



INTER-UNIVERSITY NETWORK UCARE FORUM

CULTURE OF CARE: EMPOWERING CONNECTIONS

REPORT FINDINGS

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FOREWORD

We would like to give our heartfelt thanks to the National Youth Council for supporting and enabling us to do research on a topic that all of us feel so strongly and passionately about, and Milieu Insight Pte Ltd for being our research partner for this survey. Without the efforts and significant contributions of our partners, this survey, the findings we derive, and our policy recommendations for the future would not have been possible.

ABSTRACT

Mental health issues affect people across the ages and are common regardless of generation, culture, nationality and ethnicity. Awareness has risen in Singapore over the years, and has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Undergraduates in particular, have been suffering from high levels of mental distress due to reduced interactions and uncertainty about the future. A survey to understand this mental health problem was required to draft effective policy recommendations to tackle the issue at a systemic level. This report reviews the findings from the survey issued to the undergraduate population across five different autonomous universities in Singapore. Key findings include insight regarding the culture surrounding mental health, academics playing an important role that requires support, and quantifiable improvements in current resources dedicated to offering support for mental health.

INTRODUCTION

The psychosocial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been felt across the world, affecting all populations and segments of society. In a policy brief issued on 13 May 2020, the United Nations (UN) called for action on mental health as part of the pandemic recovery response. According to the UN, large sections of the global population had been experiencing distress relating to the health impact of COVID-19 and fears of infection or losing family members, in addition to the effects of social isolation and economic fallout – whether having or risking lost livelihoods. These effects were exacerbated by loss of routine and uncertainty about the future. Closer to home, a survey by the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) conducted during the pandemic in 2021 concluded that 8.7% of the surveyed Singapore population met the criteria for clinical depression, 9.4% met the criteria for anxiety and 9.3% met the criteria for mild to severe stress. More importantly, numerous surveys carried out by the National Youth Council (NYC) showed that the problem was shown to be acute in youths, with over half of youths reporting struggling with mental health issues related to anxiety, financial doubt, and academic/work stress.¹ Students in Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) were one of the most heavily impacted, with a survey conducted by the National University Health System (NUHS) showing that 3 in 4 National University of Singapore (NUS) students were at risk of depression over the course of the pandemic.²

The UCare Initiative, born out of these common and pressing issues of mental well-being facing all undergraduates in Singapore, seeks to gauge the current mental health landscape amongst university undergraduates. With the support of NYC, the insights gained will be used to guide policy recommendations that aim to improve structural support available to the undergraduate student population as a whole.

This initiative also represents the first major project of the Inter-University Network (IUN), the first student union collaboration representing 65,000 students across five autonomous universities to advocate for issues faced by undergraduates such as mental health, employability, and sustainability. Together with the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT), the IUN hopes to gain a greater understanding of the mental health landscape across the IHLs to provide effective and practical policy recommendations on the topic.

¹Ministry of Health, Singapore. (2021, September 15). COVID-19 Mental Wellness Taskforce Report. Retrieved May 27, 20

²Qing, A. (2022, March 10). 3 in 4 NUS students at risk of depression as a result of pandemic, measures imposed: NUHS survey. The Straits Times. Retrieved May 28, 2022, from <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/3-in-4-nus-students-at-risk-of-depression-as-a-result-of-the-pandemic-measures-imposed-nuh-survey>

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The UCare initiative aims to survey the sentiments on the current mental healthcare and wellness landscape amongst students in autonomous universities. Insights gained from this survey will be shared with the respective autonomous universities to guide the policy direction and derive recommendations for the five participating autonomous universities and the nation as a whole. Additionally, we also hope that these findings will be a platform to inspire youths and empower themselves towards a culture of care for their own mental health and the mental well-being of others.

This survey was administered online and conducted on a total of 470 undergraduate students across five universities - National University of Singapore (NUS, inclusive of Yale-NUS College), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore Management University (SMU), Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) and Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT). The survey had a length of 22 questions, and fieldwork was conducted from April to May 2022. Active sampling was conducted through the use of an online platform, and data used for analyses was weighted by university population and biological sex to ensure fair representation. All other demographic variables were based on natural fall out.

FINDINGS

Analysis of the survey results generated from the fieldwork brought great insight into the mental health landscape among youths. The findings have been segmented into three distinct and key pillars concerning the mental health landscape, namely Culture, Academics and Resources (CARE). Stemming from the sentiments of the students and their views toward the current mental health landscape, each pillar concludes with recommendations on how to move forward.

The first pillar - Culture - discusses the common stressors faced by youths, the reasons that prevent youths from properly seeking help if needed, and the outlook of youths today towards mental health.

The second pillar - Academics - is based around key findings mainly relating to undergraduate grading in Singapore and its impact on students. In this pillar, we discuss the grade-obsessed mindset prevalent in universities, students' requests for academic support, and possible improvements.

The third pillar - Resources - discusses students' current level of awareness, usage, and satisfaction with the mental health resources on campus, and their reasons for satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Through this analysis, we aim to provide scope for areas that require resource expansion and increased efficiency.

CULTURE

KEY FINDINGS - COMMON STRESSORS

The survey has allowed us to delve deep into the minds of youths within tertiary institutions today, and their experiences and beliefs regarding the current mental health landscape both within their own institutions as well as the country itself.

From the findings it is apparent that an overwhelming number of youths within universities today, regardless of school and year, are highly stressed. Evidenced within the survey³ and in other local studies that examine the stress levels of youths in Singapore.⁴ Whether or not these stress levels were exacerbated by the pandemic⁵ remains to be seen. However, a look into the key stressors reveals insight into plausible reasons for such high stress levels.

STRESS LEVELS

Base: (N=470) | Q1: On a scale of 0-10, how stressed have you felt in the past 3 months?

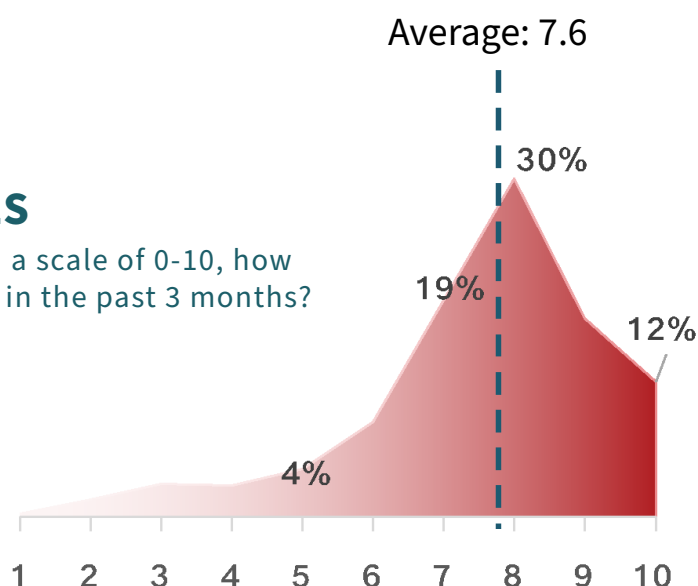


Figure 1: Stress levels of Respondents

9 in 10 respondents ranked 'Work and Study Commitments' as their top source of stress.⁶ These include situations where students attend arduous hours of classes within their curriculums (i.e. lecture, tutorials and labs), juggle school submissions with work commitments, and ensure they pass university. The leap between the first and subsequent stressors is suggestive of the huge importance undergraduates have placed upon themselves to maintain their studies either due to expectations placed upon themselves by others⁷ or the myriad of other factors that may indicate the importance of studies.

³See figure 1.

⁴Gan, Eveline. "Gen Z Faces Different Forms of Stress, May Be More Anxious, Depressed than Others Before Them, Says IMH CEO." Today. February 27, 2021.

⁵Yu, Chou Chuen, Nien Xiang Tou, and James Alvin Low. "A Comparative survey on Mental Health and Adaptability between Older and Younger Adults during the COVID-19 Circuit Breaker in Singapore." BMC Public Health 22, no. 1 (2022): 507.

⁶See figure 2.

SOURCES OF STRESS

Base: (N=470) | Q3: Which of the following factors affects your mental wellbeing the most?

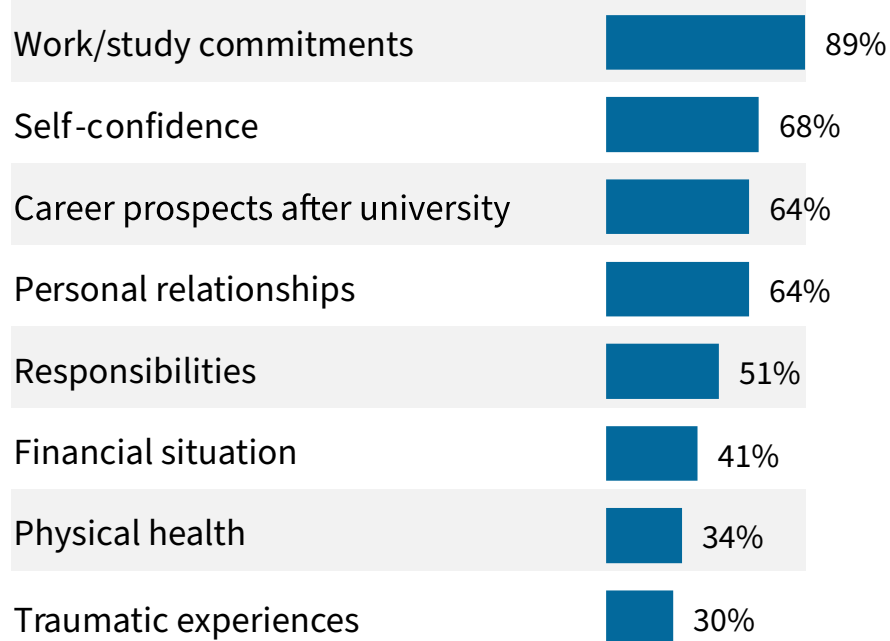


Figure 2: Ranking of Sources of Stress

Additionally, this immense weight on their studies, we believe, stems from the hyper-competitive environment the youths of today face in Singapore. A deep-seated belief that academic achievement is a necessary ingredient for lifelong success, coupled with continuous affirmations of meritocracy and earning one's own place puts pressures on youths of all levels to perform for fear of an insecure future.⁷ This mindset, ingrained during adolescence and early childhood, still clearly plays within the minds of these individuals far later into their lives and reflects the reasons why even a decade later for some, studies and work are still major stressors for their mental health.

⁷Poh, Brian. "Commentary: A Hyper-Competitive Culture Is Breeding Severe Test Anxiety among Many Students." *Channel News Asia*, September 29, 2018.

STIGMAS, BELIEFS AND JUDGEMENT

The vast majority of youths within universities are aware of the avenues for which they are able to seek support for their mental health. Yet with such a high awareness, there are many students who still do not use these resources. Looking deeper into the reasons for this discrepancy between awareness and usage, a main concern undergraduates have regarding the use of the mentioned avenues of support was their fear of judgement by those around them, with 1 in 5 of our 470 respondents citing this fear as their reason for avoiding using both professional avenues of help within universities, as well as student-led initiatives.⁸

REASONS FOR NOT USING ANY RESOURCES PROVIDED BY UNIVERSITY

Base (N=283) | Q10 [...] you've not used any of the mental health resources provided by the university administration [...] . Do help us understand why.

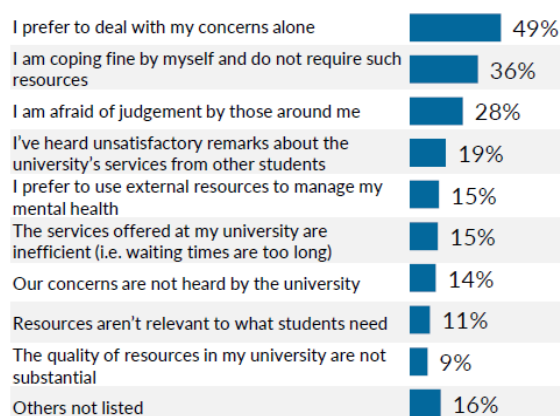


Figure 3: Reasons for not using any resources provided by the university

REASONS FOR NOT USING ANY STUDENT-LED RESOURCES

Base (N=398) | Q12 [...] You mentioned that you've not used any student-led mental health initiatives. Do help us understand why.



Figure 4: Reasons for not using any student-led resources

Currently, many youths still face difficulty when attempting to disclose their mental struggles and many do not know how to properly support someone else when they open up about such struggles.⁹ A fair number of youths themselves expressed contempt and disapproval with terms associated with mental illnesses.¹⁰ Worse still, these individuals fear being branded as “attention seeking” or exaggerating their feelings when they attempt to open up to others on their mental well-being.

Delving deeper, the findings show that amongst half of the sample who prefer to deal with their concerns, nearly 1 in 3 feel as such due to their fears of judgement from others.¹¹ Youths choose not to utilise resources to help support their mental health because of the stigmas associated with seeking help prevalent in society.

⁸ See figures 3 & 4.

⁹ Yeoh, Grace. “The Rise of Mental Health Awareness – and the Stigma That Remains Attached to Certain Conditions.” *Channel News Asia*. June 25, 2021.

¹⁰ Pang, Shirlene, Jianlin Liu, Mithila Mahesh, Boon Yiang Chua, Shazana Shahwan, Siau Pheng Lee, Janhavi Ajit Vaingankar, et al. “Stigma among Singaporean Youth: A Cross-Sectional survey on Adolescent Attitudes towards Serious Mental Illness and Social Tolerance in a Multiethnic Population.” *BMJ Open* 7, no. 10 (October 16, 2017): e016432–e016432.

Breakdown of "I am too busy to attend"

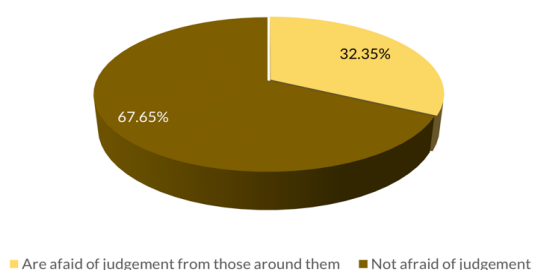


Figure 5: Breakdown of "I am too busy to attend"

PEOPLE TO CONFIDE IN

Base (N=470) | Q4: When faced with personal issues or stressors that affect your mental wellbeing, who do you usually confide in?

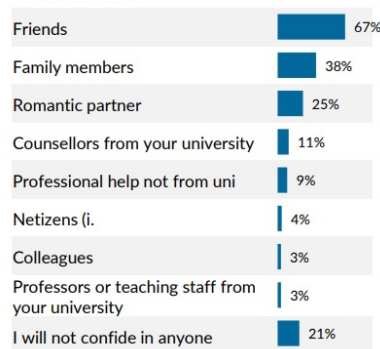


Figure 6: People to confide in

Looking at the wider society, the reasons for avoidance become more apparent. Singapore has come far in its acceptance of mental health as an integral part of life, and a part that must be supported both by the state and society. However, many still acknowledge that the stigma regarding mental health are ever-present.¹⁰ Whether it arises from the lack of proper education, societal norms, or workplace practices, these stigmas associated with mental health and individuals who have declared mental illness or are seeking mental health support are a key reason for many to avoid seeking professional avenues of help¹⁶.

The repercussions associated with judgement are further exacerbated when referring to our youths today who face a myriad of worries. Developing their self-esteem, gaining self-confidence and finding their purpose in life all add up. These are markedly different worries compared to their predecessors, and causes youth to be more susceptible to pressures that worsen their mental health.¹² Coupled with the hyper-connected digital world brought about by the prevalence of the internet and social media, ones' online identity becomes an integral part of their personal identity and deeply affects their mental well-being.¹³ However, these mediums act as platforms for broadcasting and widen the reach and scale of judgement, thus potentially causing youths to be more fearful of reaching out for help to avoid "cyberbullying" if word leaks out onto these platforms.

Even though nearly half of the respondents have stated that they prefer to 'deal with my concerns alone', it is heartening to see that when given a choice 2 in 3 respondents would confide their worries and concerns with friends, while 1 in 3 would do so with a family member.¹⁴

Indeed, the awareness of the importance of mental health, its illnesses, and the avenues of support is rising quickly, boosted by the pandemic which has led to an influx of disclosures from educators, medical professionals and government officials on the reality and impact of mental health. However, we must always keep note that even if people may be aware of mental health, it does not necessarily translate into an acceptance of facing these mental health struggles as a normal part of life.

¹¹ See figures 5.

¹² Han, Goh Yan, Qing Ang, and Gabrielle Ng. "Helping Youth Improve Mental Health amid Rising Pressures." *The Straits Times*. July 25, 2021.

¹³ Lim, Janice. "The Big Read: With Youths More Open about Mental Health, It's Time Others Learn to Listen." *Channel News Asia*, October 14, 2019.

¹⁴ See figure 6.

OUTLOOK OF YOUTHS

On a lighter note, findings from the survey have demonstrated that youths are more accepting of the realities of mental illness and the importance of seeking help. Nearly every respondent was willing to lend a hand to someone who needed support or was in distress. This is indicative of a potential area for stakeholders within the mental health space to invest educational efforts in empowering youths to create a culture of care and self-compassion in their communities.

Base (N=470) | Q18 [...] ***I am willing to help someone in need of support or if I see someone in distress.***

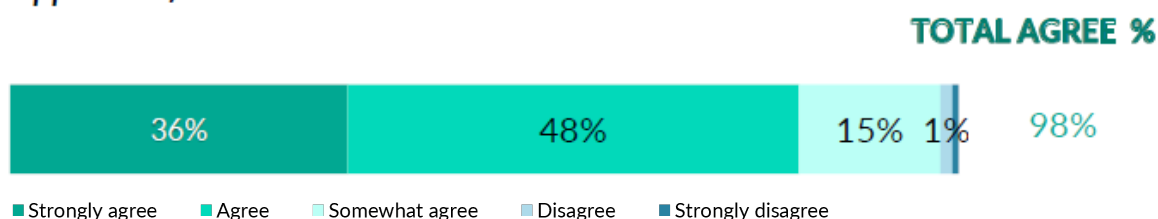


Figure 7: Willingness to help someone in need of support

It is important to acknowledge that stigma surrounding mental health still persists amongst youths.¹⁶ However, the findings show that such stigmas may become less prevalent once youths enter institutes of higher learning as many are willing to help others in mental distress, reflecting a seismic shift in perceptions of mental wellbeing compared to their older counterparts.¹⁷ This shift might come from a greater awareness of mental health issues coupled with sharing and workshops by the universities, increased dissemination of mental-health knowledge in tertiary institutions, healthier mental health cultures within these institutes, or a nation wide movement dedicated to reducing stigmas associated with mental health.

With high levels of recognition towards support for mental health and a general acceptance of the realities of mental illnesses, youths today can contribute greatly to ending the stigma surrounding mental health. Their positive outlook on mental wellbeing would add to a society increasingly accepting and encouraging of individuals to seek help if and when they need. Yet, even though awareness is high, the self-awareness and acceptance of one's need to seek help is still an avenue to be further investigated. On this front, Singapore should not be afraid to embark on a journey to comprehensively improve and add to avenues in place to help individuals with their mental health and normalise seeking help as a part of life.

¹⁵ See figures 7.

¹⁶ Pang, Shirlene, Jianlin Liu, Mithila Mahesh, Boon Yiang Chua, Shazana Shahwan, Siau Pheng Lee, Janhavi Ajit Vaingankar, et al. "Stigma among Singaporean Youth: A Cross-Sectional survey on Adolescent Attitudes towards Serious Mental Illness and Social Tolerance in a Multiethnic Population." *BMJ Open* 7, no. 10 (October 16, 2017): e016432–e016432.

¹⁷ Subramaniam, M, E Abidin, L Picco, S Pang, S Shafie, J A Vaingankar, K W Kwok, K Verma, and S A Chong. "Stigma towards People with Mental Disorders and Its Components – a Perspective from Multi-Ethnic Singapore." *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences* 26, no. 4 (2017): 371–82

ACADEMICS

GRADES-OBSESSED CULTURE

From the findings, students within IHLs feel that there is a deep-seated and unhealthy obsession with their grades with employers maintaining that academic grades remain the primary indicator used to screen candidates for hire. Students may feel that they have to perform well academically to get their “foot through the door”. This has inevitably led to the amplification of students’ stresses during the course of their education.

Unfortunately, such stress leads to the joy of learning often diminishing within this highly competitive environment, and students primarily focus on chasing grades and outdoing their peers instead of enjoying the process of learning. This hectic pace of education, coupled with the reduced joy of learning has led to the rise of multiple mental stressors within the education climate. To help alleviate these mental stressors, based on our findings, reviews of the curriculum, grading systems and mental health resources should be committed. When faculty, academic boards and school administrations strive toward building an academic environment that prioritises students’ mental health before grades, it serves to positively shape these students’ mindsets toward their academic learning.



P85:

20-30% of the class can get a grade A- and above, it (1) placed unnecessary stress on students to not take beneficial modules that they perceive will be detrimental to their GPA; (2) prevents students from learning students mental health as it is hard to trust people and when learning no longer aids in our self-enrichment and students no longer feel engaged to learn and take ownership of it, it too hampers mental wellness. ”



P105:

Academic policies to not overburden the students. Limit[ing] the number of workload and spread out grading percentages evenly. ”

¹⁸ See figure 2 & P85.

¹⁹ Ang, Jolene. “Grades still good indicator of candidate quality, employers tell student forum” *The Straits Times*. January 30, 2019.

²⁰ See P85.

²¹ See figure 8 and figure 9.

²² See figure 8.

FLEXIBILITY IN WORKLOAD AND CURRICULUM

From the findings, 3 in 4 respondents want increased support for their academics.²² Examples cited for academic support include amendments to current academic policies and the inclusion of appropriate accommodations for students with learning disabilities and mental distress.

The pace of learning differs between individuals, and current curricula dictate a blanket fast pace of learning, aggravated by back to back submissions and cramped curriculums.²³ The scramble to meet these deadlines erodes the joy in learning and aggravates the main stressors that affect their mental well-being. Therefore, offering flexibility in terms of submissions and deadlines while maintaining academic standards may help to alleviate their mental stress by slowing down their hectic school life and allow students to take charge of their learning at a comfortable pace.²⁴

One possibility would be the introduction of Grace Days, which are allowable delays beyond a specified deadline that can be applied to all assignments.²⁵ A practice adopted by several notable universities across the world, grace days give students a flexible way to handle their academic issues without the barrier of having to approach and open up to another individual since grace days need not be approved prior to being used.

In addition, increasing the degree of flexibility in the academic curriculum would be another avenue to look into. Although degree flexibility is often subject to complex factors unique to each discipline, allowing students greater autonomy in planning their academic pathway semester-by-semester has several benefits across the board. Opening up more conversations between students and the relevant academic boards can be a good start toward greater flexibility that is tailored to each degree program. When students have more choice and say in the modules they can take within the semester, they can consider modules with assignments and deadlines that better match their bandwidth for the semester. This reduces chances of a mental burnout, an issue that several students have highlighted in their responses.²³

²³ See P296.

²⁴ See P406.

²⁵ Harvard University. "Grace Days | The Honor Code," 2022.
<https://honor.fas.harvard.edu/grace-days>.

QUOTES FROM THE RESPONDENTS



P57:

Academic policies where students can ask for extensions on assignments, on the basis of going through a bad bout of mental health. ”



P296:

Consider [the] impact of hectic academic schedules on burnout and mental health, and think about revising curriculum. Everyone including me is burnt out at the end of term. ”



P406:

Putting in place policies that prioritise the mental health of students, school-wide policy for extensions because of mental distress. School-wide module teaching about mental health and how to cope with difficult situations. Putting in place policies that prioritise students taking time off, for example extensions should be based on the number of weekdays and not include weekends.... ”

An interesting observation is that respondents have expressed their preference for more autonomy over their academic journey. This translates to granting more liberty in deciding the modules and electives they need to take.²⁶ This is opposed to a system that constrains students in their selection of modules on the basis of fulfilling certain requirements. By giving students this choice, it grants them more certainty in their journey as they are able to determine their own path. This may remove some of the mental stressors that arise from the limited choices that may result in them taking courses that do not align with the academic or career-centric goals and prospects. While increasing the students' autonomy in this aspect is a complex decision (being heavily subjected to the faculty's constraints), we believe that it is an aspect that institutions can look into further when considering academics as stressors toward mental health.

QUOTES FROM THE RESPONDENTS



P333:

reducing workload... reducing the number of modules we take per sem so we can focus on what we do have. ”



P214:

1) Not placing more than 1 test/exam on the same day 2) Ensure that topics relevant to lab sessions have already been taught before letting students attempt them/assuming student should have already known 3) If the module topics cannot be taught within teaching weeks, I believe there is a need for reevaluation of the module's workload. ”



P292:

academic policies that do not sacrifice academic rigour but yet reduce stress on students. e.g. for certain modules, students are able to score above 100% throughout all the assessments. This can reduce the stress of losing marks throughout the coursework. ”

²⁶ See P333.

²⁷ See figure 9.

FACULTY AND SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION'S INFLUENCE ON MENTAL HEALTH

Another avenue that could be explored is to increase communication platforms between students and the school administration. 1 in 3 respondents indicated that they want more dialogues and opportunities for students to raise their concerns regarding mental health and wellness to their university's administration.²⁷ In order to properly tackle mental health within universities, efforts must be committed by both decision makers at the top, and sentiments from the ground. Through increased dialogue and conversation, it would foster and ensure an environment where decisions made clearly benefit the students, staff, and university as a whole.

From the data collected, students have expressed that a more fine-tuned and personalised approach would better suit their academic needs. This approach entails a higher level of proactivity from the professors to check on the welfare of the students with students also suggesting that professors can be trained to assist students who come to them with various personal and academic struggles with empathy and a commitment to confidentiality whilst remaining tactful and emotionally sensitive.²⁸ As individuals who interact with students the most during their academic journeys, professors and lecturers play an instrumental role in supporting their students' mental health. To help in this the school administration can look into investing in training for their faculty educators.

For example, empathy training covers the stages of developing empathy, identifying risk behaviours and indicators of distress for undergraduates. In addition, a refresher on upholding confidentiality and equipping professors with appropriate tools to respond with empathy to distressed students would ensure that professors are a valuable resource in helping students with their mental well-being.

We reaffirm that professors and lecturers play an important role in providing a conducive, engaging and enjoyable learning environment for their students. As part of this they should convey a clear supportive stance on mental health to their students during the start of their term or class. This affirmation signals to students that their educators care about their mental health and are open to students approaching them for assistance and will aid in moulding a more compassionate and empathetic environment. Such steps can go a long way in improving students' academic learning and their mental health.

²⁶ See P333.

²⁷ See figure 9.

²⁸ See P247.

QUOTES FROM THE RESPONDENTS

“ **P247:**

I think it would be great if the university can take the first step of approaching students to check on their mental health instead of just informing us of the available resources or giving us information on mental health. This may help those who are afraid of making the first move to seek help, to get the help that they need. ”

“ **P309:**

training professors to respect and recognise how the mental health of students can affect our studies... ”

“ **P309:**

Incorporating it into [a] larger support system [in] school - e.g. getting faculty informed and implementing support practices on the academic front. ”

RESOURCES

AWARENESS AND USAGE OF UNIVERSITY-LED AND STUDENT-LED RESOURCES

This survey has allowed us to delve deep into the level of awareness and usage of various mental health and wellness resources available to the undergraduate population in their respective universities.

From our findings, a vast majority of students are aware of university-led resources or formal initiatives related to mental health and wellness, with awareness of student-led initiatives at a significant but lower level than formal initiatives.²⁹ This high level of awareness is consistent with the present push by universities for their various mental health and wellness programmes introduced within their campus as well as the nation's current push towards more mental health literacy at all levels.³⁰

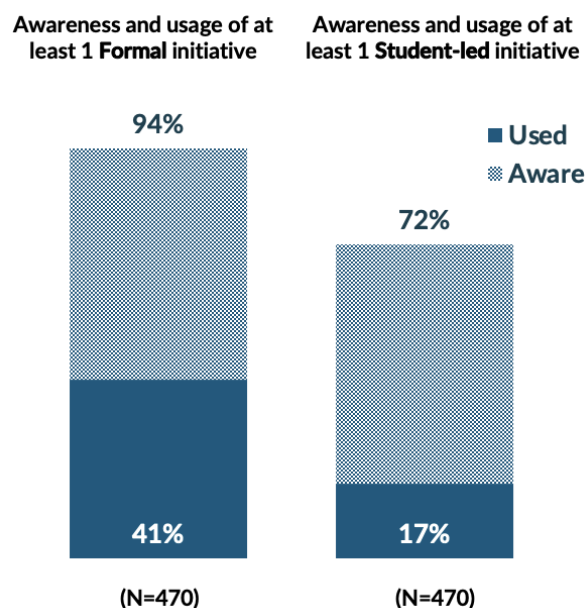


Figure 10: Awareness and usage of mental health and wellness initiatives

Upon further breakdown, the findings show that a university's counselling services received the most awareness and usage for support with mental health issues, in contrast to other formal efforts and student-led initiatives.³¹ This is likely due to the prevalence of university counselling centres as the primary avenue of professional support for issues with mental health, as well as the constant reinforcement of their importance by school administrators, educators, and student leaders across students' academic life.

²⁹ See figure 10.

³⁰ Examples include NUS' Wellbeing Day, NTU's Wellbeing Office (focused on mental wellbeing) and SMU's and YNC's Mental Health Awareness Week and SIT's Wellness Week

³¹ See figure 11.

AWARENESS AND USAGE

Base: (N=470) | Q5 & Q6: Which of these mental-health resources and initiatives in your university are you aware of/ used before?

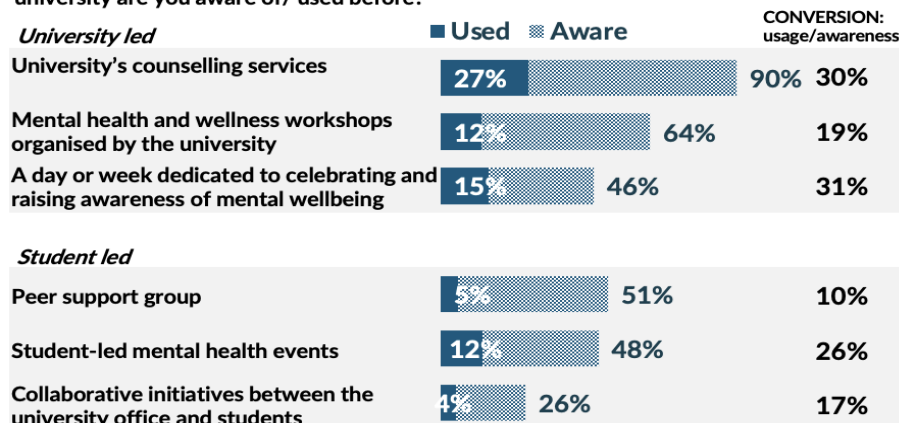


Figure 11: Detailed breakdown of the awareness and usage of mental health and wellness initiatives

STUDENT-LED RESOURCES

From the findings, student led-initiatives have a much lower awareness than university-led resources.³² Although a majority of respondents show interest in participating in student-led initiatives, roughly a third felt unsure of what to expect from these initiatives, while 1 in 3 respondents felt a lack of information on these student-led initiatives as reasons for not attending them.³³

More effort should be placed into publicising and planning student-led initiatives that can address the above-mentioned barriers that discourage students from attending and using student-led initiatives. Overall, such a higher usage of student-led initiatives may then reduce the strain placed upon students' over-subscribing to an over-encumbered university counselling service by offering alternative, complementary avenues of support.

Furthermore, the low awareness-to-usage ratio, especially for peer support groups, raises other concerns. Although almost half of our student respondents are aware of the peer support groups on campus, only 1 in 20 of them make use of these support groups, rendering the lowest awareness-to-usage ratio among student-led initiatives.³⁴ Some respondents believed that students were not equipped enough to offer mental health support and this lack of trust in peer-support groups led to their under-utilisation of this avenue as a means of support.³⁵

³² See figure 10.

³³ See figure 4.

³⁴ See figure 11.

³⁵ See P196 & P543 & P690.

QUOTES FROM THE RESPONDENTS

“ **P196:**

I don't see the tangible benefits of these resources as anyone can claim they know mental health even if they are properly trained but have they gone through the traumas of life enough to understand what I'm going through or know me well enough to be able to offer specialised advice? ”

“ **P543:**

What can they do, not like they can suddenly turn your worries into nothing. ”

“ **P690:**

I not aware of student led resources no confidence in student led resources to be accurate/useful ”

To address this, universities must continue to ensure peer supporters are rigorously trained and certified. However, beyond that more awareness has to be raised to ensure students are keenly aware of the level of training peer-supporters go through, in order to build trust for these peer support groups.

Students within the universities themselves are a resource that can and should be tapped on to aid in our institutions' support of mental health. With nearly every respondent being willing to offer aid to someone in need, it not only reflects a more healthy mental health culture amongst youths today, but also signals a wide pool of students ready to be tapped on to offer aid to their fellow peers.³⁶ Peer-support networks should be offered and expanded upon within all universities and introduced as another avenue for support for individuals who require such support for their mental health.

Base (N=470) | Q17 [...] I am confident of being able to help someone in need of support or someone in distress, even in a small way.

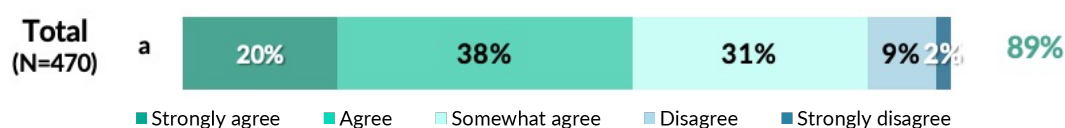


Figure 12: Confidence in helping someone in need of support or in distress.

However, student-led resources and initiatives cannot substitute professional counselling services provided for either by the school or externally. Peer-supporters are not trained to offer support to the extent of professionals and should not be relied upon by individuals who truly require professional aid, merely acting as complements and a more accessible avenue of support that helps students build up to seeking professional help. Nonetheless, we do note that building stronger peer support networks can provide an additional avenue of support for students' who require help in managing their mental health, and would take us one step further in building a comprehensive and holistic mental health support ecosystem within our campuses.

³⁶ See figure 7 & 12.

QUALITY AND QUANTITY OF UNIVERSITY-LED RESOURCES

The findings also provide important insights into possible areas of improvements for university-led resources.

SATISFACTION OF UNIVERSITY-LED RESOURCES

Base: (N=187) | Q14: Overall, how satisfied are you with the current mental-health resources available at your university? This includes only services provided by your university administration, such as the university's counselling services, mental health and wellness workshops etc

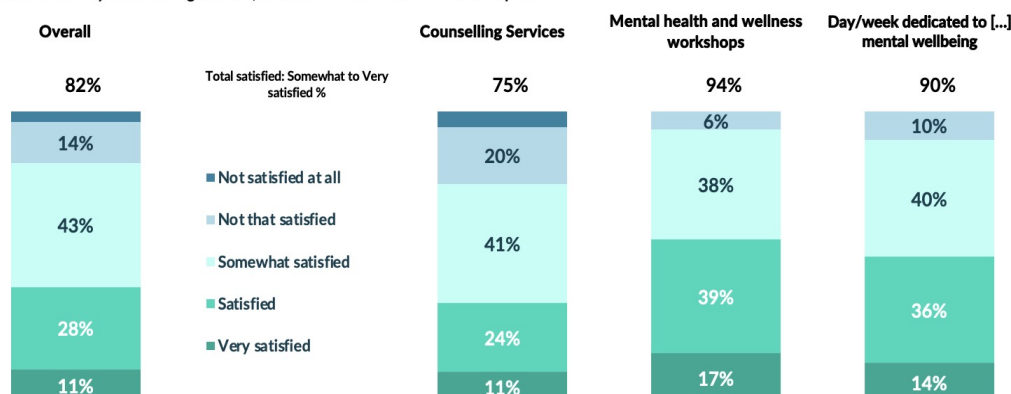


Figure 13: Satisfaction of university-led resources

An overwhelming majority of respondents are satisfied with the mental health resources offered by their universities,³⁷ and their frequently cited reasons for satisfaction are the quality of services, feeling heard and understood, and accessibility.³⁸ However, among students who are dissatisfied, lack of quality and professionalism of the university counsellors are also cited as reasons for their dissatisfaction.³⁹

QUOTES FROM THE RESPONDENTS

ON SATISFACTION FOR UNIVERSITY-LED RESOURCES

“ P642:

The university counsellors are highly professional, empathetic and knowledgeable. They provide a very high standard of care and have been helpful in assisting me with my mental health struggles. ”

“ P341:

The therapists are kind and it is a safe place to speak. They are also non judgemental and are very patient to listen to my problems. They don't make fun of you when you talk. And most importantly, they assess the situation with you, make a strategy, teach you how to get [over] the problem. And it works. ”

³⁷ See figure 13.

³⁸ See P642 & P341.

³⁹ See P755 & P194 & P301.

QUOTES FROM THE RESPONDENTS

ON DISSATISFACTION FOR UNIVERSITY-LED RESOURCES

“ **P755:**

The quality of counsellors vary, and I have heard accounts from students who visited the counselling centre only to be further distressed by the services that some counsellors provide [...] it is disheartening to see students muster up the courage to seek help only to be greatly disappointed or further distressed. ”

“ **P194:**

The counsellors are not very attuned to the students' concerns and [are] in a rush to offer solutions which often involve pointing out issues or things we need to change that is the source of our stress in the first place. ”

“ **P301:**

their counsellors are inept with dealing with problems. i told them about having suicidal thoughts and all they told me was “that’s bad”; i only got a counsellor so i could get a referral to the psychiatrist in the private health clinic on campus. ”

“ **P347:**

Lack of effort and professionalism from school counsellors, had to even chase them just to schedule and get sessions. Brought up antivax comments as well unprompted. Very difficult to schedule appointments with the school psychologist and counsellors as well, and very long wait times just to get a session. ”

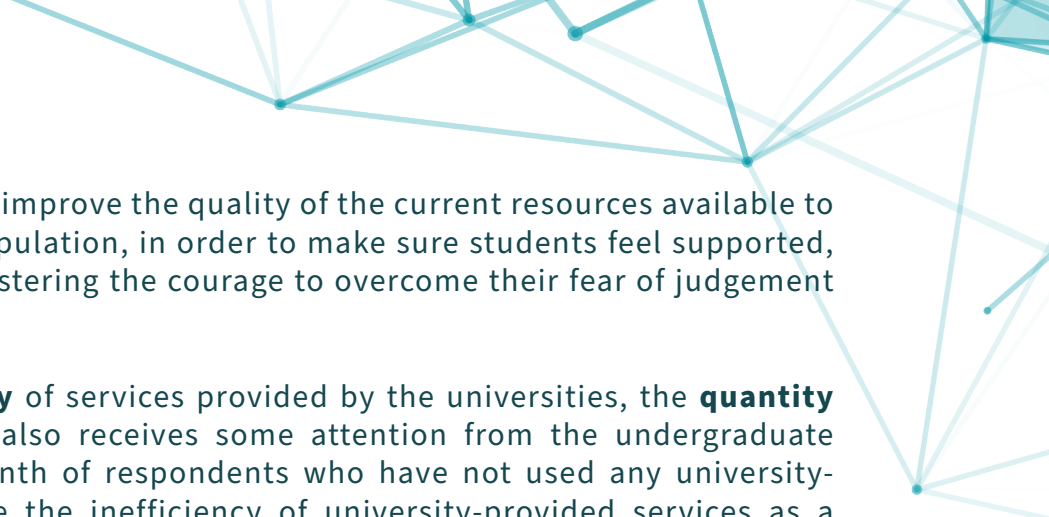
“ **P897:**

counselling at uhc was OK, just wasn't for me + the wait times are super long although it is well-meaning, mental well-being day is extremely performative and does nothing to address underlying issues. ”

Among the students who have not used any university-provided resources, 1 in 5 respondents cite hearing unsatisfactory remarks as reasons for not using their university's resources.⁴⁰ This mixed pattern of experiences and the varied quality of counsellors are in line with the varied student experiences with school counselling reported within other sources.⁴¹ While the number of students who have unsatisfactory experience with school mental health resources may not be a majority, the distrust of professional counsellors and school resources bred from such negative experience can have long-lasting impact on the belief in these resources, and can be difficult to tackle once ingrained within the minds of students. University counselling centres can leverage on feedback channels and systems where students often provide confidential and honest input on their counselling experience, in order to work on areas for improvement. Providing guarantee and assurance that such feedback is valued and implemented allows for long-term trust to be established between students and counsellors.

⁴⁰ See figure 3.

⁴¹ Goh, Chiew Tong, and Christy Yip. “With School Counsellors, It’s Really Hit-or-Miss’: Behind the Challenge of Safeguarding Student Mental Health.” *Channel News Asia*, August 1, 2021.



Overall, it is crucial to improve the quality of the current resources available to the undergraduate population, in order to make sure students feel supported, especially so after mustering the courage to overcome their fear of judgement and seek proper help.

Aside from the **quality** of services provided by the universities, the **quantity** of services available also receives some attention from the undergraduate population. Over a tenth of respondents who have not used any university-provided services cite the inefficiency of university-provided services as a reason for not using such services.⁴⁰ This is consistent with mentions of limited counselling sessions allowed for each student, long waiting times, and booking inefficiencies for counselling as reasons for dissatisfaction.⁴² Such patterns suggest the need for universities and government bodies to look into ways to provide more support to ease the manpower bottleneck that university mental health services face.

It is also important for schools to manage the expectations that students have of the mental health and wellness resources on campus. While some may see counselling as an instant fix, akin to seeing medical doctors for diseases, the process of counselling is often not as quick.⁴³ It is vital for universities to establish and publicise clear stances and guides for what each resource can and cannot offer. For example, these resources should state clearly what sort of aid they can actually provide to the students, and at what capacity, in order to allow students to have appropriate expectations for the roles of different resources at the very start. Through managing expectations it would encourage students to seek help from appropriate avenues based on their level of need for support, ensuring that those who require professional aid seek out professional services and move their reliance away from non-professional avenues.

When it comes to seeking professional help for mental ailments, the university administration will always be front and centre in their methods of ensuring adequate support and resources are given. Indeed, universities have already done their utmost to provide enough quality, free avenues of support for students who need professional support with their mental health and are keenly aware of the strained mental health support system within their institutions. As the nation moves to increase mental health professionals available in the field⁴⁴, we hope that this will translate to an easing of the manpower crunch faced across the country and within our own institutions. Psychiatrists, psychologists and counsellors are our last line of defence against the sufferings and worries mental health struggles inflict upon our minds, and we deeply recognise the important role they play within society. As the pandemic rages on and these individuals face burnout themselves⁴⁵, we, the undergraduate population, want to reaffirm and thank them for their continued efforts and work going above and beyond to support those in need.

⁴² See P347 & P897.

⁴¹ Philip Burnard and Jo Campling, *Counselling Skills for Health Professionals*, Second edition. (Place of publication not identified: Springer-Science+Business Media, B.V., 1994), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4899-3334-8>.

⁴⁴ Gan, Kim Yong. "Availability of Future-Ready Counsellors and Psychologists to Help Cope With Potential Increase In Mental Illness Cases." Ministry of Health, Singapore, October 14, 2020.

⁴⁵ Menon, Malavika. "S'pore Counsellors Face Burnout as More People Seek Therapy amid Covid-19 Pandemic." *The Straits Times*, September 20, 2021.

CONCLUSION

Youth mental health, and mental health in general is a complex, multi-faceted issue comprising countless behavioural, environmental, and cultural factors. Our report condenses these findings into three key pillars - Culture, Academics and Resources - and forms policy recommendations from an undergraduate perspective. Students desire increased flexibility within their academic curriculum and want certainty in their future trajectory. We need to improve the quality and availability of mental health resources inside and outside of institutions, especially as we encourage more youths to be proactive in seeking support for themselves. Fostering an empathetic and less stigmatising culture, where self-compassion is encouraged, forms the bedrock of a healthy mental health landscape.

A culture of care that empowers connections can be achieved but not by an individual or a single group's efforts alone. Policymakers, mental health professionals, university administrators, student-organisations, and especially undergraduates themselves, all play an important role in this process. As awareness of mental health rises in Singapore, such a culture of care reinforces and amplifies the importance of addressing the pressing concern of mental health. With this report, and the commitment and perseverance of our team, we hope to make mental health a subject more easily tackled and openly discussed within the country, empowering youths and Singaporeans alike to seek help and help others.