Dark thoughts: why mental illness is on the rise in academia

University staff battling anxiety, poor work-life balance and isolation aren't finding the support they need

• The blog that started the debate: there is a culture of acceptance around mental health issues in academia

Claire Shaw and **Lucy Ward**
Guardian Professional, Thursday 6 March 2014 11.19 GMT

Mental health issues among academics in UK universities are on the rise. Photograph: Alamy

Mental health problems are on the rise among UK academics amid the pressures of greater job insecurity, constant demand for results and an increasingly marketised higher education system.

University counselling staff and workplace health experts have seen a steady increase in numbers seeking help for mental health problems over the past decade, with research indicating nearly half of academics show symptoms of psychological distress.

"Culture of acceptance"

A recent blog on the Guardian Higher Education Network blog, which highlighted a "culture of acceptance" in universities around mental health issues, has received an unprecedented response, pointing to high levels of distress among academics.

The article, which reported instances of depression, sleep issues, eating disorders, alcoholism, self-harming, and even suicide attempts among PhD students, has been shared hundreds of thousands of times and elicited comments outlining similar personal experiences from students and academics.

But while anecdotal accounts multiply, mental health issues in academia are little-researched and hard data is thin on the ground.

However, a study published in 2013 by the University and College Union (UCU) used health and safety executive measures, assessed against a large sample of over 14,000 university employees, to reveal growing stress levels among academics prompted by heavy workloads, a long hours culture and conflicting management demands. Academics experience higher stress than those in the wider population, the survey revealed.

Tackling perfectionism

Pat Hunt, head of Nottingham University's counselling service for staff and students and a member of the UK body for heads of university counselling services, said all universities were experiencing an increase in mental health problems.

"There are increasing levels of anxiety, both generalised and acute, levels of stress, of depression and levels of what I would call perfectionism," she says.

"By that I mean when someone is aiming for and constantly expecting really high standards, so that even when there is a positive outcome they feel they have fallen short. So instead of internal aspiration helping them to do well it actually hinders them."

Academics are also caught up in a range of cycles, from league tables and student satisfaction surveys to research league tables, that dominate thinking, she adds. In one case, a department's top position in a research profile "became a poisonous thing because everyone then fights to maintain that".

Hunt said higher education should not be stigmatised for the increase in mental health issues, since it reflected a similar increase in wider society. Figures show more working days are now lost to the mental health problems than any other health issue.

Nottingham offers one-to-one and group help to students and staff, including support specifically targeted at men, who make up only a third of those seeking help, a figure likely to reflect the continuing stigma over seeking help for mental illness.

Increased workloads partly to blame

Dr Alan Swann of Imperial College London, chair of the higher education occupational physicians committee, blamed "demands for increased product and productivity" for rising levels of mental health problems among academics.

He says: "They all have to produce results – you are only as good as your research rating or as good as your ability to bring in funding for research."

Swann says most academics are stressed rather than mentally unwell: "They are thinking about their work and the consequences of not being as good as they should be; they're having difficulty switching off and feeling guilty if they're not working seven days a week."

Academics and researchers can become isolated and not realise how "out of kilter" their working lives are, he says.

The intense pressure of doctoral and post-doctoral study, and early-career academia can also reveal existing mental health problems, he adds. Universities, including Imperial, have improved systems to help, yet academia remains "pretty macho".

Uncaring academic environment

"There's still a degree of 'if you can't stand the heat, you shouldn't be here'," says Swann. He says there are "still people in senior positions in academia who actually don't care".

He adds: "But there are measures to counter that and there has been a lot of change for the good. What we have not been able to get rid of are the external pressures from government funding and the academic marketplace."

Research by Gail Kinman, professor of occupational health psychology at the University of Bedfordshire, on behalf of the UCU, offers one of the few pieces of data on mental health problems among academics.

Kinman used the health and safety executive's health and safety at work framework to assess the views of some 20,000 academics, and found "considerably higher" levels of psychological distress than in the population as a whole.

She points to poor work-life balance as a key factor, with academics putting in increasing hours as they attempt to respond to high levels of internal and external scrutiny, a fast pace of change and the notion of students as customers – leading to demands such as 24-hour limit for responses to student queries.

Internalised values hard to shake

There are examples of good practice within universities which could be shared across the sector, Kinman says, but, as an independently-minded group who are strongly committed to their work, academics are not always straightforward to support. "We don't like being told 'you can't email at two in the morning'. You can't impose solutions

from other sectors – academics are quite different and there's no 'one size fits all'."

And internalised values are hard to shake. Nadine Muller, lecturer in English literature and cultural history at Liverpool John Moores University, suggests that academia promotes the blurring of lines between the personal and the professional – often described as "doing what you love".

"This means that doctoral and early-career scholars are seldom trained in how to firmly draw that line and value themselves beyond their work," says Muller.

UCU says issues relating to mental health are frequently encountered by its representatives. General secretary Sally Hunt says sufferers experience particular prejudice at work. "Further and higher education workers who experience issues relating to mental health face ignorance, discrimination and stigma from their managers and colleagues.

"Negative and inflexible attitudes can often exclude those with mental health conditions from being able to do their job. Often these attitudes can intimidate a person away from feeling able to disclose their mental health condition at all."

John Hamilton, head of safety, health and wellbeing at Leeds Metropolitan University, says academics' problems are often a question of burnout, which he defines as a "significant disengagement" with an employer, in which a staff member no longer feels in charge of their role.

Some universities, including his own, are working hard to offer support, he says, but while many could "definitely do more", there remains a fundamental problem that some academics simply do not like the changes in their sector that have taken place over the last 20 years. "For some, it's going to be a case of 'I'm sorry, but this is the way it is, this is the political landscape'. So there's an element of putting up with it."

If academics already in post must wrestle with the stresses of fast change, what of their successors? Edward Pinkney, a mental health consultant working in education, says: "Institutions have a broader civic duty to educate potential academics about the university environment, so that prospective academics can make a more informed decision about whether or not to proceed.

"As universities become increasingly businesslike, there's a growing need for them to be independently monitored to ensure that they are not just meeting basic standards of support for their members, but also that they are providing an accurate representation of academic life and not misselling it."

Mental health in academia: experiences from around the world

PhD in health sciences at a Canadian university

"At the beginning of my PhD, the director of the department gave our entire cohort a lecture about not getting pregnant and told one of my friends when she applied for maternity leave that the PhD should be a time of celibacy. Some of our supervisors publicly and proudly exchanged stories of failed marriages as if this was the ultimate proof of their devotion to research. Others gossiped about promising colleagues who 'would have achieved so much more' had they not had children. All of these subtle and not so subtle hints guaranteed that no graduate student, especially those with families, would ever sacrifice enough for their research and would thus, by implication, always be a failure in some respect."

Lecturer at the Open University, UK

"I had only been working for the university for two years when I suffered a severe breakdown and was hospitalised. It was very difficult indeed to even contemplate going back to work but thanks to transition counselling from the union I was able to resume work after nine months. The transition counselling was invaluable for a number of reasons; it was linked to work so helped me to begin to think about going back; it carried on during my first few weeks back in the workplace, so it was invaluable in dealing with my feelings at returning to that environment again; and it enabled me to see my mental health problem as being no different to any physical one. One of the hardest things to face after a breakdown is facing the stigma (both real and perceived) that occurs in the workplace. The union gave practical and psychological support, without which I would

not have been able to return work."

University of Maine School of Law, US

"During my three years of law school, I had to come to grips with my acceptance of and seeking treatment for depression and PTSD. I've been lucky to have had a lot of support from close friends, but I've never shared these issues with the faculty. The law school culture is effectively one along the lines of 'suck it up'. When I worked in the law school clinic, I actually hid and lied to my professor about the fact that I was struggling with suicidal thoughts because I was afraid of simply being booted out of a clinic I loved. While a very large amount of law students I have known have coped with mental health issues and even school-related nervous breakdowns, it's not talked about, or even admitted beyond close friends."

PhD in chemistry, Bangor University, Wales

"In 2010 I started a PhD in chemistry. A year on, and the pressure began to build, reaching the point where I had a nervous breakdown. I spent time going to counselling for help, but then decided to take a 10-month break from the research I was doing. Upon returning I was able to work for a few months before falling back into depression because I felt I had no chance of gaining the qualification I desired. I eventually got to the stage where I felt I was going nowhere and cleared my desk late one Saturday, saying nothing to anyone that I was leaving. While suffering from depression, I felt isolated, as everyone around me was able to get on with their PhDs. I felt I was the problem. I feel I received some support for my issues but more could have been done to ease me back into full-time study after returning."

PhD in molecular biology, Uppsala University, Sweden

"My university and department supported me after I admitted I had been diagnosed with depression. In the beginning I took advantage of studenthälsan, the university's student health centre. Their team of psychologists and psychiatrists helped me to find the right long-term support. Later, my depression worsened and I was offered a private psychologist at the cost of the department. Yes, my PhD studies are still a demanding job full of stress, mentally as well as physically, but I am glad that in the days where death was the only solution to everything, my colleagues, supervisors and other officials became friends that just wanted to help me."

If you have been affected by any of the issues mentioned in this piece, contact _Samaritans_ *or* _Nightline_.

Are universities doing enough to support academics with mental health issues? Share your thoughts in the comments below, citing any relevant research.

This content is brought to you by Guardian Professional. Looking for your next university role? Browse Guardian jobs for hundreds of the latest academic, administrative and research posts.