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## Under pressure: representations of student suicide in British documentary television

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How to cite:

Calver, Kay and Michael-Fox, Bethan (2021). Under pressure: representations of student suicide in British documentary television. *Mortality*, 26(4) pp. 376–393.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/13576275.2021.1987658>

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## **Under Pressure: Representations of student suicide in British documentary television**

This article examines what the representation of university student suicide in three British television documentaries reveals about media constructions of suicide and the pressures young people experience at university. Within these documentaries, student suicide is positioned as a risk endemic in a high pressure, high-cost performance culture. Young students are depicted as stressed and ‘on the edge’, either as a consequence of the academic pressure of university or the coalescence of academic, financial and social pressures. Debates about the responsibility of individuals and the accountability of institutions come to the fore as depictions of students as fully fledged and responsible adults jostle with the notion of students as ‘adults in transition’, at risk and in need of institutions to actively monitor and intervene in their lives. The documentaries offer insight into shifting media constructions of the student from ‘fun loving’ and ‘carefree’ to ‘under pressure’ and ‘at risk’. Within them, student suicide is positioned not only as a profound personal loss, but as an economic loss to a society neglecting its young people.

**Key Words:** student suicide; student; university; suicide; documentary; media constructions.

## **Introduction**

The World Health Organisation (2008, p.5) state ‘suicide is a major public health problem, with far-reaching social, emotional and economic consequences.’ In the United Kingdom (UK), the overall number of deaths by suicide among those under 25 is relatively low in comparison to other age groups. However, suicide has been reported as the leading cause of death for those under 25, raising significant concerns about the experiences of young people today (Manders and Kaur, 2019; NCISH, 2017). Reported rises in student suicides have attracted substantial political and public attention. Between 2007 and 2015 the number of student suicides in the UK increased by 79% from 75 to 134 deaths per year (Thorley, 2017), a rise notably contemporaneous with the rise in tuition fees in England and Wales. This article examines three British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) documentaries that adopt the mode of investigative journalism to question whether ‘raising the stakes’ of higher education, in terms of cost and concomitant pressures, has affected a pivotal change in the ‘student experience.’ The documentaries offer insight into the causes of university student suicide and more broadly into concerns regarding young people, risk and the economic, social and personal ‘cost’ of higher education.

As Williams (2010, p.170) has pointed out, ‘as students are generally young adults preparing to enter the world of careers, politics and culture, the media’s opinion of students can reveal much about attitudes and anxieties towards society in the future.’ Media coverage of student suicide in the UK tends to focus heavily on school leavers entering higher education and leaving home for the first time at the age of 18. These students are often positioned as vulnerable to the attendant pressures and stresses that university might bring. It is important to acknowledge, however, that not all students who die by suicide are in the category of young people. Sabri (2011) has discussed the ways in which the notion of ‘the student

experience' can be seen to gloss over differences in students' lives. It is equally possible that discussions of university student suicide might present a narrow idea of what, or who, a student is, and what 'kind' of student might die by suicide. The three documentaries examined in this paper focus on the complex ways in which young students navigate their transition to university, at times ending with fateful consequences.

### **Research approach**

Documentaries and popular factual programming can reflect and investigate a range of prominent socio-cultural concerns, can act as a barometer for how significant a particular social concern or interest might be in the public imagination, and might also generate public concern. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), who broadcast each of the documentaries discussed here, have 'always made efforts to include the public in its programmes' (Rudin, 2011, p.93). In academia, it has become clear that television can be understood to 'constitute a gigantic empirical archive of human sense-making' (Hartley, 2003, p.xviii). The approach taken here is focused on how documentaries 'make sense' of particular social issues and the ways in which they produce and reproduce social knowledge (Livingstone, 1998). This kind of analysis can reveal the ways in which university student suicide is 'made sense' of within British culture, how British television programming represents and constructs student suicide for audiences, and how these representations and constructions relate to broader understandings of students and of suicide as a personal, cultural, social and political issue. In this sense, suicide is conceptualised here as what Roen et al., (2008, p.2089) describe as a 'discursively produced phenomenon.' The plural 'audiences' is adopted throughout this paper to acknowledge the plurality of television audiences and the ways in which different audiences can experience and interpret

documentaries in different ways depending on their personal experiences and subject positions.

### **The documentaries**

The process for selecting documentaries entailed using search engines and the audio-visual educational database Box of Broadcasts (BOB) to identify programming about students in a higher education context tagged as popular factual programming, documentary and/or reality television featuring discussion of suicide. Three BBC documentaries were identified and form the focus of the analysis presented in this paper. The commissioning and production of these documentaries for the British public service broadcaster is itself suggestive of widespread public interest in student suicide. In total, six students are focused on across the three documentaries. Four out of the six were identified as studying in England and Wales, while the place of study for two remained undisclosed. As such the focus seems to be on England and Wales and not on Scotland or Northern Ireland. The documentaries all include ‘trigger warnings’ along with guidance on where to access relevant support for anyone affected by the issues under discussion, adhering to media guidelines on reporting suicides (Samaritans, 2020). The three documentaries will now be briefly outlined.

*Death on Campus: Our Stories* is a thirty-minute documentary first aired on BBC Three in November 2017 that documents the deaths of three young students by suicide at different Higher Education institutions. BBC Three is a platform that seeks to create content aimed at a ‘diverse, UK-wide audience of 16-34s, with an editorial focus that reflects the lives of today’s 16-24 year olds’ (BBC Three, 2021). Its remit is to inform, educate and entertain younger audiences (Woods, 2016) and the BBC asserts the service’s documentary output ‘should not shy away from causing debate and controversy’ (BBC Trust, 2013, p.5).

The 9-minute mini-documentary 'Breakdowns on Campus' was first broadcast in 2018 as part of the BBC Three short series *Students on the Edge*, for the same target audiences as *Death on Campus: Our Stories*. The title of the series suggests an interest in students whose experiences are far from straightforward and represents a shift in the construction of the student in the popular imagination toward notions of the student as 'on the edge' personally, legally, financially and academically (Calver and Michael-Fox, 2021). The episode examined here, 'Breakdowns on Campus', is described as follows: 'a group of university students struggling with serious mental illness film themselves at university as they try to complete their studies against the odds.' There is a risk of conflating suicide and mental health conditions in including this episode. The Office for Students (2019) point out that 'not everyone who takes their own life has a mental health condition; nor is everyone with such a condition suicidal.' It is the explicit references to suicide from the outset and throughout that warrant its inclusion. This documentary utilises first person direct address and straight to camera recordings throughout and not the narrative format the other two documentaries adopt. This is largely because 'Breakdowns on Campus' is not focused on the profound personal losses of the families of students who have died. The documentary is, as a result, altogether more positive, given the two students involved gain the support they need. Though it is not focused on student deaths by suicide, by offering the personal, straight to camera address accounts of students who discuss suicide at UK universities, it offers insight into how student suicide is constructed, represented and 'made sense' of within British documentary programming.

*Dying for a Degree* is a thirty-minute documentary first broadcast on BBC One in May 2019. BBC One is the BBC's most popular and flagship channel and as such has a broader

demographic target and appeal (BBC One, 2020). The documentary focuses on Natasha, who was one of 11 students at the University of Bristol to die by suicide at the university within an 18-month period. The number of recent deaths by suicide at the university is reported to have increased to 13 (Stubley, 2019). Suicides at the University of Bristol have garnered significant media attention, as the documentary makes clear through its embedding of news media coverage about the cases. The decision to air the documentary on BBC One rather than the more defined target audience of BBC Three might be accounted for in part by a significant public interest in the notion of suicide contagion, given the number of deaths in a brief period at one institution. It is also suggestive more broadly of the rising profile of student suicide as a public issue. The documentary can therefore be seen to address a national concern regarding young people, to document a family's personal tragedy, and to emphasise the changes needed to support students and to prevent further deaths.

All three documentaries present emotive depictions likely to arouse intense thoughts about death and suicide and feelings of sadness, with emotive instrumental music often emphasising themes of loss. The documentaries also explicitly seek to explore and contribute to (in particular, via the inclusion of social hashtags such as #dyingforadegree within the programming) broader social debates about student suicide and the pressures of university study. The progression in the titling of the documentaries is itself revealing, shifting from *Death on Campus: Our Stories* to *Students on the Edge's* 'Breakdowns on Campus' to *Dying for a Degree*. The student experience can be seen to become progressively more precarious. Suicide shifts from being concomitant with student status in the title *Death on Campus* to more explicitly positioned as the result of the high pressure, high stakes environment of university in *Dying for a Degree*. These titles also reflect a movement that Euden and Sawyer

(2015) have identified towards the commissioning of more controversial content in documentary programming.

Three prevalent themes in each of the documentaries structure the discussion in this article. First, the construction of student suicide as growing increasingly more widespread and as an inherent risk at university. Second, the depiction of the university student as under pressure, stressed, and attempting to juggle a range of often competing financial, academic and personal challenges. Third, an emphasis on responsibility and accountability, both in terms of the responsibility of the student and others to talk about their experiences and to seek help, and on the role of higher education institutions in supporting students.

### **‘It could happen to literally anybody’: Suicide as Inherent Risk at University**

Though focused on individual stories, each of the three documentaries constructs suicide in higher education as widespread and a potential risk for any student. *Death on Campus: Our Stories* opens with footage of a range of young and older anonymous adults talking.

Audiences come to realise they are recalling and describing when they discovered that their loved ones had died. Text on the screen informs audiences that ‘134 students took their own lives in 2015’, followed by ‘the number has nearly doubled in 8 years.’ Though Mallon et al., (2016) assert the importance of being cautious with any data about suicide, in the context of these documentaries data is often presented on screen without contextual information, provisos or any narratorial input, leaving audiences to ‘make sense’ of data themselves. From the outset it is clear the documentary is emphasising student suicide to be a growing problem, with the three individual students focused on immediately positioned in relation to a broader growing number. In ‘Breakdowns on campus’ the individual stories of two students, Amy and Lauren, are also set against a backdrop of a more significant number. The focus of this



episode is not suicide but mental health. The episode opens with clips of a wide range of unnamed students, male and female, who submitted recorded personal diaries. One student reveals to camera ‘I look like shit, I feel like shit, I’ve had a shit week.’<sup>1</sup> They are not featured again, but their diary excerpts are included to emphasise that the feelings and concerns held by Amy and Lauren are not uncommon amongst the student population of the UK. It is possible that Amy and Lauren were selected as the focus explicitly because they both discuss suicidal feelings and thoughts. As Euden and Sawyer (2015, p.244) explain in their reflection on documentaries and the process of pitching their own work as producers, ‘the reality is that commissioning editors are now requiring more extreme or knowingly controversial content than ever before.’

*Dying for a Degree* opens with footage of the parents of Natasha at their home, emphasising Natasha’s role as a beloved daughter and not just a student. From the outset, Natasha’s suicide is positioned as one of a significant number of suicides at the same university. At the beginning of the documentary, text on screen informs audiences that ‘Bob and Maggie’s daughter Natasha killed herself in 2018. She was one of 11 students at the University of Bristol to take their own lives in 18 months.’ The names of other students who died by suicide are acknowledged and are accompanied by photographs. Later in the documentary, Natasha’s parents emphasise that the risk of suicide at university is one that could affect anyone, advising parents to ‘check-up the processes of how people access help before you go to university, before you need them. You really don’t know whether your child is going to be the one that falls through the net.’ There is a much more significant focus on the experience of parents in this documentary compared with the other two considered. In part this is

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<sup>1</sup> The authors have made the decision to include expletives in this article as it is believed they are necessary to communicate the meaning and context of the young people’s views in the documentaries.

because of the active role Natasha's parents have taken in launching legal action in the aftermath of Natasha's death, yet is perhaps also suggestive of a broadening concern amongst parents about student suicide. The broadcast of this documentary on BBC One, with its wider intended audience compared with BBC Three, is also suggestive of commissioning editors acknowledging a broadening concern with this issue.

Natasha's parents, who are engaged in ongoing legal action against the University of Bristol, are central to the way in which *Dying for a Degree* positions suicide as an endemic issue at universities. In the documentary they state that 'we're the only people to have actually engaged a legal team to help prevent other deaths.' Natasha's father tells audiences 'we want to find out what went wrong, so that everybody knows. We want people to put systems in place to fix it. This is not just about Natasha. This is about change on the national stage.' The documentary highlights the success of Natasha's parents' crowdfunding initiative to support their legal battle. They had at the time of filming raised £22,000. Her parents explain that 'one of the really sad things here is that we've had some incredibly generous donations, and it's come from people who have been touched in similar circumstances.' The inclusion of this call for change on a national stage acts to highlight the catastrophic impact that the death of a child has on families and functions to construct student suicide as a growing, widespread and systemic issue.

The voices of other students are also utilised to emphasise that suicide is a risk for any university student in *Death on Campus: Our Stories*. A central challenge in seeking to document student suicide is the impossibility of knowing exactly what each student was experiencing or feeling at the time leading up to their death. In *Death on Campus: Our Stories*, Effie and Andrew both gained entry to the University of Oxford from the same

school at the same time. Andrew died by suicide during his second year at university. Effie's experiences function as a counterpoint as she left university at the end of her first year and suggests she was struggling with her mental health and experiencing similar academic, social and personal pressures to Andrew. She asks 'when do you go from being sad to depressed? And, to this day, I have no idea when that point is. It's not like you can pick out people from a line and say, well, these ones are going to commit [sic] suicide in their lifetime. It could happen to literally anybody.' Here unpredictability and risk are emphasised, highlighting the potential risk of suicide at university for any student.

In *Dying for a Degree*, Natasha's friends emphasise that their own loss was both complicated and exacerbated by the broader issue of student suicide at the university. One student explains:

it was, I think, a toxic year for most people [...] this string of student suicides. It was kind of an experience, something that none of us had really thought about before. You all had this constant paranoia. Sort of, who's next? Because there were so many suicides, 11 in total. It was at the back of my mind all the time.

The phrase a 'string of student suicides' can be linked to the concept of imitational suicide. There is a heightened risk of imitational behaviour when vulnerable individuals identify with a person who has died by suicide, or with the circumstances that led to their death (Samaritans, 2020). Stanley et al., (2009, p.426) state that 'HEIs provide a close network of relationships through which knowledge of a suicide may be disseminated' and as such, the experiences of many students may be overshadowed by a heightened awareness of death and dying in contexts where suicides take place. The assertion that it was 'a toxic year for most people' suggests several students identified and struggled with the high-pressure environment of higher education.

Imitational suicide is also suggested within the structure of *Dying for a Degree*. The University of Bristol recognises that ‘in recent years [they] have experienced clustering of student deaths by suicide’ (University of Bristol, 2021a). Other students discuss being in a ‘dark place’ after Natasha’s death. One describes visiting a well-known suicide spot in Bristol, stating ‘I was just devastated, I just felt hollow. I just remember walking by the river, and I stopped underneath Clifton Suspension Bridge and I just stayed there all night.’ Here the documentary features footage of the bridge. On the screen audiences see writing stating: ‘Natasha killed herself on April 30<sup>th</sup> 2018. 5 days later, Ben Murray took his own life. His was the third suicide at the University of Bristol in two weeks, and the 11<sup>th</sup> in 18 months.’ The documentary uses footage of a prominent suicide spot, the voices of students discussing their feelings and on-screen text together to emphasise the relationships between the suicides being reported. In doing so, it constructs the university in terms of a toxic culture deficient in hope and characterised by pressure and despair. The documentary then cuts to BBC news footage discussing ‘the rising number of students taking their own lives’, and in this sense the documentary can be understood to position student suicide as endemic and as a widespread issue of national importance beyond this specific university. As mentioned earlier, the titling of these three documentaries, shifting from *Death on Campus: Our Stories* to *Dying for a Degree*, suggests a move from positioning student suicide within these media constructions as something that happens at university, to something that happens because of the high-pressure environment of university.

### **‘That’s not healthy for anyone’: Stress and Pressure at University**

The transition to university, and indeed adulthood, can result in many challenges for students that can negatively impact on their wellbeing (Office for Students, 2019). Within the documentaries there is a clear focus on the extent to which the transition to university and its

attendant pressures can contribute towards poor mental health and suicidal tendencies and attempts. Experiences of stress and pressure relating to academic study and performance have been reported to be a key influencing factor amongst university students who have died by suicide (Stanley et al., 2009). *Dying for a Degree* draws on the experiences of two students to emphasise the extent to which academic pressure can be experienced, especially at elite institutions. Luke, one of Natasha's friends, explains:

I think, definitely at Bristol University, there are pressures to perform academically. You're surrounded by people who would have been the smartest in their schools and the most competitive. And when you're not achieving in the way that you want to, or the way that you have been, it can be really degrading.

It is clear the pressure to perform is one driven by previous educational experiences and by cultural and social pressures that have informed individual ideas about success and high performance. Luke suggests that prior to university students may have had the experience of excelling in their education and had little exposure to 'failure' or average performance, signalling recent debates in the US and the UK around how educational institutions might best support students to develop the somewhat controversial quality of resilience or 'grit' to enhance student welfare (Duckworth, 2019; McIntosh and Shaw, 2017). Luke uses the word pressure when he explains: 'the stress of first year [...] you just sort of have this ridiculous pressure put upon you, immediately.' Here there is an external force implied as pressure is 'put upon' students, with the implication that the transition to university study is sudden and abrupt rather than supportive and staggered. Luke recalls the last time he saw Natasha before she died and the conversation they had:

we were just talking and she said, 'I'm failing all my exams. I've got this exam coming up. I just don't think I'll do it, like, I'm going to get kicked out of uni, I'm not going to be able to go on the master's course.' All the while, laughing [...] but I could tell she was really, really stressed.

Academic pressure and a fear of failure feature strongly here. Research has shown that student suicide is more common in April and May, which are conventionally exam months in higher education institutions in the UK (NCISH, 2017). The high-pressure environment of higher education is consistently portrayed in the documentaries as a key influencing factor in the experiences of the young people featured.

It is possible that heightened media and public interest in student suicide is related to the ways in which student suicide jostles uncomfortably with the notion of what it has, until recently, stereotypically meant 'to be a student.' From policy documents to media texts and in culture more broadly, students have often been constructed as the 'brightest and best' (Brooks, 2018) whilst also being positioned as carefree and irresponsible (Calver and Michael-Fox, 2021). As Amy in 'Breakdowns on Campus' tells audiences:

People always say like oh it's the best years of your life blah blah you have so much fun party party party but they don't mention like the social pressure, there's a pressure to join teams and be part of things, you've got like your work pressure then you're living arrangements then your student loan and balancing money and finding a job and it's just like so difficult.

In Amy's account the student is constructed as 'under pressure', expected to achieve, to earn, to enjoy themselves and to be an independent adult caring for themselves all at once. These conflicting roles, responsibilities and expectations can cause additional stress and anxiety for young people at university. The documentaries seek to raise awareness of how the coalescence of academic, financial and social expectations associated with university can result in student suicide. University students are constructed as 'under pressure', stressed and 'on the edge.'

Stanley et al., (2009, p.422) emphasise that when analysing suicide, 'an individualised, clinical approach which includes family history, retrospective diagnosis and the forensic

exploration of motive and circumstance as key elements' is often taken, referring to this as a 'psychological autopsy' approach. Though the documentaries examined here can be seen to adhere to this approach in some ways, in that they all provide details of students' pasts and potential factors shaping their individual experiences, each documentary positions the students as exemplars of a much wider, systemic issue of student suicide. These documentaries, as such, can be seen to position student suicide as an endemic risk within a high-pressure performance culture which is not conducive to young people's mental health. The emotive accounts of family and friends featured in *Death on Campus: Our Stories* and *Dying for a Degree* perhaps inevitably attempt to 'make sense' of their loved ones' deaths by pinpointing potential factors. Stefan, featured in *Death on Campus: Our Stories*, whose popularity and outgoing, sporty, fun-loving personality is emphasised, is described by his mother as facing challenges – a history of mental health conditions combined with being 'worried that he wasn't going to pass his degree' and having 'also spent all of his rent.' Nursing student Lucy is explained to have been paying her own way through university, working two jobs to pay the bills. Her friend explains 'Lucy would do 12 hours at the ward at the hospital, what she loved. But then she would have to go and do a shift at a restaurant [...] That's not healthy for anyone.' Lucy's brother explains that her boyfriend also ended their relationship and that 'on top of all the other pressures, that was the straw that broke the camel's back really.'

Though the stress and pressure of academic performance are emphasised for all the students whose lives are depicted in these documentaries, financial pressures are also positioned as central to the difficulties of several students. For Stefan and Lucy, featured in *Death on Campus: Our Stories*, family and friends make it clear that finances were a significant worry. As Andrews and Wilding (2004) point out, financial difficulties at university can increase

student levels of anxiety and depression and can have an impact on academic performance. This can lead to a situation where different stresses and pressures coalesce to a point of crisis, and the risk of this is emphasised in all three documentaries. Though statistics on suicide should always be used with caution, Pinkney (2017) has suggested, based on the analysis of data collected by the Office for National Statistics, that rising rates of university student suicide in England, Wales and Northern Ireland align with the increases to tuition fees in 2012. High levels of student debt are often depicted as highly detrimental to student wellbeing and as such these documentaries can be seen to position student suicide as politically charged, given the funding changes regarding student fees, loans and bursaries. In recent years, England and Wales have seen the abolition of grants along with the increasing cost of fees for students as the burden has shifted from the state to the individual (Bolton, 2020). In these documentaries, this financial burden is positioned as potentially catastrophic for individuals and families when it contributes to student suicide. This socio-political context is emphasised in *Dying for a Degree* when footage of heavily attended student protests is featured, demonstrating the broad concern amongst the student body and the public about university student suicide at the University of Bristol and more broadly. Footage of students marching with placards chanting phrases like 'people not profit' both emphasises and contributes to the ways in which student suicide can be tied to both the marketisation of higher education (Foskett, 2010) and the increasing financial pressures that students face.

In 'Breakdowns on campus' Lauren, a final year student, explains that she is especially stressed. Text on the screen tell us that Lauren has been struggling with her mental health since she was six and that 'university has become too much' so she is thinking of taking a break. Lauren explains 'I've never had to deal with self-harm before. I've never had to deal with genuinely planning to end my life. For now, it is just keeping myself safe.' Lauren's



discussion of suicide is disarming in its practicality and there is little sense of the finality of death, though Lauren does emphasise that ‘I could finish my course now, but I might not be around for graduation.’ Lauren’s account highlights that she had not experienced issues of self-harm or suicidal thoughts before starting university. As such, the pressure of university study is explicitly positioned as being highly detrimental to her wellbeing. A reference to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2019 is given on screen stating the proportion of ‘students leaving university due to mental health problems has increased 210% in 5 years.’ This serves both to suggest that university is not conducive to students’ mental health, and that universities are not equipped to support students struggling with their mental health to achieve, whilst also reinforcing students’ mental health as a growing issue. Lauren seems to have been supported by the anonymous higher education institution she is attending to take a break in her studies. However, not all young students will perceive this as a viable option. Study breaks are positioned in ‘Breakdowns on Campus’ as essential and helpful in managing the stress and pressure of higher education alongside mental health challenges, but in *Death on Campus: Our Stories* a more complicated picture emerges. The suggestion by the University of Oxford that Andrew take a year’s medical leave is positioned as critical, with his mother explaining that he would have been ‘absolutely devastated’ by this. Though supporting students to take study breaks may be considered best practice, how such suggestions should be handled is an especially difficult question as students may perceive a study break as ‘failure.’ As Effie explains in *Death on Campus: Our Stories*, ‘once you get into somewhere like Oxford, admitting that you don’t want to be there, and leaving is the most horrendous thing in the entire world. There is this pressure from the university, from, y’know, society as a whole, to stay there.’

As Stanley et al., (2009) explain, interviews with family and friends inevitably fall into relying on their perceptions and reconstructions of the state of mind of the person who died. These reconstructions are then filtered through the researchers' perspectives and preoccupations, or in this case through the production and construction of the documentary into a narrative format. Carlon (2020) and Sather (2015) both emphasise that those bereaved by suicide are often expected to provide explanations when talking about their loss. Both *Dying for a Degree* and *Death on Campus: Our Stories* utilise the narrative technique of producing a timeline of events leading up to each suicide with parents and friends emphasising moments prior to their loved one's deaths where they felt something might have been done differently or where an intervention might have been effective. Though there is, as Neimeyer et al., (2014) emphasise, a sense of agency inherent in the process of meaning making, the narrative structure of seeking to explain, dissect and account for the weeks, days and hours before death in these documentaries can be understood as being informed by broader cultural meanings of suicide as those who are bereaved by suicide are asked to account for their loss to audiences.

Both *Dying for a Degree* and *Death on Campus: Our Stories* adopt approaches that Sitaram (2015) associates with high-quality documentary, using techniques such as questioning, evidence and varied accounts to encourage audiences to make up their own mind about why each young person might have taken their own life. A lack of 'expert' opinions in the documentaries as a whole, except for a medical doctor who saw Andrew prior to his death in *Death on Campus: Our Stories*, is perhaps indicative of a shift away from providing 'authoritative' voices within documentaries. Taylor (2015) suggests that the absence of a narrator in recent popular documentaries is also indicative of such a shift. The three documentaries examined here rarely include a narrator, with only very brief narratorial

interjections in one of the three documentaries. The lack of a definitive voice either from a narrator or an ‘expert’ on suicide might complicate the extent to which these documentaries can be read as reliable accounts or thorough ones offering a full view of student suicide. However, the lack of a definitive voice and the emphasis on the personal, emotive, and subjective experiences of family and friends resonates with a broader recent interest in ‘experts by experience’ within mental healthcare in the UK (NHS, 2018) and adds to the emotional impact of the documentaries.

According to Williams (2010, p.170), the analysis of media representations of students can contribute to understanding ‘some of the dominant ways in which what it means to be a student is understood’ in a particular socio-cultural context. It seems evident that the dominant construction of students emerging in these documentaries is one of students under pressure, stressed and ‘on the edge’, either because of the academic pressure of university combined with a lack of support or the coalescence of academic, financial, and social pressures. Student suicide is positioned in *Death on Campus: Our Stories* and *Dying for a Degree* as the loss not only of a beloved child, relative and friend, but also as the loss of some of the ‘brightest and best’ (Brooks, 2018) young people, whose experiences of university have, rather than supporting and enabling them to flourish, proved catastrophic. Though some students are positioned as having been able to access support, those whose deaths by suicide form the focus of these documentaries are positioned as having been unable, for various reasons, to receive the help needed.

### **‘Opportunities Missed’: Responsibility and Accountability**

As adults, students are typically positioned as responsible for seeking help, should they feel they need it. Yet such an understanding jostles with constructions in media representations (Calver and Michael-Fox, 2021) and in policy (Brooks, 2018) where students can be

positioned not as legitimate adults but as vulnerable young people in need of proactive support. Thorley (2017, p.6) has suggested that alongside a:

growing public narrative suggesting a ‘crisis’ in students’ mental health, with frequent stories of long delays in accessing counselling, and tragic reports of student suicides [...] there is also a broader and more problematic construction of young people as being ‘snowflakes’ unable to cope with ordinary life events.

In the UK, the rising profile of student suicides is a contributing factor in the resurgence of debate over the notion of universities as *in loco parentis* (in place of parents). In a speech on universities’ accountability, former minister Sam Gyimah (2018) stated:

the ‘uni experience’ can be disorienting and demanding, as it should be. But, in this the universities need to act *in loco parentis*, that is to be there for students offering all the support they need to get the most from their time on campus.

The term *in loco parentis* implies ‘an intense duty of care that extends way beyond the academic aspects of university life’ and as such some have interpreted this to indicate a ‘seismic shift’ in how universities should support students (Hillman, 2018). Gyimah’s speech emphasises the growing importance of students’ mental health as an issue of public concern and connects this explicitly to the increasingly high cost of a university education, stating:

The scrutiny that universities find themselves under is a sign of how much this matters to students and to the country as a whole [...] students are not only investing some of the best years of their lives in their university experience, but where they go on to earn higher salary levels, they will be re-paying thousands of pounds of student loan funding over their subsequent careers. It’s not surprising that they expect clear evidence that this is a valuable investment.

Here, universities’ responsibility and accountability in supporting students is tied to students’ personal and economic ‘investment’ in higher education and to the future economic contributions of students. In the context of student suicide this reinforces the idea that, as the World Health Organisation (2008, p.5) state, suicide has significant ‘economic consequences’ whilst also representing a tragic personal loss for families and friends. Yet as questions arise about the extent to which universities should act *in loco parentis* to support students,

questions also arise about the capacity of universities to do so. In the documentaries examined here, responsibility and accountability come to the fore in terms of both the individual and their responsibility to seek help, speak out and gain support, and in terms of the extent to which universities should be held accountable for student suicides.

In each of the documentaries the importance of 'talking to someone' is emphasised. In the context of those who have lost a loved one this is particularly poignant. As Stefan's girlfriend Clarissa explains in *Death on Campus: Our Stories* 'I'm not saying it's the ultimate fix but talking about it helps [...] It's the best start. And people just don't want to.' Lucy's brother tells audiences 'if you are going through depression, you just need to tell somebody.' Yet at times, it is clear the family and friends of those who have died feel a keen sense of responsibility themselves. Lucy's brother tells audiences 'I just couldn't save her' and Andrew's friend Effie explains 'I could have at any point just gone, "you know what, Andrew? I'm dropping out of university. I think I'm depressed"' and that sort of sharing of stuff. If I'd have just done that, maybe it would have changed things.' In *Dying for a Degree*, Natasha's mother and friend both express feelings that they may have 'missed' something, or failed to act in some way, emphasising the complex ways in which the ideas of 'blame' and a sense of 'responsibility' can come to the fore after a bereavement by suicide (NHS, 2015).

In 'Breakdowns on Campus' Amy, who has declared a mental health condition and is extremely distressed after a busy day of study and paid work, tells the camera 'I'm like, so alone. No one listens, like. No one checks up on me. No one tries, like. I've literally been, there's so many signs about how bad I've been struggling and no-one's done shit.' The screen informs audiences that 'Amy took an overdose that night. She was admitted to hospital and later discharged.' This overdose is not described as a suicide attempt. However, when we

return to Amy's story she is heading home to her family, stating 'you know, I'm glad my overdose failed. I'm glad I'm here, I'm alive, I'm well. I'm glad I'm getting help from professionals, my family, my friends and everyone around me.' Amy's story in particular highlights the tension between university students being perceived as independent adults who are responsible for looking after themselves and actively seeking help and students as 'adults in transition' who need to be cared for and supported proactively by others. Three months later, we see Amy again, saying:

this has been just the most intense but amazing year, and I've learned so much about others, myself and especially about reaching out for help when I need it and knowing when I need to get help but also being strong for myself.

Amy's story is suggestive of an intense learning experience and of moving toward independence, but it is evident that 'reaching out' and 'getting help' remain key messages. However, social and cultural barriers to accessing support are raised in *Death on Campus: Our Stories*, where Stefan's mother explains that 'I think Stefan was very much of the mindset that wouldn't it be very blokey, or manly or appropriate to admit that you were depressed.' It emphasises that it is not only the pressures and stresses of university life but a culture that is not conducive more broadly to speaking about mental health that may be a contributing factor in suicides. Promoting a culture of open discussion about mental health is especially important amongst men as male higher education students have a significantly higher rate of suicide compared with female students (ONS, 2018). This has been attributed, in part, to traditional notions of masculinity which may prevent men from expressing concerns and seeking help (Yap, 2019).

Though the importance of reaching out for support is emphasised in these documentaries, attempts to reach out are not always responded to. In *Dying for a Degree*, Natasha's friend explains how she approached a wellbeing officer at her university. She explains:

I was obviously in quite a dark place after Natasha, and because it was quite near the end of the year, they told me to turn to my friends and family, and then if I still felt bad to come back at the start of the year, because everyone was kind of leaving now. So, I didn't feel too supported by the university.

This highlights the complexity of universities being able to support students given the structure of an academic year and strains on funding and capacity. In recent years more students have been accessing support and this has added pressure to universities and to local health services. The Office for Students (2019) have suggested:

the increased awareness of mental health and wellbeing issues among students, the increase of the student population to the point where half of young people attend university or college, and the year-on-year rise in students seeking support for their mental health, have all put pressure on universities' and colleges' support services and on their staff.

A lack of comprehensive mental health support is a key feature in all the documentaries.

*Dying for a Degree* includes footage of a news presenter stating: 'the rising number of students taking their own lives — university leaders say they are being failed by lack of mental health care.' Here, university leaders' emphasis on a lack of mental health support outside of universities may well be justified but might also be construed both as an attempt to position underlying mental health conditions as the key issue rather than the stresses and pressures of university, and as an attempt to shift focus from the responsibility of universities toward the National Health Service. This is a key concern for Natasha's parents in *Dying for a Degree*, where it is evident from the start that Natasha's parents are worried that the findings of their research, which they feel implicates the university as at fault for not meeting their duty of care, 'will be overlooked or not included...or glossed over by some sort of PR machine.' Natasha's parents read aloud emails that demonstrate how explicit Natasha was in seeking support, revealing her suicidal thoughts, and detailing what kind of assistance might help. According to a news report embedded into *Dying for a Degree*, an inquest did find fault, but not with the university. The news report tells audiences: 'opportunities missed. An

inquest says neglect was partly to blame for the death of a Bristol University student who took her own life.’ Writing on the screen clarifies that the coroner found fault with the mental health trust, which the inquest concluded failed to provide basic care for Natasha. However, ‘no evidence of fault’ was found ‘against Natasha’s GP or the university.’ Since this decision, Natasha’s parents have launched a civil action lawsuit against the university claiming negligence and disability discrimination under the Equality Act 2010.

Natasha’s parents’ criticism of and concerns about the university’s structures are made explicit very early on in *Dying for a Degree* when her father shows audiences a certificate received for Natasha’s study. Her father’s anger and incredulity are palpable as he says:

look what they sent us. She got a certificate for year one. Words fail me. And why they insulted us with the offer of a plaque in the walled garden... I mean, have they got a plaque for every dead student? They’d need a big wall.

It is unclear whether the certificate was sent intentionally or by an automated system, but it is evidently ethically fraught to send an award based on credits completed to a grieving family. Arguably, this is reflective of a broader systemic and problematic focus on ‘achievement.’ Natasha’s father emphasises that her death was not an outlier but one of a number at the university. He feels the university had a duty of care toward his daughter, but ‘the people who were meant to look after her - whatever they did tended to make matters worse, not better,’ suggesting not only a lack of care but a culture that was explicitly detrimental to students’ mental health.

Natasha’s parents emphasise the university’s inflexibility in supporting their daughter, stating ‘our daughter struggled on without any meaningful changes being made to the way in which she was assessed right up until the day of her death, despite the university knowing that she



wasn't coping.' Natasha's family has recently been interviewed in the context of a civil lawsuit they are launching against the University of Bristol. Her father explains:

Natasha was bright and academically able. Her self-esteem was rooted in her academic ability and achievement. However, because of the discrimination that we believe she suffered, Natasha became acutely and increasingly distressed. The fear of failing, not performing, or not progressing on the course affected her deeply and she became preoccupied by feelings of worthlessness (Morris, 2020).

Natasha's parents emphasise the high-pressure, academically focused and competitive nature of higher education and position this as a central factor in her death. Her parents perceive the university's lack of flexibility in responding to her requests for adjustment to assessment practices as discrimination. Their emphasis on Natasha's fear of failure or of not performing at a high level academically also emphasise the representation of university as a place where 'success' is paramount, and the stakes and expectations are higher than ever before.

In *Dying for a Degree*, the directorial decision to focus on Natasha's parents and their fight for justice signals one of the key issues raised in public debate about student suicide in recent years. This is whether students' parents should be informed if a student is perceived to be 'in crisis.' Natasha's parents explain that 'we didn't know about all of these missed assessments, the oral interviews...She never mentioned it. So we didn't know the full facts.' Information cannot be revealed to parents or guardians without their child's consent. One measure now being introduced at universities is to ask students if they wish to 'opt in' to authorising their university to contact their parents if there are concerns about their wellbeing. For example, at the University of Bristol students are now asked to decide if the university 'could contact a designated parent, guardian or friend' if the university 'have serious concerns' (University of Bristol, 2021b). In a statement given on screen in *Dying for a Degree*, the University of Bristol express that they are by 'no means complacent about the scale of the challenge in relation to student mental health', indicating within the context of this documentary that there

is at an institutional level significant concern about the pressures universities face in supporting student wellbeing. These echo the broader concerns of the sector. The three documentaries both emphasise and contribute to the position of student suicide as an issue of key concern at a national level, yet each of them in turn also explores the responsibility and accountability that institutions bear in preventing student suicide, often positioning universities as lacking in their response.

## **Conclusion**

Each of the documentaries examined here can be understood as an attempt to raise public awareness about student suicide and to position it as an increasingly widespread issue. It is important to highlight, however, that rather than suicide being an issue particular to students, it is reflective of a wider social problem, especially among young adults. Within the documentaries, student suicide is constructed not only as a profound personal loss but as a social and economic loss, raising significant questions about why young university students with promising futures might end their lives and about the ways in which young people may be being failed both by institutions and by society more broadly. Competing representations of young students as both responsible adults and vulnerable young people in need of support also raise questions about the role of universities in acting *in loco parentis*. The responsibility of individuals in seeking support and the accountability of universities both come to the fore in the structures and narratives of these documentaries.

Media constructions of 'being a student' have, we argue, shifted from the representation of those enjoying a care-free and fun-filled university experience toward cautionary tales of students struggling to manage the transition to university: stressed, under pressure and 'on the edge.' None of these media representations are wholly representative of the complexities and

nuances of any one student's experience, or of the diversity of the student population in UK universities. Rather, students' experiences will be as diverse as the student population itself. The experiences of students depicted in these documentaries are complex but are consistently tied to the representation of an increasingly 'high stakes' and stressful university environment, with footage of student protests, news footage and student and parent perspectives all utilised to emphasise the myriad ways in which students are 'under pressure.' With the marketisation of higher education, there is a greater expectation for universities to be seen as providing 'value for money' and to be meeting the needs of their 'consumer.' A significant increase in the number of students attending university with mental health issues and in those seeking support, coupled with a rise in the number of deaths by suicide, means the onus in these documentaries is often placed on universities to adapt to and respond to these challenges.

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