



USI Student Mental Health Funding Policy Position 2024

The Case for Investment in Student Mental Health

USI are seeking a national investment plan for student mental health. In 2020 the National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework was established. Whilst institutions are implementing this to the best of their ability, many of these actions can only be implemented by top-down financial resourcing from the government. One of the key actions of the implementation plan is to “provide students with safe, accessible and well-resourced mental health support”. This cannot be met without significant additional funding to student mental health services.

Multiannual Core Funding

Since the Covid-19 outbreak in 2020, counselling support in third level education has been funded by a core €3 million in the budget and an additional €2 million funding in response to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on student mental health. Rates of mental ill-health skyrocketed amongst young people during the pandemic, but post-pandemic we have not seen these numbers decrease – instead mental distress in young people has largely stayed the same since 2020, indicating that the elevated levels of mental health problems are the new normal (Smyth & Nolan, 2022). This enduring increase in mental health difficulties amongst students necessitates sealing €6 million in core, multiannual funding to offer some stability to an already swamped sector. €5 million of this would maintain current service provision, and an additional 1 million would help implement the National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework; campus mental health and wellbeing programs and student outreach.

Increase the Counsellors to Students Ratio

The internationally recommended ratio of counsellors to students for safe and ethical practice is 1:1000 to 1:1500 dependent on service need (IACS). Ireland’s current counsellor to student ratio is at unsafe levels, with a staff-student ratio 1:2240 according to PCHEI, the representative body of Psychological Counsellors in Higher Education in Ireland. PCHEI calculate that an additional investment of 11.5 million is recommended to bring us to a 1:1000 ratio, or a 4.5 million investment in staff to bring us to a 1:1500 ratio. To achieve a 1:1000 ratio would require an FTE of 244, an additional 135 FTE. The cost of this at standard “counsellor” rate, including pension and PRSI is around €85K per FTE, which would mean annual costs as follows: 1 : 1,000 target = €11.5 million or 1 : 1,500 target = €4.5 million. It’s important to note that Ireland’s 1:2240 ratio includes all clinical staff (counsellors, directors,

assistant psychologists (APs), sessional workers, etc.) Some of these staff members eg. Directors and APs also spend significant portions of their time in non-client facing work, which is why for the Irish context a ratio closer to 1:1000 would be more appropriate, costing an additional €11.5 million.

However, again this funding is only useful if the funding provided is core and multi-annual. Counselling services face challenges in recruiting staff due to the precarious nature of the current funding model, meaning many staff are on short-term contracts. It's difficult to attract good staff, with a passion for working with young adults when there's little to no guarantee of a stable job or career progression. This restricts counsellors from developing an expertise in the sector, which negatively impacts students receiving counselling. Therefore, there is a pressing need for a phased increase of the student-counselling staff ratio via a multiannual funding commitment to bring the staff-student ratio to ethical levels.

Support Campus Health Services

Currently, campus health services are funded on an institution-by-institution basis, and they receive no direct funding from the HEA. Campus health services provide a broad range of services for students, from sexual / physical health to mental healthcare. As highlighted in a recent report by the TCD Mental Health Services (2023), student health services are seeing increasing complexity and volume of mental health presentations, straining the ability of campus health services to provide effective mental healthcare. The same report highlighted that approximately 60% of presentations to the college GP service related to mental health concerns. Many other campuses around the country don't have a health service, leaving students vulnerable to not being able to access a GP/nurse when they need it. Furthermore, psychiatry provision on campuses around the country is low, with only 3 campuses known to have access to a college psychiatrist at the time of this report. Campus psychiatry provision can also be invaluable to students seeking ADHD diagnosis and access to medication, as the public ADHD clinics are only available in select locations across the country. Nurses are an invaluable pillar of campus health services and mental health nurses provide fantastic additional support to students with complex mental health difficulties. There is also a need for a memorandum of understanding between campus counselling/ health services and the HSE to ensure that students with an identified need can access secondary mental health supports in the HSE through a seamless referral process, as this is not always currently the case. With the increased demand for campus health services, the expansion of college campuses and increased reliance on international students there is a need for government investment and support in developing and resourcing student health services.

Conclusion

The case is clear. Students need adequately resourced counselling services now more than ever. The college campus is a student's community for 3-4 years and is naturally the best place to first access mental healthcare. An investment now in the college counselling services is an investment that will pay off for years to come.

Key Asks:

- €6 million core multiannual funding.
- A phased increase of the student-counselling staff ratio to 1000;1.
- Government commitment to funding student health services.

- Psychiatry provision for all colleges & universities.
- Funding for campus mental health nurses.
- Memorandums of understanding with local HSE mental health services

References

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Thematic Review of Student Mental Health Services Trinity College Dublin 2023
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