

# The stress should be on a helping hand

Suicide of a mainland student highlights pressures on our best and brightest, writes **Liz Gooch**

**S**aturday night is a time when most university students take a break from the rigours of study. It's a time to swap textbooks and lectures for a night of socialising with friends. Last weekend, a carefree night out was a world away from the dormitory room of Ge Weiwei, a mainland PhD student at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

At 7pm last Saturday a security guard found the student from Suzhou, in Jiangsu province, dead in his bedroom. Ge, 27, who had recently suffered depression and received counselling, had hanged himself.

His death has again cast light on the dark, inner troubles some students struggle to overcome. Although HKUST experienced a similar tragedy in 2004 when another mainland PhD candidate leapt to his death from a campus building, the university's students are not alone in coping with mental illness.

Psychologists say depression is more common among university students than is often acknowledged and mainland students such as Ge may suffer additional pressures.

Every day, an average of three people commit suicide in Hong Kong. Disturbingly, it is the leading cause of death for those aged 15 to 24. Recent years have seen a number of student suicides involving young people of all ages. One of the most shocking came in May when an 11-year-old boy jumped to his death.

Although cases involving younger students may attract the most attention, Paul Yip Siu-fai, director of the Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention, said mental health problems were often more common among university students than people expected.

Dr Yip said it was often assumed that if students were academically talented they would be able to cope with the challenges of university life. Reality often told a different story.

"I think the situation is serious and we have to address it," he said.

Depression was seen in students from all backgrounds, but Dr Yip said mainland students faced extra challenges.

"It's not anything less than when they go to America. They still have to adjust to a different environment," he said.

Dr Yip said mainland students were often under great pressure to perform well because many used their studies in Hong Kong as a stepping stone to pursue further studies abroad. "When they come to Hong Kong they have to work even harder and find another opportunity to go to other countries," he said. These students usually had to adjust to studying in a second language and living in a place that could be very different from where they grew up.

"These are one-child-policy kids. They might have been spoilt and well-protected in schools but coming to Hong Kong is a completely different thing," Dr Yip said, adding that study expectations for research degrees differed greatly from the undergraduate level.

Dr Yip said mainland students were often very focused.

"Because they are so focused, if anything goes wrong then I think they may have problems adjusting," he said.

Kang Tsi-kit, a clinical psychologist for more than 20 years and a former counsellor at the University of Hong Kong, said anxiety and depression may be more common among university students than the general population.

Mr Kang, who provides consulting services to schools and universities through his company Nurturing Education, remembers two student suicides during his nine years at HKU. The recent case of a



For some students, the burdens of a strange environment and different study pressures are too much to bear. Photo: K. Y. Cheng

mainland student who disappeared for more than a fortnight before being found in Shenzhen reminded him of two mainland students who went missing.

Both were eventually found but Mr Kang said: "They had to take time off to clear their thinking, away from people they knew and the campus."

Mr Kang said many mainland students worked hard to get to Hong Kong but university required a different type of learning to what they had experienced at school. Students had to collaborate, be vocal and express their opinions.

"This is the kind of thing that some of them feel that they are not comfortable doing," he said.

Some students, especially those who came from poorer backgrounds, may also be under pressure to perform well so that they can find a well-paid job to support their families.

Mr Kang said mainland students were less likely to seek counselling than their Hong Kong counterparts, a difference he attributed to the stigma attached to mental illness on the mainland.

This week HKUST pledged to strengthen support services for those studying away from home. A spokeswoman said the university already had five Putonghua-speaking counsellors but planned to increase this to about eight.

The university also has urged faculty members to pay more attention to students' behaviour.

Two of the city's biggest universities, HKU and Chinese University, each have five student counsellors. All of those at HKU and three of the CUHK team are clinical psychologists. Universities typically have orientation and buddy programmes

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Kang Tsi-kit, clinical psychologist



to support mainland students. Although experts this week said Hong Kong would need to at least double its number of psychiatrists in the next decade, Dr Yip said simply increasing the number of student counsellors was not enough.

Universities needed to prevent students' mental well-being from deteriorating in the first place. "When they have problems you have to make sure the services are there to help them but I think the important thing is to not let them develop these symptoms," he said.

Dr Yip said organised courses could help raise awareness and understanding. A 12-week, credit-bearing course for HKU undergraduates, entitled Stress, Depression and Suicide, had been oversubscribed since it was introduced two

years ago, an indication that many students were interested in understanding the issues.

Dr Yip said universities could provide more support for mainland students, such as providing counsellors who spoke Putonghua. "When they feel very depressed ... I think they would like to have someone who can speak their language."

Most universities had mainland postgraduate student associations that could help students adjust and fellow students could help identify friends who were struggling and encourage them to seek help, Dr Yip said. Supervisors could also monitor students' overall well-being.

"What I've been telling my students is, 'please go out, try to have a more balanced life and then even if one aspect of your life goes wrong, the other things can act as a protective factor'," he said.

Mr Kang said many universities were doing a good job but could benefit from a multidisciplinary approach by employing clinical psychologists, a psychiatrist and social workers. He said counsellors needed to be experienced to detect students who needed help.

"They can cover up a lot of things and try to behave in ways that don't show they have issues," he said.

Mr Kang said engaging students from different backgrounds required an understanding of their culture and the culture of the university. If the university had a culture that promoted high achievers and focused on the brightest students, others may feel pressured by this ideal.

For help at any time call the Suicide Prevention Services 24-hour hotline on 2382 0000.