

spotlight on
students:



mental health and
well-being in higher
education.

foreword.

A record number of school leavers chose to continue their education at college or university in the 2021/22 academic year: 37.9% of UK 18 year olds to be exact. Whilst many of these students find the experience of higher education rewarding and enjoyable, there is growing recognition from institutions that significant numbers have a different experience.

The best years of their lives?

Getting a university degree isn't just a quick pass to career success. In this post-pandemic world, now more than ever before students choose to go down the higher education route to expand knowledge, meet new people and enjoy new experiences, often away from home.

Experiencing that first taste of independence and freedom is a huge draw for thousands of future graduates across the country, particularly for first-time students looking for an adventure after two years of lockdowns and uncertainty. However, not everyone enjoys the pace and responsibility of juggling academic deadlines, managing finances often for the first time, whilst maintaining a healthy social life.

In the worst cases, this can lead to students 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.

50% of students surveyed have considered leaving their course.

At Randstad Student Support, we surveyed over 1600 students at the end of 2021 in order to find out the factors that contribute to this decision and how the pressures of higher education can affect the mental health and well-being of students. Our goal is to use this information to improve the non-medical helper support and counselling services we offer, whilst supporting higher education institutions to better help their students. All students who responded to our survey are in receipt of some form of additional support for the 2021/22 academic year.

Survey demographics.

1632 respondents

Gender

70% female, 23% male, 6% non-binary

Age

58% 18-25, 42% 26+

Type of course

80% full time, 15% part time, 5% other

Year of study

34% year 1, 34% year 2, 21% year 3, 7% year 4, 2% year 5, 1% year 6+

introduction.



the pressure of higher education.

Choosing to go to university is a huge milestone in life. Students who find higher education challenging are not limited to those who already suffer from poor mental health before starting their course. Students with good mental health can also encounter a change in their well-being, and students may not necessarily struggle right from the start of their course - they may find themselves needing additional support in their second or third year of study, for example. In addition to this, going to university could actually improve a student's state of mental well-being, depending on what their life prior to higher education looked like.

It is clear that student well-being will always remain a priority for universities, however with an increasing number of students requiring additional support, how can we ensure that there is a sufficient amount of the desired type of support in place to help students complete their courses?

This report will share the results of our 2021/22 academic year survey as standalone statistics, whilst also comparing them to the findings from our 2020/21, 2019/20 and 2017/18 surveys. It will particularly examine the similarities and differences in results between genders, ages and years of study.

- 52%** of students have a diagnosed mental health condition
- 37%** of non-binary students said their mental health has worsened since starting university
- 29%** of cisgendered students said their mental health has worsened since starting university
- 56%** of mature students have considered leaving their course
- 47%** of non-mature students have considered leaving their course

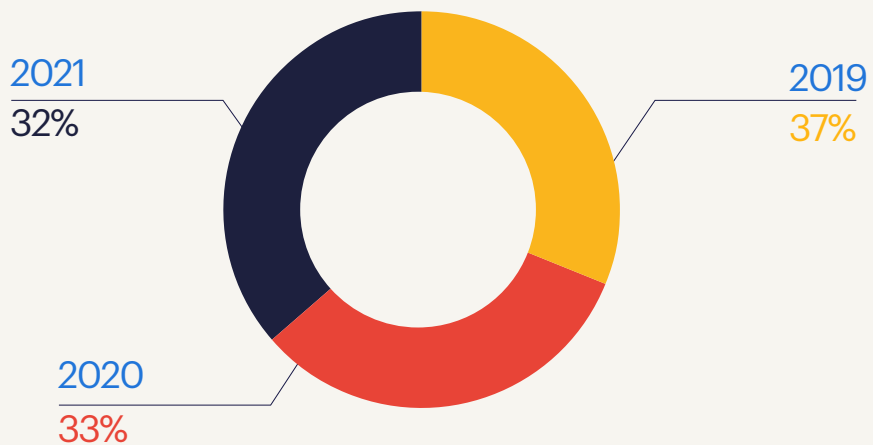
the problem.

32% of respondents' well-being has worsened since starting university.

Almost 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.

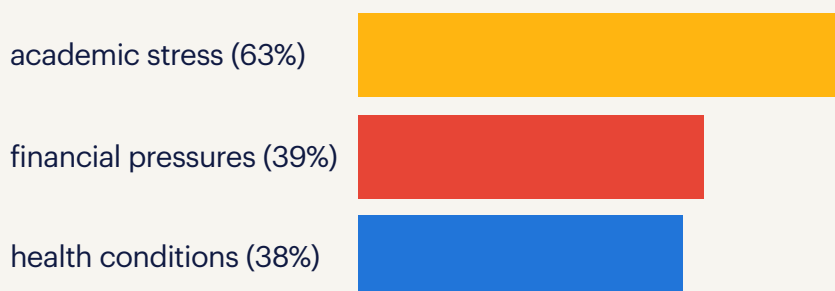
It is worrying that the mental health of students is deteriorating. In our 2021/22 survey, 32% of respondents stated that their well-being had worsened since starting university. Whilst this percentage is actually smaller than in our previous surveys, it is by no means a cause for celebration.

percentage of students reporting worsening mental health.



This 32% average does also disguise some spikes in the data - for example, 37% of non-binary students reported declining mental health. In addition, 37% of students in their third year of study or above reported declining mental health, in comparison to just 30% of first and second year students. This could suggest the different university experience students who experienced higher education pre-pandemic are having, with those who started during the pandemic.

There are a number of different overall reasons for this declining state of mental health. Our survey found that the top three were:



These factors are largely the top three causes across all demographics in the survey. Students say:



academic stress.

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, which is in line with our previous findings. It is also supported by the Student Futures Commission's report that 52% of students felt they were somewhat or much below where they personally expected to be in their academic studies.

It is no wonder that students are finding studying a challenge: whilst the pandemic brought about a necessary reliance on remote learning which actually benefited some students, others are finding the mix of remote, hybrid and face-to-face learning challenging. Although 28% of students reported that blended learning actually allowed them to study more effectively, we can't forget about the 17% who said the opposite. Plus, 90% of students have said that they prefer in person teaching where content is also recorded.

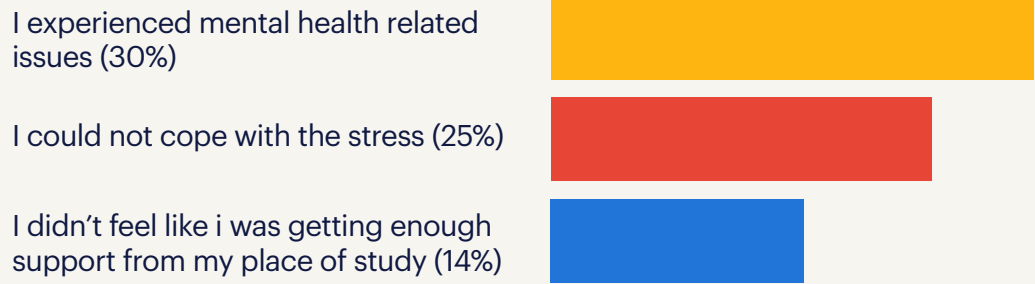
money matters.

While it might not be the most frequent factor affecting students' mental well-being, financial pressures are the second. 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 still being affected 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).

building pressure.

For some students, the pressure of higher education may prove so intense that they consider leaving university. Our survey revealed that half of all students have considered this, an increase of 10% from our 2020 survey. Whilst this increase is significant, it is pleasing to see a decline from our 2019 survey, in which 55% of students had considered leaving.

reasons for leaving higher education.



With almost a third of students highlighting mental health concerns as a key reason for considering leaving university, it is clear that more needs to be done to ensure students receive the support they are eligible for. Of those who have considered leaving their course, 61% said that the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) support they received helped to prevent them from leaving their course.

job prospects.

Students in their final year may be facing the most challenging graduate jobs market for a generation. A third of students think that the pandemic 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. However, there are significant variations in the data:

- Over half (53%) of non-binary students think that the pandemic has affected their job prospects
- 42% of third year and above students think the same
- Only 28% of first and second years students think the same

Has the pandemic affected your job prospects?



While the pandemic may have altered the jobs market, unsurprisingly it is students who are nearer graduating who have more concerns about their job prospects. It also highlights that non-binary students may need more careers support than their cisgendered peers.

the solution.

more support.

Tellingly, when we asked students why they considered leaving their course, “I did not feel like I was getting enough support from my place of study” was the third most popular reason.

One possible solution is to increase the support on offer. Student support workers, for example, are perfectly placed to help recognise the signs of deteriorating mental well-being in students. For example, they can work with students to monitor signs of decreased attendance; disengagement with university; issues meeting deadlines; support with university life - to name a few.

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, especially when met with opportunities to live a university life post pandemic. With this in mind, it is more important than ever for students to set realistic expectations, and celebrate their achievements.

upskilling internally.

In order to support the work of student support workers, a part of the solution could be to provide continuous professional development courses for internal staff. For example, 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.

Many universities 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. However, one area to consider is out-sourcing services to allow for a more holistic approach to provision.

counselling support.

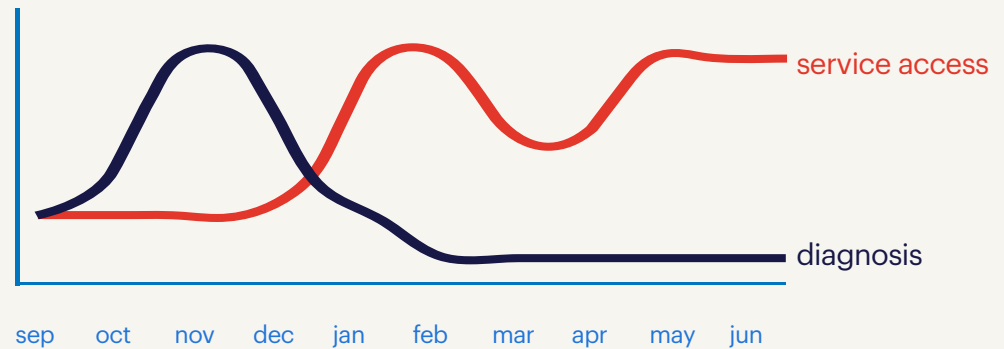
Clearly, as more students with mental health diagnoses attend university, the need for counselling support rises. Plus, an increased proportion of students who are accessing DSA are also accessing counselling services. We know from our survey that counselling is delivering real benefits to students:

55%	helped to cope with personal issues
44%	improved mental well-being
41%	helped to cope with academic pressures
36%	allowed me to remain in studies
29%	helped me to cope with issues I faced due to the Covid-19 pandemic
19%	helped to overcome social challenges and/or make friends
17%	helped to maintain or improve my grades

Interestingly, in our 2020 survey 37% said that counselling improved their well-being - this has now jumped 7%. Helping to cope with academic pressures has also increased from 37% in 2020 to 41% in 2021, suggesting that counselling is making a key contribution to reducing pain points for students. 33% of all students also said that they would benefit from additional counselling support whilst at university - a percentage which jumps to 57% for non-binary students.

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



Therefore, a key part of the solution here is to ensure that counselling support is set up in a timely manner. Of the students we spoke to, nearly three quarters (73%) of students said their support was easy or very easy to set up, with 70% getting their support set up within 2 weeks. In fact, 43% had their support set up within a week, which is a marked improvement on the 25% for the same time period in our 2019 data.

flexibility of support.

The pandemic has brought around a whole new world of both studying and accessing support. Focusing on support, students can access this virtually, face-to-face, or by a blended combination of the two.

Getting to grips with the way students want to access their support is a key way to encourage take up. For example, when looking at DSA support, 21% said they want face-to-face support, 45% said virtual support, and 32% would prefer a blended mix of the two. When reviewing counselling, 39% said they want face-to-face support, 28% said virtual support, and 20% would prefer a blend. We have been working with universities, students, and our own support workers to ensure that all types of support can be delivered, in the format that best suits the student where possible - from counselling, mentoring and one-to-one study skills support to British Sign Language interpreting.



What students want:

“Speedier support access”

“More understanding of what support actually is”

“Regular communication with my university”

Communication is something that was frequently mentioned in anecdotal feedback from students. We know that a primary challenge for those working in student mental health is that student engagement (and, therefore, attendance) can be 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. Universities need to review their initiatives to see where attendance is best, what works and what needs to be improved. University well-being services could also work more closely with 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 work with course leaders to include some mental health initiatives as part of a compulsory credit bearing module for all first-year students.

One way to alleviate some concerns students may have about their futures post university could be to put greater emphasis on career options available. It is clear that more needs to be done to support this, with only 33% of students saying that they were satisfied with the support their university had provided to help them find a job or work experience over the last 12 months.¹¹

For example universities could try partnering with local businesses for networking events, holding mock interview days, and offering support for gaining internships which could all enable students to feel more confident.

conclusion.

Higher education changes lives and sets students up for the future by providing a solid foundation to build upon in terms of knowledge, skills and life experience.

However, there are a number of factors which can hinder this student experience - poor student well-being being a key one. Although the statistics are not necessarily as extreme as in our previous reports, it is clear that more progress can be made.

While universities have been fast to alter how learning and support are given during and after the pandemic, student well-being has definitely suffered. We must take a more comprehensive approach to managing this well-being, involving collaboration between internal teams and external providers. Universities must also pay more attention to the distinctions between diverse student populations, such as cisgendered and non-binary students, as well as students of various ages and years of study. A one-size-fits-all strategy is patently ineffective.

resources.

1) <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/record-levels-young-people-accepted-university#:~:text=27%2C500%20UK%20students%20aged%2018,2020%20and%20a%20new%20record.&text=This%20means%2037.9%25%20of%20the,year's%20equivalent%20figure%20of%2036.4%25.>

2) <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8593/CBP-8593.pdf>

3) '3.7% of all UK applicants declared a mental health condition in their application to study in 2020 – up from 0.7% in 2011' <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/450-increase-student-mental-health-declarations-over-last-decade-progress-still-needed-address>

4) <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/a-student-futures-manifesto/>

5) <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/a-student-futures-manifesto/spot%20light>

6) Student hardship: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/annual-review-2021/improving-students-experience-of-higher-education/#hardship>

7) https://mhfaengland.org/?gclid=CjwKCAjwxOCRBhA8EiwA0X8hix3i3GHvKsjnNPCc932WJxrlpxKUhhMhr6ihE_7LGREnzq-v1soxhoCtrwQAvD_BwE

8) Savanta research

9) <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/02/02/how-pandemic-affected-student-engagement>

10) <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/a-student-futures-manifesto/>

11) <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/a-student-futures-manifesto/>

about us.

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.

We are part of Randstad, the international recruitment and HR consultancy headquartered in Diemen, the Netherlands. Founded in 1960, it operates in 38 countries, serves 280,000 clients, and employs approximately 38,000 people. Last year, Randstad trained more than 350,000 people and helped more than 1.8 million candidates find jobs.

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