

Executive Summary

University Mental Health: Life in a Pandemic

Listening to higher education communities throughout 2020/2021

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About the Report

Over the last eighteen months, the higher education community has been faced with a range of unique and wide-reaching challenges resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact. Students and staff have experienced significant disruption and uncertainty as universities have adapted to remote working and learning environments. Of course, these challenges, coupled with the inherent stress and uncertainty of a global pandemic, have impacted the mental health and wellbeing of members of university communities.

As the UK's student mental health charity, we made it our priority to listen to higher education communities and build an understanding of the challenges and opportunities arising over the past year-and-a-half. We have gathered insights from thousands of secondary sources, whilst also conducting our own research through two informal pulse surveys in 2020 and one larger-scale formal survey with Alterline in 2021. Throughout this report, we share what we have learned, along with some of our own reflections and recommendations for moving forwards.

By structuring the report using the themes Live, Learn, Work, Support, and Inequalities and Intersectionality from the University Mental Health Charter (2019), we have taken a whole-university approach to understanding students' mental health and wellbeing during this challenging period.

What we found

The impact of the pandemic on the higher education community has been profound and wide spread. Every aspect of students' lives has been

affected - their relationships, accommodation and financial situations; their academic experience and performance; their graduate employment opportunities; and their rites of passage such as Freshers' Weeks and graduation ceremonies. Students have reported feeling lonely, isolated and forgotten, with large proportions of students reporting a worsening in their mental health and wellbeing during the course of the pandemic. Many have faced additional financial pressures, barriers to accessing support, and challenges associated with remote learning and assessment.

For university staff, the pandemic and subsequent restrictions have meant a shift to predominately remote teaching and working. These changes have led to some staff reporting feeling overwhelmed and burnt out due to additional stress, uncertainty and increased workloads.

Across society, over the past eighteen months, we have also witnessed and reflected upon the continued existence and impacts of systemic and structural inequality and oppression. Our listening and insights work has highlighted the ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic has widened pre-existing inequalities and exacerbated long-standing issues contributing to the continued oppression of marginalised communities. Furthermore, during this period, we have collectively mourned and protested for the lives lost due to division, hate and structural inequality, igniting renewed societal focus and attention on the Black Lives Matter movement and on women's safety. This report goes some way in exploring these issues, through contributions from two Co-Authors (Myles Smith-Thompson and Chloe Maughan), and through initial considerations of the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on marginalised communities.

Recommendations

Live

- Students must be provided with a universal support payment to help them recuperate from the financial impact of the pandemic. Student Minds recommends a minimum £500 payment per student, which can be used by the student on their terms, to support their studies, tackle digital poverty, access support, or cover rent. This should be funded by the national government, noting the significant financial losses incurred by students in addition to the need to ensure students receive fair, consistent support regardless of institution.
- Acknowledging that every student has been impacted differently by the pandemic, Student Minds recommends means-tested “top-up” hardship funding available to those who have been particularly affected. This could be administered through institutions’ existing financial hardship systems and ought to be available to all students, not just those currently on the approved fee cap list.
 - Note that insights from sector colleagues suggests that many students are unaware of financial hardship support available to them, and even if so have difficulty accessing support. In addition, some student communities access financial hardship support less often – such as international students. Targeted efforts should be made to ensure all students are aware of the financial support available to them and the application process.
- Accommodation providers (university-owned, private purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) providers, and individual landlords) should put flexible protections in place (beyond force majeure clauses) to protect students from significant financial losses in the event of future disruption.
- Universities and Students’ Unions should increase funding and support for student-led activities to facilitate the establishment and maintenance of student social spaces, enabling students to develop a sense of belonging and healthy social support networks.

Learn

- Approaches to pedagogy should be co-produced wherever possible, to ensure that students can engage with learning and teaching in ways which set them up to succeed. Particularly, thought should be given to curriculum design, assessment design, and mode of delivery (remote versus face-to-face or a hybrid approach).
 - Note that students are not a monolith and will have different needs and preferences when engaging with their learning in a Covid and post-Covid context. Therefore, flexibility and sensitivity to a students’ individual circumstances should underpin this thinking.
- Measures must be taken to ensure no student is affected by digital poverty. At the pre-arrival stage (and prior to the commencement of each academic year) institutions should engage students to understand their ability to access remote learning, and ensure students can access the tools they need to succeed, taking steps to remove barriers to access (e.g. affordability). This can be facilitated by, among other things, the universal student support payment and means-tested funding top-up described in the “Live” recommendations (above).

Work

- Institutions must empower staff to accommodate these recommendations by providing the appropriate resourcing, including protected staff time, compensation, and training. The additional workload required to deliver quality, flexible, co-produced provision should be reflected in capacity planning, to allow staff to maintain healthy workplace behaviours.
- Universities and Students’ Unions should seek to eliminate precarious working conditions among staff. In the University Mental Health Charter (2019), Student Minds describes the negative impact on workplace mental health that job insecurity entails. Casual and temporary contracts should be limited in use only to where they are absolutely necessary.

Support

- Universities and Students’ Unions should ensure that support services are equally accessible to all students, as recommended by the University Mental Health Charter (2019). Culturally competent approaches to promoting mental health literacy must be taken – while not all students may appear to hold a white, British understanding of mental health and wellbeing, they may in actuality be highly literate in mental health and wellbeing topics as are relevant to them.
- Prevention and early intervention must continue to be prioritised for students at every stage of their university journey.
 - The national government should allocate greater funding for early support hubs for children and young people, with the aim of tackling emerging mental health conditions in their early stages.
 - This is supported by a whole-university approach as articulated in the University Mental Health Charter (2019), which recommends the creation of “a culture in which individuals feel safe and supported to disclose when they are experiencing poor mental health” (p.53).
- Institutions must plan for the pandemic’s impact on mental health to outlast the pandemic itself. Even when the immediate threat of the coronavirus has subsided, the cumulative stress, grief and mental health impact of the pandemic will potentially have a negative impact on students and staff for years afterwards if not properly managed.