

## Project 8: Identifying Adolescents in Need of Support for Anxiety and Depression in Schools.

### **Proposed Supervisory Team**

- Professor Polly Waite
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### **Background and rationale**

Over the past decade there has been increasing interest in mental health screening within schools to identify young people who may benefit from support. Most existing screening measures were originally developed to identify symptoms associated with anxiety and depressive disorders. While this approach provides valuable information about population mental health, it may be less useful for informing decisions about support provision within schools.

Schools must decide which young people require monitoring, targeted support, referral to specialist services or no immediate intervention. However, these decisions are typically made without universal screening, relying instead on approaches such as teacher identification, pastoral concerns or self-referral, all of which may create additional barriers for some young people. If screening is used, symptom severity alone may be insufficient. Emotional symptoms are common during adolescence and often occur in the absence of substantial distress or impairment, while some young people experience significant functional difficulties despite reporting relatively modest symptom levels. This raises questions about whether current approaches accurately identify those with the greatest need for support.

Adolescence is an important period for early identification because anxiety and depression commonly emerge during the secondary school years. Secondary schools provide a unique opportunity to identify young people who may not otherwise access support. Given well-established inequalities in help-seeking, referral and access to care, school-based screening has the potential to improve equity by identifying adolescents in need of support regardless of whether they have sought help or come to the attention of services.

### **Research Aims**

1. Review the existing literature to identify measures used to screen adolescents in secondary schools for anxiety and depression and examine their psychometric properties.
2. Co-design a measure to screen adolescents in secondary schools who are most likely to benefit from support for anxiety and depression.
3. Psychometrically evaluate the measure in secondary school populations.

### **Potential Methodologies**

Mixed methods and participatory research approaches including:

- Systematic review and evidence synthesis
- Co-design and measure development
- Psychometric evaluation