Student Psychological Wellbeing Study

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Developments affecting the HE environment

- Widening participation
- Ever more diverse student body
- Wide range of educational, cultural, social backgrounds
- Staff to student ratios have changed
- Well-funded elite system – less funded mass system
- Pastoral support increasingly provided by central services
- Increasing managerialism
Developments affecting the HE environment

More students than ever are entering FE and HE

BUT in 2008

The National Audit Office predicted that up to 20% of students may leave before completing their studies
Study Design

- Built on a HEFCE study at the University of Leicester
- Survey questionnaire in terms 1 and 2, asking about:
  - Demographic data including family history of FE/HE
  - Psychological wellbeing (General Health Questionnaire)
  - Wide range of stress-causing issues
  - Alcohol/drug consumption, binge eating
Study Design

- In term 2 the questionnaire also asked about:
  - Attendance and academic performance
  - Help seeking behaviour
  - Use of support services
Student Participants

- 731 students from 3 universities
- Youngest 17, oldest 56, mean age 24
- 73% single, 20% married or living with partner
- 38% working as well as studying
- 57% did not have a parent with an HE qualification
- 13% were from ethnic minority backgrounds
- 50% had some kind of religion
General Health Questionnaire

- Most widely used measure of psychological health.
- Developed as a screening tool to detect those likely to be at risk of developing psychiatric disorders.
- Measure of the common mental health problems, anxiety, somatic symptoms and social withdrawal.
General Health Questionnaire

- Different versions – study used General Health Questionnaire – 30 (Goldberg and Williams, 1978).

- 30 item questionnaire, with questions like:
  - Have you found everything getting on top of you?;
  - Have you been getting scared or panicky for no good reason?
  - ‘Have you been getting edgy and bad tempered?’
Scoring System

• Each item has four possible responses, ‘not at all’, ‘no more than usual’, ‘rather more than usual’ and ‘much more than usual’, scoring from 0 to 3, respectively.

• Any score exceeding the threshold value of 4 is classed as achieving ‘psychiatric caseness’.

• For the study - scores of 6 and over considered indicative of distress/disturbance.
Results for the two terms

- Participants scoring 6 or over: Term 1: 35.7%  
  Term 2: 34.7%

- No differences between institutions.

- Matched pairs analysis:
  Term 1 35.4% “distressed”
  Term 2 32.7% “distressed”
Relationship between psychological wellbeing and socio-demographic factors

- All differences associated with reduced levels of distress were highly statistically significant (p < 0.01):
  - Having a family background of Higher Education.
  - Following a religion.
  - Regularly attending a place of worship.
Key Causes of Stress

Students were asked to state how important issues were with regard to making them feel stressed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crucially important</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Fairly important</th>
<th>Not important</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

E.G. Dealing with concerns about …

Coping with inadequate/unsatisfactory housing
Dealing with severely inadequate finances
Getting used to university life ….
% Students who found issues crucially or very important in terms of causing them stress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Term 1</th>
<th>Term 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability to manage and complete course work</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with severely inadequate finances</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to clarify and meet academic/career goals</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to set priorities, make decisions, manage time</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding a job/career</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study skills in specific ways</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concentration</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing for a career after my degree</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking exams</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue</td>
<td>Term 1</td>
<td>Term 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting used to university life</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking in groups</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being assertive when necessary</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving self-esteem and confidence</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allowing myself to have fun</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing trust in friendships</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping with concerns about my subject choice</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving ability to communicate with friends</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping with inadequate/unsatisfactory housing</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In term 2 students were asked about:

- The reasons they had missed lectures/seminars etc.
- The reasons they had received lower grades.
- Students just as likely to miss lectures due to personal problems as due to physical illness
- More students received lower grades for personal or psychological problems than physical illness
- Disturbed students more likely to miss lectures (but not because of physical illness)
Help seeking behaviour

• Personal tutor (62%) – personal, study or course issues.

• Friends (54%) – psychological problems, personal problems, physical health, study or course issues.

• Family (50%) - psychological problems, personal problems, physical health, study or course issues.

• Dr/GP (34%) – physical health.
Help seeking behaviour

- Other academic staff (27%) – study or course issues
- Student support (19%) – study or course issues
- Administrative staff (17%) – study or course issues
- Other services used more infrequently
Key Messages

- Large numbers of students have high levels of disturbance on entering Higher Education.
- Psychological wellbeing of whole student population improves significantly from term 1 to term 2.
- Individual students with high levels of disturbance do not necessarily improve.
- Students with no family history of HE have shown significantly higher levels of disturbance.
Key Messages

- The most important causes of stress are issues to do with studying and academic performance.
- Inadequate finance is the second most important.
- Many students report that choice of subject area is a significant cause of stress and the proportion saying this does not reduce in term 2.
- Weight control is a significant area of concern.
- Inadequate housing a major cause of stress.
Key Messages

- Students report they miss more lectures due to personal problems than physical illness.
- Students with high levels of disturbance are more likely to miss lectures.
- Personal tutors are a key source of support, for psychological and personal as well as academic issues.
- Many students are unaware of the support available from a range of sources within the university.
Actions Taken

- Review of academic feedback arrangements (minimum waiting time now 3 weeks)
- Review of pastoral role of academic staff (move towards personal development tutors)
- Review of information provided to prospective students (in particular information provided to those with no family history of HE).