

A man in a light-colored jacket sits on a black park bench, holding a white coffee cup. He is laughing and looking towards a woman standing next to him. The woman, wearing a brown jacket and glasses, is holding a green water bottle and gesturing with her hand as if in conversation. They are in an outdoor setting with a cobblestone path, fallen leaves, and a modern glass building in the background under a clear sky.

a changing
landscape:

mental health
and well-being in
higher education.



randstad

human forward.



foreword.

Young people in schools, colleges and universities have been impacted by the social, economic and political climate over the last three years: either through missed learning due to the pandemic, or hardship caused by the cost of living crisis, or the longer term impacts of austerity measures.

Despite this, the first cohort of school leavers to undertake formal assessments since the pandemic has seen a record number of students be accepted into university or college: 275,390 students have been accepted onto a course, a 15% increase on 2019 – the last time results were based on exams¹. UCAS data has also revealed that record numbers of 18-year-olds from the most disadvantaged areas in the UK have been accepted onto a course – 32,420 students compared to 30,910 last year (+4.9%) - which narrows the entry rate gap between the most and least advantaged to 2.1, a record low².

Whilst many students new to higher education and those in second year or above, find their experience rewarding and enjoyable, there is growing recognition from institutions that significant numbers have a different experience: university is not the same for everyone. Higher education institutions are also experiencing a changing landscape: there is growing pressure for a general statutory duty of care for students³, more focus on a 'whole institution' approach to mental health (with 61 institutions now part of the University Mental Health Charter Programme for 2022/23⁴), a need to gain more data and evidence on provision and impact of student support services as well as the recent appointment of the Student Support Champion, Edward Peck, by the Department for Education⁵.

¹ [First exam year since pandemic sees record numbers entering higher education | Undergraduate | UCAS](#)

² [Record number of disadvantaged students accepted onto higher education courses in 2022 | Undergraduate | UCAS](#)

³ [Closed petition Create statutory legal duty of care for students in Higher Education](#)

⁴ [2022/23 Members | University Mental Health Charter](#)

⁵ [How we are continuing to support students who are struggling at university - The Education Hub](#)



stepping stone

to success.

Going to university can no longer be perceived as a quick route to career success and job security. It is also a chance to expand understanding and knowledge as well as the chance to meet new people, and for some the first time living away from home. Studying also offers the opportunity to cement their own ideas, values and morals, ready to enter (or re-enter) the workforce.

In fact, getting independence and freedom from home life is a huge draw for thousands of future graduates across the country. 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.

It is no secret that students who are at university for the 2022/23 academic year are experiencing more financial struggles than ever before: a recent Save the Student survey found that more than 80% of those asked said they worried about making ends meet whilst at university. The increase in student protests about accommodation costs, having to choose between missing lectures or paid work, and not even being able to afford to eat is a worrying trend⁶.

In the worst cases, the academic pressure is exacerbated by factors including the cost of living crisis, leading to students dropping out. There are different reasons behind the decision that many students are forced to make when deciding to withdraw from their studies with mental health difficulties likely a common factor.

Randstad Student Support surveyed more than 1190 disabled students between November 2022 and February 2023. We recognise differences and difficulties in relation to what students expect from their university experience and the support on offer from the university; which is a constant challenge for both universities and support providers. Our goal is to use the information gleaned from this survey to better serve the needs of the students we support, and our partner institutions. We will particularly focus on how higher education can set students of all demographics up for success, if the right support is available from the beginning.



More than a third of students surveyed have considered leaving their course

⁶ Cost of living: Students struggling with impact of soaring prices - BBC News

survey demographics.

1195 respondents



Gender

70% female
23% male
7% non-binary

Age

53% 18-25
47% 26+

Type of course

77% full time
17% part time
3% apprenticeship
3% other

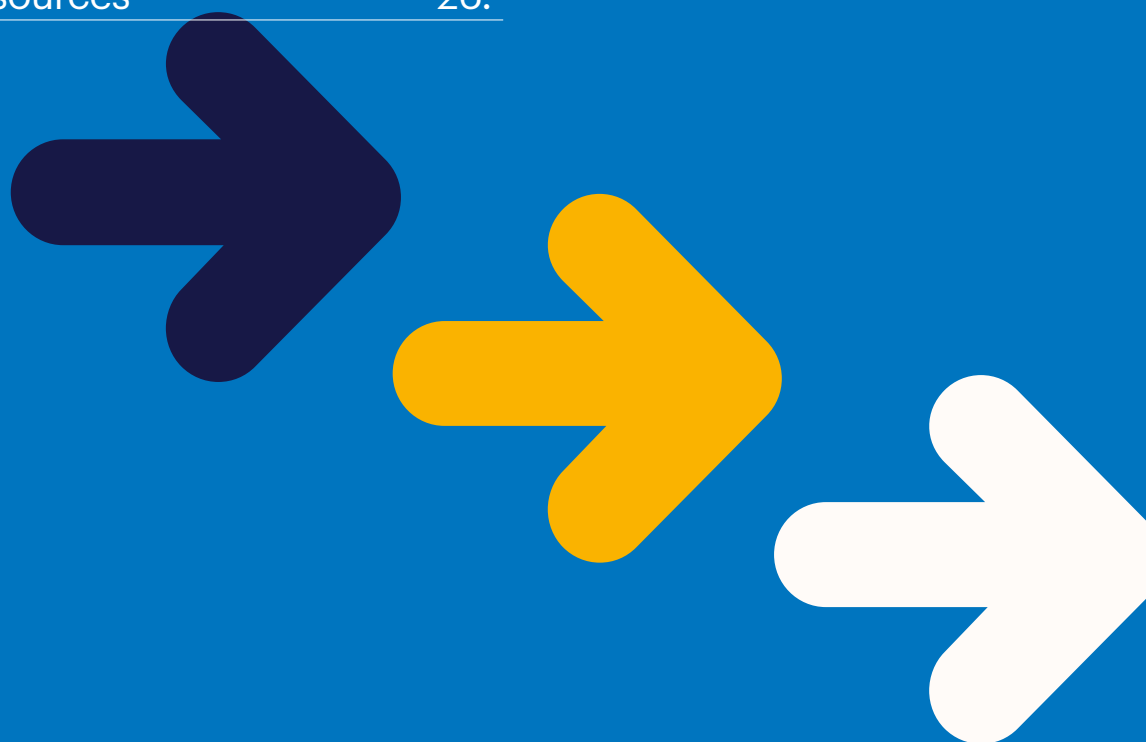
Year of study

30% year 1
33% year 2
25% year 3
7% year 4
2% year 5
3% year 6+



contents.

	page.
<u>introduction</u>	8.
The increasing pressures of higher education	
<u>the challenge</u>	10.
What impacts students' well-being	
Reasons for leaving higher education	
Setting up support	
Transitioning to higher education	
<u>the solution</u>	18.
Support on offer	
What students want	
Alleviating financial pressures	
Graduate job prospects	
<u>conclusion</u>	24.
<u>about us and resources</u>	26.



introduction.

The increasing pressures of higher education.

The decision to go to college or university after school, college, a gap year, or as a mature student, is a huge milestone in life. Students who find higher education challenging are not limited to people who already suffer from poor mental health before starting their course. Students who report 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 - and may find themselves needing additional support in their second or third year of study. In addition to this, going to university may improve a student's state of mental well-being as it opens up extensive opportunities to socialise, find new hobbies and study something they enjoy, providing meaning and purpose.

It is clear that student well-being will always remain a key priority for universities⁷, however with an increasing number of students requiring additional support - more students declaring a mental health condition on their applications⁸, and a 78% increase in mentoring support referrals to Randstad in the last three years⁹ - how can we ensure that support positively impacts the achievement of academic goals, and ultimately enables students to complete their courses? Since the pandemic, universities and support providers have made huge steps to ensure that help is available to students in the manner they want it: face-to-face, online, or a combination of both.

Data collected in this survey shows that more than four in ten (42%) students in higher education wanted to access counselling support face-to-face this year, in contrast to only two in ten (21%) last year - unsurprisingly, as students are spending more time on campus there is increased



when looking at counselling referrals for one university, 299 out of 1148 (26%) students asked for evening sessions



Therefore, when it comes to students engaging with support services, it's important to consider how and when students wish to access these services so that any provision truly meets their needs. It is also key to ensure that support workers are able to meet the student preferences - for example, at Randstad we are able to work with both students and workers to put in place weekend and out of hours support when required. In fact, when looking at counselling referrals for one university, 299 out of 1148 (26%) students asked for evening sessions. There is also an appetite from students for more counselling support, with almost three in ten (28%) saying they would benefit from this.

This report shares the results of our 2022/23 academic year survey as standalone statistics, whilst also comparing them to the findings from our reports from the last four years. It examines the similarities and differences in results between genders, ages and years of study, and provides insights and recommendations for institutions moving forward.

51%

of students surveyed have a diagnosed mental health condition

33%

of non-binary students said their mental health has worsened since starting university, compared with 30% of cisgendered students

43%

of second year and above students have considered leaving their course, compared with 31% of first years

15%

more mature students said that their non-medical helper support was essential to the success of the studies than students aged under 26



more than four in ten (42%) students in higher education wanted to access counselling support face-to-face this year.

⁷ [Support for students with mental health issues in higher education in England](#)

⁸ The most recent data published by UCAS states that: '3.7% of all UK applicants declared a mental health condition in their application to study in 2020 – up from 0.7% in 2011' [450% increase in student mental health declarations over last decade but progress still needed to address declarations stigma | Undergraduate | UCAS](#)

⁹ Randstad data

the challenge we need to solve.

Two thirds (65%) of 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.

In our most recent survey, 30% of respondents stated that their well-being had worsened since starting university. Despite this percentage being lower than in previous years, it is key to consider the factors that are causing almost a third of students to have worsening mental health: academic pressures, financial pressures and the rising cost of living.

This 30% average does also disguise some spikes in the data - for example, 10% more non-binary students reported declining mental health than their cis-gendered counterparts. With this in mind, student support services could consider engaging specialist mentors/counsellors with experience of supporting the non-binary community.

In addition, a third of students in their second year of study or above reported declining mental health, in comparison to just a quarter of first year students. This could suggest that the 2022/23 cohort of students, the first intake to be unaffected by the pandemic at university, are having a different experience to those who started during the pandemic, or were affected by lockdowns/virtual learning. Despite nearly a third of all students reporting worsening mental health since starting university, it is encouraging to see that this overall statistic has decreased by 19% since 2019, perhaps highlighting the impact of increasing support available to students, alongside the transition out of the restrictions put in place by the pandemic.



percentage of students reporting worsening mental health

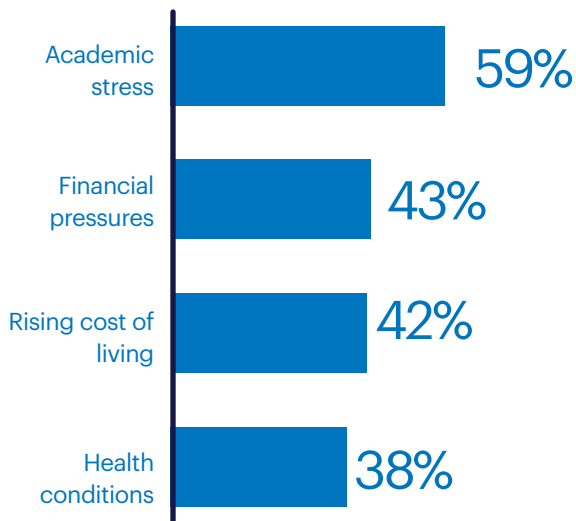
2022/23: 30%

2021/22: 32%

2020/21: 33%

2019/20: 37%

When asked to pick from a list of issues students felt impacted their mental health our survey found that the top factors were:



These statistics were reflected across the majority of demographics in the survey, and are almost identical to the 2021/22 results - the only change being the introduction of the rising cost of living as an option. It is interesting to note that students under the age of 26 cite making friends/social pressures as one of their top stressors, and unsurprisingly, balancing studies with work was the most chosen answer for those completing apprenticeships¹⁰.

¹⁰ More can be done to support the increased number of students choosing an apprenticeship: there was a 24% increase in applications for apprenticeships in 2021 vs 2020: [New UCAS research shows strong demand for apprenticeships from students keen to keep learning in the autumn](#)

feeling isolated due to living 45 minutes away from other students

struggled with finances

I felt like i wasn't smart enough to be at university

feeling overwhelmed and lost





academic stress.

Our research shows that academic stress is still 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 studies¹¹.

Academic pressures could be exacerbated because some students may still be suffering the effects of disrupted learning caused by the pandemic, whilst others may be sacrificing study time to work to earn money¹². In order to better support students who have access to additional learning or well-being support, it is key that universities ensure that support is set up in a timely manner: academic stress can be compounded by waiting lists for support.

every penny counts.

Financial pressures and the cost of living crisis are the second and third most important factors impacting students' mental health.



Not only have costs of university accommodation and rent on shared housing risen by a significant 14% year on year, according to the National Student Money Survey¹³. Increased prices of necessary items such as food and study supplies are massively affecting students and their families. This has put pressure on students to find paid work¹⁴ whilst studying, with almost a quarter (24%) of the students who responded to a Savanta ComRes poll missing a university deadline, or asking for an extension, in order to do paid work. Added to this, many parents and guardians are finding it harder to financially support their children - a survey by Unite Students reported that over a third (36%) of parents are struggling to financially support their child through university¹⁵.

building pressure.

For some students, the pressure of higher education may prove so intense that they consider leaving university.

Our survey revealed that 39% of all students have considered leaving. When looking at the results for non-binary students alone, this increases by a staggering 26% to 49%.



¹¹ [A Student Futures Manifesto - UPP Foundation](#)

¹² A BBC poll shows that One in eight (12%) students say they have skipped university to do paid work once: [Cost of living: 'I skip university lectures to do paid work instead' - BBC News](#)

¹³ National Student Money Survey insights: [Cost of living: Students struggling with impact of soaring prices - BBC News](#)

¹⁴ [Cost of living: 'I skip university lectures to do paid work instead' - BBC News](#)

¹⁵ [Rising cost of living increases pressure on parents with children at university](#)

reasons for leaving higher education.



66% I experienced mental health related issues

55% I could not cope with the stress

34% I didn't feel like I was getting enough support from my place of study

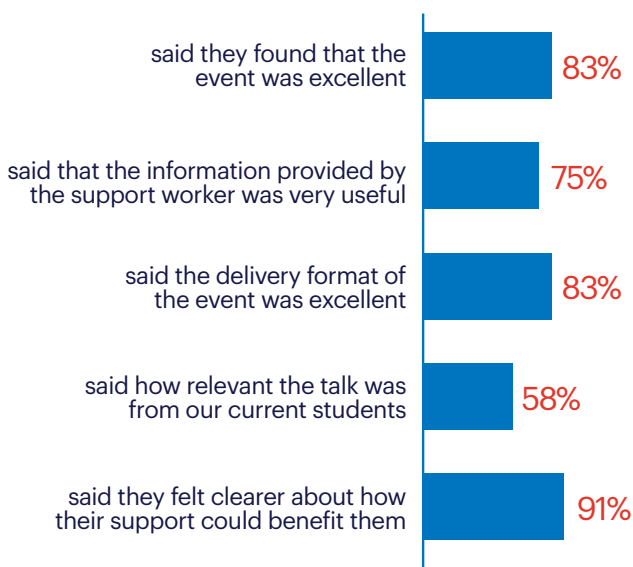
When we asked respondents who had told us they had considered leaving why, two thirds highlighted mental health concerns as a key reason for considering leaving university.

It is clear that more needs to be done to ensure students receive the support they are eligible for, whether this is non-medical helper support or counselling or well-being support. Of those who have considered leaving their course, 55% said that the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) support they received helped to prevent them from leaving their course. It is key to note that the top three reasons chosen by students are the same as in our 2021/22 survey, suggesting that they are areas which require consistent attention from universities and potentially a different approach.



100 students attended a webinar with Randstad, which offered an overview of what to expect from support, and how the set up process works. Students could also meet support workers and current students and ask any questions they had prior to the start of the current academic year.

Feedback following the event showed that:



when support works.



I would like to thank my support workers, they have both been amazing. They listen to my concerns, give support where needed and help boost my confidence.

Easy to access and respond to queries promptly.

They are very kind and flexible. They tailor my care to my needs well.

The support I have received has helped me a lot during my course.

My support has been so helpful, I definitely would not still be able to continue on my course without the support of my mentor. Although sometimes I find talking about things hard, she is understanding and I appreciate the support.

The opportunity to feel heard, listened to and understood within a non judgemental space where I feel comfortable to share my thoughts and feelings with such a warm, supportive and articulate mentor has really made a difference.

I have had excellent, positive, and engaging support this year.



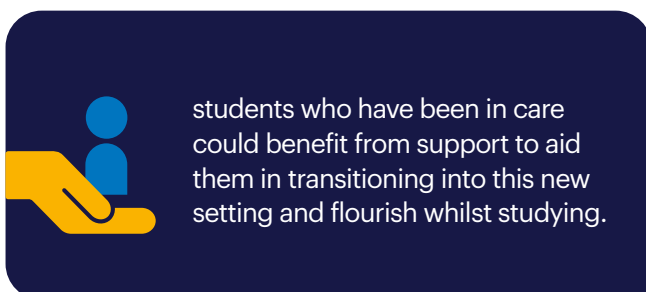
transitioning to higher education.

It is interesting that for first year students, the third most popular reason for wanting to leave their course was fitting in socially. This was the only demographic for which this factor featured in the top three reasons for wanting to leave university, potentially as a result of multiple lockdowns during the pandemic causing a general increase in social anxiety for some young people¹⁶.





This suggests that more needs to be done to support the transition into higher education for new starters. In fact, one student told us that the one thing they would improve about their support was: “Starting support before university starts”. According to the University Mental Health Charter, good transition experiences can ensure that students feel supported and that they develop a sense of belonging, confidence and motivation that can lead to increased persistence, achievement and well-being¹⁷.



It is important to consider the various levels of support that different demographics of students require when starting their course. Our survey doesn't specifically ask students about their background, however students who have been in care could benefit from support to aid them in transitioning into this new setting and flourish whilst studying: despite the Children & Social Work Act 2017 extending Personal Adviser support to all care leavers up to age 25¹⁸, UCAS data shows that 60% of young people who have been in care receive no specific support relevant to their circumstances when deciding on their options¹⁹, meaning that additional help when arriving at university could be required.

¹⁶ “Faced with extended school and university closures young people have been left vulnerable to social isolation and disconnectedness which can fuel feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and loneliness and lead to affective and behavioural problems” [The impact of COVID-19 on mental health cannot be made light of.](#)

¹⁷ [Transitioning into university](#)

¹⁸ [Extending Personal Adviser support to all care leavers to age 25 - GOV.UK](#)

¹⁹ [Three in five with experience of being in care given no guidance when applying to higher education: Three in five with experience of being in care given no guidance when applying to higher education | Undergraduate | UCAS](#)

the solution.

more support.

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, with over three in ten students choosing it.



It is also key to ensure that the right support worker is matched with the student, something which we pride ourselves in taking the time to do at Randstad, with almost eight in ten students rating the quality of their Randstad support worker as good or very good. This can mean that students are more likely to take up the support that they are offered, as they feel that they are benefitting from it. Student support workers are also 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; challenges meeting deadlines; support with university life.

One possible solution is to increase the support on offer, whether by working with students and suppliers to ensure all available support is accessed, or by making additional support options that universities have on offer more easily accessible. For example, when asked if they had accessed any digital support platforms provided by their university, only 22% of respondents said yes. There is a clear gap here between what is available, and what is being utilised and the need for more flexible support options for students.



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Upskilling internally.

In order to support the work of student support workers, 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 assistance²⁰.

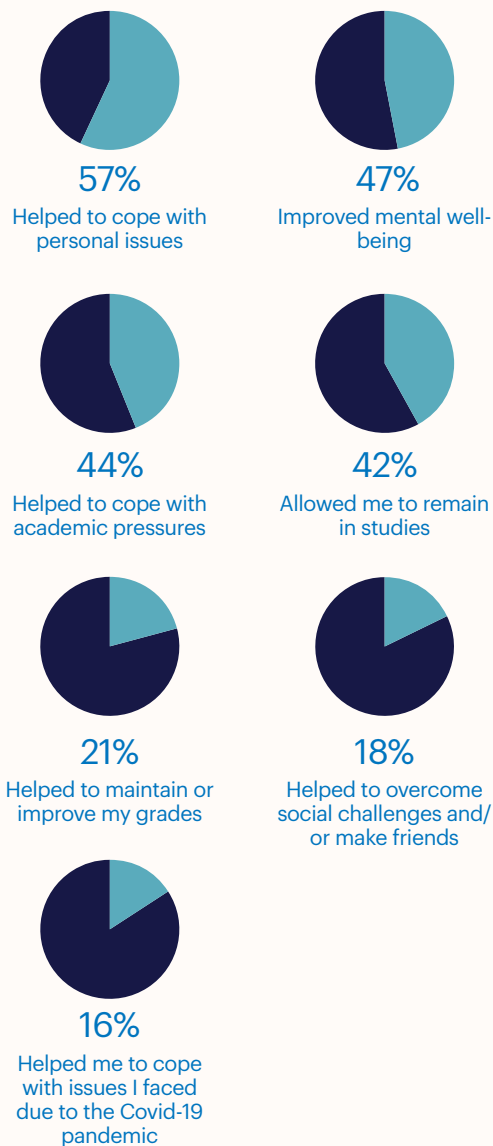
Many universities have developed an in-house provision to ensure their mental health and student well-being services meet their needs. For some, this method of in-house sourcing is attractive because it appears to offer a greater degree of control over what is being offered. One area to consider is outsourcing services to allow for a more holistic approach to provision, for additional or more flexible capacity. At Randstad, we work with universities to set up bespoke managed service referral models, and since we started managing their counselling service, one university has seen 92% of all referred students be booked into start their support, or started it.

²⁰ MHFA England

Counselling support

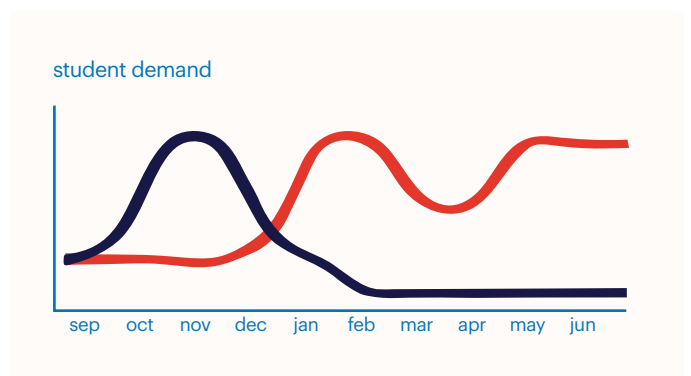
Clearly, as more students with mental health diagnoses attend university, the need for counselling and well-being support rises. Many students in receipt of DSA support also receiving counselling. 28% of students currently receiving counselling said that they'd benefit from more, with this percentage jumping to 34% when looking at first year students alone. We know from our survey that counselling is delivering real benefits to students:

How has counselling support been of benefit to you?

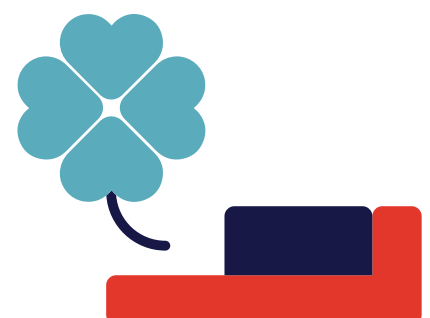


Interestingly, in our 2021/22 survey, 44% said that counselling improved their well-being - this has now increased a further 3%. Helping to cope with academic pressures has also increased from 37% in 2020/21 to 41% in 2021/22, to 44% in 2022/23, suggesting that counselling is making a key contribution to managing academic and other related demands for students.

Randstad commissioned independent research with 15 universities²¹ and found that waiting times to set up counselling support for some students can be up to three months from initial assessment due to high demand and lack of resources:



Therefore, a key part of the solution is to ensure that counselling support is set up in a timely manner. Of the students we spoke to, eight in ten said that their support was easy or very easy to set up (10% more than last year), with 76% getting their support set up within 2 weeks. In fact, over half (51%) had their support set up within a week, which is a marked improvement on the 43% for the same time period in our 2021/22 data, and 25% in 2019/20 data.





Flexibility of support.

Understanding how students want to access their support is key to encouraging take up. For example, when looking at counselling support, 42% said they want face-to-face support, 25% said virtual support, 18% would prefer a blend, and 16% have no preference. 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.

In order to confidently tailor support packages based on student preference, every student is asked to confirm their preferred support delivery preference (ie face-to-face, remote or hybrid delivery) ahead of their support commencing, so we can ensure their sessions are booked in accordance with their preference. Where we have high volumes of students opting for face-to-face support, we have worked closely with a number of partner institutions to secure confidential spaces for this support to take place within.

when support works.



The people I have had to support me have been brilliant and very well matched.

I felt very supported and having a routine was helpful as well. I feel much more stable and capable.



Without the support I have received, I would have given up the course. Thank you.



what students want.

workers with
better fit on
experience

clearer process
on switching
mentors

clearer what
support workers
actually do

better
communication
with uni



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 poor²². 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 may have little effect.

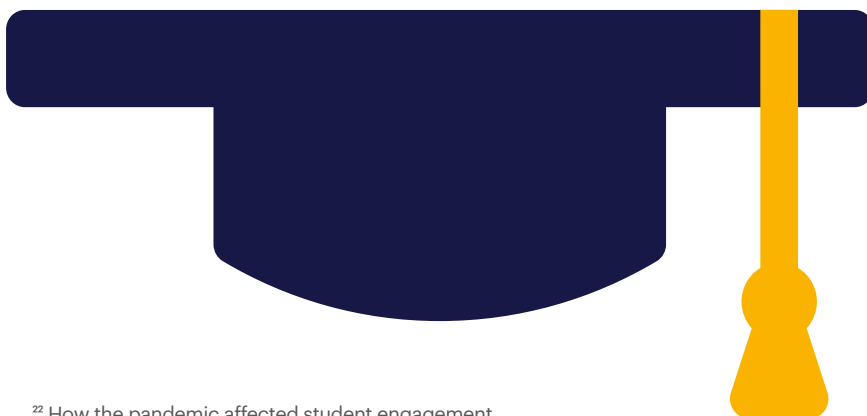
It is imperative that universities find a way to get students interested in the support they offer. Universities should regularly review their initiatives to see where attendance is best, what works and what needs to be improved. If not doing so already, university well-being services could also work more closely with student unions and student societies 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, in line with the University Mental Health Charter's advice to embed well-being into the curriculum.

Graduate job prospects.

In our survey, a third of students told us that they were concerned about their job prospects after university. One way to alleviate some concerns students may have about their futures post-university, which could be exacerbating mental health concerns, is to put greater emphasis on career support options available, working alongside employability support services.

Randstad's research shows that Generation Z workers are more likely to quit their jobs if they don't fit with their personal lives and values: more than one third of Gen Z (37%) have done this, compared to just one in five 55-67 year olds, highlighting the importance of showcasing a broad range of job options. This works hand in hand with the increased focus for universities on employment statistics²³.

With attention on improving graduate employability and the national drive to forge a skills rich workforce, the demand on universities to equip students with essential skills for the workplace is also an area of consideration and universities need to provide flexible opportunities for students to enable them to enhance their employment prospects post studying.



Generation Z workers are more likely to quit their jobs if they don't fit with their personal lives and values.

²² [How the pandemic affected student engagement](#)

²³ [Workmonitor recruitment industry trends report | Randstad UK](#)

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 enrichment experiences. However there are a number of factors which can hinder this student experience - poor student well-being being a significant one, with referrals for mentoring support increasing by 78% in the last three years, action needs to be ongoing to enable student success.

We understand that priorities and challenges for leaders within higher education are ever-changing, as the needs of their students change.

It's clear that support services must have a holistic approach in relation to:



mental health and well-being



inclusion and widening participation



employability and graduate outcomes



Universities must also place more emphasis on understanding the differences between different student demographics - cisgendered and non-binary students: different ages: different years of study. A one size fits all approach is not effective - the focus needs to be on:

- Flexibility of support provision and the way students want to access services
- Understanding the ever-changing factors affecting different student demographics
- Supporting students through the transition into, and out of higher education



about us.

As the largest provider of disability support to higher education students in the UK, Randstad Student Support is proud to work with 200+ institutions and support over 15,000 students to achieve their academic aspirations every year.



As well as providing non-medical help support through the Disabled Students' Allowance; increasingly, we work directly in partnership with university and college's disability services to develop their own inclusive support.

In addition to this, over the last 5 years we have also seen an increase in demand for our end-to-end counselling and mental health provision. We are working with over 20 universities to deliver counselling and well-being support to their students. Crucially, our services have significantly reduced waiting lists and helped to ensure students have access to timely, quality counselling support - therefore reducing overall risk to the institution and importantly - helping students to stay on their course.

Randstad is also supporting higher education institutions with their graduate employability goals: last year, we supported 1500 young people into apprenticeships and provided access to early career development frameworks to thousands more, by partnering with industry leading organisations through a series of tailored graduate programmes. We already partner with a number of university careers services, to place their newly qualified graduates into a variety of roles - including teaching, nursing and social work.



Randstad Student Support is 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.

If you would like to find out more about how we can help you and your students:

Steph Eardley
client operations manager

stephanie.eardley@randstad.co.uk

0161 247 8800



search
randstad student support

resources.

¹ [First exam year since pandemic sees record numbers entering higher education | Undergraduate | UCAS](#)

² [Record number of disadvantaged students accepted onto higher education courses in 2022 | Undergraduate | UCAS](#)

³ [Closed petition Create statutory legal duty of care for students in Higher Education](#)

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