




ACCESS AND MOBILITY

Mens sana in corpore sano:

WHERE IS STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH GOING?

Statistics show that mental illness among students is on the rise. International students have even more challenges to deal with than their native counterparts. This issue is put in the spotlight here, together with a look at what universities can actively do to help their students.

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Student mental health – there's good and bad news. The good news is: students are (statistically) better off than the rest of the general population. In Germany, data from a recent health survey showed that 31% of the population between the ages of 18 and 65 suffer from some kind of mental disorder compared with 11% of the student population.¹ This notable difference can be seen for most countries in the EU and the US (although the years of assessment differ), as Figure 1 shows.

The bad news, on the other hand, is a growing prevalence of mental illness among young people observed over the last 15 years. A proportion of this might be due to greater attention being given to mental health in general, through more diagnoses and more treatment options. However, these explanations aside, there seems to be a real increase in the numbers of young people suffering, a problem which cannot be ignored. No other disease impairs the ability to carry on with the studies like mental health problems: 91% of those afflicted report an inability to pursue their course work.²

RECOGNITION OF THE ISSUES

Between 2000 and 2004, a considerable increase in students with mental health problems was reported in a survey comprised of 18 UK universities: Bristol saw a 29% increase, Leeds saw a 59% increase and Southampton saw a 69% increase. At Cambridge University in 2004, there were a reported 43 suicidal students, 56 suffering from bulimia/anorexia, and 70 with self-harm problems. The Times newspaper

concluded in an article in 2005: "It is estimated that one in four students will experience some form of mental distress during their time at university...mental health is no longer a minority issue."

Students suffering from mental disorders are mostly diagnosed with depression, anxiety and problems with self-worth regulation. Compared to young people of the same age not studying, there is a much higher prescription rate of anti depressive medication.

Beyond Europe, according to the National Survey of Counseling Center Directors, 10.4% of the US student population between 2008 and 2009 sought help for mental health issues. The main problems noted were:

- depression
- stress/anxiety disorders
- relationship issues
- alcohol and drug use
- eating disorders
- attention deficit syndrome/attention deficit hyperactive syndrome.

The use of psycho-stimulant drugs (neuro-enhancement) was reported as being very common in extremely competitive US colleges. There was also an increase in students entering college with pre-existing mental health issues, and severe problems seemed to be on the rise. The massacre at Virginia Tech, Alabama in 2007 was a shocking signal, as were six suicides at Cornell University in six months (2009/2010). The 2008 WHO report found that 50% of the students contemplated suicide versus 15% of the general population.

Figure 1 Twelve-month prevalence rates of mental health problems

Societal group	Percentage (%) of those with any type of mental disorder
Population USA 2005	32.4
Students USA 2008	15
Population EU 2004	35.0
Adolescents EU 2003-2008	9.5-22
Population Germany 2006	31
Students Germany 2006	11

THE BURDEN OF STRESS

According to data provided by a recent survey in Germany, students perceived too high achievement demands, the examination phase at the end of the semester, 'bulimic' learning instead of deep-structure learning and a lack of practical relevance as major sources of stress. Financial problems or – in the case of international students – problems with health insurance, job permits or residence permit problems all increase the perceived stress level.

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Being a student involves finding solutions to issues like separation from family, questions of purpose in life and orientation towards goals, relationships, a balance between work, study and private life, and finances. Developing the ability to positively cope with crises builds self-efficacy and self esteem. If things develop in a positive way, goal attendance goes hand in hand with personal growth. Both lead to flexible identity conceptions with adequate ego-strength and frustration tolerance. In the case of negative progression, identity developments are shortened, resulting in pseudo-identity or identity diffusion. The MMPI factor hypomania is a good indicator of this: it is a measure of anxiety and unrealistic optimism. Surveys in the US showed an increase among students from 5% in 1938 to 31% in 2007. Given the fact that university graduates are the managers, CEOs and political leaders of tomorrow, this is an alarming result.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH

International students face the same life events and stresses as other students, but must also deal with additional pressures, without the support system of friends and family close at hand. The transition from one academic system to another can be confusing. Adjusting to a foreign culture can bring about a sense of loss in regard to native language, security and the self. Culture shock, loneliness, problems of language proficiency, financial dependency

and expectations from the supporting families can increase the likelihood of developing mental health issues. Things get worse when international students come from a cultural background where psychological difficulties are regarded as a stigma, fostering a tendency to turn psychological stress into physiological disorders. For them, the threshold for making an appointment at the counselling center is often too high.

PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS FOR UNIVERSITIES

The importance of adequate psychological support for students has been stressed by the Trends reports of the European University Association (EUA): "*The value of student support services needs to be better recognised, supported and developed in the interests of all students. In particular guidance and counselling services play a key role in widening access, improving completion rates and in preparing students for the labour market.*"³ Trends report 2010⁴ provided the following figures: 91% of higher education institutions offer academic orientation services, 83% offer career guidance and 66% offer psychological counselling. The growth rates observed since 2007 have been an increase of 17% for career guidance and 11% for psychological counselling. But simply having a counselling centre is not enough.

Universities need to develop a holistic view of students with an emphasis on the fact that successful academic learning is interrelated with personal growth and development. The enormous competition among higher education institutions worldwide in recruiting international students calls for a special sensitivity to their well being and success. Thus, institutions are well advised to implement a mental health and learning support policy, involving:

- Training and awareness raising strategies, including the awareness for psychological stress which international students might be faced with.
- Promoting student mental health in ways which pay respect to cultural and religious diversity.

- Supporting students with mental health difficulties in culturally sensitive ways.
- Supporting staff and international education providers.

Basic information should be readily available about the counselling and guidance system of the institution. Explaining concepts like psychotherapy and psychiatry by providing examples of distress and how to cope with distress is another way of raising mental health awareness. Staff members need to be aware of indicators for distress like erratic attendance, avoidance of participation in class, withdrawal from social contact, health complaints and the like. It is desirable to integrate counselling aspects into the teaching and training of faculty. Close connections between the international office and the counselling centre are important, since many international students looking for help address those agencies they have been in touch with before and upon arrival. Counselling and psychological services need to network with other student service/support agencies, the university administration, programme and curricula developers and academic staff to ensure that mental health and learning support issues are given adequate attention on all levels. **E**

For all those interested in the guidance and counselling of both domestic and international students in higher education, the EAIE has developed a new Professional Section, *Psychological Counselling in Higher Education (PSYCHE)*. Find out more at www.eaie.org/PSYCHE.

1. According to statistics from the Deutsches Studentenwerk.
2. Isserstedt, W., Middendorff, E., Fabian, G., Wolter, A. (2007). Die wirtschaftliche und soziale Lage der Studierenden in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 2006. In *Sozialerhebung des Deutschen Studentenwerks*, 18, (p. 395). Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF).
3. Crosier, D., Purser, L., & Smidt, H. (2007). *Trends V: Universities shaping the European Higher Education Area* (p. 52). EUA Publications.
4. Sursock, A., & Smidt, H. (2010) *Trends 2010: A decade of change in European Higher Education*. EUA Publications.