The background is a light grey gradient filled with numerous colorful, semi-transparent bubbles in shades of blue, red, orange, and purple. On the left side, there is a large white speech bubble with a black outline. The speech bubble has a wavy line at the top left and a small circular tail at the bottom right. Inside the speech bubble, the title is written in a bold, black, serif font. To the right of the speech bubble, there is a bright green rounded rectangular box containing the speaker's name and affiliation in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

**MENTAL HEALTH
LITERACY AND
HIGHER EDUCATION**

**Dr Wendy Sims-Schouten, UCL,
London**

What is the issue?

There is evidence that increasing numbers of students (and staff) at Universities suffer from mental health and wellbeing issues, something that has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.



Mental Health of Students



- **What is Mental Health?**
- **Diverse Student Populations, who are they?**
- **Mental Health Literacy, Wellbeing and Help-Seeking Behaviour.**
- **Supporting Students from Diverse Backgrounds and Centralising their Voices.**
- **Ways forward - campus-based and online support.**



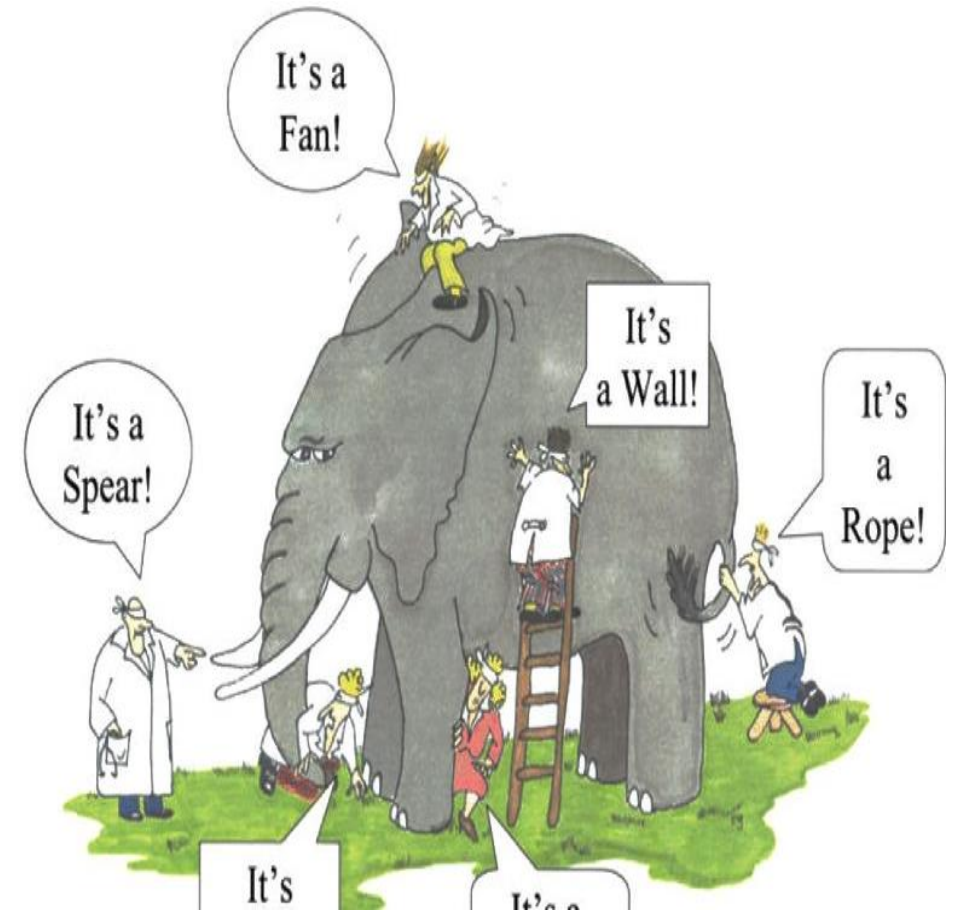
What is Mental Health?

The World Health Organization (WHO) conceptualizes mental health as a:

“state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community”.

Some of this is subjective:

- What does it mean to realise your abilities?
- What are ‘normal stresses’?
- What does productive and fruitful mean here?
- How do you contribute to your community?



Mental Health Awareness

“Good mental health is more than the absence of a mental health problem.” (Mental Health Foundation). Key

Questions:

- How many of us are surviving or thriving, and what is the difference between the two?
- Why are some communities under strain and what can the government do to support them to thrive?
- What steps can we take to look after our mental health, build resilience and cope with the demands of life?





Explaining Mental Health Problems in Young People

The Biopsychosocial model

The predominant view in Western cultures today uses the biopsychosocial model to understand mental illness.



○ Biopsychosocial model

- **Biological roots** - include genetic factors, injury, disease processes, and the like which result in abnormal brain development, damage, imbalances of neurotransmitters and hormones, all of which can result in abnormal behavior. Example: *schizophrenia - autism.*
- **Psychological roots** - an individual's life history and experiences contribute to his or her ability to cope and degree of vulnerability to stress. Freud - childhood trauma and abuse.
- **Social and cultural context** - the impact of the wider environment and related norms and values, including expectations people hold as well as social media.



Diverse Student Populations

As we move toward a collaborative and multidisciplinary approach in response to COVID19, it is vital that Universities adopt support systems and wellbeing services that engage with the range of needs of students from diverse populations.

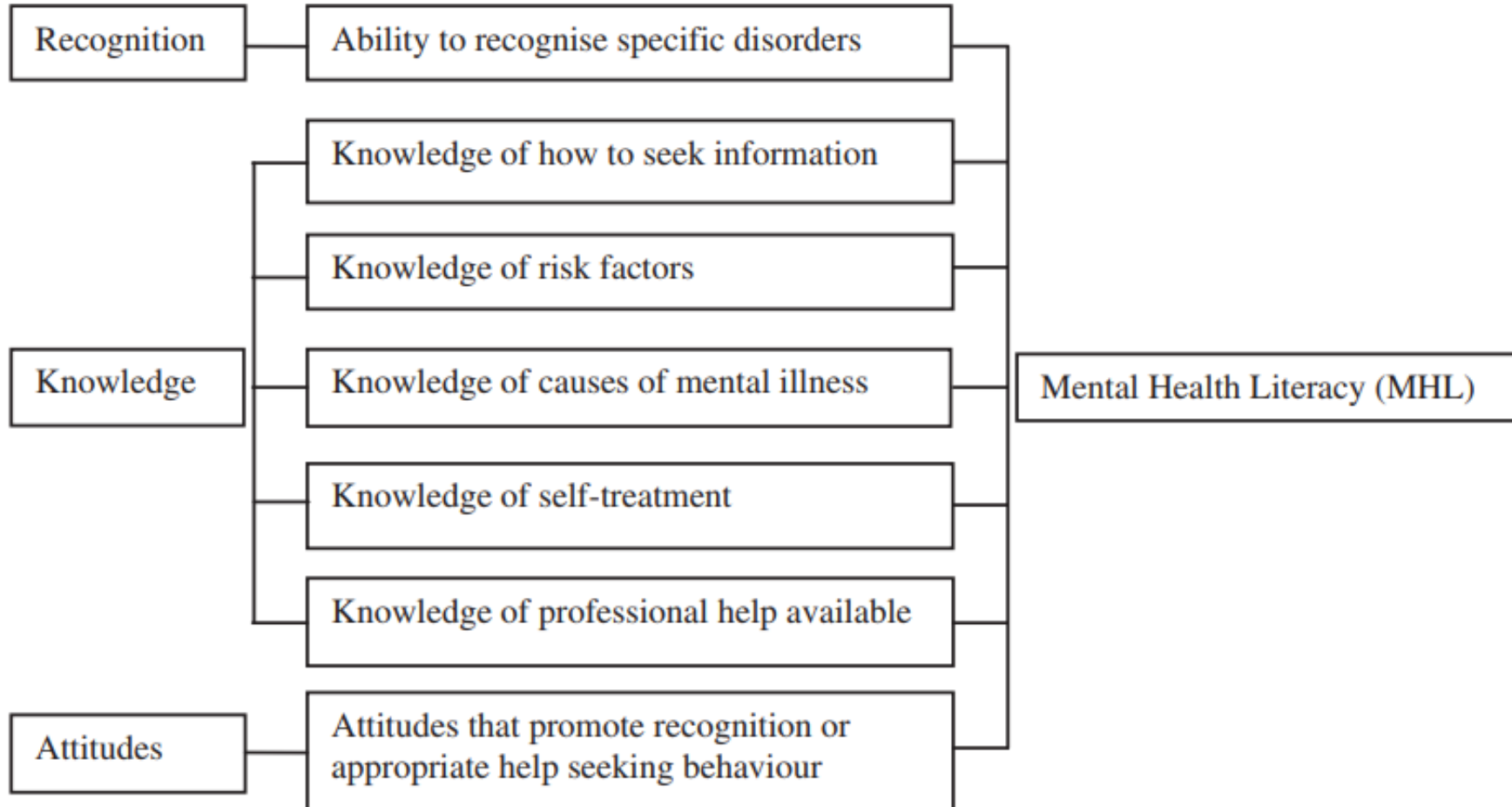
Early findings:

- Student Wellbeing has decreased and Mental Health support systems are not sufficient;
- Wellbeing needs of Diverse Groups of students are not always catered for (on and off campus): LGBTQI+; Ethnic Minority; International; Male.
- Students are too often treated as homogenous group;
- There is a need to explore co-production (Sims-Schouten and Hayden, 2017; Sims-Schouten and Riley, 2018).



Mental Health Literacy

"Knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders which aid their recognition, management or prevention" (Jorm et al., 1997, p .182)





The Link: MH literacy, Help-Seeking Behaviour, Psychological Distress & Wellbeing

Currently, **little is known** about the overall mental health literacy skills of university students.



Furthermore, **little research** has examined whether mental health literacy is associated with better mental health, overall well-being, and, most importantly, help seeking behaviour in **students** (Gorczynski et al., 2016; 2020).





Mental health literacy - is it effective?

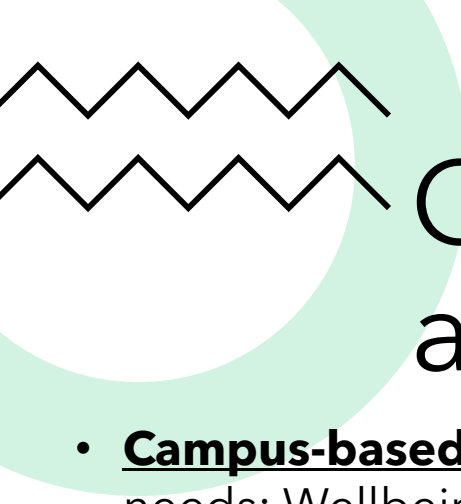
- **Education and awareness can improve mental health literacy, but to reduce distress, more personalised and intensive interventions may be required** (Reavley et al., 2014).
- **Lack of knowledge and stigma are barriers to help-seeking;** increased knowledge/support from friends and family were facilitators (Gagnon et al., 2017).
- **Under-recognition** of mental health conditions (Furnham et al., 2011).
- **Lower levels** of mental health literacy (overall) compared to previous research; association between mental health literacy and help-seeking behaviour in undergraduates (Gorczynski et al., 2017).
- **A programme of mental health literacy can improve:** (1) self-reported **knowledge;** (2) **reduce stigma;** (3) **increase help-seeking intent** (Kitchener & Jorm; 2004; Altweck et al., 2015; Hunt et al., 2019).
- Limited effectiveness for reducing psychological distress? (e.g., Dumesnil & Verger, 2009)



Wellbeing & Support

- MHL is positively associated with general (intentional) help-seeking and wellbeing, and negatively with psychological distress (e.g., Gorczynski et al., 2017; O'Connor & Casey, 2015).
- However, MHL does not predict psychological distress or wellbeing - suggesting programmes should supplement MHL initiatives with exploring other factors which impact on distress/wellbeing in HE (e.g., environmental/institutional factors).
- There is a need to engage with individual needs and challenges, especially in light of the current pandemic - *key factors: family situation and circumstances; resilience; social economic situation; ethnicity.*



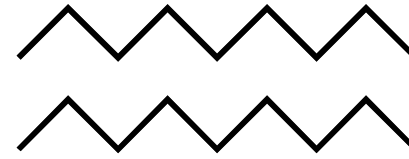


Campus-based and Online

- **Campus-based**: Personal Tutoring geared towards students needs; Wellbeing Centre and support.
- **Online**: Online support; Wellbeing App; Relevant websites and support systems, e.g. <https://togetherall.com/en-gb/>
- **On and off Campus**: Student Ambassadors, Student Activists; Student Voice and Participatory projects; Coproduction; Compassionate mind programme.



Further Work



- There is a requirement for models of mental health and wellbeing support that cater for the needs of a wide range of Students from a variety of (national and international) backgrounds, cultures and communities.
- Further work/analyses could explore:
 - **Qualitative research** through co-production with members from the diverse student communities
 - Longitudinal work - does distress/wellbeing vary across the Student lifecycle? If so, could further support mechanisms be implemented? (e.g., Sverdlik & Hall, 2019)



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Moving Forward



Researchers need to design collaborative and participatory research agendas that centralise diversity in terms of:

Intersectionality, including race, class, social economic status, culture, disability, gender, and sexuality.

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