- SUPPORTING
- STUDENTS
- I WITH THEIR
- MENTAL HEALTH





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INTRODUCTION

The number of students reporting mental health problems has increased dramatically in recent years, and the signs are that it will continue to rise further. This white paper examines the results of our recent surveys on student mental health and asks how Faculty members can support their students, offering advice on dealing with stigma, guiding students into good self-care practices and understanding the best way of sign-posting students to professional help when needed.

For most students, their first steps into higher education will be some of the most challenging times they have faced. Most will be dealing with new-found independence, along with the challenges of balancing their academic work, new financial pressures, and building new social relationships. For many, the pressures can deeply affect their mental health, and for others who are already dealing with difficult mental health problems they can find themselves struggling. Very often, students are unwilling to speak out, whether that is due to stigma, concerns about the consequences of asking for help, or simply embarrassment.

The 'Minding our Future' report from Universities UK says '50% of mental health problems are established by age 14 and 75% by age 24.' It states, 'The number of students disclosing a mental health condition to their higher education institution is increasing,' with numbers showing an increase from 16,510 reported cases in 2010-11 to 57,305 reported cases in 2016-17. And it is important to remember that many students will not report their issues to their university, so actual cases are likely to be higher. A recent article in the Journal of Abnormal Psychology concludes that 35% of students in the US are struggling with some form of mental illness.

As a Faculty member you may be the person they turn to for help. And, while there are limits to the support you can, and should, offer it is essential that you are fully equipped to deal with these situations.

METHODOLOGY

In addition to our own desk research we conducted two surveys, one aimed at faculty members and one at students. The faculty survey consisted of 17 questions themed around mental health rates among students, perceptions of stigma and issues affecting their students' mental health. Of those who responded to our questionnaire, 7.2% of respondents were based in the UK, 73.4% were based in the US and the remaining 19.3% were spread across countries around the world.

The student survey consisted of 33 questions. These questions looked at themes of mental health diagnoses, pressures students felt affected their mental health and their thoughts around their university's support systems. We received 975 responses. 6.4% of respondents were based in the UK and 6.7% based in the US. Over 85% of responses came from students across Europe.

It is interesting to note the difference in geographical responses across the two surveys. While some issues addressed are likely to be universal, there will be different levels of stigma and support in different geographical areas, something that is difficult to compare with these results.





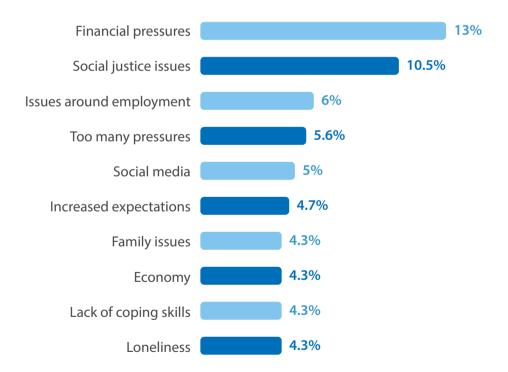


SURVEY DATA

'Right on the first day there was a lecture about how we, the students, were responsible for keeping the university as one of the best in the country, anything that didn't include studying was a waste of time and not up to the university standards. The first thing the university should do to help students with mental health problems should be to completely change that mindset.'

FACULTY SURVEY

We asked respondents if they had seen an increase in their students experiencing mental health difficulties in the past two years. The vast majority, 73.7% agreed with this statement. When asked about the factors they believe have influenced this increase we saw the following results:

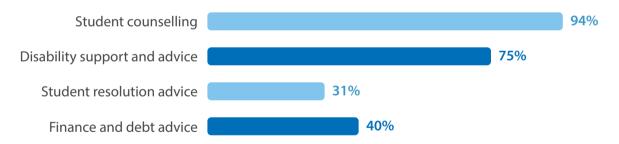


79.3% of respondents believe that there has been an increase in pressures on students, both in what is expected and what they expect of themselves in their studies, but also external pressures such as those listed in the table above.

'Parents expect their children to do better than them in life, but they cannot when they experience extreme debt loads requiring all of their time with no quality time for recreation or relaxation.' 'Pressure to have perfect grades, even when grades are not good indicators of learning, as well as the anxiety of failure is unacceptable.'

'Students are putting more pressure upon themselves to succeed and react in one of two ways – overachieve or completely fall off the edge.'

We asked what support respondents' universities offer their students. The responses were:



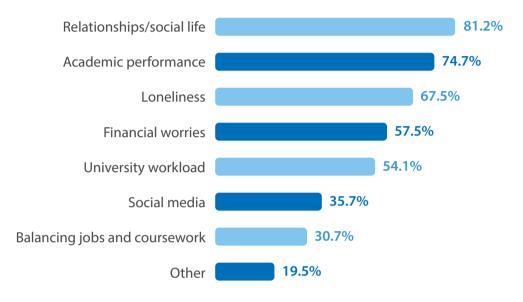
'The institution provides many services for students and was very proactive in getting telehealth services activated. The institution is also very open with its explanation of how they are adjusting to the changes in climate and address students' needs as much as they can.'





STUDENT SURVEY

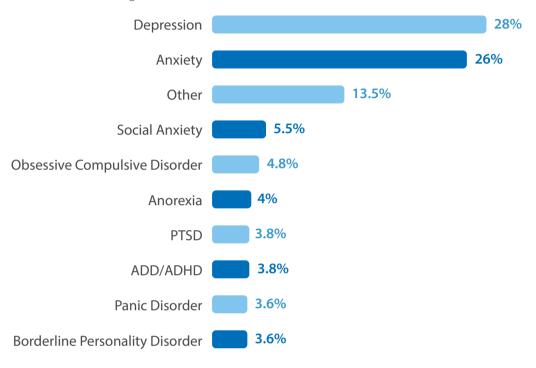
We asked students about the factors they feel affect their mental health and wellbeing. The responses were as follows:



Students were asked about current and previous mental health experiences. 31.5% of students who responded to the survey stated that they had received a mental health diagnosis in the past. 80.2% had already experienced problems with their mental health before beginning their university studies. This figure increased to 84.3% when asked if they had experienced mental health problems since beginning their studies. While these high figures are concerning, it is worth keeping in mind that it is possible that students suffering mental health problems are more likely to respond to a survey on mental health. We asked students, if they felt comfortable, to tell us what mental health issues they had experienced before and during their studies.

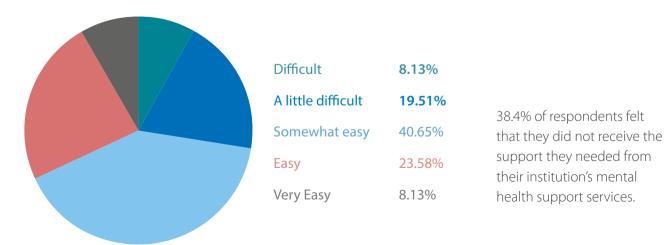
ISSUE	BEFORE	DURING
Stress	92.4%	94.2%
Anxiety	90.5%	93.2%
Low-mood	82.8%	82.0%
Depression	67%	62.9%
Self-harm	41.5%	26.6%
Suicidal thoughts	57.5%	40.1%

Digging deeper into their experiences we asked students if they had ever received a formal diagnosis of a mental health condition. 31.5% of students answered yes. We then asked, if they felt comfortable, to tell us what that diagnosis was. The results were:



Students were also asked about their experiences of accessing the support available at their institution. Only 46.2% of students said they were aware of the mental health support on offer at their university. Of those, 30.8% had accessed these services. We asked those students who had accessed the services if they had found them helpful. 57.9% of respondents said yes.

We asked the students who had accessed their institutions mental health services rate how easy or difficult it was to do so:







Students were asked why they had chosen not to access these services. 19.7% said it was because they did not know how to access them, while 46.9% said that they hadn't because they did not want the university to know that they are having problems with their mental health. Many provided more detailed reasons why they had not reached out to these services:

'I am scared because I've never reached out for help for my mental health so I don't know what that would look like.' 'I was scared to ask for help and to admit to myself it's that bad.'

'Too anxious to reach out.'

'I'm not sure. Maybe I'm afraid that I won't be taken seriously or that there are others who need the support more.' 'I am pressured to suppress these problems by my parents who think that needing help makes me weak'

Finally, we asked students about their interactions with their lecturers/tutors. Only 12.9% felt able to discuss their mental health problems with their lecturers, but of those 81.9% felt that their lecturers/tutors were supportive.

'Some of them understood, some were supportive, some didn't care and picked on me in class, and some offered some kind of help.'

'Some of them were, some were not.

One or two of my lecturers contacted me and wanted to talk to me about my mental health.

That made me feel seen, and helped me feel better to go to their classes because I knew I could confide in them and be honest.'

'They simply thought that I was trying to excuse my bad grades.'

'They don't really care about mental health issues. They just think that it's your problem and you have to solve it by yourself.'

'I was crying uncontrollably wherever
I went from October 2019 to February 2020.
People noticed. My family ignored it! True
friends and my professors cheered me up by
listening actively or distracting me as needed
and they even shared their own life stories with
me which I appreciated a lot.'

SUPPORTING STUDENTS (AND YOURSELF)

ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

It is important to remember that there are limits to what you can do and the support you can, and should, offer to students who talk to you about problems with their mental health. Some of these limits will be set by the university and others will be legal limitations around confidentiality, etc. There are also limitations in what you can be expected to do. Faculty members are not trained counsellors and psychiatrists so while it can be hard to avoid giving advice or getting too involved with a struggling student it is important not to cross into areas where you have little to no training. Find out exactly what your university expects of you and the processes it has in place to support students with mental health issues. It is important not to offer help that is beyond your role and to be clear with the student about your boundaries.

'It is important that academics are not expected (and do not presume) to take on the role of mental health professionals, but we need to know how to respond appropriately to distress, what to do in an emergency, and how to act as a bridge between our students and more specialist support services.'

All universities should ensure that every faculty member is given clear guidance about their role in relation to student mental health and should clarify exactly what responsibilities faculty members hold around duty of care and where overall responsibilities lie for student wellbeing. As a report from **Student Minds** states:

'Universities must recognise the unavoidable role academics are now playing in responding to student mental health, create open spaces for discussion and learning and provide ongoing support and accessible training.'

There is a need for the university as a whole and for faculty members to understand the university's expectation for this part of the role. You may be the first person that a student comes to for help and you need to be able to understand what support you can offer and how to help that student find the wider support and resources for them. It is also useful for staff to receive training on how to handle these often difficult conversations.





THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR

How much do you know about what signs to look out for? How would you know if your student is struggling with mental health difficulties? It is true that you can't always tell, especially for people who have lived with mental health conditions for some time. But it's important to recognize when a student is experiencing more than run-of-the-mill stress or just 'having a bad day'. Here is a list of indicators to look out for:

- Have there been noticeable changes in a student's appearance or hygiene levels? Are they dishevelled where they used to be tidy and well-presented?
- · Have you seen evidence of increased usage of alcohol or drugs?
- Do other people seem concerned about the student or their behaviour?
- Has there been a drop in the student's quality of work?
- Does the student's mood seem different to usual? Don't forget, it isn't just negative moods to look out for. A shift to an unusually or an overly positive attitude can mask what is going on inside.
- Has the student told you in the past that there is a problem?

There are also signs to look out for in conversation with a student, things that may not be of too much concern on their own but which may be of concern, especially when displayed suddenly, in contrast to their usual personality, or shown with other signs. These could include:

- · Changes in appearance, mood, sleep or appetite
- Missed deadlines or reduced attendance
- Difficulty concentrating
- Depression, anxiety or panic attacks

Keep an eye out for these signs in conversation and in class and speak to any students you are concerned about. It need not be an in depth conversation, just a check-in to see if they are ok. From there, if needed you can point them toward resources and services offered by the university and external organisations.

REDUCING STIGMA THROUGH AN ATMOSPHERE OF OPENNESS

Our surveys found that 68% of faculty members and 76% of students believe that there is still a stigma around mental health issues. While many thought that things have improved over recent years, there were still many students stating a reluctance to report for fear of how people would react. We asked students why they thought there was a stigma around mental health. These are some of their responses:

'Because some people don't see mental health problems as serious like physical health.'

'Sure, we talk a tiny bit about stress and that we should learn to breathe but apart from that? It's your problem and your problem alone. You are expected to deal with it by yourself and if you can't, you're seen as somewhat weaker.'

'Nobody wants to admit they aren't perfect or have it be known to others that they aren't perfect. I needed therapy as a teen and my mother cried because people would judge our family for having a child who wasn't correct.'

'People act as if you are crazy or not capable of living normal life because of it.'

Only 35.8% of students felt able to openly discuss their mental health with friends and family. These are some of the comments we received from students and faculty members:

'I can talk to the people around me about my mental health most of the time because I trust them, and they tell me about their issues as well. Sometimes it's hard opening up because I fear getting rejected or being left alone.'

'My family never made it `uncomfortable or made it like it's wrong or not normal. It's ok to feel whatever you feel.'

'I've spent a long time building up the courage to be more open about my mental health with my family. It was hard to get them to understand but once they did, it was a lot better.'

'Even though it seems better, I still feel like students put off seeking the help they need hoping things will get better.' 'I feel uncomfortable with my family, especially my parents because they judge me and say that the things I feel are stupid.'

'My family doesn't think that things like anxiety are real, my friends don't understand why I'm feeling that way and try to invalidate my feelings by saying that other people have worse problems.'

'The stigma on campus is not as great as it is in the general environment, but I feel that many students struggle with the stigma until they meet others who seek help and difficulties are normalized.'





"The stigma surrounding mental health issues is fading, however, there are still many students who are afraid and/or embarrassed to need a counsellor."

'Students have told me they are reluctant to seek help and ask for what they think is special treatment.'

'Having depression myself, some of my colleagues are uneasy about discussing such issues. Students, being younger and more vulnerable, have to work hard to find someone they can trust and confide in.'

There is, no doubt, a need for open discussion among both students and faculty, to make sure that the stigma of talking about mental health needs to be removed. Universities, and the wider society, need to create a culture and environment of inclusiveness and care. But it isn't an easy thing to do to something that is so ingrained. Many people feel the stigma so deeply that they are ashamed of their issues and shame is a hard thing to move past. It can be very difficult to admit that you need help when you aren't sure that you will get a positive, caring response.

There are simple things that can be done to reduce the stigma. Display resources for mental health prominently on department notice boards, clear signposts to university mental health resources as well as external organisations. Normalise looking for help and support. Why not mention these resources at the start of each course and again during stressful periods such as exam season?

We heard from respondents whose universities offer workshops on dealing with exam stress, self-care, workload management, etc. which not only gives students the opportunity to think these issues through but also normalises the issues, allowing students to find a space that is open to the things they are feeling.

LITTLE THINGS MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

'During an exam I had a panic attack and my professor asked me to be quiet because I was disturbing the other students. That professor should have been more sympathetic with my situation.'

Of one the things that stood out from the responses to our student mental health survey was that many students feel as though they aren't worth the time to be listened to, to take up counselling sessions, or that anyone would care if they admitted to struggling with their mental health. Many feared their concerns would be dismissed if they did speak up and ask for help.

Others had gotten negative responses when they had brought their issues up with faculty members. We asked students what their lecturers/tutors could have done to make them feel more supported. These were some of their answers:

'Stop stigmatising men with depression and anorexia.'

'Ask direct questions that make them seem that they want to help and are willing to negotiate i.e. "How can I help your situation?", "Would an extension help? The most I can give is x."

'Brought it up in class to verbally assure students that it's a topic they can be approached about. Also getting training in how to have those kinds of conversations.'

'Listen and help and not just dismiss it as a phase or that I'm just making it all up.'

'Ask me how my day was going if they saw me down.
That little gesture would've been enough.'

'If they saw me being obviously down it would've been nice if they'd ask me if I'm fine, it would be enough to make me feel a bit better. Anyways, the bare minimum would be understanding that I won't be at my best during class when my mental health is lacking.'

'Talked about mental health issues as a part of joining uni and stepping into a different phase in life
Saying that it is normal to feel scared and anxious
and assuring that there are people you can talk to.'

One of the clearest things in these answers is that students just want to be seen, and have their problems acknowledged, not dismissed as unimportant. Spending time to actively listen and show students that you are taking them seriously can go a long way. Some students stated that they would talk about things if someone asked but would keep their problems to themselves until that happened.

A demonstration of understanding and openness in these situations can often be all that is needed to help a student who is struggling. If you are concerned about a student, ask them how they are. They may not be willing to talk, or even feel able to give an honest answer but the action of asking the question can make a student feel noticed and cared for. During these conversations be sympathetic and understanding of what you are being told. Try to avoid negative language and reactions and repeat their words back to them, ensuring that you understand. If there is anything practical you can do to help, maybe an extension to a deadline, then work with them to come to a compromise.





There is a need to develop a climate of trust where students feel confident about disclosing a mental health condition and are reassured that there is no stigma attached to a request for help. Before your course starts you may want to consider contacting students confidentially to ask if they have mental health problems that need to be taken into consideration. Opening the conversation up in this way tells students that you are open to their concerns and that they can feel confident in disclosing any mental health issues.

SELF-CARE

For busy students finding time to look after themselves can feel like just one more thing to add to an already too long to-do list. But self-care is essential, not just for students but for you too.

While much self-care needs to be self-led and guided by students' own interests there are things universities can do to support their students in taking care of themselves. It is likely that the student counselling centre, if your university has one, is already encouraging students through regular emails. Why not encourage your students to read the emails and try some of the tips they include? A personal recommendation from someone they know and trust will go further than an email from a department they've had little to no contact with.

In one-to-one or group conversations with students encourage them to invest time in their own wellbeing and self-care. Remind them that by spending time on themselves they will be more relaxed, less stressed, and a better state of mind will likely feed into them achieving better results in coursework and exams.

Some respondents to our surveys told us that their universities had created safe spaces for their students, quiet areas where students could go to unwind and find a moment of calm. Does your institution have these spaces? If not, it could be worth suggesting them as a way of helping students.

Doing what you can to ensure your students are caring for themselves is great, but it is equally important that you look after yourself too. In a busy, often stressful job, it is essential you look after your own mental health. Finding time for self-care isn't always easy but for the sake of your mental health, try and find time each day for you.

SIGNPOSTING AND SUPPORT

Do you know what processes your university has in place for supporting students who are experiencing problems with their mental health? Do you know how students access counselling services? These are things it is important for you to know, to be able to quickly and easily point students in the direction of the help they need, but to also give you peace of mind that you have been able to help them.

As our survey showed, many students either don't know how to access their university's mental health support services or are even unaware that they exist. As they will potentially turn to you for help it is essential that you know where to signpost them. You could also display posters or leaflets about

this support, as well as external agencies on departmental noticeboards or intranet pages so the information is easy for students to find.

Some students may be reluctant to reach out to these services as many are wary of issues around confidentiality and availability, as well as being reluctant to appear vulnerable to university agencies. Reassure them that there are measures in place to ensure their confidentiality but find out from your support services of any local external charities or agencies that may be able to help if a student would prefer to talk to someone outside the university. External agencies can also play a role in supporting students when the university's service has long waiting lists. It is important to remember that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed if a student indicates a potential risk of harm to themselves or to others, including suicidal thoughts.

Think about whether to highlight student mental health services once or twice to your class during each term. This will not only ensure that students are aware of the help available should they need it, but this will also help with normalizing and destignatizing mental health.

In the responses to our survey, many students highlighted an interest in peer support groups, places where they could meet with fellow students experiencing mental health difficulties and discuss methods of self-care and tips for dealing with their problems. Some faculty members also spoke of how their institution offers workshops for students on subjects such as how to handle stress and how to work with depression.

We asked students what mental health services they felt their institutions should offer:

'Universities should at least have a counsellor and a psychologist, preferably more than one of each. And if they can't help with your problems, they should have resources to transfer you somewhere you can get the help that's needed.'

'End the taboos and speak freely on mental health. Speaking freely would lead to less judgement and spread more knowledge about this issue could help a lot of people.'

'Free therapy sessions for anyone in need would certainly help, but also just providing students someone to talk to with more experience that can understand what they are going through and maybe help them figure something out together.'





CRISIS MANAGEMENT

While it is rare, a student may reach a crisis point, telling you in person or via email that they have reached a point of extreme emotional distress. They may mention suicidal thoughts and the intention to act upon them, or in some cases mention an intention to harm others.

At this point you need to act immediately. Your university will most likely have guidelines in place for how to deal with these circumstances, but it is essential that you ensure that the person receives help. Call emergency services and stay with the person until help arrives. Encourage them to talk by asking open-ended questions and by actively listening. Speak calmly and in measured tones, making sure that you use positive language in your responses to what they say.

Once emergency services have arrived, find someone to talk to yourself, whether that is family, a friend or a colleague. Helping someone through a mental health crisis is a difficult and often traumatic experience so make sure that you practice self-care too.

Does your university offer training for staff in how to deal with crisis situations? It may not be something you ever encounter in your career but if it does arise you need to be prepared, so suggest some training be put in place.

TRAINING

Our survey to faculty members asked what training, if any, their university provided to help staff better support students with mental health issues. These were their responses:



'Mine has a strong awareness of mental health issues and good counsellors, but it would be wise to put an emphasis on mental health and the effects higher education can have on it in introductory processes, especially for freshmen.'

82% of respondents believed that their institution should provide more training in this area. There were many suggestions as to what this training should cover. Here are a few examples:

- Training to identify and know how to speak with students who are struggling
- Provide staff with guides to specific situations
- How to deal with issues arising in class and in office hours
- Recognizing signs and symptoms
- Understanding all available help and facilities within the university
- Training to understand when specialist support may be needed
- How to identify a crisis situation when immediate action is required

Does your university offer any training in these, or other areas? It is important for staff to feel fully able to support a student who comes to them with mental health issues, both so that student can get the help they need but also so that each faculty member can be confident in how they handle the conversation.





I CONCLUSION

With mental health problems among students rising rapidly, faculty members will increasingly find themselves faced with difficult conversations and a need to support more and more students. It is essential that they are fully equipped to deal with these situations but also fully supported by their university to be able to help students and to look after themselves, getting support for their own mental health and after care following difficult, often emotional conversations.

Hopefully, this white paper will have given you some food for thought for how you approach these conversations, but will also help you to do what you can to normalize conversations around mental health at your university and to reduce the stigma that stops so many people from finding the help they need.

DISCLAIMER

The content of this white paper is provided for general information only. It is not intended to, and does not amount to advice which you should rely on. It is not in any way an alternative to specific advice.

You must therefore obtain the relevant professional or specialist advice before taking, or refraining from, any action based on the information in this white paper.

If you have questions about any medical matter, you should consult a doctor or other professional healthcare provider without delay. If you think you, or someone you know, is experiencing any medical condition immediate medical attention should be sought from a doctor or other professional healthcare provider.

I REFERENCES

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APPENDIX

FACULTY SURVEY

1	. What support does your institution	n offer students	s experiencing	difficulties with	their mental	health?
(5	Select all that apply)					

- Student counselling
- Disability support and advice
- Student resolution advice
- Finance and debt advice
- Other (please specify below)
- 2. Have you seen any change in students experiencing difficulties with their mental health in the past two years?
- · Yes, it has increased
- · Yes, it has decreased
- No, it has stayed the same
- 3. (if yes) In your opinion, what do you think are the causes of this change in students experiencing difficulties with their mental health?
- 4. Have you seen any change in the amount of pressures that students have to deal with now compared with in the past?
- Yes, pressures experienced by students have increased
- Yes, pressured experienced by students have decreased
- No, it has stayed the same

5. What is the reason for your answer?
6. Do you think your institution offers enough support for students experiencing mental health issues? Yes / No / Don't know
Please explain your reasoning
7. Do you feel there is a stigma around mental health that stops students from reporting their mental health difficulties?
Yes / No / Don't know
8. What training do you receive in supporting students experiencing mental health difficulties?
9. Do you feel your institution could provide more training to faculty members to help them support these students?
Yes / No
10. In which country is your institution based?
11. Which of the below best describes your job title?
Research Assistant
Assistant/Associate Lecturer
• Lecturer
Senior Lecturer/Reader
Associate Professor
• Professor
Head of Department/Dean





STUDENT SURVEY

1. What factors do you feel affect your mental health and well-being? Tick all that apply
Financial worries
• Relationships/social life
Balancing employment and university work
• Loneliness
Academic performance
University workload
• Social media
Other (please comment)
2. Do you feel there is a stigma around mental health?
Yes / No
If yes, please comment further
3. Do you feel able to discuss your mental health with friends and family? Yes/No
If yes, please comment further
4. How often do you feel anxious? 1-10 scale where 1 is never and 10 is constantly
5. How often do you feel lonely? 1-10 scale where 1 is never and 10 is constantly
6. Have you ever received a mental health diagnosis? Yes / No

7. If yes, and you feel comfortable, please tell us what your diagnosis is
8. Did you experience mental health problems before you began your university studies? Yes / No
9. If yes, please tell us what mental health issues you have experienced?
• Stress
• Anxiety
• Low-mood
• Depression
• Self-harm
Suicidal thoughts
Other (please specify)
10. Have you experienced mental health problems since you began your university studies?
Yes / No
11. If yes, please tell us what mental health issues you have experienced?
• Stress
• Anxiety
• Low-mood
• Depression
Panic attacks
• Self-harm
Suicidal thoughts
Other (please specify)





12. Are you aware of the support offered by your university for students experiencing problems with their mental health?
Yes / No
13. Have you accessed these services?
Yes / No
14. If yes, have you found them helpful? <i>Apply logic</i>
Yes / No
15. If no, why not? (select all that apply)
• I haven't needed them
• I don't know how to access these services
I feel I have enough support from elsewhere
• I don't want anyone at the university to know that I am having mental health problems
Other (please specify)
16. How easy is it to access your university support services?
17. Do you feel you got the support you needed from your university support services? Yes / No
18. What support do you feel your university should offer students experiencing problems with their mental health?
19. If you have experienced issues with your mental health, did you feel able to discuss it with your lecturers/tutors?
Yes / No

20. If yes, were they supportive?
Yes / No
Any other comments?
21. If no, what could they have done to make you feel more supported?
22. Have you ever engaged in substance abuse to cope with negative mental health?
Yes / No
 23. If yes, how often do you do this? Every day 1-2 times a week 3-4 times a week A few times a month Less often
24. What is your age?
• 17-18
• 19-21
• 22-25
• 26-30
• 30+



Male

• Female

• Other

25. What is your gender?



26. In whic	n country are y	ou attending u	niversity?		
27. Please d	efine your stud	ent status?			
• Studying	n home counti	У			
• Studying	abroad for part	of my course			
• Studying	abroad for all o	my course			
28. What is	your year of stu	dy?			
• 1st					
• 2nd					
• 3rd					
• 4th					
• 5th					
• Post-grad	uate				



A Taylor & Francis White Paper

Working in partnership to create an expanded perspective on our communities – sharing trends and themes that broaden the discussion and inspire new ideas.





