

Project plan Caring Universities: Screening, prevention and treatment of psychological problems among students

Psychological problems such as depression, anxiety and stress are common among students. In addition, many students suffer from psychological problems such as procrastination (avoiding tasks that have to be done), perfectionism, fear of failure, lack of self-confidence, sleep problems and excessive shyness. Scientific research has shown that such problems lead to study delays and drop-outs, and that they have a negative effect on students' personal development in the long run. Psychological and psychological problems among students have been in the news a lot lately, and both universities/colleges and policy makers recognize the problems.

In the Caring Universities project, universities/colleges work together to identify these psychological and psychological problems of students, prevent them where possible and improve assistance for this target group. In addition to a questionnaire to identify the problems, we are also setting up an infrastructure to provide preventive and early layer intensive help via the internet or mobile applications to students. Research shows that students with mental health problems do not receive appropriate care on time and it is precisely this group that could benefit from low-threshold eHealth interventions. We do all this in a scientifically responsible manner.

Background Caring Universities

Caring Universities is part of the World Health Organisation college student mental health surveys (WHM-ICS) led by Prof. Dr. Ronald Kessler (Harvard Medical School). WHM-ICS is an international initiative that aims to increase students' knowledge of mental wellbeing. An online questionnaire is used to identify students' psychological problems. If it is clear what students need, mental health problems may be prevented, recognized early and treated better. Currently there are 16 countries in all continents participating in WHM-ICS (see [here](#) for an overview).

The Caring Universities project goes a step further and offers free internet support to students who need it for their mental health problems. To shape Caring Universities in the Netherlands, a consortium of collaborating universities - Universities of Leiden, Utrecht, Maastricht and VU Amsterdam - has been set up for a period of three years. Other universities and colleges of higher education may join the consortium. The universities sit on the consortium's steering committee where decisions are made about the questionnaire, which interventions are developed, they can offer their students existing interventions, and they make joint decisions about the project. Students are also represented on the steering committee.

The questionnaire

The questionnaire is meant to map the psychological problems of students and is part of the WHM-ICS. The procedure is as follows: all students at a university receive a link to an online questionnaire via their email. This will be sent via Qualtrics with a mass email. Common psychological problems are measured (including depression, anxiety, alcohol problems, suicidality), but also other relevant characteristics (such as personality, daily functioning, academic functioning). Completing the questionnaire will take about 25 minutes. After completing, the student will have the opportunity to see an overview of the scores and their

meaning. This will give the student an overview of their own mental health at that moment and a comparison will be made with the prevalence of mental health problems among students in general. The plan is to complete the questionnaire annually. First year students will receive the start questionnaire and the remaining students will receive a follow-up questionnaire from 2021 onwards. The content of both questionnaires is almost the same. Students who indicate that they no longer wish to be contacted will no longer receive reminders and follow-up emails. The questionnaire meets all requirements for privacy and data protection.

With the results of the questionnaire, the university can gain insight into the mental health status of students within the university. The results can also be compared with other universities so that specific problem areas can be mapped out.

In the meantime, the questionnaire has been distributed to 29 universities around the world and the number of participating universities is growing steadily. All data is collected at Harvard, which creates a large database that can be used to investigate psychological and psychological problems worldwide. Currently, more than 25,000 students have completed the questionnaire and that number will increase exponentially in the coming years. The first scientific publications on the results of the questionnaire have been published.

eHealth interventions

After filling in the questionnaire and receiving the results, the student will be offered guided eHealth interventions to improve their mental health. Currently, these eHealth interventions are being developed. In any case, these are interventions to reduce mood problems and stress and to tackle procrastination. Other interventions that are being developed are e.g. in the area of sleep and fear of failure. Students will receive advice on which eHealth intervention to follow, based on the results of the questionnaire. Students can also choose which intervention they would like to follow, if they meet the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the intervention.

The eHealth interventions are based on evidenced based techniques, such as cognitive behavioral therapy. The participating universities develop the interventions in co-creation with students in order to optimally focus on this target group. The interventions consist of psychoeducation, exercises and interactive elements such as videos. Students spend about six to eight weeks on an intervention and they are guided by a trained eCoach. The eCoach will give feedback on the progress and exercises via email. The coaching will be given by specially trained master students in clinical psychology under the supervision of certified senior psychologists.

Students who on the basis of the questionnaire or while following an intervention seem to have serious psychological problems such as severe depression or suicidal thoughts are advised to seek professional help and will be informed about possible routes to this help. There is a protocol developed for this.

Research

Within Caring Universities there will also be scientific research. At this moment the protocol for the entire project (questionnaire and eHealth interventions) is at the METc of the VUmc for approval. The plan is to investigate the prevalence of mental health problems among students and their impact on study failure and performance. Furthermore, the feasibility

and acceptance of the eHealth interventions will be investigated. Finally, we want to look at the effect of the interventions on psychological problems and quality of life with pre- and post measurements.

Privacy and data protection

There has been extensive consultation with privacy and security officers at the various universities. The entire project complies with the guidelines on privacy and data protection.

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Students will be informed about Caring Universities in different ways. Promotional materials will be developed (e.g. posters and flyers) that will be distributed. The project will also be promoted digitally. Furthermore, other parties involved such as student psychologists, student advisors and student counsellors will be informed so that they can draw the students' attention to the project. A communication plan will be drawn up with them to promote Caring Universities in the best possible way.

More information and contact

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