campus

'Enlitened' platform designed by The Student Room will target 40,000 students across five universities

The Student Room's 'Enlitenment' app is being tested as part of a £2m government project that uses big data to improve student wellbeing

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Universities in the UK are trialling an app to track student wellbeing, in an attempt to combat rising dissatisfaction and mental health issues on campus.

The Student Room group, the company behind the eponymous online community site, has designed the app, called "Enlitened", with plans to target 40,000 students across five universities from September.

The app, the first of its kind, is being tested as part of a £2m government project backed by the Office for Students, using Big Data to improve student wellbeing. The company said senior officials from six universities, including Exeter and UCL, had joined its advisory board.

In March, a nationwide poll found "alarmingly high" levels of anxiety and loneliness among UK university students. The research, conducted by Insight Network, a team of therapists and psychiatrists, found that 50 per cent of students had experienced thoughts of self-harm in the past year.

Chris Newson, TSR chief executive, said a spike in users reporting suicidal thoughts on the forum prompted its initiative, describing the rise in posts concerning suicide or self-harm as "a massive wake-up call".

"There were so many messages from people who said they wanted to hurt themselves or take their own lives. Only a few years ago it was zero"

Chris Newson

The site, founded in 2002, receives about 10m visits each month from students in secondary and higher education. It offers a range of services, including study tips, university and careers advice, and discussions on sexual health and relationships.

Mr Newson said the number of Student Room posts flagged under its guidelines on self-harm or suicide-related content had almost doubled in the past year, from 450 to 850.
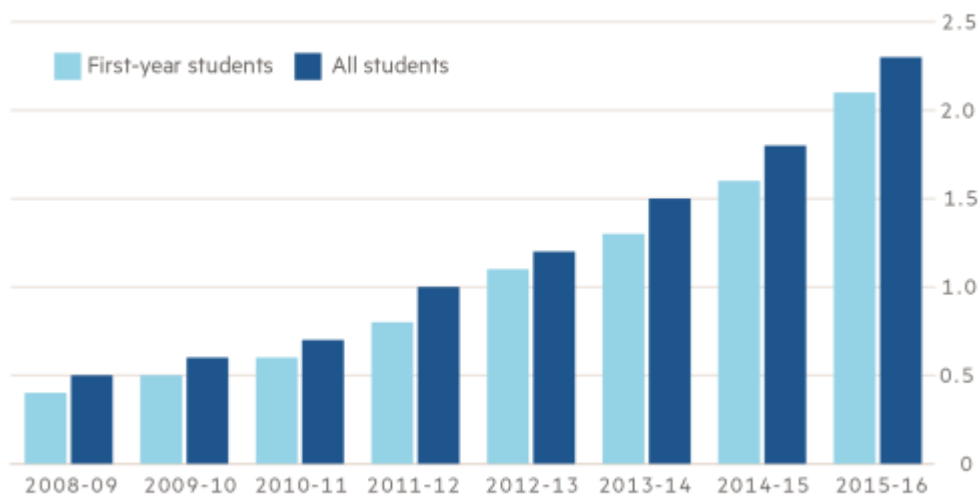
He said: "There were so many messages from people who said they wanted to hurt themselves or take their own lives. Only a few years ago it was literally zero."

The app anonymously cross-references user data, such as gender and ethnicity, with university records to measure trends in social wellbeing, mental health and student satisfaction across different social groups.

Students anonymously answer a range of questions which become increasingly specific based on their responses. Those signalling issues with their studies, as well as social or mental health problems, will be prompted to seek help from a range of sources.

Percentage of UK university students disclosing mental health issues

Conditions reported to higher education institutions include depression, schizophrenia and anxiety

Source: IPPR analysis of data provided by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)
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Participants are also able to put their proposals for improving university life to a vote by other users, giving union reps and university officials insight into the issues of greatest concern among students.

"This way, universities will be able to keep a live record of how different parts of the student body are experiencing university," said Mr Newson.

"We hope this will empower, for example, disabled students who feel they are not receiving enough support, to voice their concerns, in a way that both protects their privacy while giving them a public platform."

Although Mr Newson said the company is still "fine-tuning" its rewards scheme, users will be able to earn "Enlitened coins" based on their engagement with the app, which can then be redeemed in the universities' shops for coffee and snacks. Mr Newson said the company was actively seeking commercial partners to offer off-campus deals.

Georgina Burchell, student welfare officer at the University of East Anglia, where Enlitened has been tested, said it had proven popular, with more than 1,000 ideas being put to a vote over a 20-week trial period.

"It's been really useful," she said. "We've been campaigning for the university to provide recordings of lectures for a while, but have now secured a commitment as a result of its popularity on Enlitened."

She added: "It can be difficult trying to measure student satisfaction with email questionnaires. This new approach is great because it's instant and constantly being updated. Between us, the student union and university can work to address issues in real-time."

Enlitened has so far been tested at UEA, Exeter and Sussex universities. It will add Leicester and Northumbria in the next academic year.