# The development and evaluation of 'MePlusMe', an online intervention, supporting mood, wellbeing, study skills, and everyday functioning in students in higher education

**PATAPIA TZOTZOLI[1, 2*], MARIETTA PAPADATOU-PASTOU[3], RHIANNA GOOZÉE[4], RUTH OHLSEN[5], ELIZABETH BARLEY[5], & MARK HADDAD[6]**

[1] Chartered Clinical Psychologist in Private Practice, United Kingdom, [2] CEO & Founder of iConcipio Ltd, United Kingdom
[3] School of Education, Research Centre for Psychophysiology and Education, University of Athens, Greece
[4] Department of Psychosis Studies, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King's College London, United Kingdom
[5] Florence Nightingale Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery, King's College London, United Kingdom
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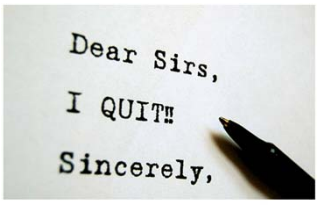
MePlusMe

## Background

There is growing concern about the mental health and wellbeing of higher education (HE) students:

- Over 16% drop out rate (Schnepf, 2014)
- Increased waiting times for student support services (SSS) (Connell et al., 2007)




Recent fee increases and budget cuts add pressure on UK higher education institutions (HEIs) to be cost-effective, show quality and value for money, and enhance 'student experience'. These are important influences on the ratings, intake, and income of HEIs.

**There is an urgent need of HEIs SSS to employ alternative means of supporting students.**

## Aim

**To develop and evaluate an online intervention to address mild to moderate psychological and/or study skill difficulties of HE students.**

The development of this system followed the Medical Research Council (MRC) guidelines for developing complex interventions. To date, two stages of the development have been fully completed:

i) a HEI student survey and;
ii) a proof of concept study

*Papadatou-Pastou et al., (2015)*

## *(i) HEI student survey*

We administered an online survey to university students at King's College London between February and April 2012. This comprised seven questions regarding **difficulties** faced by students at university, their views in terms of **acceptability and engagement** about online support systems, and what **features** make such systems useful to them. Data from 61 students answering open-ended and closed questions were explored using descriptive statistics.

Based on the findings, the following key features were included in the system:

- A **screening process** to identify students with more significant difficulties and redirect them to appropriate sources of support.
- **Two routes** for students to access the techniques of the system: i) Questionnaire route, where students identify their symptoms and are presented with a package of techniques relevant to their difficulties. ii) Workshop route, where students access up to two ready-made packages of techniques by choosing the title relevant to their difficulties.
- A **personal space** where they can access the packages with techniques presented in animated video format.
- A **rating system** to monitor their progress.
- A set of **reminders** to return to the system.
- A **social network.**

*Goozée et al., (under review)*

## *(ii) Proof of Concept study*

Five UK HEIs (King's College London, University of Edinburgh, University of Roehampton, Bournemouth University, and University of Warwick; *n* = 873 students) participated. Students were presented with an online demo of the system comprising slides and videos demonstrating the **proposed aesthetics, elements, and functions of the system**. They completed five surveys with 36 open-ended and forced-choice questions with the option to provide further information.

Further development of the system was informed by our findings:

- **Simplification** of the questionnaire's items.
- Replacement of the Workshops route with a more liberal option, the **Library** route in which relevant techniques may be chosen without restriction on the number that can be selected.
- **Optional reminder** emails and reduction in their frequency.
- Enriched animated videos with **more characters** to offer variety.
- Amended wording, phrasing and graphic design for the system ensuring that it is **appropriate for all student age groups**.
- Added functionalities, e.g. **blackout buttons**.
- The name **MePlusMe**.

*Touloumakos et al., (submitted)*

## Conclusions

**Findings from the above studies contributed significantly to the development of a system format that can facilitate engagement and meet students' aesthetics and needs.**

The next step is **a full-scale feasibility study**.

This study will evaluate potential effects on students' mood (symptoms of anxiety and depression), mental wellbeing, study skills, and everyday functioning, and their engagement and satisfaction with a fully functioning system. A short scale incorporation of the system within HEI SSS will follow.

The outcomes of this crucial step will inform a randomised controlled trial (RCT), leading to a wider scale incorporation of the system within HEI SSS.

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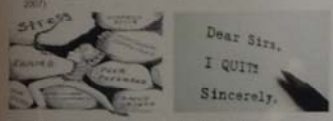


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