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# **SUPPORTING STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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# **SUPPORTING STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

**Samuel Stones  
and Jonathan Glazzard**

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# **+ CONTENTS**

**MEET THE AUTHORS** PAGE VII

**INTRODUCTION** PAGE 01

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**01**

PAGE 03

**Transitions into  
higher education**

**02**

PAGE 17

**Risk  
factors**

**03**

PAGE 31

**Common mental  
health needs in  
students**

**04**

PAGE 47

**Supporting  
student mental  
health**

**05**

PAGE 61

**Supporting  
vulnerable students  
at university**

**06**

PAGE 75

**Supporting  
transitions through  
higher education**

**07**

PAGE 93

**Supporting  
transitions out of  
higher education**

**08**

PAGE 105

**Supporting the  
mental health needs  
of postgraduate  
students**

---

**CONCLUSION** PAGE 119

**REFERENCES** PAGE 121

**INDEX** PAGE 133

SAMPLE

# + MEET THE AUTHORS

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SAMPLE



# + INTRODUCTION

Headline news in recent months has highlighted the extent of student mental ill-health in the United Kingdom. The media report that an increasing number of students in higher education are experiencing stress, anxiety, depression, self-harm, eating disorders and social and emotional problems. Cases of student suicides have also been reported in the national press.

The massification of higher education in the UK has resulted in an increasingly diverse student population over the past two decades. This has helped universities to advance social justice by transforming students' life chances. Alongside this, the Equality Act (2010) places a legal duty on higher education providers to ensure that students with protected characteristics have equality of opportunity. Mental ill-health can impact detrimentally not only on students' wellbeing but also on their academic attainment. If higher education institutions do not provide adequate support for students with mental ill-health, there is an increased risk that they will either withdraw from their courses or achieve lower academic and employment outcomes than students who are mentally healthy.

As this book goes to press there are also increasing concerns being raised about the mental health of staff who work in higher education. Concerns have been raised not only about staff workload, but also about a culture of bullying that some staff have reported. If lecturing staff are not mentally healthy, this will impact on the quality of teaching and also on the quality of support that they provide for students. Staff absence does not support a positive student experience.

Going to university is an exciting time for students. It is accompanied by a series of multiple and multidimensional transitions and these can result in mental ill-health if they are not smooth. Students may be moving away from home for the first time. While managing the challenges associated with living independently, students must manage new academic and social transitions. They will form new friendships, develop new interests and be introduced to different models of teaching and assessment to those used within school and college contexts. These transitions can be exciting but also stressful as students learn to navigate them. In this

book you will be introduced to theoretical perspectives on transitions into and through higher education and you will find out about how to support students through these.

You will be introduced to specific barriers to learning, participation and achievement experienced by different groups of students. You will learn about your responsibilities as a personal tutor or a lecturer in supporting positive mental health in students. Implications for university leaders and managers are also stated.

The book promotes an institution-wide approach for supporting students' mental health. The elements of this approach are addressed and implications for higher education policies and practices are identified.

Student mental health in higher education is everyone's concern. It is not one person's responsibility. The emphasis on supporting student mental health in institutions needs to focus on all students and not just those students who demonstrate signs of mental ill-health. By adopting an institution-wide approach, universities can create mentally healthy campuses that enable all students to experience a sense of belonging and to thrive.

We hope you enjoy reading this book and find it useful.

*Samuel Stones and Jonathan Glazzard*

# + CHAPTER 1

## TRANSITIONS INTO HIGHER EDUCATION



### PROFESSIONAL LINKS

**This chapter addresses the following:**

- ② The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) emphasises the need for higher education providers to recruit students from under-represented groups. It also places an emphasis on student retention.

## CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter you will understand:

- + the multiple and multidimensional nature of transition;
- + the role of schools, colleges and universities in supporting student transitions into higher education;
- + the role of induction in supporting transition;
- + how to facilitate smooth transitions through the first year.

## INTRODUCTION

Over several years policy initiatives in the United Kingdom have focused on widening participation in higher education. The focus on increasing the numbers of students from diverse backgrounds in higher education has drawn attention to the need for institutions to improve student engagement and retention (Gale and Parker, 2014). Consequently, there is a need to give greater attention to ways in which higher education institutions can support students through all stages of the student lifecycle.

This chapter examines the concept of transition and focuses on students' transitions into higher education. It argues that transitions are multiple, multidimensional and complex but, nevertheless, critical to the student experience. If students do not experience smooth transitions, this can result in mental ill-health. This chapter specifically focuses on the ways in which schools, colleges and universities can prepare students for their transition into higher education. The importance of induction and the first-year experience are also addressed.

## WHAT IS TRANSITION?

It may seem surprising that there is no agreed definition of what constitutes a transition (Ecclestone et al, 2010). Colley (2007) conceptualises transition as simply *a process of change over time* (p 428), while other researchers have defined transition as *the capability to navigate change* (Gale and Parker, 2014, p 737). Transition has also been defined as *a multidimensional process extending over a period* (Bonassi and Wolter, 2002, p 199).

While these perspectives emphasise the *process* of transition, traditional definitions have conceptualised transition as a *fixed turning point which takes place at a preordained time and in a certain place* (Quinn, 2010, p 122). However, the notion that transition takes place at a fixed point in time and at a fixed location has been rejected by transition theorists who conversely view transition as a *journey* (Furlong, 2009) along a pathway through several phases (Burnett, 2007).

The rejection of transition as a *pivotal moment of change* (Gale and Parker, 2014, p 739) has led to researchers giving increased attention to student transitions through the first year of higher education. It has been argued that the first year is *arguably the most critical time* (Krause, 2005, p 9) for students. It is a time when students experience multiple and multidimensional transitions. Many undergraduate students leave their home communities to study in a new town or city. They experience a physical transition. Additionally, they leave behind their social networks, which include peers, friendships and families. While technology enables them to stay socially connected with significant people, they will need to establish new social connections with people in student accommodation and peers who are studying the same course. Thus, they will need to navigate social transitions. Additionally, they will need to navigate academic transitions. Studying in higher education is fundamentally different in many ways to students' previous study. The curriculum content will be new, approaches to learning and teaching will place greater emphasis on students being independent learners and approaches to assessment are likely to be markedly different to what students have previously experienced. Research has demonstrated how there is often a mismatch between student expectations and their initial experiences of higher education (Parkinson and Forrester, 2004) and this can result in student disengagement. Students may experience psychological transitions. For many students, moving away to university provides them with an opportunity to fashion their own identities and to develop their independence. Some students will be adjusting to the demands of independent living and personal budgeting for the first time. Motivation, confidence and self-esteem can be affected positively or negatively depending on how effectively students adapt to the changes that they are experiencing. If they have a positive experience of their course and institution and are able to quickly establish social connections, it is likely that students' experiences of transition will be positive. If their experiences in relation to these factors are negative, this can detrimentally impact on these psychological attributes.

## **SUPPORTING SMOOTH TRANSITIONS PRIOR TO ENTERING HIGHER EDUCATION**

In adopting processes to support transition and develop learners' identities, schools, colleges and universities play a key role in equipping students with the skills and strategies to overcome or address transitional challenges (Briggs et al, 2012). After years of didactic teaching in primary and secondary classrooms (Kember, 2001; Harley et al, 2007), the importance of self-direction and independence within higher education can leave students feeling disorientated (Winn, 2002). Crucially, therefore, developing students' independence throughout their schooling is a priority if a smooth transition is to be experienced through and between these phases of education.

Through supporting universities' collaborative outreach programmes, open days, experience and taster sessions and pre-course events, schools and colleges play a vital role in developing students' independence through promoting an awareness of the routes through and between secondary, further and higher education courses.

### **COLLABORATIVE OUTREACH PROGRAMMES**

Collaborative outreach programmes typically involve university representatives visiting schools and colleges to deliver informative and engaging guidance through activities and workshops. This can raise students' aspirations and encourage progression to higher education. Supporting students' understanding of careers and pathways, outreach programmes develop students' confidence through addressing and exploring the questions and concerns often increasing anxiety.

### **OPEN DAYS, EXPERIENCE AND TASTER SESSIONS AND PRE-COURSE EVENTS**

Many universities now organise open days, experience and taster sessions and pre-course events for students who plan to apply for or have firmly accepted offers of places.

Open days allow students to visit and experience universities first-hand to compare course and university offerings. Providing students

with academic advice and supporting accommodation and finance decisions, these events allow students considering higher education to develop their understanding of the transition above and beyond the provisions of a prospectus. These events can also provide opportunities for parents and guardians to tour facilities and support students' aspirations through family engagement.

Following on from open days, experience and taster sessions usually take place on university premises and allow students to engage with course-specific activities to introduce the expectations of higher education study. Often varying in length, these sessions can take place during term-time or throughout the summer and can provide students with an opportunity to live on campus and experience faculty and course facilities in a low-risk environment. Enabling students to explore the higher education experience, these sessions can develop students' aspirations and independence prior to submitting course and university applications.

Programme-specific, pre-course events take place following the acceptance of a course offer. These offer students opportunities to tour faculty buildings, meet programme staff and explore subject learning environments prior to commencing study as a higher education student. Crucially, they also allow students to network with peers within their subject and faculty area ahead of enrolment. Developing familiarity, and reducing exposure to the unknown, students build confidence and independence before embarking on their higher education study programme.

Encouraging students to engage with these events reduces barriers to attendance, as confusion and anxiety often prevent or discourage students from engaging with such opportunities. This is particularly important for students who may be the first in their family to attend university. These students may lack cultural capital, particularly if they live in 'cold spot' areas where take-up of higher education is low. Their families may not be able to adequately support them with the process of applying for and transitioning to life at university. Consequently, these students may lack the networks of support from their families that other students may take for granted. For students who are first in their family to attend higher education, schools and colleges play a critical role in empowering these students so that they believe they can benefit from higher education. Considering the challenges facing first-generation students, including the potential of parents, guardians and carers to influence or limit study (Mitchall and Jaeger, 2018), efforts by schools, colleges and universities to engage these stakeholders and develop cultural capital is a priority.

## SOCIAL NETWORKING

Some courses, faculties and universities have programmes to facilitate new students joining closed social network groups during the summer period prior to starting a course in the autumn term. This provides a valuable opportunity for students to develop social connections and discuss common anxieties in a safe environment. The use of social media to support peer networking allows students to connect and communicate within a context with which they are already familiar.

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

- + How can higher education institutions support schools and colleges in developing students' independence to prepare them for higher education?
- + In what ways can higher education institutions support schools and colleges to encourage first-generation applicants to apply for entry to higher education?
- + How might higher education institutions support schools and colleges to promote student engagement with social media groups prior to them entering higher education?

- 🕒 Approximately three-quarters of adults with mental ill-health experience symptoms before the age of 25.
- 🕒 Mental health conditions account for an increasing proportion of all disability disclosed by first-year students (17 per cent in 2015/16, compared to 5 per cent in 2006/07).
- 🕒 Female first-year students are more likely than male first-year students to disclose a mental health condition (2.5 per cent compared to 1.4 per cent in 2015/16).
- 🕒 Just under half of students who report experiencing a mental health condition choose not to disclose it to their university.
- 🕒 94 per cent of universities report an increase in demand for counselling services, with 61 per cent reporting an increase in demand of over 25 per cent. In some universities, up to one in four students are using, or waiting to use, counselling services

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([www.ippr.org/files/2017-09/not-by-degrees-summary-sept-2017-1-.pdf](http://www.ippr.org/files/2017-09/not-by-degrees-summary-sept-2017-1-.pdf))



## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

- + What facts might make male students more reluctant to disclose a mental illness?
- + Why might students be reluctant to declare that they have a mental illness to their university?
- + How might universities increase declaration rates?

Research has demonstrated that the first year of higher education can often be a difficult and complex period for students from diverse social backgrounds (Kift, 2009; Kift and Nelson, 2005). Finnegan and Merrill (2015) describe transitions for working-class students to university as risky. Research by Meehan and Howells (2018) found that students from widening participation backgrounds, who are more likely to commute to university rather than live in university accommodation, are more likely to have a negative educational experience than students who live in student accommodation. Some students from working-class backgrounds experience university as an *alien* environment (Askham, 2008), particularly where they perceive it to be a largely middle-class environment (Reay et al, 2005).



## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

- + What factors might result in a negative experience of university for students from diverse backgrounds?
- + What can universities do to promote a sense of belonging for students from widening participation backgrounds?

## CASE STUDY

A university developed a residential summer school in July for students who were starting their degree programmes in September. Students who held conditional and unconditional offers of places were invited to attend a one-week pre-course induction programme. The programme was carefully designed and included a range of activities to facilitate both academic and social development. Students were introduced to

lecture theatres through a programme of keynote lectures. The academic skills team provided sessions on the importance of learning outcomes, how to search for literature, essay writing and academic referencing. The student union provided a range of activities to develop social skills and confidence. The students stayed in the university accommodation so that they could develop social connections prior to starting their course.

## **CRITICAL QUESTIONS**

- + How might students' expectations of support align with tutors' expectations of independence?
- + How can universities provide students with realistic expectations?
- + How can universities help students develop their cultural capital and overcome the 'first-generation' challenge?

## **THE ROLE OF INDUCTION IN SUPPORTING A SMOOTH TRANSITION**

It has been argued that induction should be a process rather than a one-off event (Leese, 2010). Induction activities typically focus on a variety of tasks including:

- + library induction;
- + student support services including disability support;
- + counselling and academic support;
- + student union activities;
- + specific activities related to course induction.

Typically, students on undergraduate courses in the UK experience an induction week or 'freshers' week at the beginning of their studies. They filter out information that they do not perceive as relevant and they often experience information saturation during the early stages of their studies. The advantage of spreading induction throughout the duration of the first year is that students can be provided with the information they need as and when it is required.

## + CONCLUSION

As stated at the start of this book, student mental health in higher education is the concern of everyone who works in the institution.

We have emphasised the need for an institution-wide approach to mental health that eradicates stigma. We have argued that supporting students' mental health extends beyond the support that is provided to students who demonstrate signs of mental ill-health. The institution-wide approach demonstrates a commitment enabling all students and staff to be mentally healthy while studying or working at the university.

It is a concern that declining student mental ill-health appears to be on the increase. There is insufficient research on the causes of this at present to establish the reasons for this 'crisis'. We suspect that the reasons are complex and multifaceted. However, while media attention is given to undergraduate students, we have emphasised the need for universities to pay more attention to the mental health of postgraduate students, particularly those who are studying research degrees. We have also emphasised the need for universities to give greater attention to the mental health of students following distance-learning courses who may never need to attend the physical campus. These groups of students are overlooked.

We have argued that universities need to give greater attention to supporting students' mental health and that this should be a strategic institutional priority. We have also argued that universities should report to governing bodies regularly on student mental health and we have highlighted the need for staff training in mental health.

Many young people develop mental ill-health by the age of 14 and these problems can continue into adulthood. Schools and colleges are now giving increased attention to supporting the mental health of children and young people and we are hopeful that this will pay dividends long-term. We have emphasised the need for educational institutions to monitor the impact of their mental health provision and to adjust provision in cases where interventions are deemed to be less effective. We have also emphasised the need to involve students in all discussions about the support they require to enable them to complete their studies successfully.

SAMPLE

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# + INDEX

- + **ACADEMIC LEARNING, INDUCTION, 11–12**
- + **ACADEMIC SKILLS TEAMS, 10, 99**
- + **ACCESS TO HE, INCREASING, 4, 77**
- + **ACCOMMODATION, 9**
- + **ADHD (ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER), 41–2**
- + **ADULT LEARNERS, 11**
- + **ANDREWS, P C S, 65**
- + **ANOREXIA NERVOSA, 39**
- + **ANXIETY, 36–8**
- + **ASSESSMENT LITERACY SKILLS, 28**
- + **ASSESSMENTS**
  - case studies, 24, 29
  - criteria, 19–21
  - group, 21–2, 63
  - postgraduates, 107, 113–14
  - pressures, 18–19
  - student support, 21–4
  - transition support, 12–13, 21
- + **ATTENDANCE**
  - carers, 72–3
  - international students, 71
  - monitoring, 25
  - supporting, 36
  - withdrawal from university, 96
- + **ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD), 41–2**
- + **AUTISM, 26, 63–5**
- + **BECOMING, TRANSITION AS, 81**
- + **BIESTA, G, 77**
- + **BOSSE, E, 90**
- + **BULIMIA NERVOSA, 39**
- + **BULLYING, 67**
- + **CAMPUS CLIMATE, 25–6, 49–50**
- + **CARE LEAVERS, 68–9**
- + **CAREERS SERVICES, 100**
  - mentoring scheme (case study), 101–2
- + **CARERS, 72–3**
- + **CASE STUDIES**
  - assessments, 24, 29
  - care leavers, 69
  - employment support, 103
  - external mentoring scheme, 101–2
  - international students, 72
  - professional placements, 88–9
  - research student mentoring scheme, 111
  - research supervisor training, 116–17
  - staff training and development, 84–5
  - student resilience, 57–8
  - substance abuse, 45
  - support services, 43
- + **CHANGE**
  - effect on staff, 51
  - to routines (autism), 63–4
- + **CLUBS AND SOCIETIES, 54**
- + **COLLABORATIVE OUTREACH PROGRAMMES, 6**
- + **COLLABORATIVE WORKING, 13, 57**
- + **COLLEY, H, 4**
- + **COMMUNITY FACTORS AND MENTAL HEALTH, 26–7**
- + **COMMUTER STUDENTS, 9, 11**
- + **CONDUCT DISORDERS, 41–2**
- + **CONSUMERISM FOCUS, 56**
- + **CONTEXTUALISED ASSESSMENT CRITERIA, 20**
- + **COUNSELLING SERVICES. SEE SUPPORT SERVICES**
- + **COURSE INDUCTION, 12**
- + **COURSE-RELATED FACTORS AND MENTAL HEALTH, 24–5**
- + **CRITERION-REFERENCED ASSESSMENT CRITERIA, 19–20**
- + **CURRICULUM DESIGN, 56, 66, 67**
- + **CURRICULUM, TEACHING AND LEARNING, 50–1**
- + **DEPRESSION, 34–6, 43**
- + **DEVELOPMENT, STUDENT, 79–81**
- + **DISABILITIES, STUDENTS WITH, 26, 49, 69–70, 102**
- + **DISABILITY SUPPORT SERVICES, 102**
- + **DISCLOSE OF MENTAL-HEALTH PROBLEMS, 29, 33–4, 103**
- + **DISCRIMINATION, 34, 62**
- + **DISTANCE-LEARNING, 106, 119, SEE ALSO VIRTUAL LEARNING PLATFORMS**
- + **DIVERSITY, 25–6, 49–50**
- + **EATING DISORDERS, 39**
- + **ECCLESTON, K, 77**
- + **EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS, 86–7, 88, 100**
- + **EQUALITY ACT (2010), 1, 34, 62**
- + **EQUALITY CHALLENGE UNIT, 103**

- + EVALUATION OF PROVISION, 53–4**
- + EXPECTATIONS OF HE, 5, 90**
- + EXPERIENCE AND TASTER SESSIONS, 7**
- + FABRI, M, 65**
- + FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT, 6–7, 26–7**
- + FEEDBACK**
  - from students, 24–5, 51
  - postgraduate students, 113–14
  - resilience to, 12–13
  - use of, 23–4
- + FEEDFORWARD, USE OF, 23–4**
- + FINAL YEAR STUDENTS**
  - academic skills, 99
  - challenges, 94–5
  - disability support services, 102
  - employment support (case study), 103
  - personal tutor, 96–8
  - transition support, 85, 89
- + FINNEGAN, F, 9**
- + FIRST GENERATION UNIVERSITY STUDENTS, 7**
- + FIRST YEAR STUDENTS**
  - disabilities, disclosed, 8
  - importance of, 5
  - tutors, 12–13
- + FRESHERS' WEEK. *SEE* INDUCTION PROCESS**
- + GALE, T, 77**
- + GENDER ISSUES, 8, 28, 42, 44, *SEE ALSO* LGBTQ+ STUDENTS**
- + GEOGRAPHICAL TRANSITIONS, 95**
- + GROUP ASSESSMENTS, 21–2, 63**
- + HIGHER EDUCATION, PARTICIPATION IN, 4, 77**
- + HIGH-FUNCTIONING AUTISM (ASPERGER'S), 63**
- + HOWELLS, K, 9**
- + HUGHES, M, 77**
- + HYPERKINETIC CONDUCT DISORDER. *SEE* ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD)**
- + IMPOSTER SYNDROME, 106**
- + INCLUSION AND BELONGING, 11**
- + INDEPENDENCE, 6–8, *SEE ALSO* SELF-DIRECTION**
- + INDUCTION PROCESS, 10–12, 14, 78–9**
  - postgraduate students, 106–7
- + INFORMATION SEARCHING, 11**
- + INSTITUTIONAL WIDE APPROACH, 48**
- + INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS, 70–2, 114–15**
- + KEENAN, M, 66**
- + KIFT, S, 12**
- + LEADERSHIP, 48–9**
- + LEARNING OUTCOMES, 23**
- + LECTURERS. *SEE* TUTORS**
- + LGBTQ+ STUDENTS, 28, 65–8**
- + LIFE TRANSITIONS, 76–7**
- + MEEHAN, C, 9**
- + MENTAL HEALTH, 32–3**
- + MENTAL ILL-HEALTH**
  - causes, 33, 44
  - definitions, 24, 32–3
  - experience and disclosure statistics, 8
  - identification and referral, 27
- + MENTORING SCHEMES (CASE STUDIES), 14–15, 101–2, 111**
- + MENTORS, PEER, 14, 53**
- + MERRILL, B, 9**
- + METCALFE, J, 113**
- + NATIONAL STUDENT SURVEY, 56**
- + NON-ATTENDANCE. *SEE* ATTENDANCE**
- + NORM-REFERENCED ASSESSMENT, 20**
- + O'LEARY, S, 100**
- + OPEN DAYS, 6–7**
- + OPPOSITIONAL DEFIANT DISORDER, 41**
- + ORAL BRIEFINGS FOR ASSESSMENT CRITERIA, 22**
- + OUTCOMES, INCREASED EMPHASIS ON, 77**
- + OVERSEAS STUDENTS, 70–2, 114–15**
- + PARKER, S, 77**
- + PEER MENTORING, 14–15, 53**
- + PERSONAL LEARNING AND SUPPORT PLANS, 26, 70**
- + PERSONAL TUTORS. *SEE ALSO* TUTORS**
  - attributes needed, 84
  - final year students, 85, 89, 96–8
  - first year students, 12–13
  - referring students, 27, 55
  - students beyond the first year, 82–3
  - supervision and support for, 97

- training and development needs, 97–8
- + PHOBIAS, 36–8**
- + PHYSICAL TRANSITIONS, 5**
- + PLACEMENTS, PROFESSIONAL, 85–9**
- + POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS**  
assessment, 113–14, 115–16  
challenges, 106, 111  
induction, 106–7  
international students, 114–15  
mental health research, 113  
supervision, 107–12
- + POTTS, E, 29**
- + PRE-COURSE EVENTS, 7, 9–10**
- + PRICE, M, 28**
- + PROFESSIONAL PLACEMENTS, 85–9**
- + PROGRAMME-SPECIFIC EVENTS, 7**
- + PSYCHOLOGICAL TRANSITIONS, 5, 95**
- + PSYCHOSIS, 39–40**
- + PUKKI, H K, 65**
- + QUINN, J, 79**
- + REASON, R, 90**
- + RESEARCH COMMUNITIES, 114**
- + RESILIENCE, 13, 50**
- + RHIZOMATIC LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS, 57**
- + SECOND YEAR STUDENTS, 82–3**
- + SELF-DIRECTION. SEE ALSO INDEPENDENCE**  
importance of  
induction, 11–13
- international students, 71  
students with autism, 64
- + SELF-HARMING, 38–9**
- + SIGNS, WARNING, 35, 37, 38–9, 40, 41, 82–3, 96**
- + SIKES, P, 111**
- + SOCIAL NETWORKING, 7–8**
- + SOCIAL TRANSITIONS, 5, 13, 95**
- + STAFF. SEE ALSO TUTORS**  
training and development, 51–2, 66, 72, 84–5, 97–8  
voice, 51
- + STATISTICS**  
attendance, 43–4  
autism, 65  
care leavers in HE, 69  
counselling services, 8  
employability and career advice, 100–1  
exams and assessments, 27–8  
mental ill-health experience and disclosure, 8, 13–14, 28, 42, 95–6  
postgraduate students, 116, 117  
post-university depression, 89  
support services, 44, 55–6  
Unite survey (2016), 57
- + STUDENT AS PRODUCER FRAMEWORK, 56–7**
- + STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH CHAMPIONS, 52**
- + STUDENT UNIONS, 54, 66, 98**
- + STUDENT VOICE, 51, SEE ALSO STUDENT AS PRODUCER FRAMEWORK**
- + SUBJECT PEER LEARNING MENTORS, 14–15**
- + SUBSTANCE ABUSE, 40–1, 45**
- + SUICIDAL THOUGHTS, 40**
- + SUICIDES, 14, 42, 96**
- + SUPPORT SERVICES**  
academic skills teams, 99  
case study, 43  
counselling services, 8  
provision of, 13, 29, 54–5, 98  
referrals, 27, 29–30, 38, 39, 40–1, 55, 66–7, 83, 98–9  
role of mental health support teams, 98–9
- + SUPPORT STAFF, 12–13, 84–5**
- + TEACHING, 50–1**
- + TEACHING EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK, 77**
- + TIMETABLE CHANGES, 64**
- + TRANSGENDER STUDENTS, 66, SEE ALSO LGBTQ+ STUDENTS**
- + TRANSITION**  
definitions, 4–5, 77–8  
expectations of HE, 5, 90  
final year students, 85  
international students, 70–1  
leaving higher education, 89  
pre university support, 5–8  
professional placements, 85–9  
staged, 26  
students with autism, 64  
supporting students beyond first year, 82  
theoretical perspectives, 76–81
- + TRAUTWEIN, C, 90**
- + TUTORS. SEE ALSO PERSONAL TUTORS**  
final year student support, 85  
first year students, 12–13  
managing expectations, 12  
students on professional placements, 87–8  
students with disabilities, 26, 70  
support referrals, 29–30, 55, 66–7, 83
- + UNDERGRADUATES, 42**
- + UNITE SURVEY (2016), 57**
- + UNITED STATES (HOMOPHOBIA), 66**
- + UNIVERSITY CHOICE, 68**

**+ UNIVERSITY OF LINCOLN, 57**

**+ VIDEO PODCASTS  
(ASSESSMENT  
SUPPORT), 22–3**

**+ VIRTUAL LEARNING  
PLATFORMS, 70, 73, 107, SEE  
ALSO DISTANCE-LEARNING**

**+ WELLINGTON, J, 111**

**+ WING, L, 63**

**+ WITHDRAWAL FROM  
UNIVERSITY, 96**

**+ WORK-BASED LEARNING.  
SEE PROFESSIONAL  
PLACEMENTS**

**+ WORKING CLASS  
STUDENTS, 9**

**+ WORLD HEALTH  
ORGANISATION, 32**

**+ WRITING, ACADEMIC, 11–12,  
22**

SAMPLE