

Comments

Dr Patapia Tzotzoli
Clinical Psychologist
iConcipro

With university student support services struggling to meet demand, are online interventions for students the answer?

Many students face both mental health difficulties (Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), 2014; Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2011) and study skill difficulties (HESA, 2013; Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2011). Furthermore, students with poor mental health experience less social contact with their fellow students and faculty, reduced study satisfaction, poor academic achievement, and lower graduation rates (Regehr, Glancy, & Pitts, 2013). Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that more than 8% of undergraduate students drop out in their first year (HESA, 2013), and more than one in five students fail to complete their studies (HESA, 2011).

Meanwhile, universities are facing major cuts to their budgets. In the Governmental Spending Review, cuts of up to 40% over four years were announced (HM Treasury, 2010). This affects a university's financial resources, meaning that on-campus mental health services traditionally offered to students become increasingly economically unsustainable (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2011).

There is thus an increasing need for alternative accessible and anonymous services to support higher education (HE) students suffering from psychological and/or academic difficulties. Indeed, the Royal College of Psychiatrists (2011) has proposed the use of web-based support, such as interactive computerized cognitive behavioural therapy (CCBT), for mental wellbeing. Such support is cost-effective, time saving and highly accessible for time-pressured HE students who usually have limited financial means. Students may also prefer computerized self-help as a means to increase independence and self-reliance (Rickwood and Bradford, 2012), and perceive it as less stigmatizing than traditional therapy (Farrer et al., 2013). Encouragingly, increasing evidence supports the efficacy of web-based interventions for mental health disorders (Andersson and Titov, 2014; Davies, Morriss and Glazebrook, 2014).

iConcipro is developing a web-based solution, called MePlusMe for students to address their mild to moderate psychological and study skill needs while in HE (Papadatou-Pastou, Goozée, Barley, Haddad, Tzotzoli, 2015). A student survey (Goozée R, Papadatou-Pastou M, Barley E., Haddad M, Tzotzoli, 2015) has been submitted for publication and a proof-of-concept study with students from five UK universities was recently published (Touloumakos, Goozée, Papadatou-Pastou, Barley, Haddad, and Tzotzoli, 2016). iConcipro will soon be conducting a feasibility study and they have just a few exclusive spaces for universities to participate in the study.

Using MePlusMe, students can either answer a questionnaire, which identifies their difficulties and puts together a package of techniques for them or choose directly from a list of techniques to create a package themselves. These packages consist of well-established psychological techniques presented in animated videos. Students can practice these techniques and over time, use a rating system to monitor their progress. There is also a built-in network for peer support. MePlusMe can reach out to these students with an immediate, personalized and effective solution that protects their anonymity thus overcoming the hurdle of stigma. iConcipro received the Lion's Den award for this project from King's College London and a Technology Strategy Board (smart award) funding for its research. It has also been recently shortlisted to participate in the Falling Walls Lab Competition in Berlin.

iConcipro aims to improve students experience at university by increasing students' self-efficacy to take control of their mental health and meet their potential in the world. Universities can also benefit by offering a unique, validated and cost-effective solution that can reduce dropout, and improve their ratings, intake and income.

iConcipro aspires to join forces with other initiatives that aim to improve students' experience at university including existing student support services in order to develop into a holistic approach that can be a "one-stop" service for all students in Higher Education institutions.

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Biography:

Dr Patapia Tzotzoli is an award-winning Consultant Clinical Psychologist in private practice with entrepreneurial drive and vision to help organisations deliver high-level services and meet their targets. She is the CEO & Founder of iConcipro that aspires to improve student experience by using web-based technologies to offer psychological and educational techniques to promote personal effectiveness.