Mental Health support in Higher Education

Survey findings

November 2022

Background

1. As part of the Children, Young People and Education Committee's inquiry into Mental Health support in Higher Education, a survey was conducted to gather the views of current students and recent graduates, of the efficacy of mental health and wellbeing support in higher education in Wales.

Method

2. A standardised and structured, self-completion survey was open for approximately a six week period, between Monday, 5 September – Friday, 14 October 2022. The survey was available to complete online, and in paper format upon request from the respondent.

3. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject-matter, a self-completion survey allowed respondents a degree of anonymity that other engagement methods, such as face-to-face, interviewer administered surveys, would not. All quotes which appear in this paper are anonymised, with any identifiable information removed.

4. To compile this paper, an analysis of a complete data set was conducted. All data can be sourced to individual responses and further analysis can be undertaken upon request.

Audience

5. The survey was designed to capture the views of current students in Wales, and recent graduates from Welsh Universities, to include individuals who study/studied via The Open University.

6. The survey was promoted through a number of channels including the Senedd's website and social media channels, via all Welsh universities and The Open University, Student Unions, and relevant stakeholders including NUS Cymru and AMOSSHE.

7. We would like to thank everyone who shared their views with us.

Findings

8. The survey comprised 27 questions and was split into 7 sections. 254 responses were received to the survey. On average, the survey took 10 minutes and 12 seconds to complete. All responses were received online. No responses were received in hard copy format.

9. In order to provide the Committee with an insight into respondent demographic, questions 23 – 26 (inclusive), which concerned gender, age, ethnic group and disability, are dealt with at the outset. Question 27, which asked respondents whether they would like to be kept updated with the progress of the inquiry and inviting them to submit a contact e-mail address if they answered in the affirmative, is not explored in this paper.

Gender

10. 67% of respondents to this question identified as female, 27% identified as male, with 3% of respondents identifying as non-binary. 3% of respondents to this question preferred not to specify.
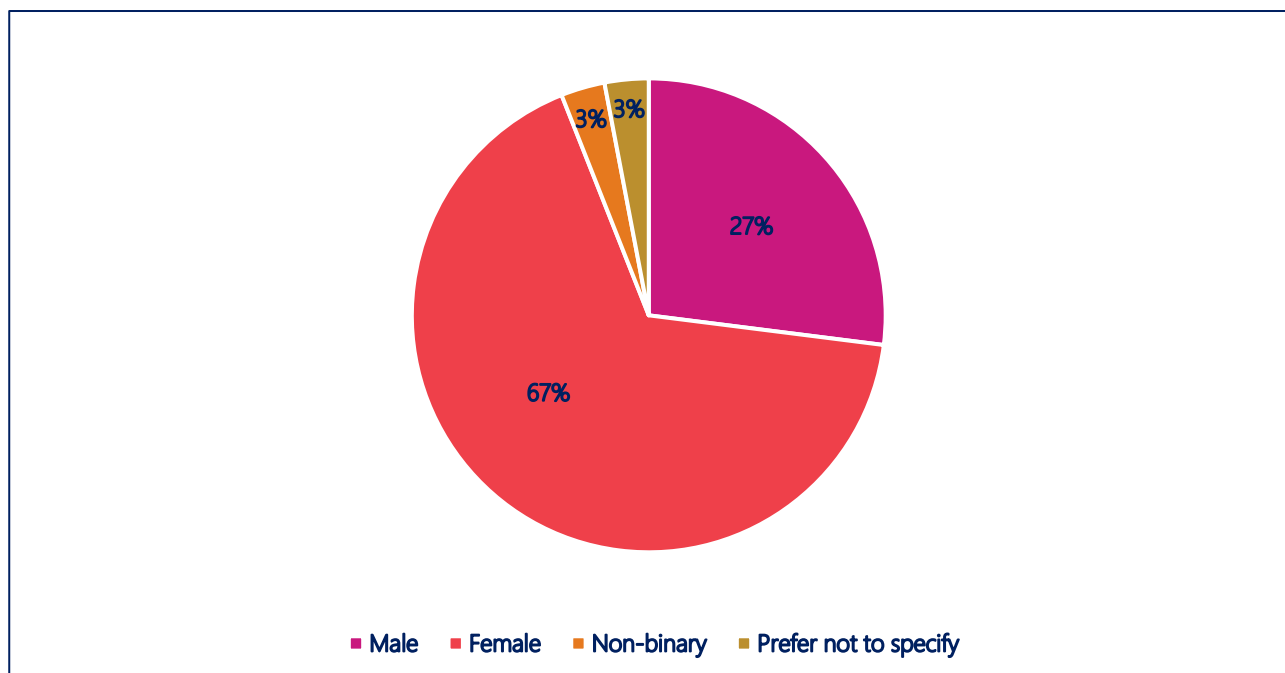
Age

11. 43% of respondents to this question were over 25 years of age. 10% of respondents were 19 years of age. 7% of respondents were aged 20, 21 or 22 years of age respectively. 6% of respondents were 23 years of age. 5% of respondents were aged 18, 24 or 25 years of age respectively. 5% of respondents to this question selected 'Other'.
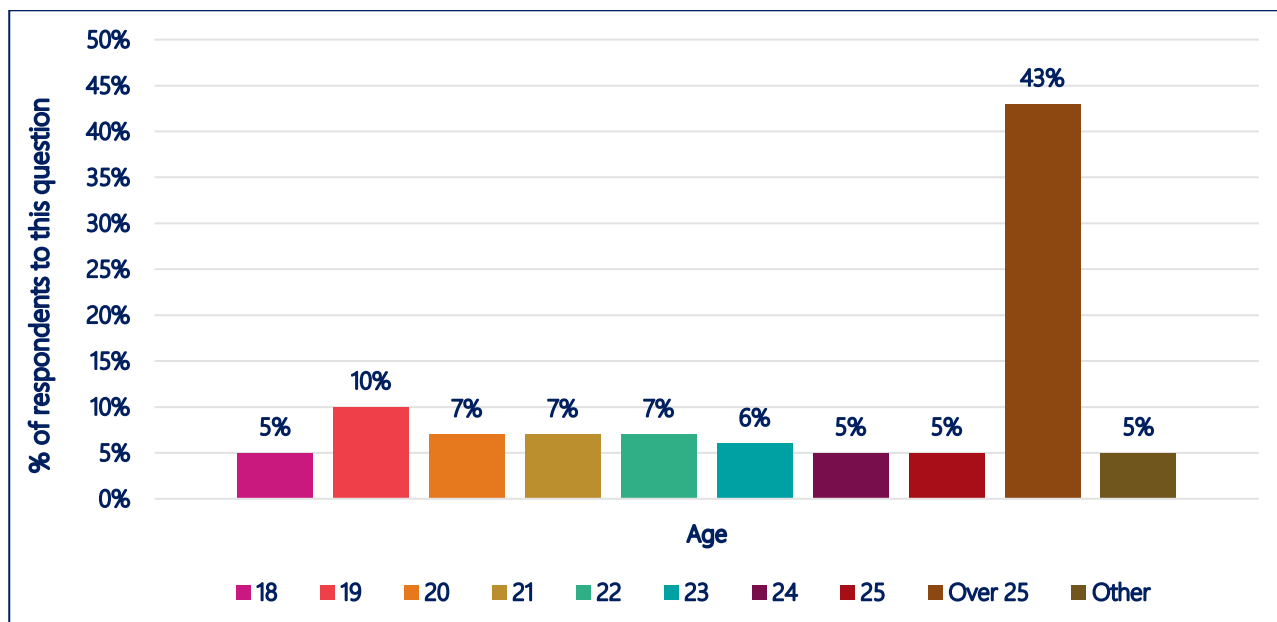

Ethnic group

12. 82% of respondents to this question were White. 8% were Asian, Asian Welsh or Asian British. 3% were Black, Black Welsh or Black British. 1% of respondents were Mixed or from multiple ethnic groups. 5% of respondents preferred not to answer. 1% of respondents selected 'Other'.
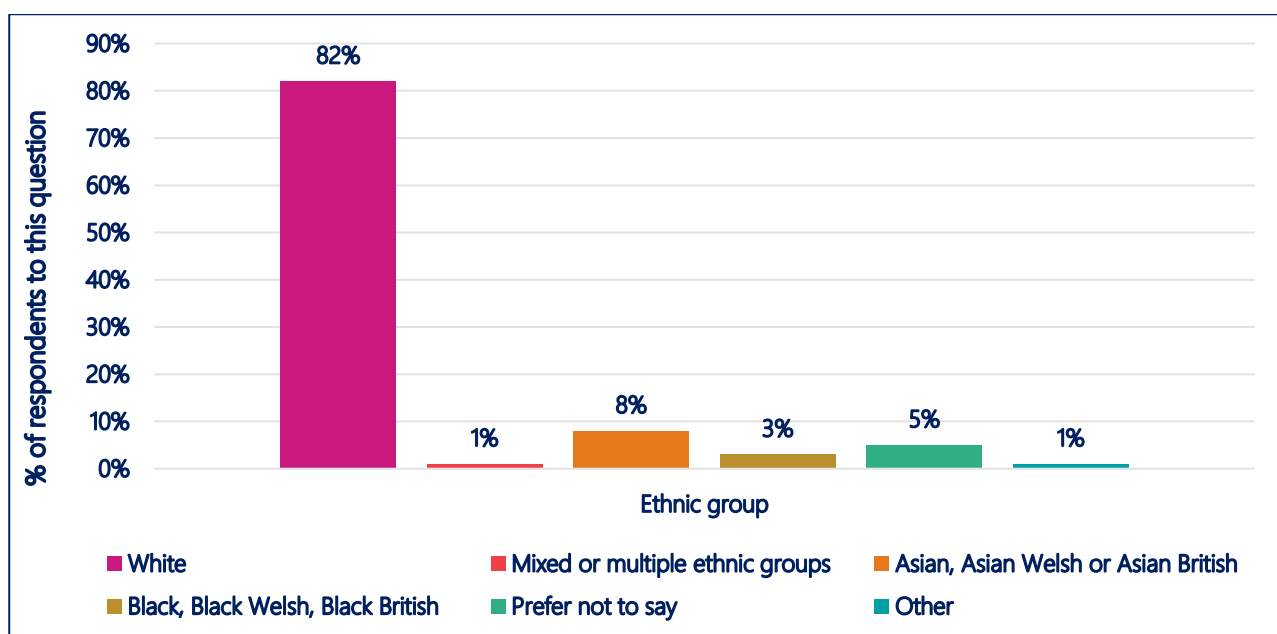
Disability

13. 62% of respondents to this question said they did not have a disability, with 30% of respondents confirming they did have a disability. 8% of respondents preferred not to say.
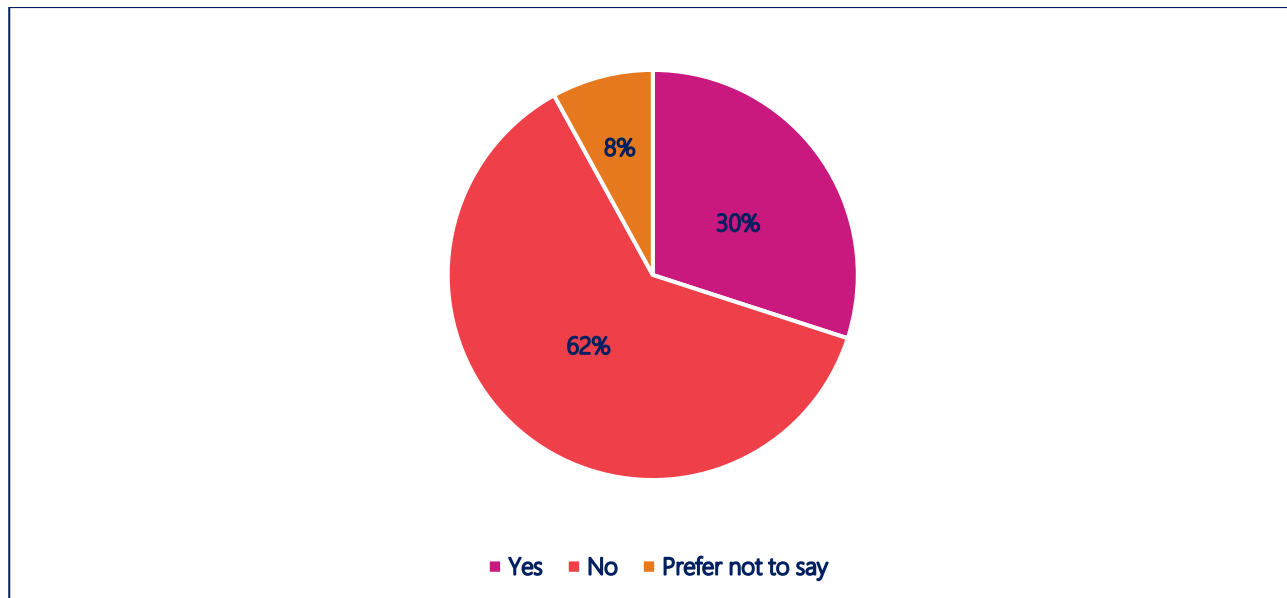

Your time at university

14. Questions 1 – 5 (inclusive) explored the respondent's study status and their background.

In which year did you start university?

15. 28% respondents to this question started university in 2022. 20% respondents started university in 2021. 17% respondents started university in 2020. 9% of respondents to this question started university in 2019 and in 2018 respectively. 17% respondents started university before 2018.
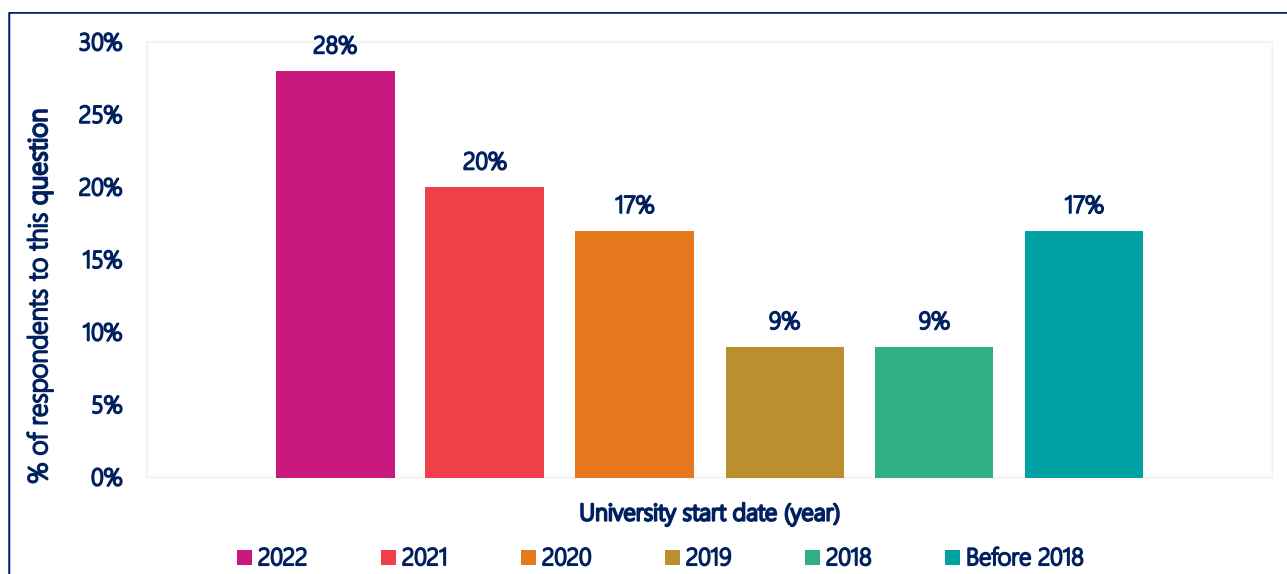
Which of the following options best describe your current study status? Please tick all that apply.

16. 32% of all responses to this question specified undergraduate status, with 19% of responses specifying postgraduate status and 2% specifying foundational year. 22% specified full-time status, followed by 5% of responses specifying part-time status. 6% of responses specified 'final year of course'. 13% of responses specified alumni, with 1% of responses specifying 'Other'.
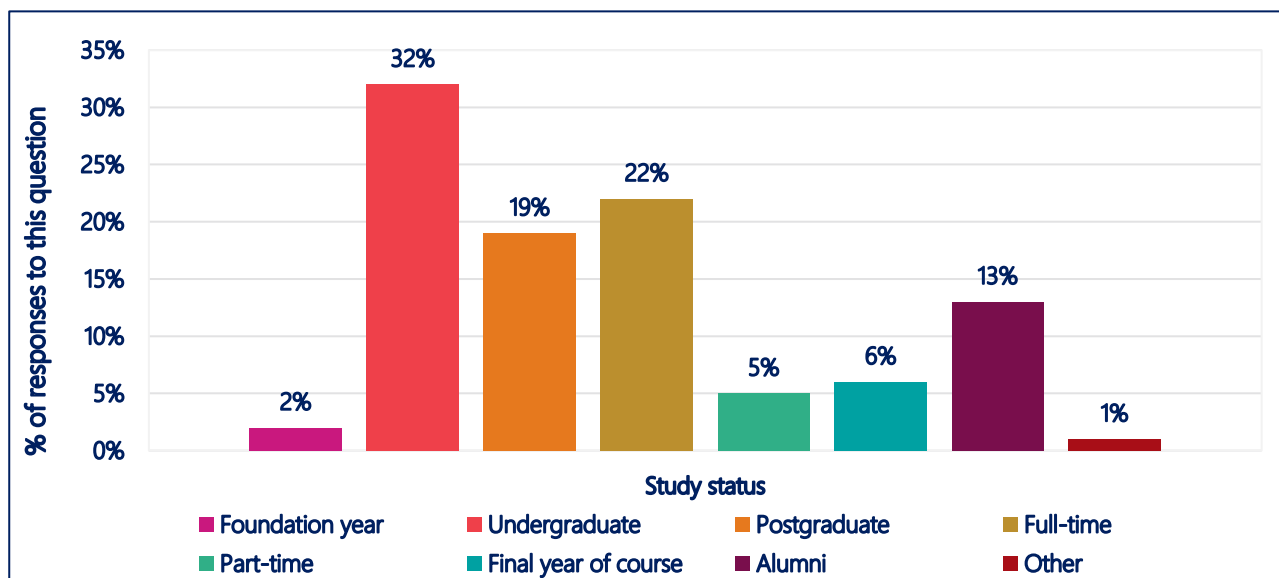

For those who answered *Alumni,* in which year did you graduate?

17. 34% of respondents to this question graduated in 2022. 23% of respondents graduated in 2021. 17% of respondents graduated in 2020. 12% of respondents graduated in 2019. 1% graduated in 2018 and 13% graduated before 2018.
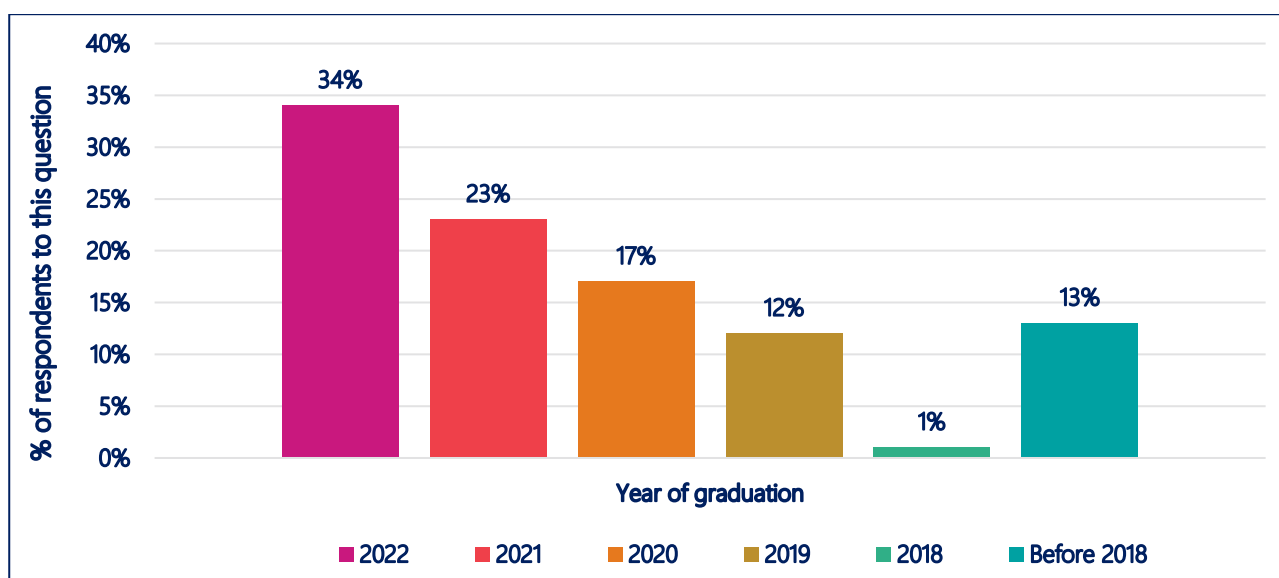
At which university are you studying/ did you study?

18. 48% of respondents to this question study or studied at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. 15% of respondents study or studied at Bangor University, with a further 15% studying or having studied at Aberystwyth University. 9% of respondents study or studied at Cardiff University. 6% of respondents study or studied at The Open University. 2% of respondents study or studied at Swansea University. 1% of respondents study or studied at Cardiff Metropolitan University, with a further 1% of respondents studying or having studied at the University of South Wales. No respondents selected Wrexham Glyndŵr University. 2% of respondents selected 'Other', whilst 1% respondents selected 'Prefer not to say.'
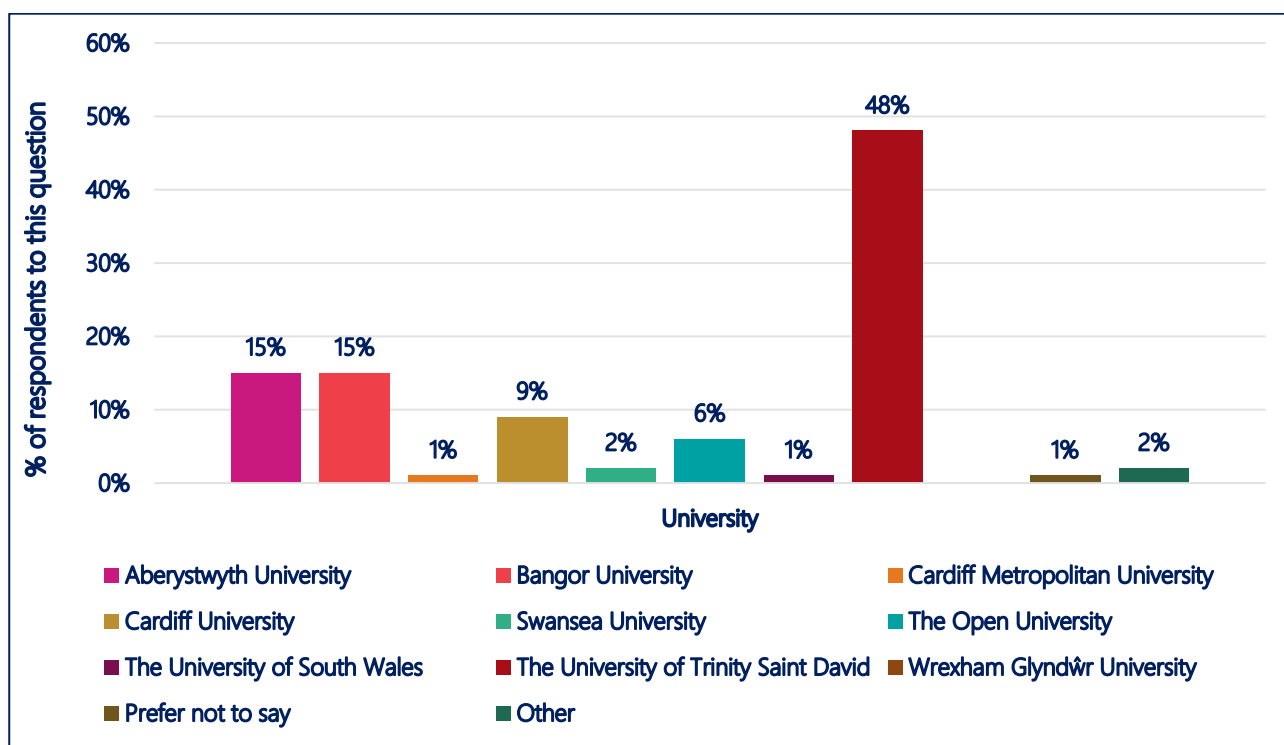
Where do you normally live outside of the university term?

19. 57% of respondents to this question selected Wales, with 34% of respondents selecting England. 1% of respondents selected Northern Ireland, with a further 1% of respondents selecting Scotland. 7% of respondents selected 'Other'.
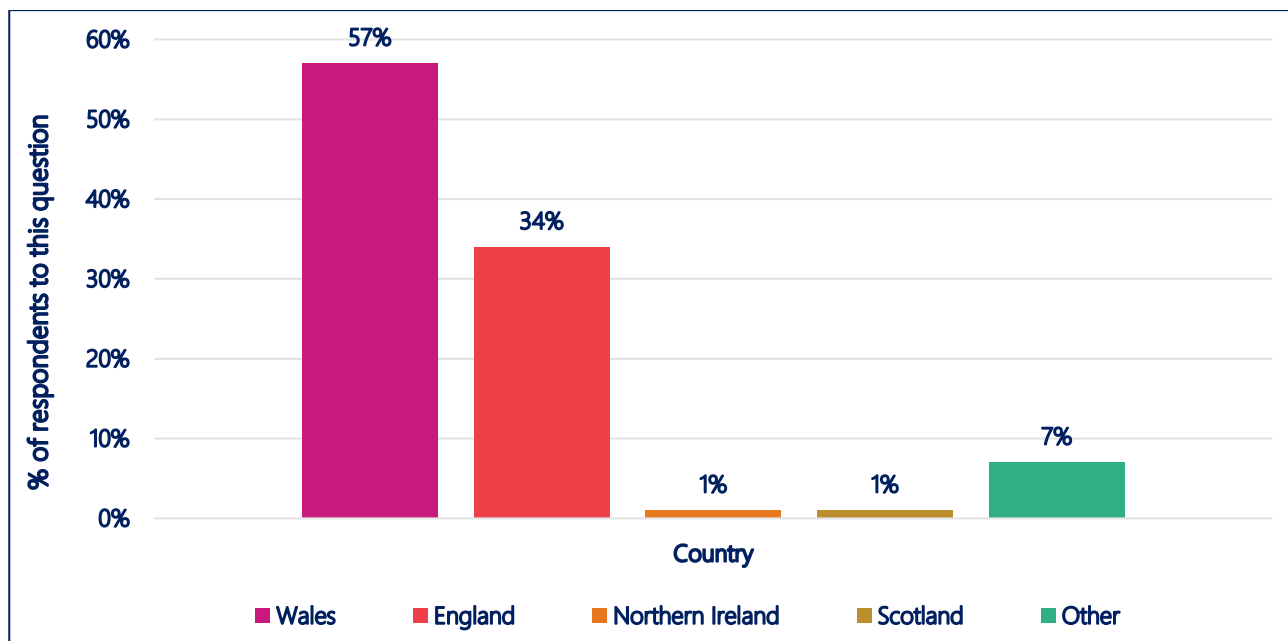
Accessing mental health support from your university

20.   Questions 6 – 10 (inclusive) sought to explore the respondent's personal experience of accessing mental health support during their time at university.

In general, do you feel your university considers the mental health of its students when delivering its services? For example, in delivering learning; timetabling, running examinations; promoting positive relationships between staff and learners; supporting with issues related to accommodation or student finance.

21.   58% of respondents to this question answered yes, with 25% of respondents answering no. 17% of respondents were not sure.
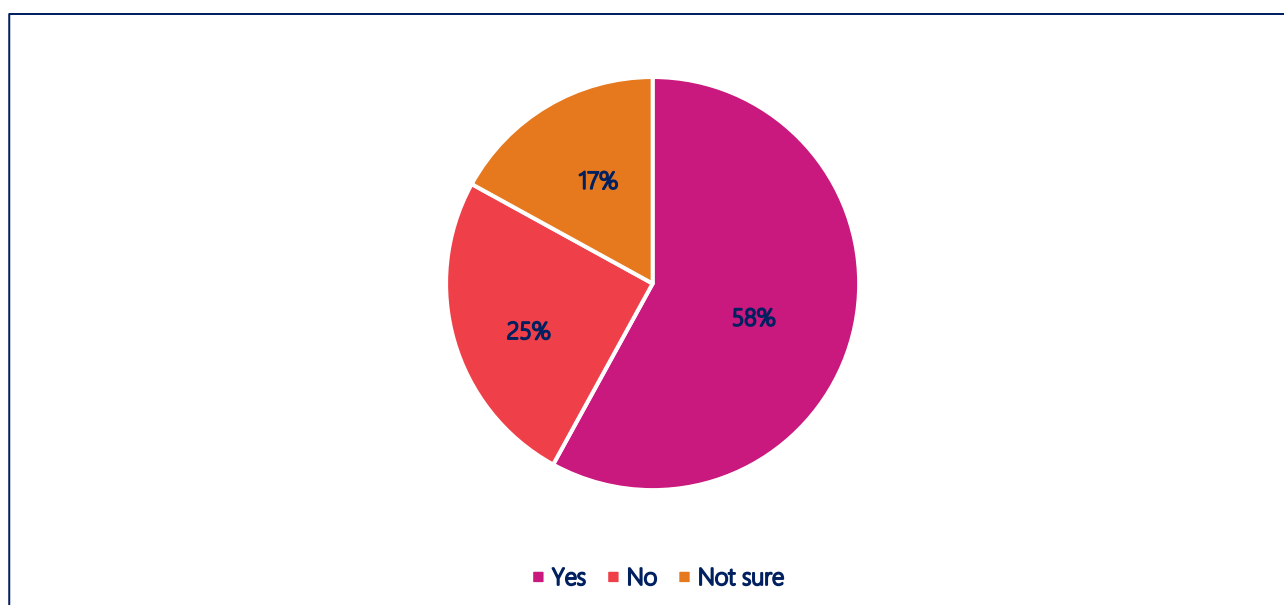
How confident are you that you know / would know how to access support from your university if you ever needed it?
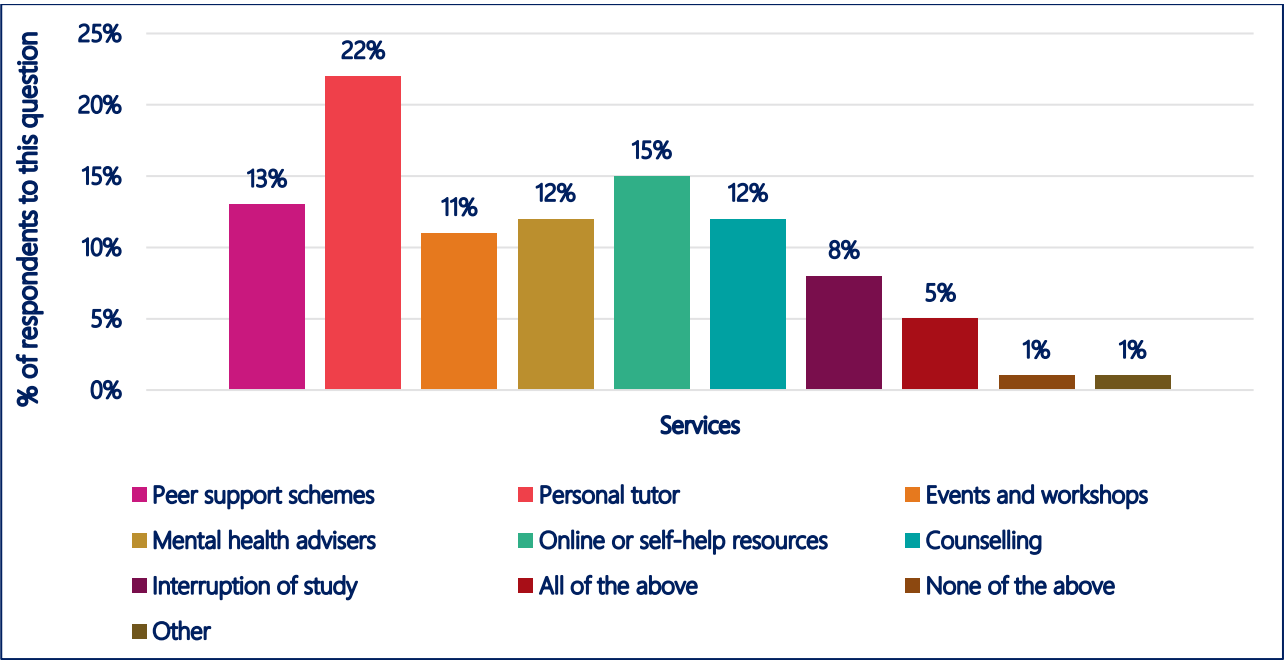
22. 64% of respondents to this question said they were confident or somewhat confident of accessing support from their university if they ever needed it. 21% of respondents to this question were somewhat not confident or not very confident at all accessing support from their university if they needed it. 12% of respondents to this question selected 'neutral', whilst 3% of respondents selected 'I don't know.'
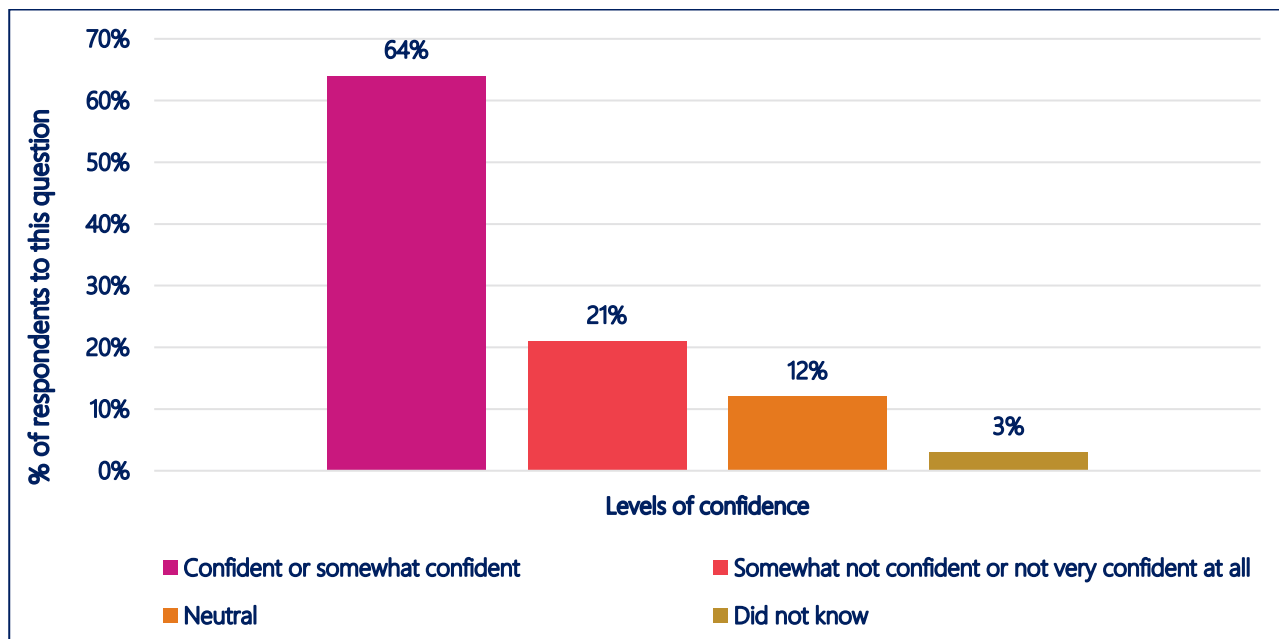
Which of the following services are you aware of at your university?

23. A personal tutor was the service selected most by respondents to this question (22%). This was followed by 'online or self-help resources; (15%) and peer support schemes, for example, mentors or buddies (13%). Counselling (12%), Mental health advisers (12%), events and workshops (11%) and interruption of studies (8%) were selected to a lesser degree. 5% of responses indicated some were aware of all services given as options to this question. Conversely, 1% of responses were not aware of any of these options. A further 1% of responses specified 'Other'.

Legend:
- Peer support schemes
- Personal tutor
- Events and workshops
- Mental health advisers
- Online or self-help resources
- Counselling
- Interruption of study
- All of the above
- None of the above
- Other

In general, how satisfied are you with the way your university promotes good mental health for its students?

24. 55% of respondents to this question were very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the way their university promotes good mental health for their students. 23% of respondents were somewhat dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. 20% of respondents to this question were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. 2% of respondents to this question selected 'I don't know'.

Legend:
- Very satisfied or somewhat satisfied
- Somewhat dissatisfied or very dissatisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- I don't know
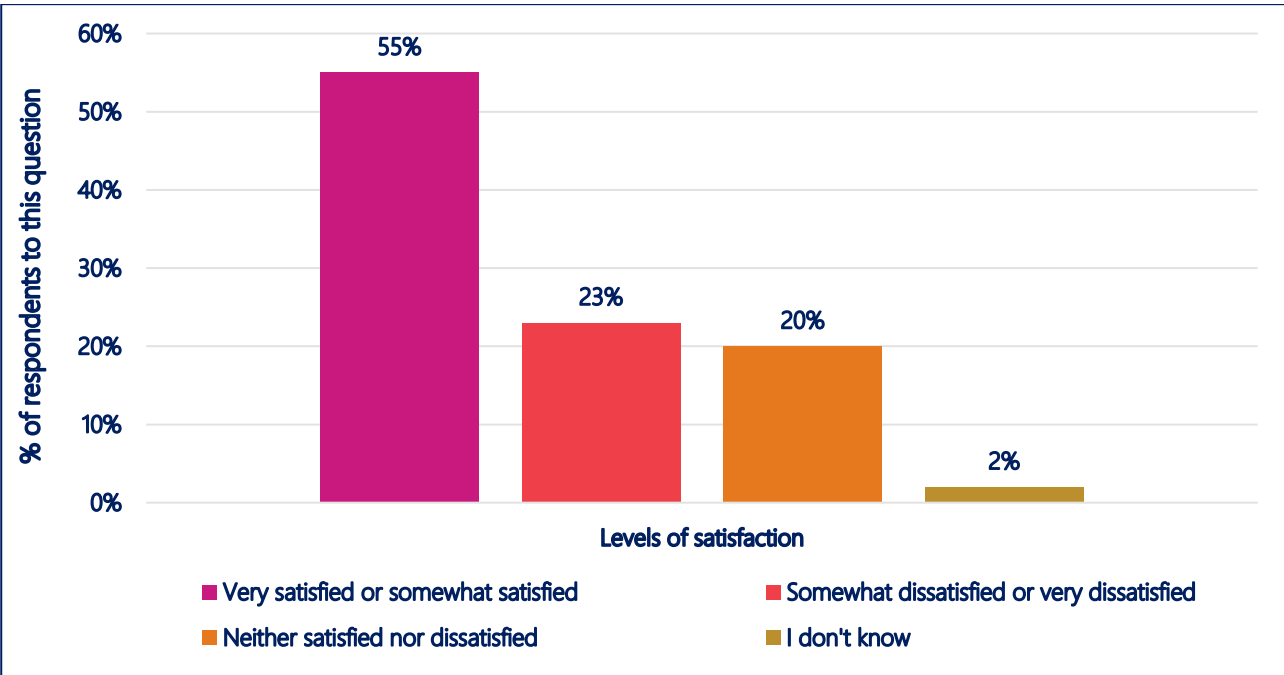
Do you think there are any challenges that might make it more difficult for a student to access support through your university?

25.   A lack of awareness of the support available to students was the theme which arose most often in response to this question. This was often interlinked with a suggestion from a number of respondents that greater and/or more effective promotion of mental health services was required. The following quotes provide a snapshot of responses to this question which highlight a lack of awareness as a particular challenge.

<u>Lack of awareness</u>

"Not knowing what is available. Student Support didn't even understand the role I had as a PhD student in also being part time teaching staff and thought that meant I had the same rights as full time staff."

"If you don't know where to look, it can be difficult to find the right paths."

"Not being aware of the support available and feeling like you might not be 'sick' enough to access help."

"I think it would help if we were explicitly told where to find counselling and other support services, rather than having to seek them out."

"… universities are vast establishments and it can be overwhelming to find out where to find help in the first instance. Some universities, particularly Russell group ones sometimes seem less approachable due to the implied higher standards expected of students, perhaps regarding attainment more strongly than well-being."

<u>Lack of promotion</u>

"Resources exist, but they're not promoted enough."

"Not every department is as on the ball with promoting mental health services as mine was. Furthermore, I had access to more information due to my role as wellbeing officer on a society committee . . . "

"It's not very well sign posted and students that slip through the screening test unnoticed but who have issues often will not be told where to find the help they may need."

26.   Poor mental health was in itself identified as a barrier to accessing mental health services at university. This was a theme which arose frequently in response to this question, with some

respondents explaining that whilst services may exist, accessing these services may be challenging for many.

Poor mental health as a barrier

"Many symptoms of mental illness/distress can act as a barrier to accessing support from the university."

"Personal reluctance to seek help, due to many factors, but one of the main barriers is having the strength to admit that you have mental health issues and also the belief that you are worthy of help."

"If a student is struggling, they may not have capacity to seek out support. They may be too overwhelmed to consider their options."

"Mental health can make it very difficult to reach out sometimes but it's even worse when you do reach out and get nothing in return."

27. Physical distance from university mental health services and the issues associated with services which exist exclusively online, were challenges identified by many respondents to this question. Particular reference was made to the difficulties experienced by distance learners.

Distance and online support

"Support for distance learners is very different to in-person students."

"The fact that everything with the university is digital and that is all my cohort has known."

"Self-directed remote study as experienced through The Open University makes it difficult to be aware of all services available and students are often working full time, or with families, or both, meaning you would need to make an additional conscious effort to access support."

"The fact that if you don't live on campus you have to travel in for support etc., which costs money - which student finance hasn't put up so we cannot afford it. (The struggle with the little money we get effects our mental health)!"

"If they live off campus they don't have much time to access that support if they want it in person rather than online."

Accessing mental health support from your university

28.   Questions 11 – 15 (inclusive) asked about the respondent's personal experience of accessing mental health support during their time at university.

Have you accessed support for your mental health during your time at university?

29.   39% of respondents to this question had accessed support. 59% had not. 2% of respondents to this question said they did not know.
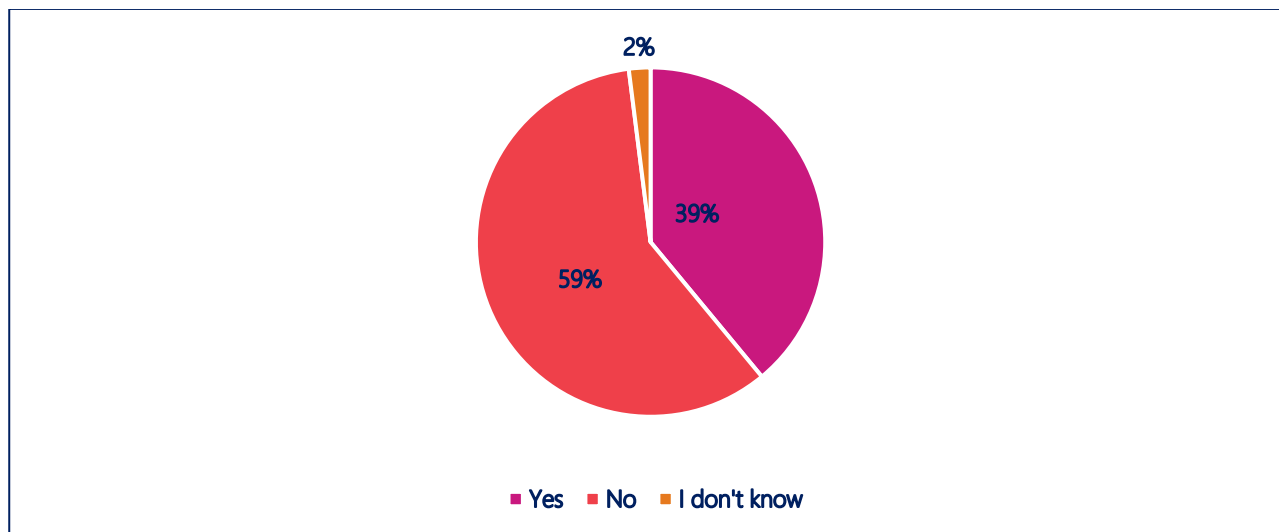
Could you tell us about the type of support you accessed? Please tick all that apply.

30.   Counselling was the option chosen most by respondents to this question (25%). This was followed by mental health advisers (21%) and personal tutor (21%). Online or self help (13%), peer-support schemes (8%), interruption of studies (4%) and events and workshops (3%) were selected to a lesser extent. 'Other' was also chosen to a lesser extent (5%).
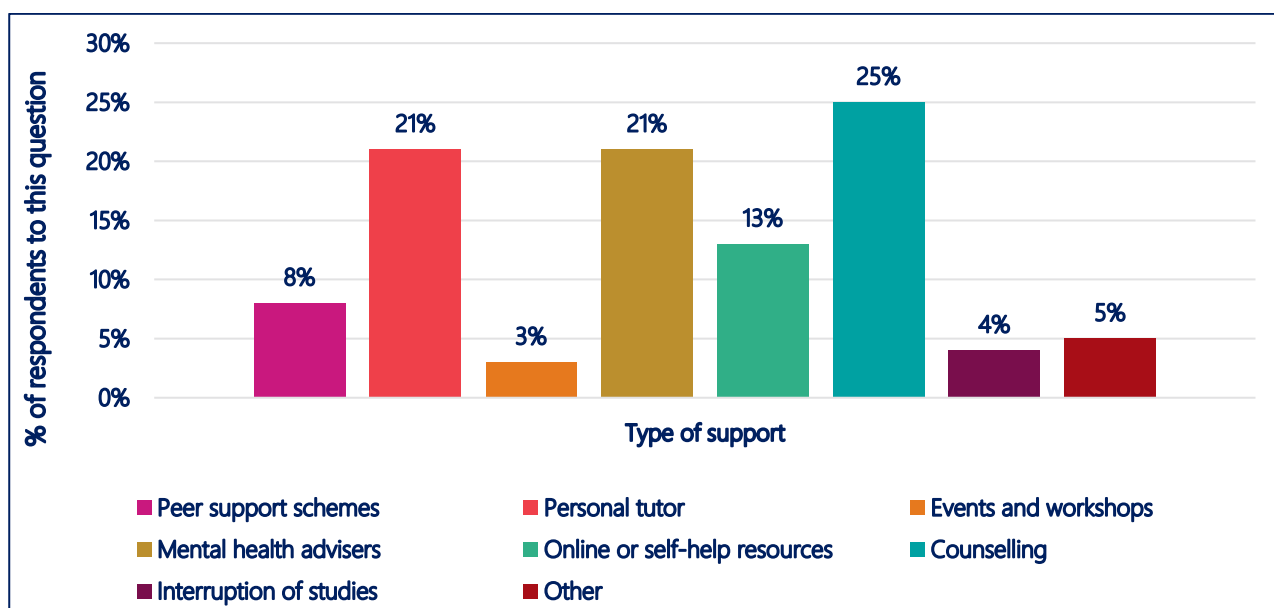
How easy or difficult did you find accessing this support?

31.   62% of respondents to this question said it was very easy or somewhat easy to access support. 25% of respondents said it was very difficult or somewhat difficult. 13% said it was neither easy or difficult.

- Very eary or somewhat easy
- Very difficult or somewhat difficult
- Neither eary nor difficult
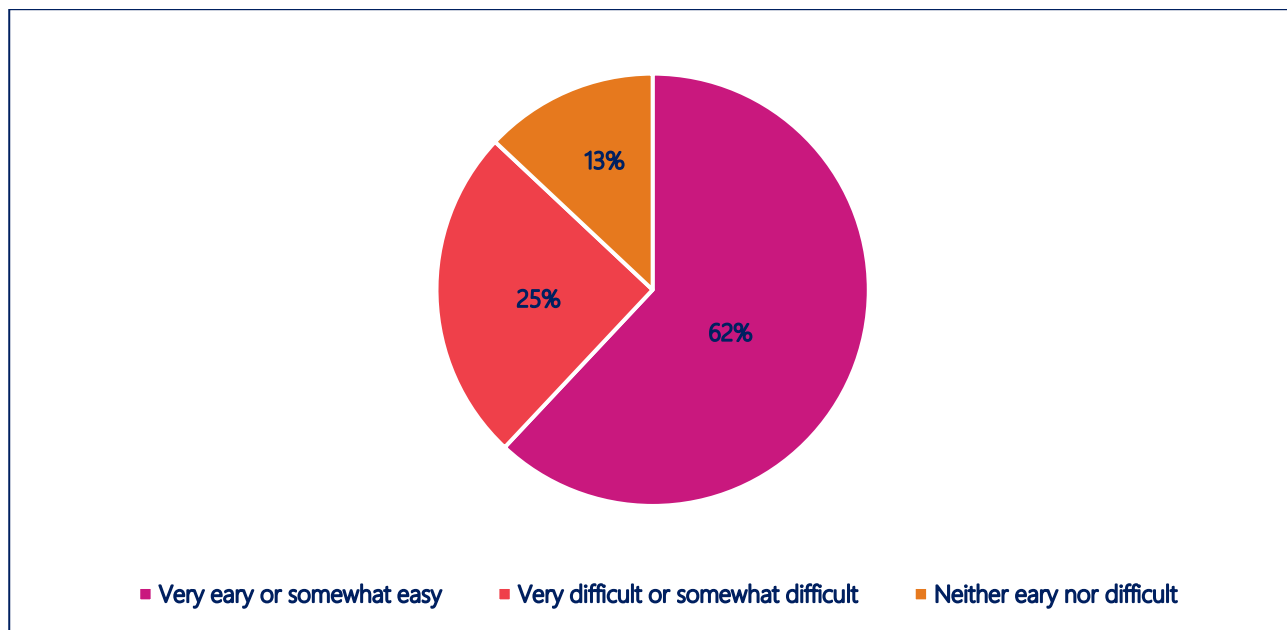
Were you happy with the support offered to you?

32.   54% of respondents to this question were happy with the support offered. 24% of respondents to this question were not happy with the support offered. 22% of respondents to this question were not sure.

- Happy with support offered
- Not happy with support offered
- Not sure
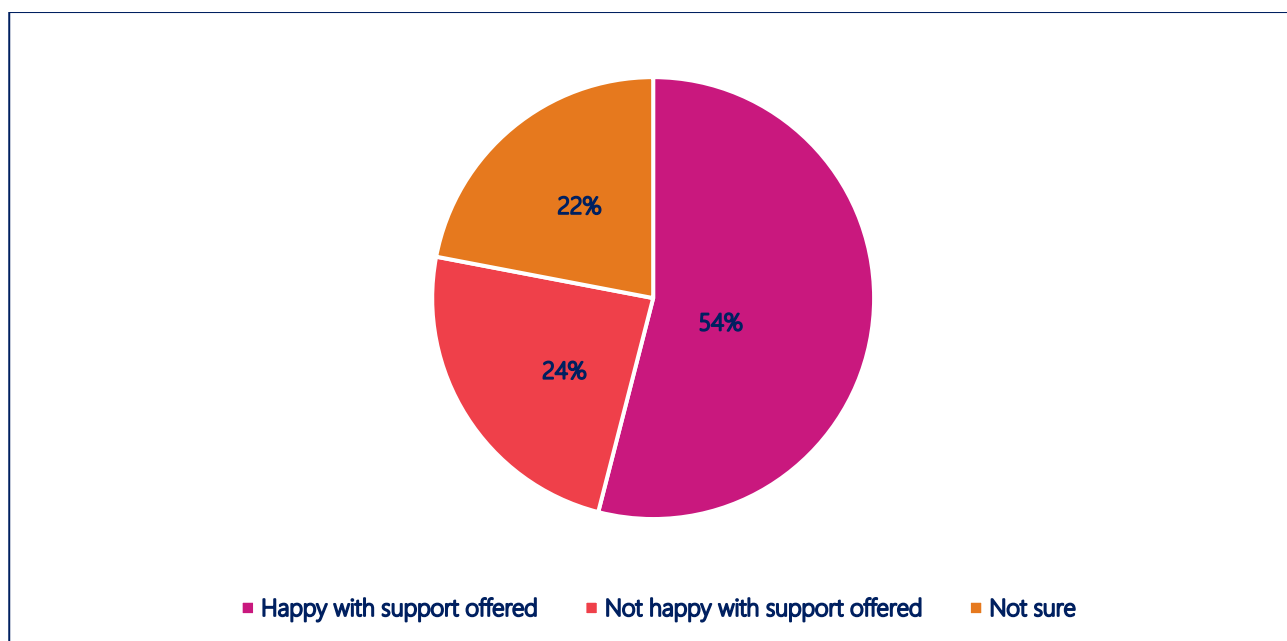
Could you provide more detail about your answer?

33. Many respondents to this question shared positive experiences of the support they were offered whilst at university, with the speed at which they were offered support characterising many of these responses.

Positive experiences

"As soon as I mentioned being suicidal, the support team that I reached out to referred me to the universities crisis support service, who were really good and helped me come up with a safety plan. The university also organised some counselling with an external service as I was approaching the end of my time at university."

"I was recommended to access the support by my personal tutor, who also contacted them for me when we realised it was an issue with me being wary about contacting them first. Support received was fantastic even with the covid 19 pandemic causing issues with me seeking external diagnosis for certain issues (still in progress), instead taking the route of putting measures in place even without the paperwork technically needed to do so, as this was something I was unable to access due to pressure on external services over the past few years."

"As soon as I decided to take a pause from my studies, I was immediately referred to the wellbeing service as a cause for concern by my personal tutor. Following on from this the wellbeing service reached out to me and gathered more information before arranging an in-person appointment. I have continued to receive ongoing help ever since."

"I was pleasantly surprised at how quickly I was offered support once I asked for help. Within 24 hours I was booked in to have a Teams meeting with the support team at the university."

"Effective mental health support was provided entirely by the dedication, good will and expertise of working class female academics in my department who understand the challenges of studying, working and parenting through a pandemic. These people kept university running . . ."

Whilst there were more positive experiences shared by respondents in response to this question, a number of respondents shared negative or mixed experiences. A number of respondents referred to the extent of the support offered, with particular reference made to the number of counselling sessions offered, which many considered to few in number.

Negative experiences

"The counsellor was judgemental and directive. She made me feel ashamed of asking for support."

"After getting in touch, I was simply put in contact with my GP, who then put me on a waiting list. Although they say support is available, they don't have the ability to do anything useful."

"It kept telling me they were busy and to use self-help resources before referring. This just discouraged me and made me feel like they did not want to help."

Mixed experience

"I was very touched by the support I received from my department, they were very understanding and helpful when I took break after my brother's death and they were so keen to help me return and perform well. However, the university in general failed to recognise that students struggle with mental health issues that not centred around performance anxiety or their studies."

"Personal tutor ace, but mostly work-focused. Didn't want to chat about personal mental health with them. Counselling service was less successful, got the sense they were understaffed and didn't feel comfortable enough to return after one session."

"Whilst the counselling offered did help slightly, it fell short in the quantity offered. Six sessions is not enough for someone with the kind of issues I had (and have) at the time of taking it. Moreover, I could not return once I'd taken them, so for the last six years, I haven't had much in the way of support or even a follow-up to my sessions."

The effect of Covid-19 on mental health support at university

34. Questions 16 -18 (inclusive) explored the effect of the pandemic on the respondent's mental health and the support available for students.

**Do you think the pandemic has had an effect on your mental health while you have been a student?**

35. 57% of respondents to this question selected yes, with 16% of respondents selecting no. 10% selected I'm not sure. 17% chose not applicable.
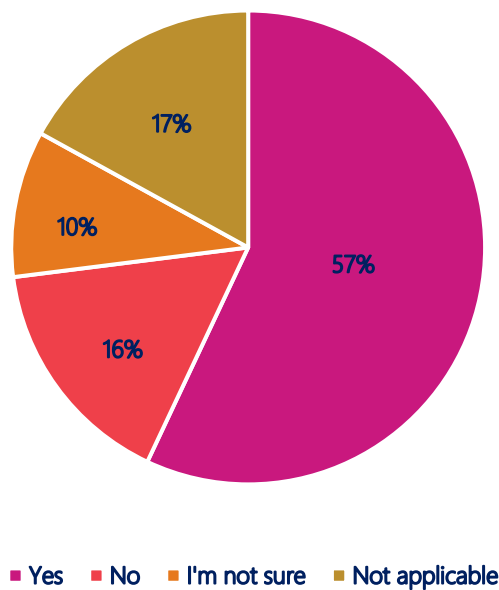
Do you think the pandemic has had an effect on the support you and other students are / were able to access for your mental health?

36. 50% of respondents to this question selected yes. 13% of respondents to this question selected no. 20% selected 'I'm not sure'. 17% of respondents to this question selected 'not applicable'.
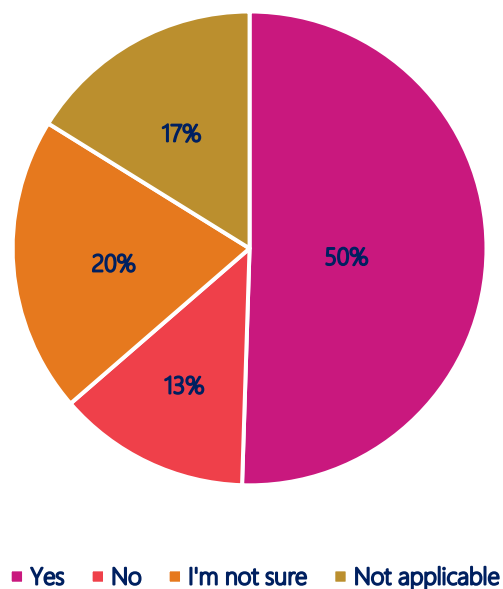
Could you provide us with some detail? For example, were you only able to access support online, did it take longer to access support etc.

37. Most responses to this question centred upon the challenges and limitations of only being able to access support delivered online. The online approach was considered ineffective and unsuitable by many respondents, although some explained they appreciated that delivering services online was the only option on occasion (for example, due to the restrictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic).

Online support

"During the covid pandemic, some support has only been available online. For some students, this has not been helpful. Face-to-face was needed for their safety and confidentiality."

"Only being able to access support online leads to a feeling of isolation from students which means a lack of a support network to actively discuss these feelings."

"There wasn't any ability to chat to people in person and only over Zoom, so it was difficult to access support."

"Online counselling isn't as effective."

An increase in waiting times to access support along with a suggestion by some respondents that this was in part due to services being oversubscribed, was a further theme which arose often in response to this question.

Waiting times

"I think the reduction of in person, face-to-face contact with services has had an impact on other students that I have been studying alongside. The majority of my ongoing support has to be accessed online or I have to e-mail to request this. Often because of the demand that is placed upon these services I have noticed that some students have always experienced longer waits."

"Only able to access support online, and the waiting times were much longer, understandably so."

"It took so much longer to access support, and not everyone is happy with accessing support online."

"Waiting lists were far longer for university and CMHT (Community Mental Health Team) counselling."

Accessing NHS mental health support

38. Questions 19 – 21 (inclusive) explored whether the respondent had received any NHS support for their mental health.

Have you received any NHS support in Wales, including seeing a GP, for your mental health during your time at university?

39. 38% of respondents to this question selected yes – they have accessed NHS or other healthcare support in Wales. 10% selected yes they have accessed NHS or other healthcare support outside of Wales. 48% had not accessed NHS support. 4% were not sure.

- Yes – accessed NHS or other healthcare support in Wales
- Yes – accessed NHS or other healthcare support outside of Wales
- No
- Not sure
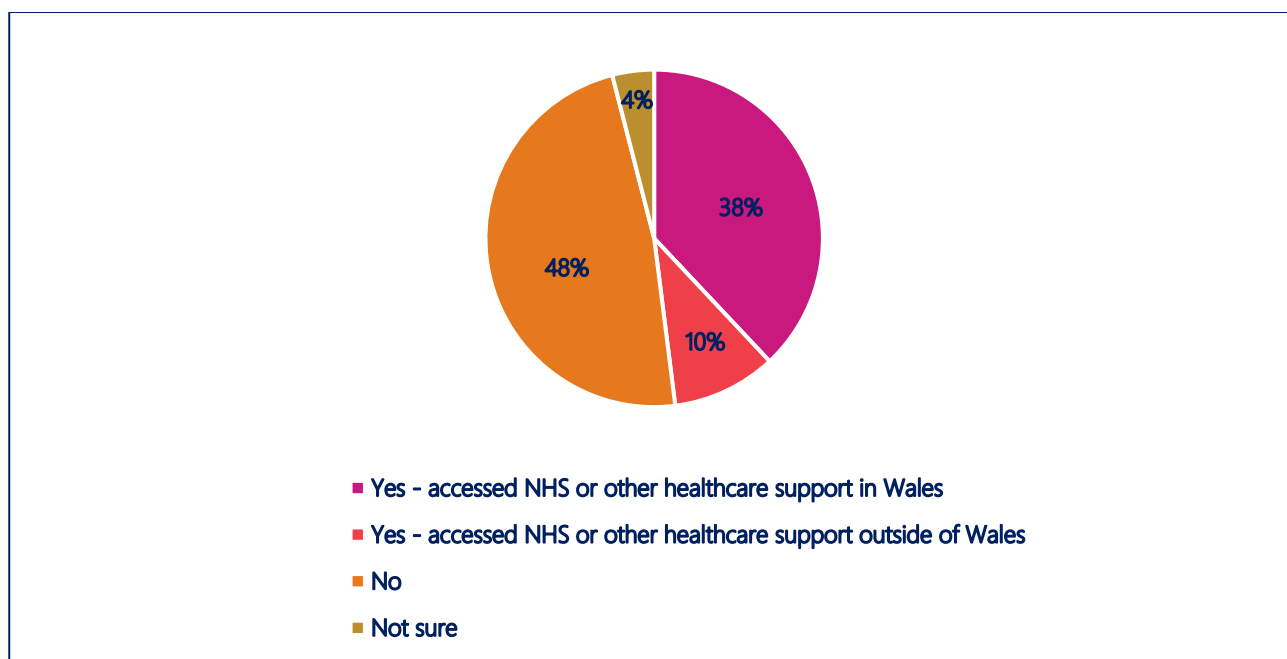
Were you accessing any NHS services for your mental health before you started at university?

40. 25% of respondents to this question selected yes, with 70% selecting no. 5% selected 'I'm not sure.'

- Yes   - No   - I'm not sure
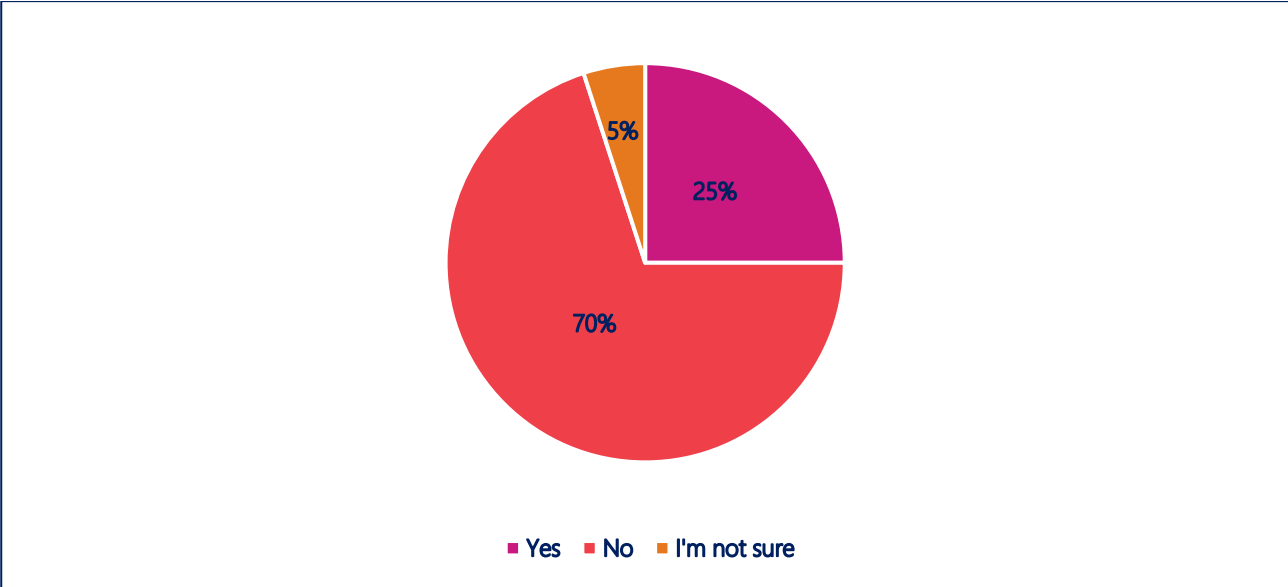
Please tick all options that you agree with

41. 54% of respondents to this question said there was no change in the way they accessed mental health support. 29% said their access to services was affected by moving to a new location of study. 17% said their access to services was affected as they transferred to adult mental health services.

- No change in the way they accessed mental health support
- Access to services affected by moving to a new locatoin of study
- Access to services affected as they trnsferred to adult mental health services
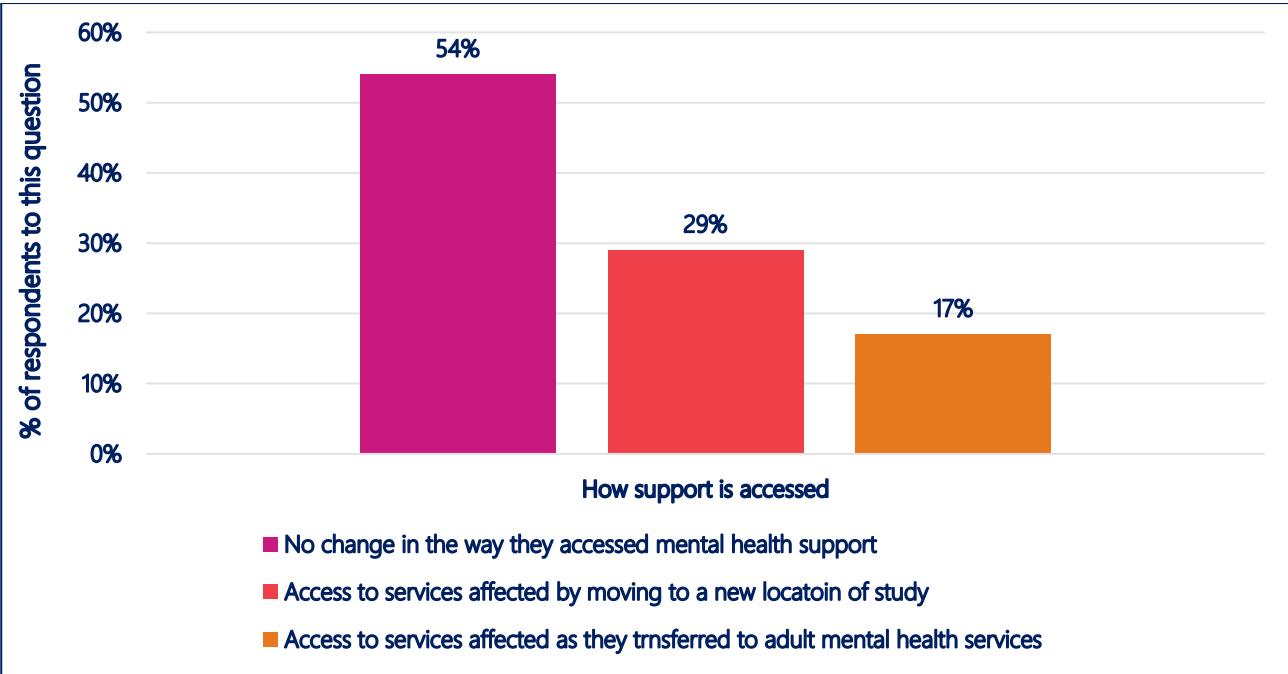
Additional comments

42. Respondents to the survey were given the opportunity to share any further comments. A need for increased funding of mental health services was the theme which arose most often in response to this question.

"The government should be funding NHS mental health services better generally, but specifically outpatient services in university cities. They should also fund universities to offer more services directly through long-term grants (not just one off pockets of funds) specifically for professional-led services. There should be a higher bar for university services to meet (and the funding to allow this) with specific, measurable criteria for the services. There should be crisis services other than A&E because students just get sent home without help as A&E is so overrun and overstretched There should be NHS outpatient mental health clinics in all university cities and access to long and short term counselling in person (locally) and online."

"I think there should be more funding and training for those who see the students for counselling services."

"I think Welsh Government should ringfence funding for mental health support for students in Wales. Going to university and figuring out how to be a young adult is really difficult, and made even harder by mental ill health. With rates of mental illness increasing amongst young people, having accessible mental health support is going to be essential to support this generation emerge into the post-graduate world with coping mechanisms to deal with the difficult work/economic climate."

43. A number of respondents to this question elaborated more generally on their experience of mental health at university, including the quality, accessibility and suitability of mental health services on offer. These experiences varied, with some commending the approach taken by their university, others critical of their university, with a smaller number of responses highlighting both positive and negative aspects to the support available.

Positive experiences

"The mental health support at . . . University was/is amazing. Students can show up at the unions, send in concerns electronically, or reach out to the departments reps if any assistance is needed. They've also been good at hosting events and teaming up with local charity mental health organisations in town, and informing students about these organizations so that people can go there if they feel that is more comfortable/convenient."

"The uni were the reason I felt brave enough to access support, very grateful we have a great support team here (for anxiety anyway, not sure about other issues)."

Negative experiences

"I have had to uptake private health care owing to my studies in part. The uni didn't care and honestly were not helpful at all. They literally are the worst."

"Universities are doing less than before the pandemic. It's almost like the pandemic gave then a get out clause."

Mixed experience

"I received excellent support from mental health and well-being officers. It is a shame that individuals' mental health is not always taken into consideration with assignment deadlines and the procedures with waiting for exam board results."

"I think the university needs to safeguard students much more thoroughly. The security team did much more than the mental health advisors to keep me safe. I was so severely unwell and the only support I got was my personal tutor (who was very good) but the mental health team was honestly awful."