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Analysis of the national population data set, *Understanding Society*, indicates that over 40% of emerging adults in the UK are experiencing mental distress. Mental health is thus the most prevalent health concern affecting emerging adults (17 – 24 year-olds), with more emerging adults struggling with their mental health than their weight (comparison with NHS Digital data on obesity).

The state of mental health among emerging adults is declining. In 2010, around 34% of emerging adults met criteria for mental distress. The trend of declining mental health is not seen in any other population group.

With this high level of prevalence, a preventative approach is essential. No service has capacity to sustain a reactive approach at this scale. The prevalence of mental distress also calls into question the contributing social and cultural factors.

Half of emerging adults enter higher education and thus understanding mental health in the university context is essential. Within the Higher Education sector there is increasing recognition that a reactive and individualized approach to improving student mental health is unsustainable. Since 2017, universities have been publicly acknowledging that their counselling services are struggling to cope with student demand. Many institutions recognize the need for a preventative approach.

In 2018 Universities UK published guidance for a Whole University Approach to student mental health. Student Minds developed a university mental health charter based around the Whole University Approach. This embodies a public health approach to student mental health, encouraging universities to think about supporting student mental health within the day-to-day context of the student experience. Everyone, right across the university, needs to be responsible for student mental health. This includes thinking about the effect of teaching, institutional policies and processes, accommodation provision, social culture on the campus and opportunity for physical activity.

Importantly, the Whole University Approach does not focus on mental health at an individual level. Teaching young adults how to be more resilient is not the answer. There is significant and real concern that such approaches can do more harm than good; with mental health literacy interventions enhancing the probability that young adults identify everyday emotions as mental health problems, causing worry and distress. The Whole University approach rightly asks about the social, cultural, and institutional factors that impact on student mental health.

Sixty universities have committed to work with Student Minds to meet the University Mental Health Charter and work towards adopting a Whole University Approach. However, progress in implementing this approach is hampered by significant research gaps. In 2022 we published a systematic review of interventions embedded in the curriculum to improve university student wellbeing. The curriculum is the only guaranteed point of contact between a university and its students, and thus a key area for implementing preventative initiatives. We only identified 46 relevant studies, and these were heterogeneous, underpowered and of low research quality.

Preventative approaches within the higher education sector obviously stretch beyond education. We are currently working with the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes on a project funded by the Office for Students to collate evidence on what works for improving student mental health. Working with systematic reviews, we identified 239 studies. We identified no substantive research into interventions based around intersystem collaboration (e.g., the effect of university policy, or information sharing between services), settings-based approaches (e.g., interventions targeting safety on campus or

students' financial security), places and spaces (e.g., the impact of built-environment or access to blue / green space).

This small evidence base, coupled with the urgent need to address the decline of mental health in emerging adults makes student mental health a crucial area for this inquiry to address. This is a significant opportunity for the inquiry to build on this chronically under-funded area which, as a result, remains underexamined. Further scrutiny is urgently needed in this area to:

1. Develop a sector wide consensus for why the preventative approach is essential for emerging adult mental health
2. Build a framework to understand the social, institutional and community level factors impacting on student mental health.
3. Develop the tools needed to effectively evaluate interventions designed to prevent mental health problems among university students.

February 2023