THE POLICY INSTITUTE

KING'S College LONDON

Student Mental Health - What Does the Data Say?

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Hi!

Partners

AdvanceHE

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Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education

what works wellbeing

KING'S College LONDON

Mental Health and time

- Over the last few decades, we've seen a gradual increase in the extent to which society is tolerant of people experiencing mental health challenges.

- We have also seen a steady decline, until recently, in suicide rates. This has however, begun to reverse lately.

Student mental health

- We are interested in the mental health of students in particular.
- Large scale survey data, with consistent methodologies deployed year after year, is unusual.
- We are lucky to have access to the student academic experiences survey, which surveys large numbers of students each year.
- We have data on participant’s self-identified mental health, and their subjective wellbeing.

Sample

- More than 10,000 participants each year, with weighting to make representative of student population.

- LGBA captured in all years; Q since 2019, Trans since 2021 and non-binary since 2022.

- This data is both unusual large, and unusually rich

	Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
POLAR Quintile	1	1430	1451	1456	882	1067	1117	841
	2	2001	2091	1996	1048	1480	1268	869
	3	2399	2352	2396	1309	1732	1558	978
	4	2785	2803	2832	1540	2032	1608	1047
	5	3324	3479	3543	2019	2415	2604	1419
Full sample		**14057**	**14046**	**14072**	**10227**	**10186**	**10142**	**10163**

What are we focusing on?

- Mental health - binary, self reported.
- Subjective Wellbeing, captured through 1-10 scale using ONS 4;
  - Happiness
  - Worthwhileness
  - Life Satisfaction
  - Anxiety (not clinical)

Mental Health Over time

Gender Identity

Sexuality and Mental Health/Wellbeing

Ethnicity - a mixed picture

Class/Socio-Economic background

- This feels qualitatively important, but is difficult to operationalise in our data.
- Traditional markers, like free school meal eligibility, aren’t captured.
- Asking people their social class is riven with difficulties.
- There are a number of (slightly imperfect) measures that we can look at.

Educational background

POLAR Quintile

Disability and Wellbeing

- Participants in the survey are asked to self identify for a range of disabilities.

- The pattern is not the most straightforward in our data, but taken together there is something systematic going on.

Work

Percent with a Mental Health difficulty
0
5
10
15
20
25
0
10
20
30
40
Hours Worked (Paid)
Fitted values
(mean) mentalhealth

Proportion high wellbeing
.4
.5
.6
.7
.8
0
10
20
30
40
Hours paid work per week
Satisfaction
Worthwhileness
Happiness
Anxiety

Drop Out and Mental Health

Alongside these graphs

- These graphs are giving us a poor, and worsening, picture, with fairly high resolution.

- They also shine a light on the need for more and better support for students.

- This has to be placed into the context of;
  - Diminishing volunteer hours post pandemic (across the board)

  - A lack of effectiveness of light touch interventions to improve student wellbeing (Stockdale and Sanders, 2023).

  - A financial position that is foreboding.

Foreboding

- The increase in top-up fees by the coalition brought a greater focus on widening participation and (to a lesser extent) on student success.
- The US picture is very bleak - WP doesn’t lead to success. We have avoided this here so far.
- The freezing of fees has also meant the freezing of resources available for these goals.
- Match this with increasing need, and it suggests a growing gap between supply and demand.

Foreboding (2)

- The fall in international, postgraduate taught students has plunged the sector into a financial …something.
- This has immediate financial consequences for institutions, and has the effect of reducing the amount of resources available for things that universities might view as non-essential, nice-to-haves.
- Smart money, especially at selective institutions, is on a pivot to UG and WP.
- Geopolitics will widen the gap further, even without having direct effects.

What can we do about it?

- (Some bias)
- Working smarter and together on support for our students.
- Recognise that our learner analytics are of limited use - and so we need to reach people where they are, and rely on a more human centred approach.
- Concentrate our resources on student success, and on addressing the causes of mental ill health or low wellbeing among students.

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Any questions?

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