

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING TRENDS OF THE STUDENT POPULATION PRE - POST COVID19



Lucy Ractliffe, Beth Leo, Sally Homden wanted to Investigate and Evaluate the Mental Health and Wellbeing trends of the Student Population, at a small Specialist University, Pre and Post Covid19

INTRODUCTION

The Hartpury University Achievement and Success Centre (ASC), provides Learning and Wellbeing Support (amongst other provisions) for students. In contrast to the wellbeing centre where they provide support for students via the chaplain, nurse and counsellors. Prior to the pandemic (2019-2020) students were able to access formal support via the wellbeing centre and DSA funded provision. The Wellness development strand was created in 2019-2020 in reaction to the increase in student demand for wellness support and the increase in number of students disclosing Mental Health Conditions (MHC). Wellness Development is not a therapeutic service but offers wellness support to students via multiple methods. During the pandemic (2020-2021) there was an increase in consciousness around mental health and wellbeing, and as such those seeking support increased, we explore the trends. This was identified in the Student Academic Experience Study, however it reported students felt they were not supported during the pandemic. Neves and Hewitt (2021) reflected that this poses significant challenges for universities following disrupted transitions and experiences over the past two years.

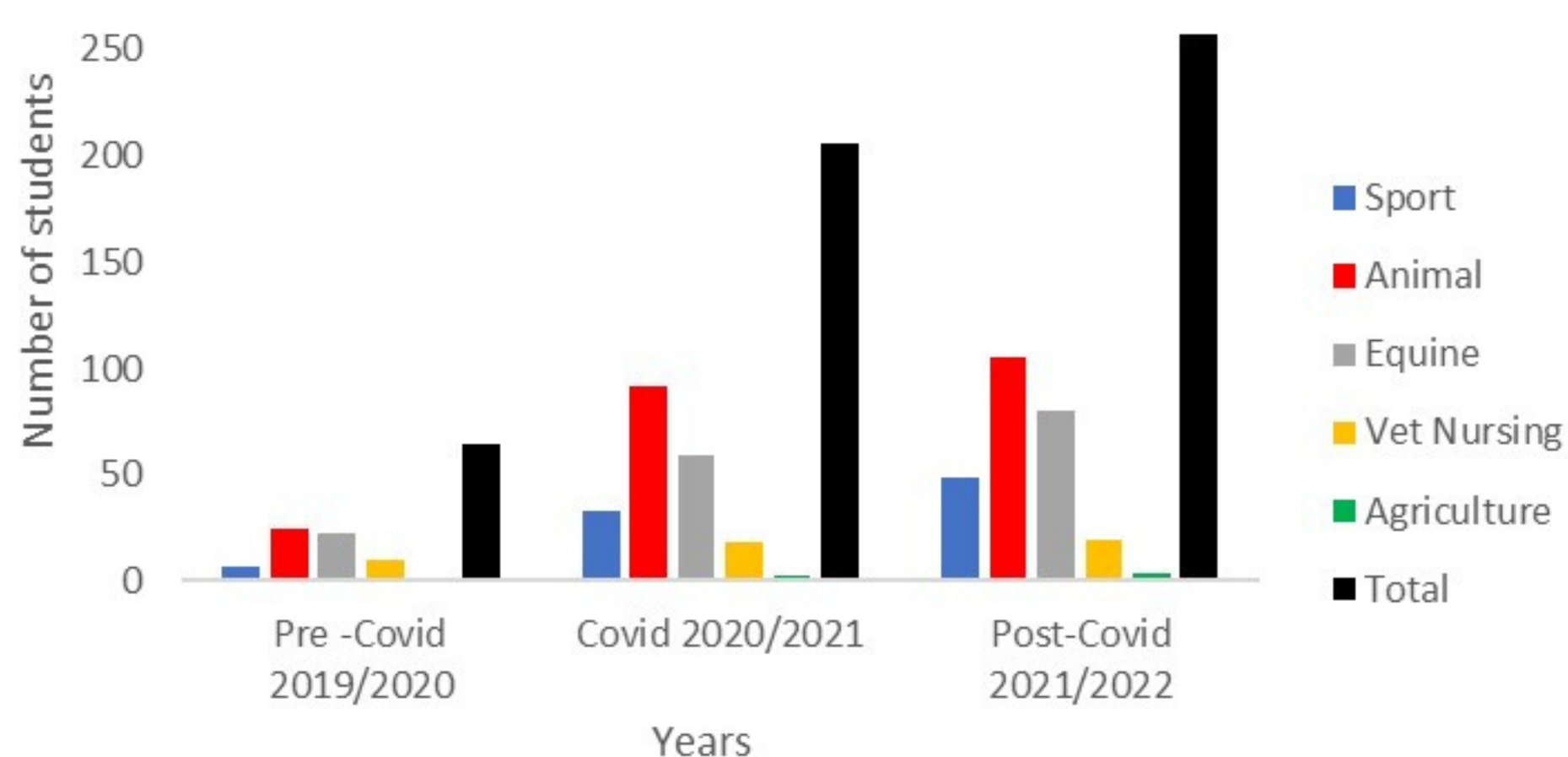
The pandemic legacy has seen a continual increase in students disclosing MHC, reporting wellness concerns and exploring support, both formal and informal. This research explores the mental health and wellbeing trends of students pre and post the pandemic at a small specialist institution.

METHODS

Ethical approval was gained prior to data analysis to explore the trends of the pandemic on Mental health and Wellbeing declarations. Existing data within the Access Participation Plan, the disability register and student engagement data was used to address the research aim. Mental health declarations prior to the pandemic (2019-2020) for formal support provided by the DSA (GOVBenefits, 2023) was declared via UCAS or throughout the year. This was recorded on an internal 'disability register'. During (2020-2021) and Post (2021-2022) pandemic, declarations were collated centrally via 'MyConcern' and stored on our student records system. The wellness development team recorded their student engagement and support in 4 ways, Physical, Wellness, Personal and Academic. Students who disclosed or were supported by the wellness development team (excluding those categorised as academic), their overarching conditions were categorised based on the NHS mental health list, of which there are 34 conditions (NHS, 2023). Student record data was used to provide additional context to aid the analysis of trends amongst the student population.

RESULTS

Student Engagement per Department



Pre-Covid (2019-2020) - Of those declaring the largest recorded condition was social anxiety (78%) and depression (40%). Of the cohort 68% of students recorded a secondary condition, 92% were female and 48% were mature students.

Covid 19 (2020-2021) - Of this first year of central records, of those who engaged, 80% were females, 58% had a secondary condition. 77% recorded social anxiety as a primary condition with a secondary condition being a learning difference, personal or academic challenge.

Post-Covid (2021-2022) - Social anxiety and depression remained the highest recorded conditions. 48% of students had a secondary symptom, predominantly ASD, SpLD and/or ADHD. Of those who declared 83% were females.

Breakdown of Mental Health and Wellness Support Provision by Year

	Pre-Covid 2019-2020	During Covid 2020-2021	Post - Covid 2021-2022
DSA Funded Support	64	110	105
ASC Wellness Dev. Support	0	96	152
Total	64	206	257

Mental Health & Wellness Support VS HESA by Year

	MH & Wellness Declarations	National Data (HESA) MH
Pre-Covid - 2019/2020	64	105,590
During Covid - 2020/2021	206	122,530
Post Covid - 2021/2022	257	131,900
% increase pre-post Covid	46%	25%

So what does this mean for a Small Specialist Institution?

Between the academic years 2019-20(pre) and 2021-22(post) there was a 301%* increase in those declaring Mental Health at the University (via ASC). The data shows the number of students seeking support for their Mental Health has increased across the institution and sector, as such reviewing our practices is an ongoing process. However, Students feel more comfortable in seeking support when required, in an informal rather than formal way. The data shows why having a holistic more rounded approach is far better than a single pronged approach to support the changing needs of our students.

What have we done?

- Streamlined reporting for effective and efficient support for students
- Delivered in module workshops on key areas identified (resilience, problem solving and managing personal challenges and emotions)
- Continue to offer 1:1 support for students via multiple methods
- Work with academics in being equipped to support their students
- Offer a Student Assistance Programme (SAP) available 24/7

With student numbers, declarations and support requirements increasing at a greater rate (11% per our student population) reviewing and ongoing investment in support via various methods is being considered. Particularly considering the current topic of Universities 'duty of care' of Students.

*Between the academic years of 2019-20 and 2021-22 there was a 402% increase in those declaring Mental health at the University (via ASC), however once duplicates (students receiving both DSA and wellness development support) were removed this equates to a 301% increase.

