



**QUEEN'S  
UNIVERSITY  
BELFAST**

**STUDENT  
WELLBEING**

# **GAPS AND PRESSURES ANALYSIS REPORT**







THE COUBE

RECEPTION

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# INTRODUCTION

Supporting student mental health and wellbeing has been a priority for the University for a number of years. As concerns about student mental health increase across the sector, particularly though not exclusively following the pandemic, universities are being encouraged to take a 'whole university approach' to student mental health and wellbeing policies which enables all students and staff to thrive and succeed to their full potential.

As outlined in our #QUBeWell Framework, a mentally healthy environment should be the ultimate target. Embedding a whole university approach ensures that wellbeing is seen as everyone's responsibility. "Our end point remains the same – transform the culture of wellbeing at the University, to tackle the root causes which lead to poor mental health and wellbeing, and embed a whole university approach where our staff and students can thrive."

The benefits of this approach are self-evident: universities should be places where students and staff can thrive. They have the potential to transform the lives of individuals, of communities, and the world. With a growing and diversifying student and staff population, it is a priority for all of us.

Creating a mentally healthy University can lead to positive outcomes of healthier, happier people and communities, healthier culture, and benefits which ripple into wider society – 'shaping a better world'.

In that context I particularly welcome this report 'Gaps and Pressures 2024' summarising the key issues in supporting students at our University. Drawing directly from the experience of academic and professional support staff in Schools the report makes a valuable contribution to help us better understand how to support our students. The outworkings of the report will feed directly into Strategy 2030 as we seek to better support our students throughout their academic journey.

I would like to thank all staff who contributed to the questionnaire and focus groups that were undertaken during this project, and in particular to Michaeline Donnelly, Student Experience Project Officer in the Student Wellbeing Service for all her work in both driving the project as well as completing the Report.

My final thanks go to all staff across the University who support students, directly or indirectly. You play an invaluable contribution to student success for which I am very grateful

Professor Judy Williams  
Pro-Vice-Chancellor Education and Students







# BACKGROUND



# BACKGROUND

Strategy 2030 sets out the University's ambition for the next ten years to shape a better world through life-changing education and research. In particular, #QUBeWell links to the Education and Skills priority strands:

- Transformative Student Experience
- Education for the Future
- Global Institute of Educational Excellence

The People and Culture Plan 2023-26 also recognises the important role that staff wellbeing plays in creating a positive employee experience.

In 2019 as part of #QUBeWell, staff in the Student Wellbeing Team at Queen's undertook some research into the pressures felt by staff working in Schools as they supported students. The final report, published in December 2019, was based on a survey and follow up meetings with each School.

Among the main themes and issues identified in the 2019 research were the following:

- Colleagues reported an increased number of students presenting with stress, anxiety and depression
- There was evidence of a higher number of increasingly complex cases
- Staff roles in Schools in relation to student support varied and were unclear in relation to roles and responsibilities
- The 'middle band' of students was the most difficult to support ie those who were not in crisis but had symptoms of low mood and anxiety
- Students were struggling to come forward early enough and staff were finding it difficult to identify students in need

- Staff felt that they were not recognised for the work that they do, and in particular the time taken to support this growing group of students
- Staff did not feel adequately trained in this area of work
- Providing out of hours student support was challenging and staff were unclear on the boundaries for support out of hours and at weekends.
- Staff believed there is a poor sense of community and belonging among students
- Current resources (in Wellbeing) were great but stretched

Much has changed since 2019 – not least the Covid 19 pandemic, and the way it has impacted both staff and students. Other factors include geopolitical events, the cost-of-living crisis and the changing funding landscape of the Higher Education sector.

Further developments in the HE sector include the Bristol University case and High Court ruling which followed, highlighting the importance of universities ensuring appropriate support and adjustments are put in place in a timely manner for disabled students, and the legal implications of failing to do so. The case gave rise to a campaign to establish a statutory duty of care from higher education providers towards students. The campaign was ultimately unsuccessful in court, though this may be subject to further appeal.

Since 2019 within the University, there has been an increase in the number of students presenting with a diagnosed disability, as well as those with a 'working diagnosis' of a disability. Additionally, new modes of study have emerged and there has been a change in staff engagement patterns, including working from home and agile working patterns.

In response to the publication of Gaps and Pressures 2019 and following the pandemic, there has been a significant investment in mental health and wellbeing services throughout the University including:

- The Student Wellbeing team has increased from 12 in 2019 to 17 members of staff in 2024 and now includes Assistant Wellbeing Advisers, a Postgraduate Wellbeing Adviser, a Safe and Healthy Relationships Wellbeing Adviser, two Wellbeing Assessment Managers and a Student Support Liaison Officer to support staff who support students. The service now operates on a faculty-facing model with a named contact for each faculty, regular drop-in sessions in each faculty and periodic sharing of impact data to help Schools and Faculties plan their student support more strategically
- The introduction of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Student Mental Health project - an integrated service providing specialist Tier 3 mental health care for students living in the Belfast Trust area
- The opening of One Elmwood building – co-locating all support services under one roof including a Student Information Point – a one-stop shop for student queries. The new Student Experience Team was also established to improve student experience, building community and belonging among all students
- Several Schools and Faculties have employed a Student Support Officer or Administrator who support students at School or Faculty level. This role has made a huge difference in those areas, through early intervention and prompt referrals to relevant support service.
- Cost of Living initiatives including the Pantry, Cost of Living breakfasts/lunches, withdrawal of library fees, accommodation bursary scheme, Financial Assistance Fund and Student Support Fund, SUQCESS project for care experienced students, access to Blackbullion scheme and Period Dignity project
- The introduction of the ‘Report and Support’ system tackling hate crime, domestic violence, sexual misconduct, scams, bullying and harassment etc.
- The roll out of an E-Learning module – Supporting Student Mental Health & Wellbeing – equipping staff with the knowledge and confidence to support and signpost students appropriately
- Expansion of the mental health resources in the Students’ Union to help focus on preventative work, student awareness and training, and tackling root causes, including the Social Prescribing initiative
- A Community of Practice for School-Based Staff Supporting Students established March 2023 to bring together staff in similar roles throughout the University to share best practice, discuss pressures/trends and identify additional training needs
- The introduction of the new Inspire Student Support Hub giving students instant access to a range of self-help resources
- The University and Students’ Union have signed up to the SOS-UK Drugs and Alcohol Impact programme, a national initiative aimed at reducing the harms associated with drug and alcohol use among students.
- QWork providing a range of opportunities with flexible working hours, complementing student learning and making it easier to access paid work on campus
- The launch of the Assessment Support Hub and rollout of the associated Exceptional Circumstances and Support to Participate in University life process
- A review of how the Student Wellbeing Service manages risk to articulate the support available to students of concern, as well as the boundaries of that support and onward referral to statutory agencies
- Annual visits by the Student Wellbeing and Accessible Learning Support (formerly Disability Services) team to School Management Meetings to establish connections with key contacts in the service and Schools, raise awareness of the remit of support available through the service, and in particular how staff can get support to refer students with complex needs. These sessions also provide a forum to share data on interactions with the students from individual Schools presenting to Student Wellbeing and Accessible Learning other support services





# METHODOLOGY



# METHODOLOGY

In light of the changing landscape, it was agreed that it would be timely to revisit the Gaps and Pressures research in 2024.

The aims and objectives of the updated research exercise were to:

- measure the distance travelled since the 2019 Gaps and Pressures report
- evaluate the success of interventions put in place over the past number of years
- hear directly from staff supporting students
- identify how the University can further improve our support including identifying groups of staff and students that might form additional or bespoke support.

In March 2024, a questionnaire was sent to all School Managers, Directors of Education and to the Community of Practice for Staff supporting students.

Largely based on the 2019 questions, colleagues were asked questions on a range of topics including issues affecting student wellbeing, specific cohorts that are affected by mental ill health, support for staff supporting students, wellbeing provision at School level and improvements that would enhance student and staff wellbeing. 43 responses to the questionnaire were received from staff in 13 Schools

Several high-level themes emerged from the survey responses:

- In 2024 staff feel more confident in supporting students and knowing where and how to refer students
- 
- The volume created by applications for Exceptional Circumstances (ECs) and Individual Student Support Agreements (ISSAs) was ever-increasing and hard to implement
- Isolation and belonging among the student body continues to be an issue – students are asking for opportunities to connect – but do not seem to be engaging, or able to engage with these opportunities when organised by Schools
- Assessment was universally seen as a particular point of pressure for many students and in ways not previously seen
- There was no consensus on groups of students to focus on – first years, international students and PGT were all mentioned as groups that may require additional support. However, several Schools mentioned that all students are likely to encounter some mental health or stress-related issues during their time at Queen's, and so interventions that are likely to improve the student experience for all students will also improve the experience for particular groups
- Some Schools appeared to have a more integrated approach to student support than others though this observation may reflect the fact that there was no consistency in the membership of School focus groups.
- The role and responsibility of Student Support Officer was variable across Schools.
- Of the 43 respondents, 9 had been in their current role for less than a year, while 20 had been in their role for one to three years.

On receipt of questionnaire responses, members of the Student Wellbeing and Accessible Learning Support and Staff Wellbeing came together to look at the main themes emerging from the responses. Six follow-up questions were drafted for discussion in School based focus groups based on the emerging themes.

These issues formed the basis of semi-structured focus groups with Schools. In total 85 staff members took part in the focus groups including staff from all 15 Schools as well as the Institute of Professional Legal Studies, with each School choosing which staff members participated. Focus groups were also carried out with Wellbeing Advisers, Students' Union Officers, a group of Student Support Officers or those in a similar role, and the #QUBeWell Management Group. Focus groups were conducted to gather more detailed information and explore new themes. As defined in research methodologies, 'The group interview is essentially a data gathering technique... that relies upon the systematic questioning of several individuals simultaneously in a formal or informal setting.'<sup>1</sup>

The focus groups were chaired by the Head of Student Affairs or Head of the Student Wellbeing and Accessible Learning Support and included members of the Student Wellbeing team. A member of the Staff Wellbeing team also attended most meetings.

This Report of the meetings will focus on each of these areas in turn, outlining the main discussion points that emerged, and which contribute to the recommendations on **page 21**.

## **1) Root causes of stress, anxiety and depression in students**

Although most Schools responded to the questionnaire by saying that stress, anxiety and depression were common amongst students, very little detail was given on what colleagues felt were the root causes. In each focus group, an open question was posed to colleagues about the underlying reasons for the increase in anxiety amongst students.

Although there were variations across Schools, several themes recurred throughout the questionnaire and subsequent focus groups. This should not be seen as an exhaustive list of concerns from staff. Rather, these are the perceptions of those staff members who were involved in this process. It is a summary of the most common issues and challenges colleagues experience in carrying out roles supporting students. Among the main themes identified by Schools were the following:

As per the previous Gaps and Pressures report, **large numbers of students are presenting with mental health issues** including the 'unholy trinity' of stress, anxiety and depression. Each participating School mentioned encountering many students presenting with 'multiple issues' throughout the academic year. Schools also talked about the complexity of the issues being presented and of some students 'requiring support far beyond what a university could be expected to provide.' Throughout the questionnaire and focus groups, there was an overall theme of the **increasing complexity of students' lives** as summed up by a Senior Lecturer in one School; 'Students are dealing with things that 18-year-olds shouldn't be dealing with. There are issues right across the board. They were not very protected 10 years ago, but it's gotten worse.' Another member of staff mentioned that 'the level of mental health need is astronomical across the board.'

Another staff member talked about having met 'many students who feel overwhelmed with their lives and who are struggling to engage with university; if they have missed some lectures or seminars because of their mental health, it is really hard for them to go back.'

Several Schools also mentioned that timely and early identification of students facing mental health difficulties can be challenging; 'Right now there are students who might not have had proper help around winter, and it might have a snowballing effect, we will see in the summer.'

When asked what they thought the root causes of these wellbeing issues were, staff mentioned varying factors. During our focus groups, many conversations highlighted generational differences as a factor contributing to the wellbeing issues faced by current students, compared to staff reflecting on their own experience of university life. Among these was 'a change in societal discourse around mental health – more students are now willing to admit that they are struggling.'

In a similar vein, some Schools spoke about **'the language of mental health being mobilised by some students who can't cope with stress.'** This theme was raised by several Schools during focus groups who spoke about mental health commonly being cited as a reason for not engaging or handing in assessments, and pointed out

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<sup>1</sup> Fontana, A. and Frey, J.H., 2000, "The interview: from structured questions to negotiated text", in Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds), [Handbook of Qualitative Research](#), 2nd ed., Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA



that students are sometimes **conflating emotions or feelings around the everyday challenges of life** such as the death of a pet, breakdown of a relationship or falling out with housemates with mental ill-health, and that **these patterns were ‘embedded by the time we see them’**.

The relationship between social media use and mental health is also complex, as shown in a [study](#) from the McKinsey Health Institute: The inundation of the topic into all pieces of our online life is a good thing when it comes to destigmatizing mental illness, but it also commodifies a serious and often life-altering topic. After all, when we’re tossing around terms like “bipolar” and “anxiety” without careful reference to diagnosis, the serious tone of the conversation falls away—and fast.<sup>2</sup>

Colleagues in some Schools talked about students having poorer ‘resilience’ than in the past. Examples cited included finding group work or presentations hard, finding it difficult to accept negative feedback, difficulty keeping things in perspective, a sense of ‘entitlement’, ‘laziness’ or ‘immaturity’, perfectionism (the perception that you need a 2.1 or you’re a failure), imposter syndrome and feeling ‘not good enough’. One respondent said **‘Students (generally speaking – there are exceptions) are not developing independent learning skills in school**. A-levels have changed and are discouraging development of the very skills we are trying to develop. This is causing more anxiety in the student body than happened in the past, and an increase in dropout rates and fails.’

Some staff members **expressed frustration that the University are enabling these behaviours**; we are ‘facilitating the slide’ or ‘letting them do what they want’, and even a suggestion that ‘the system is being played.’ Another staff member expressed concern that ‘academic staff feel that they need to be vigilant to every behaviour and conversation... there seems to be a climate of fear from staff regarding missing an indication of potential risk.’

In addition to concerns about mental health, several Schools also mentioned competitiveness between students with one School saying that they did not release results when they knew students were going to be together as they would try to work out who was ranked first. The same School mentioned they have a ‘good spud award’, a non-academic accolade for a student who contributes to the course in other ways. Another School talked about students ‘gatekeeping’ information as they see their classmates as competitors for jobs and would rather keep information to themselves. One staff member suggested that as a university we need to think about ‘our definition of success. It should be enough that you’ve passed your degree. Good enough should be good enough!’

In many Schools, staff members spoke about the need for a focus on resilience building (coaching, psychoeducation or support similar to Study Skills or Academic Mental Health were all suggested for example), personal responsibility, and of setting expectations.

Resilience is fundamentally understood as the capacity for positive adaptation or the ability to maintain or regain mental health despite facing adversity. But what exactly makes a person resilient? To address these challenges, it’s important to understand what resilience entails and how it can be developed.

Key traits that contribute to resilience include a strong sense of self, an internal locus of control, and a hopeful outlook on even the most challenging situations. Those who are resilient tend to have a clear understanding of themselves, a positive orientation towards the future, and effective interpersonal skills that help them navigate social challenges.

Dr. Lucy Hone, an expert in the field, emphasises that resilience is not a rare or extraordinary trait. Instead, she describes it as “ordinary magic”—a quality that can be cultivated in anyone. According to Dr. Hone, there are practical steps we can take to build resilience:

**1. Understand that suffering is a part of life:** Recognising that everyone faces challenges prevents us from feeling singled out, which is crucial for maintaining perspective during difficult times.

**2. Tune into the good:** Focusing on the positive aspects of life, even amid hardship, helps to balance the negative and fosters a more resilient mindset.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/gen-z-really-least-resilient-demographic-alive-ken-stern-lfvze/>

**3. Ask yourself, “Is this helping or harming me?”:** This reflective question encourages individuals to make choices that support their well-being, steering them away from behaviours or thoughts that may exacerbate stress or anxiety.

Additionally, studies have shown that having strong, supportive relationships is probably the most important thing we can do to build resilience.’ One of the key researchers in the field of resilience, Chris Peterson, said; “Other people matter.” That was the three-word summary of his decades of research.

It is therefore not surprising that students who are anxious and fearful of taking risks, such as meeting new people, are going to struggle with resilience; given that resilience includes having a sense of belonging and a group of people around you to support you.

The findings suggest that students need to be empowered to develop resilience skills. Equipping them with these tools will help them navigate challenges with confidence and maintain their mental well-being. The Welcome and Transition projects will be key to this – however it is worth reflecting on the fact that while a lot of the emphasis during discussions was on the need for students to ‘change’, there is room to consider too how ‘we’ should change to support this generation of students.

In summary, staff reflected, sometimes with empathy, sometimes with frustration, that students appeared to be more anxious, and their decision-making was driven by fear rather than taking risks. This was seen to be impacting their ability to engage well with their studies. It was apparent throughout the discussions that this generation of students is fundamentally different to those who teach and support them – something that should warrant further exploration to understand how to bridge this gap.

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## 2) Assessment and curriculum design

**Assessment** was universally cited as a significant contributing factor for poor mental health issues. Current assessment methods and academic year structure were cited by many staff members as significant sources of stress for students. There was a call among some staff for a radical rethink of how assessments are conducted to better support student wellbeing, while also a desire to maintain the academic integrity of each programme. Discussions with various Schools revealed that students often face a “relentless” burden of assessments, with coursework being particularly overwhelming. High-stakes exams, such as those covering year-long modules, seem especially stressful. Staff noted that even students who perform well in project work struggle to cope with exams. Staff reported a new pattern of students deferring their first attempt at assessments, opting to take exams in August and risking receiving capped marks if they fail. Interestingly, this trend is not limited to struggling students but is also seen among high-performing students.

The anxiety around assessments seems to be compounded by a ‘fear of being evaluated’, with students becoming overly fixated on assessments and grades. This focus on outcomes contributes to their anxiety, leading them to forget that passing an exam is merely a means to an end, not the end itself. The restructuring of the academic year has inadvertently exacerbated these issues, placing continuous pressure on students and resulting in a variable cognitive load due to uneven distribution of assessments across the semesters. It should be noted that many of the issues cited as outcomes of the restructure of the academic year were never intended outcomes of the project; for example, the growth of class tests throughout the semester on some programmes.

Staff in many Schools also spoke about perfectionism, competition between students or ‘imposter syndrome’ and some mentioned that this was also reflected in School staff around NSS results, rankings etc. Staff spoke about the extreme lengths some students were going to to avoid failure including major academic offenses such as misuse of AI, or contract cheating. These challenges have been intensified by the Covid 19 pandemic, with students experiencing heightened anxiety around assessments due to disrupted learning and having missed out on in-person exams in some cases. Additionally, we were reminded that students are balancing assessments with other responsibilities at the same time, such as applying for placements and summer jobs, further contributing to their stress.

The normalisation of stress and anxiety as part of the academic experience has been a topic of discussion, with some suggesting that students need to learn that it is okay to make mistakes.



[Research](#) indicates that if students view stress as a helpful response, it can actually enhance their performance in challenging situations.

Across almost all Schools that we spoke to, we heard about the use of the Exceptional Circumstances (EC) process to manage the stress of assessment; a ‘dramatic increase’ was noted by a number of Schools. Some staff spoke of students submitting ECs ‘pre-emptively, when they still have time’ and of the **University supporting ‘avoidance behaviours’** through ECs rather than helping students with the root causes. **‘They do it once and realise it is easy, so it becomes part of their assessment strategy’. ‘Students get into the habit of learned helplessness’.**

A big change since 2019 is that these are now ‘good’ students (using ECs) rather than those who are struggling academically. Staff told us that the students ‘have come to rely on ECs as a way to manage stress’, and ‘that it’s not leading to better work. They just fall into the vicious circle of using ECs to manage deadlines.’

Staff highlighted that students have ‘misunderstood the purpose of the EC procedure, but have mismanaged their time, or are using ECs to cover lack of childcare etc.’ One School spoke about how staff have become ‘cynical’ as ‘exceptional no longer means exceptional’, and others mentioned how the sheer volume of requests ‘makes it difficult to work out the genuine cases.’

Despite the burden on staff, the new self-certification process has been positively received for its clarity and ease of use; ‘It’s a commendable job helping students that wouldn’t have come to light under the earlier system’ and had no desire to go back to an evidence-based process, but colleagues reported that there are unintended consequences of the current set-up that puts pressure on support staff; (with) ‘the rise in students requiring additional wellbeing support... comes a corresponding increase in the number of students applying for Exceptional Circumstances and Individual Student Support Agreements. Implementing these has significantly added to academic and professional support workload.’ As well as ECs and ISSA requests, this also came out in relation to engagement monitoring for cohorts of international students who are missing more than two contact points, student support meetings, Support to Participate in University Life and/or Studies advice, concessions for PGR students, leave of absence requests etc.

Amid the growing number of EC requests, staff expressed concern that at-risk students requiring urgent attention may be overlooked.

To address some of these challenges, some Schools have started incorporating the Assessment Support Hub (ASH) and Exceptional Circumstances (ECs) process into their week-long induction programmes. They are also presenting students with case studies on EC applications, clarifying what is and isn’t likely to be approved, and discussing the equity and fairness of granting extensions when they are not warranted.

In summary, anxiety relating to assessments is a particular subset of overall anxiety among students. There was a lot of debate in focus groups about the extent to which this anxiety was caused by students themselves versus how much the University could better manage through improved assessment design. The answer likely lies somewhere between improving university assessment design and encouraging students to manage stress more effectively, but given that all students share the common experience of being assessed, the apparent rise in assessment-based anxiety should be a factor in the work currently being undertaken by the Transforming Assessment Group as part of Strategy 2030.

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### 3) Belonging and Engagement

Colleagues reported in 2019 that students seemed to struggle to feel a sense of community or belonging to the University. This issue appears to have worsened over the past five years.

In universities, fostering a sense of belonging and engagement among students presents a multifaceted challenge for staff. A sense of belonging for students has been associated with positive outcomes such as retention, engagement, and academic motivation and enjoyment. Although no single definition fully captures the concept of belonging, it could be defined as the feeling of connection, importance to others, inclusion, and support (Strayhorn, 2018; Jackson et al, 2022).

At a recent Advance HE workshop on defining ‘belonging’ at Queen’s, staff members from across the campus collaboratively identified the following key concepts and themes: community and inclusion, opportunities and communication, spaces and representation, support and accessibility, challenges and diverse needs, the role of academics and professional services staff, the impact of external factors, and the relationship between belonging and mattering.

Belonging is a key component of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, positioned in the middle tier as a social need essential for wellbeing. A strong sense of belonging is crucial not only for emotional wellbeing but also for fostering academic engagement, achievement, and student retention. Research consistently shows that students who feel connected to their university community are more likely to stay motivated, attend classes, and ultimately succeed academically<sup>3</sup>. Conversely, when students feel isolated or disconnected, they are more prone to disengagement, which can lead to poor academic performance and higher dropout rates.

During our research, the themes of belonging, engagement and connection emerged in several ways, both for students and staff.

Firstly, staff in some Schools talked about how some students are not engaging – not attending classes, going ‘off the radar,’ not attending Student Support Meetings etc; ‘Attendance is ignored until they reach crisis point... Students know there is no real consequence to not engaging.’ Some students also seem to have unrealistic expectations of what they could balance alongside study as well as around the flexibility they expected of the University. Some Schools reported that students feel overwhelmed if they miss one or two classes and as a result find it challenging to physically rejoin classes from which they now feel distanced. Staff agreed that in general, mental health issues become worse when students are not engaging, and that face-to-face contact for both staff and students was important; ‘Attendance is an issue... I believe non-attendance has a negative effect on the students’ wellbeing in that they’re less likely to feel like they are part of the QUB community.’

Anecdotally there was an increase in students working which likely impacts attendance. This trend may be partly due to the rise in the cost of living and currency fluctuations in some countries, particularly affecting PGT and international students. Where class was compulsory students were working evenings and weekends; where attendance was not compulsory students are picking and choosing when to attend – in part due to the cost of travelling to class, in part due to work. ‘Cost of Living is a driver for stress in students. The cost of the bus is not worth it to come from the city centre. The timetable doesn’t work with their work schedule. They are too tired in the morning as many work in the evenings.’ In some Schools we heard stories of students working in full time jobs while also studying on full time programmes.

Digital learning also came up as a reason for falling engagement. Some Schools seemed philosophical about this; ‘A lot of engagement seems to be done remotely. There is no corresponding drop in attainment. Everyone is working in a different way.’ On the other hand, some Schools saw remote learning as ‘catastrophic - students need to be in class and engaging in peer learning.’ The Covid 19 pandemic has also had an impact on in-person attendance.

In some areas, students in heavily timetabled programmes were reported by staff as having a stronger sense of community. Studies also show that structured academic engagement (including contact hours) contributes to a positive sense of belonging. This did not always seem to be the case however. Some Schools providing professional programmes expressed concern at the intensive nature of some of their courses; ‘Our programme is so full on (as required by our regulator) that our students do not get the opportunity to engage with the wider university experience... there is a much bigger discussion that needs to be had. It is therefore not surprising that along with the overall trend, we too are seeing increased stress and anxiety in our students.’

There was also a call across some Schools for a more **robust Attendance and Engagement Policy**, even where attendance is already monitored. Despite clear regulations, including presumed withdrawal for non-attendance, **staff often feel uncertain about enforcing these rules**, particularly given the varying modes of study that complicate the definition of attendance.

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3 Attridge, É. (2021). *Understanding and managing identity: working-class students at the University of Oxford*. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45(10), 1438-1453. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1955844>



Interestingly, some Schools suggested implementing rewards for attendance to incentivize students, or for a compulsory first year attendance policy. In one School where engagement monitoring is in place for pastoral care issues, staff told us that ‘students understand and appreciate the check-in and raise questions on the back of those check-ins.’

We know that students at Queen’s and other institutions frequently express feelings of isolation and loneliness (described by Charlotte Boulton as an ‘epidemic’), yet when we spoke to staff, they told us that students often avoid attending events designed to help them build connections within their academic community. Many Schools, as well as central university services, invest large resources into organising such events, but in general these are poorly attended, with the same students attending and fail to reach those most in need of support. When students do consider attending, they often ask questions such as, “Who will be there?” and “Will I know anyone?” – indicating a deep concern about social acceptance, the fear of not being liked and the inability or fear to ‘make new friends’.

One staff member said; ‘I’d be interested to see how students feel about student engagement and finding out why they don’t. It’s demoralising to organise events and have no-one attend or very low engagement... We should ask what they like rather than what we like... It’s a waste of money and resources.’ Other staff pointed out that many students may be working or have other responsibilities, and simply do not have the time or energy to attend such events. One School in particular told us that; **‘We’re trying to solve a problem that isn’t ours to solve. There’s nothing academics can do to give them that sense of belonging. Students are here to learn, not to socialise with us.’** This School felt quite strongly that their role was to ‘enable and empower’ the students without being ‘in their face’ for example by giving money and space to the subject society to run their own events; ‘Students will engage with (those events) when they think it’s meaningful. University doesn’t have to dominate their life. There are other things that are important in their lives.’

Staff members told us that students who do engage with subject societies, peer mentors, events etc really do benefit from it, and it helps them to feel that sense of community. Indeed, Charlotte Boulton suggests academic societies could be the ‘missing piece’ between the “academic world” of the University and the “social world” of the students’ union, and so are ‘well placed to do the challenging work of bringing together these aspects of belonging in an appealing and accessible way for students’.

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Staff reported that events embedded within the curriculum or scheduled during times when students are already on campus, such as breakfast or lunch gatherings, tend to be more effective. Peer-led activities and events offering added benefits, such as a personal reference, also show higher engagement. In some Schools, **students can be reluctant to engage in activities, especially if they do not see the direct value to their studies** or if those activities require time away from their academic responsibilities.

The issue of belonging begins at the very start of the University experience, and the transition into higher education came up often in our conversations across campus. There seemed to be a general feeling among staff that the induction process, a critical period for setting expectations about University life, often falls short in adequately preparing students. There is a **need for longer inductions** that include psychoeducation, encouraging students to take risks, helping them in the process of making new friends and a better introduction to independent learning to support students’ transition. However, we heard repeatedly that the **current approach often overwhelms students with too much information**, leaving them unsure about how to access available services.

Similarly to students, it is equally important that staff also feel a sense of belonging, as this can impact overall community engagement. In some areas, the lack of a communal atmosphere—marked by the absence of informal “water cooler moments”—is a concern.

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4 <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/academic-societies-can-make-students-time-on-campus-more-magical/>

Without a strong sense of community among staff, efforts to build student engagement may be undermined. Indeed, some Schools called for more opportunities for staff and students to meet. The use of space within Schools to help students (and staff) meet came up in a few areas, with several staff members telling us that there is no natural meeting space within their building, and that the learning spaces aren't inclusive (especially for neurodivergent staff or students), or conducive to community building; 'There is restricted space to meet up... We need hubs for students and staff. The sense of community is lost on both the student and staff side. It's having a detrimental impact on each other.'

In summary, students "Students continue to face challenges in establishing a sense of belonging and engagement, which appears to have worsened over the past five years. Key challenges include attendance at classes, increased financial pressures, and a preference for remote learning. While community-building efforts are often poorly attended due to time constraints and social anxiety, effective strategies include integrating engagement into the curriculum and offering direct benefits. Additionally, fostering a sense of belonging among staff is crucial for enhancing the overall community atmosphere.

To address these challenges, it will be essential for the University to foster stronger, more inclusive community-building initiatives for both students and staff.

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#### 4) Groups of Students who need additional support

A majority of Schools (9/16) identified **international** students as a cohort which may require some additional support. Staff suggested that those travelling to study at Queen's from other countries often seem ill-prepared and may have 'unrealistic expectations' of what their course may be like. Staff members said that international students can struggle with issues around Visas and childcare, (on which staff are unable to provide advice), and don't seem to be aware of how to register with a GP, ISSAs etc, and some staff told us that some students 'show up to the School with no accommodation asking where they are going to live... The information isn't getting through.'

Staff also spoke about **international students struggling financially 'having put themselves into debt to get here - loans, borrowing money from family, etc'**, and of working long hours. A number of those who took part in the focus groups touched on cultural issues relating to international students including the 'shame factor - the pressure to succeed. The fees are massive, and they can't fail. It is alien to them to write it down or reach for help. It makes it difficult to support them.'

International students can be concerned about disappointing family or about the 'shame' of having to resit an assessment. One School told us that 'more support is needed for international students at School level...They are generally a bit more immature and need more help, more handholding.'

Other issues raised in relation to international students included those who have brought their families along with them, those who have left their families behind, academic writing and skills, permitted working hours, international students at PGT level who have less lead-in time to settle in, international students transferring to Queen's at Level 2/3, social resilience, making friends, living and cooking on their own, navigating NI, working patterns and organisation, applying for jobs, CV and interview skills.

Another group of students that staff identified as **requiring extra support were PGT students**. Staff referred to the intensive nature of the programmes, as well as time pressures, balancing their studies with jobs or family life, isolation, and not knowing what services are available to them, or being able to immerse themselves in the full university experience. A number of staff said that many PGT students wouldn't have time to go to the Graduate School and suggested that the School could be more proactive about offering services in other locations across campus.

**Students either preparing for or already on placements** were also identified as a cohort requiring additional support. Issues included being able to secure placements or accommodation, resilience for professional practice, the geographical spread of students on placement, financial support during placement including for travel and issues encountered during placements.

Anecdotally, there also seems to have been an increase in students requesting placement allocation preference.

The transition to independent learning in higher education seems to prove challenging for **students with disabilities**, and in particular **neurodivergent students**. One School told us that ASC students in particular can get overwhelmed early, and that ‘the inflexibility of thought can be a real barrier’. Another School stated that ‘It’s not the ethos of the University to turn anybody away, but we need to set expectations. They need to know (what to expect) as a prospective student.’

According to staff, ASC students are more likely to encounter difficulties with isolation, day-to-day socialisation, communication issues and overwhelm, and one staff member pointed out that NI is far behind the rest of the UK in terms of inclusive learning environments including differences in how those students are assessed.

A number of staff raised the **challenge of getting a diagnosis currently for a few conditions, including ADHD and Autism spectrum conditions**, and one staff member suggested that the University should lobby the executive for increased funding to the NHS. The current NHS waiting list for an adult ADHD diagnosis is estimated at over 5 years meaning most students would not be seen within the duration of their programme. One member of staff put forward a suggestion that **‘there should be standard adjustments which would apply across a range of conditions’**. Due to the implications of the Bristol University vs Abrahart case, the University is preparing for the roll out of anticipatory duty to provide reasonable adjustments where a student has a working diagnosis, or where the University should know they have a disability, even if they are not registered as such.

A few respondents to the questionnaire, and participants of focus groups mentioned the need for training around neurodiversity or Autism spectrum conditions in order to best support those students.

One theme that came up in a number of Schools was a **stigma around having a disability** (particularly those with a mental health condition), and a **reluctance among some students (especially international students) to register with the Student Disability Service**. This came up particularly in relation to students who do not register with the service but become dependent on the Exceptional Circumstances process; ‘they are resistant that the label of disabled student will go with them and will affect their career. International and students with conditions that come up later in life aren’t as used to being proactive around adjustments and mitigations.’ This has now been reflected in the **rebrand of the Student Disability Service to Accessible Learning Support**.

Another cohort mentioned during our conversations were students with otherwise good resilience who are supporting family or friends who are less resilient – maybe a housemate or a family member for whom they are a carer. One School raised that these students are more likely to rely on Exceptional Circumstances to navigate assessments; ‘there is a lack of support within the University and ECs regulations for students who have caring responsibilities; essentially, these students can’t apply to ECs more than once or twice for extensions/deferrals based on supporting family members who suffer from poor physical and mental health or addictions.’

As would be expected, when asked about groups of students requiring additional support, opinions varied based on demographics within the School or programme. Other cohorts mentioned included care-experienced students, students with caring responsibilities, home students, GB students, access students (both on campus and those studying at other locations), mature students, first year, final year and level 2 students, males, elite athletes and ‘middle ground’ students. Similarly to the previous Gaps and Pressures report, staff expressed that ‘99% of time is spent with 1% of students. The middle ground are ignored. High achievers are praised, and low achievers are supported. I worry about the vast majority in the middle. Our time is eaten up and it affects the quality of the work.’

Several staff also told us that **‘a broad approach is good as all students will experience some form of issue in some way throughout their studies’**, and that each cohort require a slightly different focus on wellbeing depending on their level of study, and personal circumstances.

In summary, while there was no consensus it did seem that international students and PG students were of particular concern to those who took part in the focus groups. It was noted that there was very limited discussion about PGR students.



It was never suggested at any stage that Gaps and Pressures was solely focused on taught students and yet, with the exception of a handful of Schools, those present for discussions worked primarily with taught students. This suggested a need to repeat the exercise but with a focus on research students.

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## 5) Staff Issues

One big difference since the previous Gaps and Pressures report is that **staff who support students feel much more confident and supported in signposting to appropriate services**. Almost all staff who responded to the Gaps and Pressures questionnaire said they feel confident in supporting a student of concern and most respondents said that staff in their School feel supported in dealing with student concerns, although some staff spoke about the **increasing volume and complexity of student wellbeing issues** and the toll those can take, or the underestimation of time and resources involved.

Many staff members who participated in this report were extremely complimentary of Student Wellbeing and Accessible Learning Support and often praised team members by name. It is obvious that good relationships exist between this team and Schools, but there remains room for improvement. Some staff members suggested further outreach by the Wellbeing team within Schools, beyond School Board meetings, for example workshops, talks and monthly drop-ins at key pressure points during the year.

That said, staff who support students within Schools at Queen's are navigating a complex landscape of challenges that can affect their ability to support students effectively. A recurring issue that came up in our research was a perceived lack of clarity on the distinct remit and responsibilities of different central university services, leading to confusion and inefficiencies. Staff also identified the need for greater recognition of the roles of Advisers of Studies, Personal Tutors, and Module Coordinators. These roles are critical, as their competency directly impacts the quality of student support.

As we carried out focus groups across campus, the unwavering commitment of staff to supporting students was evident. Many of the staff stood out as an embodiment of the University values of Integrity, Connectivity, Ambition, Respect and Excellence.

At times, staff burnout emerged as a concern, exacerbated by the impact of difficult conversations with students, which can take a **heavy emotional toll on staff members**; 'A lot of academic staff were taking it upon themselves spending a lot of time and pastoral support above and beyond what should be expected' and '**I feel there is not enough support for staff or anyone for staff to talk to should they need to decompress from heavy student issues/crisis.**'

At times, the training and support provided by the central University were seen as insufficient, leaving staff ill-equipped to navigate the challenges of their roles.

Staff who participated in the Gaps and Pressures questionnaire were asked whether they knew where to access sources of staff wellbeing information and support. Most respondents told us that they did know where to access this information, but the uptake was mixed, and opinions varied. Some staff members mentioned initiatives like Inspire Counselling service or the staff choir. Other staff members told us that they didn't always find initiatives such as 'yoga classes or coffee mornings' relevant, or that things like holistic therapies were welcome, but that they might not always take place at convenient times or locations. At times it did seem that there is greater clarity needed on the role of Staff Wellbeing and on the Employee Assistance Programme. Despite these challenges, it is heartening to note that staff within several Schools spoke of supporting each other well, creating a network of peer support that is invaluable in such a demanding environment. The idea of a debrief service for staff who support students came up on several occasions; 'We all rely on colleagues as sounding boards just to say; "that was a lot" or "did that make sense?". **Compassion is needed for staff. Someone needs to reach out to those people to make sure they're ok. Some of the circumstances are horrendous.**'

Staff across several Schools referred to inconsistent staff engagement in student support initiatives, with some expressing frustration that 'not all staff have engaged as much as they should have done'.

A few staff members suggested that engagement should be officially recorded and recognised in terms of promotion for example, and one staff member suggested that there may be a gender aspect to this. Practice varies across Faculties and Schools, and as one staff member told us; **'Student support is everyone's job... Everyone should be responsible for wellbeing, not just specialist roles.'** A few Schools also referred to **'key individuals with a vast workload who hold a huge amount of institutional knowledge who are holding the system together'** and expressed concern about the risk of a 'single point of failure'.

The role of Student Support Officer (SSO) or similar seems to be one of those key roles within Schools. Schools who have an SSO in post spoke about the value of that role, but also spoke about the heavy workload involved. Schools who do not have an SSO currently in post told us about the need for the role, and about consistency in terms of what they do and how they are recognised; **'I would love to see that all Schools are given an SSO at the same appropriate grade instead of a cottage industry going begging to Faculty.'**

Staff, both academic and professional services, across campus spoke of their workload demand as a barrier to their own wellbeing. Several staff members reported being simply **too busy to engage with some of the initiatives set up to support them**; 'Staff are committed to students' welfare and it's at the expense of their emotional wellbeing... It's hard to find the energy to engage with Community of Practice (for staff supporting students) because of workload.'

In summary staff reported that although they feel better equipped to support students, they struggled with the volume and intensity of the work – as well as the emotional impact. Burnout emerged as a significant concern, particularly for staff who often go beyond their expected duties to provide pastoral care. The emotional toll of handling difficult conversations with students is compounded by insufficient support structures for staff wellbeing, leading to a sense of isolation for some. Recommendations include enhanced debrief services, clearer outreach from the Wellbeing team, and better training to help staff handle complex emotional challenges.



# RECOMMENDATIONS



# RECOMMENDATIONS

Having reviewed the material gathered throughout the project the following recommendations are made:

**Welcome / Transition Project:** Strengthen the Welcome / Transition Project by enhancing its alignment with the HEA 'Belonging' project to further cultivate a sense of community and belonging among new students. A particular focus should be placed on helping students with opportunity and the tools to connect to new peers and form new communities at the University.

**Review of Exceptional Circumstances (ECs):** Conduct a thorough review of how ECs are utilized by students to ensure fair and effective support mechanisms are in place, addressing the diverse needs of the student population.

**Transforming Assessment (Strategy 2030):** Implement the Transforming Assessment initiative, part of Strategy 2030, to introduce innovative and flexible assessment methods that better reflect modern educational practices, how 'Gen Z' learns and improve student outcomes.

**Review of the Academic Year:** Perform a comprehensive review of the academic year structure to identify areas for improvement, ensuring it creates space for and supports student learning and accommodates their learning styles effectively.

**Modern Student Learning:** Increase research and initiatives focused on understanding contemporary student learning methods, potentially in collaboration with the Institute, to develop strategies that enhance the educational experience.

**Mental Health Focus:** Maintain and expand the focus on mental health by providing ongoing training, raising awareness, and ensuring adequate resources for staff to support student well-being. Further to the Bristol University case and High Court judgement<sup>5</sup>, ensure all staff (including academic staff, administrative staff with student facing roles, accommodation and support staff and members of staff responsible for addressing appeals, complaints and fitness to study procedures) are trained on their duties under the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 This should include being trained on the duty to make reasonable adjustments before a full assessment by Accessible Learning Support has taken place, in urgent or serious situations.

**International and PGT Students:** Continue to prioritize the needs of international and postgraduate taught (PGT) students, offering tailored support to address their unique challenges and enhance their academic experience.

**Rebrand Disability Services:** Implement the rebrand of Disability Services to Accessible Learning Support to better reflect the commitment to inclusivity and provide clearer communication of available resources and assistance.

**Gaps and Pressures for PGR Students:** In collaboration with the Graduate School, extend the Gaps and Pressures analysis to postgraduate research (PGR) students in the 2024/25 academic year to ensure comprehensive support and address any emerging issues specific to this group.

**Staff Support:** Enhance support for staff through the introduction of debrief services, continuous training, and initiatives aimed at promoting staff wellbeing, recognizing their critical role in student success.  
**Compassionate Communication:** Roll out a 'Compassionate Communication' project to promote effective, clear and empathetic communication skills across the campus of Queen's and beyond. The project is an acknowledgement that 'Every contact matters'.

We trust that this report provides a helpful and reliable contribution to the discussions on how best to support student success. We hope too that it demonstrates a proactive and responsive approach to future challenges. We believe that adopting these recommendations and aligning with national and international trends in higher education and student mental health support will position Queen's as a leader in the field, committed to the continuous improvement of our whole university approach to mental health and wellbeing.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/guidance/advice-note-higher-education-sector-legal-case-University->



# QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

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