

helping students  
manage

the pressures of



higher education.

## summary

Britain's universities and colleges have been booming over the past decade, with more people graduating than ever before. But the demands of studying are taking a toll on students, with growing recognition that higher education places significant strains on their bank balances and health.

How can universities deal with these issues and what should students themselves do to ensure that their years in higher education really are the best times of their lives?

More than a third of school leavers choose to continue their education at college or university. While many of them find the experience rewarding, there is growing recognition that significant numbers of students suffer health problems or struggle to make ends meet.

With new research showing that nearly half of students have thought about dropping out of their courses, universities need to find ways to reduce the burden and help those who are struggling to cope. They also need to help with next steps - students do not believe that their qualifications will bring instant success, and the paths to finding a career are not always clear.

The growing emphasis on mental health in higher education needs to be sustained and built upon, so that students are given all the help they need to deal with their stresses. At the same time, universities and policymakers must consider ways of reducing those stresses so that higher education can continue to create a pool of talented, skilled and motivated people and help them find rewarding careers.



## about the survey

The Randstad Student Support survey was conducted in June 2017 using an online questionnaire and was completed by 1,203 undergraduates and postgraduates at a range of universities and colleges across the UK.

Randstad also organises workshops and across Universities up and down the country, addressing a range of issues relating to students mental health and wellbeing.

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# introduction.

## the pressure of higher education

For generations, getting a university degree has been viewed as a passport to a good career and financial success. Student numbers have grown enormously over the past 50 years and there's every sign of that continuing. Record numbers of 18-year-olds applied for places at British universities in 2017<sup>[1]</sup> and more than a third of the UK's workforce now has a degree.

Yet higher education is not a cost-free exercise for students, in terms of both their wealth and health. Not everyone arrives at university with the mental and financial resources to deal with the impact of taking a degree. Leaving home, studying independently and forming new social networks all take their toll.

Students require significant levels of financial support to cover outgoings like tuition fees and living expenses, support with their mental and physical wellbeing, and support to make the transition from education to the workplace.

This report will examine these issues in depth, with the help of a comprehensive survey of undergraduates and postgraduates at UK universities and colleges undertaken by Randstad, which sheds light on the way students view their situation and the way they deal with it – as well as their views on the support they feel is available to them.

# 45%

of students, the survey found, [have considered dropping out of their courses](#) – discovering why they were considering this, and what has helped them overcome their issues, is key to understanding the problem.

## financial pressures

Tuition fees receive a lot of attention in the media. With conflicting advice about the best way to approach them, how do students deal with the burden of debt? Fees are far from the only financial costs for students, who also need to fund their rent, living expenses, resources for their courses like books and IT equipment, as well as expenses for job hunting, like clothes and travel. Where can students find the money to pay for this? Are resources signposted well enough? Can all students access funds or are some at a disadvantage?



just how much does it  
cost to be a student?

### tuition fees

The maximum tuition fee is now £9,250 per year – the average is £9,188<sup>[2]</sup>

### cost of living

The average annual cost is £12,056 outside London, of which about £1,350 goes on groceries.<sup>[3]</sup> In London, the total figure rises to £15,180 due to rent.

### regional variations

Students resident in Scotland effectively pay no tuition fees. Those from Wales pay up to £3,900, with the Welsh government paying the remainder.

### health issues

Exams are considered to be the obvious area of stress for students, but there are plenty of other issues affecting people who arrive in higher education as they leave their teenage years. Housing, friendships, relationships and money worries are just a few of the other issues facing undergraduates and college students. Trying to balance their studies with their new lifestyle, keeping up with friends and trying to do too much because of the “Fear Of Missing Out” can lead to breakdowns.

The people this affects need help, but mental health is still considered to be the “Cinderella service” of the NHS, overlooked and underfunded. Where can students receive advice and support that will stop them falling into situations that will cause them serious harm? If issues arise with their physical health, can students easily access services like GPs or dentists? And given that alcohol often plays a large role in many students’ lifestyles, what health problems arise from misuse?

# 78%

of students have suffered from **mental health problems**, according to the NUS.<sup>[4]</sup>

### career uncertainty

Simply choosing a career can be a hard enough task for some people, but finding your first job is enormously daunting for many. While some roles have a well-defined and orderly route to entry, such as teaching or nursing, others can seem entirely out of reach or without any clear path to a graduate’s dream job. Are there ways for students at a higher education institution to access the right advice that will get them to the place they are aiming for? Do they have information available at the right time – for things like internships – that will give them a competitive CV when they graduate? Will they have a realistic understanding of what the world of work entails, or any preparation for the expectations placed on them by their employers? How long do they think it will take to find work?

### the objectives of this report

- to give an insight into the range of pressures affecting students in higher education
- to illuminate some of those issues with the results of the Randstad Student Support survey
- to discuss how universities, colleges and student bodies might provide the best possible support
- to signpost to students where they might be able to access services that will ease their burden

# the problem.

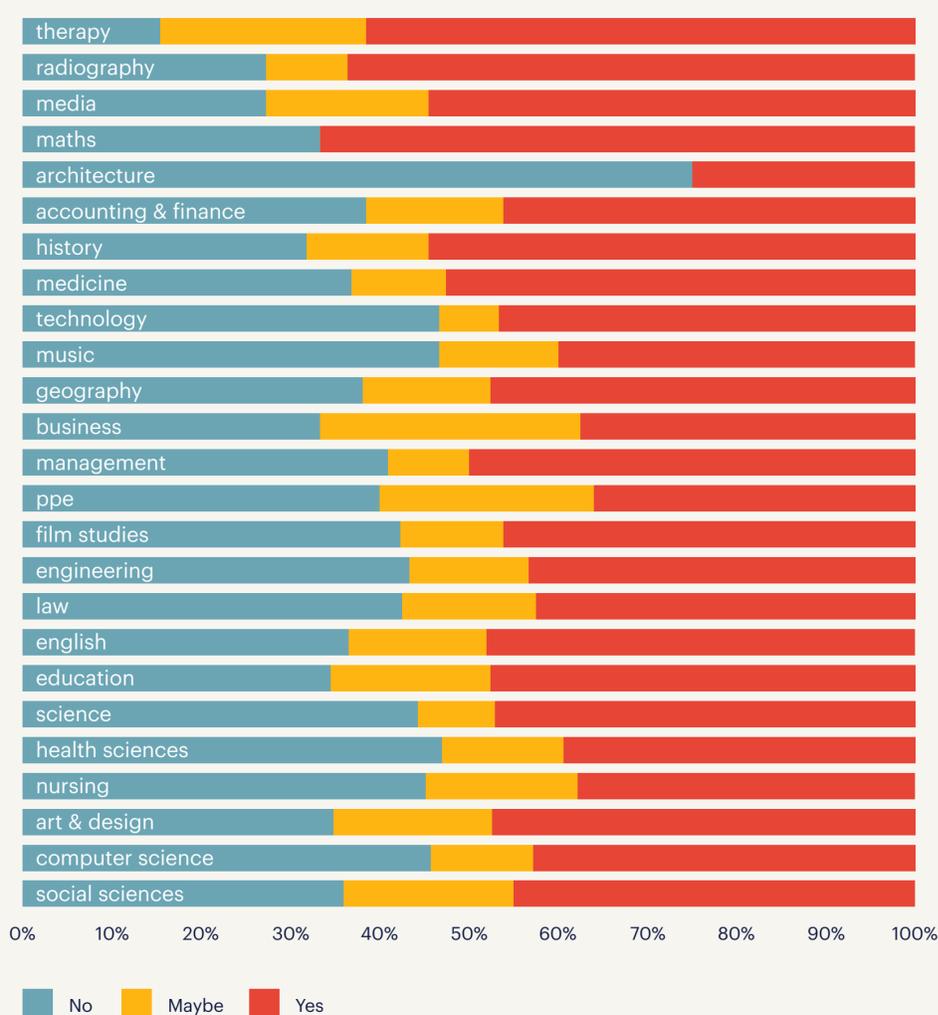
## dealing with stress and health issues

Stresses and pressures on students are a natural part of the studying process – the issue is the extent to which students can deal with those pressures and whether they are reasonable. The Randstad Student Support survey indicates that students often do not cope well with the combination of academic and personal pressures – particularly when there are major life events affecting students or their families.

When asked if they had, at any time, considered leaving their course, 45.4% of respondents said they had. Only 38.5% said they had never considered the idea, with a further 16% undecided.

## have you considered leaving your course?

The reasons for this were complex and varied. The most common reasons given were “I couldn’t cope with the stress” (15.3% of respondents) and “I experienced health-related issues” (14.3%) – and a substantial proportion of those who suffered health issues had a pre-existing condition.

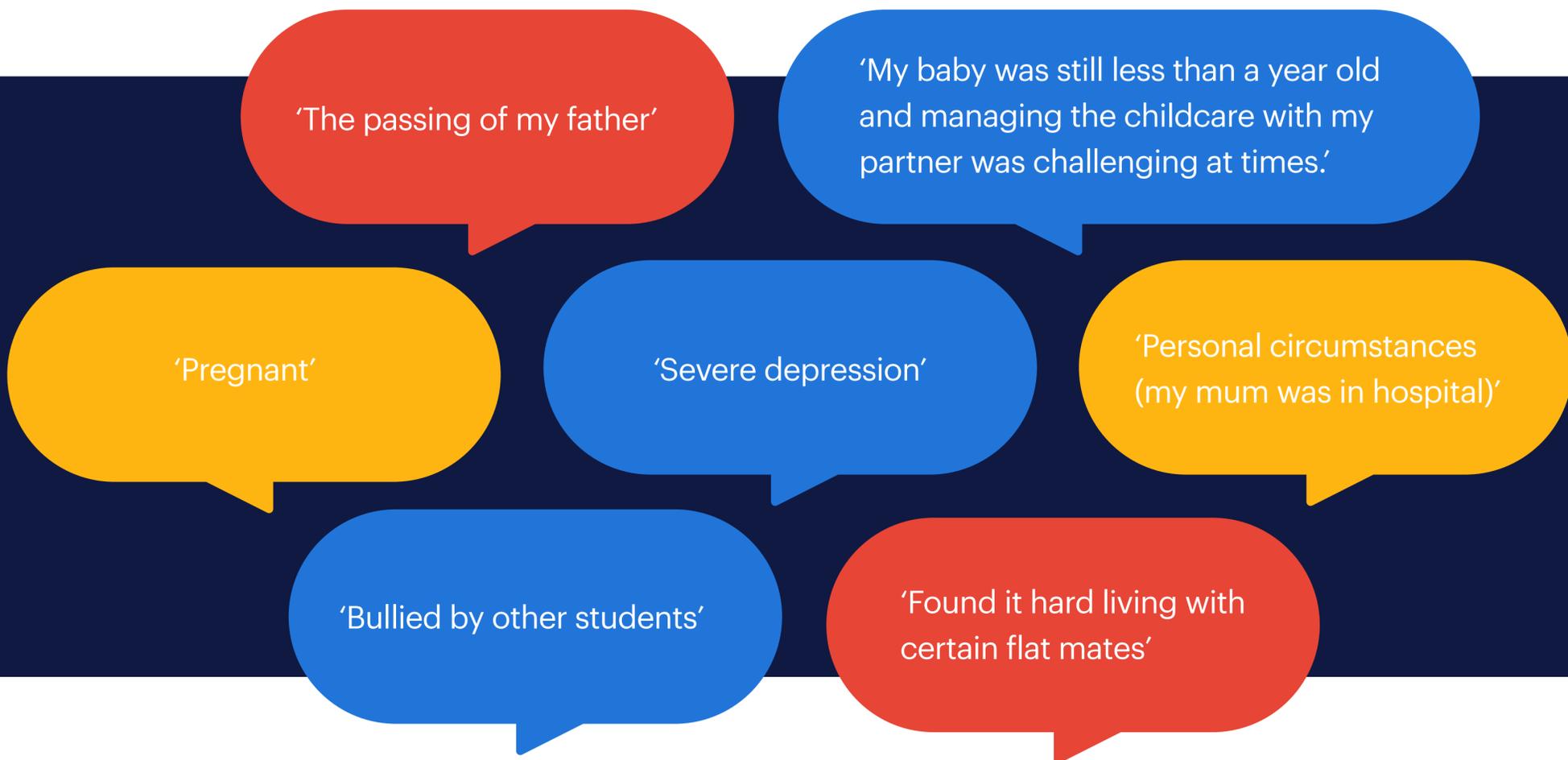


## top reasons for leaving a higher education course

- health related issues
- teaching and learning culture
- accessibility issues
- struggling with time management

Other reasons stated by significant numbers of students were “I didn’t feel I was getting enough support from the University” (10.5%) and “My grades were dropping and I felt unsuccessful” (9.5%), while many of those who added comments mentioned external factors not directly related to their time in higher education.

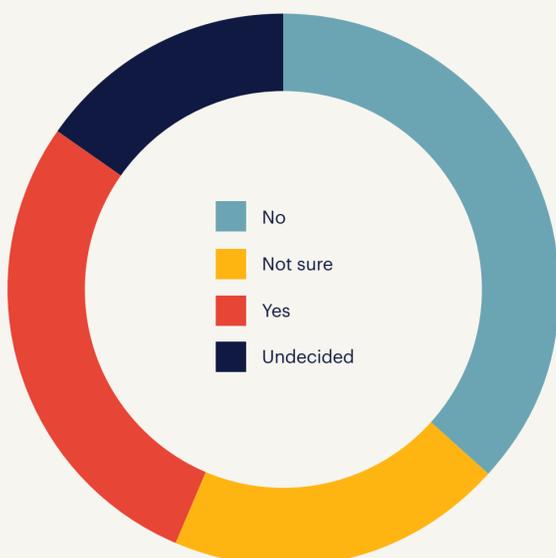
students gave a variety of explanations for their problems:



Sometimes the problem is simply accessing services. One student pointed out that spending nine months of the year at university and three months at home created difficulties for accessing primary care services. "The process for applying to GP practices and secondary health services [should be] made easier for students," she wrote. "You could stay registered at your home and university GP and NHS services." At the moment, students can register with only one doctor at a time.

### coping with financial issues

Comparatively few students mentioned course fees when they gave their reasons for considering quitting – only 3.6% said they were struggling to pay. However, the financial burden of studying was clearly a major concern for many.



### is there sufficient financial support available to help you continue with your studies?

Only a third of students believed that they had enough financial support from the government to continue their studies. Many cited the rise in tuition fees as an issue, while many nursing students were concerned with the withdrawal of the NHS bursary.

## what the students said:

'I had to struggle by myself to get through uni with £200 to last me each month considering 50% is placement which you have to pay for yourself some days I didn't eat and I was forced to get a job on top of all the uni stress.'

- nursing, London

'The student loan is impossible to live off for students that live independently during Summer. I receive no outside financial support and the summer has been very difficult for me (even though I have a job).'

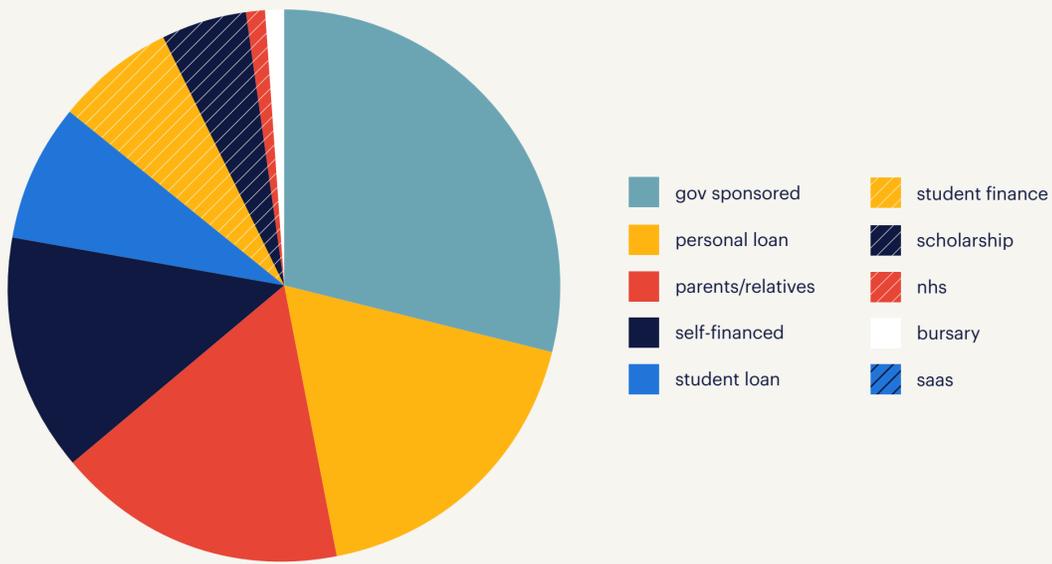
- media, Liverpool

'My biggest problem I have found is receiving a lesser amount of finance in third year when actually I have had to work a lot less due to the workload and time constraints. I feel this is completely unfair. It doesn't make sense. Why give a lesser amount in final year of studies when this is where students have to take more time out from work and therefore would need that extra bit of finance.'

- hospitality management, Plymouth

'Means testing should be scrapped as it is a very unfair system. My parents can't financially support me but when I applied at 19 I would have been given very little money due to the amount of extra hours my dad works. I know students who have to work full time because means testing means they wouldn't be able to afford to stop working and have bills to pay.'

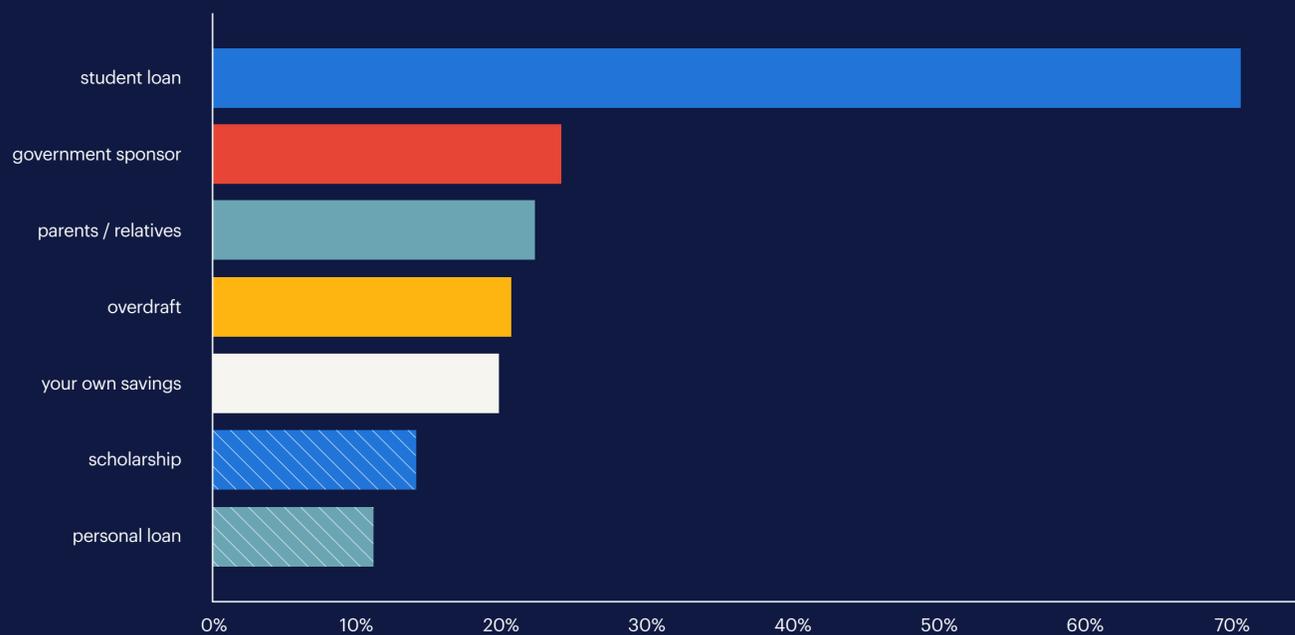
- social work, Preston



the top 10 sources of finance when joining university or college.

The student loan remains a cornerstone of student financing. Most students relied heavily on the student loan system to complete their course, with more than 70% of respondents saying it was “very important” in helping them complete their course.

## The most important sources of finance for university or college.



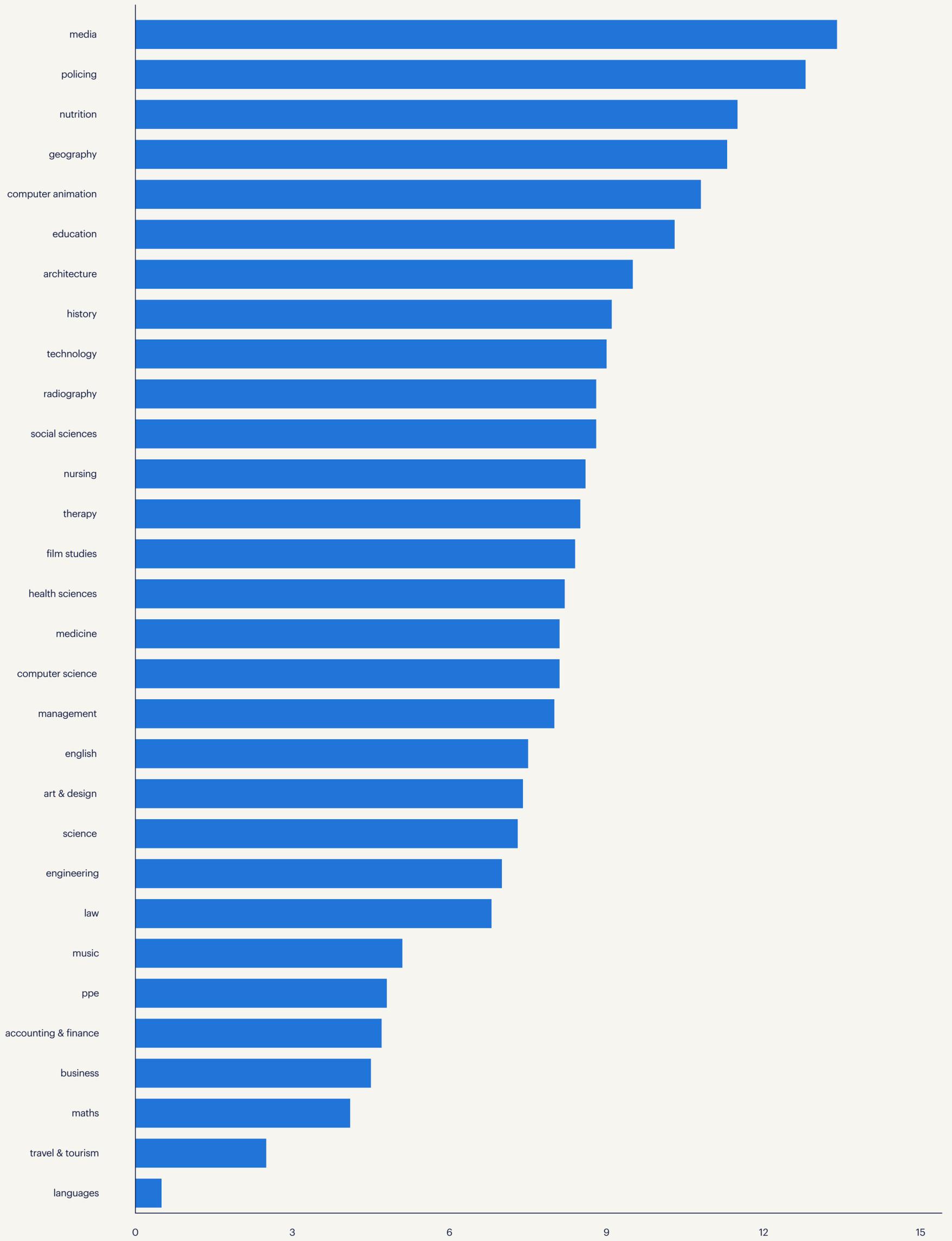
## student expectations of finding a job

The survey also contains some good news for universities and colleges. Generally, students believe that their courses prepare them well for applying their knowledge to practical situations. About three quarters of students in most disciplines said their course was good at this.

However, many seem to be sceptical that they will reap rewards of their education quickly. Students in most fields believed it would take them at least six months to find work, with those studying nutrition, policing and media convinced they would take a year or longer.



## estimated time to secure a job after graduating.



Those with qualifications in high-demand industries such as languages and travel and tourism were much more optimistic, expecting only to take one or two months to embark on their careers.

'I feel you will be able to secure a job within a year after graduating but to secure a job in the career matching your degree, it can take a lot longer, possibly up to two years.'

- hospitality management, Plymouth

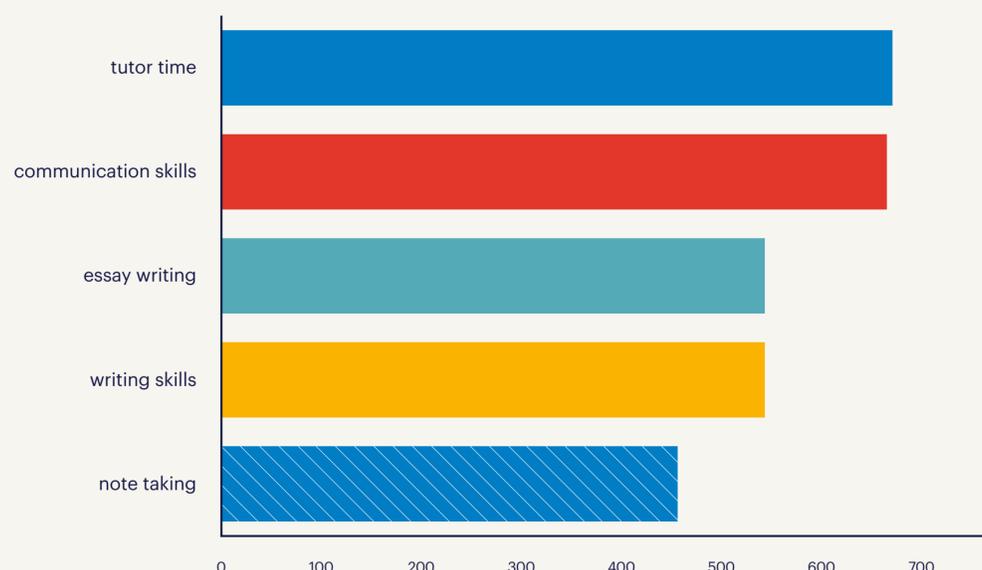
### the dropout rate

If students are considering dropping out of their courses, as the Randstad Student Support survey indicates, how many are following through and giving up their higher education? The answer is around 6% during their first year, rising to as many as 10% at some institutions.<sup>[5]</sup> Other data published by the Office for Fair Access, shows that the overall figure for students across all higher education institutions was 8.8% in 2014-15 – up from 8.2% in the previous year.<sup>[6]</sup>

There is significant evidence that depression and other mental illnesses can lead to higher dropout rates, with a 2007 study showing students were twice as likely to drop out of their studies if they were diagnosed with depression. Other studies show that 54% of students do not seek support from within their institution if they suffered mental health problems, with 63% of students experiencing stress or anxiety that interfered with their daily lives.

Clearly, universities and student bodies need to recognise the challenge and devise ways to help students tackle these three varieties of stresses which spring from the realities of modern higher education. Often people can deal with single stressors, but the impact of multiple stressors can be much harder to cope with.

'Students have a clear message for universities about ways to stop them dropping out: more guidance on their progress and more time with their tutors.'



### top five areas students would like more support from universities or colleges.

Training in essay writing, help with deadlines and developing the skills of an academic (note-taking, presentation skills and time management) were other key areas that students would like more support with. These are just some of the many solutions to dealing with the pressures and expectations of higher education that we will now explore.

# the solutions.

## preparation needs to start at college



The phrase 'prevention is better than cure' has never rang more true in regards to mental health. In order to help higher education students cope with pressures at University, colleges need to play a bigger part in equipping students with the tools they need to combat them.

An annual admissions survey highlighted that an overwhelming number of respondents feel students need to be "ready to think and learn independently", however, almost two thirds (62%) believe that this skill is missing for most students. College needs to help develop students' understanding and ability to independently manage their own finances, work processes and to get used to new social groups and situations without constant interaction with family and friends from home.

One solution is to review the assessment process at college. Feedback at University is far more qualitative than college, therefore this needs to be introduced within the A-level curriculum. Gradual introduction of both qualitative and quantitative feedback will allow students room to adapt and therefore increase their chances to effectively review this form of feedback and use it to improve their work.

Another area that can cause frustration and anxiety, often leading to mental health issues at University, is the lack of understanding, both of entry requirements and what the course will entail. Over 40% of University applicants wished they had thought more about which subjects might help them get into university and only half felt suitably informed about how their A-levels could affect their choice of University. It's clear that currently, not enough is being done to inform students of the requirements and demands of higher education. To help tackle this issue, organisations like the Russell Group have produced guides such as Informed Choices, which provide clear information on how the subjects they choose to study in sixth form or at college can affect their options at University. Whether conveyed written or verbally, students need to be encouraged to think about these decisions and given the appropriate tools to make them confidently.

Students also need to be taught before attending University how to manage and deal with stress, something that affects people from all walks of life over time. Not being equipped with adequate coping mechanisms can compound the problem. Some colleges have adopted techniques such as offering students meditation sessions or more unorthodox approaches such as puppies to stroke. Providing a mix of tactics to help alleviate stress provides students with an arsenal that they can draw from at University and beyond.

## helping students be healthier

Most universities and colleges already take the health of their students very seriously and have made substantial investments to maintain a healthy student population. Higher education institutions which are clustered around a campus will often have a university health centre or similar facility available for students to register with. Warwick University has a university health centre with GPs, nurse practitioners, a sexual health clinic, immunisation and travel clinics, screening and help for students with chronic illnesses.

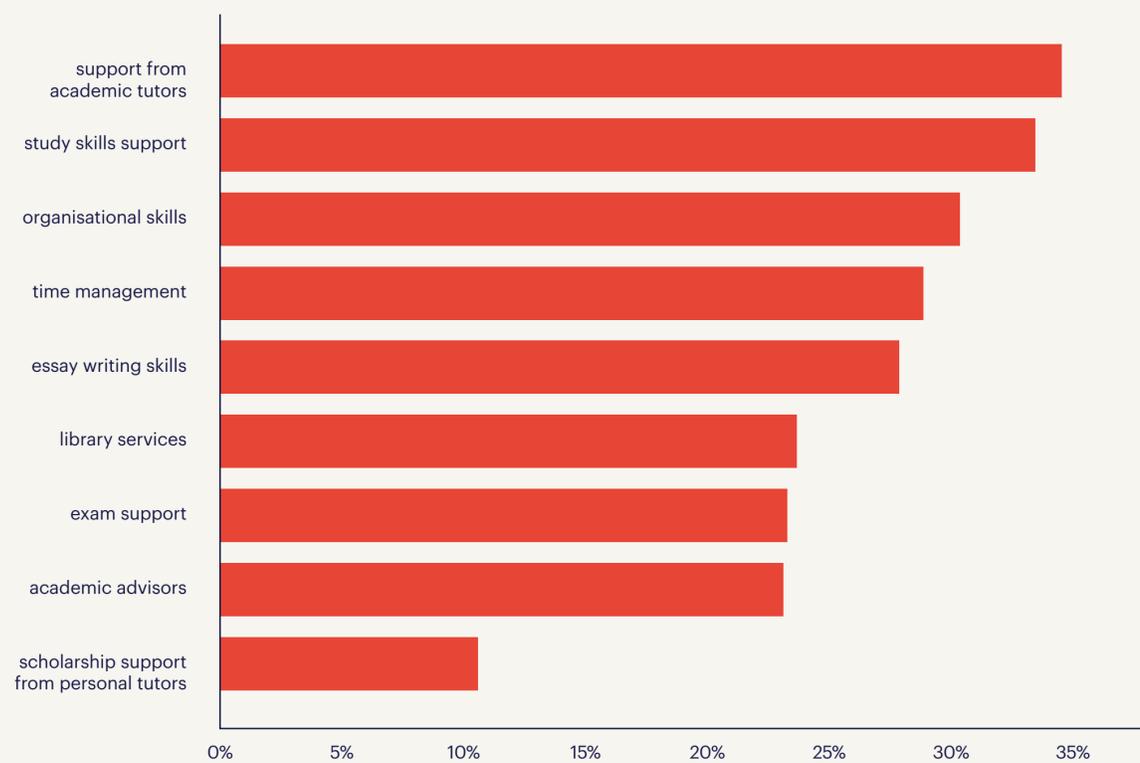
To help tackle the problem further some Universities also offer specific wellbeing drop-in centres such as Goldsmiths', these are aimed at students experiencing mental health issues. The drop in sessions are fairly short, around 15-20 minutes each, and if additional support is needed follow up sessions are scheduled. Lucy Antich, a wellbeing manager at Goldsmiths says "We are championing independence and self care and helping the students see they have the resource at their fingertips. As a result our list for counselling has hugely reduced."

Off campus, the solution is usually to use NHS services and register with a local GP. Institutions should direct students towards their local doctor and also liaise with local trusts to see what measures can be taken to lessen the impact of the transitory student population. Students can also find out their nearest GP through the NHS website at <http://www.nhs.uk/Service-Search/GP/LocationSearch/4>.

## mental health coordinators and counselling services

Every higher education institution should offer a counselling service for its staff and students, but universities are increasingly going further. Universities UK, the umbrella body, is encouraging universities and colleges to adopt a “whole university approach”, by embedding mental health and wellbeing services across every part of university life.[7] That means having teams working in student accommodation, lecture theatres and classrooms, with an emphasis on collecting data to measure the scale of the problem and the effectiveness of their solutions.

The Randstad Student Support survey also shows what students think about the support services available to them. The thing they value most highly is the support of their academic tutors, which can also have a pastoral element.



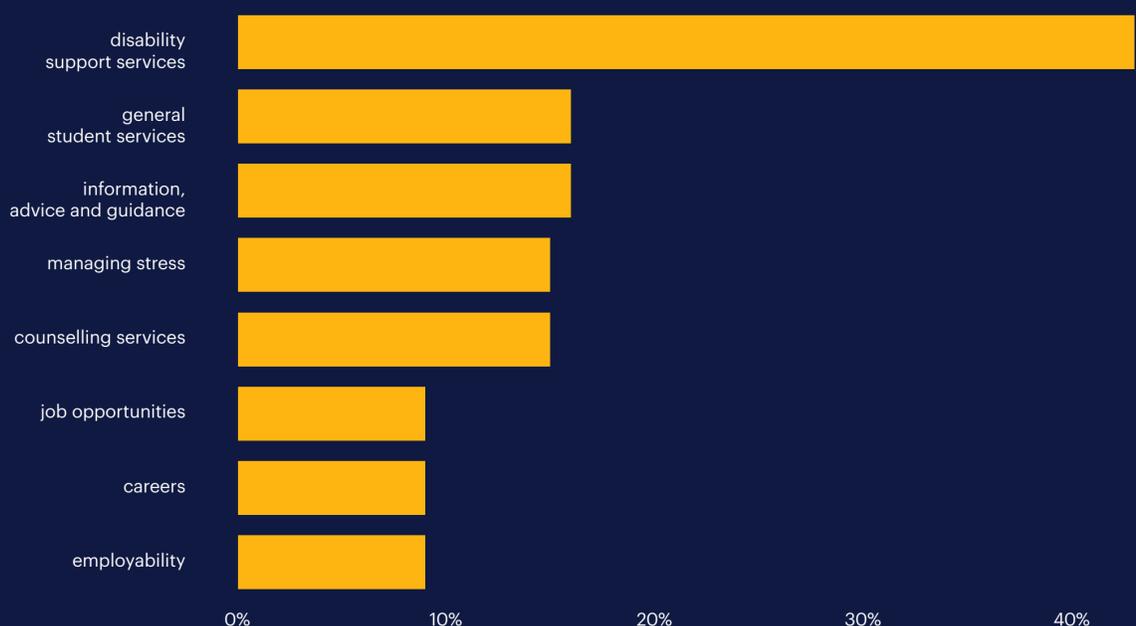
## most valued support services offered to students.

The average score was 3.41, higher than most other forms of support. Support for training in organisational skills, study skills, time management and essay writing skills also scored highly. By investing in these areas, students can be trained in what their tutors and lecturers expect them to do, rather than piecing together the correct forms by trial and error – a source of stress in its own right.

## most valued health services offered to students.

The health facilities that universities and colleges were able to offer the students in the survey were also seen as highly valuable by the respondents. Disability assistance, in particular, scored very highly with many students, receiving an average score of 3.66.

In fact the health-related services were seen as more important than other areas, with counselling, information and guidance, and managing stress considered to be particularly valuable.



## equipping students with the tools to tackle mental illness

Universities need a range of different approaches to tackle the complex issue of mental health among students, London's King College, Andy Allford has been credited for the introduction of a novel approach drawing upon his background in sports and specifically coaching to ask the question "How do we equip students to do well?"

Discussed at a Randstad Student Support workshop, attended by mental health and wellbeing experts, London's King College uses coaching and a solutions based approach involving one-on-one meetings to help students identify their own goals who are then left to make their own decisions.

The idea is to empower students using a coaching philosophy that promotes positive outcomes and resourcefulness, most importantly it's not exclusively for students suffering from mental health conditions. The same methodology can be employed by students simply looking to improve themselves and progress from a state of "go from feeling fine to feeling amazing" and the results speak for themselves - King's workshops and other events have been attended by more than 1,600 this year alone!

## creating a healthier campus – lessons from Warwick.

The University of Warwick has made its students' health a headline goal – [aiming to become the most physically active campus by 2020](#). This approach was driven by the impact of depression and mental illness on students. Warwick's six counsellors saw 1,142 students in the 2015-16 academic year, and they believe that as many as 80% would see a mental health improvement by becoming more physically active.

Students are now referred to Warwick Sport's support services, who conducted a 12-week programme to get them to be more physically active. Because many students with mental health issues do not seek help, the university has also conducted outreach sessions, with classes at easily accessible locations on the campus.

The programmes are backed by monitoring on the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale, with students reporting a rise of 3-8 points considered to be successful. So far more than 200 students have completed the outreach programme with 16 receiving more attention via the referral scheme.



## opening up pathways for financial assistance

While the sources of funding for most students remain the student loan, the bank of mum and dad and their overdraft facility, there are other avenues available. Scholarships, fee waivers and hardship funds are all potential ways to reduce the burden of debt. Yet many students don't know what is available, whether they qualify for assistance or where to go to find out.

Unfortunately, they don't view their personal tutors as a good source of information about money, according to the survey: very few considered their tutors to be able to help accessing scholarship funds. This is an area that universities and colleges may want to look at – giving training to academics to encourage them to raise the topic of money in tutor groups may help point students in the direction of assistance that may make the difference between dropping out and completing their degree course. Scholarships and bursaries are sometimes awarded on ability, but they are also sometimes awarded via a means test, or for students in particular need such as those with disabilities.

Fee waivers are offered by some universities as a way of reducing tuition fees – sometimes this is offered as part of a support package. However, since many students do not earn enough to need to pay back their student loan, this is not always beneficial.

Hardship funds are available for students with financial difficulties and can take a wide range of forms, from a single, one-off payment due to unexpected costs – such as a repair bill – to a regular payment for students who experience a drop in their income.

Part-time work was mentioned by a large number of students in the survey. Balancing paid work with academic work is made harder by the strict timetabling of the university calendar, and universities may find that a more flexible approach is required that allows students to commit to a part-time job to support themselves without hurting their studies.

## exploring other options before heading into the workplace

The growth in setting targets and measuring progress has affected schools, universities and government departments, but some believe that students should be shielded from this phenomenon. The former head of UCAS, Mary Curnock Cook, said earlier in 2017 that students should not feel that they need to be in a job within six months of leaving university. There are other options, such as travel, or more casual jobs, which allow young people the mental space to make decisions and spend time reflecting on their options.

One area that may concern universities is that students do not appear to have much faith in traditional careers advice services. When it came to issues of employability, careers and job opportunities, students did not believe they had contributed much to helping them continue with their studies.

Some university and college departments with close links to people in industry may have greater success in finding opportunities for students. Even more traditional subject areas may benefit from developing ties with people working in a relevant sector, which will expose students to some of the realities of working life before they make the transition from academia. Employers should also consider reaching out to higher education institutions to develop ties, which may allow them to shape courses that will leave students in a more polished, work-ready state when they graduate.

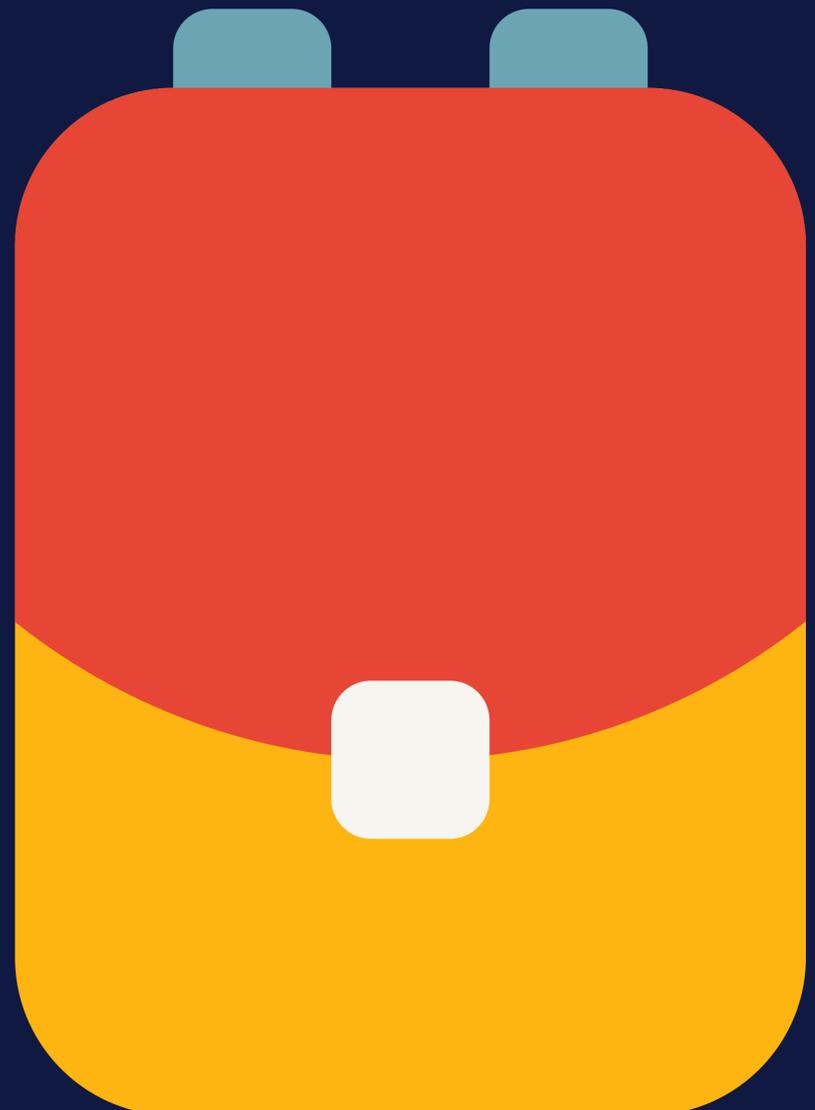
# conclusion.

Studying for a degree or diploma remains popular with parents and children, and there are still a great many advantages for people who want to enter higher education – there is no compelling evidence that Britain's young people are turning their backs on universities.

However, the combination of growing levels of student debt and an uncertain future in the workplace mean that students are feeling the pressures of higher education in ways that their predecessors did not. It's important that higher education's leaders and institutions take note of this, and take steps to alleviate that pressure.

There are encouraging signs that this is being taken seriously. The Universities UK initiative to put mental health at every level of higher education, and Warwick Sport's scheme to assist students through exercise are both laudable attempts to tackle the problem.

There are more opportunities, particularly in areas of finance, to lessen the burden on students. To continue to allow the brightest and best candidates to complete their degrees, universities, government and employers need to find innovative solutions to allow students to study.



# resources.

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