

# Degrees of Disturbance: Working with Students with Mental Health Issues

A recent study found that university staff call for:

- more **mental well-being related training**
- more **time** to help support growing numbers of students with mental health issues
- access to **mental well-being services**.



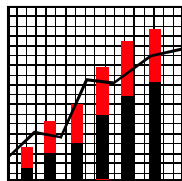
This study explored issues around higher education (HE) staff working with students with mental health issues. It looked at the experience of staff taking part in training to help them become better equipped to support vulnerable students.

The study's findings fit with those of other research which show the pressures experienced by staff working in HE (Collini, 2012; HUCS, 1999; Reisz, 2011). The recommendations correspond with those made by the Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCP, 2011) which highlight the benefits of HE-based mental well-being services and relevant training for staff. Inclusive and transformational training is valuable, as are initiatives such as 'Health Promoting Universities'.

## Context: More Pressure on HE Staff, Students and Resources

### Explosion in Student Numbers

- Increase from around 600,000 graduates in 1990 to nearly two million in 2010 (Black, 2011)
- Greater numbers with mental health issues accessing HE (Craig & Zinkiewicz, 2010) as a direct result of widening participation agenda of past 25 years (Jones, 2011)
- Greater pressure to attract and retain students (Grosling et al, 2008)
- Student-staff ratios have nearly tripled in recent decades (Collini, 2012).



### SOS - Stressed Out and Struggling

- Students recognised as a vulnerable group with 29% describing clinical levels of psychological distress (Berwick et al, 2008)
- Increase in severity of student mental health problems (RCP, 2011)
- Over 15% of undergraduates experiencing depression or anxiety disorder (RCP, 2011).

### Students Face Money Problems



Financial pressures identified as a cause of student stress (Andrews & Wilding, 2004; Jessop et al, 2005) Student debt set to increase over three-fold (Morrison & Brady, 2011) Withdrawal of financial support and the economic recession impacting on student well-being (RCP, 2011).

### Student Services Under Pressure

- Student mental well-being services long recognised as under increasing pressure (HUCS, 1999)
- Demand for mental health provision significantly

## Summary of Findings

### Staff strapped for time

In common with experience elsewhere, most staff felt time pressures when supporting students with mental health issues:

difficult making time to see students because of other demands

All personal tutors stressed lack of time an issue:

support takes place often during lunch breaks or in-between teaching commitments

having to drop everything and consequently having to take ever more work home

This finding raises concern given importance of identifying students at risk (youngminds, 2006) and the complex issues participants identified as affecting students including:

bipolarity

depression

stress

panic attacks

anxiety

self-harm

suicide

Staff described their work as "very draining" and referred to "emotional exhaustion".

## Summary of Findings cont...

Nearly all participants identified need for more training. Specific requests included:

personal tutoring and mental well-being course

Chillax [workshops] for staff

follow-on Listening and Counselling Skills course

Importance of such training is echoed in literature: 'Any member of staff in regular contact with students needs sufficient levels of awareness to identify students at risk' ([www.youngminds](http://www.youngminds.com), 2006).

Training could help reduce potential for emotional exhaustion referred to by Reisz (2011) and can help staff become more skilled at making best use of time. Reisz also points out that individual staff should not be blamed for deficiencies, and institutions should take responsibility for wider issues.

### Staff affirm importance of mental well-being services

Most participants highlighted value of being able to refer students to appropriate in-house services. In particular, staff found helpful:

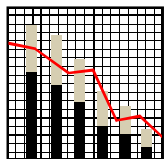
network of other helping agencies through the university

knowing what support is available

As highlighted by the RCP (2011), staff stressed the value of having

increased (RCP, 2011)

- Student support services not developed in line with increase in numbers seeking help (Grant, 2003).



### Cuts, Cuts, Cuts

Huge cuts proposed (Shepherd, 2010) in already squeezed sector (Higher Education Funding Council, n.d.); mounting pressures on all HE staff (HUCS, 1999); stress & emotional

exhaustion in academics is linked to high student numbers (Reisz, 2011).

### The Investigative Study

Ten staff at Staffordshire University completed a two page questionnaire survey after taking part in two day 'Listening and Counselling Skills' course delivered by the counselling service.



#### Study strengths:

- Many questions piloted with previous cohorts
- Anonymity of responses and 100% completion rate
- Variety of staff roles represented, including administrative, academic and support staff
- Five academics were also personal tutors and gave specific insight into learning and teaching issues
- All requirements of University's fast track ethic forms met, including voluntary nature of participation.

#### Study limitations:

- Small sample based at single institution
  - Some positive feedback may be result of 'halo' effect
- Study focuses on staff' and not student experience.

Findings fit with evidence suggesting:

- Less staff time available per student (MHF 2001)
- Demands on academics escalating (HUCS, 1999)
- Staff experiencing burn out (Reisz, 2011).

Concern that pressures set to increase still further given proposed cuts in the HE sector. Important issues for HE managers, particularly in relation to teaching and learning.

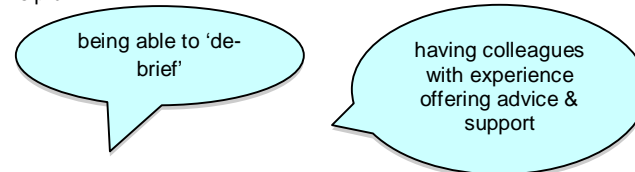
### More mental well-being related training needed

The 'Listening & Counselling Skills' course, with its 'learner-centred' and 'experiential learning' focus (Rogers, 1980) was **rated very positively by staff:**

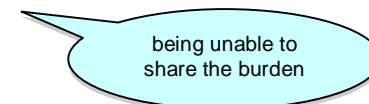


Courses such as this meet the 'transformational' element proposed by the Mental Health in Higher Education (Mhhe) project and **inclusion** principles identified by Craig (2010).

access to advice and support themselves. Participants said it was helpful:



Without such support, staff felt it was difficult:



However, critics see emotional well-being support as 'infantilising' of learners (Ecclestone, 2009). The coalition government's funding cuts to HE, together with its focus on the 'Big Society' and its move away from the 'nanny state' means support services are under threat.

These views fail to take sufficient account of the focus on student 'autonomy' within support services and the professional standards as laid out by such organisations as British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy and other organisations.

Such threats to services have major implications for teaching and learning given the recognised importance of supporting students to enable them to achieve their academic potential.

### Time to Change



The Equality Act (2010) increases the legal responsibilities of organisations towards people with mental health issues while widening participation continues to be central to the HE sector's mission (Jones, 2006). Ways forward need to address the mental well-

being of both students and staff. Tinklin et al (2005) suggests ways to address 'flaws' in the environment including the student to staff ratio issue. The 'Healthy Universities' initiative sees education as a resource for promoting the well-being of students (RCP, 2011); health promotion as suggested by Mhhe can bring benefits to all within the HE sector.

### Ways Forward to Support Staff Working with Students with Mental Well-being Issues

To help students with mental well-being issues thrive and to help staff support such students, ways forward include:

- **Dissemination of good practice** as illustrated by 'Health Promoting Universities' (Working Group for the Promotion of Mental Well-being in HE). This could include **comprehensive staff training programmes** around mental well-being, eg induction for new staff (as recommended by Mhhe) and tailor-made courses for personal tutors, front line staff and others on topics such as helping staff to recognise suicide risk (RCP, 2011)
- Promotion of **cross-institutional policy and training initiatives** (Grant, 2003) to facilitate teaching and learning
- **Greater internal and external networks** to use the "rich repository of valuable resources" (Grant, 2003) across the sector and facilitate more 'inclusive' (Burgess, Anderson & Westerby, 2009) and 'transformational' teaching throughout HE.

Like many HE institutions, **Staffordshire University** has long recognised the value of in-house support for students & relevant training for staff. It has a **Student Enabling Centre**, a well-established counselling service, Specialist Student Advisors and mentors focusing on mental well-being, and a 'Mental Well-being' policy. Current innovations and plans include: successful pilot of psycho-educational workshops for students, further mental well-being training for staff, and psycho-educational workshops for staff. Taking into account their needs and views, the University's counselling service will continue to develop training to help staff to be better able to support students with mental well-being issues.

**"Effective mental health promotion involves not only attending to the needs of those with mental health difficulties, but also promoting the general mental wellbeing of all staff and students, which will in itself bring significant benefits to the HE institution"** (Mental Health in Higher Education, n.d.)