

Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science

Mental health supports in tertiary education

August 2022

Introduction

Chairperson, members of the Joint Committee, on behalf of THEA, we appreciate this opportunity to make a submission and in this case on mental health supports in tertiary education. We would like to acknowledge and welcome the recommendations of this Committee in the report on the future funding of higher education, which relate to mental health and well-being supports (Recommendations 18,19, and 20)¹.

Context

Since the onset of COVID-19, student mental health services have been an area of increased focus and concern, recognising the effect that the pandemic has had on the general population and, in particular, on the student population.

Prior to the onset of COVID-19, the increased demand for mental health services among tertiary education students and the nature of that demand was recognised in *The National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework*², which was published by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Simon Harris TD, on 10th October 2020. This National Framework was developed, starting in 2018, in collaboration with the 'Connecting for Life' working group, comprising of students, mental health and suicide prevention specialists, academics, researchers and institutional staff. The group has been a significant enabler of co-ordinating services between the HSE and the education sector and should be supported and continued.

The National Framework identified the following statistics prior to Covid-19, which provide a context to the mental health of tertiary education students:

Irish mental health

- 18.5% of adults have a mental health disorder (OECD 2018³)
- €8.2 bn annual costs arise from those mental health disorders (OECD 2018)
- 20-24 year olds have the highest rate of inpatient psychiatric admissions (HRB 2019⁴)

Irish higher education students

- 6% of adults in Ireland are studying in HEIs (HEA 2018)
- 235,663 students are enrolled (HEA enrolments 2020/2021⁵)

Irish higher education student mental health

- 127% increase in students registered with disability services for mental health over the past 5 years (AHEAD 2019⁶)
- 21% of respondents fell into the severe and very severe categories for depression in 2019 (My World Survey 2⁷) v 14% in 2012 (My World Survey 1⁸)
- 26% of respondents fell into the severe and very severe categories for anxiety in 2019 (My World Survey 2) v 15% in 2012 (My World Survey 1)

Self harm / suicidal ideation

- 29% increase in self harm among those aged 10-24 over the last 10 years (National Suicide Research Foundation 2019)
- 8% of respondents reported a suicide attempt (MWS 2) v 7% (MWS 1)
- 53% of respondents thought that life was not worth living (MWS 2) v 43% (MWS 1)
- 33% of respondents reported deliberate self-harm (MWS 2) v 22% (MWS 1)

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen an acceleration of the increased demand for Student Counselling Services (SCSs). This was outlined in the submission that Psychological Counsellors in Higher Education Ireland

(PCHEI) have made to this Committee, which has the full support of THEA. PCHEI have reported that demand for services has climbed by between 23 per cent and 70 per cent this year alone, on the back of rising numbers of cases in recent years. PCHEI identified anxiety, low mood and loneliness as the most common presentations.

In their submission to this committee earlier this year, PCHEI noted that:

“Widening access to higher education from traditionally underrepresented groups, such as students with disabilities and from lower socio-economic groups, while very welcome and supported by PCHEI, also creates additional demands on the counselling services. AHEAD reported a 127% increase in students registering a mental health condition with their HEI Disability Service over a period of 5 years (2014– 2019). Many of these students will seek the support of the SCSs, with a number requiring ongoing support throughout their time in the HEI”

PCHEI also reported that:

“Since the re-opening of campuses in September 2021, SCSs are reporting increase in demand for services ranging from 50% to 100% increase from the same period in 2020. Students are primarily seeking in-person counselling, having been starved of personal contact for much of the preceding 18 months.”

While student counselling services are experiencing an increase in demands since COVID-19, other issues have been identified as contributing to this increase, particularly in relation to those institutions represented by THEA.

In any given academic year, up to half of all first-year entrants to THEA HEIs have gained a place on a basis other than Leaving Certificate attainment acquired in that year. Our advanced entry agreements with the FET sector maximise the potential of those entry routes for potential students. An analysis conducted by the National Transitions Reform Steering Group in June 2020⁹ demonstrated that a much higher proportion of new entrants progressed with FET qualifications into our institutions than is the case across the HE sector as a whole. The total number of students enrolled in THEA member institutions increased by 23.7% from 2014/15 to 2020/21 compared to an increase of 15.6% for other institutions¹⁰. The most recent analysis of completion rates demonstrates that as many students successfully complete their studies in technological higher education institutions as anywhere else, when like for like students are compared¹¹.

Increased student numbers have been a factor in the increased demand for student support services, particularly in THEA institutions where such services suffer from legacy funding inequalities. Given their profile, our students have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Existing inequalities in terms of housing, income, and cultural capital have been amplified. Students have sought to maintain their learning while dealing with challenges relating to mental health and wellbeing, poor quality study spaces off-campus, and extended periods of isolation which undermined the traditional “whole student” experience.

Socioeconomic profiles¹² of higher education institutions published by the HEA show that the technological higher education sector student population is more socioeconomically challenged than those of traditional universities. The mean Deprivation Index Score for THEA institutions is -1.3, which compares with the national average for all HEIs of +2.0 and +3.3 for the traditional universities. Progression rates and completion data published by the HEA shows how students from socio-economically challenged backgrounds and those with lower Leaving Certificate points attainment require greater supports in order to successfully complete their programme of study.¹³

We have previously stated the case that the most important education priority for government for 2023 should be the support of students post-COVID-19. As we stated in our submission for Budget 2022¹⁴:

“The mental health challenge of recovering from COVID-19 should not be underestimated. Our young people have taken the brunt of that effect, losing out on their most important formative years with many rites of passage either delayed, postponed, or passed by.”

The evidence on the ground over the last year confirms this to be the case. **Our Budget 2022 submission stated the need for targeted funding of €12 million for our sector to address the gap in student mental health supports relative to the traditional university sector.**

The gap in funding for student mental health supports in the TU sector relative to the traditional university remains and, if anything, continues to grow as the need for such services also increases. Furthermore, this now extends beyond the mental health services and into other support services for students whether it is around general health services, assistance with sourcing accommodation, or support with adapting to university life. We stated in our submission to Government for Budget 2023¹⁵:

“A significant investment is now overdue. When considering where to prioritize in providing the extra staff envisaged under Funding the Future, student support services in the TU sector must be top of the list. One of the areas focussed on by Funding the Future is the need to strengthen representation in higher education for under-represented groups. It is envisaged that this will provide supports for priority groups who are underrepresented in higher education.”

It is clear that the demand for mental health services for students in tertiary education increased significantly in the years up to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. PCHEI and SCSs have reported an acceleration in that demand since the COVID-19 pandemic, with loneliness, isolation, anxiety and a sense of disconnectedness driving a rapid increase in the need to access services. **The increased demand for services must be met by sustainable multi-annual ring-fenced funding and increased allocation of funding in order to support adequately counselling services and reduce the student/counsellor ratio to internationally accepted standards.**

[Data available through studentsurvey.ie](https://www.studentsurvey.ie)

Five specific projects were funded by research bursaries offered by StudentSurvey.ie in October 2020. The research findings¹⁶ point to specific support services in institutions, which students say should be improved, such as specific mental health services, academic support, library services, access to services, and awareness of services. The data also points to an increase, particularly among postgraduate research students, in feelings of disconnectedness and isolation.

[The need for multi-annual ring-fenced funding](#)

As this Committee has acknowledged, international standards state that the recommended ratio of counsellor to students is 1 counsellor to 1,000 students (IACS, 2010¹⁷). According to figures published by PCHEI, the average ratio of counsellor to students in Ireland does not meet this recommended ratio, although the increased funding provided for student mental health services in recent years has improved it. This additional funding was strongly welcomed by the sector and by PCHEI. However, the lack of visibility of year-on-year ring-fenced funding for mental health services has meant that those employed in this area are, for the most part, employed on short term contracts and are not considering student counselling services as a serious and viable career opportunity, due to the transient nature of employment contracts that are contingent on uncertain annual funding agreements. It has proven challenging to attract and recruit qualified, professionals because of the current annual funding model. **PCHEI have called for a multi-annual ring-fenced funding model that would support longer term employment contracts and THEA supports this.** Student counselling should be a very viable career path for the many assistant psychologists and trainee psychotherapists that are

employed within SCS, where we provide quality experience, training and supervision, thus supporting them in their training journey.

It is preferable that this funding be continued as an multi-annual ring-fenced funding in order to maintain the increased capacity that HEIs have been able to make in student counselling services.

The need for increased funding to reduce ratios to international standards

This Committee has acknowledged the international standards that state best practice student/counsellor ratio to be 1 to 1,000 students and we welcomed the recommendation of this Committee¹:

“The ratio of counsellors available in Higher Education Institutions (HEI)s should be at the recommended international standard of 1 counsellor to 1,000 students. To this end, ring fenced funding should be made available for the expansion of student counselling services.”

PCHEI have stated that the sector requires 28 FTE additional student counsellors to bring the ratio of counsellor to students to 1:1000. These are additional to the posts created by 2020 and 2021 COVID-19 funding. Based on point 1 of the student counsellor salary as per Dept of Education and Science, and including PRSI/Pension (€69,000) we estimate a total exchequer salary cost of €1,932,000.

This should be provided as a multi-annual ring-fenced funding allocation for mental services.

Implementation of the National Framework for Consent¹⁸ in Higher Education Institutions

THEA has worked collaboratively with the IUA and the HEA to agree implementation of the national framework on consent. Each of our institutions have submitted action plans to the HEA and these have been supported through the work of the PROPEL¹⁹ project (Promoting Consent and Preventing Sexual Violence in Higher Education Institutions). Working with the HEA Advisory Group on Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment, THEA have identified a number of areas where increased multi-annual will be required to support the full implementation of the Framework and have sent this request to Minister Harris, at his request. **The total cost of implementation across the full higher education sector is estimated to come to approximately €7m per annum.**¹⁵ This includes ring-fenced funding for additional counselling staff to provide trauma-informed support to those affected by sexual violence / harassment (SVH). The increased awareness of SVH resulting from implementing the Consent Framework will likely increase the number of persons presenting to student counselling services with issues related to sexual trauma.

New initiatives

While the tertiary education sector has been challenged through the decade of underinvestment and underfunding of services, particularly student counselling services, there are examples of best practice initiatives that have been implemented here, as exemplars from international best practice. Many examples of international best practice initiatives are outlined in the ‘National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework’¹.

One international example, which will be launched in 19 Irish higher education institutions in October 2023 is the ‘TogetherAll’ initiative. Funded by the HEA and the HSE ‘TogetherAll’ is a safe, online community where people support each other. Members can sign up instantly, share anonymously and access the community at any time, day or night. What distinguishes ‘TogetherAll’ is, that while it is an only online peer-support community, it is fully moderated on a 24/7 basis by fully trained mental health professionals and led by an on-duty clinical team. It is also geo-linked with local emergency services, which will be triggered to intervene if a moderator recognises clinical signs that an escalation to emergency intervention is necessary. While the ‘TogetherAll’ platform will provide a vital professionally moderated peer-support programme to students, it will also report statistics to each HEI around usage, rescues and service demands. This initial roll-out has been

funded through the HSE on a pilot basis and **we would support the call by PCHEI to extend and fully fund this initiative with sustainable multi-annual funding.**

Linking health services with education services

The links between health (HSE) and education have been further improved through the ongoing activity of the 'Connecting For Life' working group, which brings together professionals from the health sector and education. The transition of students from HEI-led counselling services to HSE-led services as students move between home and their HEI in the summer months, has long been recognised as problematic. This has been recognised as an issue not just in Ireland but in other jurisdictions as:

- Referrals from university support services to mental health services are not made quickly or to the appropriate service;
- Key information is not shared with higher education providers that would identify students that are particularly vulnerable (for example after an admission to a hospital);
- Duplicated care and resource for those involved in a student's care;
- Students having to act as their own care coordinators;
- Students struggling to navigate services available to them.

The UK government have committed substantial funding for both higher education and NHS providers to develop their partnership and integrated care pathways for students. They have committed £15 million to higher education providers in the 2022–23 academic year, through formula funding. The twin aims of this funding are to give additional support to students transitioning from school or college to university, and for universities and colleges to develop effective joint working between their student support services and local NHS mental health services, to ensure students are referred quickly and appropriately. This will also complement £33 million funding from NHS England in 2022–23 allocated towards improving the quality and accessibility of mental health services for young adults. This twin approach of funding through both higher education service providers and the health system will ensure that students have mental health pathways between their higher education institution and their national health service.

Summary

- THEA fully supports submissions made to the Committee by the Psychological Counsellors in Higher Education.
- The 'Connecting for Life' working group has been great enabler of co-ordinating services between the HSE and the education sector and should be supported and continued.
- Post-COVID-19 increases in mental health funding in 2020 and 2021 should be continued as multi-annual ring-fenced funding in order to ensure continuity of improved services
- The increased demand for services must be met by sustainable multi-annual ring-fenced funding and increased allocation of funding in order to adequately support counselling services and reduce the student / counsellor ratio to internationally accept standards.
- PCHEI have stated that the sector requires 28 additional student counsellors to bring the ratio of counsellor to students to 1:1000, requiring a total exchequer cost of €1,932,000.
- Initiatives such as 'TogetherAll' should be continued to be supported beyond the 12 month pilot phase.
- Consideration should be given to funding and supporting the establishment of links between HSE and education sector in order to facilitate continuation of care, similar to provisions that have been made in the UK between NHS and the higher education sector.
- €7 million should be allocated to the whole higher education sector to support the implementation of the Framework for Consent.

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- ¹⁷ <https://iacsinc.org/staff-to-student-ratios/>
- ¹⁸ Framework for Consent in Higher Education Institutions: Safe, Respectful, Supportive and Positive – Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Irish Higher Education Institution: <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/24925/?page=1>
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