

# **Pressure Vessels: The Epidemic of Poor Mental Health Among Higher Education Staff**

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# Universities begin to address student mental health

- In June 2018, Sam Gyimah, a former universities' minister, proposed a student mental health charter for universities.
- Student Minds, a charity dedicated to improving student mental health.



# But what about staff ?

- Staff employed at Higher Education Institutions are accessing counselling and occupational health services at an increasing rate.
- Between 2009 and 2015, staff referrals to counselling have risen by 77 per cent, while referrals to occupational health services during the same period have risen by 64 per cent.



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Occasional Paper 20

# The appalling consequences

- February 2018 : The death by suicide of the Cardiff University lecturer Malcolm Anderson. Reports indicated that Mr Anderson had attributed his distress to excessive workload, and management failure to respond to his objections.
- September 2014: The death by suicide of Stefan Grimm of Imperial College, London , was thought to have been precipitated by pressure from his manager to increase his research grant funding.

# Study by Andrew Oswald

- Middle-aged academics are at greater suicide risk than either students or peers in other professions.
- One academic says: 'It is almost as though we have consciously designed a system to maximise stress and fear' [*Times Higher Education*, June 28, 2018]

# **Kinman and Wray: risks associated with academic work**

- Compared academic workplaces with HSE management standards.
- Used indicator tool to measure and compare levels of psychological hazard.
- Associated with seven key dimensions associated with work-related stress: demands, control, manager support, peer support, relationship, role and change.

# **Kinman and Wray: risks associated with academic work**

- Findings indicate an overall pattern of decline in wellbeing across the data sets, suggesting the work-related wellbeing of UK academic staff worsened between 2008 and 2014.
- Six out of seven dimensions failed to meet the target levels set by the HSE. Only control met the 85<sup>th</sup> percentile of benchmarked data.
- Where wellbeing had previously been high, the data show deteriorating wellbeing across time.

# Wellbeing?

- Take responsibility ! Build 'resilience' !
- This places the onus for recovery solely on the employee.

'Framing the suffering experienced by staff and students as a mental health crisis obscures the material causes of this suffering. No amount of counselling will make you resilient enough to be able to mark 418 exams in 20 days without experiencing immense suffering.' (Grace Krause, 2018)

# Risks for HoDs

- The law demands that employers must prevent workplace stress, not merely alleviate it.
- If a number of studies point to known workplace stressors, these must be addressed
- Possibility of litigation and reputational risk to the institution if the situation does not improve.
- HoDs are on the front line.

# Number of staff referred to counselling

Institution Name	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
De Montfort University					123	118	75	303
Newcastle University*	89	65	87	139	157	165	201	201
Sheffield Hallam University*		80	82	85	124	106	125	55
The University of Bath*		25	58	48	53	61	62	118
The University of Bristol	178	209	248	343	442	237	335	497
The University of Edinburgh*	205	183	187	269	232	310	353	368
The University of Glasgow			25	34	23	26	37	37
The University of Kent*	24	94	75	95	102	74	94	
The University of Leeds*		242	253	435	473	554	625	
The University of Portsmouth*	69	76	77	85	65	104	120	
The University of Warwick*	117	148	221	230	312	309	487	

# Number of staff referred to OH

Institution Name	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
De Montfort University*	133	232	268	273	251	276	269	
Keele University			47	54	120	146	125	240
Leeds Beckett University*			240.5	194.5	461	508	444	416
Newcastle University*	937	1,074	1,054	1,157	1,199	1,212	1,242	1,133
The Nottingham Trent University*			268	315	383	384	483	
The University of Bath*	189	201	53	55	44	48	88	45
The University of Bristol*	38	69	81	110	60	81	92	58
The University of Cambridge*	218	219	263	298	365	516	608	603
The University of Essex	85	112	144	239	217	194	220	243
The University of Kent*	71	79	115	148	243	343	372	396

# Causes of stress in HE

- Workload management models
  - attempt to break down academic work into individual tasks and allocate hours to them.
  - fill all available time for each employee (calculated on an annual basis at the beginning of the year).
  - fail to build in adequate ‘headroom’ for emergency cover, let alone time for activities which emerge during the year: expert testimony; PhD examining; invited lectures; conference papers/ panels.

# Causes of stress in HE

- Workload management models
  - hours allocated for the completion of tasks are an unrealistic estimate.
  - for most staff, allocated preparation time falls seriously below what is actually worked.
  - undercounted activity:
    - email contact with students
    - maintenance of learning resources for classroom delivery and on Virtual Learning Environments (VLE)
    - administrative tasks: course leadership, module leadership, etc.

# WAM at Cardiff

- Survey in CARBS by Vicki Wass
- Evidence to the University Workload Governance Group
- There are no longer peaks and troughs across the academic year.
- For 95% of the respondents, the working week normally exceeds contractual hours: 60% 'almost always' and 35% 'often'. Only 15% can meet the requirements of their job without working unreasonable hours .

# Causes of stress in HE

- Audit
  - Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)
    - requirement that student satisfaction, especially with assessment feedback, be continually enhanced.
    - rigorously policed turnaround times for marking of exams and coursework.
  - Research Excellence Framework (REF)
    - multiple mock-REFs.
    - commonly understood threshold of 3\* quality outputs for submission.

# Causes of stress in HE

- Outcomes-based performance management
- Typical targets for professors
  - 3\* or 4\* research ‘outputs’
  - targets for grant income (low probability of success)
  - PhD supervision ‘throughput’
  - impact case study
  - international collaborations

# 'Metric Authority' (Dave Beer)

- Individual research quality now judged by metrics
  - research outputs
  - citations
  - H-index
  - journal impact factor of academic journals
  - grant capture amounts
  - alt-metrics: citations on Wikipedia, discussions on research blogs, mainstream media coverage, bookmarks on reference managers like Mendeley, and mentions on social networks such as Twitter

# Causes of stress in HE

- Precarity
- HESA statistics for 2017/18 show that 33 per cent of academics are employed on fixed-term contracts.
- New entrants to academic careers often face many years in a succession of casual posts as postdoctoral fellows, or lecturers on short-term contracts with little acknowledgment of their need to develop a research profile. The anxiety may be cumulative over many years.

# Higher education as 'anxiety machine'

- There is a toll on the emotions when one inhabits a culture driven by systems of measurement.
- Academics are forced by management into 'stress positions'.
- Hall & Bowles (2016): anxiety is designed into management practices so that it becomes a permanent feature of the academy. The calculated exploitation of employee anxiety about job security, promotion and performance adequacy is a key part of its business model.

# The VCs' pushback

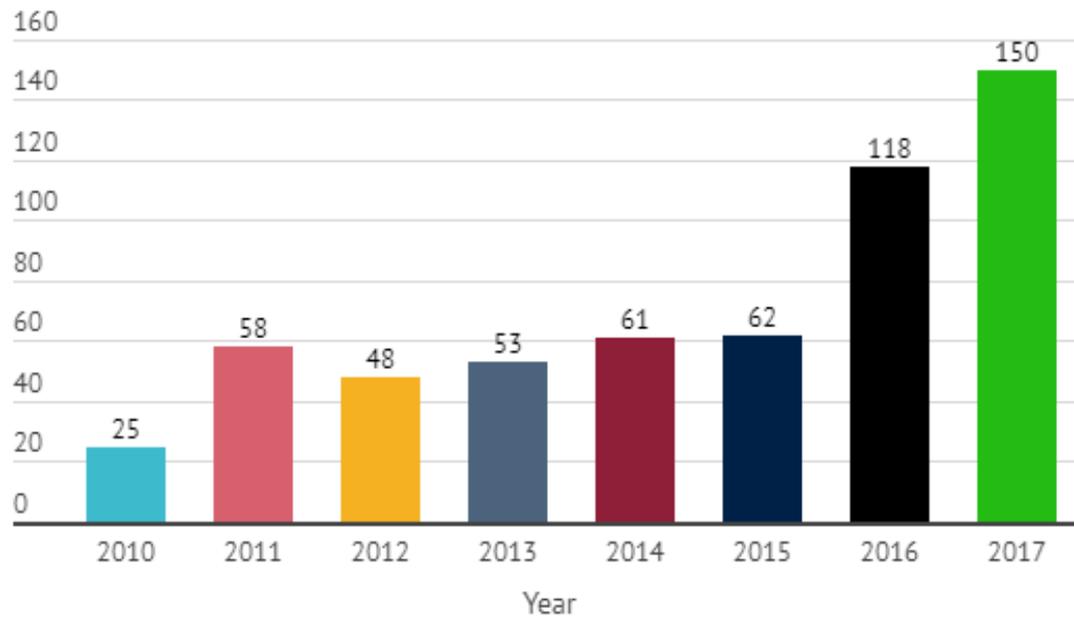
- *Pressure Vessels* was based on old data.
- The picture is improving.
- Lessons learned.
- Keeping these factors under review.

# However...2018-2019 the deterioration continues

- A smaller dataset of 17 HEIs which had shown sudden or sustained increases in referrals to occupational health and counselling.
- Counselling trends since *Pressure Vessels* showed a rise of 21.98%.
- A continued upward trajectory in occupational health with an aggregate increase in referrals since *Pressure Vessels* of 18.77%.

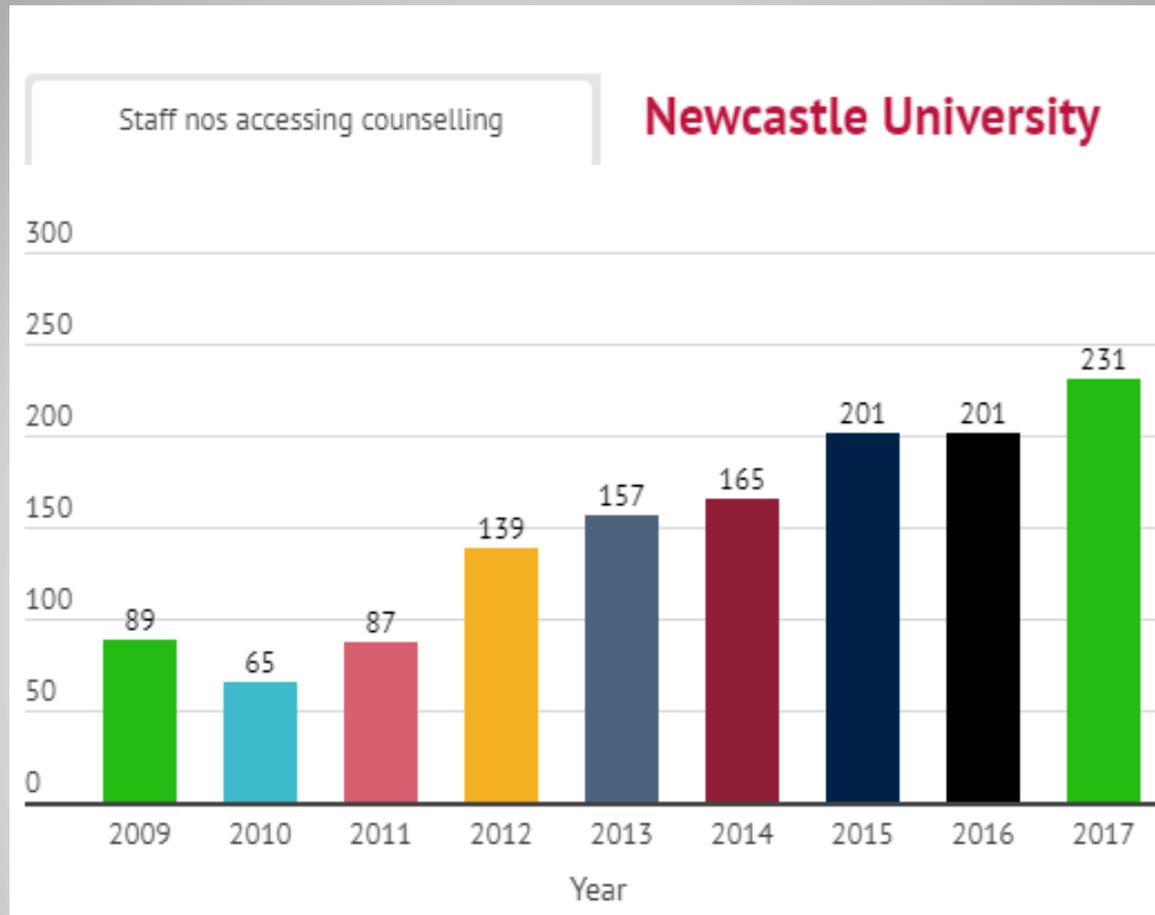
Staff nos accessing counselling

The University of Bath



## Counselling

University of Bath numbers of staff accessing counselling

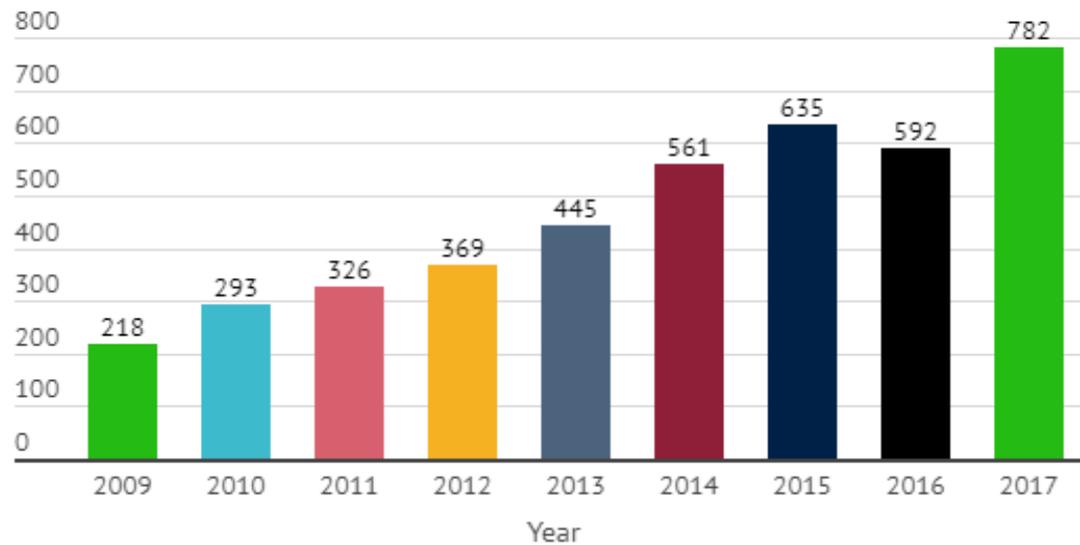


## Counselling

University of Newcastle number of staff accessing counselling.

## The University of Cambridge

Referrals of Staff to OH

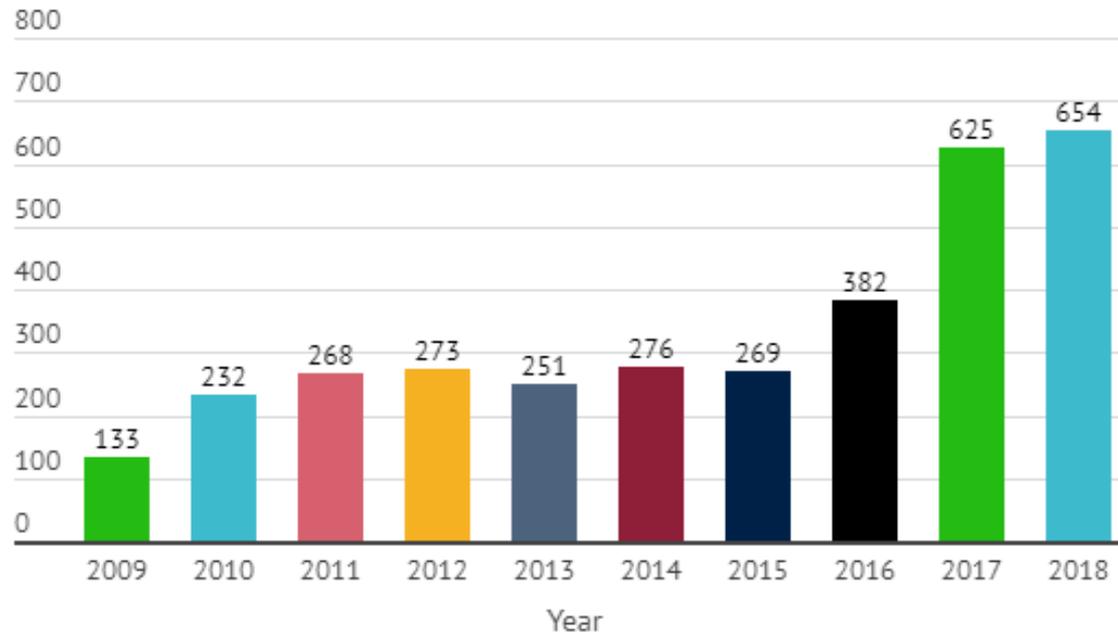


## Occupational Health

University of Cambridge number of referrals of staff to occupational health.

## De Montfort University

Referrals of Staff to OH

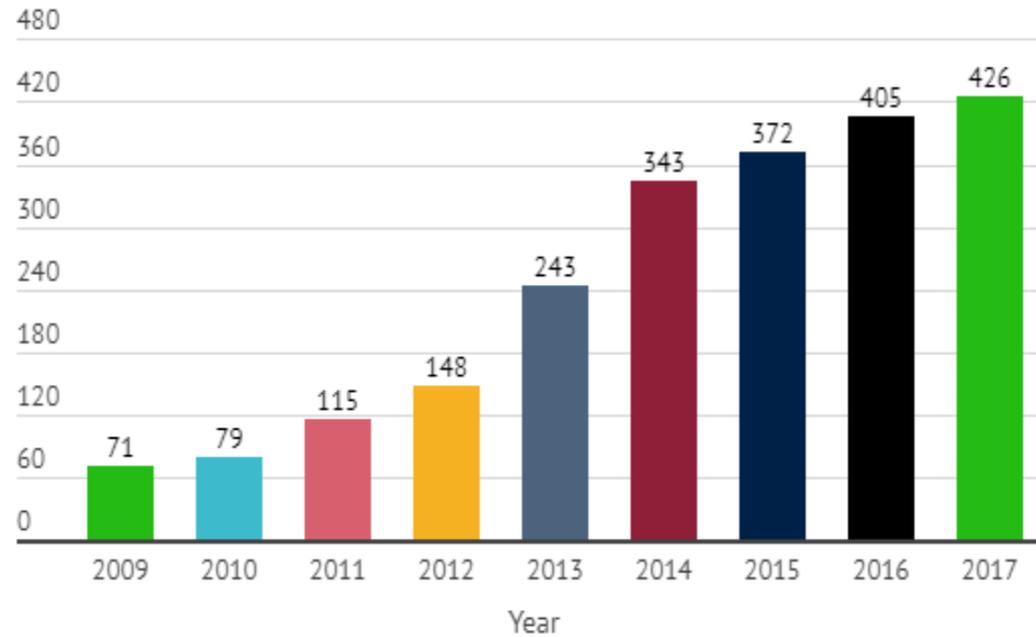


## Occupational Health

De Montfort University number of referrals of staff to occupational health.

## The University of Kent

Referrals of Staff to OH



## Occupational Health

University of Kent number of referrals of staff to occupational health.

# Referrals by gender and contract type 2009-2017.

- Women accounted for 64% of those accessing counselling.
- Women accounted for 60% of those accessing occupational health.
- Professional services (PS) staff make up a 65% of all occupational health referrals.

# Post COVID19

- We can anticipate new stressors emerging:
- Grief.
- Changed social landscape.
- New ways of teaching – perhaps a permanent future of working across multiple platforms.
- Concerns about having lost ground in research.
- Pressure to improve the student experience after lockdown.

# One testimony

- I'm working staggering hours at the moment to make the university "online-ish" - and students are more individuated than ever which means that most staff are just completely overwhelmed. It's times like this that I'm glad that I'm tech savvy and an early adopter of Sparkol, Prezi and know how to transform and mess with MP4 content - do voice overs, and offer interactive tech-driven stuff. I love this stuff - as well as broader tooling software. But, even I recognise that it is horribly time consuming, and I'm well aware that for those that don't engage with much tech stuff, that the next few months (and perhaps longer) will be ... awful. I'm also glad that I do not have any caring responsibilities and feel awful for those that do. [Professor, Russell Group university]

# Alternatives

- **Workloads**
- Should recognise academics require a degree of autonomy in their work. Trust is essential.
- Should allow for necessary time for scholarly contemplation and experimentation.
- Recognise that teaching across FTF and online platforms places severe strain on all academics.
- Workloads must reflect actual time spent on tasks, not 'notional hours'.

# Alternatives

- **Responsible Metrics**

- *The Metric Tide*, Hefce report by James Wilsdon et al. 2015.
- The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA).
- Signatories (inc. University of Oxford) commit to eliminating the use of journal-based metrics, such as Journal Impact Factors, in funding, appointment, and promotion considerations.

# Alternatives

- **Performance management**
  - Should return to its developmental function.
  - Recognise that not every employee will reach the same level in the profession, and set realistic expectations.
  - Do not communicate to a junior academic that they should be publishing 4\* research in high impact journals.
  - Academics should be given longer-term targets, with adequate support.

# Alternatives

- **End precarious contracts and develop sustainable academic career pathways**
  - Need to facilitate the transition from doctorate or postdoctoral fellowship to a lectureship.
  - Some Russell Group, universities have created fellowships which offer five years of protected time to develop a research profile, with the understanding that the incumbent will progress to a permanent lectureship at the end of that time.
  - Birmingham, Bristol, Nottingham, Manchester

# Accountability

- **Management teams of HEIs should:**
- Be held accountable for ensuring that current high levels of workplace stress are diminished, and that known stressors within institutional control are immediately reduced to HSE acceptable levels.
- HoDs are usually in charge of workload allocations and some performance management.
- In order to reduce their own accountability, HoDs should collectively campaign for mitigation of known workplace stressors at institutional level.