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Student mental health and transitions into, through and out of university: student and staff perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Student mental health is an issue of paramount concern and it is recognised that transition may have a negative impact. However, little work has captured transition-related experiences of students and staff. This study examined perspectives on perceived challenges with transitions into, during and out of university, and perceptions of what support would be beneficial for transitions. Students ($n = 67$) and staff ($n = 40$) from universities across the United Kingdom participated in focus groups on transitions and student mental health. We used thematic analysis to identify themes. For students, themes focused on equipping them to cope, enabling support networks, developing an inclusive culture and lengthening transition periods. For staff, themes centred on fostering student preparedness, community and social support, challenges faced by support services, and a 'whole university' approach. There were many similarities in student and staff perspectives, and by comparing and integrating these perspectives, specific recommendations have been identified. These focus on working in partnership, skills development, peer mentoring, funding, staff training, and providing additional support for the transition out of university. This study has implications for practices in Higher Education, to ensure students are appropriately supported throughout university in a way which could ultimately benefit their mental health.

Introduction

University presents a range of potentially challenging transitions, defined here as navigated periods of change (Gale and Parker 2014). Transitions start before entering university, and include navigating changes between years, and then leaving and entering the world of work or postgraduate study. Throughout, students must make sense of who they are and how they fit into university life (Tett, Cree, and Christie 2017). Navigating transitions can be psychologically demanding, potentially playing an important role in the context of student mental health. Student mental health and wellbeing is an important and prevalent public health issue (Barkham et al. 2019) with high numbers of students experiencing mental health difficulties. In the UK there were 81,960 students with recorded mental health conditions in 2018/19 (Higher Education Statistics Authority 2020), although evidence suggests that many instances are unrecorded (Unite Students, and Higher Education Policy Institute 2019). Longitudinal studies describe university as a period of 'heightened distress' (Bewick et al. 2010). The current study aims to consider student mental health in relation to the transitions that occur within the university context.

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Student transitions and mental health

The transition into university has been described as an 'acute stressor', due to the initial intense strain on wellbeing at the start of university, as students may struggle to adjust to university life at first (Gall, Evans, and Bellerose 2000), with some reporting they are 'just surviving' (Richardson et al. 2012). In a longitudinal study of students in the USA, Conley et al. (2020) measured psychological wellbeing at three timepoints during the first year. Participants showed heightened psychological distress and reduced psychological wellbeing at the midpoint of first year compared to the week before starting university, with little improvement by the end of the academic year. Indeed, research has shown that distress levels never return to those recorded before university (Bewick et al. 2010), suggesting the transition to university presents significant challenges for students, which may not be rebounded from (Conley et al. 2020).

Further, students have described the transition to university as a 'loss experience' – feeling a loss of their former identities, former social networks and even a sense of place, with subsequent challenges related to developing a new identity (Scanlon, Rowling, and Weber 2007; Herpen et al. 2020). Briggs, Clark, and Hall (2012) describe the importance of developing a 'learner identity' where students must adjust to academic demands as well as developing autonomy and confidence in learning. Other research outlines the importance of a sense of belonging and community for successful transitions to university (Bowles et al. 2014; Meehan and Howells 2018; Wrench, Garrett, and King 2014). A sense of belonging has been identified as important in terms of improving student retention and success (Thomas 2012, 2016): Students transitioning to university may feel that their home environments and manner of behaving are out-of-place, leading to a sense that they do not fit in (Thomas 2012). Together, these studies indicate some of the psychological challenges related to this transition.

Throughout university students experience further changes (Tett, Cree, and Christie 2017). Demands and expectations during a degree increase each year – for example, in the second year of study for students in England, students may have less academic support but more academic pressure due to assessments counting towards their final degree (Macaskill 2018). In a longitudinal study with non-traditional students in Scotland, Tett, Cree, and Christie (2017) described how students' understanding of academic requirements changed over time, but in later years they understood themselves better. Students experience different strains and fluctuating stress levels throughout their degree: Conley et al. (2020) found that for students in the USA on a four-year degree programme, psychological functioning was poorest in the first 2 years of study, with improvements in the final 2 years. For students on a three-year programme in England, Bewick et al. (2010) noted university triggered anxiety, with psychological wellbeing overall fluctuating, although in the final year of study depression rates were highest.

The transition out of university and into employment or postgraduate study can coincide with feelings of uncertainty or ambivalence (Perrone and Vickers 2003; Yazedjian, Kielaszek, and Toews 2010). Students must have realistic expectations and appropriate social support (Jusoh, Simun, and Chong 2011; Murphy et al. 2010). Some students report feeling university has prepared them well for this transition (Yazedjian, Kielaszek, and Toews 2010). However, those who see themselves as having a low adulthood status (perceiving oneself as not yet 'fully adult') may struggle more with this transition due to a sense of frustration and low self-efficacy (Halstead and Lare 2018). Some students may also have postponed major life decisions until after university (Grosemans et al. 2020; Murphy et al. 2010). After graduating, wellbeing rates can be high for those entering the workplace (Lindfors et al. 2014), but those who find themselves unemployed are at higher risk of psychological distress (Cassidy and Wright 2008). The transition out of university can also be conceptualised in terms of identity processes, where a new identity outside of university life is navigated (Grosemans et al. 2020; Jungert 2013).

The current study

Given the range of psychologically demanding transitions that students experience, it is important to understand the impact of transitions and identify the support needed for students to successfully

navigate these changes. The current study used qualitative methods to explore the experiences of current students and university staff. The research questions were: (1) What are the main challenges described by students and staff in relation to transitions? (2) What support do students and staff believe is needed for transitions?

Methods

Participants

In total, there were 107 participants. Of this, 67 were students, who took part in one of six focus groups. Student participants included undergraduate and postgraduate students, plus some Student Union staff and Sabbatical Officers. Forty members of university staff took part in six separate focus groups. These staff worked in various roles including in disability and mental health or wellbeing services ($n = 21$), academic support and general student support services ($n = 12$), academic roles ($n = 4$) and other administrative roles ($n = 3$, e.g. residents manager, security operations advisor). All focus groups took place on university campuses at institutions across the UK in March 2019 (Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, London, Midlands, and Northern England).

Participants signed up to take part in a day-long event hosted and advertised by the UK charity Student Minds. The event included focus groups and other activities centred around student mental health and the development of the Student Minds' Mental Health Charter (Hughes and Spanner, 2019). The aim of the event was to discuss *'if universities had the ideal approach to student mental health, what would that look like and how would we know?'* Participants indicated their interest in specific topics prior to attending the event, one of which focused on transitions. Student Minds pre-assigned participants to the focus groups. All participants gave informed written consent before participating. Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the University of Derby.

Materials and procedure

To develop the focus group topic guides, a literature review was used to identify areas of university life which evidence suggested were most relevant to mental health in universities. The review covered both academic and grey literature and took a grounded approach, beginning with general search terms and expanding as the literature identified relevant areas for consideration. From this review, themes were identified which influenced the approach and questions for the student and staff groups. The final topic guide for staff had questions focussed around each transition point (pre-entry, into university, throughout university and out) and asked staff to particularly reflect on the support available to students in relation to their academic, social and psychological needs, for example, 'What support or interventions do you provide to help students socially, academically and psychologically integrate into university life?'; 'How do you help students to prepare for the challenges of life beyond university?'.

For students, focus groups took the form of co–creation panels, using a future retrospective model of enquiry, in which students were asked to design the mentally healthy universities of the future around themes identified in the literature review. Specifically, students worked in small groups to design an ideal university in 20 years' time, considering what this university would do to support and prepare students before and during the transition to university, how it would support students to make friends and avoid social isolation, and how it would support students during transitions between years and out of university. After discussing these areas, these groups shared their ideas with the whole group and this discussion was recorded. The student groups were facilitated by a member of staff from Student Minds.

For staff, focus groups were conducted by researchers independent of Student Minds who were given a semi-structured set of questions, which had been informed by the literature review. Staff focus groups aimed to examine common problems students encounter during transitions, the

potential impact of transitions on their mental health and how universities can and should support students through transitions. Each focus group took approximately 50 minutes and were recorded before being transcribed verbatim.

Design and analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, following guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2006), and student and staff focus groups were analysed separately. The thematic analysis involved searching across data to deduce patterns of meaning. The researchers adopted a critical realist epistemology, which is a philosophical position that accepts an objective reality yet recognises this is accessed through a lens of individual interpretation and perception (O'Mahoney and Vincent 2014). This allowed for a detailed exploration of the Higher Education system and individual experiences. A reflexive approach towards the analysis was applied to acknowledge the impact of personal values and experiences on this process. These researchers were independent of Student Minds: one is a Lecturer in Psychology, one a Senior Lecturer in Law and one a doctoral student in Psychology and Health Sciences with a background in counselling.

The transcripts were first divided between the authors to form two groups of researchers (GR & EC – student data; EJ & EC – staff data) who undertook the following steps. Each researcher independently read and familiarised themselves with the data, noting salient points. Transcripts were independently coded to generate initial themes before the two researchers discussed, reviewed and refined ideas into a preliminary analysis. This analysis was used as a basis for one independent researcher from each group to conduct an in-depth analysis of the transcripts (GR – students; EJ – staff). This analysis involved an iterative process of extracting initial codes using NVivo and grouping these into themes. Themes were appropriately named, agreed and thematic maps generated. Finally, all researchers discussed similarities and differences across themes for both sets of transcripts. Where disagreements occurred between researchers, the discussion continued until consensus was reached.

Results

Student transition themes

Four themes were identified based on students' discussions of university transitions: 1) equip students to cope, 2) encourage and enable a stable support network, 3) foster a more supportive, inclusive culture, and 4) lengthen the transition period (Figure 1). These themes are framed as actions that could be taken by universities to soften transition periods and lessen the impact on student mental health. These themes are discussed with reference to the three transitions into, during and out of university.

Equip students to cope

Students emphasised that universities should equip them with coping skills, especially during the initial transition. Some felt that 'younger students' would have little experience of independence and suggested universities offer optional support on 'practical skills that you're going to need to meet your basic needs', for example, by providing support to address questions like 'how do you use your washing machine? How do you cook?' and, later in the degree, supporting students to understand financial and housing issues. Others recommended support for academic skills to ensure that students were able to cope with academic demands:

> We all agreed you come into uni, you're literally drowning. Do I take notes on laptops, do I record it, do I do this? Not two weeks go by without me digging on YouTube how to study in a lecture.
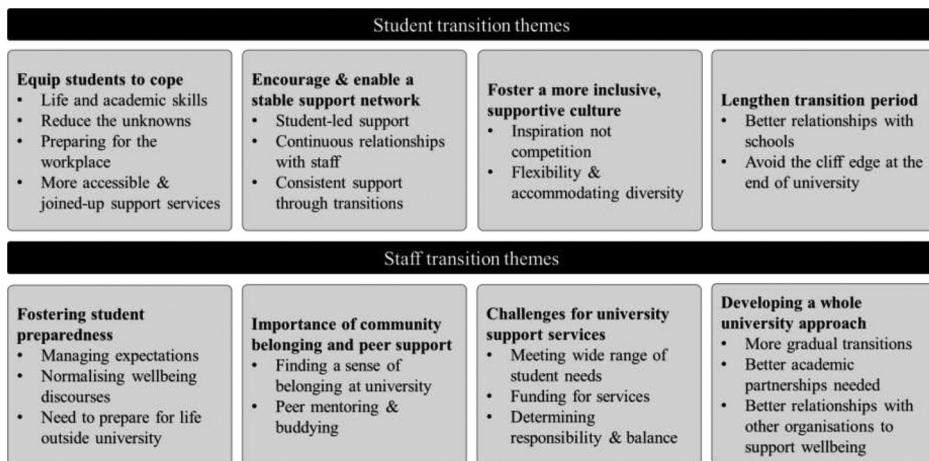
Figure 1. Themes identified in relation to student and staff focus groups on transitions. Bullet points identify key aspects within each theme.

Discussions highlighted the importance of universities providing students with sufficient information to lessen unknowns and reduce anxiety. Some felt that universities should provide taster classes and events prior to registration to mitigate unrealistic student expectations and avoid students enrolling on unsuitable courses:

> [From a friend's] personal experience, she wanted to do one course, found out it was horrible. So, if you apply for the course at UCAS, three months later you get brought on for a taster session. You find out if you don't like it, you [can] change your UCAS application.

For the transition out of university, discussions focused on how institutions could better equip students to enter the 'real world' and get jobs: 'It's almost like students have capability and then suddenly they've gone from having four hours a week of contact time in their degree to a 32-hour -a-week job'. Some suggestions focused on improving career services so they provide practical support and skills in searching, applying and interviewing for jobs.

Students felt there should be a more consistent and joined-up approach across services and these should be actively promoted so students have a greater awareness of the help available. Further, they felt that services could increase accessibility by extending opening hours or being online to accommodate students with diverse needs:

> We suggested a 24/7 helpline, extended opening hours for the students on placement, even though you're on placement 9:00am until 5:00pm, because then you come out of work and all the support [services] are shut.

Encourage and enable a stable support network

This theme centred on requests for a support network that spanned all transitions. There was an emphasis on the benefits of student-led support networks, such as mentoring or buddying schemes, that could provide students with an informal opportunity to learn from peers:

> The last few years we've run a buddy system for international students, and it's been really successful and really popular. It's being paired up to someone and it's like, 'Where can I get this? Where is this? What? How?' and just having a friendly face.

In addition, students spoke of the benefits of having continuous relationships with staff members, such as a tutor or counsellor. This approach would provide stability during their time at university. Students also thought that support networks were invaluable in assisting students with the sense of upheaval or uncertainty experienced when leaving university:

There is a massive sense of loss for a lot of students when you move on from university. You've created this little bubble for the last four years, you live with your friends, you see them every day, you've got a routine and structure, and that can be really difficult for some students to move on from that.

Foster a more inclusive, supportive culture

University culture was described as pressurised, incompatible with diversity, and unsupportive – thus having the potential to exacerbate student experiences of all three university transitions. Some students called for institutions to be 'really clear about the culture of university, and [work] to change that culture'.

Students discussed the pressure and stigma associated with a university journey that might deviate from the norm, even when this is in the student's best interest, such as when students need to take a leave of absence. They wanted universities to gain perspective on the situation and foster a supportive attitude geared towards protecting student mental health:

It's okay to take time out, it's not going to have negative consequences, it can actually be a really good thing, even [a] necessary thing . . .

Furthermore, students wanted universities to adopt a culture of inspiration instead of competition, to reduce the amount of pressure put on individuals, and thus improve their wellbeing:

I think it would make some of the biggest difference, but I have no idea how or if you could change it, is the culture of competition and the pressure that's so inherent within universities. There is so much pressure to get a place, so much pressure [to] perform well when you're in it . . . Then there's the competition afterwards with the job market that's only getting harder.

Universities were repeatedly scrutinised for overlooking the varied demographic of students and thus failing to provide appropriate support to mature, international or part-time students with alternative needs. For this reason, the ideal university of the future was described as 'being more inclusive of everybody' – providing seamless and stress-free education to all regardless of the student's personal situation:

They don't take it into consideration. The universities as a whole, the general perspective is more aimed towards the 18-to-21 demographic, which is what I've found through [going to sessions] and whatever else. This university, they have a high mature-parent population . . . it's taken me two years to get them to start doing more family-friendly activities.

Lengthen the transition period

Students described the need for transition periods to extend beyond the conventional timepoints of starting and finishing university:

Maybe starting that transition period much earlier than even graduating. Placement opportunities. In our [ideal university] we've got a community scheme, where people don't have to graduate and do their work for free for three months in an internship, because they've already got that key work experience. So, starting the transition way before graduation.

For the transition into university, students discussed the need to develop strong relationships between schools and universities. Students suggested providing more induction events and taster sessions at schools to encourage realistic expectations of university: 'Some of it could be either students or support staff going into schools and having a better relationship with schools'.

For those leaving university, students compared the sudden withdrawal of support akin to a cliff edge: 'And then it's a cliff, and I think that's the big one. It shouldn't be a cliff'. Lengthening transitions could thus help avoid students becoming overwhelmed and stressed, which could trigger mental health problems. Recommendations included extending career and emotional support by preparing students well before the end of their studies and being available for support post-

graduation. Students felt that having continuous support would be beneficial to help students develop plans for life after university and avoid feelings of loss and panic: 'Three years is quite a long time, and actually severing those links and starting afresh somewhere new is actually quite a daunting prospect for a lot of people'.

Staff transition themes

We identified four themes from the staff focus groups: 1) Fostering student preparedness, 2) The importance of community belonging and peer support, 3) Challenges for university support services, and 4) Developing a whole university approach (Figure 1). As with student transitions, these are discussed with reference to the various transitions associated with university.

Fostering student preparedness

Staff discussed the need to help students prepare for university life and beyond, with managing student expectations a key aspect of this theme:

> It's drilled into you that university is the best days of your life. Then maybe you get here and it's week three or four and you're maybe not enjoying your course or you're not getting on with your flatmates. I think a lot of people see that as not just a disappointment, but nearly a failure.

At pre-entry stage, there were indications that staff felt schools focused too much on course choice rather than the pastoral aspects of transitioning to university. This focus led to prospective students not being aware of available support or how to access it: 'It's a culture shock, isn't it? Whether you're coming from overseas or just leaving home for the first time, it's just that you know nothing about it'. There were suggestions that marketing materials used by universities focused on selling university life, rather than providing a realistic overview: 'I think at the moment we're in this position where it's kind of a recruitment drive approach as opposed to a wellbeing/preparation for transition approach'.

Staff also raised academic expectations as an issue, with some students struggling to cope with being academically successful at school to being 'right at the bottom'. Staff agreed that there was a need to educate students about wellbeing, to assist them in appreciating what was 'normal' and at what point intervention should be sought:

> It's about that education of, 'No, it is completely normal to feel stressed sometimes, to feel anxious, to feel a bit low sometimes, all those kinds of things. But, when it gets to this level or if it gets in the way of XYZ, that's where we have this extra provision.

Staff also made references to students' lack of self-care skills, described by one participant as 'Can't cook, can't wash'. Staff also discussed the need for preparing students more for life after university, as well as some of the pressure associated with this: ' … the transaction we've got is, you go to university, you get your degree, you get a good job, and that's not necessarily the case anymore. So, there's a huge amount of pressure there'. More broadly, staff suggested that these expectations could be detrimental to mental health, alongside the sense of uncertainty and shift in identity that leaving university could entail. For students with mental health difficulties, staff noted that part of the support services' role was to reduce dependence and transition them to external agencies.

The importance of community belonging and peer support

This theme affected the whole university experience. A key element was the importance of students having a sense of belonging within the university community, particularly in situations where they may not feel they fit in with the (perceived) culture: 'I hear that a lot from students, that if they don't drink or if they don't do sports, they don't feel like they belong, and they find it really difficult to find their place at university'.

There were several references to peer mentoring or buddying schemes as one way to support students through transitions:

> What the student mentors do, most of our things were around general wellbeing, homesickness, helping students to settle in, and what really works well in our service is that [...] they don't need a counsellor but just talking to another student really helps.

Challenges for university support services

It was clear across staff focus groups that support services were dealing with diverse individuals, including international students, mature students, students commuting from home, postgraduate students and disabled students:

> We've got to think not just about these are students coming from colleges and 17, 18-years-old, but you've got mature students with children as well who might have had their babies and now they're coming back, or a total career change [...] and they need a lot of support in terms of wellbeing as well.

The strain on, and need to justify, funding for services, pressures from the wider institution to enhance student retention and the need to 'spend so much time firefighting' were mentioned by all staff groups. Further, the question of responsibility for wellbeing within support services, or the university as a whole, and how far this responsibility extended, was raised: ' ... you need to ask to what extent is the university a mental health service?' An ongoing challenge was achieving the balance between providing students with appropriate support while also fostering independence; between university as a 'safe structure' and students learning about 'what the real world is like'.

Developing a whole university approach

This theme spanned the entirety of transitions, covering both timing of support and type of support needed. In terms of timing, staff raised several concerns about current welcome week practices, which could provide an overwhelming amount of information and 'so much noise' that messages about wellbeing may be missed. There were suggestions that universities could deliver a semester of welcome week as a way of ensuring key messages about well-being and mental health were better embedded.

In terms of the type of support provided, the need for support services to work in partnership was highlighted. Staff viewed academic pressure as potentially contributing to wellbeing issues, for example, via stress associated with more complex learning involved when moving between years of study. Other course-related issues included the timing of start dates and vacations, the lack of structure and emphasis on independent learning and high student numbers. Staff discussed department-level support as important to proactively promote good wellbeing, but they acknowledged that there could be inconsistencies:

> There are departments that'll send out reading material and prep students for the course ahead of them even being confirmed in place. There are some that don't even see us - we [support services] don't even factor in.

Several staff identified a need to increase some academics' awareness and training about mental health and the wider university support available:

> I think a lot of what goes on is that students will describe something or have a chat to a personal tutor or a lecturer, [they] might be struggling and that member of staff won't necessarily put two and two together and [say] 'actually, there is a package of support that you would be able to access'.

Overall, the preferred solution was an inclusive and holistic approach in which wellbeing was embedded and signposted across the university, including within the curriculum and career services. It would also include university support services working in partnership with external bodies such as the National Health Service. Staff suggested that this approach could alleviate some of the issues identified around raising student awareness of the support available and facilitating student engagement with wellbeing information:

> It's everyone's responsibility, not to do what our team [does] and the specialist nature of that, but to just know what's there and how to get someone to it. I think [that] is a really powerful thing for us to be able to say and do.

Discussion

This study considered the challenges described by students and staff in relation to transitions, and the potential support needed for students throughout these periods of change, within the context of student mental health. The themes identified have several overlapping ideas which suggest change is needed to improve the transition experiences throughout university. The challenges highlighted by both students and staff included ensuring students have the skills to cope with university and life afterwards. Issues with current university culture were noted by both groups, including the need for a more authentic and accommodating approach. It was emphasised that such an approach needs to begin pre-entry, with appropriate marketing and recruitment practices and messages. Overall, its emphasis needs to be on managing student expectations appropriately, and normalising wellbeing issues which students may experience. Staff also highlighted challenges related to the provision of support services, including a lack of sufficient funding, the challenges of meeting diverse student needs, and the question of where to draw lines of responsibility. In terms of support needed, both groups discussed the importance of social support, belonging and community for navigating transitions. Both suggested that a whole university approach – with better partnerships both into, within and out of university – could be key in improving student mental health. Together, the findings of the current study enable us to make practical recommendations for improving university transitions.

Recommendation one: take a whole university approach to supporting student wellbeing

Both groups in this study referred to a whole university approach, discussing the need for partnership and joined-up services which embed wellbeing across their provision and ensure services are consistent and cohesive. This approach has been suggested and discussed by staff and students previously (Baik, Larcombe, and Brooker 2019; Dooris and Doherty 2010). The approach focuses on the system as a whole – ensuring that positive approaches to mental wellbeing are embedded within all learning and teaching (Houghton and Anderson 2017). Such an approach should have a commitment from the managerial level as well as empowering and involving students in developing such an approach (Dooris and Doherty 2010; Newton, Dooris, and Wills 2016). This recommendation underpins our subsequent recommendations, which provide specific ways of achieving a whole university approach.

Recommendation two: equip students with the expectations and skills to cope with university by providing additional transition support during pre-entry

Both students and staff echoed an emphasis on the need for students to be appropriately prepared for independence and university-level study. This recommendation may particularly relate to younger students; however, mature students may also need support in developing their new identity as a student (Chapman 2013). To equip students with the skills needed, both groups discussed how a lengthening of the initial transition period may be beneficial. For example, this period could begin at the pre-registration stage and continue beyond 'welcome week' at university. Optional pre-transition programmes could also be provided for offer holders, giving a realistic insight into university life: 'Summer bridge' programmes in the United States for particular groups of students have been found to increase academic attainment (Bir and Myrick 2015), foster a greater sense of belonging and develop more

confidence in university expectations (Suzuki, Amrein-Beardsley, and Perry 2012). Summer schools for students on the autism spectrum, where examples of lectures, student societies, socialising and daily living in student accommodation are provided, can be effective in reducing concerns about university (Lei et al. 2018). Offering such transition programmes more broadly could equip students with some of the skills needed for university life and manage their expectations of university.

Recommendation three: foster students' sense of community and belonging through the provision of peer mentoring or 'buddying' schemes

Social support is psychologically important and could protect against burnout (Kim et al. 2018). Both groups in the study suggested peer mentoring or 'buddying' as a way of supporting transitions. Pairing with a student further on in their academic journey could help first-year students to integrate into their social and academic settings. It can be an effective way of assisting with student integration and retention, protecting against decreases in self-esteem and facilitating the development of social networks (Collings, Swanson, and Watkins 2014). However, facilitating such programmes requires a significant commitment from universities, to ensure that the scheme's objectives are clear, that mentors are adequately trained and supported, and that impact is appropriately evaluated (Gunn, Lee, and Steed 2017). It is also important to acknowledge that such schemes cannot replace the provision of wider mental health services within universities, but instead can signpost students to these when required.

Recommendation four: clarify the role of student services in supporting mental health and appropriately fund services and train staff

While taking a whole university approach requires all staff to acknowledge and facilitate student wellbeing, it is important to recognise the key role of mental health professionals who are trained and experienced in helping students experiencing mental health issues (Broglia et al. forthcoming). The students in the current study emphasised the need for the provision of such services (often 24/7), whereas staff highlighted issues around resources and funding arising from increased demand. This finding suggests that there are potential tensions between students' expectations and what universities can feasibly offer. Further, the need to clarify the level of support universities are offering was also raised – thus it is likely beneficial to focus efforts on improving existing embedded mental health services and enhance communication between academic staff and mental health professionals while clarifying to students what university mental health services can and cannot do – and ensuring they are able to access external mental health services where required. This suggestion reflects the recent call by Barkham et al. (2019) for a clearly defined and coordinated approach towards university mental health services and the need to develop evidence-based interventions and improve student outcomes.

In this study, the staff noted that students often first went to their personal tutors – members of academic staff – when facing difficulties. However, academic staff often do not have sufficient training in supporting students with mental health difficulties (Margrove, Gustowska, and Grove 2014). Placing the responsibility of supporting student mental health on academic staff also poses a substantial risk to these individuals' own mental health (Hughes et al. 2018; Kinman and Jones 2008). Ensuring academic staff are appropriately trained to hold conversations about student mental health is important, as well as ensuring academic staff are able to signpost students on to high-quality mental health services within their university.

Recommendation five: provide additional support for students leaving university to assist with both the practical and emotional transition

Both groups emphasised the need to prepare students for the transition out of university and into the workplace or further study. Of concern within the context of student mental health is the fact that in the UK, graduates with mental health conditions are less likely to be working full time and more likely to be unemployed or on zero-hours contracts compared to peers without disabilities (Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services 2018). Although the need for careers support was raised, it was clear that such support needed to also address the wider practical and emotional elements of this transition. This support could take the form of careers advisors offering seminars on preparing for the workplace and anticipated challenges or internships during university (Murphy et al. 2010).

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the study is qualitative and cannot make claims about generalisability (Braun and Clarke 2019). Second, the sample, recruited via the charity Student Minds, was likely biased towards those with a pre-existing interest in mental health and wellbeing. Staff involved in student services were over-represented within the staff focus groups (e.g. compared to academics). The notion of a 'whole university' approach, which was discussed within the focus groups, may have been influenced by other discussions within the broader Student Minds event of which the focus groups were a part of. Further, the student sample is likely limited in generalisability as it included students who additionally worked in their Student Union, and these students may be particularly proactive and engaged with issues concerning mental health. We also did not record the specific numbers of students who had additional roles within their Student Union. Despite these limitations, the current study provides valuable data on an often under-explored topic.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the importance of transitions to student wellbeing and mental health. Although there were differences between students and staff on some issues, notably when discussing student support services, there were significant commonalities between the two. Both often emphasised the need for universities to play a more proactive role in facilitating transitions, including managing student expectations and providing practical and emotional support where appropriate. The recommendations in this paper are a starting point for universities to develop their exploration of these issues in a contextualised and nuanced manner, which integrates a consideration of wellbeing and mental health into the whole student journey.

Disclosure statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Notes on contributors

Eilidh Cage is a Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Stirling. She is primarily an autism researcher, aiming to understand the experiences of autistic people particularly in relation to mental health and wellbeing, but she is also interested in understanding and improving wellbeing for all students. Prior to Stirling, she was a teaching-focused Lecturer in Psychology at Royal Holloway, University of London. She is a Fellow of the HEA.

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