



Student
**MENTAL HEALTH
& WELLBEING**
HIGHER EDUCATION

A practical guide

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Foreword

'Universities have always acknowledged that the emotional and psychological wellbeing of their students is part of their remit'. So begins the editors' introduction to this timely volume. I am not entirely sure about 'always', but it is indisputable that there has never been a time when matters of health and wellbeing have had such prominence both within and without our universities or schools, or, indeed, received such funding, a reasonable quantitative measure of concern. Similar rises are also seen in metrics such as the number of students seeking help, declaring to the university that they have mental health problems, or answering affirmatively to similar questions in surveys.

It is a moot point if students actually have higher rates of mental disorders than appropriate comparison groups, but it probably matters little. Although the enormous expansion in student numbers since 'my day' (rather a long time ago I am afraid) means it is certain that proportionately more young people with known mental health disorders are now able to go to university (a good thing), it is still the case that going to university is not random, and that those at higher risk of poor mental health are less likely to be in full-time education. It is for that reason that it was not unexpected that the first national data on student suicide showed a lower, not higher, rate than the corresponding population. And whilst population rates of mental disorders have remained remarkably stable for decades, the only exception to this is in young women between 16 and 24, so whether or not students are at higher or lower risk, the absolute numbers of those at university with mental health disorders are likely to be increasing.

What is indisputable is that more and more students recognise themselves to have mental health problems, and are prepared to come forward and ask for help. And, as this volume shows, it is also indisputable that this has created something of a crisis in universities, with no consensus on what lies behind these changes, and hence, and not surprisingly, no consensus on what should be the appropriate response. It is for that reason that this volume is so timely.

Going to university is a time of transition, and like all times of transition it is accompanied by challenges, strains, upset, turmoil and occasionally mental disorder. When I was elected President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in 2014 I made a promise to visit every university with a medical school to talk about mental health and ill health. I had not kept up with the expansion of medical schools,

or perhaps I would not have made that commitment, but in any event I fulfilled it. Usually the venues were packed, and on occasion we needed an overflow room. Most of the student unions I visited had conducted some form of mental health survey, which often reported high rates of mental health problems, usually in the 70 to 80% range, well above what more formal studies using standardised interviews found. The stories were varied, but many told of loneliness, anomie, homesickness, difficulties establishing relationships, relentless academic pressure, financial worries, especially around debt, and so on. These are not normally constructed as 'mental disorders' which probably explains some of the difference in prevalences between epidemiological rigorous studies and others organised more locally. Others talked about the struggle to get help with what professionals such as myself would definitely consider mental disorders, such as eating disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder, or development disorders such as autism. Waiting lists for support were sometimes long, especially if help was needed from secondary mental health services within the NHS.

I was left in no doubt that if any progress was to be made, it was going to have to come from within the universities, including from those who are not mental health professionals, namely the staff and students themselves. Expecting the NHS to come to the rescue for anything other than the most serious of disorders was simply never going to happen. I would go further and say not only won't it happen, it probably shouldn't either for the majority of the stories that I heard. The dangers of over-professionalising and medicalising problems was apparent to me, and to much of the audience as well.

At the end of these talks I would share my own experience. I had moved from a Northern state school to an Oxbridge college, encountering for the first time in my life public school boys (and it was boys, as we are talking about the era when only two colleges were not single sex). My first term was not happy. I felt excluded, gauche and lonely. Half way through I had returned home, miserable and wondering if I should carry on. After a week my parents gently persuaded me to return. Things picked up – not least when early exam results showed I was the intellectual equal of my more sophisticated fellow students. I wasn't sporty – I did coxing but largely as an anthropological project rather than out of any sporting desire. However, music and a minor talent at comedy writing created social networks, some of which still survive. So after a stuttering start I had settled down, and started to enjoy myself.

And the point is what? Not to bemoan the lack of informal support from my peers on arrival, although that was true and would have made a difference. Nor the fact that my college barely registered what was going on – also true, but I am still unsure if that would have helped much. My unhappiness was definitely related to my lack of an early peer group. But I used my own experience to tell my modern audiences that university is a time that changes nearly all fortunate enough to experience it. The experience is complex, but in the end we know that the benefits usually outweigh the problems. Perhaps the worst thing we can do is create the impression that a university is a 'toxic environment' for health

and wellbeing, which runs the danger of becoming self-fulfilling. And the second worst thing is to pretend the opposite, that it will be a nirvana in which everyone will smile and thrive all of the time. Because you won't.

Now unlike my Round Britain Tour, this book is not aimed specifically at students. Its audience is those who have to decide on how they will address the real and present problems that universities and their students now face. And there will inevitably be disagreements – there is nothing wrong in that, indeed I would be more concerned if everyone was in agreement, because the state of the evidence, especially around interventions, does not at the moment support such certainties.

But where there is no dispute or argument is that the inevitable result of the awareness that has already been raised, let alone any yet to come, is an increasing pressure on universities to devote more resources to addressing mental health needs. And that is most easily and speedily done by increasing resources for, and access to professional mental health interventions, especially where the waiting lists are long, and tested triage and risk management procedures have not yet been adopted. Ensuring then that such interventions are directed towards those in most need is an essential part of any response.

But, as this book shows, that is very much not the end. First, everyone must remember the known risks of over-reaction and over-professionalisation. This is particularly likely if we fail to match up skills and need. Using people like me to treat normal emotional reactions to life experience is not just a waste of money, it can do more harm than good. Second, if used alone then this is an approach that is directed at individuals, and not the whole university approach that this book describes and endorses.

This approach I would summarise as putting mental health and wellbeing at the heart of what a university does – but without needing to make that explicit. Creating an atmosphere in which social networks flourish will counter loneliness and isolation, as will encouraging cultural diversity. Teaching good learning and examination techniques and skills will reduce anxiety. Adjustments to the built environment, accommodation and so on can have an immediate impact on wellbeing.

It is the whole university workforce who really deliver not just the teaching, but the culture and ethos of the university. Most of those in the Armed Forces never meet a general or admiral, just like in any office few people meet the chief executive or the board of directors. It is just the same in a university. Few students know or even need to know the name of their vice chancellor or head of school. What matters are the lecturers, tutors and so on. As has been shown in the armed forces, and in 'blue light' organisations, a little bit of mental health training goes a long way when given to the right people, the ones in daily contact with those in need.

And even more important than training is the wellbeing and morale of those in those 'frontline' jobs. This is one topic on which we can for once say that no further research is needed. In health services around the world, a work force that is well supported and has good job satisfaction delivers better clinical care and

There are fewer mistakes than one that isn't. In the NHS we are constantly told to put the patient at the heart of everything that we do' – true enough, but the easy way to do that is to pay more attention to the morale of the workforce. Sort that out, and the rest follows. I doubt that universities are different.

You can read and enjoy this book. It contains all the research evidence that you need, including much that I didn't know existed. But it is also full of good advice and practical support. A lifetime in academia has persuaded me that a good case study is more compelling than a Lancet paper, and this volume is also full of them.

But overall what I commend to you is the importance of taking a whole university approach to the issue of mental health, and that must be owned at all times by the university itself. It cannot be farmed out to external organisations, no matter how glossy their brochures. Let's not pretend that even if you follow everything outlined in this book there will be no problems, no disasters, no unhappiness – there will be, but implementing some of the strategies in this book is a good start. And finally, you are probably reading this book because you believe that going to university remains a life-enriching experience. And you are right. It is.

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