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Editorial: Online and technology based mental health support in higher education

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Online and technology based mental health support in higher education

The global prevalence of mental disorders, particularly depressive and anxiety disorders, has been a significant concern, with 4.4% of the global population identified by the [World Health Organization \(2017\)](#) as having some form of depressive disorder and 3.6% some form of anxiety disorder. However, in their 2022 the WHO Mental health stated that the “rates of common conditions such as anxiety and depression had risen by more than 25% in the first year of the pandemic.” In the United Kingdom, mental illnesses are the second-largest source of disease burden, affecting one in six adults, and exhibiting gender disparities, especially among students. Higher Education (HE) students worldwide, and particularly in the UK, face a higher prevalence of mental health disorders, with 31% screening positive for such issues. The onset of mental health problems often predates university enrolment and can negatively impact academic success, leading to attrition.

Students with mental health disorders experience challenges in campus engagement and relationships, putting them at a higher risk of dropping out. This poses significant financial implications for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), especially considering the potential decrease in student numbers due to various factors, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on mental health, with a significant increase in the prevalence of symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and insomnia among the general population and higher education (HE) students in the UK. A study found that 52% of respondents in the general population screened positive for a Common Mental Disorder (CMD), and 28% screened positive for clinical insomnia since the beginning of lockdown ([Pieh et al., 2021](#)). Similarly, a meta-analysis on HE students across 15 countries reported high levels of anxiety (39.4%) and depression (31.2%), along with stress (26.0%), post-traumatic stress disorder (29.8%), and impaired sleep quality (50.5%) ([Batra et al., 2021](#)). The Office for Students acknowledges the sound financial position of universities but warns of potential student dropout rates, estimating long-term losses in the university sector due to COVID-19 to range between £3 billion and £19 billion ([Drayton and Waltmann, 2020](#)).

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are actively addressing mental health challenges, with surveys indicating that three-quarters of students are aware of available counseling services. While 18% of students with mental illnesses have utilized university mental health services, satisfaction levels vary, with 30% finding services very helpful, 45% somewhat helpful, and 21% not helpful at all. Online resources are increasingly popular, with the NHS website, other external online sources, mental health charity websites, and HEI student services websites being common choices for seeking mental health advice (Waight and Giordano, 2018).

To address the growing demand for mental health support, various online interventions have been developed internationally, often utilizing internet-based cognitive-behavioral therapy (iCBT). However, a meta-analysis by Lattie et al. (2019) indicates that while these interventions are partially effective, usability and acceptability outcomes are not consistently addressed. Recognizing the need for improved web-based interventions, the World Health Organization (2022) initiated the World Mental Health International College Student (WMH-ICS) initiative, focusing on surveys, prevention, early intervention, and continuous improvement (Cuijpers et al., 2019).

In the UK and Ireland, iCBT-based interventions like PLUS, Insomnia Relief, Anxiety Relief, StudiCare Stress, Calming Anxiety, and MindReSolve have been developed. These interventions aim to improve mental health outcomes among HE students, addressing issues such as anxiety, depression, and stress. Non-iCBT interventions, including Mindful Kiwi's Mindfulness-Based Coping with University Life, State of Mind Ireland-Higher Education (SOMI-HE), and MePlusMe, also play a role in enhancing mental health and wellbeing. Training in mental health first aid (MHFA) is another approach, with pilot studies showing improvements in students' MHFA skills and confidence (Davies et al., 2018).

It is our pleasure to have been the editors for this special edition looking at research into the area of HE student wellbeing. The edition includes four very different articles providing readers with some examples of good practice across the sector as well as preliminary findings from new initiatives. We hope readers enjoy the articles as much as we did.

The article by Lister et al. presents two student wellbeing projects in Higher education. One project "wellbeing pedagogies library" was designed to share pedagogical practices that support student wellbeing and practical support. The other project "mental wellbeing in distance learning" looked at addressing barriers to wellbeing for students studying via distance learning. Using participatory methods, the authors propose the importance of working with students in the design of digital resources to support student wellbeing.

Keane et al. in their paper discuss how they designed and developed an online toolkit that aimed to support Higher education students with self-regulation in terms of stress responses

and provide self-regulation techniques. The data presented is from a pilot study which found preliminary support for the program with further developments of the online toolkit "SETTLE DOWN" planned.

The article by Boniel-Nissim and Alt investigated through structural equation modeling student use of social media during the COVID pandemic. The study investigated how social media was used during this time to support students with social support and life satisfaction. A total of 365 higher education students took part in the study with findings suggesting two types of social media user; intensive users who had more family support and problematic users who tended to be felt lonely and reported less external support. The article supports the positive role social media can play in the lives of students through connecting people, however also highlighting that problematic usage can ultimately have a negative impact.

In the final article within this special edition, Lister and Allman present examples of good practice from seven HE providers supporting the needs of student mental wellbeing. The paper includes 27 examples that developed an Online Educational Resource toolkit that can be used across the sector in showcasing how mental wellbeing can be embedded within the curriculum.

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