



APPG briefing

"Lost in transition? – provision of mental health support for 16-21 year olds moving to further and higher education"

Monday 14 December – 4:00pm-5:00pm – Room C, 1 Parliament Street, London, SW1A 2NE

Panellists

Maddy Kirkman, Disabled Students' Officer, National Union of Students
Rosie Tressler, Chief Executive, Students Minds
Dr Ruth Caleb, Chair, Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education Working Group

The event will be chaired by Paul Blomfield MP, Chair of the APPG on Students. James Morris MP, Chair of the APPG on Mental Health, will be providing a first response to the speeches.

Agenda

4:00-4:05: Guests arrive
4:05-4:10: Chair's introduction
4:10-4:15: Maddy Kirkman to speak
4:15-4:20: Rosie Tressler to speak
4:20-4:25: Dr Caleb to speak
4:25-4:30: Chair of APPG on Mental Health's response
4:30-4:55: Audience question and answer
4:55-5:00: Chair's reflections

Event summary

The mental wellbeing of students has a profound impact on their studies. It is vital that they have access to the support they need to thrive in their courses and to enjoy their experiences of college and university. However, for many students, moving on to further or higher education can dramatically affect the mental health support they receive. Not only might they move from child and adolescent mental health services up to adult services, they might move around the country and find that different provision in different areas has left them without the vital support they had previously relied on.

A panel will deliver speeches on the scope of the problem for students, the impact that the transition can have, and what institutions can do to respond to students' mental health needs. In setting this challenge in the context of current policy implications, the discussion can address what MPs and others can do to take opportunities to find solutions.

Student mental health survey

A poll of 1,093 students conducted by NUS for the APPG on Students in November and December 2015 has given an insight into current issues surrounding student mental health. Surveying both higher and further education students, it explores how students themselves feel about their mental health and about the support they receive while they are studying. While this was a self-selecting survey, which may exaggerate the prevalence of mental health problems among students, the results nonetheless give an eye-opening insight into the concerns that students have for their own mental health and wellbeing.

The scope of the problem

The survey has indicated a shocking level of stress and concern amongst students about their mental wellbeing, and can be paired with survey data from 2013 to discern a worrying trend in the severity of problems that students experience. Research typically shows that around a quarter of students have difficulties with their mental health, reflecting the similar prevalence amongst the general population.¹

¹ <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/files/pdfversion/CR166.pdf>;
<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Documents/2015/StudentMentalWellbeingInHE.pdf>; and,
<http://www.nus.org.uk/Global/Campaigns/20130517%20Mental%20Distress%20Survey%20%20Overview.pdf>



However, as this recent survey shows, students themselves feel significant mental health pressures on a highly concerning scale.

Key survey findings – scope of the problem

- **78 per cent** of respondents said they believe they have experienced mental health problems in the last year, (whether diagnosed or undiagnosed).
- **87 per cent** have felt stress; **77 per cent** have suffered anxiety; and, **69 per cent** have felt depressed in the last year.
- **33 per cent have had suicidal thoughts** – around double the figure (17%) for the general population.² Of respondents who did not identify as heterosexual, **55% reported suicidal thoughts**.

We know that demand for mental health services at university is increasing. A recent HEFCE report identified that “**there were increasing numbers [of students] disclosing pre-arrival [at university]; increasing needs emerging while students were at university; and increasing complexity of problems and comorbidity of mental health problems alongside other impairments.**”³ Estimates suggest that counselling services are facing an annual rise of demand of about 10 per cent.⁴

There is now a much more open atmosphere surrounding mental health and there is, of course, an ever-growing student population – both of which may partially explain the rise in students in need of support. However, this should not obscure the particular challenges that are presented by the university and college environment.

There can be many particular pressures on students that impact on their mental health. Many students frequently experience stressful periods, from trying to find somewhere to live to worrying about their friendships and relationships, from trying to manage strained finances to the obvious academic pressures of passing exams and completing coursework. **In a 2013 survey, students identified course deadlines (65%), exams (54%) and financial difficulties (47%) amongst the main triggers of mental distress.**⁵

The problem of transition

In addition to the challenges faced by students outlined above, students experience an especially unique challenge when they make the transition to a new institution. This time of uncertainty can present very real, very worrying problems for students’ mental health. The simultaneous new experiences make the transition to college or university incredibly pressurised times, while the practical problems of needing to access new support services can really affect the wellbeing of new students.

Key survey findings – problems with transition

- Of respondents who will be starting a new college or university in the next year, **37 per cent were worried** about what support would be available at their new institution and **40 per cent were nervous** about receiving support from their new institution.
- Of the respondents who sought support, **67 per cent** sought it from their local GP. **49 per cent** sought it from their institution and **39 per cent** sought it from their family.
- **33 per cent** of respondents said that they **would not know where to go to get mental health support** at their college or university if they needed it.

² [Adult psychiatric morbidity in England, 2007 - Results of a household survey](#)

³

http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2015/Understanding_provision_for_students_with_mental_health_problems/HEFCE2015_mh.pdf

⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-34354405>

⁵ <http://www.nus.org.uk/Global/Campaigns/20130517%20Mental%20Distress%20Survey%20%20Overview.pdf>



The period in which students progress to a new tier of education – whether that is further or higher education – is an incredibly formative stage in their lives. They are moving to new surroundings – maybe even moving away from home; they are entering a new academic environment that presents new expectations and challenges; and, they are assuming new responsibilities and independence as they grow older. When a 2014 survey found that **61 per cent of 16-18 year olds felt unprepared** for university,⁶ it becomes evident that this transition period is one of great concern for students. Without coordination and collaboration between the various agencies involved in the transition to college or universities, the progression to a new institution can jeopardise a students' educational experience, mental wellbeing and stability.

The APPG's survey revealed how damaging the unknown can be for new students. Students who were about to begin a new institution expressed significant concerns and apprehension about the support that they would be able to access, with 37% describing their feelings towards the transition as being worried and 40% describing themselves as being nervous.

This is of particular concern given the survey found a third of students do not know where to go to get mental health support. When the transition period can already be so uncertain and unstable, the survey suggests that there is a need to ensure it goes much more smoothly to signpost students – and certainly *new* students – to the support that they need.

The ways in which students access support, and the places that they rely on for their wellbeing, can also be impacted by the transition to a new institution.

There are persistent concerns about the transition that young people make from children's and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) to adult mental health services (AMHS). The transition from CAMHS to AMHS risks a drop of provision, as adult services have different – often higher – eligibility thresholds, which mean that students who had previously received support lose it.

Provision of both CAMHS and AMHS also varies across the country, which can affect students who move away from home to study, in particular at universities, who find that they no longer have the mental health support while they are studying that they had at home.

The survey showed that the most used service by students for mental health problems by far was their local GP (67%). There are therefore implications for students during their transition to, for example, a university away from home, where they must register for a new GP. This is especially pertinent considering surveys suggest a quarter of students do not register with a GP.⁷

Organisations such as Student Minds and YoungMinds have done recent work on the difficulty of the transition between CAMHS and AMHS, highlighting the gaps in care that this risks creating.

Support at institutions: responding to students' needs

As the survey shows, students often turn to their college or university for support when they are experiencing mental health difficulties. Responding to an emphasis on the 'whole' student experience, institutions have developed policies and practices not only relating to teaching and learning but students' experience of all aspects of their living and social environment.

Amongst examples of services provided through institutions: many colleges and most universities have a free and confidential in-house counselling service; many institutions develop partnerships with external agencies and specialist organisations; and, guidance exists to encourage best practice amongst institutions.⁸

However, the response of institutions to students' mental health needs faces a number of challenges, including financial circumstances that have seen the reduction in available services and the limited

⁶ <https://about.futurelearn.com/press-releases/61-students-feel-prepared-university-learning-finds-futurelearns-student-futures-survey/>

⁷ http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/02/24/students-eating-disorders-failed-nhs_n_4845828.html?1393253213

⁸ <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Documents/2015/StudentMentalWellbeingInHE.pdf>



disclosure by students of issues they may be experiencing. These present challenges for institutions in identifying and responding to the problem.

In this climate, many institutions find innovative ways of providing students with appropriate support. Many lead peer support initiatives, run campaigns to combat the stigma surrounding mental health, and support student-led initiatives (such as NightLine).

Key survey findings – institutions and their responses

- **Almost half of survey respondents** (49%) who had sought mental health support said they had sought support from college or university services.
- Survey respondents were broadly satisfied with institutions' mental health services: over half (52%) rated support as 7, 8, 9 or 10 out of 10.
- However, more than half of students (54%) who believed they'd experienced mental health problems **did not seek support**.

Looking ahead: what are the current challenges and opportunities?

The current policy climate certainly presents challenges to institutions and students in addressing students' mental health needs. Both the further and higher education sectors have been, and continue to be, subject to considerable reform.

Ongoing area reviews of post-16 education and training institutions aim to create "fewer, larger, more efficient and resilient" institutions in further education.⁹ The resultant mergers expected from this process may reduce the number of individual further education campuses, and consequently impact the availability of local mental health services.

- An Association of Colleges survey (June 2015) found that demand for mental health services in FE is increasing substantially, with 86% of respondent institutions saying numbers of students using services had slightly (20%) or significantly (66%) increased over the last three years.
- Although 55 per cent of respondents reported cutbacks in the mental health support they could offer due to continued issues surrounding FE funding, the focus that area reviews are affording to how FE institutions engage students presents a potential opportunity.
- Only 35 per cent of AoC's said they had a mental health policy, and yet the area review guidance makes no mention of mental health provision as something to consider. In this context, area reviews present both a challenge and an opportunity of keeping mental health services on agenda in further education and of coordinating institutions' responses.¹⁰

In higher education, the proposals surrounding changes to Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) present a considerable challenge.

- The changes would cut public funding for disabled students that universities currently use to help pay for support, and give responsibility for this directly to the institution.¹¹
- Funding to support students with mental health difficulties is currently linked to DSA, though there are problems with this surrounding the need to disclose problems to receive funding and whether students with mental health difficulties identify as having a disability at all.¹² DSA is only provided to students with mental health difficulties when it impacts on their study, meaning many may not get DSA who have mental health problems.
- This is an important time to debate how universities are, and should be, expected to fund mental health service provision for students.

For further information, please contact Alexander Lee, Public Affairs Officer, National Union of Students (alexander.lee@nus.org.uk).

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-education-and-training-institutions-area-based-reviews>

¹⁰

<https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/AoC%20survey%20on%20students%20with%20mental%20health%20conditions%20in%20Further%20Education%20-%20summary%20report%202015%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

¹¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/dec/02/government-to-cut-funding-disabled-university-students-jo-johnson>

¹² <http://studentmindsorg.blogspot.co.uk/2015/08/funding-support-for-students-with.html>