The All-Party Parliamentary
University Group

6 December 2016

Agenda

The subject of the meeting of the All-Party Parliamentary University Group is the impact of social media on the mental health of students and staff.

8.30am	**Lord Norton of Louth**, Co-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary University Group, welcome and introductions.
c8.35am	**Professor Steve West,** Vice-Chancellor, University of the West of England
c8.45am	**Dr Anne Haase,** Senior Lecturer, University of Bristol
c8.55am	Questions, comments, and discussion with university leaders, MPs and Peers.
10am	Speaker meeting concludes.

Speaker biographies

Professor Steve West

Professor Steve West took up the post of Vice-Chancellor of the University of the West of England Bristol in 2008.

Steve trained as a Podiatrist and Podiatric Surgeon in London and developed his research interests in Lower Limb Biomechanics and the Diabetic Foot at King's College London. He holds a number of national and international advisory appointments in Higher Education in his discipline, healthcare policy and practice.

Steve is the Chair of the West of England Academic Health Science Network (WEAHSN). He is also a Board Member of Universities UK and Chair of the Universities UK Health Education and Research Policy Network. Steve is also the Higher Education representative on the West of England Local Enterprise Partnership Board.

He is President of Business West and Chair of the Bristol Chamber of Commerce and Initiative and Vice-Chair of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) South West.

Dr Anne Haase

Dr Haase's research interests focus on understanding psychological factors and health behaviours that underpin individual and family theory-based interventions for improving mental health (e.g., depression, eating disorders).

Recent work encompasses exploring how social media plays a role in eating and exercise behaviour within young people, as well as understanding positive and negative influences of coping, resilience and self-esteem.

Exploring how compulsivity and habituation in eating and social network site use occur will outline new approaches to understanding the interaction between neural circuitry and actual behaviour, alongside addressing anxiety, body image, weight issues and body checking in young people. Other research includes developing the application of online (eHealth) platforms to support behavior change in brief interventions for different populations dealing with mental health issues or chronic disease (e.g., suicide, cancer and surgery). Dr Haase's research employs various methodology ranging from qualitative and quantitative approaches to experimental interventions.

Briefing: The impact of social media on the mental health of students and staff

Prepared for members of the All-Party Parliamentary University Group

Background

With half of all school leavers now going to university, students comprise a significant health cohort with specific vulnerabilities around geographic, emotional and social transition. The majority are of an age where the economic and social benefits of successful mental well-being interventions will be very significant.

Recent work by HEFCE[1] has indicated a 130% increase in demand [2008-9 to 2012-13] for university-provided student mental health services. Related to this sharp growth in demand, there is a strong, public narrative[2] of a crisis of mental health in our universities. A recent, well-publicised NUS survey[3] for the Students APPG suggested just under 80% students experiencing mental health problems.

At the same time as demand is increasing, central funding for support is decreasing: universities are being asked to take on more responsibility for student welfare. The Disabled Students Sector Leadership Group aims to support the higher education sector in responding to the changes to Disability Student Allowances (DSAs); it will explore how to enhance inclusivity in the learning environment via the development of a common vision of the provision for disabled students and the interventions required to support this.

The issue of student mental health is also set against the wider national well-being. Poor mental health currently carries an economic and social cost of £105 billion per year in England alone. Although mental health accounts for 23 per cent of NHS activity, there is not *parity of esteem* with physical health. As a result, there has been chronic underinvestment in services and in preventive measures to promote healthy communities, reduce stigma and encourage disclosure.

The Five Year Forward View for Mental Health[4] and Future in Mind[5] indicate a particular emphasis on mental health promotion and prevention, early intervention and quick access to good quality care for children and young people. However, with these declared strategic priorities largely not yet translated into services commissioned for students, university support services are reporting gaps in provision, long waiting times to access NHS care and severe psychiatric illness referred back onto campus.

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[1] http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2015/mh/Title,104768,en.html
[2] https://www.theguardian.com/education/series/mental-health-a-university-crisis
[3] https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/dec/14/majority-of-students-experience-mental-health-issues-says-nus-survey
[4] https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Mental-Health-Taskforce-FYFV-final.pdf
[5] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-mental-health-services-for-young-people

There are multiple public, private and third sector organisations involved in this space, including statutory NHS bodies and services, university student support services, students' unions, activist third sector bodies and many others. One of these, the Mental Well Being in Higher Education [MWBHE] group[6], brings together many of these stakeholders. The group released guidelines for best practice last year and leads a well-attended annual conference.

How could social media help or hinder?

There is, comparatively to studies done on younger people - for example work by the ONS[7] which suggested more than a quarter of children who spend longer on social media networking websites reported mental ill-health symptoms - little research on social media with specific regard for university students or how increased interaction on social media with students could negatively affect university staff.

It is therefore important for the sector to further understand and acknowledge the benefits of social media alongside the negatives. Some of these possible opportunities and risks are detail below, but this is not in any way an exhaustive list.

Opportunities - connectivity across a variety of platforms, greater reach and impact or social media led learning, support and intervention, for example, social media communities that support students with mental health problems.

Risks -a possibility that online teaching could diminish the core or expected experience and possible unintended consequences, such as issues of bullying, self-image, mental health.

Eric Stoller, a higher education consultant, wrote an article for Jisc[8] last year that discussed how social media now has a place at every step of the student journey. He argued that the importance of technology has been increasing for both **teaching and administrative staff**. From student recruitment to alumni relations, social media is being used increasingly for how universities communicate with their students and vice-versa.

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[6] http://www.mwbhe.com/
[7] http://visual.ons.gov.uk/more-than-a-quarter-of-children-who-spend-longer-on-social-networking-websites-report-mental-ill-health-symptoms-2/
[8] https://www.jisc.ac.uk/news/why-educators-need-social-media-07-jul-2015#

"What might start off as mostly marketing-based communications at the beginning of a student's institutional journey quickly becomes a conversation about community, leadership and support. Institutions can use social media as community management interfaces."[9]

In February 2016 the **NUS** ran an #antisocialmedia campaign[10]. They polled students and found that 48% agreed that internet trolling is getting worse, and that online shaming, threats and abuse are now considered a norm within the daily routine of social media posts and messages. Much of this work was aimed at the response that NUS elected officers had received but the work also suggests that there is abuse levelled at all students.

What might be needed?

A greater understanding: As social media and screen time has become more prevalent within our higher education institutions in recent years, and it may be that more work needs to be done to understand the dangers and benefits to both staff and students. Although many institutions have already begun work in the wellbeing and mental health area.

To invest in effective support services: Provision of services for students who need support remains variable across the sector. Additionally, there are problems with the joining up of child to adult services, of statutory services across two or more locations and of statutory and university-provided services. Despite the size of the student population, there is a lack of robust evidence on levels of need and demand as well as on appropriate and effective interventions and delivery models, evidence that is needed to invest in effective support services for students or staff experiencing mental health difficulties.
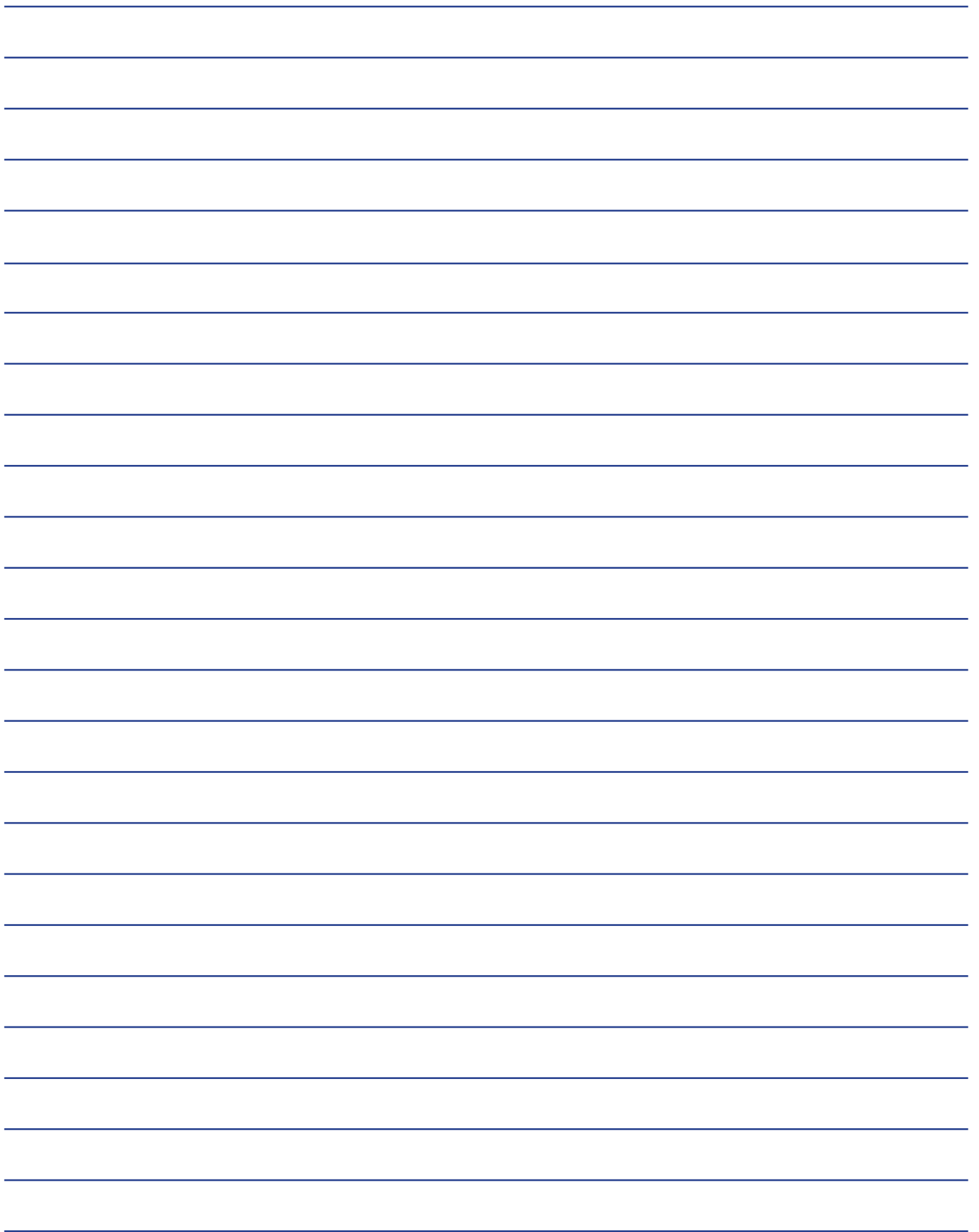
Institutional guidelines and clear strategies: in place to deal with the use of platforms including staff-student interaction, bullying and hate. This should not take the form of overreacting to a crisis, but should be data-informed and consensual.

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[9] https://www.jisc.ac.uk/news/why-educators-need-social-media-07-jul-2015#
[10] http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/antisocial-media-briefing-for-students-unions

To take a whole university approach to mental health: Wellbeing is fundamental to student experience, to learning and research, to the acquisition of skills that equip graduates to meet the demands of employers. It should be at the heart of a modern university. Targeted investment in services for mental ill health needs to be set within a broader approach and deployment of resource. The case to invest in well-being and mental health sets out benefits for the whole student and staff body, well and unwell across all aspects of university mission. This suggests a key role for leadership and the need for a strategic approach to wellbeing as an opportunity.

Education for staff and students as to the positive benefits and risks of social media. This covers multiple domains from making the most of the tools across work and personal life to reinforcement of wellbeing, confidence and positive body image. We assume that millennials are digital natives: they may be but that does not mean that they are digital adepts. Work at Southampton suggests that students often need to relearn digital and social tools.

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Future meetings

Tuesday 31 January 2017
Industrial Strategy
6-7.30pm, Committee Room 4, followed by dinner

Tuesday 7 March 2017
Social mobility
6-7.30pm, Committee Room 4, followed by dinner

Wednesday 10 May 2017
Higher level skills
8.30-10am, Dining Room B

Tuesday 20 June 2017
Devolution
6-7.30pm, Committee Room 4, followed by dinner

For more information about the group please email appug@universitiesuk.ac.uk or visit www.universityappg.co.uk