

## **Vulnerable versus Accountable: A Foucauldian Analysis of Student Mental Health and Neoliberal Discourse in UK Higher Education**

Bianca Sanfilippo

University of Surrey, Guildford, United Kingdom

### **Research Domains**

Higher Education policy (HEP)

### **Abstract**

Student mental health has emerged as a key concern in UK higher education, aligning with what scholars have termed a 'therapeutic turn.' This paper examines the paradoxical discourse that positions students as both emotionally vulnerable and expected to excel in high-pressure, performance-driven environments shaped by neoliberal reform. Using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, it interrogates how mental health is constructed across policy, institutional, and media texts. The analysis identifies four dominant constructions: crisis and moral panic, governance through self-surveillance, resilience and the entrepreneurial subject, and emotional fragility under neoliberal subjectification. These narratives shift responsibility from institutions to individuals, depoliticising distress and marginalising students from structurally disadvantaged backgrounds. As a result, mental health support becomes a tool of regulation rather than care. Instead of reinforcing neoliberal expectations of self-management and performance, this paper calls for a structural reframing of well-being rooted in equity and institutional accountability.

### **Full paper**

### **Introduction**

UK higher education has undergone a 'therapeutic turn,' making student mental health a central concern (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2019) and attracting significant policy and institutional focus (Campbell et al., 2022). This reveals a paradox: students are portrayed as uniquely vulnerable (Broglia, 2018), yet they are expected to thrive in performance-driven environments shaped by austerity and rising debt (Balan, 2023; Harris et al., 2021).

### **Research Aims and Methodology**

This study investigates how discourses of student mental health intersect with neoliberal values such as individualism, responsibilisation, and performance. It addresses the following research questions:

- How is student mental health constructed as a problem in public and institutional texts?
- What mechanisms of neoliberal governance operate within these discourses?
- How are students positioned, and with what effects?
- How do these discourses reproduce neoliberal subjectivities?

The study draws on a four-step Foucauldian framework proposed by Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2017), analysing eleven UK-based texts published between 2019 and 2025, including government reports, briefings, and media commentary.

## **Key Findings: Four Dominant Constructions of Student Mental Health**

The analysis reveals four dominant discursive constructions that influence the understanding and governance of student mental health within UK higher education policy and institutional discourse.

### **1. Crisis and Moral Panic**

Student mental health is often framed as a crisis, employing alarmist language such as 'dramatic increase' or 'urgent call to action' (Hubble & Bolton, 2019; OfS, 2019; Weale, 2019). This framing contributes to moral panic (Cohen, 1972), legitimising intensified surveillance and intervention such as the 'Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce' (DfE, 2024).

### **2. Governance through Self-Surveillance**

Universities are increasingly positioned as regulators of student well-being through tools such as well-being metrics, audits, and risk assessments (Hewitt, 2019; OfS, 2019a). These mechanisms function as disciplinary technologies aligned with Foucault's (1979) concept of panoptic surveillance, encouraging students to self-monitor and align their emotional conduct with institutional imperatives such as resilience and productivity. In this framework, mental health provision shifts from care to regulation.

### **3. Resilience and the Entrepreneurial Subject**

Resilience is constructed as a 'technology of the self' (Foucault, 1982), and policy discourse promotes emotional resilience and individual responsibility as key elements of mental well-being (Pollard et al., 2021; Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2021). This framing individualises distress, shifting attention away from structural causes and marginalising students who cannot conform to the ideal of the resilient, high-performing subject.

### **4. Emotional Fragility and Neoliberal Subjectification**

Students are increasingly depicted as emotionally fragile, particularly in contrast to their non-university peers (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2021; DfE, 2023). While intended to be

protective, this discourse risks infantilising learners and reducing higher education to a form of emotional management rather than intellectual and critical development (Ecclestone, 2020). At the same time, students are expected to operate as market-oriented individuals, with mental health framed in relation to academic performance, employability, and economic output (OfS, 2019a; Universities UK, 2023). This reflects Foucault's (1979) concept of *Homo Economicus*, wherein individuals are governed by market rationality. Students are caught in a double bind. On one hand, they are framed as vulnerable due to financial stress, academic overload, and structural inequalities—such as marginalisation related to sexuality, ethnicity, and socio-economic status (Lewis et al., 2021; Lewis & Stiebahl, 2025). On the other, they are expected to self-regulate and maximise performance.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study demonstrates how student mental health discourse functions as a mechanism of neoliberal governance. Although institutions publicly advocate for student well-being, dominant narratives emphasise emotional self-regulation, resilience, and personal responsibility. These framings obscure the structural and institutional factors, such as economic inequality, academic pressure, and systemic discrimination, that contribute to student distress and uphold existing power structures (Malla & Gold, 2024; Gee et al., 2025). Students are encouraged to internalise neoliberal values of self-sufficiency and optimisation, even when these expectations clash with the lived realities of marginalised groups. Those who fail to conform are pathologised as 'failing subjects' (Fotiadou, 2020).

This dynamic reflects Foucault's (1982) concept of governmentality: power operates not through overt control but through internalised norms and expectations. Students are simultaneously positioned as emotionally fragile and economically rational subjects—held accountable for managing their vulnerabilities while being expected to maximise productivity. This dual positioning reinforces compliance and limits the space for critical resistance or structural critique.

Despite limited acknowledgement of inequality in policy discourse, institutional responses to student mental health remain largely individualised and depoliticised. There is an urgent need to reframe student well-being through a justice-oriented, systemic lens— one that addresses the social determinants of distress and prioritises inclusive, equitable, and genuinely caring academic environments.