidation is also emerging, especially in science research groups and institutes. A 2018 investigation by the Guardian revealed that nearly 300 academics across the UK, including senior professors and laboratory directors, had been reported for bullying in the last few years (https://ji.sc/bullying_reports).
What might be causing it?

There are several possible reasons behind the current mental health challenge in further and higher education.

Changing demographics (https://ji.sc/changing_demographics) may be a factor, with more young people in education for longer. 64% of the university student population (and 83% of the undergraduate population) are between 16 and 24 years old, an age group that is particularly vulnerable to mental health issues, with 75% of mental health problems established by the age of 25. In addition, the number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education has increased over the last five years. While mental health issues can affect people in all socio-economic groups, being from a more socially disadvantaged background is associated with a substantially higher risk of experiencing mental health challenges. This is particularly pertinent for further education, which educates two-thirds of 16-18 year olds and recruits disproportionately from disadvantaged areas.

Looking at the pipeline from schools into colleges and universities, increasing numbers of children and young people under the age of 19 are reporting mental health disorders. One in eight people aged under 19 in England have a mental health disorder, according to recent NHS statistics (https://ji.sc/nhs_statistics). Social and family context emerges as a clear risk factor, particularly parental mental illness, family separation or financial difficulties.

Once they have made the transition to higher education (which in itself can be disorientating and can cause students to slip through gaps in the health system), debt accumulation and financial concerns play a role, with 78% of students worrying about making ends meet and 46% saying that their mental health suffers as a result, according to a 2018 Student Money survey (https://ji.sc/student_money_survey). Money worries have an impact on their social life, with 68% saying that they can’t afford to go out, increasing the risk of isolation. It also affects students’ diet, with 50% saying that they do not eat as often, as much or as healthily as they would like. Juggling part-time jobs with study adds to the stress.

Life after university or college is also a source of anxiety, with 53% of undergraduates not confident about finding work after graduation.

The use of social media — which represents a significant new factor for this generation — is widely blamed anecdotally for increased feelings of inadequacy in the face of pressure to be seen to be popular and socially successful. It also comes with a loss of a sense of privacy. Certainly, according to the NHS statistics, 29.4% of those aged 11 to 19 with a disorder spent more than four hours a day on social media, whereas just 12% of those displaying no symptoms did the same thing. In addition, those who have a disorder were much more likely to compare themselves with others on social media and to say that “likes, comments and shares impact my mood”. However, more nuanced studies also look at the positive role (bbc.co.uk/news/uk-46115932) social media can play in offering support networks and reducing isolation.

Finally, students who may previously have been reluctant to talk about mental health problems, or access support in dealing with them, may now be more likely to do so due to greater awareness of the issue and reduced stigma in talking about mental health and wellbeing.
What impact is it having?

For the young people concerned, mental health issues are deeply distressing and impact every aspect of their life, from feelings of social isolation to academic failure.

The Unite Students Insight Report 2016 (https://ji.sc/unite_students) found that nearly a third of students (29%) had sometimes considered leaving university, with 10% reporting that they had strongly considered doing so. In 2015, 2,050 students with mental health problems dropped out of university. As mentioned above, student suicide continues to be a concern.

For colleges and universities, there is increasing pressure on institutional counselling services and a need to place more resources into mental health support. IPPR research (https://ji.sc/not_by_degrees) found that over the past five years 94% of universities have experienced a sharp increase in the number of people trying to access support services, with some institutions noticing a threefold increase. At some universities, one in four students were using, or waiting to use, counselling services. In addition to the need to fund more support services, there are also financial and reputational implications (https://ji.sc/reputational_implications) for institutions if support services are criticised as inadequate and increasing numbers of students drop out of courses.

For FE the financial pressure is particularly acute, with 43% reporting (https://ji.sc/aoc_surveys) no full-time counsellor in college and 55% reporting cutbacks in this area.
What is being done?

At a national policy level, UUK’s 2018 Minding our Future report (universitiesuk.ac.uk/minding-our-future) called for urgent action involving a partnership of national and local government, schools, colleges, the NHS and universities, to work together to “join up” mental health care services.

This follows its 2017 #StepChange framework (universitiesuk.ac.uk/stepchange), encouraging leaders across the higher education sector to take a whole university approach in response to student mental health. Its recent Suicide Safer Universities guidance (https://ji.sc/suicide_guidance) offers advice on developing a strategy focused specifically on suicide prevention.

Student Minds, the student mental health charity, has identified ‘10 grand challenges’ (https://ji.sc/grand_challenges) to highlight where efforts to improve the state of student mental health might be directed.

The AoC has a mental health policy group and has also created a package of resources including a college self-assessment tool which supports the development of a whole college strategy on mental health.

At a local, institutional level, colleges and universities have introduced their own initiatives to tackle the issue. For example, many universities now have mental health advisers who work collaboratively, within their academic departments, with students who have mental health issues. Wolverhampton University has trained 450 staff – including security guards, caretakers and cleaners who have regular out-of-hours contact with students – to recognise early warning signs in at-risk students and how to follow up in a compassionate way.

In FE, East Coast College has created a wellbeing programme focused on developing resilience, which is incorporated into all aspects of college life; staff wellbeing is also covered. Truro and Penwith College has introduced a wellbeing and sport service to reduce social anxiety and depression, including specific one-to-one sessions for safeguarding and mental health referrals.

Schools are also taking steps to support students’ overall mental health and wellbeing; one example is the use of specific technology in boarding schools (https://ji.sc/boarding_school_tech).

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The government perspective

The government has acknowledged the mental health challenge in society and pledged to tackle it, including by putting mental health on an equal footing with physical health by 2020.

However, there remains "a gap between rhetoric and reality", according to the King’s Fund (https://ji.sc/kingsfund), arguably partly attributable to funding gaps and the time-sapping demands of Brexit.

Recent developments include the launch of the first loneliness strategy (https://ji.sc/loneliness_strategy), led by then-sports minister Tracey Crouch. In February of this year, at the Office for Students launch conference, the then-universities minister Sam Gyimah described (https://ji.sc/accountability_revolution) the ‘challenge’ for universities as "to be there for students offering all the support they need to get the most from their time on campus", particularly in the area of mental health. His use of the words “in loco parentis” in relation to universities was more controversial (https://ji.sc/loco_parentis).

On 7 March 2019 (University Mental health Day), the government announced a new taskforce to look at how students moving from sixth-form or college to university can be better supported in their crucial first year. Known as the Education Transitions Network, the group will include UCAS, the National Union of Students, Student Minds, Universities UK, the Association of Colleges and the Office for Students. It is tasked with developing measures to help students maintain good mental health.
What role can technology play?

Learning analytics

Big data and analytics is an area being seriously explored for its potential in tackling student disengagement. Identifying those at risk and enabling early intervention is crucial and, with the right metrics (https://ji.sc/student_minds), it becomes possible to identify patterns of disengagement. These may give early warning of mental health concerns, allowing timely responses. Jisc’s Learning Analytics Service went live in August 2018 and is now being rolled out to institutions. Student wellbeing and mental health is one of the research areas (https://ji.sc/la_research) that will be explicitly explored in the next phase of development. Some universities are already moving into that area. For example, Nottingham Trent University has a dashboard for staff and students that generates an alert after 14 days of lack of engagement, allowing tutors to follow up. The University of Greenwich is also expanding its learning analytics system to cover mental wellbeing.

“I see the technology as a human optimisation system, so the meaningful support people get … comes from human beings. It’s that initial referral, realising that the people who need help are those who’re least likely to ask for it when they’re in a dark place, which the technology helps with.”

Phil Richards, chief innovation officer, Jisc

Apps and online mood diaries

Apps such as Calm Harm, online counselling (Kooth) and mood diaries (Blue Ice) are increasingly popular with young people seeking help with anxiety, depression and self-harm. Given that NHS England has endorsed (https://ji.sc/mental_health_endorse) a number of apps to help tackle mental ill-health, there may be potential for FE/HE-specific apps. Start-ups are moving into this area with keen interest.

Online support services

Big White Wall (https://ji.sc/big_white_wall), a 24/7 anonymous online peer support space overseen by qualified counsellors, is being used by an increasing number of institutions.

According to the head of student support at a Russell Group university:

“It’s been really interesting because students are using it in the evenings when our services don’t tend to be open and different sorts of students are using it. Specialist services tend to be accessed by white female students and you get more male students using the online space so it’s catering for a need out there - and [tackling] some of the stigma of saying out loud, as a 19-year-old fella, that you’re homesick.”

Chatbots

A handful of universities and colleges have started to explore AI-driven natural language text and voice — chatbots — as a communication channel with students. Examples include Becky (https://ji.sc/becky_the_bot) at Leeds Beckett University and Ada (aftabhussain.com/ada.html) at Bolton College. Could such uses of AI have a role to play in addressing student mental health challenges? Certainly, says Bolton College’s Aftab Hussain:

“Very early in the project we asked the college’s mental health team how the chatbot should respond if a student asked a question around their mental health. For example, if a student has been made homeless or is struggling with stress, or self-harm, the chatbot service will respond with links to appropriate online information and the contact details for the college’s mental health team. We are also improving the service so that our mental health unit is automatically notified when students are seeking further advice and support on these matters.”
What does the future hold?

It is clear that the mental health and wellbeing challenge facing universities is not going to diminish in the foreseeable future.

Continuing societal and demographic changes are likely to increase the incidence of mental health disorders in young people while the increasing destigmatisation of the issues will open up more sophisticated conversations about the causes, and potential ways to alleviate, mental health distress. The following predictions offer an insight into how that conversation might unfold in the near future and the actions that might develop as a result.

Predictions: now to two years

Ever-increasing awareness and understanding of mental health and wellbeing
Students will arrive at university with better understanding of their own mental health and having experienced more personal development opportunities relating to mental health and resilience. This process has already started and will become more widespread. It will also increase students’ expectations of the support they will receive at university and their own role in that, including a greater level of agency.

Likely

It’s not just about students
There will be wider recognition that a whole institution conversation about mental wellbeing is needed and that the mental health challenges faced by staff in increasingly time- and finance-pressured colleges and universities must also be recognised and addressed.

Likely

Greater focus on transitions
Ways to ease the move from school or college into university will be examined, whether by taking a fresh look at overhauling the admissions system (https://ji.sc/overhaul_admissions) to bring in post-qualification admissions or better enabling of student communities to provide peer support at the start of term. Social media will also be more deliberately used in a positive way by institutions and students to provide enhanced peer support.

Likely

Destigmatising the application process
Only 37% of those applying to university with pre-diagnosed mental health conditions disclose it in the UCAS process. The majority do not for fear it will jeopardise their application. More reassurance and destigmatisation will result in 100% UCAS disclosure.

Likely

Greater flexibility
Courses will become more flexible and bite-sized to support students to learn in the way that suits them best, with multiple points of entry and more opportunities to take longer or take breaks in study.

Highly likely

Data sharing
There will be increasing and better data sharing between different providers that touch on students’ lives, especially regarding health data. Universities may consider contracting private providers for mental health support, given pressures on the NHS.

Unlikely

Apps and technology
A wider range of individual and personalised technological mental wellbeing support will be available as start-ups see the opportunities on offer in this field.

Highly likely
Predictions: three to five years

Peer-to-peer support
As students become ever more aware of mental health issues, they will increasingly support each other in a more knowledgeable way as a student body, managed and tracked by institutions, rather than support always being provided through a top-down approach.

Likely

A pervasive, human-centred approach
The wellbeing of staff and students will become a fundamental value that must be considered in all the institution does. Every time a policy or system is designed, the mental health implications of it will be factored in, just as it currently is with disability, equality and other protected characteristics.

Likely

Systematic analytics
There will be an increasingly systematic approach to data sharing and to spotting changes in circumstances that feeds into an early alert or warning system.

Likely

Companion robots
Already trialled with children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), robots will support students not only with personalised learning but also with social and emotional needs.

Possible

Predictions: 5 years+

Tracked from pre-school to post-grad
There will be a data flow from day one in school to university, with a significant number of data points around the individual educational journey of a student in order to identify outlier behaviour and raise a digital flag.

Possible

The rise of the neo-luddites
Young people will increasingly reject social media and absent themselves from technology due to its perceived negative impact on mental health.

Unlikely
What needs to happen to improve student wellbeing?

The Horizons group suggests a number of actions that can be taken as steps to address the mental health and wellbeing challenge, both now and further into the future.

- Offer schools and colleges better guidance in writing university references to ensure all relevant mental health information is included
- Provide more staff training and support around understanding mental distress and appropriate action to take
- Introduce or improve resilience education for all students, including learning how to learn, what a good work ethic looks like, reducing the stress of studying and avoiding the negative feedback loop of the glamour of the all-nighter
- Introduce mandatory on-enrolment modules on financial management and personal and life skills
- Extend equality, diversity and inclusion assessments of all policies and strategies to include mental health measures
- Improve metrics on mental health issues by incorporating the student voice in this area in a formalised way. This could be through broad focus groups of students on a quarterly basis and include a metric in the NSS or HEPI student survey
- Examine the potential for 24/7 support for mental health issues to match other 24/7 support services such as libraries
- Consider a Jisc Collections-style deal for self-help resources, enabling colleges and universities to better signpost, and make as accessible as possible, apps and other support
- Provide more guidance for mental health professionals and educators, and remove ambiguity around who can support young people with mental health issues, when and how
- Lobby government to facilitate ease of transfer between courses and institutions, and highlight where poor data flow has been a hindrance
- Explore a data trust approach ([https://ji.sc/what_is_a_data_trust](https://ji.sc/what_is_a_data_trust)) for responsible sharing of relevant learner data and empowering students to manage their own data through a student data cooperative
Next steps

It is clear that the mental health and wellbeing challenge facing education is a complex problem. It will take time, a range of interventions and extensive collaboration to solve.

The extent of the problem shouldn't deter us from acting; a problem as difficult as this will only be solved by many people taking action and exploring new ideas. Some of those actions and ideas can be taken individually by people working in universities and colleges but others require more coordinated action between a number of organisations or would benefit from a national approach.

The need for this coordinated approach has been recognised at a national level by the Office for Students, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, the NHS and others, and many universities are responding to the need to provide an enhanced level of support for their students. Some key guidance has been published by UUK (https://ji.sc/some_key_guidance) to help universities with this and call them to action. There has also been a very high level of interest in the call for proposals, published by the Office for Students, to achieve a major step change in student mental health support; using analytics to support students will be a major element of this work.

At Jisc we will be working with organisations such as Universities UK and the Association of Colleges to continue to develop a joint vision for how we harness analytics to support mental health and wellbeing. As part of this, it is absolutely key that we continue the national conversation around mental health and wellbeing and we will be working with a range of partners to explore technology which could form part of the solution to the mental health challenge.

Specifically, Jisc will:

- As a result of the Horizons group meeting, convene co-design labs to explore two topics. A co-design lab is a short exploration of an idea carried out by a mixture of Jisc staff and experts from universities and colleges. Both labs will aim to develop some form of prototype output by June 2019. The topics we will explore are:
  
  a. A wellbeing data trust — can we use a data trust arrangement, like those being explored by the Open Data Institute, to enable a variety of organisations to share sensitive data related to student wellbeing? The data trust would need to be endorsed and trusted by students and focused on helping them rather than the organisations sharing the data
  
  b. A wellbeing bundle — can we produce a bundle of quality-assured resources that universities and colleges can purchase quickly and easily to enhance their wellbeing offer? The bundle would need to include e-books, wellbeing apps and services related to wellbeing

- Work to extend our analytics code of practice (jisc.ac.uk/guides/code-of-practice-for-learning-analytics) to cover the legal and ethical issues involved in using analytics to support wellbeing services in universities and colleges

- Identify and work with partners on multiple projects to develop the use of analytics to support the staff in institutions responsible for student wellbeing

- Continue to explore wellbeing analytics through our learning analytics (jisc.ac.uk/learning-analytics) and analytics labs services (jisc.ac.uk/rd/projects/business-intelligence-project)
Next Horizons report

The Horizons group will reconvene in June 2019. We will refresh the information on the strategic challenges and the technologies as well as discussing a new in-depth topic. The next version of the Horizons report will follow that meeting and be released in autumn 2019.