

a degree of
uncertainty



student wellbeing
in higher education.

foreword.

Getting a university degree isn't just a quick pass to career success. Students choose to go down the higher education route to expand knowledge, meet new people and enjoy new experiences, often away from home. Getting a first taste of independence and freedom is a huge draw for thousands of future graduates across the country but not everyone enjoys the pace and responsibility of juggling social life with academic deadlines, while often managing finances for the first time.

Recent statistics suggest that across the UK, more than 20,000 young people - about 1 in 16, don't make it into their second year of university. There is often a huge challenge faced by students to smoothly transition between home and university life. In the worst cases, this can lead to dropping out and pursuing a different career or education route.

There are many different reasons behind the difficult decision many students are forced to make when deciding to withdraw from their studies. In order to find out some of the reasons leading to this decision, and with the aim of improving the services offered by Randstad Student Support we surveyed over 1800 students in 2019.

Despite a record percentage of young people applying for university places in recent times, our survey results discovered that half said they had considered leaving due to poor mental and physical health or academic stress. Of those that have considered leaving, 71% said that the DSA (Disabled Students' Allowance) support they received encouraged them to continue with their studies.

Support services clearly play a huge part in sustaining wellbeing and providing the resources students need to effectively carry out their studies. With a growing emphasis on mental health and new findings suggesting that positive mental wellbeing is on the decline for students, it is evident that more needs to be done to support students dealing with the pressure and stress that university brings while creating an open platform to prompt positive discussion.

With the UK facing a skills shortage of specialist trained workers, especially in the STEM field, universities and policymakers must consider ways of reducing stress while increasing motivation to protect students, and encourage them to continue with their degree.

**Victoria Short, managing director,
Randstad Public Services.**

introduction.



the pressure of higher education.

University is a huge milestone for many. While the learning and social elements of beginning university life can be rewarding and exciting, it is not necessarily an easy change for everyone. Students who find higher education challenging are not limited to those who already suffer from mental health issues before starting their course. Students with good mental health can also encounter a change in their wellbeing due to added pressures of the lifestyle change.

Student wellbeing will always remain a priority for universities, however with more students requiring additional support than ever, how can we ensure that there is sufficient support in place to help students complete their course? Recently we surveyed 1,809 students to find out. As part of the study, we also took a look at what has changed in the two year period from our last survey carried out in 2017.

the problem.

37% of students report deteriorating mental health.

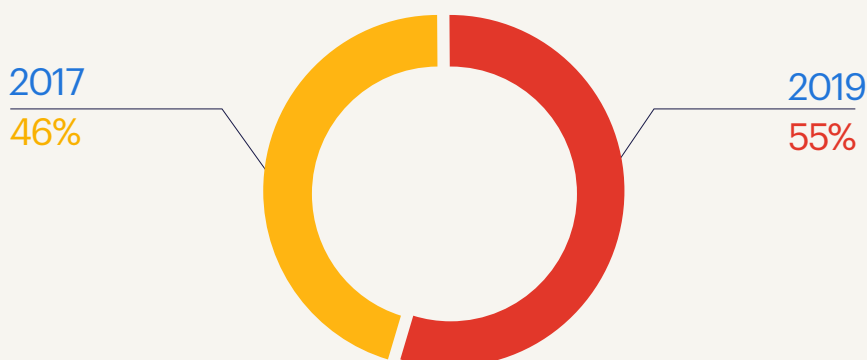
According to the 2019 Support for Disabled Students in Higher Education in England government report, the number of students reporting they have a mental health condition has doubled since 2014/15. Results from our 2019 survey support these earlier findings, revealing that 37% of respondents believe their state of mental wellbeing has deteriorated since they started studying in higher education. In fact, 64% report that studies and university lifestyle impacted their state of mental wellbeing negatively.

The top three factors impacting state of mental wellbeing from the survey were academic stress, financial pressures and balancing studies with work. Financial pressures are typically thought to be the number one pressure point for students, however our research shows that academic stress is the top factor impacting the state of mental wellbeing.

Worryingly, our survey highlights that there is a significant proportion of the student population that require mental health support. True figures however are likely to be higher according to the Office for Students (OfS), for a variety of reasons including a stigma remaining around talking about a mental health issue.

A decline in positive mental health is resulting in some students considering leaving their course. According to our data, the number of students who have considered this has risen from 46% in 2017 to 55% in 2019. This alarming increase of 9% suggests that little progress has been made in combating student mental health issues over the past two years.

students considering leaving their course.

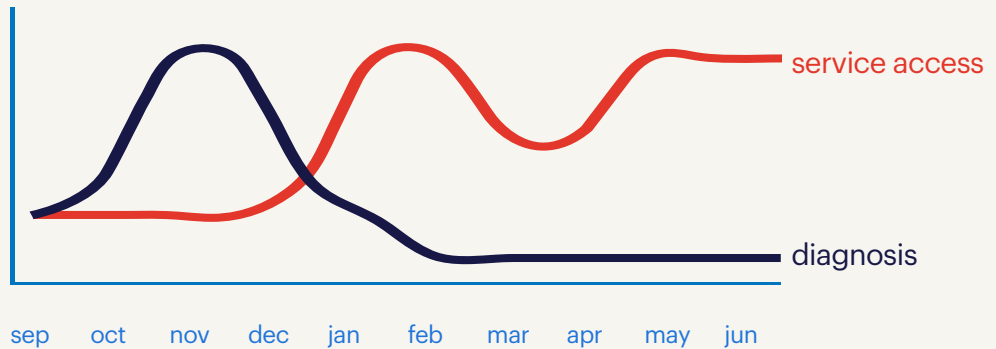


It is important to understand the reasons behind students considering leaving their course. When asked, the top three reasons given were:

1. I experienced mental health related issues
2. I could not cope with the stress
3. I did not feel like I was getting enough support from my place of study

Randstad commissioned independent research with 15 universities and found that waiting times to set up counselling support for some students can be up to three months from diagnosis due to high demand and lack of resources:

student demand



tackling concerns.

With around 20% of respondents stating mental health as a key reason behind them considering leaving their course, support available to students needs to be reviewed. Interestingly, these top three reasons have not changed over the last two years. However, whereas mental health related issues was the second most popular reason in 2017, in 2019, it tops the list. This demonstrates the growing importance of mental health and tackling student mental health concerns.

Research undertaken by the OfS also found that full-time students who reported a mental health condition have lower continuation, attainment and progression rates compared to full-time students overall.

Of those who have considered leaving their course, 71% said that Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) support helped to prevent them from leaving their course. However, of those who knew they had DSA support available to them, only 57% knew how to access it with 55% knowing what it would entail and how it could benefit them. This suggests a disconnect between university student support services and the students themselves.

The DSA application process (awareness, application and knowledge of what to do once received) may be hindering hundreds of students from receiving support. According to a previous DfE report, the top reason given by eligible students for not applying for DSA support was because they did not want to go through the assessment process. The report also reinforces our survey findings in that a large proportion of DSA recipients (68%) stated that their support enabled them to participate more fully in their course.

So, there is a lot that can be done to change this: with only 25% of students we surveyed receiving support within a week of requesting it, there is clearly room for improvement. Universities need to have a bank of skilled support workers ready and available to set up sessions as soon as they are required.

Has DSA support helped to prevent you from leaving your course?



yes: 71%

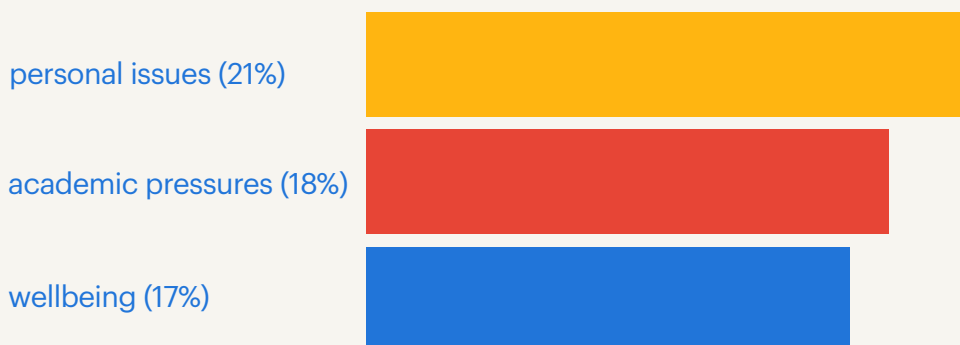
no: 29%

the solutions.

what next?

From the findings above, it is clear that students need more support for their mental health needs. The demand for support in relation to mental health has been rapidly increasing and this is placing greater pressures on universities to provide a range of mental health initiatives to support students. Our research shows that this support could take place in many forms such as counselling, mental health first aid and CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy).

42% of students surveyed have accessed counselling support from their university at some point in their studies. The positive impact that these counselling services have had was represented in the feedback, helping students cope with: personal issues (21%); academic pressures (18%) and helping improve mental wellbeing (17%).



the impact of DSA support.

DSA support is also another form of support that needs to be highlighted to eligible students. 74% stated that DSA support had a positive impact on their studies and helped them to achieve higher grades, and when asked when it was most beneficial during their course, more than half (54%) said it was beneficial all throughout the course. However, going back to our findings above, there is an apparent disconnect and lack of awareness about how to access DSA support and benefit from it - a clear area of improvement for universities.

There needs to be greater communication and awareness around the DSA application process too, the help available and the benefits associated with receiving DSA support. This could change the lives of many students and dramatically reduce the number of students considering leaving their course as evidenced by our data. With 96% of respondents saying that they would recommend DSA support to other students that may be eligible, the benefits are self-evident.

Chris Millward, director for fair access and participation at the OfS says "It is time for universities to ensure genuinely equal opportunities for disabled students. This means not only meeting their legal duties to individual students, but learning from each other to create learning environments in which all students can thrive."



However, our survey also highlighted many areas for improvement when it comes to the DSA application process. Once students receive DSA support, the feedback is very positive but the hurdles they face simply to get the support required is lengthy and difficult in a lot of cases, which may put a lot of students off in getting the support they need. A quarter of respondents said that they found it difficult to apply for DSA. This suggests that the process for applying for DSA needs to be reviewed. The introduction of the new online application process is a step in the right direction but many students commented on needing more support in regards to the evidence required during the application.

When asked what could be improved about the process for applying for DSA, students responded:

“Simplification of application process for continuing students”

“Fully online process and email evidence instead of having to post it”

“Very time consuming - offering support to complete”

“Provide a step by step guide leaflet to apply”

“The admin and communication”

“Being made aware of this before I started my course. I struggled in my first year and was advised about the service in my second year”

The 2019 Support for Students with Mental Health Issues in Higher Education in England government report acknowledges that most institutions have a mental health policy but that this does not always extend as far as providing dedicated on-site mental health services. The Stepchange framework published in 2017 provides guidance on what universities can do to assist students and the government have recently also published a University Mental Health Charter to recognise and reward institutions that can demonstrate mental health is a priority.

conclusion.

Higher education has the potential to change lives and set students up for the future by providing a solid foundation to build upon in terms of knowledge, skills and networks. However, there are a number of factors hindering universities to fulfil these promises and lack of support for student mental health and wellbeing is one of them. Growing pressures on students need to be taken into account and transforming the student experience needs to be a joint effort from universities, government and employers.

resources.

- 1) <https://inews.co.uk/news/education/universities-using-technology-understand-students-dropping-out-807694>
- 2) <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/record-percentage-young-people-are-university>
- 3) <https://www.stem.org.uk/news-and-views/news/skills-shortage-costing-stem-sector-15bn>
- 4) <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-8716>
- 5) www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/mental-health-are-all-students-being-properly-supported
- 6) <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/mental-health-are-all-students-being-properly-supported/>
- 7) <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/mental-health-are-all-students-being-properly-supported/>
- 8) <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/mental-health-are-all-students-being-properly-supported/>
- 9) https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/disabled-students-university-dropping-out-support-ofs-education-a9160416.html?utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1571380247
- 10) <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-8593>
- 11) <https://www.studentminds.org.uk/charter.html#>

about us.

Randstad Student Support is the largest national provider of non-medical higher support to students in higher education. We also work with university counselling and wellbeing services to reduce waiting lists and provide much-needed counselling support to their students, along with providing wellbeing mentors to support students with short-term “stressors” to stay on track and engaged with their studies.

As part of the survey, we also asked students who have accessed DSA to rate the services we provided to them out of 5 stars. We were rated 4 or 5 stars by 72% of students for our quality of service, and by 81% for the quality of the worker/s we provided them with.

If you would like to find out more about how we can help you and your students with a 5 star rated service, please get in touch.

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