



Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Opening statement: Joseph Morning, Mental Health Content Editor, spunout

Mental health supports for further and higher education

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the committee today on the important topic of further and higher education and mental health.

spunout is Ireland's youth information service run by young people, for young people. Through our platforms, we provide young people in Ireland with access to quality, non-judgemental information services with over one hundred and eighty thousand readers relying on our information resources every month.

We seek to understand the information needs and experiences of young people through a wide range of participatory exercises including large scale surveys, focus groups and through ongoing listening exercises with our regional Action Panel youth participation structures. This engagement with young people allows us to gather significant insight into the challenges young people face when entering further or higher education in Ireland, and their experiences as they go about their studies.

Findings from the seminal My World Survey 2, Ireland's largest and most comprehensive survey of young people's mental health, highlight that poor student mental health is a pervasive and problematic issue in Ireland. Roughly one-fifth of the Irish student population experiences severe depression and anxiety and over 10% of students reported a suicide attempt. The My World Survey 2 was carried out before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, and research conducted since then indicates further deteriorations in student mental health. International research demonstrates this crisis in student mental health in Ireland is mirroring trends that are unfolding globally.

These research findings are reflecting what we're seeing on the ground. Since the start of 2021, our text support service '50808' has engaged in over 2,000 conversations with young texters relating to further or higher education. Anxiety featured as an issue in 43% of these conversations, while 38% of texters talked to us about stress, 21% about isolation, and 15% shared they were having thoughts of suicide.

Within the student population in Ireland, there are a number of groups that are at increased risk of experiencing mental health difficulties. The My World Survey findings showed that

younger students were at an increased risk of mental health difficulties. This finding makes a lot of sense. For many young people in Ireland, entering further or higher education coincides with a key transition stage in their life. These transition stages come with a unique set of challenges and adjustments that have an impact on mental health and wellbeing.

For many young people in Ireland, this phase of change, uncertainty, and challenge can form the backdrop, against which, mental health issues can emerge. Mental health issues that develop at this stage, if not properly identified and addressed, can have significant and long-lasting impacts that span their entire adult life. This represents a critical stage for mental health intervention that has ramifications for the public health of the entire population of Ireland.

Research shows that poor mental health poses a significant barrier to engagement with further and higher education. Young people are frequently presenting to our Youth Information Chat service enquiring about whether they can defer a college course due to their mental health deteriorating. A study carried out by the Union of Students in Ireland found that over 50% of young people who had accessed a mental health support service before entering higher education were concerned about being able to access support once they entered higher education. This underscores the need for sufficiently funded dedicated mental health support services that can reduce the impact of poor mental health by providing the right intervention at the right time.

We welcome the commitment of Minister Simon Harris to the issue of student mental health and the recent allocation of an additional €5m for student counselling and mental health services, however, we need a longer term strategy for the resourcing of mental health supports in further and higher education. As we have outlined, these additional resources serve to build capacity in a suite of college mental health services which have long been under-resourced and which are now facing a rapidly increasing wave of demand for support from students. We urge the Committee and indeed the Minister to continue to advocate for dedicated and ring-fenced exchequer funding for student mental health services.

In 2020, the Higher Education Authority published their national student mental health and suicide prevention framework for Ireland, a really important development which has encouraged much greater collaboration between agencies such as the HEA and the National Office for Suicide Prevention, NGOs and higher education institutions. This framework provides a practical, multi-dimensional, stepped-care approach to improving mental health outcomes for students.

I'm going to highlight a number of key elements of this framework that we see as being particularly crucial going forward. First, students experiencing mental health difficulties need access to safe, well-resourced clinical supports that are culturally appropriate and inclusive for all. This is vital, not only because our student population is becoming more diverse, but because groups of students at higher risk of experiencing mental health difficulties include those who identify as LGBTI+; international students; and those from ethnic minorities.

Our student population is also changing in terms of how they engage with their education. A traditional approach to student mental health that solely relies on on-campus supports is no longer accessible to all. This is particularly important because online/remote students are at

an increased risk of mental health difficulties. Hybrid approaches to mental health that include digital and online support services are a cost-effective solution, but they are underdeveloped in higher education and need investment.

The framework also calls for the development of universal preventative interventions to maintain the mental wellbeing of all students. Adopting a universal approach helps to identify those most in need of support and creates a culture of shared responsibility for mental wellbeing support. It also builds educational institutions that encourage and normalise help-seeking for mental health needs. Mental health awareness training for all staff and students enhances recognition and referral, and reduces stigma.

Providing the mental health supports that our student (and indeed general, whole) population needs will require a professional workforce trained in the use of high quality, evidence-based interventions and therapies. More than ever, we need the Department of Further & Higher Education to expand the number of training places in key mental health professions.

This means creating more training places for Clinical, Counselling, and Educational Psychologists, paying the associated fees for all trainees to ensure an equitable opportunity. This will also help to build a workforce that can better meet the needs of our growing student population by ensuring psychology is open to people from a diverse range of backgrounds.

We also need more mental health nurses, psychiatrists, social workers, occupational therapists and other allied health professionals. The Department of Further & Higher Education has a pivotal role in ensure we plan for a sufficient workforce to provide the kinds of accessible, quality mental health services we need to transform mental health care in Ireland.

Finally, there must be major steps taken to ensure further and higher education opportunities are genuinely open to everyone, including and especially those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. We know that financial pressures can be a major detrimental factor on a person's mental health. As the cost of living soars ever higher, so too does the risk of students being forced out of education by challenges exacerbated by financial concerns.

The clearest solution to this lies with the SUSI grant; and yet we are currently seeing only the first review of SUSI rates in ten years. This is vital opportunity to support students that must not be missed. We can and must set the SUSI grant at a rate that adequately covers the costs of engaging in further and higher education. We can also link the rates of payment for the SUSI grant to inflation. These are crucial steps to ensure that engaging in higher education is accessible to all.

In tackling these issues, there can be no substitute for authentic, driven leadership from Government and from the Oireachtas. I would urge the Committee to adopt a broad, societal approach to the intersectional issues of mental health inequality, social exclusion and economic inequality when setting out recommendations on the future of mental health support in further and higher education. We need to see investment in measures that treat the causes of poor mental health in educational contexts as well as measures that address its symptoms. Ultimately, our student population have never been more reliant on us to

deliver in the area of mental health. What we require is the investment, the leadership, and the structures of accountability in pursuit of a vision where students in Ireland are supported to achieve and thrive in further & higher education and beyond as they build careers and happy, healthy lives.