

Universities ignoring binge drinking culture and failing to protect students' wellbeing, say teachers

Survey of school leaders finds universal concern over pastoral support offered at higher education institutions

Universities are failing in their duty of care to undergraduates by ignoring the binge drinking culture and failing to help young people settle into student life, according to head teachers.

A survey of school leaders at both private and state schools revealed almost universal concern over the level of pastoral support on offer at higher education institutions.

The findings come amid evidence of growing mental health problems and a sharp increase in the number of suicides among those in full-time education.

The research seen by *The Independent* was carried out by Dr Anthony Seldon, Master of Wellington College, who today launches a four point plan to help stem the growing levels of psychological distress among undergraduates. A questionnaire sent to 104 heads from both state academies, private and specialist schools showed a growing gulf in confidence in what lay ahead for their former charges.

It found that 96 per cent of heads believed adults in higher education were failing to demonstrate a meticulous enough approach to the wellbeing of young people studying away from home for the first time. Nearly nine out of ten thought that senior academics were turning a blind eye to drunkenness whilst more than 80 per cent considered there was a serious issue with pastoral care – a similar number that felt universities were not doing enough to help students settle into residential life on campus.

Seven out of 10 heads conceded that schools were not doing enough to prepare young people for undergraduate life and living on their own.

Dr Seldon said the findings were a “damning indictment” and that more must be done to ease the passage into adult study.

“The majority of undergraduates have a great time but a significant minority do not and an unacceptable number have psychological problems,” said Dr Seldon.

“There is a belief among vice chancellors that young people are adults and can fend for themselves. But 18-year-olds today are a lot less robust and worldly wise.

“They might also argue that there is not the money to provide better support. They are putting what they have into academia and there is arguably not enough for that.

They are also competing to get students in the first place and a carefree lifestyle is part of the attraction. Who will want to go to a university where the beer is more expensive and the bar closes early?” he added. A recent study by the Royal College of Psychiatrists found 29 per cent of those students referred to the health services showed clinical levels of distress.

Professor Eric Thomas, president of Universities UK, which represents the higher education sector, said institutions took the issue of wellbeing seriously and that whilst student unions now encouraged alcohol-free events, binge drinking was an issue for the whole of society.

“Universities recognise the importance of monitoring a student’s transition into higher education, and many provide training for staff so that they can be alert for students at risk. “They have in place extensive support for students, including welfare officers, advice centres, hall wardens and university counselling services,” he said.

In his plan launched tomorrow in the Times Higher Education, Dr Seldon is calling for every new student to be offered a personal tutor and for better communication between schools and universities over vulnerable youngsters. He is also urging tougher action on binge-drinking and for universities to adopt wellbeing or happiness classes of the type pioneered at Wellington College.

Last year the Office for National Statistics has reported a 36 per cent rise in the number of male students in full time education taking their own lives between 2007 and 2011 with a doubling in the number of female students committing suicide over the same period.

Pete Mercer, NUS vice-president (welfare) said: “Universities should do all they can to provide comprehensive pastoral and welfare support for their students. Services could be delivered by the institution themselves or by supporting the students union or local services.