**Conversations in Social Justice:**



**Student Mental Health and the University**

**Podcast transcript**

Series 2. Episode 7.

*This podcast is hosted by Human Geography Lecturer Su Fitzpatrick in conversation with Amie Hayes and Laura Southward of York based learning support partnership Equip Your Mind. Together they discuss critical challenges for UK universities as provides for mental health support services for students; staff capacity and training; and the impact of outsourcing support services to private providers.*

**Su Fitzpatrick**

Hi, welcome to this Institute for Social Justice podcast brought to you by York St. John University. My name's Su Fitzpatrick. I'm a lecturer in human geography here at York St. John. And today I'm talking to Amie Hayes and Laura Southward from Equip your Mind, which is based in York in the UK. Equip your Mind provides one to one mental health mentoring, specialist autism mentoring, and it also provides tailored academic support for students of a range of ages. But today, we're focusing on higher education and the range of critical issues that arise around the provision of specialist mental health support services for students, in this context. I'm interested in talking to Amy and Laura about how these services relate to student's academic experience, and more broadly, how universities are managing that relationship between being an academic institution and taking increasing responsibility for mental health support to students. I'm just going to quickly point out that this subject area doesn't relate directly to my own research. But clearly, student welfare and pastoral care is very much part of the day to day work of lecturing staff. And we're going to come to the interesting way that the support services have evolved at York St John in a moment, but Amie and Laura, can you just start us off by telling us a bit more about Equip your Mind, please?

**Laura Southward**

Yeah, absolutely. Myself and Amie are old colleagues who used to work at York St. John, and we decided to team up together and create Equip your Mind to basically provide specialist mentoring to a greater population than the current provision for just students with a declared disability at universities. So we're a very new business. But we've been open a few months now. It's going quite well, isn't it Amie?

**Amie Hayes**

It is very busy, very exciting. At the same time.

**Su Fitzpatrick**

Are you finding that when people talk about mental health provision for, especially for younger people at the present time, whether we're talking about HE or secondary school or primary school, it's often in relation to the existing services, being completely oversubscribed, there being an absolutely massive need for these support services? So have you come along at the right time in that way, in terms of like the sort of the need for these services?

**Laura Southward**

Absolutely. Personally, prior to working at York St. John, I've experienced working in the NHS and mental health services. And one of the main things that I've seen firsthand is the lengthy waiting lists for support. And what tends to happen is people declare a problem at the GP, they get referred in maybe for something slightly minor. But by the time they're actually seen, it's then snowballing into a much worse situation for them. And current mental health provision, although they can only do so much with the funding that they have. And they're doing really well. But it feels like there isn't enough at the beginning of their declaration, which is where we sort of come in because we are more preventative as well in our approach to try and catch that person at the first instance, rather than firefighting later on down the line when they're finally able to get into some therapy.

**Su Fitzpatrick**

Could you kind of give us a sense of a little bit of your kind of qualifications background, and then possibly move into the kind of your background in terms of coming from York St. John, and then you know, the journey towards setting up Equip your Mind? Could you sort of paint a bit of a picture around that?

**Amie Hayes**

So would you like to start with background first. Both of our background and training primarily is in psychology. And then we also both have postgraduate qualifications in psychology as well in different specialisms. I did my masters in cognitive neuroscience and Laura did on adolescent development. And to perform the role of a specialist mentor, for Disabled Students Allowance, you need certain qualifications and these include an undergraduate degree in psychology that's BPS accredited, a postgraduate BPS accredited course, and British Psychological Society, professional body membership, ongoing as a regular practice. Laura and I first started talking to each other about starting a business a couple of years, sort of into working together, because we noticed that, you know, there was a lot of instances where maybe students didn't have a declared disability. And then it was getting to a point where the university was having to help that student firefight before that declaration came forward and provision could be made available. And as Laura suggested, you know, small problems if left without support become big problems. And so we felt it would be really helpful for something like the specialist mentoring system that exists for DSA students within universities to also be available to students who don't have a formal diagnosis who haven't gone through the Disabled Students Allowance system on application. And there's really solid evidence to suggest that even though the number of declared disabilities on campus is going up, we're still looking at about half of students who have a disability coming onto campus without declaring that to anybody in terms of for that additional support through the Disabled Students Allowance system or creating a learning support plan within the university.

**Su Fitzpatrick**

Let's explore for a minute the situation as it is now in terms of provision by these private providers. Now, do they use a pool of different providers? Or are they just using one private provider, it might also be useful for you to kind of illustrate the way that you're now connected with these private providers as well, in terms of the work that you do with the students at the university. The consequences both for students and for yourselves, basically.

**Laura Southward**

The short end of it is, a provider is chosen based on if they're able to provide support in that area, comes down to price. And that's chosen by the needs assessment centres. So the university doesn't really have any control really over who gets that support. When a student is linked with a provider, providers do liaise to some degree. But it's not the same as providing an in house provision. In that sense.

**Amie Hayes**

As agency staff, I'm back on zero hours contracts, obviously. So I have less security outside of term time, when students are receiving support, that's not a source of income anymore, because they don't need that support. And so to a certain extent, it's very temperamental sort of income, which doesn't leave you financially secure as a provider, which isn't an ideal position to be in when you have to be as qualified as a professional as you do to perform the role to find yourself in that kind of financially insecure position where this is the only structure through which you can provide that work. The consequence for students, as I say, is that sort of reduction of joined up support between different support services within the university. So, for example, it's not broken down completely, I can flag an issue that a student is having with their consent to share, I can flag that up to say, their provider, their provider can then as long as there's been consent to share, given, they can share that with the university. However, there's more steps in that chain. And also, most agencies, they don't have the same duty of care, as the institution. So you know, for example, when we were working on campus, if a student came to session, and they were in crisis, that was something we immediately would go to the wellbeing team with. And immediately start working out what to do about that situation. Whereas, you know, if a student comes to me in crisis through an agency, the best I can do is phone the agency, make them aware and ask them to pass that information along in the strongest possible terms. And I can't guarantee because different agencies give themselves, there's not necessarily uniformity in their policies and procedures around when they're going to contact universities, or whether they're going to take any responsibility for contacting universities, and so on and so forth,

**Laura Southward**

Reminded me of some of the experiences I've had. So likewise, as Amie, I also am an agency worker working as provider, specialist mental health. The main problem that I have is when a student, for example comes with a problem. Usually, if we were on campus, if that student needed assistance, which most do, we could take them along, we could go with them, support them, scaffold them to problem solve it themselves. Whereas at the moment, especially the majority of my students, I see virtually, because I see them up and down the country, I can't be there in person. So it's very much trying to persuade them, which is sometimes tricky when they're having difficulty doing it on their own, as well, when you need University intervention, like Amie said, you've got to get consent for the students to share it with the support provider. I'd say 90% of the time, when I raise issues with a support provider, their main response to me is to try and encourage the student to do it themselves. Now, the problem with that is usually already tried doing that, and that student is having a breakdown in what they're able to do. So there's this constant too-ing and froing. At this point, sometimes weeks are passing when an issue isn't being addressed. When this was on campus, when support providers in person on campus and you've got a rapport built with staff members, you can catch that person who will know that student directly, and you'd be able to do something much quicker, you'd be able to take action much more quickly and support the student more appropriately. That's the main sort of problem I have with that.

**Su Fitzpatrick**

Would you guys be able to talk about a national picture. So Laura, you're saying that you supporting students up and down the country? I take it from the website and from things that Amie has said that we're talking about a sort of an age range that obviously goes beyond HE. I appreciate that. But just thinking for a moment about the HE students that you support. Could you illustrate for us the kinds of issues that you've been talking about in relation to the national picture. So the general approach that you're aware the other universities might be taking in this respect.

**Laura Southward**

So I see students from a number of universities, I think, as far as Newcastle, and as far down as South End, and what's apparent is is how different universities are structured. So are certainly better than others at supporting students and providing for students. But I think it's in the minority, quite frankly. And that's definitely changed over the last couple of years as well. In my opinion. One of the main things that I tend to see is that if a student is having a problem, the route that they would follow is they would need to get in touch with their disability advice team or whatever the equivalent of that is at a university, learning support team or whatever, that learning support team then puts provisions in place for academics to follow potentially, so that student is supported. And that's generally how it goes, and usually it goes quite well.But for these students who do have particular problems and experience issues in their personal life, which impacts upon the university work, basically a stumbling block, when any problems like that come across, there is a breakdown of communication within universities, and there is nowhere to go, there is no point of contact. On a number of universities, there's actually no point, no person, a student can go and approach, they have to do it all online, the route to actually speak to somebody is convoluted, which for a student with autism, say for example, it's just unyielding for them, they're not getting anywhere fast, it's extremely stressful. They're trying to deal with their own emotions. And it feels like there's no help that they can get. There's been one or two occasions with some students that I've had that they've had meetings with the VC, at universities, because of the provision that isn’t being provided to them. In my opinion, it shouldn't have to get to that I think that's really inappropriate to be quite frank. And it should just be something that's dealt with on the minute level, you know, somebody even being able to approach somebody at reception to be able to point them in the right direction. That's how it should be. But it's not in a lot of cases.

**Laura Southward**

Similarly to Laura, I'm supporting university students nationwide through agency, you know, since the pandemic began, because everything went virtual. So I've got students as far as Newcastle, as far south as Brighton, and Portsmouth. So there is that when there's so many different institutions, and they all have different processes and policies, and some make certain provisions for some things, and others don't make that provision for some things. It's so hard to give the student clear and accurate information as to how to resolve the issue for them with their institution. And I think one of the benefits of when we were an in house team is that we knew the York St John policies and systems and which teams were whose like the back of our hand. And while you can kind of vaguely get a familiarity of different institutions over time, it doesn't help the student when their specialist support can't support them within the context of actually navigating their own institution. And especially if you're a student with anxiety, or mental health issues, or social anxiety and approaching people is challenging, at the best of times, then when things are going wrong, it's where those breakdowns of communication are most likely to happen. And it's where students slip through the net for support before things, before things get out of hand and start spiralling

**Su Fitzpatrick**

Where does this leave us in terms of the advice that you would give to universities, if they asked for it, if they came to you and said: Give us workshops on how best we can, lets say, change our systems, change the way we work? If the university came to you and asked you that question, where does that leave us? Because it sounds like the answer would be well provide it inhouse you know, and that seems to be something that we're we're going away from it. First of all, maybe if I could ask you Do we universities ever asked you that question? Or would you be looking at some point in the future with Equip you Mind to actually provide that kind of guidance, that kind of best practice, type? workshopping?

**Amie Hayes**

I think in an ideal world, that's what we'd love to do is actually raise awareness and strategies of things that would benefit not just students with a declared disability on campus, but to the student population and wellbeing as a general rule, because quite often, removing barriers to success for disabled students removes barriers to success for other students as well, because disabled students and students with mental health issues, struggle with the same things as everybody else, just more so. You know, it's not alien things that students with disabilities are struggling with. It's the same everyday life stuff as every other student. For example, a really big one that's not necessarily directly related to inhouse or out house support is how things like assessments are structured or assignment briefs are phrased and worded and how those things are structured. It would be things like most universities use some system like Moodle, and across the board, every lecturer has their own system for organising a module. And students are having to learn eight different structures for Module courses on where to find things, you know, on the same course in the same year, this naturally causes confusion and anxiety, they might get deadlines confused, or they know where to find things isn't one module and not for another. So just having a certain level of standardisation there so that every student knows, this is where I'm looking for this. And this is where I'm looking for this, regardless of what module it is, would resolve a lot of barriers. For a lot of students whether they have the declared mental health issue, a disability or not, there is a lot more sort of broader general things that would make universities and academic courses more accessible, but at the same time, work towards improving general student wellbeing on campus.

**Laura Southward**

In addition to that, as well, it's not necessarily saying that universities need to provide in house specialist mentoring support, DSS apart, though in an ideal world, that would be great. If possible. .I can understand the university from a business perspective, outsourcing it. Personally, what it feels like is happening is that they're outsourcing it and then forgetting almost about that group of students. And then that support is not translating over into the university. So for example, they will have a learning support plan. But that learning support plan might not encompass some of the strategies that perhaps a specialist mentor has detected, in seeing them for a greater length of period than one assessment session, which will be really beneficial in their classes, for example, there's none of that sort of crossover with the support that's offered, nor communication, it really does break down. Whereas if it was in house, it can be a little bit easier to make adjustments. However, aside from that, I don't think it's just an issue of providing an in house team. I think it's broader than that. And I think it comes down to the overall sort of society of the university, I think, I think if you were to ask an individual, most individuals do really care about mental health and wellbeing of the students. But when you turn that into a team, and when you turn it into an organisation, it does sort of get broken down as to what they feel they're able to do. I think it's more a change of ethic, a change of value somewhat across staff, and really trying to give it a real good go together, coming together and thinking about how can we actually tackle this, because I think even on a micro scale, just taking one university, between departments, there's differences on how they handle wellbeing and mental health and students. Some departments are great, and some aren't. And that's kind of questionable, when you think a university as a whole might be fantastic. And may, you know, talk about how much they value and wellbeing and mental health and make all these provisions, but still on a department basis, some departments just aren't up to the mark, that just illustrates how inconsistent it is within an institution.

**Amie Hayes**

By the same token, I think there's a lot of variability between departments, within an institution, between departments, between institutions, and the variability between departments and how things are handled, and also between institutions. And so you end up almost with a bit of a lottery of experience, depending on what you're studying, or where you're studying it, and so on and so forth. I do think that by the same token, while a certain level of pastoral role has always been part of an academics work, the amount or level to which, especially considering workloads and so on, and so forth, I think that there's also maybe not necessarily the level of training and understanding in academics that there could be because they simply haven't had the opportunity to be trained in those things, to have understanding of actually, well, here are some really good communication strategies for when you're trying to support a neurodiverse student, or when you're trying to support a student with mental health issues. And it's not about the academic having responsibility for that student’s pastoral care, more about just a consistency of approach and attitude among, well across campus really, beyond academic staff and into support staff and everything. If everybody's on the same page, everybody gets the same experience.

**Su Fitzpatrick**

I think we're entering into a bit of the discussion that I wanted to kind of touch on and that's about the responsibility of the lecturing staff. And but I suppose also taking into account as Laura’s said the kind of the civic life if you like or the society that a university that that world that sort of university kind of creates when you're in it. And I'm thinking I'd like to share with you just sort of email that I received, I think it was last summer, and it was suggesting an afternoon, I think of maybe two or three hours of it was kind of a training session for lecturing staff and it was asking about whether or not lecturing staff would like to attend this session and it has to do with the needs of students and understanding the mental health needs of students more. And my initial reaction to that was, I was slightly concerned that it was a two hour training session. Because if there is that need there, and I think there is that need, and whether that goes back to say, part of your PhD training or something like that, like, or some sort of part of your induction into university, but some training needs to be given, and awareness raised amongst lecturing staff as to the kind of boundaries of their roles and responsibilities, but also just understanding neurodiverse students, and the idea of it being a two hour session didn't feel right. And there is also a kind of a workload issue as well. So I wonder what the answer is to that question. It's quite a difficult question to be asking. It's quite broad. But where does that start that kind of, or where might we build where might we start building a better and more supportive, sort of like university society for everybody to be more aware of neurodiverse students needs, particularly in respect of academic learning.

**Amie Hayes**

There's a balance that needs to be found. Lecturers and academic staff and support staff need to be given the appropriate time and space to actually have the time and energy to do that learning with regards to learning about neurodiversity and the things that might be helpful for neurodiverse students or also students with mental health issues and how that might benefit other students more generally, and so on and so forth. But by the same token, I think the pastoral responsibilities of lecturers have sort of shifted in the last 10 years, not necessarily in a way that's helpful for lecturers, I mean, the student coming to a tutorial super stressed out about an assessment and you know, having a bit of a meltdown about that is is one thing, but when academic staff are being essentially the first point of disclosure for really severe mental health issues, or really traumatic circumstances, we also need to think about the support for the academic staff, as well, and what needs to be taken off your plate so that you have the capacity to actually be able to get support for yourselves as well. Because, you know, wellbeing of students on campus is obviously an incredibly high priority. However, academics can't provide their best pastoral care or their best academic training, if you're exhausted, stressed and emotionally burnt out, you know, so that I think there needs to be... the one feeds into the other, I think is a thing.

**Laura Southward**

For a lot of students cases, their academic is their first point of contact. And usually, with the amount of time that you spend with your academics quite frequently, you do make, build rapport with them. So that student trusts that individual and approach them sometimes in times of need, I think it's important for the academic to feel equipped, that they can manage that situation appropriately. So you know, in some instances, the student might disclose some quite serious information. And if the lecturer didn't know how to handle that appropriately, not just signpost, but handle it emotionally... that can be, one quite stressful for the academic, but also two, for the student as well. And I think it would give a lecturer confidence as well in themselves that when they're going to have these tutorials with students that they feel that they can manage any of these situations. But then also seek support. As Amie said, there needs to be some support for the academic too, so you don't feel alone in some of these issues. Because I think that does happen sometimes for sure. With regards to the topic brought up about a two hour training session, it's definitely a start. And I think you know, any any sort of training sessions that's going to broaden our learning on diversity of individuals, whatever the topic, I think it's really useful. But I think a two hour session, again, is just the start. And it needs to be ongoing. And it also comes down to a questioning of our values as well, because they can come across in lectures and talks and things like that, being aware of those. Similarly, just as our political values, we don't bring them, I think just more needs to be done. I think having more conversations about it, and really opening up the subject a lot more and breaking down the stigma that still exists around mental health and also showing someone what issues with mental health and neurodivergency see can can actually cause a student and showing personal how that might be from a student's perspective, I think could really help as well.

**Su Fitzpatrick**

Just like to kind of introduce one more theme into it. It's very much related to what we've been talking about, the marketization of universities. So process that's been going on perhaps since the late 90s. We can see kind of intensification of that process, perhaps from the kind of fee hikes that we first started to see in about 2010 kind of time. To me it creates a tension where you've got a sense of universities marketing themselves along the lines of “come here because we are the sort of like pastoral care, you know, we're in the top 10, or we're this that or the next thing in terms of how we prioritise your mental health as a student”. That's become part of the marketing of universities, I think. Also the fact that the wider over a period of a few decades a wider section of society been encouraged to attend university in a way that perhaps a few decades ago, you know, they weren't. So there's kind of more people coming to university, perhaps a more diverse set of needs. I suppose what I'm asking, the question that I'd like to ask you is, what directions do you see this marketization going in? In one sense, you know, could it be that the marketization has actually possibly improved things for students in terms of mental health provision, because universities are now more inclined towards its provision? As you know, in a competitive marketplace, for example. What direction do you see mental health support services for students going in universities in this country?

**Amie Hayes**

I think context and especially the broader context is really, really important here because along with marketization of universities, and the introduction, and then raising of tuition fees, and so on and so forth, it's put a much more stressful, broader context on the student population in terms of their university time. So for example, one local university estimates that the cost of living in York for a year is at the lowest possible and 8,600 ish pounds and at the upper end 17,000. And the maximum maintenance loan for this academic year is 9,500. So finances that are provided to students to support them, aren't really going far enough to support them. Student beings reported that more than a third of students have a part time job and 21% have more than one, like at least two. And a quarter of all respondents on the same survey said that, yes, when asked if financial stress had ever caused them to consider dropping out of university. So the the financial and background context of their living environment has a huge implication for their wellbeing on campus and their academic attainment. On top of that, 40% of those students that were working said that their primary reason for working was to cover rent and bills. So these are like the foundational things that are allowing them to live to study, as opposed to maybe 20, 30 years ago, when those financial pressures weren't quite so prevalent on students and debt wasn't something that they have to consider. Students quite often have to think very, very carefully about things like taking a leave of absence, because it has financial implications for their ongoing tuition support, for their ongoing maintenance support, and so on and so forth. So the context of pressure to succeed academically, is dramatically increased when there are both financial and living consequences for things not going to plan. So, you know, the marketization of universities broadly, I think has the potential to, as things continue to go the way they are, especially with the financial context, I think you're going to see more and more students being unwell. And if you don't mind me doing just a brief statistics dump, student declarations to UCAS of mental health issues are up 450%, from 10 years ago, so the landscape of student mental health has changed dramatically in the last decade. But also on top of that 49% of students said they had not disclosed their mental health condition. So you're potentially looking at almost double the number of students that have a declared mental health issue actually being on campus. And then of course, there's the third forgotten group, which would be taken into account in the statistics, which is the group of students who didn't disclose to the interviewer that they had a mental health issue. So there's there's all these populations that are represented on campus. And it's something that I think universities, and especially for their marketing and so forth, are going to have to consider and continue to push to compete because students care about what their provision and mental health support is going to be like at universities. Now. It's a priority.

**Laura Southward**

Definitely a tricky one, because I think in some regard, I do agree that the marketization and they using sort of mental health provision is like a one-uping on other universities can come with benefits in that universities do actually have to do something to give some substance to the claims that they're providing for students with mental health issues. However, what what I personally also see happening is that although they're claiming to be offering this support and they are to some extent, the support is usually quite limited. So it's trying to gauge the boundary of what support is appropriate to be offered at universities, because that, again, is supposed to be an academic institute, it's not supposed to be a mental health care institution, but then also making that be clear to students just think about some of my experiences. And in the past when there's been issues regarding unconditional offers being given to students who haven't reached the grades that would have been required for their studies and who have come to university and on the odd occasion, they've not met the level to be pass academically, some of these individuals as well, who also have quite complicated mental health backgrounds, that is a massive knock to their confidence. And they've sort of been sold and aware that if they come to a certain university, they're going to be looked after. And oh, they've been given an unconditional offer. So yes, I must be able to do well at university, then when they get there, the support isn't enough for that individual. And they're sort of being set up to fail in some ways, which is sort of unethical in some regard. So I think it's making sure that, yes, the university is providing support, but making it clear as to how much support they can actually give, because there is a limit to it, I believe, just so students who are looking at universities and come in, they can weigh up their options and decide whether or not university is right for them right now, given their current situation, whether their support is enough for them, or whether or not they might need just some time to seek professional support from whoever that may be.

**Su Fitzpatrick**

The tension there is palpable, because there's a certain pressure that is brought to bear on departments to retain students. So even in the cases where students have taken, perhaps they've suspended the studies for up to a year or six months, there's definitely a sense in which you know, you know, they're encouraged to return and so on. And those external pressures, really, they don't feel like they truly take into account the deeper issues going on with that individual student. And it's not something that I feel I've ever really done, but I think it's a possibility that lecturing staff may feel under pressure to retain that student or whatever, or if it's not in their best interests. And the broader question of knowing that students who have perhaps are more vulnerable, are entering into this world or this sort of institution that, yeah, they have all sorts of preconceived ideas about but really, it just kind of gets bigger. Because the whole idea of like, the open days, the prospectuses, everybody always smiling on sunny days on campus, and you know, there's a certain responsibility there to be like, Yeah, that's actually kind of like, maybe think about the other dimension of your university experience that isn't about laughing on sunny days on campus, you know, but that really isn't there because of this competitive marketplace. But to me, it just sort of tends to kind of balloon outwards that the amount of external pressures that have been brought to bear, and what sometimes feels to me like a tokenistic appreciation of like the student's individual needs. That's not a question. But I don't know if you've got any comments or responses.

**Laura Southward**

Again, it's difficult to provide a definitive answer, because it's a complex question, because obviously, the universities are providing support for students that they aren't marketing, which is available. However, when we scaled it back and we bring it down to an individual level, there umpteen cases where students aren't being supported appropriately. And that's just because the support isn't there from the university, not because maybe they it's not necessarily that they don't want to provide it, it's just that they don't have the staff or the resources to do it. It's no individual's problem. And I think, because these population of students are so vulnerable, they're not going to be the type of population who are going to make a scene about it, because they don't have the energy to do that, quite frankly. And they've usually got so much going on in their personal life, that their academics is the first thing that falls, academic attainment and students wellbeing is directly related. So once their well being declines that they're gonna drop off. And I don't think that is being illustrated or collected in a way in a meaningful way that the university can do something about as of yet. I don't know, perhaps they haven't even thought about looking at it, or perhaps they have thought about it. I'm not too sure. But yeah, I think, again, as I said, with the marketing side of things, it always looks good on a sunny day, but actually, in reality, that's maybe 10% of the time that it's a sunny day, and actually being at university is a really difficult experience for many people. And definitely not all about sitting on the grass, outside of campus in the sunshine with your friends.

**Amie Hayes**

As you say it's all great when it's sunny days on campus in the summer and everything's beautiful. And in the same way, it is great that most universities have an on campus counselling service nowadays, most have an in house like disability advice team to coordinate student support plans or learning support plans, whatever the institution calls them. However, it's when you get into the nitty gritty and on the ground. And it's the value of having a counselling service on campus can be limited if there's a waiting list of four or five weeks to get your first appointment with that service or facility of having disability advisors on campus. This is a national problem students from all over the place of having severe severe delays in their support plan being produced such as they've mostly gone through an academic year before it's really gotten to the department. And so that support hasn't been in place. And there's been additional struggles as a consequence. And because maybe support plan extensions haven't been in place, they've then needed to apply for lots of like formal extensions, and gone through all those complicated and stressful situations, which just snowball the situation. And really, I think the whole conversation is, prevention is better than cure, it's much better to have that early intervention where it's actually low level pastoral intervention that's needed before it gets to crisis. Because the problem is if you're in crisis, and then you refer to, you know, an on campus counselling service, or whatever, and then it's three, four or five weeks, you're either better by the time you see them, or you're very much not, and one way or the other it's not necessarily serve the purpose that the system is designed to serve. Now, again, this isn't those teams fault that it's a oversubscription issue, though, it's too much demand for the resources available. But I think I think that's actually a trend across a lot of universities. And I think it's something that universities need to urgently consider. Because if there are these waiting lists for that support, you're going to run into problems eventually.

**Laura Southward**

Yeah, I just wanted to add into that as well, because I think it's really important that certainly what I've been seeing as well is that over the last few years, there has been not just an increase of students declaring mental health problems, but also coming with more and more complex issues. On top of that, outside of universities, they're not able to get support, because there are these massive waiting lists. Like, for example, trying to get an autism and ADHD assessment locally is about a two year waiting list. So regardless of whether or not that student has or has not got that diagnosis, they still need support that they're not getting, that falls to some regard on the university. And you know, the wellbeing teams that universities provide are fantastic, they've got great staff, etc, but may only be able to offer six sessions of counselling, which for something, if somebody has a diagnosis of ADHD or autism, is just not going to cut it, quite frankly, and again, no individual's problem, but it's just that there is a lack of support and over subscription, a lack of funding...and it just means that it's kind of a big soup of unpleasantness for the for the increasing number of students who have more and more complex situations that are in academia at the moment.

**Amie Hayes**

Similarly, with mental health, it's similar, you know, if the waiting lists for actually getting access to a therapist through GP referral, or even, you know, going through IAPT the self referring systems, and so on, and so forth. If there's, you know, months and months waiting list before you're going to get any support there, then you're not getting support from the community, which means the university becomes your only source of support. And I think Laura and I both had experiences where quite worryingly, we have been the only reliable, consistent support available for their mental health throughout parts of their degree or their entire degree, which is not really the role that that, you know, we're designed to be. We are not a replacement for community mental health support, or mental health nurses or counsellors or therapy, you know. But it feels like the safety net isn't there. So when you become the only regular contact for that student and their wellbeing, as I say, it's concerning, because there needs to be that broader support system, both within the university and outside and there needs to be more joined up support, so that it's not all falling onto universities, but also, so that community mental health services actually have some kind of setup and capacity to be able to manage the needs of the population of that area.

**Su Fitzpatrick**

Do we need to be a little bit more honest with students in that respect from day one, from the open days or from whatever point that they start to think about entering into universities? These challenges exist in universities, these challenges exist in society. I am not sure that that's a message that comes across to students. And so there's a sort of a double, a double impact on them of experiencing the mental health problems and the surprise and rather kind of like, a horrible, you know, realisation that perhaps the support really isn't there in the way that they need it to be there and that comes to them whilst at university, usually in their early 20s, which is a bit of a crazy time for most people anyway. So is it a point about having a more mature and kind of honest conversation with students do you think?

**Laura Southward**

I definitely think that will be beneficial. Absolutely. I think in addition to that, as well, when they come to the end of their studies, the little support that they may have drops off completely. Quite frequently in that period of leaving university students quite vulnerable, and can experience decline in their mental health and wellbeing too. I'm not saying that a university has to provide for that student afterwards, but it's a transitional shock. And again, coming into university is a transitional shock. If they're expecting something to happen, and it's not there, it's unfair to suggest that that might be present when in fact, it's not, and they to better prepare themselves, having an awareness will be beneficial to them. Absolutely.

**Su Fitzpatrick**

It's just whether universities are courageous enough to be that honest at that point where they're talking about recruitment. So I'd like to thank Amie and Laura for their time today. And I look forward to continuing these conversations, hopefully on campus, hopefully in a collaborative setting with other lecturers and yourselves. Thank you so much.

**Laura Southward & Amie Hayes**

Thank you for having us. Thank you.