



Project title: Student Mental Health and Wellbeing on the Island of Ireland

Supervisors: Dr Margaret McLafferty, Dr Louise McBride, Dr Elaine Murray

DURATION: Funded for 4 years, full-time.

LOCATION: ATU Donegal, Port Rd, Gortlee, Letterkenny, Co. Donegal

DESCRIPTION: A fully-funded PhD opportunity for a candidate to join a multidisciplinary team led by *Atlantic Technological University* to investigate Student Mental Health and Wellbeing on the Island of Ireland.

Keywords: students, mental health, transition, university

Project summary

Research has revealed very high rates of mental health problems and suicidal behaviour among students commencing university in Northern Ireland (McLafferty et al., 2017; O'Neill et al., 2018). Furthermore, a recent cross-border project revealed that students attending a college in the Republic of Ireland have even higher rates of depression, and suicidal behaviours (McLafferty et al., 2021; Ward et al., 2022). It is important therefore to identify risk and protective factors and ascertain how students may be better prepared for the transition to college life across the Island of Ireland.

The overall project aims to:

1. Develop, promote and co-ordinate a large-scale, standardised, longitudinal wellbeing study across a wide range of colleges on the Island of Ireland.
2. Evaluate if variations in the prevalence rates of mental health disorders and suicidal behaviour found among college students are related to the different education systems, and the support provided to secondary school students as they transition to college, on either side of the Irish border.
3. Explore how schools help prepare students for the transition to third level education.
4. Examine how parent-child relationships in the years prior to commencing college impact on mental health and the transition to higher-level education.

The objectives of the project include:

- Co-developing open access resources which can be shared with colleges interested in conducting longitudinal surveys among their students in relation to mental health and wellbeing.
- Conducting a pilot study to trial the standardised resources and collating and analysing data.
- Conducting a scoping exercise to ascertain the impact of the different second-level education systems in NI and the ROI on student's mental health and wellbeing and their transition to college.
- Conducting a survey and focus groups/interviews with college students on both sides of the Irish border, to ascertain how they may be best prepared/supported for the transition to college.
- Conducting a survey with parents of second level students, and students themselves, to ascertain how the parent's behaviour towards their child can impact on the young person's mental health and wellbeing and ability to cope with stressors. This cohort of students will be surveyed again if/when they start college and once more at the end of their first year to monitor their wellbeing during the transition to third level education. This may help identify any issues early in the time at college.

PROFILE REQUIREMENTS:

The candidate must have at least a 2.1 honours BSc (essential) and/or a MSc (desirable) in a subject relevant to the proposed area of study (e.g. psychology, mental health nursing, social science). We may also consider applications from those who hold equivalent qualifications, for example, a Lower Second Class Honours Degree plus a Master's Degree with Distinction. The candidate will be expected to work independently on their own initiative and as part of a dynamic team. The candidate must work effectively with project collaborators and be willing to acquire the broader skills necessary for the successful completion of a PhD project.

The project will be based at ATU Donegal, however, the candidate may be required to spend a period of time with collaborators at ATU campuses and/or Ulster University, campuses to meet the demands of the project.

Essential Criteria

- Sound understanding of subject area as evidenced by a comprehensive research proposal. (Minimum 2.1 honours BSc or MSc with Distinction if lower)
- A comprehensive and articulate personal statement
- Research proposal of 1500 words detailing aims, objectives, milestones and methodology of the project
- A demonstrable interest in the research area associated with the studentship
- Fluent in English with excellent oral and written communication skills.
- Proficient in quantitative analysis and have strong communication and qualitative research skills

Desirable Criteria

- First Class Honours (1st) Degree
- Masters at 70%

- Experience using research methods or other approaches relevant to the subject domain
- Research project completion within taught Masters degree or MRES
- Peer reviewed publications appropriate to career stage
- Experience of presentation of research findings
- Full clean driving licence

Garda Vetting: Please note, the successful candidate will be required to undergo Garda vetting prior to registration due to the nature of the project.

This project is funded by: The Irish Research Council (IRC). This 4-year PhD scholarship will cover tuition fees and a maintenance allowance for four years, subject to satisfactory academic performance. The IRC currently funds postgraduate student stipends at a rate of €19,000 per annum.

Expected Start Date: September 2023

Recommended reading

Mc Lafferty, M., Brown, N., Mc Hugh, R., Ward, C., Stevenson, A., McBride, L., Brady, J., Bjourson, A.J., O'Neill, S., Walsh, C.P., & Murray, E.K. (2021). Depression, anxiety and suicidal behaviour among college students: Comparisons pre-COVID-19 and during the pandemic. *Psychiatry Research Communications*, 1(2), 1-19. doi: 10.1016/j.psycom.2021.100012

McLafferty, M., Lapsley, C.R., Ennis, E., Armour, C., Murphy, S., Bunting, B.P., Bjourson, A.J., Murray, E.K., & O'Neill, S.M. (2017). Mental health, behavioural problems and treatment seeking among students commencing university in Northern Ireland. *PLoS ONE*, 12(12), e0188785 doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0188785

O'Neill, S., McLafferty, M., Ennis, E., Lapsley, C., Bjourson, A.J., Armour, C., Murphy, S., Bunting, B.P., & Murray, E. (2018). Socio-demographic, mental health and childhood adversity risk factors for self-harm and suicidal behaviour in college students in Northern Ireland. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 239, 58-65. doi: 10.1016/j.jad.2018.06.006

Ward, C., McLafferty, M., McLaughlin, J., McHugh, R., McBride, L., Brady, J., Bjourson, A.J., Walsh, C., O'Neill, S.M., & Murray, E.K. (2022). Suicidal behaviours and mental health disorders among students commencing college. *Psychiatry Research*, 307, 114314. doi: 10.1016/j.psychres.2021.114314