

STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH PROJECT

2023





ARU Students Union Student Mental Health Research Project 2023

In a recent survey of UK students, over half self-reported a current mental health issue, and 30% reported a decline in mental wellbeing since starting university (*Student Minds Survey, 2023*). This is especially concerning when compared to young people of a similar age that do not go to university, who report fewer symptoms of a mental health disorder than those that attend university (*Department of Education, 2021*).

Research investigating these predictors has varied results, but loneliness, social support and exam and coursework pressures are consistently highlighted as stressors for students (*Campbell et al., 2022; Sampson et al., 2022*). Conversely, positive factors such as social support have a stronger impact on student wellbeing than negative factors like financial concerns (*Charles et al., 2021*).

Data from several Anglia Ruskin University Students Union (ARUSU) surveys of our students in 2023 highlighted several key concerns around ARU student wellbeing. Specifically, overall students are concerned with their mental well-being, perhaps more worryingly, a particularly low rate of mental wellbeing was reported in amongst harder to reach groups such as distant learners, disabled students, and non-binary students.

Therefore, to understand how we can improve these outcomes improve student wellbeing ARUSU commissioned an independent research project to understand in detail what areas of student life at ARU causes negative impacts upon mental health of students and make recommendations as to how we might better support students.

The results of the mixed method research (survey and focus group work) identified that being a student in the UK is inherently stressful for some.

Furthermore, several vulnerable groups including females, non-binary, and distant learners were significantly more likely to feel less satisfied, less happy, less worthwhile, and more anxious. This trend was also observed in other vulnerable groups including LGBTQ+ and black students. International students also reported feeling more anxious and were found life less worthwhile than UK domicile students.

Based on the data gathered, the independent research recommended the following areas in which ARU and the ARU Students' Union can work together to improve students' wellbeing:

- Changing the culture and attitudes towards students' wellbeing,
- Increasing sense of community across ARU,
- Increasing awareness of and reducing barriers to support services,
- Continuing to utilise student feedback and give students a voice when developing services.

Culture and Attitude to Students Wellbeing

It is recommended that a proactive approach would be more successful, meaning the university including the Students' Union takes greater responsibility for student wellbeing before, during and after they reach out in crisis. This approach has been implemented in several universities through preventative interventions such as resilience training, mindfulness and meditation programmes, and mental health education (*Lister et al., 2021*).

Increasing the Sense of Community across ARU

A clear sense of community was established from the focus groups in this study as students had their own peer support network with friends and would often avoid official sources of support unless they were recommended by a friend. This feeling of community was also spoken of by students from minority student groups, implying they have their own smaller circles of support too.

However, this identity and sense of belonging as an ARU student was not present in all students, especially distance learners. Sense of belonging can be increased generally by encouraging society membership and the establishment of new societies that are less course-based so students from different departments can interact more. For distance learners, more outreach is needed from the University as little was known regarding support available to distance learners. The research recommended more events that are accessible to distance learners are needed outside of their welcome week to encourage more social connection in an already isolated student group. Many on-campus learners also expressed interest in online events due to travel or time constraints, which could offer an opportunity for distance and in-person learners to mix, bringing distance learners into the ARU community. Communication between distance learners could also be facilitated by setting up group chats or similar platforms for connection as those interviewed in our focus groups stressed the supportiveness of WhatsApp group chats.

Feeling a sense of belonging at university is recognised as a very significant factor in student success and retention in higher education (Ahn & Davis, 2019), and is an essential protective factor against poor mental health (McBeath et al., 2018).

Increasing Awareness and Reducing Barriers to Support

The present study showed highlighted a lack of awareness of support services, and several barriers to accessing support, particularly in minority student groups.

Although a lot of support is available and covers a wide range of issues, ARU students are not aware of these services or how to access them. Questionnaire data showed that students were more inclined to use the support services that were familiar to them (e.g. the iCentre, ARU student and counselling wellbeing), and less likely to use services that were unfamiliar to them (Students' Union advice service, Silvercloud app).

It is recommended that ARUSU works closely with ARU to create a resource pack that can be distributed to the students during welcome week and made available throughout the year that clearly highlights what services are available to students.

The university could also choose to implement support service information during teaching contact time, for example a quick reminder of support available at the end of a lecture.

The current work to achieve Mental Health charter status working with the Students Minds charity is highlighted as an extremely positive step forward for ARU and will underpin a comprehensive commitment to improving student mental health.

Utilising Student Feedback

There is an opportunity identified for ARU and ARUSU to increase their utilisation of student feedback and involvement in developing and scoping new welfare services. This will not only improve service provision but also likely increase feelings of belonging and sense of power and self-determination over student life experiences.

Conducting regular feedback surveys about current initiatives and services and collating and using feedback after events will increase understanding of whether the service meets students' expectations and needs. This would also help empower students by involving them in decisions and making their opinions heard, encouraging participation in campus events and initiatives if they feel they can make a real difference.

Next Steps

- Student Union to work on creating a positive sense of community and strengthen circle of support for students.
- Improve awareness of support for students.
- Collaborate with ARU on proactive support for mental health.
- Think about practical projects with ARU to improve the experience of groups such as international students and LGBTQ+ students.
- Make sure colleagues at ARU buy-in to this programme of work and the SU ensures the student voice is heard in designing mental health support.