Preparing Students for the Transition to University

to reduce the risk of mental health problems

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Three questions

- WHEN in students' lives do mental health problems start - and so when does action need to be taken to prevent this?

- WHY – what has changed that might explain the increased risk compared with previous generations of students?

- WHAT therefore needs to be done to reduce the risk?

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Our Research

Phase One

- Literature search and student mental health conferences
- Anecdotal feedback from students
- Interviews with staff working with students

Phase Two

- Pilot study with a sample of first year students at KCL, Ulster University & Greenwich University in November 2020

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WHEN do student mental health problems start?

- At school – for 81.6% of students
  (survey responses from over 37,000 students, published in 2019)

- At school – for an unexpectedly large number of students
  (research reported at the SMaRteN Conference, December 2019)

- At school – for the ‘vast majority’ of students
  (survey responses from 21,000 students, published in 2020)

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Why the increase?

- If a factor has been true for generations of students this may explain some students in each generation but not the recent <u>increase</u>

  e.g. the transition from home/school to university isn't new

- If it is a new factor but university specific, it doesn't explain so many students coming already predisposed to mental health problems

  e.g. student loans are relatively new historically but university specific

- So it needs to be a new factor (i.e. not affecting previous generations) which first started to affect students while they were still at school

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WHY – what has changed?

- Schooling (increased safeguarding and ‘spoon-feeding’)
- Parenting (free range parenting > ‘helicopter parents’)
- Communications Technology (smart phones & social media)
- The use and understanding of mental health terminology

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Schools: Safeguarding and Spoon-feeding

‘As western societies have sought to protect children from risk there has been a substantial increase in psycho-social disorders.’ Barnardo’s 2002

‘Kids need to develop a normal immune response, not an allergic response, to the everyday irritations and provocations of life.’ Lukianoff/Haidt 2018

“The school/college experience was persistently described as ‘spoon-feeding’ by students” *The Paired Peers Project* 2013

This makes the transition to independent learning more challenging (‘I didn’t realise I’d have to read books.’)

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Sample of first year students at three universities

November 2020

How well prepared for university by school/college	Percentage
Very Good	16%
Good	33%
About Adequate	36%
Poor	10%
Very Poor	5%

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Changes in Parenting

20th century: 'Free Range parenting'

Children made their own way to and from school, played out unsupervised, did their own homework, their parents didn't intervene at school etc.

21st century: Over-Protective Parenting

"When I let my two children, aged 8 and 9, walk together to the local corner shop, some of my friends called me 'feckless'." (Head Teacher interviewed during our research)

Schools in middle class areas report 'helicopter' parents:

- Regularly contest their children's grades
- Edit or write their children's homework
- Intervene constantly in friendship issues etc.

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Helicopter Parenting & Mental Health

Most research suggests negative effects e.g.

- Increased levels of anxiety, stress and depression
- Decreased perceptions of wellbeing
- Increased emotional problems
- Neuroticism
- Dependency
- Sense of entitlement (believing others should solve their problems)
- Low self-efficacy
- Poorer coping skills.

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Helicopter Parenting reported by students

Examples	
Parents intervened at school on behalf of their children	49%
Phone contact daily or multiple times per week while at university (usually initiated by parents)	66%

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Social Media & Mental Health

Emotionally draining

"By the age of 15 – 16 they can get exhausted, not so much with GCSEs but with keeping up the pretence - the face they present to the world versus the real them". (Head of an independent girls school)

Delays adulthood

"18-year-olds now act more like 15-year-olds used to."

(US inter-generational researcher)

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Non-study time online in Sixth Form

	3 + hours per day	Less than 3 hours per day
Well prepared for the university/course they wanted	33%	44%
Often/always felt lonely at university	24%	8%
Feelings of anxiety/stress at university	67%	52%

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Medicalising Normal Feelings & Emotions

Diagnostic thresholds lowered in 2013 (DSM-5)
'confuses mental disorder with the everyday sadness, anxiety, grief, disappointments, and stress responses that are an inescapable part of the human condition.' Dr Allen Frances (Chair of the previous DSM-4 taskforce)

The emergence of self-reported 'mental distress'
e.g. feeling stressed, anxious, worried, panicky, or lonely

"Through medicalising children's normal emotional upheavals, young people are trained to regard the challenges integral to growing up as a source of psychological distress."

Professor Frank Furedi (TES 2016)

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Mental health problems? Student perceptions

Perceived as mental health problem	Agree or Strongly Agree	Perceived as mental health problem	Agree or Strongly Agree
Anxiety	90%	Insomnia/trouble sleeping	83%
Depressed feeling	87%	Stress	75%
Sudden mood swings	85%	Lack of energy/motivation	74%
Panic	83%	Feeling unhappy/down	71.5%
Feelings of helplessness or worthlessness	83%	Irritability or anger	70%

Conclusion – Implications for universities

Waiting until students arrive at university to address mental health problems is too little, too late.

Universities can't control what happens to young people before they come to university but they can **influence** what happens

- Through the messages they communicate to schools, parents, pupils and the media
- Through partnership working (building on what they are often already doing with schools e.g. to widen participation e.g. via PGCE placements)
- Through research into **pre-**university influences
- Through their admissions policies

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Universities as influencers

- Help schools, parents and pupils recognise the problems ‘spoon-feeding’ can cause (OFSTED’s Chief Inspector is now an ally here) – and the value of ‘productive failure’
- Encourage opportunities to experience life away from over-protective schools, parents and social media e.g. Scouts/Guides for long-term mental health and Outdoor Adventure programmes for resilience
- Encourage the use of appropriate peer influencers to help young people manage social media rather than being managed by it
- Help everyone (including the media) recognise the difference between mental illness and normal feelings and emotions

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Our Phase 3 Research

If you'd be interested in becoming a partner in the next phase of our research, due to take place in November 2022,

you can contact me at:

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