Is there an increase or decrease in considerations for mental health amongst university students?

Elliot Aston – 2105377 ECPT6009

Abstract

This action research project will explore factors of mental health amongst university students. The methodology comprises of secondary research from news articles, statistic sites, research articles, university websites, government resources, and charities/foundations attentive towards this cause. The findings recognises current initiatives, coordinated by numerous universities, charities, and government schemes, to improving mental health services for students whilst highlighting further demands for student support as a result from COVID-19.

Introduction

Various studies are held regularly to assess mental health amongst students. UCAS (2021) estimate 70,000 student applications include statements of mental health conditions including depression, anxiety, stress etc. 49% of UCAS applicants hide this information due to fears of rejection. This indicates an unknown situation regarding decreasing mental health in students, especially as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, academic stress, achievement reach etc (Keong, et al. 2015). Student Minds (2021) declares 74% of university students experienced negative impacts from the pandemic resulting from missing out on a traditional campus lifestyle (Kahn, 2021). Evidence exists showing universities making attempts to improving the mental health of students by investing into their services and creating support schemes for students.

This project aimed to investigate three key areas;

1. ***Increases and/or decreases in mental health of university students***
2. ***The impacts of COVID-19 on university students mental health***
3. ***Available support for university students.***

Methodology

Many factors are considered regarding mental health and university students; much existing analyses focuses on both/either aspect meaning numerous resources are available. Statistical websites, such as ONS, are used for relevant data to create a snapshot of the current state of mental health in students. This will also be supported by quantifiable evidence e.g., participants responses. For example, Tinsley (2020) reports students feeling less happiness, increased anxiety, lower life satisfaction etc. University websites will be visited to provide varied insights into current services and procedures established to assist students and their mental wellbeing. This will highlight any differences and similarities that can lead to further recommendations.

The UK government website will show support schemes available to universities that will improve services, train staff, and provide appropriate resources. Lastly, news articles will be used as an external source of information. News articles will likely provide non-biased articles and interviews providing different perspectives on this topic.

Discussion

Increases and/or decreases in mental health of university students

Studies suggest declining mental health with university students. This is related to focusing on academics and social development during education leaving little room for mental wellbeing. This is evident through universities requesting links to NHS services to support students (Williams, et al. 2019). Linkages with other resources are potentially being made as students argue against current support systems (Yokoyama and Yates, 2019). Students believe this is because of minimal knowledge on various mental health conditions, lack of appropriate advice, incompetent training, and failure to guide students properly (Duffy, et al. 2019) highlighting demands for further development in university services and creating access to external resources. Utilising external resources will allow access to professionals with experience in mental health who can provide appropriate advice to students.

The impacts of COVID-19 on university students mental health

COVID-19 drastically changed daily life greatly influencing our social lives and mental wellbeing (UKRI, 2022). Restrictions were implemented to decrease the spread of the virus including social distancing, remaining indoors, and the closure of many non-essential businesses (Legislation.gov.uk, 2020). These restrictions impacted students mental health as a result from their experiences differing from what was expected and the removal of support systems e.g., friends and family (Student Minds, 2021). This indicates mental health is a growing concern after the pandemic, this is evident from poor grades, poor social skills, loss of opportunities etc. (Chen & Lucock, 2022). The pandemic also highlighted a lack of support for students and showed students losing trust in universities. NUS (2020) assert 52% of students experience depleting mental health from the pandemic.

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What support is available for university students?

Universities will tailor their services depending on specific students needs. They also ensure trained staff and counsellors are available for on-site support allowing students to gain instantaneous support. Online tools have been developed for students to research mental wellbeing exercises, learn about mental illnesses, and gain access to external organisations. Professional training is undertaken to ensure all staff are competent in providing support for students (UCAS, 2022). A growing concern is further developing these services due to beliefs of 'not enough being done' to help students (Hamilton, 2021). Many support schemes have been introduced throughout the UK to assist universities in getting financial aid to improving their mental health services (GOV.uk, 2022).

Conclusion

Mental health is a cause of concern in university as it continues to deplete and has become influenced from the COVID-19 pandemic as numerous aspects of a students lifestyle is removed. Many of the points made above support this as they indicate the student perspective of mental health. For example, there is little expectation towards the competency of mental health services and little trust in external resources. However, efforts are being made to improving this perspective as universities are gaining access to funding and are developing their services and receiving proper training to ensure their support systems can be effective in assisting students. Many external organisations are further supporting this by providing access to the resources needed to achieve these goals e.g., professionals to offer training schemes, online counsellors, mental wellbeing advice etc.

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