



The All-Party Parliamentary **University Group**

Note of speaker meeting: “The impact of social media on the mental health of students and staff”

Speakers:

Professor Steve West, Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, University of the West of England

Dr Anne Haase, Senior Lecturer, University of Bristol

Professor Steve West began his comments by explaining the prevalence of social media use among students at university and how the institutions have started to capitalise on this to connect to students before they even arrive. He noted that in his own experience it had been useful for the university to use social media groups to help students feel connected to the university, arguing that the quicker a student feels comfortable the more likely they are to benefit faster from their education. He also noted that within an increasingly global society, connectivity is important for staff and students.

However, Professor West went on to argue that in addition to the positive opportunities that social media presents there are of course negative side-effects. He suggested that people are spending up to three hours a day on social networking sites and that therefore this amount of interaction could be a cause for concern with regards to the mental well-being of staff and students. He described how it was not unusual for a lecturer or seminar leader to walk into a room and see people disconnected with the world around them but connected elsewhere through social media in that moment. Referring to research which states that one in four people experience some kind of mental well-being issues in any one year, he argued that if universities could work to get mental health and well-being to an optimal level the performance of staff and students would be better. Students would get better grades and staff would be more engaged and productive.

Professor West noted that universities across the country are seeing a significant increase in their students accessing mental health support services, citing cyber-bullying, sexual harassment and stresses. The research in this area is limited and more needs to be done to ensure that universities are getting the balance correct between encouraging use of social media positively, providing education or re-education to make students aware of the possible dangers, and providing the correct mental health support.

He concluded his comments by referring to a programme of work that he will be leading across all universities in partnership with Universities UK, sponsored by the funding council, which looks at

mental health support from a strategic perspective. Developing in partnership, tools which can support staff and students and ways to share best practice.

Dr Anne Haase opened her presentation by setting out some of the research findings in this area. She described how there are both positives and negatives associated with social media interaction. Some of the ways that social media can improve mental well-being include: allowing young adults to interact in a positive and supportive way, staying connected to their offline friends, and staying in touch with relatives that they don't see very frequently.

Dr Haase argued that Facebook has become more like email, used by people to find out information about their connections. Younger generations now tend to be more engaged with other social networking sites such as Snapchat and Instagram.

She noted research that had found how the more negative feedback that you have on a social networking site, the more negative words that you read or see, the more this negatively affects a person's mental well-being. Calling on her own research into social media and eating disorders, Dr Haase set out how, irrespective of the social network used, the more time spent on a site the greater the level of dissatisfaction with a users' body image and the larger the drive to conform to the societal norm of thinness.

Dr Haase concluded that there is not a full understanding of how online and social media can be used effectively to support university students and staff. She noted the rapid increase in requirements to access mental health facilities and flagged the associated increase of untrained staff time spent on these issues. Therefore, she argued that a three pronged approach is required, support for students, support for staff in their own mental well-being and support and training for staff who are interacted with these students.

Q&A and Discussion

The discussion centred around how **more research needs to be done** in this area and the types of intervention that can be made at university level. Some attendees felt that there might be merit in an evaluation of how different universities tackle issues of mental health and well-being.

It was acknowledged that universities use different methods to track when students have become disengaged, for example using **data** to see if there is a pattern of non-attendance at lectures. However, it was also acknowledged that not all mental health concerns have disengagement as an identifier, in some cases people may become hyper-engaged, spending more time on campus or in the library. Some universities have also developed **apps** where students can seek advice and guidance, although these need to be consistently evaluated.

The topic of **mentors and pastoral care** was brought up by both sector and parliamentary attendees. There was general concern that students might meet with someone once or maybe twice throughout their time at university. Therefore, a greater knowledge of what kinds of roles like this exist across the sector is required.

There were a number of suggested **recommendations** from the attendees including: universities having a greater ability to cross refer to the NHS, dispelling the assumption that the younger

generation are digital natives and that in fact they may need re-educating on how to use social media safely, and that solving this is too wide for universities alone, part they have an opportunity to play a valuable role, perhaps working within a wider public health campaign.

It was generally agreed that **staff** are placed into a challenging situation. Universities are diverse and students come from many different backgrounds and cultures. Therefore, it cannot be expected that staff, without training or guidance, would be able to relate to these points of reference or know innately how to deal with mental health issues.

It was also agreed that universities need to consider **additional support** for some students, those studying part-time or adult learners who may have a full time job or family to support, those that are carers. And those that study courses such as social care, or who take a year out in industry, who will have a very different experience to the typical undergraduate degree.

Again attendees felt that more research needed to be done on the causes of mental health illness at university, and importantly looking across **genders**. Social media may be a cause but course and parental as well as financial pressure may all be key explainers. Information on **resilience training** and preventative care should be provided for staff and students. And finally the **benefits of social media** must also be realised.