

Chapter 1

Perceptions of Support Worker Roles in English Secondary Schools: Impact on Transition to Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Transition from school to higher education is an exciting but stressful time for school leavers. They may be living away from home with all the extra responsibilities this brings. In addition, despite a clutch of great grades, they will be learning to adapt to different academic expectations. It is not surprising that for many this impacts negatively on their wellbeing. This chapter explores the preparation of school leavers for their new journey. In England, unlike other countries, school librarians who might offer academic support and school counsellors who could identify potential mental health issues are not statutory. In some schools they have a very different role to the services provided by a university and may not even be qualified. So how does a student begin to understand the availability of support if they have no school model to follow? This chapter will attempt to address concerns in this dichotomy.

BACKGROUND

The role of the school librarian and the school counsellor within secondary schools in England is very different to how these professionals offer services in higher education (HE). Increasingly a librarian employed by a school, focusses only on providing “reading for pleasure” support (BMG Research, 2019). The school counselling service, where it exists, is perceived as a referral service for those students in need of help for identified areas of concern (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2015).

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In HE, librarians support academic learning including research guidance and advice on academic writing style (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, 2023). The counselling service is very much concerned with general wellbeing, dealing with a new environment away from home and is open for self-referral (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2017). There has been much reporting on how transition to HE affects the mental health of undergraduates, sometimes with tragic consequences. Here we will discuss the barriers that might contribute to students being unwilling to contact library or counselling services when arriving at university and how these might be overcome to ensure the students can manage their transition more smoothly.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE USE OF COUNSELLING AND LIBRARY SERVICES BY NEW UNDERGRADUATES

Engagement with Mental Health Services in HE

Although the challenge of transition from school or college to university is well researched and documented students are still struggling both academically and emotionally and these two aspects are closely intertwined. Recently to address the high numbers of suicides in university students, Universities UK, 2022 has called for universities to break confidentiality when they feel that a student is at risk to a trusted contact identified by the student. Undergraduate suicide rates are a concern in HE with a recent UK Government report showing 3 deaths per 100,000 students and white males being identified as being most at risk (ONS, 2022). Many more students have made attempts to take their own life or have self-harmed and here the numbers for female students are higher than for males according to The Office for Students (2022a).

This same report shows that only 1 in 3 people who died from suicide in the previous 12 months had been in touch with mental health services. This, they conclude, suggests many at risk students do not access counselling services either or ask for help. The report claims there are many different reasons why HE students in the UK may not seek help from mental health services. These include:

- **Stigma:** Students may be concerned about being judged or perceived as weak if they seek help and are worried, they might be asked to leave the course or lose their friends. This belief is perpetuated if at school only a referral service to counselling was provided.
- **Lack of Awareness:** Some students may not understand what is available to them and how to access help. This is very true if there has been no access to counselling services at their school.
- **Time Constraints:** Time management might involve workload pressures, managing debt, a part time job and they do not give their mental health the attention it deserves and so do not want to waste time contacting services.
- **Shame or Embarrassment:** Similarly, to stigma, some students would feel a failure in having to contact mental health providers thinking this was for other people, again underpinned if the school counselling service was only accessible through referral.
- **Lack of Trust:** Some students may have had negative experiences with these services in the past, which may discourage them from seeking help. Here if the counselling service at school was not run by a professional then such issues might arise.

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