



Trends in Higher Education

A publication of the University of the West Indies Office of Planning

Vol. 6, Iss. 3 (June 2024)

Message from the Publisher

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The social issues, especially as they relate to mental health among staff and students highlighted in this issue of *Trends in Higher Education* demonstrate how the education sector has to contend with lifestyle challenges that will determine how institutions treat with students and staff. The effects of these not only impact student success and staff retention but also student engagement and satisfaction as well as staff morale. Examples from other universities are provided that can inform the actions of the sector going forward.

Increasingly, universities have to consider their recruitment and enrolment practices alongside credit transfer approaches in their planning process and what will be relevant based on their current model. Graduate output in STEM disciplines and disciplinary gender biases in research grant rates are highlighted. This provides the basis for universities to examine their own practices and develop corrective strategies.

It is our hope that the issues and actions captured in this *Bulletin* capture your interest and can be adapted to The University of the West Indies, in their policy frameworks.

Happy reading!

Trends in Higher Education – Social Issues

Introduction

This instalment of *Trends in Higher Education* considers some of the social issues affecting the higher education sector. Health and well-being continue to dominate the conversation. For students, issues of adequate sleep and mental health are considered as that in turn affects their success. Similarly, staff psychosocial safety is addressed which links to their productivity and performance. In addition, as access and diversity remain at the forefront of student recruitment practices, universities are relooking at their approach to admissions. This issue of the Bulletin also looks at the challenges and solutions that effect credit transfers and identifies concerns related to college-readiness. Other areas addressed include building out a multicultural ethos and female under-representation among STEM graduates.

Are students getting enough zzz's?

Recently, colleges have drawn attention to the sleep habits of students. Many students, especially first-year students, struggle to get a good night sleep as they have 'competing pressures' to stay up late. The understanding of the sleep patterns of students can assist campuses in developing campaigns or workshops, to assist students in sleeping better at nights.

A two-year study by the National Academy of Sciences examined the sleep habits of more than 600 college freshmen (Amenabar 2023). The study revealed that the average student fell asleep about 2:30 a.m. and that barely any of them went to bed before midnight. Moreover, the study exposed that on average students slept six and a half hours a night. These results are of concern to higher education

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as inadequate sleep can lead to decreased focus, memory impairment, increased stress, and ultimately impact their performance in the classroom and during exams. The researchers also found that for every lost hour of average nightly sleep at the start of an academic term was associated with a 0.07-point drop in a student's end-of-term GPA. Moreover, when a student sleeps less than six hours a night, the effect of lost sleep on a student's grades becomes more pronounced. About one-quarter of Rochester students report their academic performance was adversely affected by sleep in the last twelve months (University of Rochester).

Against that backdrop several universities and colleges have introduced initiatives to encourage good sleeping habits and have facilitated students napping on campus. For example, the University of Rochester hosts an online '21-day Zzzz to As Sleep Challenge' throughout the academic year and provides students with informational emails, and relaxation and mindfulness training, while the University of Texas at Austin offers a 'Sleep Week' awareness campaign each fall (University of Rochester; Flaherty 2023). Nap sites have been developed on some campuses using the following criteria: accessibility, comfort, crowd activity, and noise. The eventual nap maps by both universities identify prime indoor or outdoor locations for napping on campuses.

Improving student well-being

In the United Kingdom, a minority of students report a mental health condition to their university or college. OfS (2023b) noted that 4.5% of full-time students (or 24,700) and 5.3% of part-time students (or 4,040) reported a mental health condition to their university or college when entering higher education in England in 2021/2022. This data reflects a 0.7 percent increase in reporting for full-time

undergraduate entrants in 2010/2011. For some, poor mental health can negatively impact their ability to participate in and complete higher education courses. However, the OfS (2023b) observed that the attainment rate difference between students with a reported mental health condition and those without, has been close to zero and, generally, much smaller than the differences seen in continuation, completion, and progression rates.

Looking to the United States now, a report produced by Mc Graw Hill (2023) shows that students face increased responsibilities, a lack of free time as well as several other challenges that take a toll on learners' mental health. The report highlighted some major challenges including:

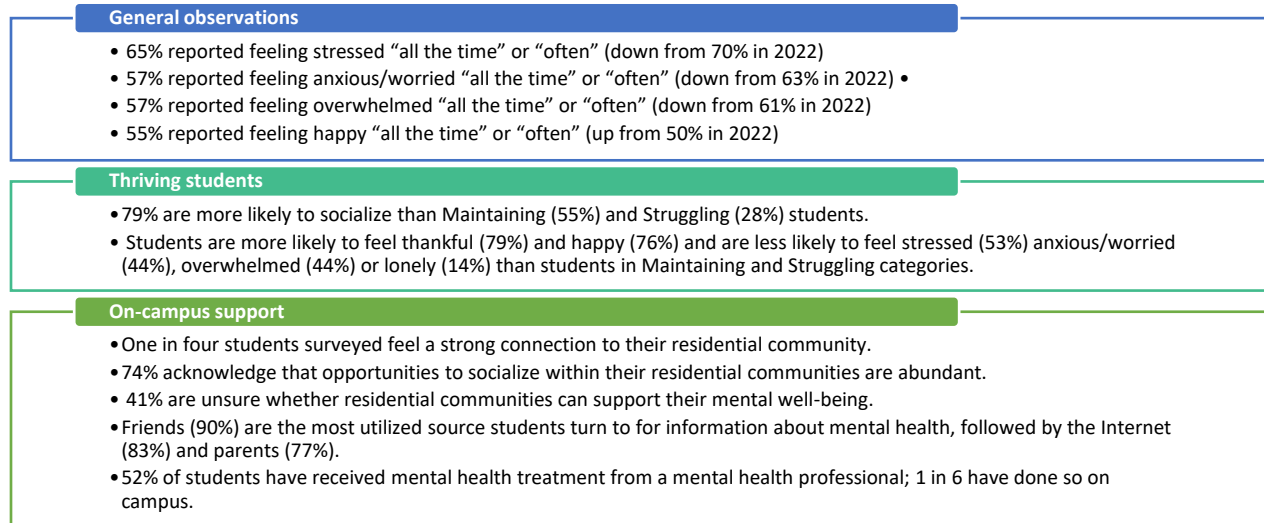
- (i) Two thirds of students (66%) said they have to choose between schoolwork and obligations outside of school, which is a significant increase over 59% last year.
- (ii) Most undergraduate students (93%) reported feeling negative emotions because of studying. The report mentioned that 57% of students who responded to the survey reported feeling overwhelmed and 56% stressed because of their studies.
- (iii) More than one in three (35%) of students said they had considered dropping out as a result of the difficulties they experience when studying, up from 26% in last year's survey. Eighty percent of instructors say students would be more successful if they had better mental health resources.

Another 2023 report, this time by Ipsos, sought to provide resident insights on mental wellness that help to inform mental wellness programmes for students.¹ The overall finding from the

¹ The report uses the following terms: thriving students (i.e. individuals are living their best lives and see the future as even brighter future); maintaining (i.e. individuals might be doing just fine in their own eyes but, perhaps they can envision a better life both now, and in the future); and struggling (individuals are likely

to be having a tough experience managing life and they aren't necessarily optimistic that this is going to change). This is based on students own self-rating their current lives – and expectations for their future lives – on a scale of 0 through 10, where 0 represents the worst possible life and 10 represents the best possible life.

Figure 1: Summary of Ipsos 2024 findings.



Source: Ipsos, 2024.

Thriving College Student Index Report showed that students who self-identified as thriving reported less frequent feelings of stress, anxiety and being overwhelmed compared to the previous year. Figure 1 shows some of the key findings from the report.

The top-five coping mechanisms identified by the respondents to manage stress were listening to music (82%) followed by socialising with friends (67%), watching TV or movies (59%), spending time outside (43%), and getting a good night’s sleep (42%).

The findings from these two reports point to the urgent need by higher education institutions (HEIs) to provide mental health resources to students. SCUP (2024) drawing on the findings from the report suggested: (i) HEIs give thought to how they can support struggling students by

communicating to the campus community mental health programmes, amenities, and events; and (ii) identifying resources available for faculty and staff to educate them about referring students to the appropriate resources to support mental health.

In the UK, findings from a 2022 Department for Education survey of universities and colleges suggest that they were taking a more strategic approach to addressing students’ mental health. Only three percent of the institutions responding had no mental health strategy and no current plans to create one, in contrast with nine percent in a previous survey in 2019 (OfS 2023b). Moreover, the 2023 National Student Survey found that 75.9% of students studying in England responded positively to how well information on their university or college’s mental wellbeing services was communicated.

Box 1: Meeting students’ mental health needs at University of Toronto

During the 2017-2018 academic year, the university provided 31,300 counselling sessions, up 30% from four years earlier. Yet, demand continued to exceed available services. As such, the university decided to overhaul its student mental health services. They examined mental health service delivery; coordination of student supports; partnerships with community-based organisations and hospitals; and physical spaces. They also focused on four pathways to system transformation: leadership, partnerships, service tools and research. Key changes included same-day counselling appointments at our health clinics, improved signposting of available services and the establishment of a single electronic medical record for students at all three clinics. They also built partnerships with local hospitals and mental health experts while stepping up research into student mental health at their institution. Between 2019-20 and 2022-23, mental health visits and interactions rose by 16% across our three health centres, with 2023-2024 projections indicating we will see another 7% increase.

Source: Welsh and Cheryl Regehr, 2024.

Through funding competitions by the Office for Students (OfS 2023a) higher education providers can develop and test novel approaches to improve mental health outcomes for students. For example, universities developed programmes that offer pre-entry support and outreach activity, and from undergraduate into postgraduate study or employment, with a focus on susceptible or vulnerable groups. Additional approaches adopted included providing new forms of mental health literacy training to staff and students or developing student analytics to inform improved and enhanced interventions (OfS 2023a).

Staff psychosocial health and well-being

Research on Australian universities drew attention to the psychological safety of staff (Ross 2024a). The study noted that two-thirds of university staff are at high or very high risk for “mental injury stemming from work conditions,” up from 62% in 2020. The report cited the following:

- 44% of respondents claimed to experience frequent symptoms of psychological distress such as tiredness, anxiety, and depression.
- 66% reported high or very high “emotional exhaustion.”
- 90% reported excessive work pressures.
- 69% of respondents indicated a lack of time to “get the job done”, with 63% saying email volumes were “overwhelming”.
- 37% said they felt that “my work controls me”, and 35% said student evaluations were a source of “dread”.
- 81% reported expectations of working “very fast” and 90% “very hard”.
- 30% of respondents reported headaches were familiar experiences, 37% muscle soreness, and 49% neck or back pain.

The study highlighted that if HEIs do not address these issues there is the potential for the situation to get worse. Mental distress, it was noted, was more acute in universities than in most other workplaces. Across multiple professions the researchers found that 54% of respondents were working in low-risk psychosocial environments, while in universities,

the figure was just 18%. The study ranked tertiary education as the fifth worst of 53 occupational groupings for psychosocial safety.

Looking ahead, the researchers recommended that universities should be obliged to report on psychosocial safety and that universities’ workplace health centres or initiatives should be “separated” from human resources departments.

Increasing enrolment through direct admissions

Universities drive to increase college enrolment through direct admissions is a “fast evolving feature in the admissions landscape” as colleges and universities are dropping standardised requirements as they are eager to raise enrolment (Anderson 2023). The Common Application is a nonprofit platform that allows students to apply to more than 1,000 member colleges and universities but is not that the only pathway for direct admissions. Several years ago, Anderson (2023) noted, colleges and universities in Idaho introduced the idea of admitting students directly from within their state as a technique to counter stagnant enrolment. The app asks users to complete their profile (personal background, academic credentials, and extracurricular activities) and, includes prompts for various forms and high school transcripts, or essays.

In a pilot last year with fourteen institutions, it was found that of the 33,000 students who were automatically admitted, 1,893 had applied to one of the fourteen colleges (or less than six percent of the pool) and more than 800 eventually accepted those offers (Bauer-Wolf 2023, Anderson 2023). However, the programme resulted in an estimated four percent increase in the share of under-represented minority students who applied and about a three percent increase in those from low-income neighbourhoods (Bauer-Wolf 2023). There are pros and cons to this direct admissions programme. Supporters insist that they wear down the barriers keeping historically

marginalised students out of college, while the detractors point out that automatic admission cannot replace financial aid packages.

For the 2023 round of admissions, seventy schools participated from twenty-eight states (Anderson 2023). Admission offers were sent late last year to qualified students from states where the schools are based. To qualify students must identify as a potential first-generation college student or come from a family with low to moderate income and meet the minimum high school GPA that each participating school establishes. Nevertheless, applicants had to determine for themselves if they qualified for financial aid.

The direct admissions programme is seen as way to increase enrolment and improve diversity and access on campuses. George Mason University, which is participating in the programme, indicates that the objectives of the app align with their commitment to admitting students from diverse backgrounds (SCUP 2024). The app also assists in promoting Connecticut institution's programme, which targets high school students in the state who graduate in the top 30% of their class (Bauer-Wolf 2023). As institutions utilise the app it will require them to consider how direct admissions will impact on the function of other departments such as student support services, residence life.

The transfer of credit journey

There is a growing belief that transfer between HEIs should be easier and less costly. While the number of transfer students increased rapidly in the late 2000s in the United States, it has tapered off over the last decade (Schermele 2023). A recent report from Causey et al (2023) on transfer students noted that upward transfers (i.e. students who transfer from a two-year to a four-year institution, with or without first receiving an award) declined by 14.5% since fall 2020. Moreover, transfers to primarily online institutions drove 40% of the annual growth in transfer for students returning from a stop out, in fall 2022.

Typically, students who move from community colleges to four-year schools in the United States face several challenges including the possibility of losing their hard-earned, paid-for, college credits. Schermele (2023) drawing on data from the US Department of Education highlights that on average, students lose nearly 40% of credits in the process of changing schools. Against this backdrop, action is being taken to ensure credits transfer between HEIs. In Kentucky, 71% of credits earned by first-time students who transferred in fall 2021 were accepted by the four-year institution. In addition, the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education launched a statewide strategy to support transfer students built on three principles - centering student needs, building on institutional collaborations, and removing obstacles to transfer and recognition of learning. Universities are using student journey maps to demonstrate how transfer students are faring, where they are encountering barriers to transfer, and maximum applicability of transfer credits (SCUP 2024).

Student success and college readiness

In a 2023 report released by McGraw Hill, which examined *inter alia* student and instructor opinions on changing study habits and student use of digital tools found that students are experiencing learning loss. Twice as many students indicated feeling unprepared for courses heading into Semester 1 in 2023 (21%) compared to 11% in 2022. One in five students reported that learning loss caused by the pandemic had a negative impact on their education and college preparedness. Instructors agree – with 34% estimating that all or most of their students struggled due to learning loss, compared to just 21% of students who said they personally struggled for this reason. The researchers observed that first-year students spent a large portion of their high school years dealing with covid-related interruptions and that learning loss has spilled over to college.

To fill the gap in learning, students are changing how they study with 81% of college students

stating they have changed their studying habits since the pandemic, up from 75% last year. Also, four out of five students say they have used social media or ChatGPT to study or find content related to their classes. In addition, the report notes that:

- (i) 78% of students and 70% of instructors think students would study more if learning materials were as convenient as social media.
- (ii) 73% of students and 64% of instructors think students could study more effectively if the materials were more like social media.
- (iii) 35% of students said they have used gen AI chatbots like ChatGPT in the past year to help with schoolwork.

The findings suggested that HEIs need to examine the tools they have for evaluating student preparedness for courses, the criteria they might use to measure student preparedness, and the resources provided to improve course preparedness (SCUP 2024).

Training in pronouncing of students' name

As part of diversity and inclusion policies, it has been proposed that staff should be given training in how to pronounce students' names to make learners from diverse backgrounds feel more welcome in the classroom. The study led by scholars at Nottingham Trent University interviewed staff about their experience of working with students from different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds (Jack 2024a). They found that several strategies were adopted by staff including avoidance in using the names of students which they struggled to pronounce; asking students how to pronounce their name correctly; or researching correct pronunciations by searching online or asking colleagues. These strategies were generally *ad hoc*, the researchers noted. In addition, the fears of mispronunciation meant that students were not engaged thus, impacting their learning and the sense of belonging.

The researchers suggested that solutions could include incorporating name pronunciation into equality and diversity training for all staff and in induction activities for students. Additionally, student digital records and staff and student email signatures should include audio recordings of individuals saying their own names (Jack 2024a).

Disciplinary gender bias

Generally, the overall representation of females in higher education has increased and they are more likely to graduate from university than men in many countries. Despite that, there are still challenges remaining in terms of their representation among graduates in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Fewer than one in six female students globally chooses to study degrees in STEM fields compared with one in three men (Jack 2024b). In fact, only 15% of female students choose STEM over other courses, compared with 35% of men.

Drawing on data from United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Jack (2024b) stated that women made up 35% of STEM graduates in 2020/2021, a proportion that had remained unchanged for a decade. Moreover, there were particularly large gaps in some countries. For example, Finland, Germany, and Sweden have gaps of more than 30 percentage points between the proportion of male and female graduates choosing STEM degrees. Conversely, India reported one of the smallest gaps: 26% of its female graduates chose STEM degrees, compared with 33% of men. There are also differences in female representation across various STEM fields. In 2016 to 2018, women represented 57% of natural sciences, maths, and statistics graduates, but only 28% of engineering and manufacturing graduates. Based on data, thought will have to be given to how to effectively promote STEM offerings among females.

Apart from attracting females to STEM fields, Ross (2024b) highlights another challenge among females and males in research. Drawing

on the findings from a University of Canterbury study he notes that “disciplinary gender balances underpin a worldwide skew in research grant rates and quality evaluations.” Academics regardless of sex experience have a bias against female-dominated fields such as education and nursing. The article also noted that “quality scores of their research are up to 28 per cent lower than those achieved by men and women working in male-dominated areas such as physics or philosophy, while funding success rates are as much as 5 percentage points lower.”

The researchers posit that the bias is not against females, but it is against subject areas dominated by women. In addition, the authors of the study investigated whether the differences in quality scores could be explained by factors such as citation rates or disciplinary age profiles. The review shows that this was a result of publication rates, “with more prolific fields generally receiving better quality ratings.” The findings led the researchers to advocate that each subject field is different and that it should be judged differently.

Conclusion

Some of the social issues discussed are recurring. Given its persistence, HEIs may need to investigate how it best addresses the mental health and well-being challenges faced by students and staff and identify strategies to meeting those needs. This is seen as crucial to positive student outcomes and staff productivity and retention. In addition, supporting enrolment management and creating pathways for student success remain high on the agenda of HEIs as well as mitigating biases in enrolment in STEM programmes and in research grants and quality scores. Overall, the issues and concerns raised within this *Bulletin* will require HEIs to pay closer attention to their stakeholders, facilities, operations, and services.

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