

the 2023/24 student
support insight report

under pressure: disability & mental health support amid the university funding crisis.

foreword.

After the upheaval of Covid, higher education institutions could have been forgiven for hoping for a return to stability. Instead, they have had to contend with more change and more uncertainty.

The nature of higher education institutions' duty of care when managing student mental health has shifted. The attention being paid to graduate employability (and the national drive to forge a skills-rich workforce) has increased demand on universities to equip students with essential skills for the workplace. Student expectations have changed. Young people are reporting more mental health issues than ever.

The nature of the challenges faced by the higher education sector have evolved — while expectations have risen.



The UK's higher education sector is also attempting to navigate a financial storm, marked by falling real-term funding and frozen tuition fees. Current government spending per university student in the UK is now less than half that of Germany¹. Brexit has cut off EU funding streams, and high inflation has eroded the real-term value of tuition fees.



In the past, higher education providers have relied on uncapped tuition fees from international students to mitigate financial challenges. But now this crucial revenue stream is threatened by tougher immigration policies and growing international competition.



This fiscal squeeze is placing immense pressure on institutions seeking to balance accessibility and equity with educational quality.

This is the backdrop to our latest report into student mental health. As the UK's leading provider of disability support workers to students with disabilities, health conditions or additional learning needs — working with over 250 universities and colleges while supporting 20,000 students — we have unique insight into the opinions of the student population. Our report is based on the responses of 1,429 students with a disability or mental health condition studying in more than 200 higher education institutions, and it delves into the current state of student support in the UK as experienced by those who need it most.

The research provides deep insights into the student experience amid a turbulent educational landscape and shows that, despite the financial challenges ahead, the need for student support is greater than ever. It highlights the critical importance of regular support, the unique challenges faced by trans and non-binary students, and the pervasive issue of mental health.

It also highlights a crisis of confidence



It is becoming harder than ever to earn a decent income without the benefit of higher education or vocational training. For decades university degrees have

been a must-have for entry-level professional roles. Companies continue to pay a premium for graduates.

But our research suggests that young people with additional challenges still lack the confidence to go for jobs and become a valuable and diverse part of our UK workforce.

The 2023/24 Student Support Insight Report demonstrates that cuts to budgets will have very clear, negative outcomes on students — at university and beyond. Students will need your continued support if they are to embrace the range of opportunities higher education offers them.



Victoria Short
CEO of Randstad UK&I

¹ Foster P., Gross, A., & Borrett, A., 'The looming financial crisis at UK universities', Financial Times (18 July 2023)

the sector has faced a year of challenge.



Real-terms funding for higher education has been falling — leaving higher education institutions trying to balance access and quality. The UK government now spends less than half as much per university student than Germany². Tuition fees have been frozen at £9,250 (£9,000 in Wales) for around seven years³. The Russell Group has estimated that, on average, English universities made a £2,500 loss on each domestic student last year⁴. The ongoing trend is concerning: if the current funding climate continues, the shortfall will increase to £5,000 per student per year by 2029-30⁵.

With the number of first-year undergraduate students in England entering higher education set to increase by about one-third by the end of the decade — from around 522,000 this year to 683,000 in 2030-31⁶ — it is clear budgets will be put under immense strain.

There's little slack in the system. Institutions already have to contend with the rise in inflation and the loss of EU funds. High inflation has eroded the real-terms value of tuition fees to below £6,500 — and Brexit cut off access to EU funding streams worth an aggregate average of £800mn per year to UK higher education institutions between 2010 and 2020⁷.

international rescue



Universities have, at least, been able to subsidise domestic students via the higher (uncapped) tuition fees paid by international students — who, on average, pay in the region of £22,000 each year⁸. The brightest students from across the globe aspire to be UK-educated; attracting talented students from around the world has been a great success story, saving British students money, generating £26bn in economic benefit for the country, and funding research⁹.

International fees currently account for nearly 20 per cent of universities' income — up from about 10 per cent just over a decade ago¹⁰. A 2023 financial sustainability report for English universities by the Office for Students, the sector regulator, estimated tuition fees from non-EU overseas students would account for 24 per cent of income by 2025-26¹¹, while Coventry University already gets more than 40 per cent of its income from overseas students¹². International students have become integral to the financial sustainability of the higher education sector.

2 Foster P., Gross, A., & Borrett, A., 'The looming financial crisis at UK universities', Financial Times (18 July 2023)

3 'Cost of living boost for students', Department for Education (11 January 2023)

4 'Russell Group response to The Times article on international student fee income', Russell Group (25 March 2024)

5 'Understanding a research-intensive university's business model for educating students', Russell Group (24 August 2023)

6 Foster, P., & Gross, A., 'Looming rise in student numbers sparks calls for skills reform in England', Financial Times (7 April 2024)

7 Foster P., Gross, A., & Borrett, A., 'The looming financial crisis at UK universities', Financial Times (18 July 2023)

8 Rigby, N., 'University's finances hit by 40% drop in overseas students', BBC News (26 May 2024)

9 Shafik, M., 'How to fix the UK's higher and further education finance system', Financial Times (9 April 2023)

10 Foster, P., 'UK universities urged to cut 'fraudulent' international student applications', Financial Times (19 October 2023)

11 Foster, P., Borrett, A., & Gross, A., 'Foreign students cool on British universities as funding strain worsens', Financial Times (21 January 2024)

12 Foster, P., Borrett, A., & Gross, A., 'Foreign students cool on British universities as funding strain worsens', Financial Times (21 January 2024)

But it has never felt like a lasting solution

The theme of 2024 has been the tightening of the international student market. In January, the UK banned most international students from bringing family members with them as part of a wider plan to reduce net migration. The recent government's announcement of a review of the graduate route — which allows overseas students to work for two years post-graduation (three for PhDs) — sent tremors through the system.

It is key to the UK's competitiveness in the market for international students and any move to remove this, or make it less attractive, risks tipping many institutions into deficit. Further uncertainty around the international student market has grown as China's relations with the west came under growing strain. A currency crisis in Nigeria and increased competition from rival markets such as Canada, the US and Australia has also affected numbers.

Indeed, there are indications enrolments may have fallen by more than a third from key countries including Nigeria and India¹³. Data from Enrolly, a web platform used by one in three international students for managing enrollment, showed deposit payments in January 2024 were down 37 per cent compared to January 2023¹⁴.

Senior leaders at top-tier UK universities say they have seen significantly less international students taking up confirmed places, even after paying their deposits. Some institutions have started lowering entry requirements for some international students in response to "financial challenges" driven by a downturn in their numbers¹⁵. PwC says a sharp drop in international students could put four-fifths of universities in England and Northern Ireland in deficit.

It's a long way from the days of relatively high tuition fees, low inflation, generous government research grants, EU structural funds and strong growth in international student numbers.

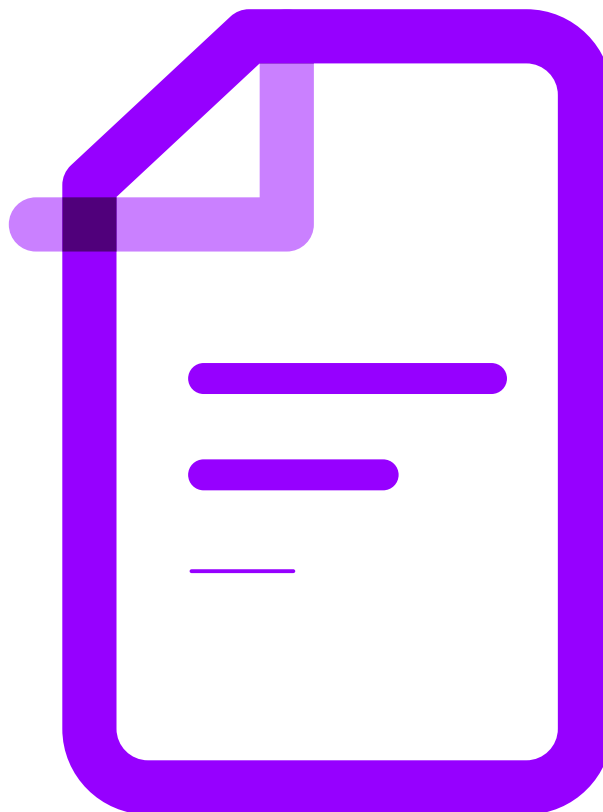
It's far from certain that any new government post the 2024 election will link tuition fees to inflation or allow an independent advisory body to set tuition fees. Raising fees looks too unpalatable, politically. There appears to be no emerging mandate from any political party to put more public money into higher education, at least not in sufficient quantities to change the pressures facing the sector.

How will higher education institutions react to this groundswell of pressure? Some will find organisational synergies: a few are already experimenting with closer collaboration on courses and back-office functions. There will be other cost savings, such as pruning the number of courses offered (or, in some cases, closing entire departments) and job cuts and voluntary redundancies. But these measures will not be enough to address the coming funding squeeze. Alarm bells are sounding about the sustainability of the wider sector's finances.



- 13 Foster, P., & Borrett, A., 'UK universities risk falling into deficit as foreign student numbers fall' Financial Times (12 January 2024)
- 14 'CAS and deposits rally but remain significantly down year-on-year as Pakistan leapfrogs Nigeria', Enrolly (11th January 2024)
- 15 Clarence-Smith, L., 'University lowers entry requirements for overseas students after financial challenges', Daily Telegraph (11 January 2024)

This is the backdrop to the latest survey from Randstad UK's Student Support Team. This is what directors of student support, heads of support services, and heads of wellbeing across the UK are facing.



While much of the funding for student support comes from central government, these challenges will inevitably mean support for students is likely to find itself squeezed further



Furthermore, the government-funded element of the Disabled Students' Allowance is already in a state of flux. Changes to the assessment and equipment

provision and training process have been underway since February. There has been a call for evidence ahead of potential changes to the Non-Medical Helpers process¹⁶.

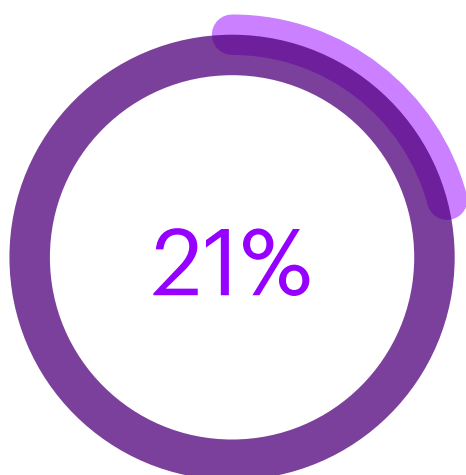
The deadline for responses had been set as July. If this goes ahead, it will lead to changes in the current support system, with a potential shift to the universities to address the barriers they encounter.

But, as we have seen, the financial bedrock that our higher education institutions are built upon may not be sound enough to absorb these new costs. It is unclear how universities are planning for this eventuality. In all probability, student support leaders will be left fighting for every penny they can get to support their students, against competing financial priorities.

¹⁶ 'Non-medical support for disabled students in higher education', Department for Education, 10 April 2024

The likelihood is that teams will have to do more with less to ensure students in need of support have the same equitable experience as their peers. They will have to work smarter to ensure they meet their responsibilities to students under the 2010 Equality Act, as laid out by the European Court of Human Rights. After all, these are the ideals we have settled on as a society — this is what we have declared as law. To borrow from Disabled Students UK, “going back is not a choice”¹⁷.

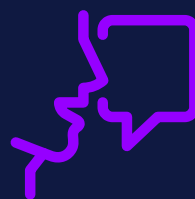
This year, our survey was issued to 10,000 students who are currently receiving support — in the form of mentoring, counselling, tutoring, note taking and practical support roles. We have had 1,429 respondents.



a fifth of UCAS applications declare as having a disability.¹⁸

Perhaps the sample size should not surprise us. Either way, this is now the largest, most comprehensive overview of student sentiment in the country.

It represents the voice of the disabled student



The findings offer student support professionals deep insights into the experiences of students with disabilities. There are four issues that stand out: the provision of

support is already failing trans and non-binary students; the lack of confidence students have in their employability post education; the effectiveness of support is strongly associated with the regularity with which it is provided; and how large stress, depression, and other mental health issues still loom on campus.

¹⁷ 'Going Back is Not a Choice', Disabled Students UK (15 March 2022)

¹⁸ Lundy, A., 'Disabled Students UK launches the first university performance evaluation on disability inclusion', Disabled Students UK (29 November 2023)



01 gender identity matters.

Our findings suggest that those who identify as trans (including non-binary) not only need different sorts of support, they need more of it. Worryingly, the support they currently receive appears to be less effective, too.



Needs are different. While 55 per cent of cisgendered students report that going to university has had a positive impact on their mental health,

44% of trans students say the same.

Nearly half of trans respondents (48 per cent) accessed mental health support — in comparison to a little over a third (36 per cent) of their cisgender peers (although cisgendered women were more likely to access this support than cisgendered men: 38 per cent vs 27 per cent).

Trans students are more likely to have considered leaving their course than cisgendered students (62 per cent vs 47 per cent). Typically, this was driven by mental health concerns, with 95 per cent citing mental health issues compared to 86 per cent of cisgendered students.

Fewer trans students report that the support they are being offered helps their academic performance. While two thirds of cisgendered students (65 per cent) say the support improved their revision techniques, only 58 per cent of trans students said the same. Cisgender students were also more likely to report getting better grades as a result of their support: 62 per cent vs 57 per cent for trans students.

Given these findings, perhaps it's not a surprise to find that stress relating to academic results is more of a problem for our trans cohort.

76%

Three-quarters of trans students (76 per cent) strongly agree that they have been affected by stress over their academic results — compared to 56 per cent of their cisgendered peers.

Four in five (81 per cent) report being anxious about their academic performance — compared to fewer than three in five (58 per cent) of their cisgender peers.

gender identity outside of the lecture theatre

It's not all about the academic side of the higher education experience. Trans students are more likely to be worried by their housing / living arrangements than their cisgender peers (77 per cent vs 56 per cent) and social pressures (84 per cent vs 63 per cent).



effectiveness of student support within the trans cohort

The support offered to trans students needs to be looked at with a more specialised focus. While trans students are more likely to have received counselling support than their cisgender peers (62 per cent vs 46 per cent), they are more likely to have found the counselling unhelpful (32 per cent vs 21 per cent). They are also more likely to say that the support was unhelpful when it came to continuing their studies (22 per cent vs 12 per cent).

This is despite greater emphasis on face-to-face support. As well as being more likely to need mental health support (of any sort), trans students were also much more likely to be receiving that support on a face-to-face basis: 18 per cent vs 11 per cent for cisgender students.

It is clear that trans students would benefit from more specialised support. Universities will need more counsellors and support workers trained to provide support tailored specifically to the trans students.

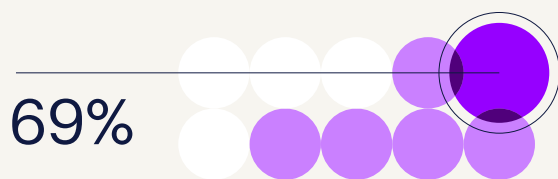
02

employability, job interviews & the labour market.

Employability is a concern — even on primetime. *Is University Really Worth It?*, an engaging hour-long BBC documentary, broadcast in spring 2024, questioned whether the ivory towers of English academia represent good value for money¹⁹.

More than half of the student body is worried about finding employment after university (although those in the south are marginally more confident about applying for jobs than those in the north or in Wales — 53 per cent vs 51 and 45 per cent respectively).

Two-thirds of trans students are worried about their job prospects.



But this is not borne out by the overall experience of graduates. In the UK, the “graduate premium” — the wage boost received by people with a degree — is equal to roughly 50 per cent more pay than people without a degree²⁰. Britons who left the education system at age 18 without a degree were paid an average of £14 per hour in 2022; the median hourly earnings of British

graduates was £21²¹. Holding a degree will still increase overall average career earnings by £130,000 for a man and £100,000 for a woman, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies²². Another study by the IFS found that those who had benefited from free school meals later went on to university were almost four times more likely to be within the highest 20 per cent of earners at age 30 than those who did not²³.

This is despite an increase in the number of graduates, which could have been seen as diluting the value of a degree in the jobs market.



In the UK, 57 per cent of young adults were university educated in 2021, up from 29 per cent two decades ago²⁴.

But the graduate premium has held up as emerging jobs become more complex, and roles requiring degree-level skills have increased.

¹⁹ Nicholson, R., ‘Is University Really Worth It? review – not when students are left starving’, *The Guardian* (11 March 2024)

²⁰ Borrett, A., ‘Is a degree worth it?’, *Financial Times* (18 August 2023)

²¹ Burn-Murdoch, J., ‘Britain’s graduates are being short-changed while America’s are rich’, *Financial Times* (28 October 2023)

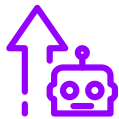
²² Britton, J., Dearden, L., Waltmann, B., & van der Erve, L., ‘Most students get a big pay-off from going to university – but some would be better off financially if they hadn’t done a degree’, *Institute of Fiscal Studies* (29 February 2020)

²³ Britton, J., Drayton, E., & van der Erve, L., ‘English universities ranked on their contributions to social mobility – and the least selective post-1992 universities come out on top’, *Institute of Fiscal Studies* (24 November 2021)

²⁴ Borrett, A., ‘Is a degree worth it?’, *Financial Times* (18 August 2023)

“when it comes to the changing world of work, higher education still... works.”

And students are well-placed to thrive in the workplace of tomorrow.



As AI and automation make routine, repetitive jobs redundant, the importance of higher education will only continue to grow.

Given the significant net benefit of higher education contrasted with the lack of confidence students appear to have in their employment prospects, universities need to provide more specific support on how to navigate applying for jobs and how to be successful in interviews.

In a 2023 study, Universities UK reported the results of a survey of FTSE 350 senior figures which found that 51 per cent believed “graduates with critical thinking skills will be more important to the workforce than ever should AI be used to automate more white-collar jobs”. They forecast that 88 per cent of ‘new jobs’ would be graduate level by 2035²⁵.



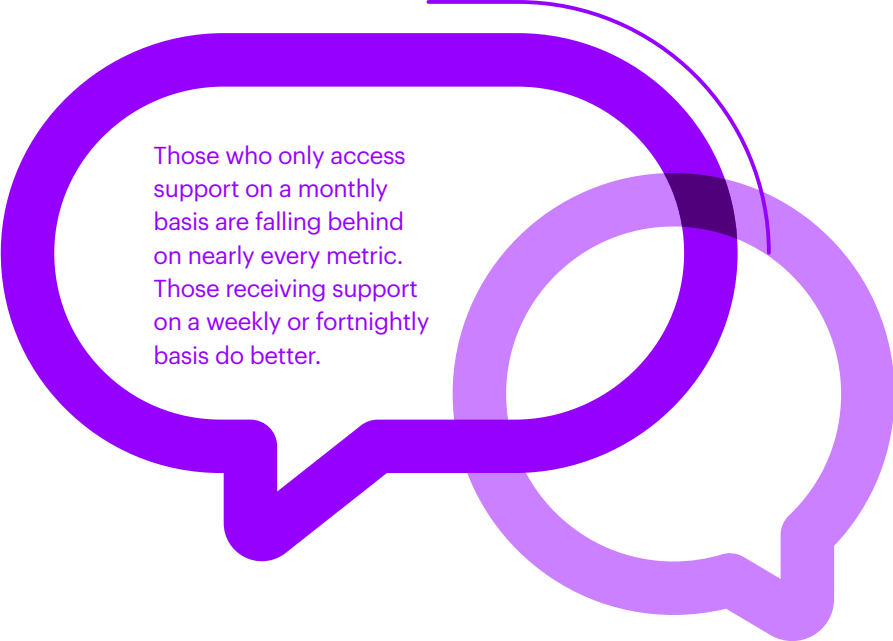
Almost a quarter of jobs will be disrupted in the next five years, according to the World Economic Forum. Lower-skilled roles are most at risk, but it is expected that transferable skills, such as creative and analytical thinking, will increase in importance. These — and other skills such as social intelligence or complex problem solving — are all honed by higher education.

²⁵ ‘Creativity and critical thinking craved as UK businesses need 11 million new graduates’, Universities UK (30 October 2023)

03

frequency & regularity of support provision.

The results show that the frequency of the support offered affects the positive impact and outcomes for students significantly.



Those who only access support on a monthly basis are falling behind on nearly every metric. Those receiving support on a weekly or fortnightly basis do better.

For instance, more than four-fifths of students who had support on a weekly basis or every fortnight (83 and 85 per cent respectively) found that the support provided them with useful skills and strategies to use in their studies. This sits in stark contrast to those whose support was accessed on a monthly basis (56 per cent).



84% of those receiving support on a weekly or fortnightly basis tell us they felt it had a positive impact on their mental health/wellbeing - compared to less than

12 in every 20 (58 per cent) who received their support on a monthly basis.

While 83 per cent of students receiving support on a weekly or fortnightly basis found it helped them manage stress and anxiety, only 50 per cent of those receiving support on a monthly basis said the same.

And more than three-quarters of students receiving support on a weekly or fortnightly basis (78 per cent) report it helps them with organisation and time management — only half (52 per cent) of those who receive support on a monthly basis say the same.

Less than half of those receiving monthly support felt it helped with revision techniques (43 per cent). This increases to 66 per cent where weekly and fortnightly support is in place.

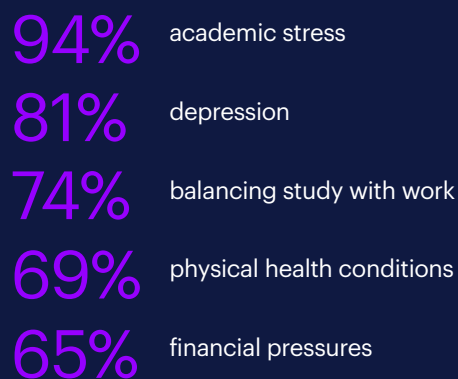
We can trace the impact more frequent support can have all the way through to academic success. Two in every five students receiving support on a monthly basis (41 per cent) felt it helped with grades. But this increases to three in every five (60 per cent) of those who receive support on a weekly or fortnightly basis.

When it comes to support, frequency counts.

04

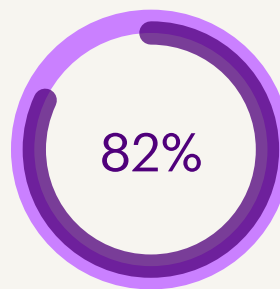
mental health: a growing challenge.

Most common causes of poor mental health



Anecdotally, we have heard about students skipping lectures because financial difficulties are forcing them to prioritise paid work over studying²⁶. But the long running nature of our research offers some empirical evidence that helps put the current student experience in some perspective. While financial pressures are now the fifth most common cause of poor mental health in this student cohort, in 2022/3 financial pressures were the second most common factor affecting students' mental health — as they were in 2021/2.

The good news is that, where students are receiving support, it has the greatest impact on improving mental health and wellbeing.



More than four in every five of the students we surveyed (82 per cent) said mental health and wellbeing was the area where support had helped the most.

This may explain why the number of students who agree that “going to university has had a negative impact on my mental health” is still shrinking. In 2019/2020, 37 per cent said their mental health had deteriorated. In 2020/2021, it fell to 33 per cent, then fell to 32 per cent in 2021/2022. Last year it was 30 per cent — now it's 24 per cent.

²⁶ Otte, J., “‘I see little point’: UK university students on why attendance has plummeted”, The Guardian (28 May 2024)



The bad news is that many students say they can't access the support they need. By way of example, two in every five students (42 per cent) we asked said they weren't sure where to go to get the counselling support they need. Indeed, half of the male students we polled (50 per cent) said the same. This is a significant problem: particularly in light of a third of students saying they would benefit from counselling (32 per cent).

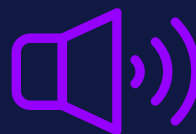
Moreover, when we asked about the barriers stopping students accessing the support they need, between a fifth and a quarter of students (21 per cent) say they didn't know how to access it.



Again, men fared particularly badly with 29 per cent telling us they didn't know how to access support.

The upshot is that mental health concerns are leading to a large percentage of students to consider leaving their courses. The main reasons that students give for wanting to leave their courses are stress (93 per cent) and mental health issues (85 per cent). If support is not more easily accessed, they will drop out.

Furthermore, the number of students who have considered leaving their course has increased since the last academic year. In our last report, 31 per cent of first-year students reported considering leaving their course. This has risen to 40 per cent. Additionally, last year, 43 per cent of second-year and above students said they had considered leaving their course. This has now risen to 54 per cent.



At the very least, it appears universities need to work on their communications — with clearer signposting of the support available and how to access it.

conclusion.

The past year has presented extraordinary challenges to the UK's higher education sector, revealing deep-seated vulnerabilities that threaten not only its stability but even its sustainability. As we highlight in this report, the financial landscape is bleak, with real-term funding cuts, frozen tuition fees, and a reliance on a disappearing cohort of international students disrupting universities. This precarious situation has been exacerbated by political and economic issues, including Brexit and rising inflation which have collectively strained resources and exacerbated funding shortfalls.

The data paints a stark picture: UK universities are struggling to balance quality education with financial viability. With the projection that the funding gap per domestic student will widen significantly by 2029-30, and the anticipated increase in (loss-making) first-year undergraduate enrollments, tight budgets are set to be strained further.

Against this backdrop, the findings of our research highlight growing demand for support services. The data clearly indicate that the regularity of support plays a significant role in student outcomes; frequent, consistent support is associated with better academic performance, improved mental health, and greater overall satisfaction — its cadence must not be compromised.

Moreover, our study reveals significant disparities in support effectiveness for trans students, who face unique challenges that current support systems are failing to address adequately. These students report higher levels of mental health issues and lower satisfaction with the support provided, indicating an urgent need for tailored interventions that cater to their specific needs.

Despite the availability of support services, many students remain unaware of how to access them. Higher dropout rates will be the inevitable conclusion. This underscores the importance of improving awareness of support services.

The bright spot is employability. While many students lack the confidence to tackle job interviews, the wider picture remains positive. As AI eradicates many lower-skilled jobs, the importance of higher education is set to grow. The significance of the transferable skills that higher education hones — such as complex problem solving, social intelligence, analytical thinking, and creativity — is only going to increase.

The higher education sector in the UK stands at a crossroads. Universities need to enhance their support services to cater to the diverse needs of their student populations. And yet, they are looking to do more with less in the face of significant financial headwinds. If they cannot square this circle, disparities in student support will continue — and equity will be eroded further.



About Randstad Student Support

Randstad Student Support provides non-medical support to approximately 20,000 students in 250 higher education institutions across the UK — we are the largest provider of this type of support in the country.

The support ranges from study skills and mentoring to more general practical help, such as manual note-taking, library support and exam scribe and reader assistance, along with employability mentoring for students pre and post graduation. We also work with university wellbeing services to provide counselling and specialist mental health support to students, reducing appointment waiting times — helping students to stay on track with their studies.

To find out more about how we can help you and your students, telephone 0161 247 8800 or email studentsupport@randstad.co.uk

Internationally, Randstad advised over 230,000 clients on their recruitment and wider talent needs last year, helping more than 2 million people find a job with an aim to be the most specialised and equitable talent organisation in the world. Founded in 1960, Randstad now employs more than 46,000 people across 38 markets. It is headquartered in Diemen, the Netherlands. Randstad N.V. is listed on the Euronext Amsterdam.