

450% increase in student mental health declarations over last decade but progress still needed to address declarations stigma

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Over the last decade there has been a significant shift in the willingness of students to talk about their mental health – the number of UK applicants to UCAS that shared a mental health condition has increased by 450% in this time, yet today's report, *Starting the Conversation: UCAS report on student mental health*, shows there is still more work to do to smash the myths and stigma around mental health, and to highlight the support available to students in higher education.

Despite this growth, today's analysis indicates that nearly half of students do not share information about their mental health with their chosen university or college. In total, UCAS estimates that over 70,000 students may enter HE every year with a mental health condition, but 49% told a UCAS survey of first year students that they had not shared this information.

All students have autonomy over whether they choose to declare any condition in their application. Whilst there are many reasons why a student may choose not to share this information, UCAS research suggests the most common reason is due to a lack of understanding about what the data will be used for, and the belief it will impact on their chances of receiving a university offer. UCAS is committed to improving the application process, offering greater flexibility and ensuring students have a greater understanding of the use and value of sharing this information and will work with partners to achieve a culture of positive disclosure.

The benefits of sharing this information are clear. The Office for Students (OfS) has reported that students with mental health conditions tend to have lower rates of continuation, attainment, and progression into skilled work or further study, so it is

vital that students are able to understand what is available and access the right support early on to enable them to succeed with their studies.

Key findings from today's report include:

- 3.7% of all UK applicants declared a mental health condition in their application to study in 2020 – up from 0.7% in 2011.
- Women are 2.2 times more likely to declare a mental health condition than men.
- Alongside engineering, medicine and dentistry courses have the lowest declaration rates with only 1.4% of accepted applicants sharing an existing mental health condition.
- Some LGBT+ students are around six times more likely to share a mental health condition, and care experienced students are almost three times as likely – underlining the value of recognising how mental health intersects with other characteristics and support needs.
- One in five students research support specifically for an existing mental health condition before they apply, and more than one in four look at the provision of general mental health and wellbeing service
- Within the report, UCAS suggests a series of next steps to be taken by the sector to achieve the aim of fostering an environment of positive disclosure so that everyone who can benefit from support is able to do so.

UCAS Chief Executive Clare Marchant said: “Despite the significant growth in mental health declarations, there remains an equally significant number of students who choose not to declare it as part of their UCAS application. Creating a culture of positive disclosure is fundamental to delivering our charitable objectives. UCAS is about providing access to education for all. No student should be, or fear being, negatively impacted by disclosing a mental health condition.

“Universities and colleges want students to succeed in their studies and have an array of support services available to ensure this. Whilst there are a number of opportunities for students to disclose any mental health concerns with their chosen university throughout the application and enrolment process, it is clear that the earlier that important conversation starts, the better informed the student will be about this support.

“At UCAS we are continuously reviewing how we collect information about students, not only about their mental and/or physical health conditions but other support needs - recognising that connecting students to the right support will, in turn, support their mental health and wellbeing more broadly, giving them the best chance of success.

“As a sector we know how important it is to eradicate outdated stigmas and meet the needs of all students. We recognise that, collectively, more needs to be done to ensure there is an awareness of the provision of services available and to remove any perception that opportunities could be restricted if an existing condition is disclosed.”

Rosie Tressler OBE, CEO of Student Minds, said: “We are pleased that UCAS is listening to and sharing the voices of students, as well as exploring how it can adapt the application system to better support disclosure.

“Once you’re at university or college, asking for help with your mental health needs to feel as simple as saying you’re trying to find the right book in the library. We know that universities and colleges are working towards comprehensive whole-institution approaches to mental health, which will support and enable disclosure of health conditions at any and every stage of the student journey.

“The more our future students see how ingrained a mental health and wellbeing strategy is within and across an institution, the more confident they will feel that they are entering an inclusive environment that celebrates difference as a strength.

“I’m encouraged that our sector is heading in the direction in which this is the reality for all. This long-term investment is crucial especially as we know that many challenges will have been exacerbated by and will outlast the pandemic. For any student that is looking for support through this difficult period, we encourage you to visit our Student Space, where you can find out about the services at your institution, access guidance and a range of services.”

Ends

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Notes for editors

To receive a copy of the report, contact the UCAS Press Office

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