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Trends in incidence of self-harm, neurodevelopmental and mental health conditions among university students compared to the general population: a nationwide electronic data linkage study in Wales.

Olivier Rouquette[1], Sze Chim Lee[1], Jo Smith[2], Marcos del Pozo Banos[1], and Ann John[1]

[1]Swansea University Medical School

[2]University of Worcester

Objective and Approach

With the increasing digital availability of large population databases of historical census or vital event records, the tasks of storing, cleaning, processing, linking and analysing such data become more challenging. Suitable computing platforms and software systems are required to handle such databases, and facilitate the application of complex record linkage algorithms, for example to reconstruct populations that cover a full country over many decades. We present our efforts to achieve these goals on a database of over 20 million vital event records spanning over 120 years to create a "Historic Population Platform" (HiPP).

Results

This e-cohort study included 96,760 students and 151,795 non-students. Being male, self-harm and mental-health conditions recorded before university entry, and higher deprivation levels resulted in lower odds of entering university and higher odds of dropout. Risks of self-harm, Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), depression, anxiety, drug misuse, and schizophrenia were lower for students. Risks of self-harm, ASD, ADHD, depression, alcohol misuse and schizophrenia were increasing more in students over time. Older students experienced higher risk of self-harm and mental-health conditions. Younger students were more at risk of alcohol misuse than non-students.

Results

Mental health conditions in students are common, diverse and they influence their academic outcomes. University students have mental health needs and trajectories that differ from those of the general population.

Conclusion

The diversity and complexity of students' needs require integrated person-centred stepped care approach within universities including triage, access to well-being support, counselling, and referral pathways to mental health services.

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