

Obsession with grades adds to undergrads' stress levels

Report on mental health also highlights need for better and more support in institutions

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"Grace days" and tackling a "grades-obsessed culture" were among recommendations to improve the mental health of undergraduates, in a report by the Inter-University Network (IUN).

Respondents to an online survey of 470 undergraduates from April to last month were asked how stressed they had felt in the three months before the poll on a scale of zero to 10, with 10 being the most stressed. The average level of stress came to 7.6.

Eighty-nine per cent of the respondents said work and study commitments were among their top five sources of stress, while 68 per cent said it was a lack of confidence in their own abilities.

Sixty-four per cent cited career prospects after university, and the same proportion said it was personal relationships.

These results and more were in the UCare Mental Health Report, which was presented to Minister for Culture, Community and Youth and Second Minister for Law Edwin Tong at the UCare Mental Health Forum yesterday.

Speaking to The Straits Times at the sidelines of the event, Ms Shyanne Loh, 28, a student leader at the Singapore Institute of Technology – which collaborated with IUN on the report – noted that the emphasis in Singapore for the past few years has been on raising awareness of mental health issues.

She hopes the report will result in more concrete action being taken to address the issues.

The IUN said in its report that the survey results suggest the huge responsibility undergraduates have placed upon themselves to do well in their studies.

One recommendation was the introduction of "grace days", which are allowable delays beyond a specified deadline that can be applied



Above: Students studying on the NUS campus. The IUN said in its report that the survey results suggest the huge responsibility undergraduates have placed upon themselves to do well in their studies.
ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG



Left: Ms Shyanne Loh, student leader at Singapore Institute of Technology, said she hopes for more concrete action to address mental health issues. ST PHOTOS: ALPHONSUS CHERN

those who did not use university-provided services said this was because of the inefficiency of such services.

"Such patterns suggest the need for universities and government bodies to look into ways to provide more support to ease the manpower bottleneck that university mental health services face," it said.

Asked about the issue of university-initiated mental health resources being overwhelmed, Ms Rebecca Tay, 22, director of wellness in the student government of Yale-NUS College, whose student leaders are part of IUN, said it is important for university administrations to understand the stressors that students face and put forth initiatives to tackle them.

She said: "I think rather than counsellors being the single solution to every single mental health emergency students face, more stakeholders can come into this conversation and contribute their efforts as well."

Nearly 400 of the respondents said they had not made use of any student-led mental health initiatives, with 26 per cent of this group saying they did not know how to start or where to get help.

The report suggested more effort be put into publicising and planning student-led initiatives.

"Overall, such a higher usage of student-led initiatives may then reduce the strain placed upon students' oversubscribing to an over-encumbered university counselling

8 ways to improve undergraduates' mental health

These are eight of the recommendations made by the Inter-University Network in its mental health report:

1. Review universities' academic infrastructure to prioritise mental health before grades.
2. Offer flexibility in the workload and curriculum, including introducing "grace days".
3. Increase communication between students and the school's administration to shape a better learning environment.
4. Put more effort into publicising and planning student-led mental health initiatives.
5. Ensure peer supporters are rigorously trained and certified.
6. Gather feedback on university-provided counselling services and try to improve by implementing changes.
7. Manage students' expectations of mental health resources on campus.
8. Normalise help-seeking behaviour among students.

MORE STAKEHOLDERS

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MS REBECCA TAY, 22, director of wellness in the student government of Yale-NUS College.

to all assignments, and do not need prior approval for usage.

Noting that several universities around the world have adopted this practice, the IUN said it would give students a flexible way to handle their academic issues without having to approach other individuals, such as their lecturers.

The IUN added that students feel there is a "deep-seated and unhealthy obsession with their grades", as employers continue to use these as the primary part of screening for the hiring process.

This in turn leads to an increase in stress during undergraduates' education, with students primarily focused on chasing grades and out-

doing their peers rather than enjoying learning, said the IUN, calling for a review of universities' curricula, grading systems and mental health resources.

More than half the respondents – about 280 – said they had not used any of the mental health resources provided by their university's administration.

Of this group, 19 per cent said they had heard unsatisfactory remarks about the services from other students.

The IUN said it was crucial to improve the quality of the resources available to the undergraduate population, so students feel supported. It also noted that 15 per cent of

service by offering alternative, complementary avenues of support," it said.

Speaking at the event, Mr Tong said data from the National Youth Council's Monthly Youth Sentiments Tracker, from February to October last year, found that one in five youth reported poor or very poor mental well-being.

Emphasising that action is needed at every level to tackle mental health issues, he highlighted a number of initiatives by the Government and in the community, and added that individuals have a part to play too.

He called on people to play the role of mental health first responders, and said: "Continue to share views and have conversations, so that we can normalise the discussions around mental health... don't be afraid to seek help when you need help. It is not a sign of weakness, it is not a sign of failure."

Ms Tay and Ms Loh both said that rather than a sign that today's youth are weak, the IUN's calls for a review of the academic system are an effort of the younger generation to address the challenges they face with better tools and perspectives.

Ms Tay said: "All these are how we can work towards a different reality, where youth are still achieving their goals – but now they're given the right resources to help them go even further into the future."

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