

REPORT

Centre for  
Mental Health



# Student Space

An evaluation of a web-based intervention supporting student mental wellbeing over the pandemic

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**STUDENT  
SPACE**

From  
**student  
minds**

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## A note on terminology regarding race and ethnicity

We are aware that the terminology used to discuss race and ethnicity in policy and research contexts (including the term ‘Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic’) is sometimes highly problematic. For this reason, wherever possible we have used the term ‘racialised communities’. Exceptions are made when quoting other organisations' research or direct quotes from participants. Read more in [our terminology guide](#).



## Executive summary

Students in higher education have been dramatically impacted by the pandemic and restrictions. A survey conducted during the 2021 summer term (ONS, 2021b) reported that 29% of students had used a service to support their mental health.

Centre for Mental Health conducted an independent evaluation of a web-based intervention to support student mental wellbeing in England and Wales during the pandemic. The intervention, Student Space, was developed by Student Minds and funded by the Office for Students and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales.

### Student Space

Student Space was launched in August 2020 and included four key elements:

- Advice and information
- Student stories – five-minute video clips made by students giving practical advice
- Support services – from the outset, these included a phoneline, a text service, an email service and webchat. Eight further services, tailored to groups of students with the highest needs, were launched in April 2021
- Support at your university – this provides links to most higher education mental health and wellbeing services, via a search bar.

### The evaluation

Centre for Mental Health reviewed other research conducted over the pandemic, interviewed expert stakeholders, ran two focus groups with ‘widening participation’<sup>1</sup> students, conducted an online survey completed by 157 students, and analysed Student Space website statistics to answer four key questions:

- How does Student Space respond to students’ needs, addressing their key areas of concern?

- How does it address gaps in support and respond to emerging needs?
- Does Student Space provide clear information and signpost students to help within the NHS or third sector?
- Does Student Space improve access to and availability of mental health support for students?

### Students faced major challenges to daily living and their mental wellbeing

The higher education sector is extremely diverse. There is no single culture and often several cultures within a single establishment, and so there is variation in mental health offers for students across the sector.

Higher education mental health and wellbeing services had expected a surge in the number of students experiencing difficulties with their mental wellbeing from the start of the pandemic, and some struggled initially to develop the capacity to meet this need virtually. This expectation, however, was not necessarily borne out, and it was reported by higher education mental health and wellbeing service providers, and others in our interviews, that there was a marked drop in students seeking help. This, of course, may not have been the case for all higher education establishments. It was also reported in our interviews that students seeking help had much more complex needs than many providers had met before.

Our key stakeholders reported that not all students were impacted equally, and that some groups of students experienced greater challenges. Those they identified were:

- Students from racialised communities
- Students with disabilities
- International students
- Students from ‘widening participation’<sup>1</sup> groups.

<sup>1</sup> Students from backgrounds that are underrepresented in higher education, including students from socially deprived or ‘looked after’ backgrounds, those who are the first in their family to go into higher education, students estranged from their families, and those entering higher education by a non-A-level route (UCAS, n.d.)

## How does Student Space respond to students' needs, addressing their key areas of concern?

All of the key stakeholders and students were impressed by the quality of Student Space and it was described as strongly evidence-based, relevant and very readable. Student Minds achieved this through ongoing insights research and robust processes to ensure the quality of material on the website.

The four elements of Student Space have all been well received. However, not all elements of Student Space have as yet been fully tested and may be yet to reach their potential.

## How does it address gaps in support and respond to emerging needs?

Student Minds conducted ongoing insight research with different groups of students throughout the life of Student Space and via its advisory group. This was used to inform the content and to change and expand the nature of the support service offer. In April 2021, eight new services, tailored to particular groups of students, were launched.

The needs identified by students in the focus groups and survey, by key stakeholders, and indeed in the wider research are, in our view, reflected in the content of Student Space.

## Does Student Space provide clear information and signpost students to help within the NHS or third sector?

There is some advice on Student Space to seek help from a GP, but the bulk of signposting was to one or more of the support services on Student Space, or to the university/college links. Accessing these types of support might lead to more appropriate or targeted signposting.

However, Student Space did provide clear, evidence-based and readable information, often of a pragmatic nature and relating to everyday aspects of student life.

## Does Student Space improve access to and availability of mental health support for students?

Student Minds have conducted marketing and communications activity for much of the life of Student Space to date. However, there is a question as to whether this penetrated deeply enough into the sector.

### We make the following recommendations:

1. Student Space should receive funding for at least the next academic year. Such funding should cover:
  - Site maintenance
  - Commissioning of evidence based and accessible written and video material
  - Insights research
  - Expert advice
  - Maintenance of links for the 'Support at your university' element of Student Space.
2. A further review of any direct support service elements should be conducted. The review should include a consultation with the sector on what support, for whom and of what type, is available and where there are gaps. Such a review would aim to make the business case for any service support element.
3. Some of this funding should be dedicated to marketing, promotion and awareness.
4. Student Minds should work with marketing experts to develop a strategy for ongoing promotion and awareness raising, particularly utilising social media platforms that students use.
5. Student Minds should continue to support students whose first or preferred language is Welsh, and funding should continue to support translation into Welsh.

## Introduction

In early 2020 we all became aware of a new virus, and within a very short time we had entered a worldwide pandemic. Whilst vaccines have begun to combat the virus, and people in higher education have been double-vaccinated in significant numbers in the UK (ONS 2021), we remain in a global pandemic. It has had a dramatic impact on us all, young and old alike. In the UK, early on in the crisis, the media reported widely on the plight of university students, many being confined and isolated in student accommodation. This report explores the impact of the pandemic on student mental wellbeing and describes an intervention designed to support higher education students during the pandemic.

There are some 2.5 million students in higher education across the UK (HESA, 2021) with about 2.2 million in England and Wales, 296,695 in Scotland (in 2017 – Scottish Funding Council, 2019) and 59,075 in Northern Ireland (in 2019 – Northern Ireland Executive, 2021). The UK also hosts many thousands of international students: in 2019/20 there were 556,625 foreign students enrolled in higher education in the UK, most (408,825) from outside the European Union (HESA, 2021). The pandemic impacted significantly both on domestic and international students.

In this report we describe the impact of the pandemic on student mental wellbeing and describe a web-based intervention, Student Space, developed by the charity Student Minds, to support student mental wellbeing during these challenging times. Student Space itself and Centre for Mental Health's evaluation (upon which this report is based) were funded by England's Office for Students and Cyngor Cyllido Addysg Uwch Cymru (Higher Education Funding Council for Wales).

### What is Student Space?

Student Space provides web-based mental wellbeing support, specifically targeted towards students at higher education establishments, and specifically geared towards the issues generated during the pandemic.

It comprises several elements:

**Advice and information** – consisting of clinically sound and readable articles on coping with mental health difficulties and a variety of everyday issues that can affect students' mental wellbeing. Its 'Mental Health and Wellbeing' subsection has (at the time of writing) 15 articles, mostly taking no more than two minutes to read, and helpfully stating this at the outset. Each has links to other potentially relevant pages. Some articles link to the support services available via Student Space and all have simple and practical advice. These articles are commissioned by Student Minds from clinical experts; each one is based on insights research conducted with a range of students by Student Minds, is subject to an independent clinical review, and is edited so that it is accessible to students. New material has been commissioned throughout the life of Student Space.

**Student stories** – five-minute video clips made by students giving practical advice on issues ranging from balancing screen time to coping with grief and finding one's first job on graduation. These are commissioned and produced following the same robust process for the 'advice and information' section and, at the time of writing, there are 20 resources in this section.

**Support services** – links to the following types of support (all except one was still in operation at the time of writing):

- Services commissioned to support all students:
  - Phone support (open 3pm to midnight, seven days a week)
  - Text message support (open 24 hours a day, seven days a week)
  - Email support
  - Webchat support (open 3pm to midnight, seven days a week)
- Services commissioned to support specific groups of students identified as needing specific, tailored support:

- Support for Black students, provided through peer support groups
- Support for Muslim students, provided through helpline, text and webchat services
- Support for Punjabi students, provided through peer support groups
- Support for trans students, provided through helpline, text and webchat services
- Support for working-class students through webinars
- Support for students hearing voices through peer support groups
- Support for students with OCD and Body Dysmorphic Disorder through peer support groups
- Support for students with disordered eating through access to counselling

**‘Support at your University’** – providing links to most higher education mental health and wellbeing services, found via a search bar.

Student Space is available in English or Welsh via a button at the top of the page, though the Student Stories videos are in English.

## History of the project

In mid June 2020 funding was provided for Student Space, and Student Minds began commissioning content, developing the website and all the other activities required to establish it. Student Space launched on 10 August, 2020.

Student Minds established an advisory and governance process, consisting of the Independent Governance Group (20 members representing 13 organisations) and Programme Advisory Group (26 members from 23 organisations). Each group is composed of experts and key stakeholders, including those from the higher education sector, mental health

and wellbeing providers to this sector, and student representative bodies. The number of organisations involved in both groups had the potential for spreading awareness quite widely.

Student Minds also recruited and set a process for ongoing recruitment of students from across England and Wales and from different cohorts (e.g. international students, students from racialised communities, those from different regions and different types of establishments etc) to inform the content of Student Space. The Mix and Shout 85258 were also commissioned to provide the first direct service support, and this was all operating by 4 August, 2020.

## The evaluation

Centre for Mental Health used a multi-method approach to evaluate. We collected statistical data on website usage; spoke to 26 expert stakeholders from across the higher education sector (including representatives of higher education welfare/wellbeing services, lecturers, academics, educational department managers and representative bodies); ran two focus groups with students from ‘widening participation’ groups; conducted an online survey in which 157 students participated; and reviewed other research in this area. When we collected data, we focused on the following questions:

- How does Student Space respond to students’ needs, addressing their key areas of concern?
- How does it address gaps in support and respond to emerging needs?
- Does Student Space provide clear information and signpost students to help within the NHS or third sector?
- Does Student Space improve access to and availability of mental health support for students?



# The impact of Covid on higher education

This section summarises the main themes that emerged from our conversations in one-to-one interviews, focus groups, our student survey, website statistics analysis and some of the other research that was taking place.

## The higher education sector

*“...There is no such thing as a university culture; there are many cultures, as many as there are universities...”*

It is important to give a brief overview of the education sector by way of context. The higher education sector in England and Wales is extremely diverse. Higher education establishments are very individual organisations, and a university may have several cultures within it, across its faculties, colleges and departments. Some establishments have developed over the last 100+ years (and our oldest have been around for nearly a millennium). The twentieth century had various phases of growth in the sector, with many of the most recent arriving in the 1990s. Universities vary in size and in their offer. Consequently, what they offer in the way of wellbeing and welfare support will vary markedly, and indeed “...the priority such support is given will vary...” [Student Minds representative].

Whilst universities and other higher education establishments have senior management teams, considerable power often lies with the constituent parts of each establishment. Thus, influencing universities and how they support the mental or physical wellbeing of their students is a complex task. The adoption of a policy by a university’s senior management team is not a guarantor of wholesale adoption, nor of consequential changes in practice.

## Students and the pandemic

The immediate impact of the pandemic for most students was the closure of universities, until virtual systems of tuition could be developed. Some students returned home and studied from there; others were largely confined to

their student accommodation, often in a bubble with people they might not have known very well. Work opportunities evaporated, and many students relying on part-time jobs to meet the cost of living entered financial crisis. Students were particularly isolated. For much of the last 18 months, the rich social life (or any social life) promised to students was gone. Graduation ceremonies were cancelled or became highly restricted affairs, preventing students from celebrating their achievement with friends and family. And of course, students had the same worries and concerns as anyone else during the pandemic.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2021a) summarised research conducted during the autumn of 2020 on higher education students, including their own survey of students for the same period, and found that:

- Students were less likely to have left their home/place of residence in the week before the survey than the general public
- Some 29% were dissatisfied with their learning experience
- Just over half were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their social experience
- Students tested with “...lower levels of life satisfaction, life worthwhile and happiness, and higher levels of anxiety, compared with the general population...” (page 2)
- Over half of students reported a decline in their mental wellbeing as a result of the pandemic (this finding emerged from three separate studies conducted in November 2020).

A research review by ONS (ONS, 2021b) covering the summer term of 2021 reported some improvement, such as in life satisfaction scores (though still significantly lower than average scores for the general population). More than half the sample of students had left their home or place of residence in the week prior to being surveyed and had met friends or family they were not living with. However,

29% had used a service to support their mental wellbeing, such as their GP, a higher education mental wellbeing service or an Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) service (available by self-referral and GP referral across England). If this figure is in any way representative of the wider population of students, this would equate to just over 600,000 students in England and Wales seeking support for their mental wellbeing. Additionally, more than half of students surveyed remained dissatisfied with their learning experience.

We know that Covid-19 did not impact us all equally: some groups, such as people from racialised communities, were disproportionately affected. Likewise, the impact on students was unequal. An example of this in recent research is provided by the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2021). It conducted two surveys which covered undergraduate and postgraduate psychology students and academic staff. The results were similar to those reported above, but also noted that:

*“...Staff highlighted that economically disadvantaged students, particularly from BAME groups, were disproportionately negatively affected, primarily due to limited access to technology...”* (page 7).

Whilst the majority of students and staff suffered a decline in their wellbeing, students with disabilities and staff with caring responsibilities suffered disproportionately.

Our key stakeholder participants, particularly those involved in providing mental health and wellbeing services, stated that they had expected a large influx of students requesting help as an immediate impact of the pandemic: *“...we actually thought we might be swamped...”* [Higher education mental health and wellbeing provider]. Mental health and wellbeing service providers rushed to develop virtual service offers and to advertise these to students.

*“...just as with virtual tuition at uni...we had to develop all this [virtual assessment and counselling] from scratch...and not all our staff are as IT savvy as others...”* [Higher education mental health and wellbeing provider]

Instead, what these key stakeholders reported happening was a marked reduction in requests for help, certainly in 2020:

*“...I think the reduction in footfall might be explained by some students being home-based and using services locally, where they live...and possibly also the anxieties around being away from home, perhaps for the first time, were not there...”* [Higher education mental health and wellbeing provider]

*“...In my experience a lot of this was because students didn't have the personal space to... access online support from home. There was always someone who could hear. I did therapy sessions with students constantly pausing because they thought they could hear someone coming home and with one student who was hiding behind a shed, so no one could hear them...”* [Student Minds representative]

*“...I might be in a minority but... I have a lot of social anxiety, and this all reduced with the lockdown... in lots of ways all this [restrictions, being bubbled and virtual tuition] made university life easier for me...”* [Student]

However, while there was a reduction in ‘footfall’, it was also universally reported in our interviews with key stakeholders that the profile of those who did come forward for help had changed. All the providers we spoke to reported that the degree of complexity, multiplicity and severity of need had increased. And this posed its own challenges.

*“...we have great links to the NHS and local voluntary services...but even for us it was difficult to refer on as these services were struggling to respond to the pandemic too... there will be colleges where their local NHS etc are not as well engaged and it would be much worse for those...”* [Higher education mental health and wellbeing provider]

*“...most of the young people coming forward presented with much more complexity and consequently [required] more than just counselling... often having multiple problems...”* [Academic/lecturer/departments lead]



*“...Some of my team have had to deal with students in some really quite challenging and difficult situations in their homes, such as witnessing and experiencing domestic violence...”* [Higher education mental health and wellbeing provider]

The students we spoke to and surveyed gave a very similar picture to the one reported in the surveys and research above.

### **The pandemic brought about dramatic changes to everyday life**

It was very clear that changes in how students were taught and in everyday living had a dramatic impact on mental wellbeing. Common daily challenges listed by students included:

- Isolation and loneliness  
*“...I was in student accommodation alone, none of my housemates came back to college, my entire life went virtual...”*
- Not seeing friends in person
- Not being able to do social activities  
*“...there was no let up, the same things in the same place with no chance to feel some release...”*
- Being “confined” with housemates with whom one did not necessarily get on, for weeks at a time  
*“...I am in the uni’s student accommodation, I didn’t have any choice in who I live with, I don’t live with my friends, and it was not a problem before. Now I feel pretty much on my own even though there are other people around...”*
- Studying from home in less-than-ideal conditions: some students had little or no privacy and faced family distractions such as younger siblings, or poor internet access
- For some students, going to college is a break from a difficult family life – “...and this was denied us...”
- Dealing with what some students saw as sub-standard tutoring from lecturers who had not developed skills in delivering learning content virtually. The move to virtual tuition also brought some benefits, however:

*“...lots of lectures are now recorded so at least now you can go back and revisit these...”*

- Neurodiverse students attending our focus groups told us that normally they would have some reasonable adjustments to support their tuition, but that they did not receive the equivalent adjustments for their virtual learning
- Students on vocational courses being unable to attend placements, or having anxieties about the virus and infection when placements were possible: these concerns were particularly strong for medical, nursing, and allied health profession students
- Poor access to support and mental wellbeing services – several students reported long waits even for virtual wellbeing support. This suggests, in contrast to what was reported previously, that demand for wellbeing support increased at some higher education establishments. Obviously, this varied by establishment, and this was a small sample of students
- Most of those we spoke to could be classed as ‘widening participation’ students, often being the first in their family to go into higher education and coming from socially deprived families. Most also talked about having money worries.

*“...in my first year I supported myself by working in restaurants and bars. That just wasn’t an option this past year...I have really struggled...”*

There appeared to be differences between those studying in English and Welsh establishments in terms of additional financial support available, with those in our small sample from Welsh universities having greater access to non-means tested crisis funds.

*“...university life is or was great, but it can also be quite stressful...all the extra challenges we have had this year have made it all the more stressful...”*

## The uneven impacts of Covid-19

Key stakeholders and students identified the following four groups as being particularly impacted:

- Students from racialised communities
- Disabled students
- International students
- ‘Widening participation’ students.

Some of our participants mentioned students on vocational courses – specifically those on nursing, medical and allied health profession courses – as facing particular challenges. In some cases, placements did not take place, posing a particular challenge to students for whom such experiences are a critical part of the learning experience. In other cases, placements were permitted, but visits from lecture staff to students on placement could not take place (e.g. on nursing courses), which could be problematic if there were difficulties on the placement. Additionally, it was reported that students on placement were sometimes quite anxious about their potential exposure to Covid-19.

### ***Students from racialised groups, the impact of racism and the focus on racism***

The focus group with students from racialised communities and some of our interviews highlighted that in 2020 (particularly the summer and thereafter) it was not just the pandemic that dominated the headlines and their attention, but also the murder of George Floyd, the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests and a renewed focus on racism. The impact of this on students of colour was to “further fatigue” and add another strain on their mental wellbeing.

*“...racism takes a real toll on your mental health...but [I have] also found all the issues that this past year has brought up and how little in many ways we have moved on as a country has been sapping too...”*

*“...trying to study and focus with Covid and then all this [racism and the focus on it] has been really tough...”*

*“...Universities are very white places and I think I became all the more aware of that last summer [2020]...”*

## ***Disabled students and reasonable adjustments***

Most of the students we talked to identified as having mental health difficulties or being neurodiverse, and they found that the move to virtual tuition and lectures meant the loss of previous reasonable adjustments to support their learning. The focus groups were held nearly a year after the first lockdown, and still no attention had been given to addressing this, at least for these students.

Most also reported a lack of support, with long waits for assessment and intervention for mental health support, as well as for academic and welfare support.

### ***International students***

We learned that international students, under ordinary circumstances, tend not to use mental health and wellbeing services at university or college and may be less aware of their existence.

They were identified by many of our participants as a group of students experiencing difficulties over the pandemic.

*“...the very different regimes of restrictions internationally impact on this group...we have groups of students who have not been able to get back to their courses after Christmas and who live in different time zones making studying a major challenge for them...”* [Academic/lecturer/departments lead]

*“...I have students who have been stranded here...they are doubly isolated...stuck in accommodation sometimes on their own but also often thousands of miles away from home and family and with no guarantees of when they can get home or whether they could come back...”* [Academic/lecturer/departments lead]

One interview pointed out that virtual tuition that allowed a student to ‘attend’ a British university from their country of origin had eased the sometimes difficult process of obtaining a visa.

***'Widening participation' students***

It was clear from our interviews, focus groups and survey that the experience of 'widening participation' students might be very different at different establishments.

A participant working in an English university stated:

*"...we see part of our main mission as being a wider participation university...we have high deprivation in our city...and I think as a consequence of this we might have been better set up than many universities at the outset [of the pandemic]... Sure, we had the usual struggle with setting up virtual responses...but we were quite proactive in testing out with our students how things are...and this was not just the wellbeing services, this was actually led by the faculties..."* [Higher education mental health and wellbeing provider]



## Delivering the Student Space programme: A rapid response to a crisis

Student Space was developed rapidly over just a few weeks, with most of its current elements commissioned and in place ready for its launch in August 2020. This rapid response came at a cost. Whilst marketing and advertising of Student Space took place in 2020 and 2021, the rapid response to what was perceived as an impending crisis meant that Student Space was launched without the usual levels of promotion prior to launch.

Students who attended our focus groups and 64% of students who completed our survey had not been aware of Student Space prior to our engagement with them. But most subsequently used it and found it helpful and easy to navigate. Both the survey and focus groups took place in the summer of 2021. We are unable to estimate the number of individual Student Space users (due to privacy laws which prevent sharing of this data), but other survey data suggests the mental health need amongst students was high, and it is likely that Student Space could have been helpful to many more had awareness been more widespread.

Stakeholders gave quite consistent views across the interviews on how Student Space had been marketed and communicated to the sector.

*“...if you are launching a digital product, an app or website, you would normally expect quite a significant campaign and one conducted over months, to build one’s audience and anticipation...”* [Higher education mental health and wellbeing provider]

*“...Perhaps the point is that, despite the variety of comms and marketing undertaken, the speed of the setup and the lack of time to build trust before launch hampered the efforts that were made...”* [Student Minds representative]

The rapid nature of the launch and limited opportunity for building prelaunch awareness may also have impacted on the take-up of the direct support services offered via Student Space over the first few months.

### The challenge of getting the sector inside

Student Minds always seeks to consult – and, ideally, co-produce projects with – the sector. However, the necessary rapid development of Student Space meant that Student Minds could not work in its normal way.

*“...our normal way of working would be to adopt a consultative approach and spend time with the sector and engage them in the development of an idea...”* [Student Minds representative]

Given the huge diversity in the higher education sector and numerous higher education cultures, working in consultation with the sector is seen as critical in influencing what “...ultimately goes on, on the ground...”. An example of Student Minds’ normal consultation and partnership style of working is the **University Mental Health Charter**. The development of the Charter involved speaking to 360 students and staff across 181 higher education establishments, surveying over 2,000 staff and students, and then running focus groups.

*“...there was absolutely no opportunity for this [in the development of Student Space]...”* [Student Minds representative]

*“...I think had there been an opportunity then it would have significantly increased understanding of what it was about and also ownership of it by the sector...”* [Academic/lecturer/department lead]

The result, in some cases, was a misunderstanding of what Student Space was. In two incidences reported by participants, higher education mental health and wellbeing providers saw Student Space as a threat, even a “cheap alternative” to their service, rather than as an additional resource and adjunct at a time of crisis. This thinking to some degree appeared to seep into an article in *The Guardian* in late 2020, ‘Your course mates are just computer icons’: universities call for mental health cash (Fazackerley, 2020).

## The temporary nature of Student Space

*“...It has been a really great resource... really great... but I would now hesitate in recommending it to a student if I am not 100% that it is still going to be there...”* [Higher education mental health and wellbeing provider]

This comment summed up the views of the expert stakeholders interviewed towards the end of the evaluation. But it had been a concern for many stakeholders throughout our research.

*“...I think the temporary nature – or rather, the uncertain future – will stop many providers from investing in it [i.e. recommending and promoting it]...”* [Academic/lecturer/department lead]

## Evidence based, readable and insightful

The consistent view of our expert stakeholders, and particularly of students, was that Student Space contained a very “relevant” and very “readable” set of resources. So, while the rapid development of Student Space compromised the opportunities for building awareness to a degree, it did not, in our participants’ view, compromise the quality, readability and utility of the material available on the website. This was also reflected in the positive results of short surveys completed by Student Space website users, and in comments made by the students who completed our survey, all of whom were asked to visit the site and review it as part of the process.

In interviews with members of the Student Minds team, it was reported that the team had good access to clinical knowledge and the evidence base, and that it has good networks with clinical experts. Indeed, such expertise is present within the team. This made it easier for Student Minds to commission a range of clinical experts to provide material for Student Space. Student Minds has always sought to make its materials readable, and so all commissioned work was subjected to “robust” editing, to ensure materials were accessible to a student audience, and to students with access needs.

A final element which ensures the quality and relevance of Student Space, according to participants, is the insights work Student Minds does to research the current needs and priorities of students. In the same way Student Minds commissioned clinical expertise to ensure evidence-based content, it also invested in researching the utility of Student Space through direct engagement with a range of students throughout the life span of the project.

A student we spoke to commented that there was “...a huge range of materials on the website...perhaps too much...”, but this student and others noted that what appeared on opening Student Space “...was very current...”. Another student noted that website “...appeared to be kept up to date and wasn’t the same old stuff...”

One student commented:

*“...I had never heard of Student Space, until I had been approached for this [focus group]...I found it a really helpful resource and I found some of the blogs especially helpful...it felt very authentic...”*

Most of the written content was available in both English and Welsh.

## Helpfulness and navigability

Between August 2020 and mid July 2021, Student Space had 367,000 unique views amounting to 469,000 page views in total (some visitors to Student Space visited particular pages several times within a session). This suggests several thousands of students used the site, but we cannot establish from these statistics exactly how many (due to GDPR and privacy rules) or how useful they found Student Space. ‘Meaningful views’ – where a visitor scrolls down a page to read at least 75% of it – may give a better indication of a user finding the web content useful. There was an average of 3,851 such views per month, but with a range between approximately 1,500 meaningful views (April 2021) and nearly 10,000 meaningful views (February 2021). The proportion of visits to Student Space that involved ‘meaningful views’ was around 22%, suggesting a sizeable group of visitors gave the site more than a casual glance.

The students who completed our survey were asked, if they had not already, to visit and review Student Space. Only 36% had been aware of Student Space prior to the survey. Very few of our students (12.3%) thought that students had had enough support for their mental wellbeing over the course of the pandemic to that point. Most (88%) found Student Space at least somewhat helpful and 47% found it very or quite helpful. Around 96% found Student Space reasonably easy to navigate. Student Space had put considerable effort throughout into testing with different groups of students, and adjusting and developing the site based on this user feedback.

## Responsiveness

Comments from participants indicate that Student Space content remained relevant, and Student Minds commissioned and added new content when needed.

*“...anxieties and concerns changed over time and I found that Student Space kept up with this... for this reason it’s been a great resource to direct students to...”* [Higher education mental health and wellbeing provider]

*“...I wish I had known about this before...but I am finding it useful even now...”* [Student responding to our survey]

*“...It’s great to find a resource like this, to find you are not alone and that the concerns you have, other people have, and better still, have advice of managing [a specific reference to Student Story videos]...”* [Student responding to our survey]

This responsiveness to students’ needs, based on research with students, led to the development of a number of tailored direct support services available from April 2021:

- Support for Black students (twice weekly virtual workshops – ‘Black Students Talk’)
- Support for Muslim students (a helpline (4pm-10pm), webchat, WhatsApp support and email support)
- Support for Punjabi students (fortnightly general workshop and fortnightly LGBTQ+ workshop)
- Support for trans students (a helpline (Mon-Fri 9am-9pm), webchat and a forum)
- Support for working-class students (webinars and podcasts)
- Support for students who hear voices (virtual workshops and an online forum)
- Support for students with obsessive compulsive disorder and body dysmorphic disorder (virtual peer-led workshops)
- Support for students experiencing disordered eating (counselling and befriending).

These were all in addition to the phone, text and email support provided by The Mix and Shout 85258 from the outset.



## Discussion

We set out to explore four key questions, and the extent to which we have been able to gauge Student Space's success against these is outlined below.

### **How does Student Space respond to students' needs, addressing their key areas of concern?**

All the key stakeholders we interviewed were impressed by the quality of Student Space's offer, stressing (where qualified) its strong evidence base, its readability, and its accessibility. This was echoed by most students offering comments in our survey.

Student Minds achieved this through a combination of ongoing insights research with students and those on its advisory group (including student and other sector representative bodies, mental health wellbeing providers and academics), and its robust commissioning process of materials for the website. The latter involved commissioning clinical experts to write articles, submitting these for independent review by clinical experts, and finally subjecting articles to a readability edit. This process also applied to podcasts and video materials, as well as written ones.

### **How does it address gaps in support and respond to emerging needs?**

The insights work, (described in previous chapters), was the primary vehicle for identifying new issues. The advisory group also supported Student Minds in keeping abreast of research which was conducted over this period.

The concerns students reported via focus groups in June 2021 largely accord with what we learnt from other sources (our survey, key stakeholder interviews and the research), and appear to be reflected in what is offered on Student Space.

### **Does Student Space provide clear information and signpost students to help within the NHS or third sector?**

Specifically signposting students to the NHS and voluntary services (beyond the services it commissions) has been a very small part of Student Space's work. It has primarily given practical advice to manage day-to-day issues that might affect wellbeing, such as recommending exercises, managing sleep, changes to diet and managing screentime. There are places where students are advised on where they might seek help, e.g. via their GP, but the primary signposting has been to the support services it provides and the 'Support at your university' links.

It is hard to see how Student Space could really have signposted in any useful way beyond that which is described above. One would expect the commissioned support services would, after contact with a student, be in a better position to provide appropriate advice (including signposting), as would a student's own mental health and wellbeing service.

### **Does Student Space improve access to and availability of mental health support for students?**

If a student is aware of Student Space and chooses to access it, then Student Space clearly offers this potential. We have received numerous comments on just how useful and helpful the materials on Student Space are. We have also received overwhelmingly positive comments on how easy the website is to navigate, which obviously magnifies this potential. However, these have come from our stakeholder interviews and comments made to our survey. And while a third of student survey respondents had visited Student Space prior to the survey, the majority did not appear to be aware of Student Space until introduced to it via our consultation.

We cannot know how many students have used Student Space. The closest proxy to the number of individual students might have been a count of the unique internet provider (IP) addresses. However, it is no longer possible to collect these via vehicles such as Google Analytics due to GDPR policies.

The direct support services commissioned as part of the Student Space offer could, by and large, be accessed outside of Student Space, with the site serving to promote their availability and contact details. Services such as The Mix and Shout 85258, which were established before Student Space, report increased use of their services by students over the course of the pandemic, and some of this ‘increased footfall’ may be as a direct result of Student Space.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Other research studies have suggested that, if they are representative of the general student population, somewhere in the region of 600,000 students have sought help for their mental wellbeing over the course of the pandemic. Therefore, the potential need for Student Space was huge. Our participants were on the whole doubtful that awareness of Student Space had spread as widely as it could, and our survey responses (albeit from a small sample whose level of representation cannot be gauged) also suggest this.

Student Minds set out to provide an intervention that offered readable, targeted, clinically sound advice; relevant and supportive accounts from peers; access to a range of support services; and a means of accessing all higher education establishments' support services. The evidence we have collected suggests this was achieved and delivered within a very short time frame. It also had to establish a complex infrastructure to get Student Space off the ground and to maintain, develop and "keep it fresh". The infrastructure included governance and advisory support, a process for researching student insights, and a commissioning process for ensuring clinically sound, readable content. All of this was achieved and managed without dedicated project management support for much of the first year of its operation. The temporary nature and uncertain future of the project made recruitment to the project management post difficult. And it should be stressed that this was the largest scale commission that Student Minds had managed to date.

It is clear from analysing the website usage data that, with a little short of half a million page views, many students have used the website and found it helpful. However, partially due to the necessarily rapid development of Student Space, there was very little opportunity to consult with the higher education sector and to

achieve the level of marketing and promotion that might have best served Student Space and improved awareness. Many students were not aware of Student Space, and the help it offered did not reach some of those who might have benefited from it.

The temporary nature and uncertain future of Student Space have also (and probably more latterly) meant that those parts of the sector that are aware of it might now be hesitant to promote it among students.

However, our participants' views, usage of the site itself and our survey data all indicate that there remains, at present, a significant need for such an intervention.

The views of pages translated into Welsh appear to approximate the proportion of Welsh speakers in the population, and we would see this as supporting the continued inclusion of Welsh language resources on Student Space.

Student Space was commissioned specifically to provide an intervention which supported student mental wellbeing during the pandemic. While neither the commissioners nor Student Minds knew how long the pandemic would last, the assumption was months (probably more than the initial three months), but not the 22 months it has lasted thus far, and with no end in sight. The UK has vaccinated a significant proportion of its population and rolled out booster vaccinations over the autumn and winter of 2021/22. And yet we remain uncertain as to whether we are near the end of this crisis; new and more virulent variants, which vaccines may offer less protection against, are a distinct possibility. The pandemic has posed not only a physical threat but a threat to our mental wellbeing, and this threat is likely to endure beyond the pandemic and restrictions. It was apparent throughout this evaluation that students have been significantly impacted by this.



For this reason, Centre for Mental Health sees an ongoing need for a resource like Student Space, as an adjunct to provision within higher education. The evidence from our participants suggests that there may be a need for such a resource even in ‘normal’ times (dissatisfaction with pre- and post-Covid higher education mental wellbeing services appeared to be high). But we believe there is certainly a reasonable case for continuing for at least the next academic year. We believe it has a significant role as an additional resource to university-based provision.

We believe Student Space can make an important contribution and that there are strong arguments for continuing to fund the following elements:

- Advice and information
- Student stories
- Support at your university.

Accordingly, we make recommendations below supporting these and recommend that the direct service support element be given a further period of testing.

Whilst Student Space was designed as an intervention and not as a pilot, it has nevertheless provided a test of what such a digital intervention can offer.

We make the following recommendations:

1. Student Space should receive funding for at least the next academic year. Such funding should cover:
  - Site maintenance
  - Commissioning of evidence based and accessible written and video material
  - Insight research
  - Expert advice
  - Maintenance of links for the ‘Support at your university’ element of Student Space
2. A further review of any direct support service elements should be conducted. The review should include a consultation with the sector on what support, for whom and of what type, is available and where there are gaps. Such a review would aim to make the business case for any service support element.
3. Some of this funding should be dedicated to marketing, promotion and awareness.
4. Student Minds should work with marketing experts to develop a strategy for ongoing promotion and awareness raising, particularly utilising social media platforms that students use.
5. Student Minds should continue to support students whose first or preferred language is Welsh, and funding should continue to support translation into Welsh.

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## Student Space

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