LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY
CARNEGIE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION



MENTAL HEALTH INSIGHTS WORKING PAPER

July 2026

Editorial

Since its launch in 2017, the Carnegie Centre of Excellence for Mental Health in Schools has blossomed into a thriving community of over 1,500 members, all dedicated to improving mental health and wellbeing in schools. Our goal is to support and empower school staff as they work to create healthier environments for their entire school community.

In 2026, mental health in boarding schools is a priority. Every day, houseparents and pastoral teams do extraordinary work, weaving wellbeing into the very fabric of community life.

Yet, we cannot ignore the unique pressures of a 24/7 environment. For today's boarders, the digital world follows them everywhere, and living where you learn means there is rarely a true moment to switch off. This continuous cycle also places an immense demand on staff. Balancing round-the-clock care and complex safeguarding while protecting their own wellbeing is a delicate act, making staff burnout a challenge. When communities are tested like this, supporting the adults holding the safety net is just as critical as supporting the young people inside it.

I am incredibly proud to introduce our wonderful contributors - passionate practitioners and academics living and working in and with boarding schools. By sharing evidence-based research, case studies, and think pieces, they show what best practice looks like in action. Together, their insights show us how to ensure our boarding schools remain safe, nurturing spaces where both students and staff can truly thrive.

We start the journey with a doctoral research piece from Tracy Shand. She points out current research, and official standards largely ignore the wellbeing of boarding staff. While the UK's National Minimum Standards (DfE, 2026) mention "wellbeing" 14 times, it is never used in relation to staff. Shand's doctoral study is the first of its kind to address this gap by gathering "grassroots" data directly from the lived experiences of the practitioners themselves. It's a fascinating introductory read and I look forward to reading the final doctoral dissertation.

A study by Katie Phillips shows that integrating psychotherapeutic "Work Discussion" models into schools helps boarding staff look past disruptive behaviours to understand a student's underlying emotional needs. By participating in externally facilitated reflective sessions, staff learn that embracing emotional vulnerability and self-awareness makes them safer, more empathetic practitioners. This collaborative approach bridges the gap between traditional education and mental health, reducing staff isolation while creating a healthier environment where both educators and youth can thrive.

This deep emotional safety is a vital lifeline for our most invisible students, particularly Chinese and East Asian international boarders with autism or autistic traits highlighted in the *Hidden Dragon, Crouching Phoenix* research study being conducted by Yi White. She points out that due to severe cultural stigma, this specific sector of neurodivergent students often intensely masks their struggles, leaving their profound loneliness completely unnoticed by adults who mistake silence for compliance. By introducing culturally familiar tools—like resources inspired by Journey to the West characters—and guiding staff to provide emotional warmth rather than rigid supervision, schools can create a compassionate environment where neither students nor staff have to hide behind a mask.

We move on to the case study where Leighton Park School successfully shifted its international boarding culture from reactive crisis response to 24/7 proactive care by combining the youHQ digital check-in platform with First Aid for Mental Health training. This system uses real-time data to catch hidden issues like poor sleep and spark early support conversations, particularly helping quieter boarders or those from cultures where mental health is stigmatised. By also introducing peer student ambassadors and training pastoral staff in non-judgmental coaching methods, the school has embedded preventative wellbeing into the everyday rhythm of residential life.

Callum Caroll’s think piece explores the barrier of stigma and how culturally ingrained masculine ideals of self-reliance, stoicism, and emotional control cause boys to view help-seeking as weakness or a threat to their social status. He focuses on the power of boarding school residential staff and how they occupy a unique position outside the classroom to actively spot distress and dismantle these barriers. He proposes adapting pastoral care and suggests interventions must shift from face-to-face clinical meetings to "side-by-side," informal connections (e.g. kitchen chats, casual activities) and to utilise these male role models, and leverage peer networks to make vulnerability respectable.

LVS Ascot staff, James Wilder and Laura Collins have shared a passionate case study of their whole school approach to mental wellbeing highlighting their 6 prong approach: mental health first aid training for all boarding staff; facilitating a Multidisciplinary Internal Care Network; data-driven, proactive tracking; age-appropriate mental health topics are regularly integrated into daily roll-call discussions, destigmatising the conversation and promoting personal self-reflection; peer mentoring & student voice and finally a commitment to strategic continuous improvement by completing the Carnegie Mental Health Award framework to critically evaluate and enhance its pastoral provision.

When we look closely at Kieran Jones' research on how boarding schools handle sleep, we learn a few eye-opening truths:

First, he found that changing a school's evening routine or upgrading bedrooms is the easy part—and it helps the adults first, giving staff clearer boundaries and lowering their daily stress. However, Kieran notes that fixing the environment does not automatically fix the students' habits, because during exam season, teenagers still stay up late on their phones and sacrifice sleep due to a deep-seated school culture that connects exhaustion with success.

Kieran's study teaches us that mental health cannot just be a policy on paper if the academic system continues to reward overwork. True wellbeing does not come from a one-off wellness workshop, but from what he calls active "oversight"—adults deliberately paying attention, noticing patterns before a crisis hits, and protecting students when they are at their most tired and stressed

OIC Brighton's Deputy Principal, Jonno Melia has shared a powerful case study on how they support mental wellbeing, built around their personalised *ROCKS* framework (adapted from the Five Ways to Wellbeing): nurturing peer connections via house activities; encouraging digital boundaries in nature; promoting local volunteering; offering a diverse "Super Curriculum" to reduce exam stress; and providing varied physical activities. This personalised, year-round approach seamlessly integrates student mental health with academic success.

James Greenham’s think piece's central takeaway is that boarding school mental health strategy has fundamentally shifted over the past decade. Senior leaders are no longer just offering external or reactive access to support services; instead, they are embedding an evidence-informed, "whole-school approach" directly into the governance, curriculum, leadership, and daily fabric of residential life. Some of the points he observes is how schools are heavily investing in pre-arrival events and structured induction frameworks to mitigate the intense emotional vulnerability students face when moving away from home. In addition, proactive education initiatives, like TASIS England’s Thrive programme, are explicitly teaching students about sleep, nutrition, and relationships so they can take ownership of their own mental health.

The publication ends with a think piece from Susan Fang who shines the spotlight on Modern international boarders who are struggling with post-lockdown social gaps, lower baseline English skills, and a strong sense of national pride, which staff frequently misinterpret as shyness or defiance due to outdated training manuals. This article reframes student isolation and anxiety not as a personal failure to adapt, but as a systemic ‘briefing gap’ that schools can proactively fix through modernised, low-stakes pastoral care and faster, culturally aware communication.

Clare Erasmus

Editor

Research Piece

(Re)Thinking Boarding Practitioner Wellbeing

Tracy Shand

PhD Researcher Leeds Beckett University

What three words would you use to describe wellbeing in your boarding world?

My doctoral journey started from this question, a question that gave personal insights into the wellbeing world of boarding practitioners. As a coach for the Boarding Mental Health Award, I use adaptations of this question to uncover boarding school worlds as an outsider to visualise and understand the place where practitioners call home. So, how would you answer my coaching questions for your community?

What three words would you use to describe mental health and wellbeing of

your boarders

your colleagues

whole school

leadership

Would your colleagues say the same words?

Asking these questions provides quick answers to the lived experience of your community using everyday language. What did you learn about the words that you used to describe the immersive nonstop space which is your boarding world? (Note to reader: just go for the first three words and embrace the silence if you need to.) These questions use the free word association method that comes from the cognitive links from your lived experience.

Although boarding schools are unique in nature, they are all bound by the National Minimum Standards. (DFE, 2026). Within these standards the word ‘wellbeing’ is mentioned 14 times (DFE, 2026) but not in relation to staff wellbeing. Furthermore, within Standard 20 which deals with staffing – wellbeing is not mentioned. During my doctoral journey it became clear that there was very little research in staff wellbeing for boarding schools. To date no study exists learning from the grass roots of the profession. This is where my study comes into its own, using an inductive approach for practitioners to share their words to allow the story of the lived wellbeing boarding world to be expressed. Starting within the UK to listen and learn with a methodological structure that can be replicated around the world to learn about other

countries. Being a boarding practitioner in any part of the world is a personal experience where daily interactions and stories form the wellbeing narrative for all. Each day is different. Each community is different. Each story is different. The strength of my doctoral study comes from the idea of being human in a boarding world.

Boarding schools are unique in that they provided education where students live at school. The term boarding schools comes from the word ‘boarding’ which historically meant that room and board was included. With the Boarding School Association (BSA) staff surveys citing work life balance as a factor for boarding practitioners, my study decided to look at this concept through lived balance and equilibrium. (BSA, 2023, 2024). To begin, figure one models the boarding school world thorough practitioner reality.

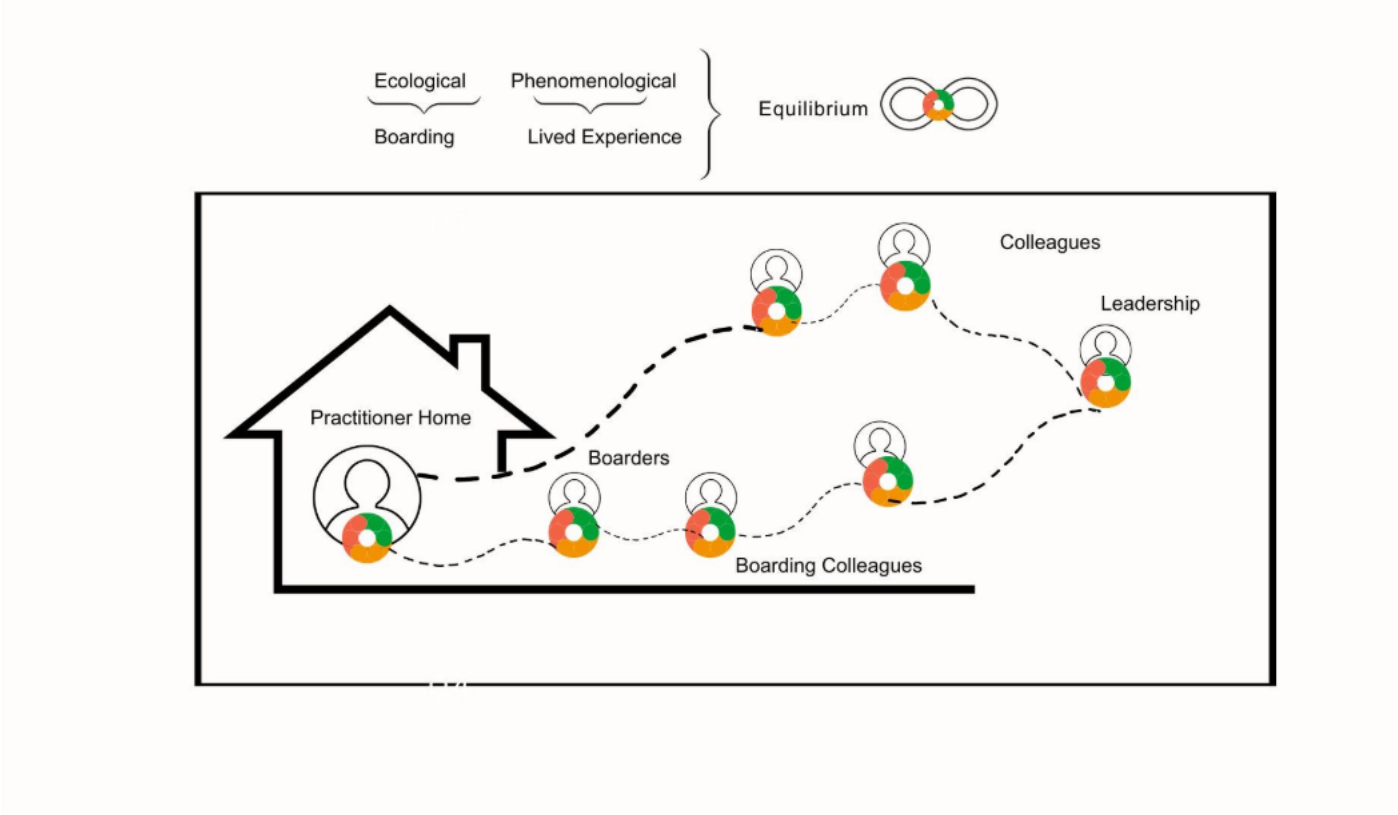


Figure 1: Boarding Lived Experience Equilibrium Mapping

To begin, it is interesting to note the concept of the practitioner's home in the figure, always open. This signifies the way in which the boarding school world is modelled with boarding practitioner's worlds being school focussed while the boarders are in residence. The reality is that a door will be there for safeguarding reasons, but the lived space of a practitioner is an always on culture which is reflected in previous studies. (BSA, 2023,2024; Clair 2021; Watts, 2024). As a boarding practitioner fulfils their daily professional responsibilities, they interact with colleagues and young people who have different levels of wellbeing. From the figure, you can see each person within the community has a wheel of colours – green for good wellbeing, amber for fluctuating wellbeing and red for poor wellbeing. Interacting with each of these people, provides cumulative moments that can affect any practitioner's wellbeing an infinite number of times until they go home at the end of the day. It could be suggested that boarding practitioners live in a unique ecology rather than a house, which is why this study leads with defining boarding as an ecology. So, what does this ecology look like?

Prior to his original 1979 ecological systems theory, Bronfenbrenner studied the effects of the environment on boarders by comparing day and boarding students from three different Moscow schools. The research found that children raised in a boarding setting had socialisation outcomes that were different from day students and the boarding environment played a significant role in shaping development outcomes for boarding students (Bronfenbrenner, 1970). His model posits that there are many different spheres of environmental influence that can affect a child's development, starting with people and institutions immediately surrounding the individual and extending to broader cultural forced. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Adapting this model with a boarding practitioner at the centre is shown below in Figure 2.

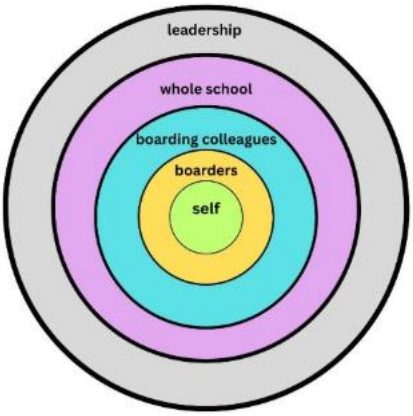


Figure 2: Boarding practitioner lived daily ecology.

Remember at the start of the article, I asked you to reflect on three words that you would use to describe wellbeing in your boarding community. What if you placed them into this ecological system? Would these everyday words create wellbeing equilibrium in your world or not? How does it feel to live as a boarding practitioner within these words? For every boarding practitioner, there are fifteen words available to build the wellbeing of the sector as a world of words.

Words associated with wellbeing have many meanings and states. Looking at equilibrium means considering the true meanings of words and interpreting whether each word creates resources or challenges as a lived experience in the boarding world. For example, tired is related to physical wellbeing and can be a challenge – so is red. On the other side, supported is a resource which is green. The problem comes when we are looking at words that could relate to fluctuating wellbeing (orange) which could be words such as mixed or mediocre. At the end of each boarding day, a boarding practitioner comes home to themselves. Wellbeing is a multifaceted concept held within this world where both internal and external factors can influence the daily lived experience of boarding practitioners. In addition, wellbeing while living in such a unique but dynamic space becomes a human ecology of multi directional wellbeing due to work also being home.

The lived experience of staff in boarding schools represent a unique and underexplored area within educational research. Behind the data, is daily human experience through different mediums of words – spoken, written, said, unsaid, questions and stories. All these word experiences contribute to the lived wellbeing experience and worldview.

The final words of the 2024 Boarding Staff Survey conclude that it has ‘drawn attention to some significant areas boarding schools could focus on to best support their staff and work towards a boarding community that prioritises staff wellbeing in all areas’. This study responds to the calls for further research but in a nontraditional way. It provides a state of the nation for boarding wellbeing through practitioner words and lived experience. The findings aim to contribute to a holistic understanding of the UK boarding school ecosystem from the words of boarding practitioners through written and spoken voice. Voices which may not have been heard, until today.

Thank you for participating in my article to raise awareness of the lived experience of your boarding community through everyday words. For each practitioner that participates, we gain fifteen words that combined with other practitioners can build a world where equilibrium can be defined and insights gained.

What have you learned about your boarding world from the words that you have used? What words do you wish you could say? What would your ideal ecology look like?

Finally, how can you address the gap with insights and action to improve the staff wellbeing of your community?

Tracy Shand is currently a PHD student, Boarding World Building Consultant and Coach for the Boarding Mental Health Award. She is the author of Boardingology and continues to share her expertise through her Exeat She Writes newsletter.

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Research Piece

‘More vulnerable, but safer’ boarding practitioners? Exploring the potential of a Work Discussion-based model of reflective practice for boarding schools

By Katie Phillips

> *‘Sometimes I joke with my matron that I should have been a therapist to do this job’* (Housemistress, start of project)

In many ways, this quote resonates with my own, not-at-all-joking, decision to train as a Child and Adolescent Psychotherapeutic Counsellor having worked as a boarding practitioner for several years. Today, I hold both professional identities- Housemistress and therapist- in separate organisations, but it is the intersection of the two which particularly intrigues me.

What has previously been written by psychotherapists about boarding predominantly focuses on use of psychotherapeutic theory to explain the development of ‘Boarding School Syndrome’. This term, coined by the late Joy Schavarien, describes potential trauma and long-term, psychological impacts of separation, abandonment and loss experienced by ex-boarders, or ‘Boarding School Survivors’. Alongside accounts of institutional abuse, this does not make for easy reading for current boarding practitioners. However, whilst it might be tempting to do so, I believe we need to be careful not to dismiss this literature, or experiences of ex-boarders, as simply ‘historic’.

As someone who works in both fields, a question that has felt important to me for a while is: *‘how might psychotherapeutic theory be used in a more positive and proactive way to support boarders’ wellbeing?’* Furthermore, without needing to undertake formal counselling training, how might we help boarding staff feel better equipped to manage emotionally challenging aspects of their roles?

As part of master's level research in 2023, I considered these questions by reflecting on my own boarding practice. I kept returning to the idea that my therapeutic training had made me a 'more vulnerable, but safer' boarding practitioner, which may initially seem paradoxical. However, my sense is that, since qualifying as a counsellor, I have become more emotionally 'vulnerable': self-aware, reflective and reflexive, and open to emotions and defensive reactions of myself and boarders in my care. In turn, my boarding practice has become 'safer' as I have a greater understanding of boarders' emotions and behaviours, am more empathic, less defensive, and have stronger professional boundaries.

Following encouraging results from this master's research, I continued to explore how 'more vulnerable, but safer' boarding practice might be fostered more widely through an informal pilot study trialling a potential model of reflective practice for boarding in my own school. This year, I have subsequently had the opportunity to trial this model formally in two co-educational boarding schools, supported by a research grant from the Boarding Schools' Association (BSA) Foundation.

Over the year, six boarding staff participants in each school have engaged in a workshop on attachment theory, followed by a series of facilitated, individual and group reflective practice sessions. These have been loosely based on 'Work Discussion', a concept developed from psychoanalysis with a focus on improving practice. In these Work Discussions, participants have been encouraged to bring written reports of situations they have experienced with boarders that have felt challenging, confusing, or emotionally intense. By presenting these reports aloud, staff have had the opportunity to reflect on situations collaboratively, with an emphasis on exploring lived experiences and emotions of both participants and boarders presented.

Whilst data analysis of the final evaluation sessions is not yet complete, evidence so far seems to suggest that the Work Discussion-based model might be a beneficial tool for: fostering student wellbeing, cultivating greater understanding of boarder-staff relational dynamics, improving staff wellbeing, and providing individualised professional development.

Fostering student wellbeing

> *'I think I'd readily ask myself, "what does this [boarder] need and what is going on?" in a much wider scope […] than I did before'*

In both schools, boarding staff identified how Work Discussions seemed to have encouraged deeper reflection on individual boarders. Inspired by Karen Treisman's concept of 'see a behaviour differently, see a different behaviour', participants observed noticing a shift in their practice since being involved in the research project. As noted in the quote above, participants particularly seemed to recognise an increasing tendency to hypothesise, and reflect, on the emotions and the 'why' behind boarders' behaviour. Some boarders, inevitably, remain more challenging to interpret. However, staff provided examples of how their increased curiosity and willingness to understand boarders' needs and emotions was developing their empathy and having a direct, positive impact on their interactions in house and, in turn, student wellbeing:

> *'Who we talked about last time, I've really been a lot better at understanding. We need to do [Work Discussion] for every pupil […] it really makes you think "ok, what is going on there and what can I do to help support them?"'*

Cultivating greater understanding of boarder-staff relational dynamics

> *'It's recognising yourself in the relationship because you often focus on the student […] You don't immediately go to how [you're] feeling, but obviously it does impact how you deal with somebody […] Now I think I reflect on [that] more'*

In evaluation sessions, participants considered the ways in which different aspects of the research project had stimulated reflection on the two-way nature of their relationships with boarders. Fostering greater self-awareness of their own emotions, strengths and vulnerabilities, and having opportunities to discuss these in relation to those of boarders in their care was a significant focus of reflective practice sessions. In doing so, boarding staff became engaged in untangling challenging relational dynamics and potentially unhelpful patterns in relationships with particular boarders. For many, this involved exploration of how their own experiences, emotions and emotional defences might interact with boarders' and, in turn, possibly impact relationships:

> *'When we were looking at the beginning on attachment and thinking about our pupils in terms of our own attachment and how that plays out in our relationship […] I think it has helped me to understand a lot about my responses, their responses, how that relationship developed'*

Again, participants acknowledged that reflecting in this way seemed to have had a direct, positive impact on their practice and their day-to-day interactions with boarders.

Improving staff wellbeing

> *'I think what I've enjoyed the most is the sort of sense of we're all in it together. Solidarity. […] It's quite easy to imagine "I'm the only one who's finding things difficult" […] so it's nice to sort of, you know, see the human side of everyone'*

The benefits of Work Discussions as a validating and safe space for boarding practitioners is evidenced strongly in initial findings. A significant proportion of the evaluation sessions in both schools were spent reflecting on the value of having an opportunity to be vulnerable in front of others, and the comfort and humanity of having this reciprocated by colleagues. Participants seemed to appreciate being able to discuss, as a group, occasions when they felt they had perhaps got things wrong, moments of imposter syndrome, and challenging situations with boarders and boarders' parents. By having these experiences and feelings normalised and validated in Work Discussions, staff expressed feeling reassured and less 'alone'. Colleagues also described how they felt that this validation, together with opportunities to learn from others' experiences, had developed their confidence. Indeed, as facilitator, it was rewarding to see this positive impact of colleagues affirming each other first-hand.

Having an external facilitator was also identified in both schools as further promoting a sense of safety within Work Discussion groups:

> School 1- *'Because you are not in our institution, you are a safe person for us to do this with. You are not going to do our appraisals, so we can be weak or vulnerable in front of you and we know that's ok'*

> School 2- *'I think the individual [Work Discussions] were nice at the start, because I think, […] you're kind of like impartial, so we could say absolutely anything and you'd be like, "yeah, okay", and then work through it'*

As these quotes demonstrate, participants acknowledged that external facilitation enabled them to share openly without worrying about the impact that being vulnerable might have on performance reviews or line managers' perceptions.

Providing individualised professional development

> *'Such brilliant professional and personal development that just really like looks after your staff […] If you are a Senior Team and you think "I'll provide this for my [boarding staff]". Excellent. They're much more equipped to be able to do what they need to do'*

Whilst recognising my own bias, participants in both schools seemed to suggest that they would value ongoing opportunities for reflective practice. Furthermore, in both groups, staff identified ways in which the project could continue to develop in their schools:

> *'I think [this experience of reflective practice] has been brilliant and I think there's scope for more of it within our tutor system. I think it would be beneficial to give people confidence in this area'*

Staff newer to working in boarding appeared to have particularly found learning from lived experiences of others in Work Discussions valuable, emphasising the benefits of this over hypothetical situations and role plays that might normally be discussed in staff CPD or INSET. More experienced colleagues similarly valued 'unpicking' such lived experiences in ways they would not normally have time or space to explore. Again, participants highlighted how they could see how having dedicated time for Work Discussion might have a direct effect on their boarding practice:

> *'[Work Discussion] is like bespoke professional development in a reflective way […] This is actual, sort of, hands on learning and professional development that has an impact in your setting'*

Initial findings suggest boarding staff also appreciated being encouraged in Work Discussions to reflect on situations in new ways, sit with uncertainty and answer challenging questions. Participants highlighted this as an opportunity for professional growth through collaborative exploration of situations that had previously felt 'stuck'. Having a facilitator who could introduce aspects of psychotherapeutic thinking to inform staff's understanding of situations and individual boarders, also seemed to be considered a valuable part of Work Discussions and the workshop on attachment theory. Throughout the research project, participants seemed to demonstrate becoming increasingly aware of their professional strengths, but also recognising areas for further professional, and in some cases personal, development.

Conclusions so far…

In the feedback above, participants acknowledge how Work Discussions seem to have fostered a greater interest and curiosity in understanding boarders' behaviour, as well as their emotional reactions to it. This shift towards increased reflection on student and staff emotions seems to echo my own experience of 'more vulnerable, but safer' practice. However, one of the most poignant quotes for me is a comment from the Housemistress with whom I started this article. In the evaluation session of the project, reflecting on how things had changed since the start, she reflected as follows:

> *'Sometimes I felt like "oh, my job feels really serious, but I am not a counsellor or a psychotherapist. I am ill equipped to do it" […] You've moved from being Head of Department or a subject teacher to this. It feels huge. This, like, fills the gap in between'.*

Alongside the other initial findings above, this reaffirms that boarding staff do not necessarily need to train as counsellors or psychotherapists. However, by offering a safe, reflective space for staff in boarding schools, informed by psychotherapeutic thinking, practitioners can be supported to cultivate a deeper and richer understanding of boarders and themselves. This not only seems to improve staff wellbeing but also enhances the quality of care boarding staff can provide. As such, a Work Discussion-based model appears to foster 'more vulnerable, but safer' boarding practice in staff through the development of greater emotional awareness, empathy, and dedicated time for group and self-reflection. Whilst analysis is still ongoing, a consistent pattern seems to be emerging suggesting reflective practice models of this kind could play an important and proactive role in supporting wellbeing of both staff and boarders within boarding communities.

Katie Phillips has worked in boarding schools, both in the UK and internationally, for 15 years. She is currently a Housemistress and Mental Health Lead. Alongside this, she works part-time for other local organisations as an accredited (UKCP) Child and Adolescent Psychotherapeutic Counsellor.

Since 2022, Katie has engaged in research exploring the intersection of her two professional identities, in particular considering how psychotherapeutic theory and practices might help inform the pastoral work of boarding staff within boarding schools.

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Research Piece

Hidden dragon, Crouching Phoenix: Hidden dragon, Crouching Phoenix:

The need to listen closely to those silenced; struggling autism and autistic traits Chinese/East Asian students in boarding school settings.

By Yi White

Motivation: The 'Rage' – "怒"

My research journey began with a feeling that I can only describe as rage – 怒(nu), though not rage as aggression, but as a response to what has been repeatedly unseen, unheard, misunderstood, or left unrecorded.

Having personally experienced life as a young boarder, between the ages of three and seven, and later came to the UK to study as an international student twenty-five years ago. Coupled with the past fifteen years as an educational agent, independent listener, and integrative psychotherapeutic counsellor has brought me into close contact with international students, parents, schools, pastoral teams and counsellors. Across these different positions, I have observed a troubling and significant rise in mental health challenges among students, particularly international students.

These challenges span a wide spectrum, including homesickness, peer on peer bullying, social isolation, academic disengagement leading to underachievement, and, most alarmingly, self-harm and suicidal ideation, and in the most devastating cases, suicide. What has concerned me most is not only the suffering itself, but the silence around it. During the literature review for my postgraduate training in Child and Adolescent Psychotherapeutic Counselling (White, 2024) at the University of Cambridge, I became increasingly aware that those challenges are not recorded and researched through schools and related educational services.

Encountering these silent struggles and unspoken bewilderments has highlighted the urgent need for further research to better understand students' perspectives and to provide support grounded in the principles of unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 2015).

Through my work with children and pastoral care teams across UK independent and state schools, I also have encountered a considerable number of students whose behavioural presentations suggest possible neurodivergence. Especially with Chinese and East Asian students in boarding-school contexts, when autism and autism traits are unrecognised, misunderstand or unsupported, these needs can compound the demands of studying abroad and contribute to acute mental-health difficulties, the challenges of separation, cultural transition, language, identity, academic pressure, social belonging, and emotional masking may intersect in complex and often hidden ways.

I have also become aware of how limited understanding, misunderstanding, social stigma and shame around neurodivergence -particularly Autism –may exist within many Chinese families and communities. Notably, the common Chinese terms for autism, 自闭症 (zìbìzhèng) and 孤独症 (gūdúzhèng)—literally "self-seclusion disease" and "loneliness disease"—can be misconstrued, at times leading to dismissive attitudes or attempts to "train" children to behave "more like a normal child" in ways that may be demeaning (Ma, 2020).

My positionality is therefore central to this research. As a multicultural and bilingual integrative psychotherapeutic counsellor, as well as previously having worked closely with students and families seeking UK independent school education, has shaped how I see the under supported Autistic Chinese cohort of children, and has also given me particular access to students,' educators and counsellors' experiences (Briggs et al., 2012).

At the heart of this research is a simple but urgent question: what could we do differently if we listened more closely to autistic Chinese and East Asian students themselves?

This study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm (Briggs et al. 2012). Ontologically, it treats social reality as dynamic and context-dependent, shaped through relationships, culture, and lived experience ("reality-in-change") (Briggs et al. 2012). Epistemologically, knowledge is understood as situated and co-constructed through participants' meaning-making and my reflexive engagement as a researcher-practitioner. Methodologically, this justifies a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews to access participants' perspectives "from the inside," followed by an interpretive analytic approach (e.g., thematic analysis) to examine how meanings are produced in context with an empathetic understanding (Briggs et al.2012; Smith, Flowers, Larkins, 2022). Epistemologically, knowledge is understood as situated and co-constructed through participants' meaning-making and my reflexive engagement as a researcher-practitioner. Methodologically, this justifies a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews to access participants' perspectives "from the inside," followed by an interpretive analytic approach (e.g., thematic analysis) to examine how meanings are

produced in context with an empathetic understanding (Briggs et al.2012; Smith, Flowers, Larkins, 2022).

To allow developing a holistic yet detailed understanding of both personal and institutional dimensions of possible autistic international students' experiences. Three different participant positions were chosen: former students at boarding schools, counsellors, and SENCos. Former students remain at the centre of the research, while counsellors and SENCos provide professional perspectives on how emotional, pastoral, and learning needs may be recognised and supported within boarding school contexts.

Currently, this research has completed data collection, and undergoing data analysis, and the final research paper will be ready in November 2026.

It is worth noting, however, the emerging group experiential themes for former students have indicated a layered vulnerability for Chinese and East Asian boarders with autism or autistic traits. Their experiences appear to sit both within and beyond what has sometimes been described as "boarding school syndrome" (Schaverien, 2015), such as profound loneliness, the boarding house as closed and confined environment, high level of masking—particularly among East Asian girls, and adult support relationship that were experienced as functional rather than emotionally attuned.

Culture differences, however, appear to play a vital yet often silent role, shaping whether Chinese students feel able to trust adults and seek help from pastoral-support systems within boarding-school settings.

A key result of the research is to develop two practical artefacts grounded in the voices of the former students and professionals. These will be shaped through thematic analysis and will seek to translate lived experience into practical psychotherapeutically, pastoral, and educational support.

In the student-facing artefact, the visual characters are inspired by "Journey to the West" – the Monkey King, the Monk, Sandy, and Pigsy, a culturally familiar figure associated with courage, survival, transformation and truth seeking. The aim is, through that symbolic presentation to create a resource to help students reduce shame, support emotional vocabulary, and to show that those troubled thoughts, feelings, or behaviours are valid and meaningful– simply 'you are not alone.'

The artefact also seeks to reassure and indicate students that support resources are available, that help can be reached for, and their experiences can be met with empathy, mindfulness, and emotional holding rather than judgement.

In the artefact for professional staff, the contents would be developed through former students' experiences and needs, with the aim of enhancing cultural understanding and possible therapeutic guidance.

Finally, I would like to conclude as Tao Zhu's thoughts paraphrased:

"The highest good is like water; water benefits all things without striving."

This is also how I understand therapeutic work. We do not force change. We do not force children to become more acceptable versions of others and themselves. Instead, we seek to understand, to make space, and to create the conditions in which change can emerge and flow in its own time.

Yi White

Yi White is a Child and Adolescent Integrative Psychotherapeutic Counsellor who graduated from the University of Cambridge and is currently undergoing her master's in education at Cambridge. She has extensive experience supporting children, young people, and families across diverse cultural, state, and independent educational settings. She has worked with complex trauma cases and neurodivergent children and young people, including those with diagnosed or undiagnosed Autism and ADHD, specializing in psychotherapeutic interventions, international student mental health support, and parent engagement. She brings TheraPlay® Level 1 and Dyadic Developmental Practice (DDP) Level 2-informed knowledge to her work, supporting emotional wellbeing, attachment, resilience, and positive developmental outcomes

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Research Piece

From Overstudy to Oversight: Rethinking Mental Wellbeing in Boarding Schools.

Written by Kieran Jones, Director of Boarding, Oxford International College

In boarding schools, mental wellbeing is shaped less by discrete interventions and more by the cumulative experience of life lived within routine, relationship and pressure. Unlike day schools, boarding environments operate continuously and do not pause at the end of the school day. As a result, the influence of organisational culture is intensified. This gives boarding schools a distinctive capacity to promote psychological wellbeing, but equally the potential to amplify risk where leadership attention is inconsistent or insufficiently intentional (Deal and Peterson, 2016; Schein, 2010).

Research into adolescent mental health consistently identifies sleep, routine and emotional regulation as foundational to wellbeing, learning and behaviour (Owens and Weiss, 2017; Blakemore, 2018). However, in academically driven boarding contexts, values such as independence, resilience and productivity are often prioritised. Over time, these can solidify into unexamined and unchallenged assumptions: late-night study is equated with commitment; fatigue becomes an acceptable cost of academic success; and young people are expected to self-regulate under sustained pressure. While wellbeing is frequently positioned as a strategic priority in policy and rhetoric, institutional structures may inadvertently reinforce behaviours that undermine it (Martin et al., 2014; Schaverien, 2015).

My own action research project that accumulated in a professional enquiry emerged directly from this tension. Rather than initiating a broad, multistrand wellbeing strategy, the enquiry focused deliberately on solely sleep as a core behavioural and cultural indicator, using engagement with the Boarding Schools' Association (BSA) *Sleep Champions* scheme as a structured driver for change. Sleep is neither a proxy for wellbeing nor a solution in isolation. Nevertheless, a substantial evidence base links insufficient adolescent sleep with heightened emotional reactivity, reduced executive functioning, increased anxiety and depressive symptoms, and impaired learning and academic outcomes (Owens and Weiss, 2017; Johri et al., 2025). Within boarding environments, where routines, supervision and physical conditions are institutionally and intentionally configured, sleep provides a

particularly revealing lens through which to examine the gap between wellbeing intent and lived experience of our boarding students.

The professional enquiry adopted a mixed methods approach, drawing on student and staff surveys, environmental audits, and external validation. Findings closely aligned with wider research on school culture and organisational change. Structural and symbolic change occurred relatively quickly. Strengthened evening routines, improved environmental conditions and clearer overnight supervision contributed to calmer residential environments and greater predictability. Point in time data outcomes revealed students reported enhanced comfort and reduced friction around routines, while staff described increased clarity, confidence and role security. These outcomes reflect established cultural theory, which emphasises the power of symbols, rituals and daily practices in shaping experience (Schein, 2010; Deal and Peterson, 2016).

Notably, improvements in staff wellbeing preceded substantive shifts in student behaviour. This mirrors research indicating that adult psychological safety, role clarity and leadership coherence are leading indicators of sustainable cultural change in schools (Deal and Peterson, 2016). As routines became more coherent and expectations more explicit, emotional labour reduced and staff capacity to respond relationally was strengthened. This reinforced a critical insight for boarding leaders: protecting student mental health is inseparable from protecting the wellbeing of the adults responsible for sustaining the environment.

However, the enquiry also highlighted the limits of structural reform. Despite improvements in routine predictability and physical environment, student sleep duration did not increase and late-night device use intensified during periods of heightened academic pressure. This aligns with cultural change theory, which distinguishes between practices that are structurally enforced and behaviours embedded in identity, anxiety and perceived success (Lewin, 1947; Kotter, 2012). While systems and rituals can be adjusted relatively quickly, deeply habituated behaviours often persist, particularly under stress. This also held up a mirror to us in the lens of significant government reform around the use of electronic devices in school and in boarding houses, something that would dominate several stand-alone articles itself.

This distinction has important implications for whole-school approaches to mental health. In boarding contexts, wellbeing cannot be located solely within pastoral teams or addressed through time-limited initiatives. Academic expectations, assessment structures, leadership narratives, staff capacity, and residential routines interact continuously. When one part of the system rewards overwork while another promotes balance, students respond to the dominant signal (Martin et al., 2014; Deal and Peterson, 2016). This is particularly relevant in high-pressured, academically driven international schools such as the ones I have spent most of my career in.

My action research project enquiry reinforced the need for humility and patience in mental health leadership. Cultural change is iterative rather than linear, and early indicators of improvement can obscure unresolved deeper patterns. Research cautions against conflating compliance with genuine wellbeing, to confirm behaviours that persist during periods of pressure often reveal the underlying values of a system (Schein, 2010). For boarding schools, this necessitates sustained attentiveness during examination cycles and other high-stress periods when protective structures are most vulnerable.

Ultimately, the professional enquiry reframed mental wellbeing in boarding as an issue of *oversight* rather than intervention. Oversight does not imply surveillance but refers to the quality of adult attention paid to how young people live when tired, anxious or under strain. Mental wellbeing is sustained through noticing patterns before crises emerge, recognising when independence becomes an absence of care, and intervening early with relational authority (Shand, 2016).

In this sense, my overriding findings were that mental wellbeing in boarding does not derive from doing more, but from noticing more. Such noticing is not incidental; it is a deliberate, research-informed act of leadership that sits at the heart of a whole-school approach to mental health. Which both students and staff can benefit and indeed thrive from.

Kieran has nearly a decade of experience working in leading international boarding schools, specialising in pastoral leadership, safeguarding, and student wellbeing. Now serving as a Director of Boarding, he is particularly interested in how research-informed leadership can shape boarding cultures that promote mental health, resilience, and academic success. His recent action research project professional enquiry examined sleep as a lever for cultural change in boarding environments, with a focus on whole-school coherence and staff wellbeing.

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Case Study

From Reactive to Proactive: Changing the Mental Health Culture in Boarding at Leighton Park School

By Jez Belas in collaboration with key boarding house staff at Leighton Park School

In a boarding school, wellbeing does not stop at the end of the school day.

"Students are not just learning here. They are living here too."

That's the comment from one of the Housemasters at Leighton Park School, located in the centre of Reading. Boarding brings huge opportunities for connection, belonging and community, but also unique challenges, such as homesickness, academic pressure, social media, identity, and loneliness. Sleep is another challenge for boarders - and is a key attributor of low mood at the school, identified via the youHQ digital platform.

The Problem: Why a Reactive Approach Was Not Enough

For international boarding communities like Leighton Park, mental health support needs to be far more than reactive safeguarding or crisis response. It has to become part of the culture of everyday life.to become part of the culture of everyday life.

Leighton Park School has worked alongside youHQ and its accompanying training initiatives over the last 4 years to help shift the culture around mental health and wellbeing. In consultation with staff and students, wellbeing has moved from something largely reactive, to something more preventative, proactive and openly discussed.

One member of staff described the difference between boarding and day students as simply:

"It's 24 hours / 7 days a week."

Boarding staff are often not just teachers or pastoral leads. They become trusted adults, mentors, listeners and, at times, surrogate family figures for young people navigating adolescence in an increasingly complicated world.

"Supporting mental health in boarding means basically having a 24/7, family orientated based care rather than support limited to the school day."
- Boarding Staff Member, Leighton Park School

Before introducing the youHQ wellbeing platform and First Aid for Mental Health training, staff identified a wide range of challenges within the boarding environment, all of which are common across boarding schools internationally. These included anxiety, self-harm, eating disorders, isolation, and difficulties around emotional communication.

Alongside this came another challenge familiar to many international schools and boarding environments: varying cultural understandings of mental health itself. For some students, talking about mental health felt natural. For others, it carried uncertainty or stigma.

Reflecting on supporting an international student experiencing serious issues around mental health, one boarding house staff member reported:

"This was challenging for an international family where mental health is less likely to be discussed openly."

A Whole Community Shift: Key Initiatives

One of the biggest shifts at Leighton Park has been the normalisation of those conversations. A member of staff reflected:

"Mental health is openly discussed without stigma."

Another shared:

"It became relevant to everyone and impacts all in a boarding community."

Wellbeing support works best when it is not viewed as something only accessed during crisis. The aim instead shifted to building an environment where students had the skills to recognise low mood, felt able to speak earlier, seek support sooner, and build wellbeing habits proactively.

This preventative approach has been supported through a combination of staff training, student voice, wellbeing education and the integration of youHQ (a digital platform used for student check-ins and goal setting) within the boarding setting.

Measuring Impact and Normalising Conversations

During just one term from the 2025/26 academic year, students completed 208 wellbeing goals, alongside 36 wellbeing check-ins, and 51 low mood alerts and support conversations.

These platform statistics are bigger than just the numbers, indicating students actively engaging with support, communicating earlier, and building healthier habits around wellbeing.

Staff also described how the visibility of wellbeing systems and trained staff helped reduce stigma and encourage help seeking:

“The training provides an important framework and reassurance to all in the community that the staff are both trained but also willing to have these conversations.”

Another highlighted how regular wellbeing check-ins and recordings through youHQ created opportunities for earlier conversations, particularly with quieter students who may not otherwise seek support directly, or students from communities were talking about mental health might be considered a sign of weakness.

Empowering Peers: The Student Ambassador Role

A particularly important development has been the introduction of student Mental Health First Aid awareness ambassadors and wellness champions within the boarding community itself.

In February 2026, Leighton Park trained students across Years 9 and 10, alongside senior boarding students, helping to create a stronger peer support network within the houses.

This has also added another layer of support within boarding life, because students will often confide in their peers before approaching adults.

The role of the student ambassadors is not to replace professional support or safeguarding systems, but to help create a culture where conversations around mental health feel safer, normalised, and easier to begin - with clear escalation if professional support is needed. In a boarding environment especially, that visibility matters.

Students are surrounded by friends and peers every day. Knowing that other students understand the language of mental health, can recognise warning signs, and know how to encourage someone towards help creates a stronger sense of shared responsibility and belonging across the community.

One member of staff described the impact of the initiative: *“It allows students to talk, should they want to speak to them in a boarding environment.”*

The training has also helped students better understand how to listen without judgement and support each other appropriately, while reinforcing the importance of signposting concerns to trusted adults.

Deepening Relationships: The Coaching Approach

Alongside First Aid for Mental Health training, Leighton Park has also introduced coaching approaches across pastoral teams. Many staff have now completed Graydin coaching training, helping shift conversations away from immediately trying to “fix” problems and instead focusing on listening, reflection and emotional exploration.

As one member of staff explained,

“Coaching is all about listening and guiding, rather than telling students what is wrong and how to solve it.”

This approach appears particularly powerful within boarding where relationships between students and staff are often deeper due to the amount of time spent together.

Sustaining the Culture

Research from the Carnegie Centre of Excellence for Mental Health in Schools highlights the importance of whole school approaches that create healthier environments for entire communities; not simply reactive interventions once difficulties emerge.

At Leighton Park, this whole community approach appears increasingly visible across boarding life through stronger conversations, improved awareness, earlier intervention and greater student engagement with wellbeing support.

Most importantly, the work remains ongoing. Building a mentally healthy boarding culture is not achieved through one program or awareness week. It is built gradually through trust, training, relationships, consistency, and leadership commitment over time. One member of staff reflected:

“It no longer feels like a few kind people going the extra mile; it feels like a whole school approach where the majority of people are aligned in their thinking, goals and practice.”

And that says the most.

When wellbeing becomes part of the everyday rhythm of boarding life rather than an additional initiative, culture begins to change and improve. In a world where young people face growing pressures both online and offline, creating boarding communities where students feel safe, connected and able to ask for help has never mattered more.

Moving forward, the school plans to integrate the First Aid for Mental Health Awareness program into the curriculum for all ‘new’ staff and continue to use the youHQ platform to track the long-term impact of improved student sleep habits.

Leighton Park School in Central Reading, is the UK's leading future-focused, values-led school and a top ten small-cohort IB World School.

Written by Jez Belas based on a survey and contributions from key boarding staff members at the school

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Think Piece

Side-by-Side Pastoral Care: Breaking the “Masculinity Trap” in Co-Educational Boarding.

By Callum Carroll (Head of Boarding)

Introduction

The traditional landscape of adolescent mental health support is facing a quiet but significant crisis of engagement. A recent survey by the Mental Health Foundation[1] found that 89% of young people aged between 18 and 24 have been affected by anxiety in their daily life. Recent data from the Kent & Medway Learning Event highlighted a stark reality: a 65% increase in CAMHS crisis presentations, alongside the enduring truth that young men remain significantly more likely to die by suicide. Yet, despite the rising tide of distress, our traditional avenues for help-seeking are failing to reach teenage boys.

As a practitioner running a co-educational boarding house, these statistics aren't just figures on a page; they represent the daily social and emotional dynamics playing out under our roof. Boarding schools are no longer the centres of brutality as described by Schaverien (2015). Now boarding schools occupy a unique, highly privileged position in a young person’s life. Because we live alongside them, we see them outside the artificial constraints of the classroom. Consequently, we are uniquely positioned to dismantle the barriers preventing young men from accessing the help they need.

The Current Climate

When we look at the timeline of adolescent development, the window for intervention is incredibly tight. The data proves what we feel instinctively on the ground: nearly half of all lifetime mental health struggles take root before a child turns 18, with the volatile age of 14.5 marking the absolute peak for onset (Solmi et al. (2022)). This tells us everything we need to know. If we are going to shift the needle on mental health, the critical battleground is right here in secondary education.

Yet, it is young men who are consistently falling through the gaps of this safety net. The consequences of letting them slip by are devastating; we know that young men face disproportionately poorer outcomes, a reality that peaks tragically when male university students face significantly higher suicide rates than their female peers, particularly during their first year away from home.[2]

But the most frustrating paradox of pastoral care is that a spike in need rarely equals a spike in help-seeking. Young men remain profoundly underrepresented in clinical spaces, making up less than 30% of NHS psychological therapy referrals for the 18–25 age bracket. The barrier isn't a lack of services; it's a deeply ingrained mindset. As the literature suggests, the boys who need the most support are often the ones who view asking for it as a failure. Rickwood et al. (2007) found that those who were more reluctant to seek help for mental health often viewed help-seeking as a negative process or saw mental health difficulties as something they could solve themselves.

Research by Gulliver et al. (2010) highlights that for young people in general, a pervasive social stigma combined with a fundamental lack of mental health literacy acts as a massive roadblock to help-seeking. When adolescents don't understand what they are experiencing, or view it through a lens of shame, they simply don't reach out.

For young men, this barrier is compounded further by ingrained cultural expectations. While Addis and Mahalik (2003) originally identified this trend in adult males, the reality is that the blueprint forms right here in adolescence: traditional notions of masculinity - specifically Connell's hierarchy (2005) and the demands of hegemonic masculinity for total self-reliance, emotional control, and an aura of power - mean that men feel inherently unable to approach services.

In a residential community, the threat of breaking that mould is terrifying. For a boarder to admit that they cannot handle the pressure means risking their status. As Addis and Mahalik proposed, boys carry a deep, systemic fear of being 'othered' by their peers - isolated from the group for showing what they perceive as weakness. They don't see a mental health struggle as a challenge to be shared with a trusted adult; they see it as a personal flaw that they are entirely expected to fix on their own. It is far safer for a boy to retreat behind a mask of irritation or isolation than to risk his place in the social hierarchy by raising his hand for help.

Previously, I have seen a note left by a boarder on their roommate's bed before they returned during exams expressing how they just needed to go home. Not a conversation, a note. Separating the emotional connection with card left in his place. A phrase that stayed with me was "*Boarding isn't for the weak. No place like home."* This is not the first time within boarding the term "weak" has been used when identifying support systems within the pastoral care of our school network. Another young man refused to engage with our school counsellor after being given the option to, claiming: *"I don't need that, I'm not weak."* It becomes apparent that the most common cause in avoiding help-seeking behaviour is perception.

Sheikh et al. (2024) emphasises that help-seeking avoidance cannot be viewed in a vacuum; it is driven by a complex interplay between Conformity to Masculine Norms (CMN) and internalised self-stigma. When adolescent boys adhere strictly to traditional ideals of emotional stoicism and mental strength, they begin to view psychological distress as a personal deficit. This triggers an intense self-stigma, where asking for help is perceived as an absolute sign of weakness or a direct threat to their masculinity. To bypass this, we must actively reframe our pastoral delivery by replacing intimidating, face-to-face clinical interventions with non-contact methods, written or digital resources, and male-friendly, non-diagnostic language. Furthermore, the data suggests that help-seeking must be viewed through an intersectional lens, noting that expectations of "mental strength" can manifest with distinct, heightened pressures within specific ethnic groups, such as Black UK communities.

Crucially, the research introduces the concept of self-compassion as a vital psychological buffer, proving that young men who are taught to treat themselves with kindness experience significantly lower levels of anxiety and depression, effectively neutralizing the fear of vulnerability. While formal, professional help is overwhelmingly viewed by boys as a terrifying "last resort," their natural inclination is to lean on informal networks - turning first to family, and increasingly to peers as they grow older. However, this creates a distinct paradox: boys want to talk to their friends but are simultaneously paralyzed by the fear of being judged or "othered" within their social circle. This highlights a massive opportunity for residential environments. Rather than forcing boys into clinical settings, schools should focus on "gender-based prevention" by training peer groups and utilising relatable male role models to foster a non-judgmental, culturally acceptable space right in the house, empowering boys to support one another organically.

The Real-Time "Emotional Divergence"

In a co-ed residential environment, you get a front-row seat to a phenomenon sociologists call "The Emotional Divergence." Around the age of 10, boys and girls demonstrate remarkably similar levels of emotional literacy. But by age 13, a chasm opens. Girls rapidly outpace boys, developing a nuanced, articulate vocabulary for their internal landscapes.

Meanwhile, many boys fall victim to the "Peer Pressure Cooker". To maintain social status and fit into idealised cultural norms of masculinity - where emotional control and suppression are equated with strength - they begin to view vulnerability as a liability. In a mixed peer environment, this fear of looking "soft" or "beneath" their peers is amplified tenfold. While the girls in the house might openly sit in the common room and articulate their anxieties, the boys often retreat or mask their concerns and anxieties behind an irritable wall of performance.

Decoding the Soft Language of Distress

If we expect a teenage boy to walk into a visible pastoral office, sit across a desk, and announce, *"I am feeling depressed,"* we are setting him up to fail. Traditional clinical labels scare boys away. They fear a lack of confidentiality, and they fear the stigma.

Instead, boys communicate through what is known as "soft language" or "utility language". In our house, a boy who is struggling won't say he is anxious. He will tell you he is "stressed," "tired," or "over it". If the distress deepens, it shifts to utility: "I'm useless" or "What's the point?"

Furthermore, boys rarely initiate these conversations. They rely heavily on a "Notice Me" dynamic, masking their internal turmoil through external behaviours like sudden irritability, social withdrawal, or physical distancing. In a boarding community, catching these shifts requires staff to be active observers, ready to spot the subtle change in how a boy walks into dinner or how long he spends isolated in his room, so we can proactively and discreetly step in.

The Power of "Side-by-Side" Pastoral Care

So, how do we bridge this gap in a co-ed house? The answer lies in shifting our environment from a face-to-face interrogation to a side-by-side connection.

The best pastoral work with young men does not happen across a desk. It happens organically. It happens while making toast in the house kitchen at 9:00 PM, while playing a casual game of pool, watching a football match, or setting up a house challenge. By engaging boys in informal, lower-stakes spaces, the pressure drops. When eye contact is optional and your hands are busy, the barriers come down.

In a co-ed house, we must intentionally curate these moments. This means:

- **Mirroring Their Language:** Meeting boys exactly where they are. If a boy says he is "stressed" or "angry", we work with that word rather than forcing him into a complex emotional vocabulary that causes immediate discomfort.

- **Corridor Check-ins:** Normalising brief, proactive, and incredibly discreet check-ins. A quick chat on the stairs or over a dinner plate protects their privacy and removes the visible "shame" of seeking help in front of their peers.
- **Visible Role Models:** Actively utilising male residential staff who aren't afraid to model a full emotional range. When boys see men they respect talking openly about their own setbacks, pressures, and feelings, the rigid masculine hierarchy begins to fracture. The veil drops and they see that respect goes both ways.

Individual Care Over One-Size-Fits-All

Ultimately, taking boys seriously means acknowledging that equality in pastoral care does not mean treating everyone the same. There is a difference between what is equal and what is equitable. It means recognising that different genders - and indeed, different individuals - navigate the stormy waters of adolescence differently.

When positive male role models within the residential team professionally share a part of their own emotional capacity with adolescent young men, the shift in the house dynamic is palpable. I saw this firsthand recently during a discussion about the complex feelings surrounding home and belonging. After opening up and modelling that emotional transparency with the previously mentioned Year 11, he looked at me and said words that stayed with me: *“I know you care and I respect you a lot, sir.”*

In that single, quiet moment, the entire masculine hierarchy shifted for that young man. He didn't see vulnerability as soft; he saw it as something worthy of respect. By stepping out from behind the traditional facade of stoic authority and meeting our boys' side-by-side, we aren't just offering pastoral care - we are giving them permission to rewrite what it means to be a man.

By moving past traditional "sit and talk" structures and leaning into the relational, informal strengths of the boarding ethos, we can ensure that every young man in our care feels seen, heard, known, and supported - on his own terms.

Callum Carroll currently works at King’s School Rochester, a 3-18 Independent Day and Boarding School in Rochester, Kent. He is both Head of Boarding and one of the Day Housemasters. He is a Level 2 BSA Accredited Practitioner and recently led the merging of our well-established boys’ and girls’ house into a new co-educational community.

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Case Study

LVS ASCOT Whole school approach to mental wellbeing

by James Wilder (Head of Boarding) and Laura Collins (Safeguarding lead).

LVS Ascot is a vibrant co-educational independent school located in Berkshire, offering a supportive and inclusive environment for pupils aged 4 to 18. Known for its strong emphasis on both academic achievement and personal development, the school provides a broad curriculum alongside a wide range of cocurricular opportunities. With excellent boarding facilities, modern resources, and a focus on nurturing confidence and character, LVS Ascot strives to help every student exceed expectations in a welcoming and forward-thinking community.

Mental wellbeing sits at the heart of boarding life at LVS Ascot, underpinning the school's commitment to fostering a safe, supportive, and nurturing environment in which every boarder can thrive and feel a strong sense of belonging. The boarding provision is designed to ensure that pupils feel valued, understood, and supported, recognising that emotional wellbeing is fundamental to both personal development and academic success.

A key strength of the provision is the expertise and dedication of the boarding team. The majority of boarding staff are trained Mental Health First Aiders, enabling them to recognise early signs of distress and respond effectively and sensitively. This is complemented by this being a highly experienced, committed, and cohesive boarding team who build strong, trusting relationships with pupils and their families through consistent care and daily interaction; ensuring a joined-up approach to each boarder's wellbeing.

LVS Ascot benefits from well-established links with external agencies, allowing the school to access specialist advice and support when required. Internally, pupils have access to a comprehensive network of support, including not only the school nursing team but also a qualified counsellor and a dedicated wellbeing practitioner. Where appropriate, Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) provision is available, offering targeted intervention to help pupils develop emotional awareness and coping strategies.

The school adopts a holistic approach to monitoring and supporting wellbeing. The use of CPOMS ensures that all relevant information is recorded and shared appropriately, allowing staff to build a complete and informed picture of each boarder. Those boarders that are identified as needing extra support or monitoring also have a bespoke care plan, which enables all boarding staff insight as to techniques and support that may or, sometimes more importantly, not be appropriate for that individual child. This is reinforced by regular discussions during roll calls, where topics related to mental wellbeing and its impact on daily life are explored in an age-appropriate and supportive manner. These conversations help to normalise discussions around mental health and encourage pupils to reflect on their own wellbeing practise.

Pupil voice plays a vital role within the boarding community. Strong leadership opportunities enable boarders to contribute meaningfully to decision making processes, while also providing a supportive peer platform for those who may feel less confident in expressing concerns. Older or more experienced boarders actively support those less experienced in this environment as well as being role models for their younger counterparts to look up to. This inclusive culture ensures that all pupils feel heard and valued.

Community cohesion is further enhanced through the celebration of cultural diversity and the observance of a wide range of cultural events. Additionally, the boarding houses place great emphasis on shared experiences, regularly organising activities that bring pupils together as a House and as a wider boarding community. These collective experiences foster a sense of belonging, promote positive relationships, and strengthen peer support networks which we find are key to happy and successful children.

Within the wider school framework, boarders participate in the Cambridge Wellbeing Check, providing an additional mechanism for identifying potential concerns. Any issues flagged are followed up by the pastoral team, ensuring timely and appropriate intervention where necessary.

Finally, the school's ongoing work towards the Carnegie Mental Health Award demonstrates a proactive commitment to continuous improvement. This process is enabling pastoral leaders to reflect critically on current provision and to further enhance the support available to pupils, ensuring that mental wellbeing remains central to the experience of attending LVS Ascot.

James Wilder
Is Head of Boarding of LVS Ascot community, he works closely with pupils from a wide range of backgrounds and nationalities, ensuring they feel at home while developing independence, confidence and lifelong friendships.
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Case Study

From anxiety to achievement: ROCKS is the answer

By Jonno Melia, Deputy Principal: Pastoral and Wellbeing, Oxford International College (OIC) Brighton

As winter approaches, it's easy to focus on wellbeing. But, at OIC Brighton, we believe it matters all year round. Academic success is not just about achieving top grades; it's about nurturing the whole student, and wellbeing is central to that journey.

Just like the pebbles on Brighton beach, every child is unique, which is why our approach to wellbeing is personalised, not one-size-fits-all. And just like the words on a stick of Brighton rock, wellbeing runs through everything we do – from academic excellence to personal growth and career readiness. This is especially true as students approach the mock exam period in the lead-up to their exams next year.

Inspired by the New Economics Foundation's Five Ways to Wellbeing, our own approach, OIC Brighton ROCKS, offers five adaptable steps to support your child's physical and mental wellbeing, throughout their GCSE or A Level years.

Relate

Feeling connected to others is vital for wellbeing. Whether your child is a day or boarding student, friendships and a sense of belonging can make all the difference. For day students, socialising with their friends helps build community and reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation. For those living away from home for the first time and, it is natural to experience homesickness or anxiety as they adjust to an unfamiliar environment. Encouraging young people to form meaningful connections is key to helping them feel supported and settled.

At our college, our house parents encourage bonding through group activities such as baking, bingo or pizza and film nights. Peer support initiatives, mentorship programmes or a buddy system can be useful if your child needs extra support to find their place within their school community – especially at the beginning of the academic year.

Observe

Overexposure to technology and social media is well-recognised for contributing to stress, anxiety and low moods in young people. That is why schools must encourage students to spend time offline and develop healthy boundaries with the digital world. This boosts productivity and promotes better sleep, which, in turn, contributes to their overall mental wellbeing. If your child's school lives in a rural location, like our college, do they encourage students to spend time outdoors in nature? Being able to eat lunch or dinner outside in nature or take short walks in green surroundings can boost your teenager's feelings of wellness. Reading, art and meditation are also meaningful ways to reduce reliance on technology.

Care

More than three quarters (77 per cent) of volunteers agreed that volunteering improves their mental health and wellbeing, which is why we encourage all our students to get involved in supporting local causes. Whether it is litter picking in the local community, planning a fundraising event, or donating time to a worthy cause, teenagers who volunteer benefit from improved wellbeing and the development of valuable skills such as leadership, communication and critical thinking.

Keep learning

Learning a new skill helps young people gain confidence, become adaptable and reduces feelings of stress. At OIC Brighton, students benefit from our Super Curriculum Programme, which provides an extensive range of experiences led by staff and students. From robotics to football coaching to arts, every young person can explore their passions and interests whilst enhancing their personal development. Clubs and societies also offer valuable opportunities for teenagers to make friends. In the lead-up to their exams, encouraging your child to join a new club or schedule time for their hobbies can be a powerful way to support their wellbeing.

Stay active

A healthy mind and body are essential for academic success and overall happiness. A well-balanced diet and regular physical activity are key to ensuring that your child is prepared to navigate the upcoming exam period. To encourage teenagers to embrace an active lifestyle, it is important that their school offers a wide range of activities so that they can explore and find one or two that they truly enjoy. Whether this is a team sport such as football, hockey or basketball, or an individual pursuit such as archery or running, regular exercise empowers young people to live healthy, fulfilling lives.

A wellbeing strategy that is tailored to your child will ensure that they feel nurtured and valued at school - and have the tools they need to navigate their upcoming exams with confidence and ease. If there is one thing we know for certain, OIC Brighton has a wellbeing strategy that ROCKS.

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Think Piece

Mental Health in Boarding Schools: Emerging insights, effective practice and the importance of strategic leadership by

James Greenham of the Health and Education Association

Mental health and wellbeing remain among the most significant priorities for school leaders, and boarding schools face a distinctive set of opportunities and challenges. It is also a key pillar of the training provided by HIEDA, the Health in Education Association, which aims to champion excellence within school healthcare departments and medical teams.

Whilst the wellbeing of pupils is of fundamental importance across all school communities, boarding environments provide strong pastoral support, stable routines and established wellbeing programmes focussed specifically to address areas associated with separation from family, transitions, peer relationships, academic pressure and the demands of living and learning within the same environment.

Research increasingly suggests that the quality of relationships, pastoral care systems and whole-school wellbeing strategies are critical determinants of positive mental health outcomes for boarding students.

Studies examining boarding school experiences have found that student wellbeing is closely linked to feelings of belonging, trusted adult relationships and effective support during key transition periods.

Longitudinal research from Australia has shown that students entering boarding environments may experience increased emotional challenges during transition phases, highlighting the importance of structured induction programmes, peer mentoring and ongoing wellbeing monitoring.

However, the same studies also suggest that strong support systems can mitigate these risks and help students adapt successfully.

In response, many boarding schools have significantly strengthened their mental health provision over the past decade. A growing number have adopted a whole-school approach to wellbeing, integrating mental health promotion into leadership, curriculum design, safeguarding, staff development and pastoral care structures. This aligns with guidance from the Department for Education (DfE), which emphasises evidence-informed, organisation-wide approaches led by trained senior mental health leaders.

TASIS England, have created a boarding wellbeing and mentoring programme called ‘Thrive’ designed to educate students around topics that would help them take ownership of their own wellbeing. Each week, students were provided with knowledge, skills and support based around key themes, ranging from sleep health to nutrition and developing healthy relationships. The school believes the programme has created a *“research-based blueprint or theories of change for new boarding initiatives”.*

Across the sector, common practices also now include dedicated wellbeing teams, school counsellors, mental health practitioners, house-based pastoral systems and enhanced safeguarding procedures. Boarding houses increasingly use regular wellbeing check-ins, structured tutor programmes and pastoral tracking systems to identify concerns early. Many schools have also introduced peer-support initiatives, resilience education, emotional literacy programmes and staff training designed to improve confidence in recognising and responding to emerging mental health needs. These measures reflect evidence showing that supportive relationships between students, staff and families are among the strongest protective factors for young people's wellbeing.

Policy frameworks have similarly evolved. Most boarding schools now maintain comprehensive mental health and wellbeing policies that sit alongside safeguarding, behaviour, attendance and pastoral care procedures. Effective policies typically outline referral pathways, risk assessment processes, crisis response arrangements, confidentiality protocols and expectations for multi-agency working. Schools are also increasingly adopting wellbeing strategies that address both student and staff mental health, recognising the close relationship between workforce wellbeing and the quality of support available to young people. The DfE's whole-school approach framework places particular emphasis on leadership commitment, staff development, student voice and continuous evaluation of wellbeing provision.

Another notable development is the growing recognition of transition support as a key component of boarding school mental health strategy. Research has consistently demonstrated that the move into boarding can be emotionally demanding for some students, particularly younger pupils and those living far from home. Schools are therefore investing in pre-arrival engagement, transition events, family communication strategies and ongoing monitoring throughout the first year of boarding. These interventions aim to strengthen resilience while ensuring that students receive timely support if difficulties emerge.

DLD College London ensure the wellbeing needs of their international students are met by *“integrating cultural sensitivity, therapeutic tools and a focus on responsibility and empowerment”* with a view to creating an inclusive, supportive environment to help students far away from home navigate challenges with resilience and confidence.

For senior leaders, the challenge is no longer simply providing access to support services. Increasingly, the focus is on creating cultures in which wellbeing is embedded across every aspect of school life. This requires robust governance, clear accountability, evidence-informed decision making and continuous professional development for staff at all levels. The role of the Senior Mental Health Lead has become central to this agenda, helping schools coordinate strategy, evaluate impact and ensure that wellbeing remains a core element of school improvement planning.

HIEDA supports boarding school leaders and pastoral professionals through a comprehensive training programme focused on mental health, wellbeing and safeguarding. This includes Mental Health First Aid training, specialist guidance on policy development and procedures, and accredited certificate programmes designed to strengthen professional knowledge and leadership capability.

By providing evidence-informed training, practical resources and sector-specific expertise, HIEDA supports health centres in boarding schools to develop confident staff teams and sustainable whole-school approaches to mental health that meet the evolving needs of students and communities.

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Think Piece

Why International Pupils Aren't Failing to Adapt—We Are

By Susan Fang

Bobby, a Year 9 boy arrives at his new boarding house in September. Headphones in, eyes down on the phone. He has not made small talk with an unfamiliar grown-up since he was seven, because the last time anyone expected him to, the world had just been told to stay indoors.

Nobody thought to mention any of this to his houseparent.

So, our best people carry on. The ones who have done this job for twenty years, and are quite rightly proud of it, are still reading this boy through a lens for a different child altogether: the one who stopped arriving around 2020. That is the bit the sector keeps tiptoeing past.

Everyone nods along that boarding schools “must do more” for their Chinese pupils. Far fewer will say the quiet part aloud, which is that the child has not failed to adapt to boarding at all. The briefing simply has not caught up with the child.

There are three specific ways this year’s intake differs from the one your handbook was written for. None of them is about being “more Chinese” or “less Chinese” - do put that tired framing to bed. They are generational, and they land on a British Year 9 every bit as much as a Shanghai one. They just hit the international boarder harder because he arrives with far less runway to sort it out before the exam clock starts ticking.

1. The Social Development Gap Nobody Put on the Risk Register

Your new Year 9, 10 or 12 was seven, eight or ten when the world locked its doors. That is not a footnote. Those are the very years a child learns to read a room, talk their way into a seat at the lunch table, lose an argument with a friend on Monday and be close again by the weekend. The whole curriculum was cancelled, and nobody sat it again on their behalf.

I wrote about Mia last year. A Shanghai teenager who spent most of middle school attending lessons from her bedroom, she arrived in the UK for her A levels with no real idea how to connect with people face to face. “It’s like everyone else knows how to do this,” she told me, “But I don’t.” She was not unwilling. She was unrehearsed.

Schools clock a quiet, phone-absorbed pupil and file the whole thing under “shy,” or worse, under “cultural reserve.” Increasingly, it is neither. It is a child who missed the years when socialising turns into second nature, now trying to learn it live, in a second language, in front of an audience.

The fix is not more supervision. It is more rehearsal. Structured, low-stakes social repetition: the house gathering before lights-out that nobody put on a timetable but everyone turns up to; the Upper Sixth girl running a bit of pastoral care in the common room because she watched someone do exactly that the year before. You cannot write that into a policy document eighteen months ahead of when it is needed. You build the habit years in advance, on purpose, the way you would build a fire drill. Only this drill is “how to sit next to someone at breakfast when you haven’t the foggiest what to say.”

And do watch the phones properly, not for show. A corridor of teenagers walking with their heads up, talking to one another, is a house that has cracked it. A corridor where every child is hunched over a screen is a house that is losing a fight most Heads will not admit they are even in.

2. The English Gap Nobody’s Allowed to Say Out Loud

This is where schools land in hot water because it collides with face culture at pace.

Cast your mind back fifteen years. A pupil applying to join Year 12 of a UK boarding school would, as a matter of course, turn up with English at roughly IELTS 6 - comfortably enough to get at the A level curriculum without much fuss. Today the average is nearer IELTS 5, and often below. Same schools, same age group, same fees. A whole band of English proficiency has drained away in a decade and a half.

This is not a run of unlucky admissions. It is a generation. Chinese families, taken as a whole, are no longer invested in their children learning English the way they once were, and there’s policy behind it. Several major Chinese universities, Xi’an Jiaotong and Fudan among them, have dropped the College English Test (CET-4/6) as a hard graduation requirement, moving instead to practical assessment or making English credits optional by major. Shanghai and Beijing have pared back how often and how heavily primary-school English is examined, to ease the load on young pupils. The subject is still taught, just tested less and prized less as a formal badge of achievement. Even the Gaokao’s English component is now openly argued over in Chinese public discourse, though it remains a pillar of admissions for the time being.

None of this is Chinese families under-investing out of idleness. It is a generation raised inside a system that has itself downgraded English as a proof point, and it is boarding staff who meet the consequence of that shift, in a British boarding house, without ever having been told it happened. The pupil who would once have arrived exam-ready now arrives needing to be built up to it, and that gap has to be named to someone - to the child, and to the family.

The fix is not to lower the bar, nor to pretend the gap is not there. It is to change who delivers the message and how quickly. A conversation about a child's English is where face culture and British plain-speaking collide hardest and fast. Our complaint rhythm is email, then meeting, then resolution, over a comfortable fortnight. The Chinese rhythm is WeChat, then viral, then decision, inside forty-eight hours; say the wrong thing to the wrong parent and forty families can be in a group chat about it by supper. So, frame it, from the very first sentence, as an investment plan with a name and a timeline attached, never as a verdict. Lead with "here is the extra support and here is who's delivering it," long before you get anywhere near "here is the shortfall." And if something does go awry, the three words that save you are "we'll fix this," said inside two hours, not two weeks.

3. The Pupil Who Is Not Trying to Become More Western

This is the one that genuinely changes the job.

A Gen Z or Gen Alpha Chinese pupil today is not necessarily arriving in the hope of becoming more Western. They have grown up in a China that hands them Huawei, Li-Ning, Xiaohongshu and a real, evidenced belief that home offers every bit as much as the West does, if not more. I said as much back when Chinese Gen Z were watching 1921, the 2021 film marking the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party, and telling me, entirely unprompted, that nothing compares to home. That instinct has not reversed. If anything, it is stronger in the pupils walking through the door now.

Which means the old authority model does not land any more: tell a child what British boarding expects and expect gratitude for the correction. The child is not being defiant. It is that the underlying premise, that they ought to want to change, has stopped being true for them.

The fix is persuasion over instruction, starting with staff who can decode the question underneath the question. A Chinese family rarely tells you straight out what is worrying them. They'll ask about the Beijing boy in the football academy, the Grade 8 violinist in the year above, the exact route one particular pupil took… and that's how they test whether you actually know their child's world or are just reciting the prospectus back at them. Staff who win the room are those who can hear that and show rather than instruct. Staff who lecture lose it and never find out why.

The Actual Contrarian Bit

Not one of these three is a "Chinese student problem." They are what happens when an entire generation's operating system gets rewritten and the boarding briefing does not.

The compliance version of guardianship watches for these three gaps and reacts once they have caused a complaint. The premium version spots them before they ever need managing.

Here is what I will say plainly because it is only fair to say it to houseparents themselves: nobody should be expected to work all this out alone, on the floor, at ten o'clock at night, middle of a term. This is not a character test. It is a preparation gap, and preparation is something schools can supply, if only somebody asks them to.

There is already a proper, structured way to do this, rather than leaving skilled staff to improvise. A half-day, on-site briefing for pastoral teams, built with an academic English specialist, covering exactly the three gaps above: reading silence and compliance, what to do in week one, and how to have the English-ability conversation without it landing in a WeChat group by lunchtime. It is part of the Thrive partnership I run with Aster Academy, currently being piloted with our Founding Schools. If your school has not yet put anything of the sort in front of your staff, that is a conversation worth having with your Head of Boarding. The tools exist. Someone just must ask for them.

So, here is the real question for anyone running a boarding house this September. Is your training still preparing people to manage a child who last existed in 2019, or has someone equipped them for the child sitting in front of them now?

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She co-runs the Thrive pastoral partnership with Aster Academy, currently being piloted across a founding cohort of UK boarding schools.

She is a prominent voice on East–West international education, specialising in the cultural nuances and consumer psychology of the Chinese diaspora to help families make informed choices.

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