

## **SPIT: Student Psychological Intervention Trial Led by Dr Elaine Murray**

### ***Why did we conduct this trial?***

Elevated rates of psychological problems are reported among college students globally, yet many appear reluctant to seek help from traditional sources. The main aim of Phase 1 of the SPIT project was to monitor student mental health and wellbeing during their time at college and to identify and help those in need of support. Phase 2 of the project involved a Randomised Control Trial (RCT) to ascertain if an online Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) based, guided, intervention would help reduce symptoms in students with mild to moderate levels of depression or anxiety.

### ***What did we do?***

A large-scale longitudinal survey was conducted in Ulster University, Northern Ireland (NI) and in Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT), Republic Of Ireland (ROI), as part of the World Mental Health International College Student Initiative (N=1,829 first year undergraduate students). The survey commenced in Autumn 2019 and questionnaires were completed with this cohort throughout their time at college, concluding in Summer 2022. The RCT was conducted with a sub-group of students from both institutions (N=71). An online CBT based guided Intervention, which was available 24/7, consisted of seven weekly sessions, with written support provided by trained guides. All participants in the trial (control and intervention groups), completed depression and anxiety measures at the start and end of the trial.

### ***What answer did we get?***

High prevalence rates of a range of mental health and substance abuse problems, and suicidal behaviour were revealed among this cohort when they started college, particularly among females, students over the age of 21 and students who identified as non-heterosexual. Variations in prevalence rates were found among different academic disciplines. Furthermore, screening positively for probable ADHD, was a substantial risk factor for suicidal behaviour. A follow-up study comparing data collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, with data collected in Autumn 2020, when students were commencing their second year at college, revealed that levels of depression increased significantly, while anxiety decreased. Preliminary findings from the RCT indicate that symptoms significantly reduced among those who received the intervention, and the decrease in depression scores remain significant six months post-intervention. Interviews were also conducted with a subgroup of participants and guides, with some reporting that they liked the online intervention and found it useful, while others indicated that they would prefer face-to-face support.

### ***What should be done now?***

These findings indicate that it is very important to monitor student mental health and wellbeing and that supports should be put in place to address the needs of third-level students. There has been a call for more innovative support and treatments for young people. The findings from the trial, indicating that symptoms were reduced among those who received the intervention, is very encouraging and would suggest that it would be beneficial to offer the current intervention to students as an alternative support option.

For further information please check out the SPIT website:

<https://www.ulster.ac.uk/research/topic/psychology/projects/spit>