

## SUPPORTING STUDENT SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: WHAT DO STUDENTS NEED?

Gráinne Bannigan<sup>1,2</sup>, Lucy Bryan<sup>1</sup>, Alexandra Burgess<sup>1</sup>, Lara Gillespie<sup>1</sup>, Sinead Wylde<sup>1</sup>,  
Ciara Duignan<sup>1,2</sup>, & Denise McGrath<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of Public Health, Physiotherapy & Sports Science, University College Dublin (Ireland)*

<sup>2</sup>*Insight SFI Research Centre for Data Analytics, University College Dublin (Ireland)*

### Abstract

The number of university students encountering issues with their well-being is increasing every year, with many struggling to seek appropriate support or lacking the necessary skills to identify themselves as struggling. One of the biggest factors affecting this is academic pressure due to being ill-prepared for the independent learning skills required at university, such as self-management and self-regulation, for which many still need support. To understand what these support needs are, four focus groups were carried out with university students across multiple programmes and stages. These were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. Four key themes are presented: (1) supports at university are often impersonal and unapproachable in nature, (2) importance of holistic well-being and personal development literacy to enable students to thrive at university, (3) need for better awareness and sign-posting of available supports, and (4) peer influences can have a substantial positive and/or negative effect on students. The implications of these are discussed in relation to improving supports, the importance of involving varied student voices throughout this process is highlighted, and further research steps are discussed.

**Keywords:** *Well-being, student success, higher education.*

---

### 1. Introduction

The number of students in higher education institutions (HEIs) encountering issues with their well-being is increasing every year, with 96% of HEIs reporting that their well-being services have experienced an increase in demand in the past five years (Worsley, Pennington, & Corcoran, 2020). Only 1 in 3 students struggling with their well-being seek support, citing stigma as the main barrier, followed by lack of knowledge of the support services available (Querstret, 2019). There are also many students who lack the skills to identify themselves as struggling in the first place, thereby needing support whilst also not having the capability and/or motivation to do so (Field, Duffy, & Huggins, 2015).

If prolonged and unaddressed, these issues relating to well-being can impact student success, where 'success' encapsulates several factors at both the institutional (academic attainment, academic competence, acquisition of general education) and individual level (personal development, & accomplishments, preparation for adulthood & citizenship, cognitive skills & intellectual dispositions, occupational attainment) (O'Farrell, 2019). Fostering well-being literacy can increase students' willingness to seek help in times of distress (Gorzynski, Sims-Schouten, Hill, & Wilson, 2017).

Academic pressure is one of the biggest factors affecting student success and could be due to the independent learning style required at university, for which students are ill-prepared. Instruction on how to be an independent learner, which is based on self-management and behavioural self-regulation, is not encouraged at second level and often not formally taught at third level (Denny et al., 2015). Many students do not know what it is, are unaware of the need to develop values, attitudes and skills to make responsible decisions for their own learning, and are often unaware of their own learning needs and interests (Field et al., 2015). There is thus a need to investigate where the gaps in acquiring and fostering these skills at third level remain in order to understand how they could best be addressed.

Increasing emphasis has been put on the importance of including student voices in the development of academic and well-being supports (Querstret, 2019) as this will help foster autonomy, self-determination and user empowerment which are all key to developing successful well-being supports (Baik, Larcombe, & Brooker, 2019). To date, there remains a gap in our knowledge around what students themselves view as the essential actions that HEIs could be adopting to better support their success and

well-being. This is problematic given that students are, arguably, best placed to inform the design of the supports meant to help them based on their own perceived needs and experiences (Busher, 2012).

This research was developed in collaboration with several undergraduate UCD students who participated in the design and delivery of the study as well as the interpretation of results. The aim of this study is to understand the experiences and unmet needs of undergraduate university students in their academic, personal, and professional development journeys. These learnings will enable us to develop student-centred approaches to better support the processes involved in effective self-management and well-being which contribute to student success.

## 2. Methods

As part of a wider research project, undergraduate students from the university were recruited to take part in focus groups designed to explore their perceptions, experiences and needs with respect to accessing supports in HE. Participants were recruited by the student authors across several undergraduate programmes and stages in the College of Health and Agricultural Sciences. They were provided with an information sheet before giving written informed consent. Ethical approval was granted by the UCD Human Research Ethics Committee. Four focus groups consisting of 3-4 participants each (total N = 15) were conducted by the undergraduate researchers both in-person and online. These researchers received thorough training and were involved in the creation and piloting of the focus group topic guide. To enable more fluidity in participants' discussions, in the first three focus groups participants were presented with a hypothetical scenario of a normally high-achieving student experiencing a period of particularly high stress, resulting in ineffective study efforts and a poor assignment grade. Participants were then invited to discuss various aspects of this scenario (i.e., what might be causing stress, what skills might the person need, how can they be developed, what could they do now, how would you advise them, how might they get support etc.). The participants were then invited to discuss their own experiences of needing and/or accessing support at university and how/when they developed skills to support themselves. The final focus group focused on what a potential solution might look like to help support students in their campus lives. This included a discussion about student needs followed by a prioritisation of these needs.

The focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, with all transcripts de-identified to protect participants' privacy. An inductive thematic analysis approach was applied to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). After an initial familiarisation period with the data, two coding teams were established with two student researchers in each team, working with a PhD researcher. Each team separately coded two different transcripts, first as individuals before coming together as a team to agree on the main codes identified. Both teams then came together as a whole group to share these codes, using them to identify common patterns across all four transcripts which were then collated into a preliminary set of themes. These themes were then reviewed with the principal investigator and renamed separately by all individuals before once again coming together as a group to refine them for inclusion in this paper. This iterative process using independent coding and several in-depth discussion meetings bolstered the trustworthiness of the analysis.

## 3. Results

Four key themes were created from the thematic analysis, presented here. Extracts from the data are denoted according to their respective transcripts (T1, T2, T3, T4).

### 3.1. Supports at university feel impersonal and unapproachable

Participants frequently described the supports offered at university as impersonal and unapproachable. They were perceived as overly formal and professional, "*[university] could be doing a lot more to make their services more approachable to students. At the moment, I very much feel they aren't approachable. It's a very professional setting.*" (T1). They expressed concern about being perceived and treated as a generic number in a much larger crowd of other struggling students, "*I'm not sure how approachable it is. If you feel like you're one in a thousand people that are seen queuing up to do it, they can just tell them the same thing.*" (T1). This led to them feeling disconnected from the university structure as a whole and contributed significantly to their unwillingness to seek support: "*I don't know how comfortable I would feel arranging a talk with my student advisor, just because I feel like I get an email every once in a while telling me all these people are here, but it doesn't really feel like there is that personal connection with the student body.*" (T1). Participants also spoke about the desire to feel "*special*" through a personal touch (T4).

Participants imagined informal, inviting advisory spaces to explore their issues, "*So let's say it was like a student advisor room with a private office where you could go in and have a chat, but in the*

room it had like mindfulness colouring [...] At the moment it's very much like 'that's an office up there that you can go to'." (T1). They suggested the idea of spaces which offer group sessions for those who may find it easier to open up around similar others: "If they perhaps offered group sessions, so like four or five of you went, I'd say it'd be easier to talk through problems when you're with other people." (T1).

Online communication (i.e. email) and online teaching compounds this feeling of unapproachability, due to the impact on the quality of relationships that can be formed online: "I know you get emails for student forums, but they're just kind of marketed as 'yeah, we're just going to have an agenda'. But I think if you can actually promote it as 'we want to hear how you feel, because we want things to improve for you', I think you'd get a lot more engagement and it'd be a much less formal environment." (T1). In comparison, students valued face-to-face communication: "You can't beat in-person, face-to-face interactions. You're going to pick up way more cues, you're going to pick up more rapport with the person, you're going to trust them more, you're going to be perhaps more vulnerable with them." (T1). However, some still felt that there are certain benefits to digital communication methods as a starting point for those who may feel less confident seeking support: "Younger students might not be inclined to meet someone face-to-face, but when they would actually go to the meeting they might be more reassured than a zoom meeting. Maybe there should be an option between the two." (T3).

To appeal more to students and deliver effective support, consideration should be given to how supports can be de-formalised to facilitate personal and individualised connections between students and key institutional figures (i.e., student mentor, academic advisor etc.) (O'Keeffe, 2013) and encourage students to feel like they can discuss their issues in an open, non-judgmental setting (de Moissac, Waddell, Smith, & Rocque, 2020). Additional consideration should also be given to the format in which support is advertised and delivered, as many students feel overwhelmed with emails and desire a certain level of face-to-face communication. Our data are corroborated by Querstret (2019) who suggested a combined approach of digital and in-person support to give students the option to seek support in the format that best suits them.

### **3.2. Importance of holistic well-being & personal development literacy to enable students to thrive at university**

Participants had an appreciation of personal development skills and well-being literacy, referring to processes and concepts such as goal-setting, "Planning efficiently is the key to everything. Because if you have a plan then you at least know what you're meant to do, how you're meant to go about it. But if you just know you have to do X, Y, and Z, and you just have a list, it looks like you have a lot to do. So, planning out days and times is really good." (T1); self-awareness, "I think what is important is getting students to be self-aware because a lot of the time stress often causes a lot of problems, and rather than becoming self-aware because of hitting rock bottom, they need to learn to be self-aware before they hit rock bottom." (T2); reflection, "When you're in it and you can't see how much you're doing and that you're doing great, reflection is good to do." (T3); self-compassion, "Positive affirmations I think are so key. [...] Just giving yourself that time to appreciate what you do have as opposed to always worrying about what you have to do or what you have not done." (T1).

Students also understood that success at university is related to holistic well-being, "Other than sitting at your desk reading notes, it's more about how to balance your workloads. That you need your release in sports, or going out and being with friends, or exercise, or anything like that. And that's what study skills is the overarching bracket of." (T1), and that many structures exist at university to support this balance, "There's so many amenities and activities for us to do in college, they're not there for no reason. There are obviously all our lecture halls. There are obviously all our areas to study. There's also so many sporting facilities. There's so many well-being things to do like just different releases for people." (T1). However, many still struggled with putting this understanding into practice to maintain good work/life balance: "It's so easy to just be so engrossed and trying to get the work done and kind of not going out for a walk even or anything like that." (T4).

These skills were viewed as significant contributors to the overall university experience and beyond: "The main place to make the impact would be in university. Because that's when the workload really does increase because you need to get a good grade and because you need a job." (T1). Students wished to improve these skills, "As soon as a child enters any sort of schooling, or goes from one stage to the next, the importance of well-being should really be pushed." (T1), but felt that dialogues around these are neglected throughout education, "Not many students are taught exactly how to do that and, like I'm taught how to do it in nursing, and we've had those kind of lectures. But I feel like not all students, especially [those] not in Health Science, would be taught how to do that." (T1).

There needs to be much more encouragement and structures put in place to support students in acquiring holistic well-being and personal development skills during the transition from second to third level education so that they are well prepared for the independence required of them, as is well-

documented as having a positive effect on students when implemented (Fox, Byrne, & Surdey, 2020). Achieving this necessitates a change in the perception of these skills, often viewed as ‘soft’ or non-essential, through increased awareness and advocacy of their indispensability to student success in academia and beyond.

### 3.3. Need for better awareness and sign-posting of available supports

Participants frequently described themselves as lacking appropriate knowledge around how to find or access supports: *“I’ve been here for three years and I still have no idea where student counselling actually is. Like I don’t actually know where to go.”* (T2). In many cases, they did not know where to start looking for support as information on this tends to get lost amongst all of the other supports that they feel have been ‘thrown’ at them: *“I feel like it can be kind of hard to know who to turn to. I mean, you can go and talk to your lecturer and see like, where did I go wrong? How can I improve? But I feel like in terms of, making it specific...sometimes I feel like they throw all the supports at you.”* (T1).

There is a demand from students for more awareness of supports for health, well-being and academic management, in the university setting, *“It wouldn’t hurt for them to pop up to us at the start of every orientation at the start of every year and say ‘lads, I know you might not remember me from last semester, but remember my room is upstairs in room whatever and I am here to listen to whatever you guys have to say and I will help you in whatever way I can.”* (T2), but also general health management systems outside of university, *“Learning about health-orientated skills, it could also be really helpful. I’m not from Ireland and I don’t really know how to navigate the health system.”* (T4).

Available supports need to be better sign-posted, at the opportune time so that students know how and who to turn to for a specific issue. Getting the right information to students at the right time is a well-documented challenge in HEIs. Promotion via channels that students are already aware of or more connected to, such as word of mouth or social media, is a recommended strategy (IUQ Board, 2006). These supports should also be promoted more consistently over time throughout all stages the academic journey, not just at the beginning of the academic year, as students’ each have their own unique circumstances and contexts which will cause their needs to vary and change over time (Baik et al., 2019).

### 3.4. Peer influences can have a substantial positive and/or negative effect on students

Participants recognised that academic success and well-being go hand-in-hand, *“If you’re not having fun, if you’re not socialising, then you’re just going to contribute to the anxiety and contribute to the stress. And you need that release to do well, whenever you do your studies.”* (T1), and that personal relationships are strong mediators of both. These students saw the value of receiving additional perspectives on their issues from peers, *“From my own experience, when you struggle through that stuff on your own and you don’t get to talk to people about it and normalise it, it feels a lot harder.”* (T3).

They did not want to feel like they were the only ones going through something, *“The advantage of going to your peers and seeing how they’re getting on, it’s going to help you realise that everyone is in the same boat. That it’s not just you and you are not just on your own.”* (T2). They valued having shared experiences with their fellow students who they could then rely on for support and additional guidance, *“My first port of call would be to go to peers and classmates in my year because they’re going through the same thing as me.”* (T3), but also to help reduce the stigma one might experience in seeking out support, *“You might feel ashamed that you’re struggling and you’re not coping very well, so seeing that other people use those services as well would definitely be encouraging.”* (T3). Indeed, they valued being able to learn from each other, specifically from someone who was more relatable to them or had gone through something similar, *“Like if you can see someone in a higher year that’s around the same age, was probably a lot more helpful than going to one of the services that [the university] throws at you.”* (T1), to help normalise their own experience, *“Sometimes it can make you feel reassured that other people went through this too and like other people find this really hard as well and maybe it’s not as bad as I thought it was or that it’s manageable.”* (T3).

However, students sometimes felt insignificant among their peers: *“I think a big problem in [a big university], is the fact that it’s very one in 30,000 as it is [...] you’re one in a thousand and you kind of think, if you don’t have that supervisor or someone that you actually know, and you know you’re one in a thousand, they’d be like ‘right here’s ten minutes that’s it’.”* (T4). Rather than helping them feel less alone or like they’re in the same boat as everyone else, this can have the opposite effect of making them feel like their problems are not big enough to warrant seeking support and that they should be able to handle it as well as everyone else, *“Sometimes you’re like, no, this is my hurdle I need to kind of overcome and I can do it and I’m, like, smart enough, I can get through this all. There’s enough time in the day and everything.”* (T1), or that they would just *“get missed in the big crowd”* (T1).

Students need to be made to feel less alone and know that they can turn to each other for support and/or reassurance, as this can help foster a sense of belonging (Darwin & Palmer, 2009) as well as

positive well-being and mental health (Leach, 2014). This can be achieved through additional fostering of positive peer interactions in university, such as the provision of peer-mentor groups, as students' feel more encouraged to believe in themselves and their ability to succeed when this support comes from 'sympathetic others' who more closely relate to their own situation (Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009).

#### 4. Conclusion

We believe that including the student's perspective is essential in finding ways to foster student success through the collaborative design and implementation of HEI programmes and supports. The student perspectives presented here have helped us identify which self-management and well-being skills are considered valuable to them and their success, and what their needs are regarding the acquisition and application of such skills. Supports that nurture these skills that reach into the student body in a personalised way are lacking. The influential nature of their peers in all of this has been identified as an important lever in student well-being. The next phase of this project will involve taking these learnings and combining them with further student-led discussions and suggestions around the design and implementation of a tool which will support them to succeed and thrive in the HEI environment, with the goal of fostering student empowerment and creating something useful and meaningful to them.

#### References

- Baik, C., Larcombe, W., & Brooker, A. (2019). How universities can enhance student mental wellbeing: The student perspective. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 38 (4), 674-687.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol. 2. Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 57-71). American Psychological Association.
- Busher, H. (2012). Students as expert witnesses of teaching and learning. *Management in Education*, 26 (3), 113-119.
- Darwin, A., & Palmer, E. (2009). Mentoring circles in higher education. *Higher education research & development*, 28 (2), 125-136.
- de Moissac, D., Waddell, C., Smith, N., & Rocque, R. (2020). Students' Perspectives on Mental Health: Using World Cafés to Engage in Dialogue about Health Promotion and Support Services. *Collected Essays on Learning and Teaching*, 13, 2-11.
- Denny, E., Brosnon, G., O'Keefe, A., Risquez, A., Hoyne, S., Fitzgerald, M. and Ryan M. (2015). *Transitions from Second Level and Further Education to Third Level* (Focused Research Report No. 6). Ireland: The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.
- Field, R., Duffy, J., & Huggins, A. (2015). Teaching Independent Learning Skills in the First Year: A Positive Psychology Strategy for Promoting Law Student Well-Being. *Journal of Learning Design*, 8 (2), 1-10.
- Fox, T., Byrne, D., & Surdey, J. (2020). *National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.
- Gorzynski, P., Sims-Schouten, W., Hill, D., & Wilson, J. C. (2017). Examining mental health literacy, help seeking behaviours, and mental health outcomes in UK university students. *The Journal of Mental Health Training, Education and Practice*, 12 (2), 111-120.
- Irish Universities Quality Board (2006). *Good Practice in the Organisation of Student Support Services in Irish Universities*. National Guidelines. Retrieved on April 22nd from [https://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/iuqbgood\\_practice\\_sss%5B2%5D.pdf](https://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/iuqbgood_practice_sss%5B2%5D.pdf)
- Jacklin, A., & Le Riche, P. (2009). Reconceptualising student support: from 'support' to 'supportive'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34 (7), 735-749.
- Leach, J. (2014). *Improving mental health through social support: Building positive and empowering relationships*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- O'Farrell, L. (2019). *Understanding and enabling student success in Irish higher education*. Ireland: National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.
- O'Keefe, P. (2013). A sense of belonging: Improving student retention. *College Student Journal*, 47 (4), 605-613.
- Querret, D. (2019). Collaborating with Students to Support Student Mental Health and Well-being. In Lygo-Baker, S., Kinchin, I., Winstone, N. (Eds.), *Engaging Student Voices in Higher Education* (pp. 191-207). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- Worsley, J., Pennington, A., & Corcoran, R. (2020). *What interventions improve college and university students' mental health and wellbeing? A review of review-level evidence*. What Works Centre for Well-being.