Manifesto on Students' Mental Health

Study Session

By participants of the Study Session on Student Mental Health Manifesto

1 Problem Statement and Position

All human beings have the right to health and proper access to healthcare services [1]. Bearing this in mind, the mental health of any individual plays a key role in their daily life. As Nelson Mandela said, education is the most powerful weapon to change the world. Thus it is deeply concerning that only 18.1% of university students are likely to be well [2].

According to OECD, young people were 30% to 80% more likely to report symptoms of depression or anxiety than adults [3].

Several studies across Europe showed the rise of people with mental health problems after the 2008 crisis and during the Covid-19 pandemics [2, 4, 5]. On the other hand, the lack of awareness of student mental health starts with a lack of information, and therefore stigmatization is based on the topic of mental health. Especially during the COVID-19 Pandemic, 49% of students [5] said they feel 'worried or very much worried' about the lockdown measures applied by the government. More information on mental health would help reduce those numbers and give students the confidence to help themselves and each other and know where to get help and reach out for it.

Furthermore, the accessibility problem is still an issue. Various cultural and societal predispositions concerning mental health significantly impact using the provided MH services to their fullest capacity. Many among the youth find it shameful to ask for mental health specialists' help with their struggles - high numbers of suicide ideation are reported (Downs & Eisenberg, 2012, p. 108 [6]), and yet more than half receive no treatment. Considering that generally, mental illnesses are less reported to receive counseling, these numbers raise even more concern.

A quantitative analysis (Megan Krone's study [7]) specifies some of the examples of how stigmatization can affect the support students may get. For the most part, college students indicate they care about individuals with mental illness; however, they also indicate their environment does not consistently deliver a message of care [7]. This tension may show the influence of campus culture regarding mental illness, the presence of stigma in the environment, and a desire to change that culture. Due to the fear of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination, individuals with mental illness may self-conceal the signs and symptoms of their illness or treatment to avoid the stigma of mental illness.

Keeping in mind that students are the reason universities exist urges the need to improve students' mental health to have a healthy university and empowers them to be autonomous and choose the best possible option.

2 Call to Action

We call upon the following stakeholders to help improve the status of student mental health.

GOVERNMENT

We urge governments and respective Ministries to increase the number of mental health professionals working with university students. We invite health insurance companies to consider having psychotherapy sessions covered (reimbursed) for students.

We remind local, regional, and national authorities to fulfill all the elements of the right to health - availability, accessibility, acceptability, and quality of mental health services for university students [1]. We demand governments adopt a national mental health strategy/action plan, through a consultative process with all relevant stakeholders - including university students, and allocate funds necessary for the implementation of the strategy. In addition, we encourage governments to do the constant monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the strategy.

- Increase the number of mental health professionals working with university students.
- Provide more human resources.
- Create a national mental health strategy.

Providing more human resources - on all levels - would improve the access and the quality of the mental health services. The budget for services, resources, and support to universities, NGOs, student councils, and other stakeholders who advocate for students' mental health should be increased and stable. A national mental health strategy should be created and implemented, involving all stakeholders - the health professionals, higher education institutions and the faculty members and staff, NGO and civil society, student unions and councils, youth organizations, and all youth groups, and supported by an action plan with concrete steps, measurable elements, evaluation periods and criteria and monitoring. All the mentioned sides should take part in monitoring and periodical evaluation of the strategy and the plan, as well as proposing the following steps and changes that need to be made to ensure long-term change, impact, and a higher quality of mental health services and support, and student's life.

UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP

We call upon the University Leadership to address mental health issues for students and academic staff. We are deeply convinced that the issue at hand requires the leadership's utmost attention as the current studies show that the mental health issues aren't going anywhere, and the situation is still dire. To tackle the problem, we emphasize the need to start looking at the issue as a whole and conduct research among students and staff and create a concrete action plan based on the results with measurable elements, evaluation periods, criteria, and most importantly, monitoring. In this strategy, some of the key points should cover accessibility, availability, quality, and acceptability.
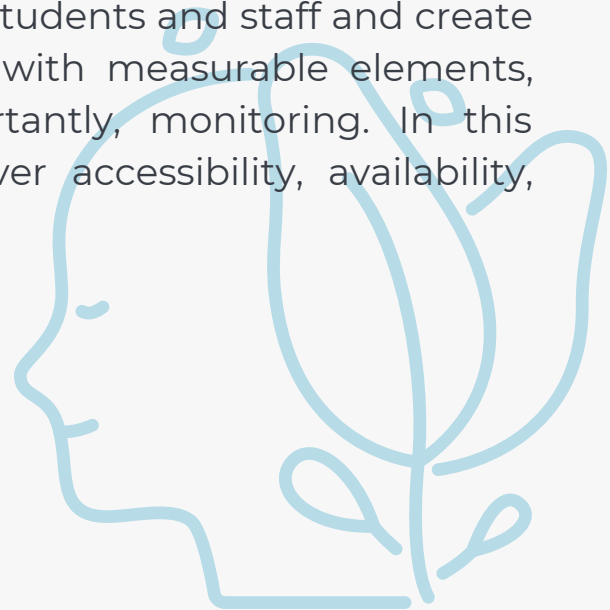
> "Eurostudent studies show that more than 45% of students are experiencing financial issues."

Recognizing the accessibility point, we are deeply convinced that psychological counseling in the Higher Education Institutions (HEI) should be free, as Eurostudent studies show that more than 45% of students are experiencing financial issues [4]. We mustn't burden students or academic staff with extra financial obligations, especially if it's connected to their mental well-being.

Furthermore, to increase the accessibility of mental help, we emphasize the need to expand the pool of experts who could provide these services. The current situation shows that the waiting times for consultations are anywhere from two to six weeks. We would also like to emphasize the need to educate the academic community about the availability of psychological counsel. The need for informational seminars and other activities to raise awareness and understanding of mental health issues is mandatory as the literacy on mental health is still biased.

A friendly and healthy environment at the university and campus is an added value to the quality of students' lives. Ensuring the accessibility of the buildings for the students with disabilities and any access needs, having space for sports, culture, arts, and other activities that could directly contribute to students' mental health, securing sustainability of students clubs and societies, and having green spaces would contribute to the quality of students' life.

FACULTY MEMBERS/ACADEMIC STAFF

We call upon all Faculty Members and the Academic Staff to join the actions alongside the key actors addressed above. As the ones in direct contact with the students daily and the ones that help students achieve their (academic) goals, faculty members and academic staff have a crucial role in students' lives and academic journeys. We are confident that including the topic of mental health in classes, e.g., into an already existing or building a new curriculum that will be available to all students to add to their study program.

One of the biggest challenges is preserving the balance between studies, life outside the classroom, and extracurricular activities. For this reason, it is crucial to reflect on the obligations and criteria that are put upon students and need to be met.

Furthermore, open communication about mental health in classes and being open to offering academic support and flexibility when needed, as well as access to information about the service and support available for students, all contribute to creating a safe space and fighting stigma.

When discussing the types and availability of services and support, one of the productive ones would be peer-to-peer counseling, which would allow students to find other young people of the same or similar age and experiences.

For the members and staff in general, attending a training on the topic of mental health in which they would learn about how to recognize signs or calls for support, knowing how and when to approach students and where to direct them will be an added value to their pedagogical approach, and it will benefit to both sides. Having faculty members, academic staff and everyone involved in students' lives being aware of and recognizing the importance of mental health and the appropriate help and support to those who need it nurtures the development of the young people who invested in their education.
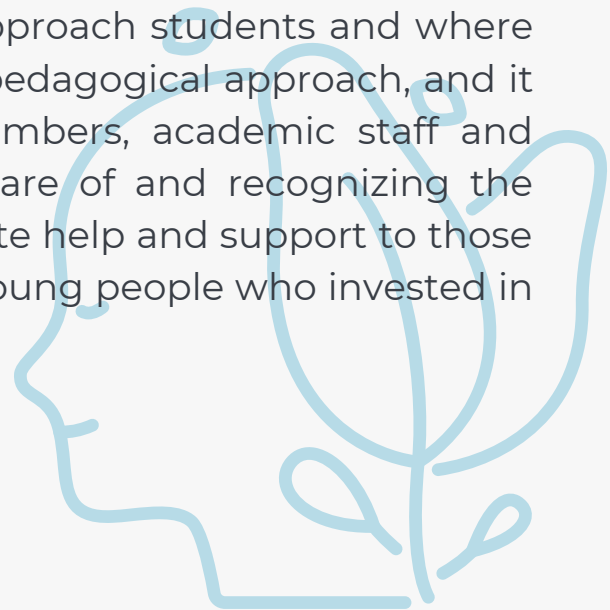
HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

Considering the expertise and role that healthcare professionals have, they can significantly impact healthcare prevention and empowerment within schools and universities.

As university mental health staff, they can make the first step toward the most vulnerable students and students meeting academic difficulties. Also, they can build, promote and facilitate mental health awareness and prevention programs among university staff and mental health professionals. As experts in the area, healthcare professionals can assess their needs in achieving their goals in mental health and advocate, in collaboration with students' unions and other organizations, for assigning more financial support and human resources to tackle student mental health. Nonetheless, healthcare professionals can and should publicly speak up and share information about the importance of mental health through awareness campaigns, on the governmental level, and through government policies. Regarding the accessibility of mental health support, healthcare professionals can provide help through live anonymous chat and green line, with the financial support of universities and the Government.

NGOS/CIVIL SOCIETY/YOUTH ORGANISATIONS

Youth organizations/NGOs/Civil Society could host panels where students with different diagnoses can speak about their personal experiences to break down any stigma associated with their respective diagnoses or difficulties. These groups can also use their social media to give these individuals a bigger platform to speak about their experiences and give youth and their communities opportunities to engage with them in a structured and safe way. These groups should also host periodical consultations with their stakeholders or members in order to monitor the progress of their work with supporting youth and students.
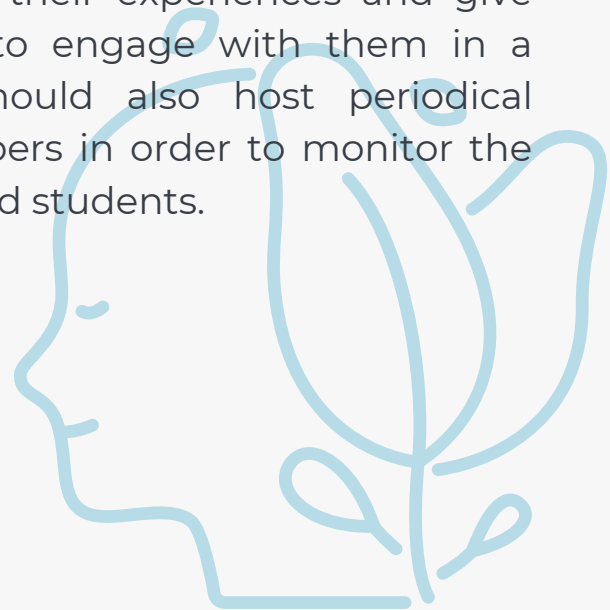
Youth organizations could also lobby the Government for additional funding to promote themselves across the country, focusing on rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. These organizations could also host activities for their members to connect at sporting events, theatre, and concerts. These events could also be used as fundraising opportunities for mental health support in local communities.

STUDENT COUNCIL
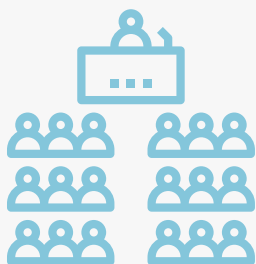
Students' Unions/Councils are acutely aware of student mental health concerns. They can call for action on the local and national levels, such as lobbying the Government to increase funding for mental health supports and implementing a national Mental Health strategy.

Students' Unions/Councils could organize and host webinars with guest speakers to talk about student mental health with a focus on prevention, awareness, managing, and taking care of one's mental health while in academia.

Unions/Councils can also run campaigns against the stigmatization of mental health difficulties, which could involve information sessions, informational posters, and a social media campaign. Students Unions/Councils can also hold consultations and focus groups with students to assess their needs of students, and what further support they require (including vulnerable groups, such as migrants and LGBTQ+). This way, they gather data regarding the current mental state of students to have leverage in the decision-making process.

Unions/Councils should also organize meetings with the college executive/management/dean and express the mental health needs of students and accessibility using the data from prior consultations. Following this, Students' Unions can advocate for an anonymous help-line for students in a crisis to call or text to be set up for students to access support outside of college counseling hours. They can also offer different extracurricular activities for students, such as clubs and societies, sports, and cultural activities.
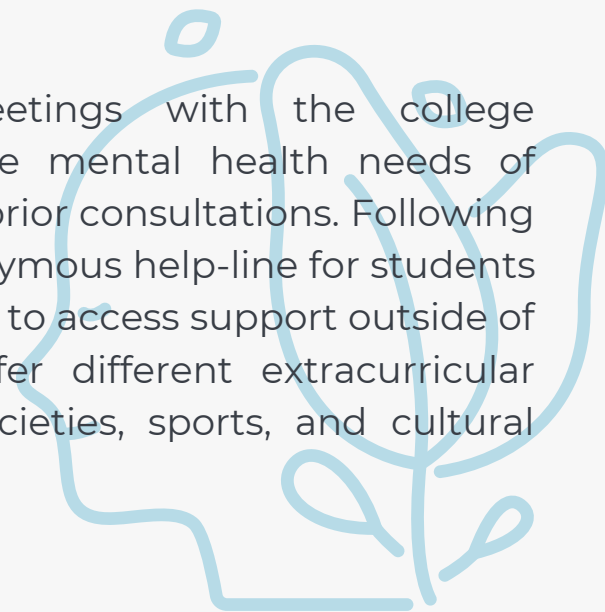
Students' Unions can use their experience and voice to provide tutoring for students with mental health conditions or academic difficulties and provide information around managing academic expectations, mental health, time management, and motivation, both in person, in groups, and through webinars.

Local students' unions can also network with each other, or if they are members of a national students' union, they can join forces to have a more significant impact. For example, they can organize nationwide protests to call for additional funding to be administered to mental health support while simultaneously creating a public demonstration for their local communities on the issue of student mental health.

STUDENTS

Students are the essence of a university and convinced of their importance in addressing any matter, we encourage them to think critically, promote human rights, raise awareness for mental health and engage in academic activities that would improve their literacy about mental health problems in the academic community.

Students living with a mental health disorder can be involved as mental health ambassadors, promote the fight against stigma and the importance of students' mental health through their experience, and present the mental health issues as a normal phenomenon that shouldn't be stigmatized.

Students, as the main beneficiaries of educational services, should advocate with their peers for mental health issues and focus on awareness around its impact and the need for professional help and reach out to the students' council in order to include the topic in their agenda.

Sources

1. United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948.
2. Barros, Pedro Pita; Matias, Maria Ana; Moura, Ana. Desemprego jovem e auto perceção de saúde mental. Coimbra, 2015.
3. OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19). Supporting young people's mental health through the COVID-19 crisis, 2021.
4. Hendrik Schirmer, DZHW. EUROSTUDENT Intelligence Brief 1/2020
5. Chegg.org, Global Student Survey, 2021
6. Downs, M. F. & Eisenberg, D. Help seeking and treatment use among suicidal college students. Journal of American College Health, 2012. 60(2), 104 - 114
7. Krone, Megan. Campus Mental Health Practices and the Stigma of Mental Illness: A Quantitative Analysis of Student Affairs Professionals, 2016. Dissertations. 33

This Manifesto is a product of a study session on mental health organized by the International Youth Health Organization and the European Students Union, supported by European Youth Centre in Budapest by Council of Europe.