

The Impact of Student Wellbeing in the UK and Its Trend Over the Past Decade

Over the past decade, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of student wellbeing in the UK. This is reflected in the increasing number of research papers, reports, and articles that have been published on this topic. The number of students disclosing a mental health condition when entering higher education in England has increased from 0.7% in 2010/11 to 4.5% in 2021/22¹. This trend is likely due to several factors, including increased awareness of mental health issues, reduced stigma around seeking help, and the growing pressures that students face².

Research on Student Wellbeing in the UK

A number of research papers and reports have been published on student wellbeing in the UK. The 2023 Studiosity Student Wellbeing report explores students' experiences of stress, its causes, and how it affects their studies, the cost-of-living crisis, and views on their future employment³. These studies have explored a variety of topics, including the factors that contribute to student wellbeing, the challenges to student wellbeing, and the impact of student wellbeing on academic performance, mental health, and social relationships⁴.

One study, exploring student and staff perspectives on wellbeing in the teaching and learning environment, found that student wellbeing is less than that of the general population and continues to decline⁴. This decline in student wellbeing is a cause for concern, as it can have a negative impact on students' academic performance, mental health, and social relationships. Another study found that 87% of UK respondents and 90% of international respondents indicated that wellbeing is a priority to a great or moderate extent in their schools⁵.

A 2024 qualitative study examined student and staff experiences of new well-being advisers in academic departments and halls of residence at one UK university in 2018⁶. The study found that while these advisers offered timely, low-intensity support, there were operational challenges, such as data sharing between staff, and the volume of students seeking support sometimes compromised resources intended for preventative and community-building work⁶.

Statistics on Student Wellbeing in the UK Over the Past Decade

The number of UK applicants to UCAS that shared a mental health condition has increased by 450% over the last decade². This significant increase highlights a growing willingness among students to disclose their mental health conditions. However, it's crucial to consider that surveys with confidential responses reveal a much higher prevalence of poor mental health among students compared to disclosures made to universities⁷. For instance, in a 2022 survey by the mental health charity Student Minds, 57% of respondents self-reported a mental health issue, and 27% said they had a diagnosed mental health condition⁷. This discrepancy suggests that a

significant number of students may still hesitate to disclose their mental health concerns to their institutions, potentially due to fears of stigma or discrimination.

Furthermore, 37% of students report that their wellbeing has worsened since starting university⁸. This alarming statistic indicates that the university environment itself may be contributing to the decline in student wellbeing. Factors such as academic pressure, financial stress, and social challenges could be playing a role in this trend.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a significant impact on student wellbeing. A study of 254 UK undergraduate students reported increased clinically significant depressive symptoms and decreased wellbeing six months into the pandemic compared to a pre-pandemic baseline⁹. This highlights the detrimental effects of the pandemic on students' mental health, potentially due to social isolation, disruptions to education, and increased uncertainty about the future.

While there is some evidence that the overall suicide rate for students increased in the decade to 2017/18, it fell in 2018/19 and 2019/20¹⁰. However, the Office for National Statistics has warned that the small annual numbers make it difficult to identify statistically significant differences over time¹⁰. It's important to note that suicide rates among students are lower than for other young people and the general population¹⁰.

Another concerning statistic is the high dropout rate among university students. Research indicates that 937 students drop out of university every day, and tragically, a student takes their own life every four days¹¹. These figures underscore the severity of the challenges faced by students and the urgent need for effective support systems.

Articles and News Reports Discussing the Impact of Student Wellbeing in the UK

A number of articles and news reports have discussed the impact of student wellbeing in the UK. These articles have highlighted the challenges that students face, such as stress, anxiety, and financial concerns¹². They have also discussed the importance of providing support to students to help them improve their wellbeing¹⁴.

One article discussed how low levels of wellbeing and associated mental health problems can have adverse consequences for the health and development of young people¹⁴. Another article discussed how a whole-school approach to supporting students' wellbeing can help with their learning¹⁴. These articles highlight the importance of taking a holistic approach to student wellbeing.

Challenges to Student Wellbeing

There are a number of challenges to student wellbeing, including stress, anxiety, financial

concerns, and environmental concerns.

Stress

Stress is a common experience for students, and it can have a negative impact on their mental and physical health¹². Academic stress, stemming from the pressure to excel academically, meet deadlines, and perform well in exams, can lead to high levels of stress and anxiety, creating a vicious cycle where mental health challenges further hinder academic performance¹⁵. Sources of stress for students include academic pressure, financial concerns, and social relationships¹². It's crucial to recognize that two-thirds of university staff are considering leaving the sector within five years due to workload¹¹. This potential exodus of experienced staff could further increase pressure on students and exacerbate their stress levels.

Anxiety

Anxiety is another common challenge for students¹². It can manifest in a number of ways, including excessive worry, difficulty concentrating, and physical symptoms such as a racing heart and sweating¹². Fear of being judged and a lack of understanding about mental health problems are significant challenges that contribute to anxiety among students¹⁶. These challenges can be addressed by promoting mental health awareness, reducing stigma, and creating a more supportive and inclusive environment where students feel comfortable seeking help.

Financial Concerns

Financial concerns are a major challenge for many students¹³. The cost of tuition, accommodation, and living expenses can put a significant strain on students' finances, which can lead to stress and anxiety¹³. The cost of living crisis has further intensified these financial challenges, negatively impacting student mental health¹⁷. Moreover, research shows that money worries continue to affect graduates, with 79% of those with low mental health scores worrying about money daily or weekly even after leaving university¹⁸. This highlights the long-term impact of financial stress on students' wellbeing. It's also concerning that prospective students are not always aware of the obligations of the student loan system, including repayment thresholds, which can contribute to financial concerns and stress¹⁹.

Environmental Concerns

Climate change is an emerging concern that significantly impacts student wellbeing. A recent report found that 90% of students say climate change affects their mental wellbeing²⁰. This highlights the growing anxiety among young people about the environmental challenges facing the world and the potential impact on their future.

Government Initiatives and Policies Related to

Student Wellbeing in the UK

The UK government has implemented a number of initiatives and policies related to student wellbeing. These initiatives aim to provide support to students and to promote mental health awareness in schools and universities.

A variety of government documents outline strategies and guidelines for addressing student wellbeing. These include documents on safeguarding devices, teacher training on online safety and harms, guidance on relationships, sex, and health education, and safeguarding in remote education²¹.

One initiative is the provision of a grant to schools and colleges of £1,200 for training senior mental health leads²². The government has also committed to offering senior mental health lead training to all eligible state-funded schools and colleges by 2025²². These initiatives are designed to improve the mental health and wellbeing of students in the UK.

In Northern Ireland, specific initiatives include a counselling service in schools and the Derrytrasna Pastoral Care Awards, which recognize and promote good practice in pastoral care²³.

Impact of Student Wellbeing on Academic Performance, Mental Health, and Social Relationships

Student wellbeing has a significant impact on academic performance, mental health, and social relationships. There's a reciprocal and interconnected relationship between wellbeing and learning, where wellbeing influences learning outcomes, and success in learning enhances wellbeing²⁴. Students who experience positive emotional, social, and physical wellbeing are more likely to be alert and focused in the classroom, to manage stress effectively, and to have better overall wellbeing, leading to improved academic performance²⁵. They are also more likely to be resilient and to have positive relationships with their peers and teachers²⁶. The more students experience academic satisfaction, performance, engagement, and success, the more they may experience positive wellbeing, which further motivates them to continue on that path²⁷.

On the other hand, students who experience poor wellbeing are more likely to struggle academically, to experience mental health problems, and to have difficulties with their social relationships²⁸. This can lead to a negative cycle of poor wellbeing and poor academic performance. Moreover, student mental health issues can have long-term implications for achievement, careers, and life outcomes²⁹.

Social relationships also play a crucial role in student wellbeing and academic success. Studies have shown a direct link between social relationships and learning, even when considering mental health status³⁰. For example, research indicates that lonely college students tend to underperform academically³¹.

Factors That Contribute to Student Wellbeing

A number of factors contribute to student wellbeing, including social support, physical activity, sleep, and a supportive school environment. These factors are summarized in the table below:

Factors Contributing to Student Wellbeing	Description/Impact
Social Support	Social support from family, friends, and teachers can help students feel connected and supported, which can improve their wellbeing ³² . Students who feel supported are more likely to be resilient and to cope with challenges ³² . Both formal and informal social support systems, including support from institutions, family, and friends, are crucial for student wellbeing ³³ .
Physical Activity	Physical activity has been shown to have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing ³⁵ . Students who are physically active are more likely to be alert and focused in the classroom, and to have better sleep quality ³⁶ . Physical activity behavior is influenced by various factors, including intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, community, and public policy ³⁷ . Addressing these factors can help promote physical activity among students.
Sleep	Sleep is essential for physical and mental health ³⁸ . Students who get enough sleep are more likely to be able to concentrate in class, to manage stress, and to have better overall wellbeing ³⁸ . Sleep quality is a complex issue influenced by various factors, including sociodemographic factors, lifestyle habits, health status, psychological conditions, and environmental factors ³⁹ .
School Environment	Schools play a crucial role in fostering an

Factors Contributing to Student Wellbeing

Description/Impact

inclusive environment and connecting students to caring adults⁴⁰. This can help reduce feelings of isolation and encourage healthier social interactions among students, contributing to their overall wellbeing.

Interventions and Strategies to Improve Student Wellbeing

A number of interventions and strategies can be used to improve student wellbeing. These include individual-level interventions like mindfulness, hypnosis, and mental health programs, as well as curriculum-level interventions like pass/fail grading and problem-based curricula⁴¹.

- **Mindfulness:** Mindfulness-based interventions have been shown to be effective in reducing stress and anxiety, and in improving wellbeing⁴². Schools can incorporate activities that promote mindfulness and stress management techniques into the curriculum⁴².
- **Counseling services:** Access to counseling services can provide students with support and guidance to help them manage their mental health⁴². Schools can offer individual and group counseling sessions, as well as workshops and support groups.
- **Physical activity:** Encouraging physical activity can help to improve students' physical and mental health⁴². Schools can promote physical activity by urging students to be active throughout the day, starting new sports clubs, organizing regular walk-and-talk sessions, and offering opportunities for spontaneous play breaks⁴².
- **Sleep hygiene:** Promoting good sleep hygiene can help students to get enough sleep, which is essential for their wellbeing⁴². Schools can educate students about the importance of sleep and provide tips for improving sleep habits.
- **Social support:** Creating a supportive school environment can help students to feel connected and supported⁴². This can be achieved by fostering a sense of community, encouraging peer support, and providing opportunities for students to connect with teachers and staff.
- **Wellbeing Advisers in Educational Settings:** Some universities have introduced wellbeing advisers in academic departments and halls of residence to provide more accessible support to students⁶. While this intervention has shown promise, there are operational challenges, such as data sharing and resource allocation, that need to be addressed⁶.

It's important to acknowledge that there is a lack of clear evidence for the best configuration of student support services⁶. Further research is needed to identify the most effective interventions and strategies for improving student wellbeing.

Synthesis and Conclusion

Student wellbeing in the UK is a multifaceted issue influenced by a complex interplay of factors. Over the past decade, there has been a concerning decline in student wellbeing, with a significant increase in reported mental health issues. This decline is likely driven by various factors, including academic pressure, financial concerns, social challenges, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and growing environmental concerns.

While the research highlights these challenges, it also points to potential solutions. A variety of interventions and strategies, both at the individual and curriculum level, have been explored to improve student wellbeing. These include mindfulness-based interventions, counseling services, promoting physical activity, improving sleep hygiene, fostering social support, and providing wellbeing advisers in educational settings.

However, it's crucial to recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. A holistic approach is needed, considering the unique needs of individual students and the specific challenges they face. Schools, universities, and the government need to work together to create a more supportive environment where students feel valued, connected, and empowered to thrive.

Further research is needed to identify the most effective interventions and strategies for improving student wellbeing, particularly in light of the evolving challenges faced by students, such as the cost of living crisis and climate change. It's also essential to address the discrepancy between self-reported mental health issues and disclosures made to universities, potentially by reducing stigma and increasing awareness of available support services.

By prioritizing student wellbeing and implementing evidence-based interventions, the UK can ensure that its students have the opportunity to reach their full potential, both academically and personally.

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