



OUTPUT 1

Report Mapping Comparative Innovative HE practices in Student Mental Wellbeing, Using the Partner Countries as Case Studies – GREECE, SPAIN, LITHUNIA, SERBIA, UK and indicating emerging trends Across Europe

Partners on Embrace HE project



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Executive Summary

This document is part of the outputs of the EMBRACE HE project, which was funded by the ERASMUS+ UK Agency and is running 2019-2022, project number KA203-5B5EC153.

Project partners are: Birmingham City University, United Kingdom; Universidad Publica De Navarra Spain; Western Balkans Institute, Serbia; Panepistimo Kritis Greece; Vilniious Universitetos, Lithuania.

The report outlines the situation and literature from each of the consortium partner countries, as listed above and then summarises key concerns from across wider Europe. The themes visible in the partner countries also parallel key themes from across Europe, which are shaping the way that HEIs respond and deal with mental health issues. It is important to note that most of this review was written between November 2019 and mid-2020, just capturing the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis and very early literature on this.

Greece

- Students in Greece have been found to be at higher risk of mental health problems (Ansari et al., 2011; Stallman 2010) even in comparison to students in other countries (Boon, Kimhi, Sapountzaki, Parmak, Groh, & Ryan, 2017). In one study a quarter of the 805 university students reported high depression rates and nearly half general poor mental health status (Kounenou, Koutra, Katsiadrami, & Diacogiannis, 2011). Depression and anxiety are the main mental health issues experienced linked to:
 - Substance misuse – literature on this issue and student cohort has been attributed to contextual and individual factors (Donnelly, Young, Pearson, Penhollov, & Hernandez, 2008; Kokkevi, Richardson, Florescu, Kuzman, & Stergar, 2007; Jimenez, Musitu, & Murgui, 2008).
 - Addiction to the internet/tech is a recognized issue with data gathered linking such use other risk issues of smoking, drinking alcohol drinking, and taking drugs (Frangos, Frangos, & Sotiropoulos, 2011).
 - Uncertainty/fear for the future (Katsionis and Kalatha, 2010) with debt problems, fears around getting a job/career later shaping mental health, along with stress from having to work to pay (Stolikidis et al., 2014; 2014).
- The HE environment and organization of teaching and learning is vital in supporting wellbeing, particularly relationships between staff and students.
- Student sense of environmental mastery is linked to better mental health, factors like having friends and family, self-acceptance.
- Student Counselling Centre (SCC) are a norm in Greek HE, which usually include individual and group counselling; prevention and outreach and consultation for faculty and staff and support for students with additional needs, such as learning disabilities, with online intervention/provision of this increasing (Holm-Hadullaa & Koutsoukou-Argyraki, 2015; Bitsios, Karademas, Mouzaki, Manolitsis, Kapellaki, Diacatou, & Giovazolias, 2017). After the start of covid-19, online provision is increasingly common.
- Apart from activities related to physical, cultural, and social activities (athletes center, theatre groups, etc.) there are no specific reported programmes promoting wellbeing, which is open for future development.

Spain

- The Spanish Network of Spanish Universities is running a major ongoing programme, supported by Ministry of Health and Consumer Affairs, 'The Healthy Universities Plan', with 57 universities implementing active health programmes. This is innovating through projects in these HEIs and improving practice.
- The University Community have specific health needs linked to the nature of learning organisations and studying. The 3 key groups in the community - students, PDI (Teaching and Research Staff) and PAS (Administration and Services Staff), influence the health each other. An ecological approach or view of how the university as a community influences mental health and wellbeing through policies and practices is vital (Acción Social & Universidad Pública de Navarra, 2016).
- Rates of HE student depression and anxiety in Spain, as found in other European countries, is high and of serious concern.
- Students report overwhelm and distress from academic matters, for instance, taking an exam, lack of time to complete academic activities, academic overload and exposure of work in class (Hernández Armenteros & Pérez García, 2018).
- A key student risk in mental health and wellbeing matters in Spain is substance misuse with students taking illegal and prescription medications (Universidad Pública de Navarra et al., 2007; Lucena et al., 2013).
- Youth unemployment, careers and work stability are, as in wider Europe, sources of mental distress for students in Spain, coupled with student debt and financial worries (Acción Social & Universidad Pública de Navarra, 2016).
- Strong and supportive relationships in the classroom between students and teachers can have an ameliorating impact on stress and poor mental health (Acción Social & Universidad Pública de Navarra, 2016).
- Innovations that are enhancing student mental health in Spain include: Support projects in the transition from high school studies to higher studies; linking with community organisations to fulfil needs; mediation between the student and the different university departments and services in relation to adaptations for disabilities and special requirements/support, both teaching and administrative; projects developing resources for disabilities, including technical assistance, grants and financial aid, interpreters etc; Promotion of the participation of all members of the university community; Development of mental health awareness and training actions aimed at the university community.

- There is greater recognition of gender and differential harassment/abuse and hate crime experiences as part of student mental health and wellbeing and response through initiatives. (Martínez-Otero, 2014; Salaberría et al., 2016; Hernández, Armenteros and Pérez García, 2018, Pedro et al., 2019).
- The work of Red Española de Universidades Saludables, REUS) and the Healthy Universities plan have made positive impacts in health in HEIs, psychological and counselling support services have been enhanced to widen the scope of students supported and HEIs are recognizing and changing the way they work and cultures towards supporting student wellbeing using pan-organisational, holistic and salutogenic models of wellbeing.

Lithuania

Despite high past rates of youth suicide (Zaborskis, Zemaitiene, Grabauskas, Puras & Povilaitis, 2007) through extensive preventative strategies and interventions Lithuania now provides a textbook case of best practice in the field. Despite this, student mental distress remains a concern as in all European countries. Surveys of students have found high rates of distress, mainly strong anxiety, stress, mood issues, depression and panic attacks. (Lithuanian Students Union 2019; Lithuanian Students Union 2021). Quality of life studies for students have shown consistent low scores, especially for women.

During the pandemic students' motivation to study decreased 17%, good mood and satisfaction with the learning process decreased by 11%, sleep disturbances increased by 10%.

Substance misuse is a known problem that is related to student stress and distress in their lives in Lithuania (Lithuanian Congress of Psychologists, 2022).

High achievement in HE by students has been found to be protective against mental health and distress, although further research is ongoing to understand how these factors influence each other. Rapuano (2019).

The Ministry of Health of the Republic of Lithuania implemented the innovative student mental health project, '*A Systematic Program for Strengthening Student Mental Health in Lithuanian HEIs*', which ran until 2020. This ensured availability of free psychological counselling services and emotional support of HEI students. It embedded in-house psychological sites into HEI structures, including qualified psychological support and implemented preventative activities, such as relaxation or mindfulness classes. This project has innovated in levelling out mental health provision between different tertiary education providers and has influenced new innovations that are currently going forward.

Serbia and the Western Balkans

- Serbian literature and policy on student mental health is in its infancy, presently most literature describes the problems but does not provide remedies or innovative projects/responses.
- Stress is an identified problem for students across the Western Balkans, but studies show that there are different levels between countries. Differences appear to arise in efficacy of coping strategies (Đurić, 2017).
- Increasing student competence, self-orientation, connectedness to others, confidence, autonomy and have been found to be linked to ability to cope better with difficult situations as a student (Randelović and Stojiljković, 2014).
- Techno-stress, in the form of mobile phone use, is arising in the literature as a growing problem for students, including addiction to tech and mobile phones (Višnjić et al., 2018).
- Problematic alcohol and substance misuse, including tobacco, is noted as a problem within university student groups. (Piumatti, Lietz, Aresi, and Bjegović-Mikanović, 2019; Milić,, Gazibara, Pekmezović, Kisić Tepavčević, Marić, and Popović 2020). Overuse of alcohol increases symptoms of psychological distress and use of binge drinking to attempt to self-medicate for underlying mental health issues presented as created further psychological, social, educational and emotional problems.
- Certain groups of students are becoming recognized as more at risk for mental distress, for instance medical, nursing and paramedical students in Serbia (Vićentić et al., 2015) and North Macedonia and Kosovo (Mancevska and Plunčević, 2014).
- The literature in some countries of the Western Balkans, has emphasized the importance of examining sex and gender issues and mental health for HEI students, particularly focusing on coping styles (Xhakollari, 2015; Hasanbegović and Tuce 2019; Marojević, 2020).
- There is no evidence around HEI student services because these are very early in development but there is growing interest in addressing these matters, especially post-Covid.

Student Mental Health and Wellbeing in the United Kingdom

- Age and experience issues are increasingly being seen as important to student mental health, covering undergraduate and other modes of study, along with younger and more mature student needs for mental health and wellbeing. (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Turner et al, 2007; Scalon, Rowling & Weber, 2010; Gale & Parker, 2012; Bowles et al., 2013; Macaskill, 2013)
- Inclusion of students from the key protected characteristics is a major challenge for UK HEIs in relation to preventing exclusion and abuse and protecting mental health and wellbeing. (National Union of Students, 2014 and 2018; Garvey et al, 2018; Policy Connect and the The Higher Education Commission, 2020)
- International students and postgraduates also struggle with mental health issues related to isolation/exclusion and sometimes hostility. Some of these students may also be refugees from their own countries with additional support needs related to past trauma. Postgraduate students, suffer key stresses in studying at higher levels under intense achievement pressure. Several UK HEIs are investing in projects to support these groups. (Bradley, 2000: Jones et al, 2019) and the University of Sanctuary scheme also provides places for refugees and wider wellbeing support.
- Innovative online mental health support for students is currently a key trend in HEIs. This was developing prior to Covid-19 but became more important after this. Innovative projects, such as Big White Wall, enable 24 hour a day access to resources and support.
- Mental health first aid has become embedded as best practice in many HEIs and is expanding. Supported by the voluntary sector organization, *Student Minds*, this initiative supports mental health across HEI organisations, focusing on cross-organisational culture change responses to mental wellbeing for staff and students. It engages staff across teaching and learning, professional services, counselling, and HEI sections in becoming better equipped to support mental health crisis.

Mental Health and Wellbeing Trends in HE Students Across Wider Europe

- Pan-European and individual country analysis show that by far the most prevalent forms of mental illness experienced by HE students are anxiety and depression, with relatively high prescription medication use for these (Ruckert, 2015; Statista 2022).
- The issue of support for international students is increasingly visible as HEIs expand into the global and diversify, including issues of acculturation stress, wellbeing issues in host communities (Yeh and Inose, 2003) Forbes-Mewett and Schermuly, 2021; British Universities International Liaison Society, 2023).
- An emerging area of interest across Europe in relation to mental health is Technostress – or the stress brought on by interacting with and using technology and the digital. In HE this has been greatly increased by Covid-19 conditions, but even before this was visible in the literature as a concern ((Royo et al, 2019 Boyer-Davis, 2020; Amazu 2020; Gonzalez Lopez, 2021), which is also noted in some of the partner country examinations above.) This is an important area for further research and interventions.
- Wider impacts of the Covid-19 epidemic are profound - researchers noted that some groups of HE students were more likely to experience increased anxiety, depression, and distress (Wathelet et al 2020; University of Ghent, 2020; Sahu, 2020). Work is still ongoing on the risk factors and after-shocks of the disease on broad-ranging wellbeing. Students in Medicine and Professionals Allied to Medicine face special risks due to placements and the level of distress and death they were, and still are, being exposed to, due to the pandemic (Maben and Bridges, 2020; Cervera-Gasch et al, 2020; Pang et al 2020; Sögüt et al, 2020). These issues demand ongoing research and innovative projects.
- There are diverse initiatives and projects that are making a difference across Europe. These are described in the main report but some key links are:
 - European Education Area
[Mental health support for students in Europe | European Education Area \(europa.eu\)](https://europa.eu/education/mental-health-support-for-students-in-europe)
 - Buddy System projects across Europe
<https://buddysystem.eu/en/the-project>
 - European Student Union – provides help, advice and signposting on mental health and wellbeing
[Home - European Students' Union \(esu-online.org\)](https://esu-online.org/)
 - Mental Health First Aid in Universities
<https://mhfaengland.org/organisations/higher-education/>

- Mindfulness Practice 4 Students (M4S) EU funded project on integrating mindfulness into HEIs
<https://mp4s.eu/>
- Studee.com – 20 of the best Mental Health Innovations in UK HEIs
<https://studee.com/discover/15-of-the-best-university-mental-health-initiatives-in-the-uk/>
- Buddy System EU: First independent, peer-to-peer student mentoring and buddying system, with resources for students and staff
<https://buddysystem.eu/en/>
- Goldman Saks Mentally Healthy Universities Initiative
<https://www.mind.org.uk/workplace/mentally-healthy-universities-programme/>
- HIPPOCAMPUS: EU project promoting health and wellbeing amongst young people, including HEI students, resources and HEI links
<https://hippocampusproject.eu/>
- World Health Organisation Pan-European Coalition, house some resources on student mental health and wellbeing
[The Pan-European Mental Health Coalition \(who.int\)](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/pan-european-mental-health-coalition)
- World Economic Forum – ‘We Support’ pages on University provision of mental health support, including initiatives and resources from Europe
<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/03/education-institutions-and-fostering-a-true-culture-of-care/>

European Student Mental Health Initiative Resources:

European Education Area [Mental health support for students in Europe | European Education Area \(europa.eu\)](#)

Buddy System projects across Europe: <https://buddysystem.eu/en/the-project>

European Student Union – provides help, advice and signposting on mental health and wellbeing: [Home - European Students' Union \(esu-online.org\)](#)

Mental Health First Aid in Universities: <https://mhfaengland.org/organisations/higher-education/>
Mindfulness Practice 4 Students (M4S) EU funded project on integrating mindfulness into HEIs. <https://mp4s.eu/>

Studee.com – 20 of the best Mental Health Innovations in UK HEIs - <https://studee.com/discover/15-of-the-best-university-mental-health-initiatives-in-the-uk/>

Buddy System EU: First independent, peer-to-peer student mentoring and buddying system, with resources for students and staff: <https://buddysystem.eu/en/>

Goldman Saks Mentally Healthy Universities Initiative: <https://www.mind.org.uk/workplace/mentally-healthy-universities-programme/>

HIPPOCAMPUS: EU project promoting health and wellbeing amongst young people, including HEI students, resources and HEI links: <https://hippocampusproject.eu/>

World Health Organisation Pan-European Coalition, house some resources on student mental health and wellbeing, [The Pan-European Mental Health Coalition \(who.int\)](#)

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