

Briefing: University Mental Health - Life in a Pandemic

November 2021

Introduction

Student Minds, a UK student mental health charity, conducted two informal pulse surveys and one large-scale formal survey with Alterline, and carried out secondary source research, on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of university students and staff between April 2020 and May 2021. The resulting report, *University Mental Health: Life in a Pandemic*¹, shares their results according to the themes of Live, Learn, Work, Support, and Inequalities and Intersectionality.

Headline Findings

Overall, 74% of respondents reported that Covid-19 has had a negative impact on their **mental health and wellbeing** at university. A vast majority of respondents (82%) felt the pandemic has negatively impacted their **academic experience**. Beyond academics, 65% of respondents reported needing **additional help or advice** during the pandemic, with only 19% reported having received the help they needed. Additionally, nearly half (49%) of respondents reported that the pandemic has negatively affected their **financial situation**. Certain groups have felt **disproportionate impacts** including women, young people, individuals from low-income households, black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) individuals, and people with disabilities.

Findings: Live

Students have faced challenges with **accommodation, finances, and social isolation** during the pandemic.

- » Of those who reported negative financial effects, many had **difficulties paying** for items such as extracurricular activities and events (58%), study resources (40%), basic living needs (35%), accommodation (30%), and tuition fees (16%).
- » Fewer students participated in **student activities** and societies during the pandemic, as 67% of students felt that social interactions with peers could not be replicated online.

Findings: Learn

Learning experiences have been greatly impacted with the shift to **online learning**, although students report mixed feelings. Across the UK, 93% of respondents reported studying mostly online or completely online for the 2020-2021 academic year.

- » Overall, 82% of respondents reported that the pandemic has **negatively impacted** their academic experience and 67% agreed that the lack of face-to-face teaching has had a 'major' or 'moderate' effect

¹ <https://www.studentminds.org.uk/lifeinapandemic.html>

on the quality of their course. However, 45% of respondents were satisfied with the online learning provided by their university, while 35% were dissatisfied.

- » Issues related to **space, technology, and resources** presented challenges, with 18% of respondents reporting lack of access to necessary resources for online learning and 24% reporting lack of space. Other concerns include poor Wi-Fi connections, problems accessing online platforms, cost of mobile data, and a need for specialist software.
- » 22% of respondents felt they did not have the **support** they needed to complete their course, and 44% did not feel well equipped to manage the pressures of their course.

Findings: Work

The pandemic has placed heavy demands on university staff to **adapt curriculums** for online learning, teaching, and assessment. Like students, staff report mixed feelings about the shift to **home working**.

- » 58% of respondents reported that their **workload increased** 'a lot' and only 49.5% of teaching staff felt prepared to deliver online learning.
- » Some teaching staff favour **continuing online delivery** beyond the pandemic including student one-to-ones (51%), asynchronous recorded lectures (41%), and synchronous live online lectures (34%).
- » Other staff reported **positive aspects** of working from home such as schedule flexibility, no commute, and more time for professional development, administrative tasks, side projects, and research.

Findings: Support

The pandemic has increased students' needs for **mental health support** and other forms of **help and advice**, however some students have faced barriers to access these services.

- » 48% of students have accessed support or advice for **mental health** during university, and 20% of students sought support for their mental health specifically during the pandemic.
- » 45% of students felt that they needed **additional help/advice** during the pandemic but did not get it.

Findings: Inequalities and Intersectionality

Certain groups of students have faced **disproportionate impacts** from the pandemic, which has exacerbated existing inequalities.

- » **BAME students** were more likely to report having inadequate study space and negative financial impacts. However, Black student attainment increased, narrowing the attainment gap.
- » **International students** have faced border closures and difficulties traveling, studying in different time zones, and problems accessing resources from abroad. However, international students were less likely to report feeling lonely or isolated than home students.
- » **LGBTQ+ students** have reported disproportionately high levels of mental stress during the pandemic, which may be exacerbated by unwelcoming or unsafe family home environments during lockdown.
- » **Disabled students** have experienced some benefits such as the widespread use of recorded lectures, flexible assessments, and no need to travel to campus. However, they also reported disproportionately negative impacts on mental health and wellbeing.
- » **Women students** were more likely to report negative impacts on their mental health.
- » **Students from low-income backgrounds** have reported less access to resources, technology, and space for remote learning as well as lost income and financial hardship.