

The current situation regarding mental health in universities reflects the need for improvement. As has been [well-documented](#), mental health issues have been increasing for decades. Some of the most telling statistics come from examining the last decade, during which the number of university students who considered suicide increased by 77 per cent. At the same time, diagnoses of depression and anxiety increased by nearly 50 per cent and 80 per cent respectively.

Universities' response has been treatment-based, with an increase in wellness programmes, counsellors and medical professionals. While this approach has its merits, the figures above indicate that it is time to try something different.

Given the [interconnectedness](#) of individuals' physical, social and mental health, I believe that the key is for universities to aim to [promote health across campus](#) in everything it does. This whole-system approach entails the creation of spaces, resources and communities where individuals – students, staff and members of the public – and groups can achieve optimal health through everyday activities.

For universities, it is essential to create top-down solutions. Adopting the healthy university framework that suggests embedding health into campus culture, administrative policy, university operations, and academic mandates. These strategies are suggested by the [Okanagan Charter](#) which was the result of the 2015 International Conference on Health Promoting Universities and Colleges, and this sets the necessary foundation to promote health across the university campus and the community.

Adopting this framework would entail two strategies. First, universities would embed health across their operations and academic mandates, such as increasing sustainability on campus, creating better spaces for students to study and live, and creating opportunities for people to develop academically, personally and professionally.

Second, universities would integrate health across disciplines, conduct research into mental health, and collaborate locally and globally on making improvements to their approach to mental health.

A big driver of improved university mental health is a better understanding of the students' perceived influences, in addition to the medical records provided by counsellors and medical professionals. The American College Health uses a [comprehensive survey](#) to assess the health of university students in the US, and it is available for local use. Universities should consider altering or adding areas to the survey that are relevant to students. Ideally, the responses would be filtered at university, college and programme level, providing feedback on student wellbeing to staff at each of these management levels.

In addition to the survey, the university should build resources that pertain to student needs. The concept of [study ability](#) describes three core areas necessary for students to succeed while at university: personal resources, study skills and study environment. Creating resources that can develop an individual's well-being, time management, study skills and choice of study

environment provide students with the necessary support to succeed, as well as build the soft skills they need to succeed beyond university. Provision could be at physical locations, with support from professors and staff, but should also be accessible anonymously online.

Additionally, universities should work to embed these skills and knowledge into curricula. A standout example is [Yale University's course on happiness](#), the most popular class in the history of the university.

A big part of what makes a campus' culture is, of course, the faculty and staff. They are in frequent contact with students that help shape their perception of the university. So, it is important that faculty and staff have the necessary skills and knowledge of campus resources to contribute to a supportive and health-promoting culture. There are a number of training programmes that are developed internally, as well as external vendors that provide training to identify and respond to signs of poor health.

While this is valuable, it is also important to improve empathy in faculty and staff. That will build trust with students and create the necessary rapport and dialogue to give students feelings of support on campus. Creating a workshop that helps faculty and staff use their specialised university health survey to identify the issues that their particular students are facing would be immensely valuable. The workshop would occur at least once a year and would also ensure that faculty and staff were up-to-date about the resources available to students facing those particular issues, and in a position to encourage students to access them.

Shifting from a reliance on treating mental illness to promoting mental health is a long-term project. But if students have knowledge of and belief in resources to help them develop academically, personally, and professionally, the mental health situation on university campuses will surely improve.

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