

the COVID-19
pandemic

and student
mental health



in higher
education.

February 2021

executive summary.

The stigma around mental health issues is losing some of its odium. More students are declaring mental health difficulties to university staff before they begin their studies.

More organisations, both student and staff-led, are being set up to provide support to students as university starts. Directors of student support, heads of support services, and heads of well-being across the UK are more aware of the problem than ever.

In regulatory guidance published last year, the Office for Students noted that “all students are likely to require increased pastoral support and resources to support their well-being” during the pandemic. They made clear their expectation that universities and colleges should take “reasonable steps to put in place equivalent alternative arrangements for such support for all students”¹.

We have undertaken our annual survey (1,314 students who have been awarded some form of DSA support) to establish the effect the pandemic has had on students’ mental health and well-being - and to generate insights that can help professionals in higher education improve the support provided to students. [Analysis](#) we carried out last year highlighted a rapidly growing number of students who disclosed a mental health issue. With COVID-19 having turned the university experience upside down, students need support more than ever.

Our research shows that, despite greater awareness and regulatory guidance, approximately half (48 per cent) of students have considered leaving their course because of their mental health. Seven in every ten students are either experiencing a short-term mental health condition, have been diagnosed with a long-term mental health condition, or think they may have a condition but not been diagnosed.

While there appears to be only a very limited link between mental health and a student’s status as an undergraduate or postgraduate, or whether they are full-time or part-time, some students are faring worse than others.

More than half of students in their thirties, for example, have considered leaving their course. Non-binary students are also more likely to report that the pandemic has a negative affect on their mental health (84 per cent say it has) compared to their cisgendered peers while students over fifty are more prone to feelings of isolation - almost nine in ten say they feel more isolated as a result of the pandemic. Two in five students under the age of thirty report that their mental health has deteriorated since they began their studies.

There have been changes in the causes of the poor mental health of students. The pandemic has, naturally, played its part. Three quarters of the students we spoke to told us that the virus - as well as its associated lockdowns and restrictions - has had a negative effect on their mental health. More than four in every five students said they felt more isolated as a result of the pandemic.



Universities have been taking steps to ensure that a range of services are available to support student mental health and well-being, which may include a combination of holistic support or one-to-one provision. More and more students are attending university and reporting a mental health condition.

While there are a range of services that can be offered to a student there has been increasing demand and pressure placed on university counselling services. Findings from our recent student survey highlight this; a third of students (32 per cent) say they would benefit from more counselling (including two in every five postgraduates). This should be facilitated by and delivered through the harnessing of technology.

While the pandemic has presented challenges to the provision of in person support, only a quarter of students (28 per cent) report that remote support is not as beneficial meeting in person - while the majority say it is. With the proper communication of the help available and a coordinated approach more can be achieved.

“The student mental health epidemic has been growing for years. COVID-19 represents the icing on the cake.”

professional services team member,
Russell Group university

48%

of students have considered leaving their course due to mental health.



7 in every 10 students are experiencing a short-term mental health condition or have been diagnosed with a long-term mental health condition.

84%

of non-binary students report that the pandemic has had a negative affect on their mental health.



2 in 5 students under the age of thirty report that their mental health has deteriorated since they began their studies.

3/4

of students said that the virus, as well as its associated lockdowns and restrictions had a negative effect on their mental health.



foreword.

The pandemic seemed likely to damage universities. Lectures were no longer face-to-face, international students were unable to travel, and the extra curricular activities promoted by campus life all but stopped.

Nonetheless, universities have proved resilient. UCAS expects a five per cent jump in applications this year.² Circumstances have played their part, certainly. Travel restrictions have sustained domestic applications - with more school leavers than ever applying to local universities so that they can study closer to home, amid concerns that the impact of the pandemic may extend into the next academic year. Universities have even been able to take on some international students who might otherwise have worried about getting stranded abroad. And the attractiveness of tertiary education has risen as the country has dipped into recession, with a weaker job market lowering the opportunity cost of forgoing salaries.

Universities themselves also deserve credit for adapting to the new normal; they have worked tirelessly to address the emergency needs of students, pivoting to online learning and emergency remote teaching.

They have ensured learning has continued, loaning out hundreds of computers and licences for essential software to students.

They have put measures in place to protect their students. They have delayed semesters, staggered campus exoduses, and adapted exam requirements — all while reacting to the changing demand for courses. Many have had to make hard choices, restructuring to remain financially sustainable in the face of falling international student numbers.

As successfully as universities have negotiated the disruption caused by the pandemic and the associated shift to remote learning, some students are not faring as well.

Many are struggling with their mental health. Our latest survey on the well-being of students, which considered the views and feedback of over 1,300 students, suggests that approximately three quarters (74 per cent) think the pandemic had a negative effect on their well-being - while almost half have considered leaving their course as a result.

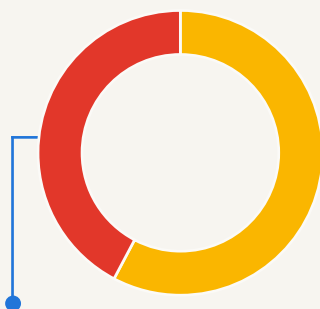


Other studies suggest that around one in five (22 per cent) of 17 to 22 year olds with a probable mental disorder have decided not to seek help for a mental health concern due to the pandemic.³

student well-being:

the problem.

Seven in every ten students have either been diagnosed with a long-term mental health condition, are experiencing a short term mental health condition, or think they may have a condition that has not been diagnosed.



42% of non-binary students say their mental health has deteriorated while at university.

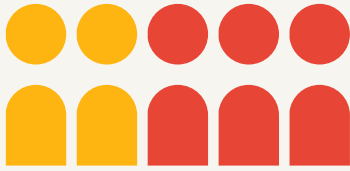
Worryingly, the mental health of students is also deteriorating. Our latest survey on the well-being of students suggests that over a third now report that their mental well-being has changed for the worse since starting higher education. While that number is broadly in line with our 2020 data (when 37 per cent of respondents said their state of mental well-being had deteriorated since they started studying in higher education), this is by no means a cause for celebration.

The bald averages also mask worrying spikes. For example, two in every five non-binary students (42 per cent) say their mental health has deteriorated while at university.

There are a number of different causes for this - although one stands out. The pandemic. Approximately three quarters (74 per cent) of students report that the pandemic had a negative effect on their mental health. No wonder. Students may have contracted the virus. They may be responsible for caring for ill family and friends. Some may have financial problems. They may be on the pandemic's frontline, assisting in hospitals. They may be concerned about the risk to their health of sharing communal areas while living in student accommodation. And on top of all this, the pandemic has also affected the way they learn.



remote learning.

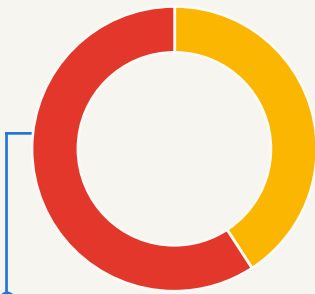


two in every five students (40%) told us they had considered dropping out of their course.

The COVID-19 crisis has elevated the importance of digital. Responses to the panic on campuses up and down the UK were abrupt and unprecedented, leaving faculty and professional services teams at universities scrambling to provide a safe and expedient way to provide learning at home. Remote learning became the quick fix and many students are now completing coursework and assignments remotely. Several institutions, including the London School of Economics, have told students that teaching will be online only, for the rest of the academic year.⁴ Working online may help some students - who find lectures in person stressful in terms of social anxiety around crowds or in enclosed spaces. Indeed, only one in twelve students said they had considered leaving their course because they did not like the students on their course in 2021, a six percentage point fall on our 2020 poll when one in seven said the same.

But, in the majority of cases, remote learning is proving detrimental to students' mental well-being. It is telling that two in every five of the students (40 per cent) who told us they had considered dropping out, cited "the quality of teaching/learning" as one of the reasons; a 17 percentage point increase on 2020, when fewer than a quarter (23 per cent) said the same.⁵

isolation and loneliness.



59% of 17 to 22 year olds with a probable mental health disorder say that lockdown has made their life worse.

While the coronavirus pandemic and the various measures introduced to slow its spread have affected the day-to-day lifestyle and mental well-being of the general public, many students have found themselves in a unique situation - perhaps isolating in a household with others they do not know well.

Furthermore, while students follow coronavirus guidance in much the same way as the general public, students are more likely not to have left their home or accommodation in the seven days prior to being surveyed (between two and three in ten) than the general public (fewer than one in ten⁶). And some disabled students may have to self-isolate in these circumstances for the duration of the pandemic.

For many, isolation has increased the pressures and stress that they may already be feeling from going to university and living and studying independently for the first time. Plenty of the students we are liaising with have stayed in a houseshare but are now living there alone. Loneliness is serious. We know from research that one in ten people aged between 11 and 22 years say they often or always feel lonely. But children and young people with a probable mental disorder are about eight times more likely to report feeling lonely often or always (29 per cent) than those unlikely to have a mental disorder (4 per cent⁷).

Isolation and loneliness also compound problems. More than a third (36 per cent) of 17 to 22 year olds report lockdown had made their life a little worse, while one in fourteen (7 per cent) of 17 to 22 year olds say it had made it much worse. Young people with a probable mental health disorder were more likely to say that lockdown had made their life worse (59 per cent of 17 to 22 year olds), than those unlikely to have a mental disorder (37 per cent respectively⁸).



academic pressures.

When we asked what factors affected students' mental health, four in every five students reported that it was stress from studying (81 per cent) which is in line with the findings from our previous report. Financial pressures are typically thought to be the number one pressure point for students - but our research shows that academic stress is the most significant factor affecting the state of mental well-being.

money matters.



While it might not be the most frequent factor affecting students' mental well-being, financial pressures are the second: nine in every twenty students (46 per cent) told us that financial pressures affect their mental health and well-being. There are students with parents who, due to the pandemic, are finding it harder to support their children. Students may be able to earn less as industries providing students with flexible employment or temporary holiday work (leisure and hospitality, in particular) are buffeted by the pandemic. That could be leaving them unable to work their way out of debt - having, potentially, invested heavily for the new learning environment (buying new laptops for example).

job prospects.



three in every five students think that COVID-19 has affected their job prospects.

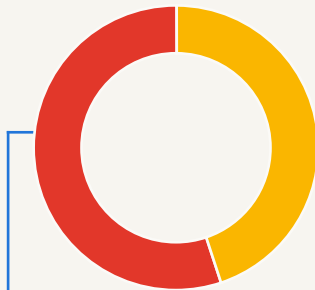
Students in their final year may be facing the most challenging graduate jobs market for a generation.

Almost three in every five students think that COVID-19 has affected their job prospects and that they will find it more difficult to find a job when they graduate as a result of the pandemic. There are significant variations:

- one in two undergraduate freshers think COVID-19 has affected their job prospects
- three in five second year students think the same
- two thirds of third years students and more than seven in 10 students in their fourth year also believe the same

While the pandemic may have altered the jobs market, the findings are broadly in line with those from our 2020 research.

why this matters.



55% of students in their 30s have considered leaving their course.

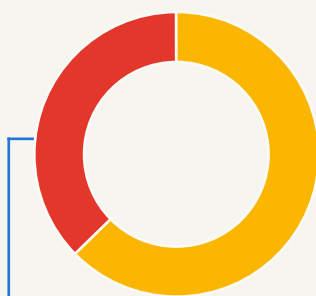
While we have seen a (material) seven percentage point fall in the number of students deliberating whether to continue their studies as a result of their mental health, almost half (48 per cent) still say they have considered leaving their course. Furthermore, significant areas of concern remain: eleven in every twenty students in their thirties (55 per cent) say they have considered leaving their course, for instance.



student well-being:

the solution.

more support.



38% of students say they feel like they are not getting enough support from their place of study.

Tellingly, when we asked students why they considered leaving their course, almost two in five (38 per cent) told us “I did not feel like I was getting enough support from my place of study” - an increase on 2020.

One possible solution is, then, more support. Student support workers, for example, are perfectly placed to help recognise the signs of deteriorating mental well-being in students. They can watch out for signs of decreased attendance to lectures and seminars as well as problems meeting deadlines⁹ - essentially, helping prevent students from falling through the cracks.

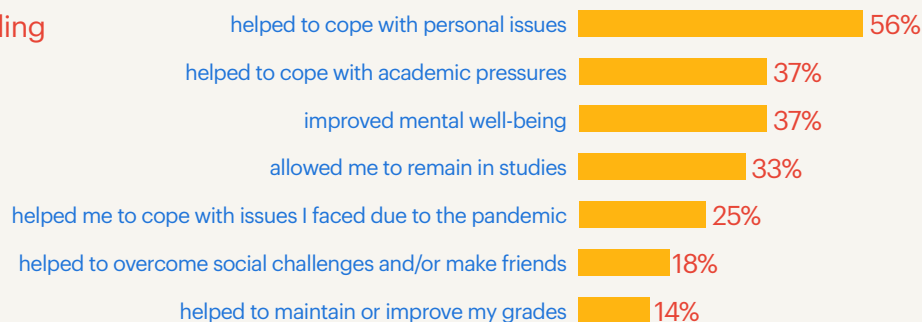
By spotting these signals, a support specialist could make a real difference in a student's life. The answer might be as simple as setting targets. It can be difficult for students to stay motivated to complete work when stuck within the same four walls all day. With this in mind, it is more important than ever for students to set realistic expectations, and celebrate their achievements.

Setting ongoing targets, such as putting into practice techniques and reporting back the next day, allows students to reflect on work and see how much has been completed facilitating the celebration of achievements. There's certainly demand for support.

counselling support.

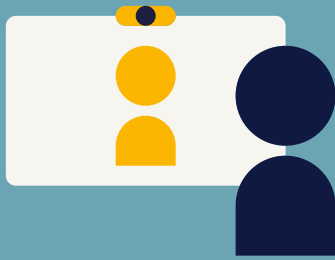
Clearly, as more students with mental health diagnoses attend university, the need for counselling support rises. A higher proportion of students accessing DSA are also accessing counselling services. The pandemic is exacerbating this. We know from our latest survey that counselling is delivering real benefits to students.

How has counselling support been of benefit to you?



remote support.

Of course, eligible students now need to be able to access the support they need while studying remotely. We have already spoken to the students we work with, and the vast majority still want to receive support remotely for as long as they require it. We have been working with universities, students, and our own support workers to ensure that all types of support can be delivered remotely - from counselling, mentoring and one-to-one study skills support to British Sign Language interpreting.



“In my weekly Skype sessions, we use some of our time to discuss concerns I am having and how they may be affecting my work. The sessions have been amazing in boosting my confidence and making my time studying by myself easier and more fulfilling” student interviewee.

“Meeting remotely helps to give structure to a student’s day. For instance, one student I support said they felt more inclined to get up and start their day earlier to prepare for our appointment, rather than staying in bed” student support worker.

One good thing about providing support online is that there are many options available for how to do it, from Skype and the phone to FaceTime, WhatsApp, and Google Meets. We’ve learned that it’s important to speak to students to find out which method suits them best: some students may prefer to chat on video call, whereas others may be more comfortable away from the camera. Whatever suits, there is a solution available.

Providing counselling and other mental health support virtually sidesteps the logistical issue of space. Finding appropriate space to provide support where students can feel safe can be a major issue in universities, especially those without a centralised space booking system; as more students need support, the demand grows, so even when specialist support workers and counsellors are available, there may be nowhere suitable for them to meet.

Although the pandemic has presented challenges to the traditional provision of support in person, only a quarter of students report that remote support is not as beneficial as in person support - while the majority say it is as good. Indeed, in theory, providing structured support for graduates and facilitating access to a network of qualified specialist counsellors and support workers should work better remotely. For example, students could be matched to a much wider virtual network of counsellors, based on a bespoke blend of expertise and experience – not just who happens to be in their postcode.

The experience of students using support and counselling services remotely over the last year reinforces this. Six in every seven students (85 per cent) report that they have accessed the same amount of support as previously or that they accessed more, as a result of the shift towards online provision. Just one in six (16 per cent) say they have accessed less.



virtual support can make a huge difference.

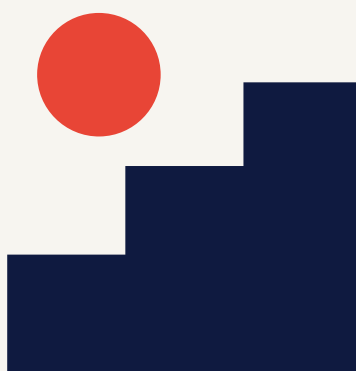
Of the students that we surveyed who had chosen to stay on at university, having thought at some stage that they might leave, seven in ten put their decision to stay down to the provision of student support. The provision of support was even more effective when furnished to the over thirties (71 per cent) and far more significant for non-binary students; five in every six of whom (83 per cent) said they decided to stay on their course as a result of the support they received.



“This is an important and timely report. Life goes on, even in a pandemic. We can’t ignore COVID-19 or underplay it, but neither can we afford to forget about everything else - and that includes the provision of student support.

The journey through university is a life-changing one and it is essential that students have the support they need - provided by internal teams and external third parties working in partnership - to achieve their potential. Over the course of the last year, we have learned that technology can facilitate the provision of student support. But, if utilised to its fullest extent, I think it could begin to improve it.” chairman of business school advisory board, Russell Group university.

upskilling internally.



Another part of the solution is the provision of courses for internal staff. Mental Health First Aid England offers a variety of training courses, to train staff and students alike how to actively listen and effectively signpost those needing further assistance. The course is designed to help students and staff to recognise the signs and symptoms of mental health issues and can fit into a university’s existing well-being provision. This could potentially facilitate the engagement of students through established staff/student relationships. The problem is finding the bandwidth, given the constraints imposed by hiring freezes and shrinking headcounts.

Many universities have been attempting to in-source most of their mental health and student well-being services to reduce potential expenditure. For some, in-sourcing is attractive because it appears to offer a greater degree of control over what is being offered. A result, many universities tend not to use external providers to deliver mental health support, with the exception of the NHS and in some instances, charities.



The problem with the in-sourcing approach is that student services are already under pressure as increasing numbers of students attend university with established mental health problems. Universities are struggling to keep up with demand for counselling resources, for example. Students can wait for up to three months from diagnosis to get the support they need, potentially making a crisis more likely. NHS mental health services are often oversubscribed, too. Universities can also struggle to form a joined up, communicative relationship with NHS staff - which can lead to students slipping through the net and not getting the on-going support they need. And ensuring provision is consistent across multiple locations is also difficult - especially for universities that operate across different campuses. These existing challenges are being amplified by the impact of the pandemic.

This is why external providers need to be part of a holistic solution to the challenges posed by the current crisis in student mental health. External providers offer flexible bandwidth, helping universities to tackle high demand at peak times, and ensuring students are having a consistent experience, whichever campus, halls of residence or part of the country they happen to be living in this year.

tackling financial stresses.



financial pressures,
less prevalent than
they were.

A group of vice-chancellors from seven universities have suggested the interest on student loans in England should be scrapped for 15 months¹⁰. While this would undoubtedly be welcomed by students, our research suggests that financial pressures (while no less significant to those they affect) are less prevalent than they were in 2020. Two years ago, thirteen in every twenty students (63 per cent) said their mental health was being affected by financial pressures. That has now fallen to nine in every twenty (46 per cent).

This may be thanks to government support. In England, the government announced an extra £20m to support students in difficulties last December. The Welsh government announced a further £40m in support for students, including funding to address digital poverty¹¹. More recently, the government announced an extra £50m for student hardship funds in England (on top of £20m agreed at the end of last year). Universities will be able to use the extra funding to help students facing loss of employment, additional costs for alternative accommodation or to support access to remote teaching amid COVID-19.

It seems likely that the pandemic has forced students to rein in their spending. Living at home, and having fewer social engagements or extra curricular activities, students may well have saved money recently; their bank balances have been the beneficiaries.

While some vice-chancellors argue that waiving the charge would ease the pressure on graduates, our research suggests they might be missing the mark.



communication.



We know from previous research that the primary challenge for those working in student mental health is that student engagement (and, therefore, attendance) is poor. While staff are trying to find ways to support students and prevent mental health issues developing (or worsening), without the ability to engage students, these will have little effect. It is imperative that universities find a way to get students interested in the support they offer if their efforts are to deliver the desired results.

Universities need to review their initiatives to see where attendance is best; what works and what needs to be improved. They could also work more closely with the student unions to understand what could be done to make under-performing initiatives more appealing to students - or get their buy-in to help publicise support initiatives such as online counselling sessions. Alternatively, universities could include some initiatives as part of a compulsory credit bearing module for all first-year students. That would improve student well-being by making them aware of their mental health and helping them become more resilient.

the conclusion.

Student mental health and well-being challenges have changed since our previous report, developing and evolving as the pandemic has unfolded.

While universities have been quick to alter the manner in which their mental health support is delivered - by, for instance, switching to online counselling sessions - student well-being is still suffering. But our response to the pandemic must not be one-dimensional. A more holistic approach to managing the effects on the mental well-being of students - involving the integrated efforts of internal teams and external providers, facilitated by technology - is essential.



endnotes.

1. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/guidance-on-quality-and-standards-during-coronavirus-pandemic/>
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jan/02/students-choose-local-universities-covid-pandemic-rages>
3. http://www.exeter.ac.uk/news/university/title_822977_en.html
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jan/17/digital-poverty-lost-generation-university-students-vice-chancellors>
5. Equally, only one in five students (22 per cent) said they found it difficult to fit into the social environment - compared to a third (33 per cent) who said the same in 2020
6. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/articles/coronavirusandtheimpactonstudentsinhighereducationinenglandseptembertodecember2020/2020-12-21>
7. http://www.exeter.ac.uk/news/university/title_822977_en.html
8. http://www.exeter.ac.uk/news/university/title_822977_en.html
9. While early indicators of student disengagement and mental health issues based on conventional student engagement analytics (such as lecture attendance or library usage) cannot no longer be applied thanks to the pandemic, virtual attendance and engagement can still be monitored
10. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-55895334>
11. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jan/17/digital-poverty-lost-generation-university-students-vice-chancellors>

about randstad student support.

Randstad Student Support provides non-medical helper support to students in higher education in the UK. Support ranges from study skills and mentoring support and more general support (which covers a range of practical support roles, such as manual note-taking, library support and exam scribe and reader support).

We also work with university well-being services to provide counselling and specialist mental health support services to students, reducing appointment waiting times and helping students to stay on track with their studies. We work with 250 institutions to support 17,000 students across the country, we are the largest provider of this type of support in the UK.

If you would like to find out more about how we can help you and your students, get in touch with Sam Graham at sam.graham@randstad.co.uk

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