



STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH &
WELLBEING

GAPS & PRESSURES

ANALYSIS SUMMARY


**STUDENT
WELLBEING
SERVICE**



**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



INTRODUCTION

Supporting student mental health and wellbeing has been a priority for Queen's University for several years. As concerns about student mental health increase across the sector, particularly though not exclusively following the pandemic, universities are being encouraged to take a 'whole university approach' to student mental health and wellbeing policies which enables all students and staff to thrive and succeed to their full potential.

The Gaps and Pressures 2024 report presents a detailed examination of the current challenges and opportunities in supporting student mental health and wellbeing at Queen's. The findings are based on research conducted with academic and professional services staff who directly support students in each of the Schools across campus. Building upon findings from the 2019 report and influenced by recent challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, cost of living pressures and wider societal changes, the report highlights the University's commitment to adopting a comprehensive 'whole university approach' to effectively support both students and staff.



KEY FINDINGS

1. Increasing Mental Health Challenges

There has been a significant rise in students presenting with stress, anxiety, and depression, exacerbated by the pandemic, geopolitical events, and cost-of-living increases. The complexity of these cases often exceeds the university's capacity to provide support.

2. Impact of Assessment and Curriculum

Current assessment methods and academic structures are major stressors for students. The report calls for a re-evaluation of these systems to reduce pressure while maintaining academic integrity.

3. Sense of Belonging and Engagement

Despite ongoing efforts to foster a sense of community, many students still seem to struggle with feelings of isolation and disconnection from the university. This issue appears to have been compounded by remote learning, financial pressures, and the Covid 19 pandemic. While community-building initiatives have been implemented, participation rates remain low, largely due to factors such as social anxiety, time constraints, and competing academic demands. To effectively address this, strategies need to focus on integrating community engagement into the academic experience and creating opportunities that are accessible and beneficial to students' immediate needs.

4. Support for Diverse Student Groups

Certain student cohorts, such as international students, postgraduate taught (PGT) students, and students with disabilities, face unique challenges that require tailored support. There is a need for targeted interventions to address their specific needs. That said, staff reported that all students are likely to encounter wellbeing issues at some point during their academic journey, and interventions that improve the universal student experience are to be welcomed.

5. Staff Support and Wellbeing

Staff supporting students report feeling more confident in their roles but face increased workload and risk burnout. The emotional toll of handling complex and difficult conversations, combined with insufficient support structures for staff wellbeing, underscores the importance of continued training, and the need for more robust mental health resources for staff.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Enhance Welcome and Transition Initiatives**

Strengthen projects aimed at fostering a sense of community and belonging among new students and ensuring they are better equipped to navigate independent learning.

- **Review Exceptional Circumstances (ECs) Usage**

Assess the current use of ECs to ensure fair and effective assessment support mechanisms for when things aren't going as planned.

- **Transform Assessment Practices**

Implement innovative, flexible and student-centred assessment methods aligned with modern educational practices.

- **Re-evaluate the Academic Year Structure**

Review the academic calendar to better support student learning and wellbeing.

- **Focus on Mental Health**

Continue to prioritise mental health resources and training for both students and staff.

- **Support for International and PGT Students**

Develop targeted support programmes to enhance the experience of these groups.

- **Rebrand Disability Services**

Transition to a more inclusive 'Accessible Learning Support'.

- **Extend Gaps and Pressures Analysis to PGR Students**

Expand research to include postgraduate research students to ensure comprehensive support.

- **Improve Staff Support**

Explore the potential for a staff debrief service and enhance training for staff to manage their own wellbeing effectively.

- **Compassionate Communications**

Develop a toolkit advising on best practice in compassionate communication.



CONCLUSION

OVERVIEW & SUMMARY

The Gaps and Pressures 2024 report provides a detailed analysis of the challenges and opportunities in supporting student mental health and wellbeing. The recommendations aim to enhance the University's Strategy 2030 aims by promoting an inclusive, supportive, and engaging environment for all students and staff. Adopting these measures will position the University as a leader in student support and wellbeing, committed to continuous improvement and innovation in higher education.





STUDENT WELLBEING & ACCESSIBLE LEARNING

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