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# The University of Bath will be the most healthy and supportive student community in the world

We view our health as an important issue – we are proud that we are highly ranked in independent league tables for our world leading courses (such as Sports Science) and recognise that the University is a leader in high-quality research in health, as well as a leading university for sports.

We know the importance of awareness, access to resources, and support systems. We call for de-stigmatisation, comprehensive counselling services, and regular mental health education. We also know the value of preventative measures and a supportive environment that addresses mental health triggers and promotes overall well-being.

In our consultations, many expressed difficulties in making friends and building a sense of community, especially for those of us who are international and first-year students. We have been told of long wait times for support services and have a sense that sometimes teaching and assessment can harm our mental health unnecessarily.

We believe that health for students is both an enabler of academic success and an outcome in itself - it enhances academic performance, reduces stress, and improves overall wellbeing.

For us, being a healthy student community is about three things:

❶ An approach to health that is aspirational - and recognises that good mental health is both an important outcome and a precursor to our academic attainment.

❷ A portfolio of student support services that is responsive, student centred and provides space to for us to learn together.

❸ Academic and social communities that build belonging and ensure that none of us feel we are alone at the University.

# Students told us:

## Health

Data from The SU and University Be Well Surveys (2019 – 2023) show that year on year more students are experiencing difficulties with their mental health, with increased numbers of students since the pandemic reporting that they arrived at university with a pre-existing mental health condition.

Students described high levels of stress and anxiety as part of the *Together We Shape Tomorrow* engagement, with this particularly peaking around assessment periods, resulting in students criticising the bunching of assessments, and lack of communication between unit convenors, which negatively impacts their mental health.

Impacts of the increases in cost of living are also being felt by students in relation to their health and wellbeing, students are cutting back on personal hygiene and health items to save money and physical and mental health is being negatively impacted.

Students told us that preventative measures which would support student health included greater promotion of support available through channels students are already using (lectures, social media, emails), specific wellbeing offering for doctoral students, year-round wellbeing activities such as mindfulness practices, stress management, and self-care strategies to build resilience in students, and the reduction of key 'stressors' - namely the bunching of assessments *(Be Well Survey 2022, Together We Shape Tomorrow engagement)*.
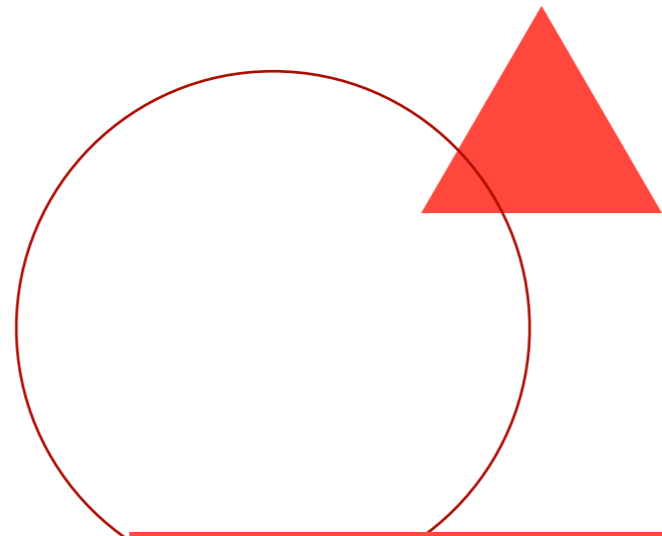
SINCE THE PANDEMIC, THERE HAS BEEN AN INCREASED NUMBER OF STUDENTS REPORTING THAT THEY ARRIVED AT UNIVERSITY WITH A PRE-EXISTING MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION

Students are cutting back on personal hygiene and health items to save money

Physical and mental health is being negatively impacted as a result

## Student Support Services

Students speak positively about support services, counselling and mental health services available through the University, as well as the support they receive from a wide range of staff in roles across professional and academic services. Positively, students also say that they would be willing to seek help should they start experiencing difficulties with their mental health.

Students report that the communication of information about the University's mental wellbeing support services is done well in the *National Student Survey*, with Bath being significantly above the sector average.

Three quarters of students agree that, when needed, the information and advice offered by welfare and support services had been helpful *(National Student Survey optional question bank 2024)*, however students from black ethnicities are less likely to agree.

However, students told us about difficulties in accessing support services, such as long wait times for counselling or mental health support. A third of students accessing University Therapeutic Services reported waiting more than 4 weeks for an appointment, and half of these waited over 8 weeks *(Be Well Survey 2023)*. It is also vital that students understand their entitlement to these services and support infrastructure while they undertake placements. Students suggested improving the availability and accessibility of mental health support services on campus. Students also highlighted the importance of being able to access a diversity of therapists reflecting the diverse student population.

Doctoral students have identified the dynamic of being students as well as staff and colleagues (when teaching) as something which can cause tension within supervision relationships, with some students not feeling able to raise honest feedback

**STUDENTS REPORT THAT THE COMMUNICATION OF INFORMATION ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY'S MENTAL WELLBEING SUPPORT SERVICES IS DONE WELL, WITH BATH BEING SIGNIFICANTLY ABOVE THE SECTOR AVERAGE**

and seek support because of this dynamic (PRES 2023). Anecdotal evidence and feedback via The SU Advice service has also indicated a disparity in the pastoral training of doctoral supervisors, impacting on the consistency of health and wellbeing support students can hope to access. Many doctoral students do not feel able to access extracurricular opportunities because of their teaching responsibilities.

Year on year we see half of our student community reporting that they are supporting someone else who is experiencing mental health problems which in turn causes them to experience stress *(Be Well Surveys 2019 – 2023)*. Support therefore needs to be in place for those supporting others, opening dialogue and conversations, and supporting students to seek professional support where needed.

## Communities

Being part of a community and having a sense of belonging is important to students. Prospective students told us at open days that they expect to make lifelong friendships and meet lots of new people when coming to university *(Together We Shape Tomorrow open day engagement)*, so these expectations are starting long before students arrive at Bath.

Students spoke positively of finding their communities through SU clubs and societies, and also departmental activities and events when living in University halls *(Together We Shape Tomorrow engagement)*. Be Well Surveys show year-on-year that students engaged in extracurricular activities were less likely to feel lonely and more likely to feel a sense of belonging and community.

64% of students are satisfied with the opportunities they have to interact socially with other students. Barriers faced were linked to reduced finances due to increased cost-of-living and the intensity of their course, leading to a lack of time to engage with others *(Together We Shape Tomorrow Survey May 2024)*.

Distance learners and students living off campus also had difficulties connecting with other students due to restricted opportunities to access on-campus facilities designed to facilitate students coming together.

The community within an academic department is important to students. 72% of students reported forming their friendship group at university by making friends on their course *(Together We Shape Tomorrow Survey 2024)*. Recent feedback from undergraduate student representatives showed that being an integral part of the University community was highly important to them and they felt part of a community of staff and students. Despite this, there are around 30% of students who are not feeling part of a community within the University *(National Student Survey optional bank of questions 2024)*.

We saw clear connections between students' feelings of being part of a community at a departmental level and the engagement with academic representation, SU departmental societies, and peer support schemes. This speaks to the need for investment in academic community development.

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OF STUDENTS ARE SATISFIED WITH THE OPPORTUNITIES THEY HAVE TO INTERACT SOCIALLY WITH OTHER STUDENTS

**72%**
REPORTED FORMING THEIR FRIENDSHIP GROUP BY MAKING FRIENDS ON THEIR COURSE

**AROUND 30%**
OF STUDENTS DON'T FEEL PART OF A COMMUNITY WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY

Some of our student communities find making connections and having a sense of belonging more challenging, particularly communities who are based off campus (distance-learners, placement students), and those here for a limited time (one-year master's courses).

# Feedback from undergraduate student representatives shows that being an integral part of the University community was highly important to them
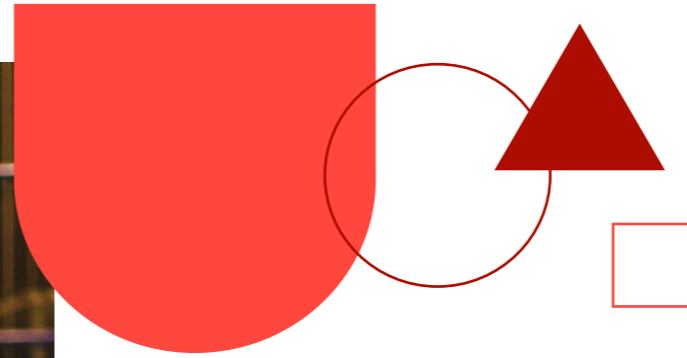
## On **health, we want to see:**

❶ Counselling and advisory services that are culturally competent, student-centred, and easily accessible, including expanding online counselling options – with a high priority review of wait times.

❷ New staff training programs must include mandatory mental health awareness training, regularly updated to reflect new research and best practice, supporting all staff with pastoral responsibilities to do their role safely.

❸ Ensuring there is placement specific health and student support guidance.

❹ To work towards all new students engaging in an initial mental health check-up that enables them to develop a personal plan to maintain and improve their wellbeing.

❺ To aspire to join the "healthy campus" initiative and guarantee all students affordable access to facilities, services and activities aimed at improving their physical health - regardless of their sporting prowess.

❻ Collaboration to build an inclusive sport and physical agenda, enabling all students to take part in physical activity regardless of physical or financial access barriers.

❼ A city-wide partnership between the universities, SUs, NHS and public health officials that integrates services and prevention efforts and provides friction-free pathways for students that need support ensuring students do not fall through the gaps between services as they transition to, through and beyond university.

## On **student support services, we want to see:**

❶ Counselling and support services that are responsive, culturally competent, student-centred, and accessible - including expanded online options.

❷ Mandatory and regularly updated mental health awareness training for academic staff, alongside peer support networks guided by professionals so staff with pastoral responsibilities are supported to deliver outstanding guidance throughout our academic lives.

❸ Ensuring there is placement specific health and student support guidance, and that placement students understand the differences in support they can expect from their University and their employer.

❹ A campus master plan that sees the university work towards spaces that are conducive to social learning, healthy and maximises "third" spaces owned by students as their second, academic home - with the ability to prepare food for themselves and others as central to the plan.

## On **academic and social communities,** we want to see:

❶ For every subject area to host a thriving academic community body, which is trusted to and is capable of taking responsibility for student representation, social activity, study skills and subject-focused career activities, and for the SU to be resourced to enable this consistently across the institution.

❷ A commitment to systematically measure the belonging of students in a way that enables targeted action to boost associative activity on campus.

❸ Create a bespoke programme of enhancements based on the needs of international students, maximising the benefits of being a global and diverse university.

❹ A move over time to maximise the number and quality of physical spaces across campus and in the city for use by student communities, providing a "home" for students whatever their subject.