Project Details	
Project Code	MRCPHS24Br Herbert
Title	Higher education and employment journeys for young adults and the impact on their mental health
Research Theme	Population Health Sciences
Summary	There links between experiences of higher education/employment and mental health among today's young adults are poorly understood - evidence is desperately needed to inform policy and support young people. In this exciting project, the student will carry out research training using genetic, questionnaire and clinic data on over 30,000 UK individuals, and gain understanding of population health research, specifically social epidemiology.
Description	Young adulthood is a period characterised by profound life transitions, and the peak period for emerging mental health problems. Difficulties at this life stage can potentially set in motion chains of events adversely impacting the ability of young people to meet their potential. One significant transition during this time is leaving school and either going into further/higher education or employment, potentially involving positive experiences and opportunities, such as increased independence. However, some may not do either – being Not in Education, Employment, or Training ('NEET') at all, losing a job, or leaving university before graduating, have previously been linked to poor mental health, though the extent to which it is poor mental health that drives these events, or these events that drive poor mental health, is not well understood. A better understanding can inform where policymakers may be able to intervene to improve later outcomes. In this exciting project, the student will research the interplay between education/employment patterns and mental health trajectories among young adults, addressing the following questions: 1. What are the typical patterns of education/employment during young adulthood (ages 18-25)? Do these patterns vary for different demographic groups? 2. Is there a causal relationship between mental health problems in adolescence and different employment/education patterns during young adulthood? 3. Is there a bi-directional causal relationship between education/employment patterns and mental health during young adulthood? Which patterns carry the highest risks? 4. Are there modifiable factors on the causal pathway between education/employment patterns and mental health, that could help mitigate against poor mental health? Based on relevant literature, a key hypothesis is that adverse education/employment patterns (e.g. periods of NEET status) are more likely for those on steeper trajectories of poor mental health but that adverse education/employment patterns causally further steepen these trajectories, increasing likelihood of overt disorder. The student will use rich data (including repeated measures on education, employment, mental health) from two UK cohorts (Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children [ALSPAC]; Next Steps), on >30,000 people, and cutting-edge statistical/epidemiological methods (including genetic and longitudinal modelling, e.g. Mendelian Randomisation, difference-in-difference analyses). Given a lack of studies in this area with either a causal or longitudinal focus, the research questions are deliberately broad, and there is scope for the

student to tailor the questions and methods used to specific interests, which will be first discussed during the Prep period. For example, studying specific elements of education/employment (e.g. NEET status, job loss), mental health (e.g. anxiety, depression), populations (e.g. men, LGBTQ+), or modifiable factors for intervention (e.g. finances, relationships). The Prep period will include discussions with relevant academics (beyond the supervisors) and non-academics, to help steer these choices.   The student will get hands-on research training across three world-leading centres in statistics/epidemiology, education, and psychology. Beyond general research skills (e.g. academic writing), and training in the datasets/methods listed above, they will be encouraged to get the full experience of enriching their research and ensuring relevance (through opportunities to engage with relevant academics, policymakers, and the public).   That is, the student will receive strong mentorship, and become expert in a range of skills adaptable for a future career in academia, public health, or industry. Given the research context in a time of economic and mental health crises, the student will be carrying out research in a critical area where national policy focus and funds are being prioritised.

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