
Supporting Students with Mental Health Difficulties in Higher Education in Ireland

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“The purpose of today’s event is to bring together a diverse range of expertise, take a step back, look at things as they are, and think collectively and creatively, about how things might be different.”

Dr Emma Farrell

Assistant Professor in Mental Health,
Maynooth University

Introduction

‘This summary report and the accompanying recommendation arise from a seminar and expert panel discussion on ‘Supporting Students with Mental Health Difficulties in Higher Education in Ireland: Opportunities, Challenges and Supports’ held at the Royal Irish Academy on the 31st of March 2025.

The seminar was opened by Mr James Lawless TD, Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, and Dr Siobhán O’Sullivan Executive Director of the Royal Irish Academy. The purpose of the seminar was to bring together leading academics, practitioners, policy makers and students to explore how higher education can best respond to increased mental health need amongst students in the context of limited resources.

This summary report and recommendations aims to reflect the discussion, collective expertise and perspectives shared on the day. It is compiled and offered in the spirit of contributing to ongoing efforts to promote excellent, inclusive and supportive higher education environments across Ireland.

I would like to thank the expert panel for sharing their experiences and optimism, and Dr Shane Bergin for expertly facilitating an engaging discussion.

It is through the fusing of diverse horizons that we create the greatest potential for understanding the challenges and opportunities of supporting all students to achieve their higher education ambitions and potential.’

Dr Emma Farrell BA., MA., PhD., C.Psychol., MYAI



Dr Emma Farrell is Assistant Professor in Mental Health in the Department of Psychology, Maynooth University. She is author of ‘Making Sense of Mental Health: A Practical Approach through Lived Experience’ (2022) and ‘Irish University Students with Mental Health Difficulties: Experiences, Challenges and Supports’ (2024).

*“Mental health problems arise
in contexts of inequalities of
power and resources”*

Dr Lucy Johnstone

Consultant Clinical Psychologist & co-author
of Power Threat Meaning Framework

Challenges

Increased mental health need among students

The number of students accessing support for mental health difficulties at higher education has increased in recent years. University disability services have charted an eight-fold increase in the number of students registering with a ‘mental health condition’^{1*}—from 558 in 2012 to 4,412 in 2022.³

x8

Between 2012 and 2022 there was an eightfold increase in the number of students registering with university disability services with a ‘mental health condition’

This increase is likely the result of three inter-related factors:

Increased levels of distress

The number of students experiencing distress/mental health difficulties may be increasing—driven by factors such as rising inequality⁴ and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵

Increased help-seeking

The number of students seeking help may be increasing due to greater awareness, less stigma and greater availability of mental health support.

Increased diagnosis

The number of students receiving a mental health diagnosis may be increasing, driven by increased medicalisation of human experiences⁶ and/or increased ‘romanticisation’ of mental health difficulties online.⁷

It is likely that a combination of all three is contributing to the increase in students accessing support for their mental health in higher education.

1. Higher Education Authority. *Fund for Students with Disabilities: Guidelines for Higher Education Institutions*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority; 2023.
2. Ahead. *Survey on the Participation of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education for the Academic Year 2011/2012*. Dublin: Ahead; 2012.
3. Ahead. *Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2021.22*. Dublin: Ahead; 2023.
4. World Health Organisation. *World mental health report: transforming mental health for all*. Geneva: World Health Organisation; 2022.
5. U.S. Surgeon General. *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*. Washington D.C.: Office of the U.S. Surgeon General; 2023.
6. O’Sullivan S. *The Age of Diagnosis: Sickness, health and why medicine has gone too far*. London: Hodder Press; 2025.
7. Ndour A, Foulkes L. *The romanticisation of mental health problems in adolescents and its implications: a narrative review*. *European child & adolescent psychiatry*. 2025.

* The term ‘mental health condition’ is used by the hea’s fund for students with disabilities to refer to disorders such as ‘bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, clinical depression, severe anxiety, severe phobias, obsessive compulsive disorder, severe eating disorders and psychosis’¹ it does not include adhd or autism, both of which are separate categories.

Challenges

Limited resources in higher education

The Irish Universities Association (IUA) estimates that Irish Higher Education Institutes are underfunded by €307 million annually.⁸

€307 Million

Irish Higher Education Institutes are underfunded by an estimated €307 million annually, with consequences across teaching, student support services, and efforts to widen participation.

Underfunding has consequences at every level of the university resulting in:

Staff on Precarious Contracts

A significant proportion of lecturers on short-term and/or precarious contracts with little time or opportunity to foster a sense of connection or belonging for students.⁹

High Staff-Student Ratios

High staff-student ratios mean that many lecturers struggle to know, let alone support, their students' learning and development.¹⁰

Limited Student Support Resources

Limited resources for universities to provide students with the support they need, when they need it.¹¹

Struggle to Widen Participation

Limited student support resources (e.g. access, counselling and learning support) which are required to support the Government's 'widening participation' approach to higher education.

8. Irish Universities Association. Investing in Skills & Talent and the Capacity of Universities to Support Core National Priorities. (Irish Universities Association, Dublin, 2023).

9. Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT). Zero Precarity Full Potential. (Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT), Dublin, 2024).

10. OECD. Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators. (OECD Publishing, Paris, 2024).

11. Houses of the Oireachtas. Mental Health Supports in Schools and Tertiary Education. (Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Dublin, 2023).

Opportunities

Higher education's role in supporting mental health

Recognise the Root Causes

Higher education has a role in recognising and naming the root causes of mental health difficulty and distress—namely inequalities of power and resources (e.g. poverty, abuse, discrimination, neglect etc.) and the ideologies that reinforce these inequalities.

Adopt Universal Design for Learning

Higher education is uniquely placed to adopt a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach to teaching and assessment to yield a more inclusive and equitable learning and assessment environment for all students—not just students struggling with their mental health.

Reevaluate the Purpose

Higher education has a role in reevaluating its own purpose in the 21st century in light of:

1. An increasingly ‘transactional’ (expert panellist) form of higher education
2. An institution historically ill-prepared for widening participation
3. The growing influence of large language models such as AI

Reduce Competitive Pressure

Higher education has the potential to ‘take the heat’ out of competition and assessment by replacing granular grading, such as Grade Point Average (GPA), with broader categorisations (e.g. first, 2:1, 2:2 etc.) that provide insight into student learning without unnecessary competition and pressure for students.

Foster Belonging

Higher education represents a unique opportunity to cultivate belonging which is central to student well-being and academic success. This can be achieved through the cultivation of relationships between academic staff and students; nurturing disciplinary identities and communities; providing opportunities for students to live together on-campus, and; supporting peer-led initiatives on campus.

Reevaluate the model

Higher education is uniquely placed to reevaluate the model of mental health support and consider if a medicalised model of disability support best supports the mental health of students. This re-evaluation requires the engagement of students, academics, researchers, policy makers and practitioners alike and involves ‘look[ing] at the system, not just the student’ (expert panellist).

Recommendations

Six practical steps for supporting student mental health

National Charter for Universal Design

Adopt and implement the National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education

1

Purpose of Higher Education

Consider the purpose of Higher Education in the 21st Century as part of the forthcoming Government Convention on Education.

2

Staff-Student Ratios

Reduce staff-student ratios to facilitate the time, relationships and interpersonal connection that is central to both learning and well-being.

3

Affordable Accommodation

Ensure every first-year undergraduate has access to affordable on-campus accommodation

4

Assessment Metrics

Replace granular grading metrics such as GPA, percentages or letter grades with broader grading bands (first; 2:1; 2:2 etc.).

5

Belonging Initiatives

Create a fund for initiatives aimed at understanding and developing the people, places, environments and experiences that foster belonging.

6

Conclusion

Building a compassionate and inclusive future

This event drew into awareness the co-existing and often competing structures and priorities within higher education in Ireland that gave rise to the challenges and opportunities above.

Higher Education's Elite Origins

The university as an institution designed, centuries ago, for the education of a minority of society's elites.

Widening Participation Since the 1960s

A strategy, from the 1960s onwards, of widening participation in higher education in order to further Ireland's economic and social agenda;

The Medicalisation of Distress

A framework of distress that is less than 100 years old but which shapes how we name (diagnosis), conceptualise (aetiology), and respond to (treat) human distress according to the assumptions and principles of medicine/the scientific method.

These competing structures and priorities have resulted in a revered institution, ill-equipped to include the increasing diversity of its students, and leaning on a disability model that is straining to respond to the increased framing of human distress as illness/disability. As such, higher education represents a nexus of issues that, individually and collectively, far exceed its capacity and resources.

Any response to the growing level of mental health need amongst the student population must involve:

1. Critical appraisal of the issue.
2. Thoughtful and compassionate orientation.
3. Series of practical solutions or responses that empower and enact all those within the institution.

It is from this three-prong position that this summary report, and its associated recommendations, is offered.

*“We should think hard about
what kinds of environments
invite people not just to attend,
but to belong.”*

Dr Maeve Houlihan

Associate Dean and Director
UCD Lochlann Quinn School of Business

Seminar

Convenor, moderator, keynote speaker and expert panel

CONVENOR

Dr Emma Farrell

Assistant Professor in Mental Health, Department of Psychology, MU

MODERATOR

Dr Shane Bergin

Associate Professor, UCD

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Dr Lucy Johnstone

Consultant Clinical Psychologist &
co-author of Power Threat Meaning Framework

EXPERT PANEL

Dr Cian Aherne

Clinical Manager, Jigsaw Limerick

Ralph Armstrong-Astley

Coordinator, Student 2 Student, Trinity College Dublin

Prof. Barbara Dooley

Full Professor of Psychology, UCD

Joanna Harney

Deputy Director, TCD Student Counselling Service

Dr Maeve Houlihan

Associate Dean & Director, UCD Lochlan Quinn School of Business

Sarah Hughes

Union of Students of Ireland, Mental Health Programme Manager

Dr Eithne Hunt

Lecturer in Occupational Therapy, UCC

Dara Ryder

CEO, AHEAD

Dr Ross Woods

Higher Education Authority (absent on the day)

Prof. Phoebe Young

Chair & Professor, Department of History, University of Colorado

Summary Report & Recommendations

Prepared by:

Dr Emma Farrell
Assistant Professor in Mental Health
Department of Psychology
Maynooth University

Emma.Farrell@mu.ie