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Silently Stressed

A survey into student mental wellbeing

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Contents

Foreword

Many students begin university or college with the expectation of it being the 'best years of your life.' But what if this is not the case?

The general perception of student life being a carefree, social and relaxed time of life is hugely misguided. With increasing financial hardship, a lack of graduate employment opportunities and the need to balance studies, paid employment and skills development, the pressures on a students' mental wellbeing are many and substantial. We already know that 1 in 4 people will suffer from mental ill health at some point in their lives and this applies to the student community too. That is over 160,000 students in Scotland. However, we can make education more accessible to those with mental ill health and, by recognising the issues students face, can perhaps prevent stress or worry becoming a longer term mental health diagnosis.

NUS Scotland has been awarded funding by the Scottish Government in recognition of the growing issue of mental ill health amongst the student population. The project we have taken forward, Think Positive, has already started to make an impact. Think Positive has been working with students' associations across Scotland to provide training in Scottish Mental Health First Aid and campaigning and to provide students with the tools to look after their own mental wellbeing and recognise mental ill health in others. But there is much more to do.

This research report details the outcomes of NUS Scotland's Student Stress Survey, which was completed by students across the country. The results of the survey are a real cause for concern and make a clear call for immediate action and better investment by institutions. NUS Scotland has found that a high proportion of students are significantly stressed by exams, thoughts of their future careers and financial strain. What is more concerning is that the majority of students are unlikely to come forward for any form of professional support. Instead they are likely to continue to be stressed in silence.

The recommendations in this paper include actions that NUS Scotland would encourage institutions, mental health organisations and the Government to implement in order to create an adequately supported and mentally healthier student population.

It is the duty of universities, colleges and governing bodies to eradicate the barriers which prevent students from reaching their full potential in education, particularly when these are barriers that may have an impact on their mental wellbeing for the rest of their lives.

Jennifer Cádiz

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Depute President

Executive Summary

Many universities, colleges and mental health agencies have recognised the growing issue of student mental ill health. However little research exists to tell us why mental ill health is on the increase among students and what issues in particular concern them. In recognition of this, NUS Scotland conducted research into student stress and support. The survey was completed by over 1800 students from 19 colleges and 15 universities across Scotland. The survey asked students to identify which issues caused them stress while studying, where they would turn to for support and what, if anything, acts as a barrier to them in coming forward for support for a mental health concern.

Exams and assessments

Examinations were found to be the biggest concern for students. An overwhelming 90% of students reported this caused them more stress than expected. Less than 2% reported exams and assessments did not cause them stress at all.

Recommendations

- Institutions should review the balance of coursework and assessment and ensure that there is ample communication between departments to prevent overlap in examinations and submission dates.

Future careers

Over 75% of students reported that considering their future career prospects after completion of their current studies was either reasonably or very stressful. It is likely that this looming worry of future employment has an impact on the pressure students feel regarding their examinations and academic performance and add to the stress they feel through their assessments.

Recommendations

- Universities and colleges need to provide greater levels of support to students to find work after finishing their studies and provide networking opportunities with prospective employers.

- Institutions must make moves to advise students on the job market early in their tertiary education.

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Having enough money to get by

Financial stress was reported by almost 70% of the students surveyed. The survey asked whether students felt that having enough money to get by day to day was stressful for them. A majority reported this to be the case, while only 9% reported not having financial stress.

Recommendations

- Students deserve adequate financial support that does not hinder their academic performance or increase the risk of mental ill-health. We believe students should be provided with a minimum income of £7000 to ensure access to education is based on academic ability not the ability to pay.

- Students should be given sufficient advice on budgeting and finance from the start of their academic experience.

Working a paid job

When asked about balancing academic life with other life pressures, 50% of students surveyed found working a paid job while studying 'reasonably' or 'very' stressful.

Recommendations

- Institutions need to recognise that too many students are working beyond the recommended 10 hours per week and provide them with the support and advice they require to reach their full academic potential.

Asking for support

The report has found that a high number of students would not come forward in asking for professional support if and when they needed it. Only 30% reported feeling comfortable disclosing their concerns to an academic and less than 20% were willing to approach the support services in their institution. Of greater concern is that, less than 7% would turn to external agencies or help lines such as the Samaritans if they felt they were in need of immediate support.

Recommendations

- Universities and colleges should consider providing mental health related training for lecturing staff, enabling them to provide immediate support and referral if and when required.

Barriers to asking for support

When asked what issues students felt prevented them from asking for personal support, an overwhelming 80% reported that the stigma attached to mental illness would act as a barrier in approaching someone for support.

Recommendations

- Universities and colleges must work with their respective students' associations to consider ways in which barriers to asking for support may be removed.

The reality of support services

Earlier in the year NUS Scotland surveyed student support and counselling services in institutions across Scotland. Of the 24 institutions that took part, 75% reported that the number of students in need of mental health support had increased since the previous academic year. More worrying, over half of colleges surveyed did not have any mental health support provision and felt they were unable to provide sufficient support to their students. In contrast all universities had mental health specific support, however 40% still felt they were unable to meet demand.

Recommendations

- The education sector is likely to face severe funding pressures in the near future, however support services and pastoral care must not be cut as an easy method of saving money. On the contrary this is an area that has required, and continues to require, further investment and development.

How the survey was completed

The survey was designed in collaboration with the Think Positive Project steering group, with representatives from the Samaritans, See Me, and NHS Scotland, as well as students themselves. By involving key stakeholders we were able to ensure we asked relevant and clear questions.

The survey was completed by participants both online and in hardcopy. University and college students associations across Scotland worked to encourage students to complete the survey through emails, other written communications, face to face contact, and by providing direct links on their websites for students to complete it online. NUS Scotland also visited institutions and provided students with the opportunity to complete the survey in person.

All students were given an explanation as to the purpose and content of the survey and where the information would be used.

The student demographic

1,872 students from 19 colleges and 15 university campuses took part in the mental health stressor survey. The survey is the biggest and most diverse piece of research to be carried out on student mental health in Scotland.

Where they studied

- 74% University
- 23% College
- 3% Unspecified
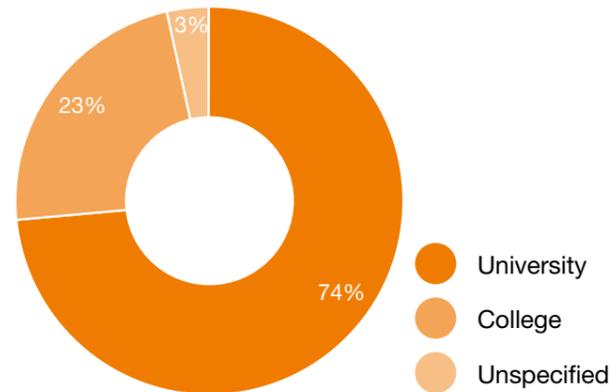
1380 participants were from universities, 428 from colleges and 64 did not specify where they study.

Year of study

- 16% HNC/HND/Access
- 26% First
- 16% Second
- 18% Third
- 13% Forth
- 11% Postgradaute
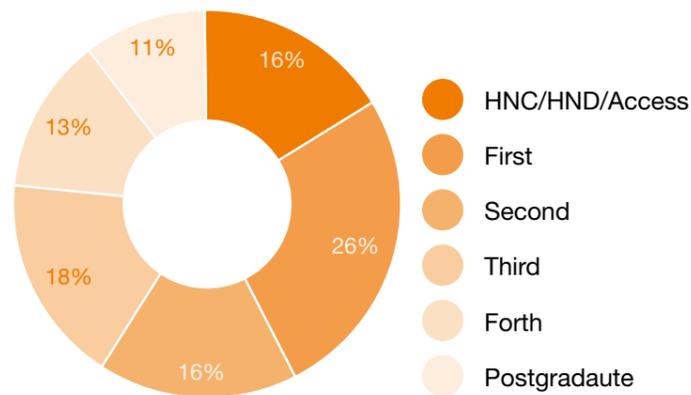
The findings reflected a spread of students from different year groups and levels of studies.

Gender

- 67% Female
- 32% Male
- .003% Other Gender Identity
- 1% Unspecified
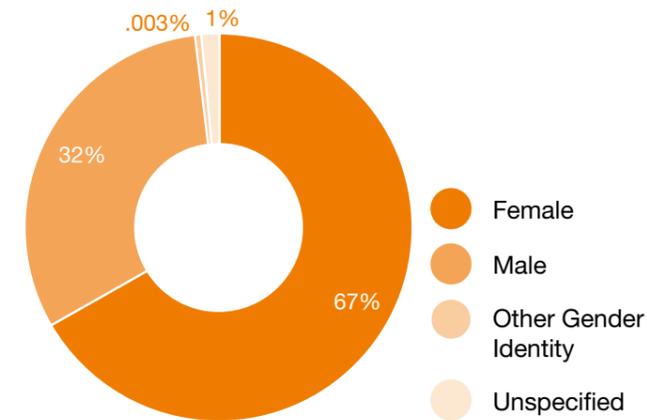
The majority of students who completed the survey were female (1218 or 65%). A greater number of female respondents is likely to reflect wider additional stigma among men regarding mental health.

General findings

It has been shown time and time again that high levels of stress can lead to heightened mental health problems, which often have negative physical health effects. Our research found that levels of stress are very high in the student population. Students feel particularly stressed by their academic assessments, financial pressures and self image. While attending university or college will, by definition, lead to periods of time when students feel under pressure, it is clear from this research that financial worries and concerns about future career prospects are additional stress factors felt by students across the board.

Equally concerning was that those students experiencing mental ill-health were highly unlikely to turn to any form of professional support. Though they were willing to go to friends or family for support, only a small minority would turn to their academic mentors or a lecturer and a very low number would look for support from professional help lines.

The research

What aspects of student life stressed them?

Table 1 – Key Stress Issues for Students

Issues	% who believe this to be 'reasonably' or 'very' stressful
Exams and assessments	90.5%
Considering career prospects	75.2%
Managing time and deadlines	83.3%
Self image	54.6%
Paying rent and bills	48.7%
Having enough money to get by	68.2%
Dealing with student loans	38%
Dealing with commercial debt	35.2%
Working a paid job	50%

We asked students what the most stressful factors were for them in their lives. The table above outlines the main issues that students described as either 'reasonably' or 'very' stressful. It is clear that exams and assessments are very stressful for students, with the vast majority of respondents reporting that they felt stressed by these.

However, financial issues and concerns around future prospects were not far behind in terms of stress factors for students.

Almost 30% of students felt that four key issues; exams, considering career prospects, having enough money to get by and working a paid job were considerably stressful and had a negative impact on their lives.

This report will consider these findings in detail and look into each key stress factor individually.

2. Exams and assessments

The stress caused by exams and assessments was reported by survey participants as very high, with over 90 per cent of respondents citing this as a significant stress. Although it can be expected that assessments would cause a certain level of anxiety, it was unexpected that so many students would find them to be so difficult. While a certain level of stress is inherent in undertaking exams and coursework, institutions must be careful not to apply too much pressure to students, or unnecessary amounts, as additional pressure and stress may impair a students' academic performance in assessments.

For an overwhelming majority of students, the stress of exams and assessments is very significant. We believe universities and colleges need to reconsider the types of assessments used to gauge academic performance, and consider ways in which students can be assessed without being overwhelmed and without having an assessment timetable which adds unnecessary and unhealthy pressure. Given the flexibility promoted in modern teaching it is no longer acceptable or excusable for students to have an academic calendar which does not reflect the needs of the learner and does not take into account their learning experience in the greater sense.

Recommendation

- Institutions should constantly review the balance of coursework and assessment and consider what impact this is having on all aspects of the student experience.

- Institutions should ensure there is ample communication between departments to prevent overlap in exam and coursework submission dates, preventing students feeling high levels of pressure at one time.

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Case study

Student

Course: Electrical and Mechanical Engineering (UG)

Academic pressure

Throughout my degree, I have felt very stressed on numerous occasions as it was not unusual to have many deadlines in the same week and because of this I was in a situation where I had to follow my timetable and try and keep up with different classes and on top of this meet deadlines. This meant that I would always be working from 9AM to 1AM and despite all this effort I was usually behind on tutorials for all my classes. I've always found this stressful because I felt that I never had time to relax or breathe even on weekends as there was so much work to be done and this situation is a lot worse in the final weeks of the semester.

Other things I found very stressful were when I had multiple exams in the same week, sometimes up to 3 or 4 in a row, and due to breadth of material I had to revise, I worried a lot about the exams that I just didn't have time to study for as I knew I would do terrible in those classes.

I considered, on many occasions, switching degrees, taking a year out or even taking medication to combat my chronic stress and depression but I never did.

How could your institution improve?

As this degree is an interdisciplinary degree between two different departments, there is a lack of communication on when deadlines and exams are set and I would even go as far as saying that these departments lack sympathy for students and consider this amount of pressure to be the norm.

3. Considering career prospects

Students who found considering career prospects 'reasonably' or 'very' stressful.
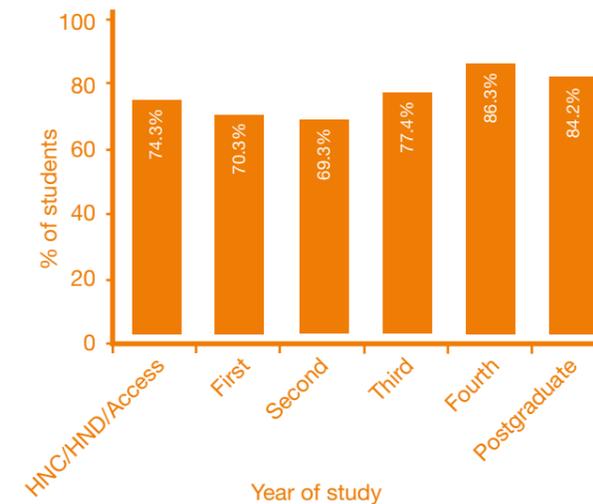
Surveyed students, regardless of their year of study, found considering career prospects a significant cause of stress while at university or college. Given the current economic landscape and the struggle many students will expect in finding a job upon graduation, it is not surprising that the idea of finding a job after graduation is stressful. The levels of stress reported rose for those finishing their studies. 86% of fourth year students reported stress regarding their future prospects as compared with 70% for first year students. It is clear that the looming nature of graduating and finding a job clearly has a negative effect on stress levels.

Over the past few years there has been a shift in academia towards incorporating employability skills into curriculums in an effort to create what is known as the '21st century graduate. However, while this push to support students in becoming employable is welcomed, it may also have indirectly heightened the pressure students feel in terms of the career they should aspire to.

Recommendation

• Universities and colleges need to provide greater levels of support to students to find work after finishing their studies and ensure there are ample opportunities for students to network with prospective employers.

• Students should be given advice about the job market and how it will impact them. This should be done early in their tertiary education to manage expectations and ensure students are aware of the realities that they face and the diverse range of opportunities available to them.

4. Having enough money to get by

Almost 70% of students believed that ensuring they had enough money for day to day living was a stress factor for them. This is in line with previous research. NUS Scotland's Overstretched and Overdrawn report, published in 2009, found that the majority of students were in some form of debt. NUS Scotland has, for some time, been campaigning to increase student funding support. Our latest research into student hardship, Still in the Red, released in September 2010, found that nearly a third of students "frequently" worried about their finances and a further 28% saying they worried all the time. Furthermore, nearly two thirds (62%) of all students said that not receiving enough money in student support was having a negative impact on their studies (Still in the Red, 2010). This is also reflected in the Think Positive research, as over a third of students found student loans or commercial debt significantly stressful.

The Scottish Association of Mental Health (SAMH) recently published a report finding that people facing economic concerns due to the recession were eight times more likely to seek help for anxiety or depression. This link is worrying, given the scale of student hardship in Scotland.

Recommendation

- Students need to be given the financial help they need to concentrate on their studies without worries about money hindering academic performance or increasing the risk of mental ill-health. We believe students should be provided with a minimum income of £7000 to ensure access to education is based on academic ability not the ability to pay.

- Students should be given sufficient advice on budgeting and finance from the start of their academic experience.

5. Working a paid job

The survey found that 50% of the students surveyed found working a paid job while studying 'reasonably' and 'very' stressful. NUS Scotland's Still in the Red survey 2010 found that 50% of full time students were working for additional income alongside their studies. Of these, 68% were working more than 10 hours per week. 19% were working more than 20 hours per week and 5% were working more than 30 hours per week.

The Committee of Inquiry into Student Finance (the Cubie report 1999) recommended that full-time students should not work more than ten hours a week as working more than this would risk a detrimental effect on their academic performance. It is therefore unsurprising that 50% of students surveyed found this a stressful balance to maintain. Trying to maintain paid employment while attending lectures, completing coursework and revising for assessments is likely to be a stressful and highly pressured experience for any student. As such, returning to the recommendation made previously regarding a minimum income, students should be entitled the basic financial support necessary to allow them to fully focus on their studies.

Recommendation

- Institutions need to be able to recognise those students who are working beyond the recommended 10 hours per week and provide them with the support and advice they require. Furthermore, institutions need to be able to recognise students struggling with the fine balance between paid work and their studies.

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6. Where do students go for support?
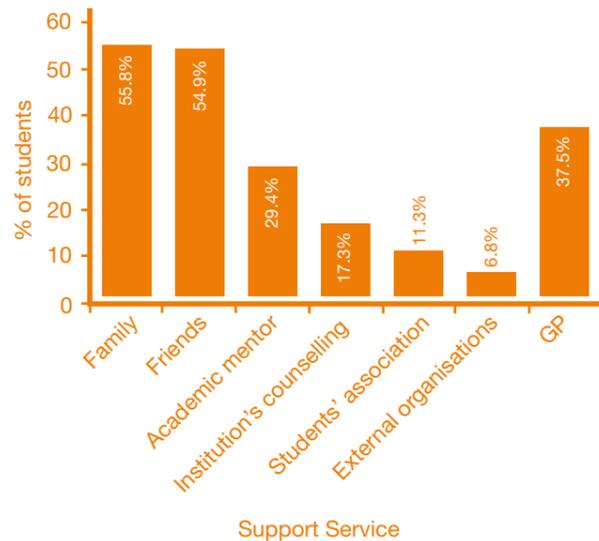
The findings were particularly worrying when students were asked whether they would approach certain services/individuals if they felt they needed mental health support. Though over half of the students surveyed would approach their family or friends for support, a significant number would not use any professional service. This leaves the concern that students are not seeking or receiving the support they need. It is of benefit to not only students, but also institutions, to provide adequate support. Accessing necessary support early and easily can promote faster recovery and may also assist universities and colleges in supporting those students considering dropping out of their courses due to mental ill health.

Academic mentor

When asked if they would approach an academic mentor, or staff member responsible for academic progress, many respondents suggested that they were either inaccessible or that their relationship was not strong enough to approach them. Given that students tend to interact with academic staff most regularly, it is possible that they may be the first point of call for students if they are experiencing difficulties. However, less than a third of students would consider asking for their support.

"I'd be hesitant to go to them with problems if they think that it will negatively impact on my place on the course"

Final year university student

"Because I am only spending 36 weeks with each mentor, I feel as though it would be difficult to get to know them well enough to talk comfortably regarding social, personal or family matters."

HNC college student

"I'm not sure who mine is, I feel like I'm bothering them, I think that students should be made more aware of who the person is"

Second year university student

However for those who did see their academic mentor as a supporter found it hugely beneficial:

"My student advisor is absolutely incredible. I can go to her with any problem and she listens and helps any way she can."

HNC college student

Recommendation

- There is a need for mental health related training for student advisors and academic mentors. This needs to include how to be a first point of contact for students dealing with mental health concerns, how to recognise common symptoms of mental illness in students and where to refer them for support.

Research into student support services

NUS Scotland, with the help of the Association of Managers of Support Services in Higher Education (AMOSSHE), Heads of University Counselling (HUCS) and Scotland's Colleges, surveyed support services in universities and colleges.

Of the 24 institution surveys, 75% stated that the numbers of students coming forward for support had increased since the last academic year. This would suggest that the service is utilised when available and necessary.

Although all universities had professional mental health services available to their

As one student said:

"They are not trained within mental health and would just put you somewhere else. But I feel it is important that they are aware of any issues that may affect class performance and attendance."

HND college student

Institution counselling services

When asked whether they would approach their institution's counselling/welfare service, fewer than 18% said they would consider it. There are likely to be many factors involved for why this is; many institutions, especially colleges, do not have specialised mental health services or are under resourced in this area.

students, less than half of the colleges surveyed had specific mental health provisions and many stated that they did not feel they were able to provide adequate support to meet students' needs. From the universities surveyed, almost 40% felt they were unable to provide sufficient support through their services. From the research, it would appear that there is an unfair dichotomy between the services college students are provided with in comparison to their counterparts at university.

When asked why they would not use this service many students commented that they did not know it existed or where it could be accessed:

"I don't know them or where they are or what they can do..."

First year university student

For those who had used the counselling service, many stated that they found it valuable:

"I have used University support services before for counselling during my undergraduate degree and they were very supportive and helpful."

Postgraduate university student

"Recommendation from academic mentor, turned out to be good advice!"

Third year university student

From respondents' comments and from the feedback from student services at universities and colleges, it would it clear that for those who have accessed the mental health services provided by universities and colleges, the service is valued highly.

Recommendations

• Universities and colleges need to invest to ensure they have sufficient support services to provide help for students with mental ill-health. This is particularly important in the college sector, where many institutions reported that they provided no specific help for mental ill-health among their students.

• The further and higher education sector in Scotland is facing increasing pressure from funding cuts and although this will have an impact on the resources available for expenditure, NUS Scotland believes that cutting support services, such as those for mental ill-health, cannot be justified. These services are vital to the student experience, providing essential care in times of crisis and as such, an institution cannot afford to cut back on its pastoral care.

Case study

Name: June Kerr

Age: 43

Course: MSW in Social Work

I am currently studying at Glasgow School of Social Work doing a MSW. I have a psychology honours degree and a PG diploma in drug and alcohol research.

I am a single parent with two children, my daughter is currently starting second year at Strathclyde and I have a son who is 12 and in second year in secondary school. I have found being a parent and studying quite difficult to manage. At the beginning of my studies my marriage broke down and I had to go through a very messy and protracted divorce, and my daughter has had some problems that resulted in her having to see a psychologist for a year.

I had studied two years with the Open University prior to me coming back to Scotland to study. I did not expect the level of dedication needed to pass the exams and essays. Particularly as I had been a housewife for the sixteen years of my marriage, so I was not prepared at all. Although there are many mature students at university, I believe that university life is primarily 'geared' for young people and there is no allowance for people with additional pressures. Being a mature student I felt that I should have the necessary skills and tools to help me and felt somewhat embarrassed asking for help and although at the beginning of the course student welfare made themselves known it was only the one time and by then I had totally forgotten where they were and even how to approach them.

How can your institution improve your mental wellbeing?

I believe that students should be given the tour of student services, so that students know exactly where to contact them, perhaps a document outlining where these places are and whom exactly it is you should contact.

You could also link up other people who are and have experienced the same pressures could offer some insight on how to make the most of university life. Perhaps there could be some functions during the day rather than at night as I felt that I missed many lectures from guests because I had to rush home for my children, whereas if it had been during the day I would have attended.

External support services

A surprising outcome of our research was the findings that a very low percentage of students said they would approach external services for support. In this survey, external services were defined as helplines and mental health organisations such as the Samaritans or Breathing Space.

Less than 7% of students felt they would approach these services if they were in need of support. More research would need to be conducted to discover why this is, but reasons might include a lack of knowledge about the support they actually can provide or perhaps simply not knowing the number to call. However, a high number of comments we received seemed to indicate that students felt that their problems had to be very severe in order to access this service.

"I think I'd have to perceive my problems as pretty big before I approached an external organisation."

Second year college student

"It seems to me that if I turned to Samaritans I would prove to myself I'm really desperate and I don't want to feel I'm at the suicidal level of mental health."

Second year university student

"I don't feel my problems are severe enough to be dealt with by charities"

HNC college student

Helplines and external charities aim to assist all individuals going through any form of

mental health or emotional crisis, however, it would seem that the majority of students surveyed felt that these services were only for a certain 'level' of mental health distress. The findings suggest that many students do not feel their problems or concerns are to the extent of requiring the services provided by such organisations as the Samaritans.

Recommendation

- External services should consider how to address the misconception that they are only for 'extreme circumstances' and how they can appeal to the issues that students may experience.

Case study

Name: Susan Osbeck

Age: 29 years

Course: PhD in Engineering

I returned to education to do my PhD after spending 5 years working for the NHS as a Medical Physicist. The PhD was fully funded which was one of the reasons I took it on. This allowed me to concentrate just on the PhD rather than having to do a part time job as well. I only have minor financial pressures as I have support at home from my husband as well as savings.

What is the biggest issue for you?

I feel that my situation, as a Phd student, is very isolating. At one point, I was the only student in my office and my lab. My supervisor was also rarely in the department so I could often spend a whole week not having any interaction with other people. I suffered from issues with lack of supervision and academic direction. I am also very stressed about finishing before my funding runs out. As someone with work

experience, I was used to working alone on projects but I always had support from other members of staff. I had anticipated being able to have discussions with my supervisor but this did not happen and I was often left to work out things myself with no guidance at all.

What do you think universities/colleges/other agencies could be doing to improve student mental wellbeing?

I had lots of interaction with other students during my undergraduate and postgraduate (MSc) degrees. However, the PhD is a different thing entirely and I felt very alone. There needs to be more contact with PhD students, perhaps a mentoring or buddy scheme where someone other than the supervisor takes an interest in the student. Sometimes even talking about the problem is enough to get through it. I used the counselling service at University and it helped me a lot. For my issues, my mental health would have been better if I had had enough academic support but from most of the stories I have heard, supervision is often a problem for students.

7. What stops students from asking for support?
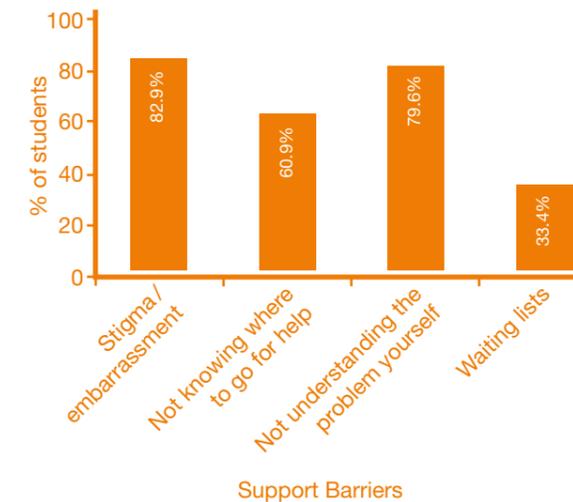
Support Barriers

Students were asked to consider any barriers they felt prevented them from coming forward for support.

An overwhelming number, over 80%, believed that stigma or embarrassment was a significant barrier in asking for support. Given the active campaigning work that organisations such as See Me and SAMH have done in past years, it was unexpected to find that the issue of stigma was still a considerable concern for students.

The second most common perceived barrier to students seeking support was a lack of knowledge about the mental health problem they may be facing. This is a core area NUS Scotland's Think Positive project continues to work on.

One of the aims of the project is to train students in Scottish Mental Health First Aid, an NHS Scotland-recognised qualification.

The purpose of this training is to provide students with the skills to assist others during a mental health crisis and also the knowledge of how to maintain their own mental wellbeing. NUS Scotland believes that this type of training and education is essential in not only encouraging students to understand their mental health but also in helping to overcome the stigma attached to it.

Students' associations and institutions need to work together to eliminate the perceived barriers that students feel prevent them from accessing the necessary support. Through the Think Positive project, NUS Scotland has been campaigning to eradicate mental ill health stigma on campuses and it is hoped that this work will continue throughout universities and colleges in Scotland.

University and college campuses are small societies within themselves and often have a highly diverse population, with students increasingly coming from all backgrounds and walks of like. As such it is imperative that universities, colleges and students associations work to ensure that their student environments are inclusive and free of prejudice.

Recommendation

- Universities and colleges must work with their respective students' associations to consider ways in which barriers to asking for support may be removed.

8. Conclusions

A student's mental health has a direct impact on their academic performance, on their experience at an institution and on the relationships they foster during this time. It is not only in the best interests of an institution to invest in a student's mental wellbeing, but it is in fact their responsibility.

The research conducted by NUS Scotland highlights the many factors which can affect a student's mental wellbeing throughout their time in education. From financial worries to academic pressures, financial stress to balancing work and education, all of these issues can take their toll. NUS Scotland believes that institutions and the education sector as a whole needs to do more to support students through their academic journey to ensure that they are producing graduates who are not only knowledgeable in their subject area but well rounded, balanced individuals.

It seems universities and colleges are not providing enough, or the right form of support in their academic structures. Whether it is ensuring academic mentors are knowledgeable in mental health issues or ensuring that the curriculum and examination structures are flexible to the needs of those with mental health concerns, changes need to be made to ensure that students with mental ill health or those that develop mental health problems while studying are given the experience at university or college that they deserve.

In the current economic climate, the education sector in Scotland is likely to face financial pressures. In the face of funding cuts, universities and colleges may need to decrease spending and consider where their priorities lie in terms of spending. NUS Scotland believes that student support and welfare should not be targeted in such a situation. Student counselling, advice and support in whatever model, are fundamental to the student experience at an institution and should not be closed as a method of cost cutting. It is in the interests of the education sector and society as a whole to support students facing mental health difficulties and create environments which are open and free of stigma.

Universities and colleges have the opportunity to lead the way in eradicating stigma and changing attitudes towards mental ill health. Education is not only for the purpose of a qualification, it is a time when individuals broaden their horizons and learn more about themselves. If universities and colleges were to invest in creating graduates with expertise not only in their specific fields but also graduates with a liberated and open minded view of their world, they would be setting the wheels in motion for a step change in the societal attitude towards mental ill health.

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