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Inter-University Network report recommends ‘grace days’ among ways to better support students mental wellbeing

The report’s findings show that a hyper-competitive academic culture combined with mental health stigma contributes to the lack of help-seeking behaviour in university students.

University undergraduates in Singapore face high levels of stress related to work and academics, but prefer not to seek mental health support due to fear of judgement from those around them.

This was revealed in a study conducted by Inter-University Network (IUN), which surveyed 470 university undergraduates across five autonomous universities. The study was done to understand the mental health landscape in Singapore universities and posit policy recommendations for better mental health support to the Government.

The survey respondents were from the National University of Singapore (NUS, including Yale-NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore Management University (SMU), Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), and Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT).

The findings from the study were presented at the IUN UCare Mental Health Forum 2022, *Culture of Care: Empowering Connections* on Tuesday (Jun 21). The IUN also shared their recommendations based on the findings.

Here are the key insights from the forum.

Hustle culture has heavily impacted students’ mental health

The report found that nine in 10 respondents named work and study commitments as a top cause of stress for them. These include situations where students have long hours of classes, juggle multiple submissions with other commitments and strive to do well.

In comparison, lack of self-confidence is the next most common stressor at 68 per cent, with a distinct gap of 21 per cent between this and the first stressor. This indicates that undergraduate students place huge amounts of pressure on themselves to do well academically, read the report.

It added that the pressure to perform well stems from Singapore's hyper-competitive environment, which nurtures "a deep-seated belief that academic achievement is a necessary ingredient for lifelong success, coupled with continuous affirmations of meritocracy and earning one's own place".

The findings also showed that students within IHLs feel that they have a "deep-seated and unhealthy obsession" with grades because academic results are the primary indicator used by employers when hiring.

This has diminished the joy of learning because "students primarily focus on chasing grades and outdoing their peers", said IUN.

Mr Ethan Pang, director of NTU's University Wellbeing Office, said this is problematic as he feels that the meaning and purpose of life has been traded away for the obsession with climbing the corporate ladder.

"Perhaps we would respond to wellbeing in a different way if we could change our outlook on work – instead of being stressed by it, we can be excited," he said.

Mr Pang acknowledged that this deep-rooted mindset is hard to shift, having been passed down through generations. However, he emphasised that the shift must consciously be done by the current generation of students, as these are the parents and employers of the future.

"We can do all we can at the university, but you have to realise that it's down to you – change has to start somewhere," he said.

Universities can support students with greater academic flexibility

The study found that three in four students want more academic support, including more avenues for professional advice and changes to academic policies.

Based on the findings, the IUN proposed greater flexibility in workload and curriculum planning, such as the introduction of "grace days", to ease the stress of juggling heavy workloads and meeting tight deadlines.

The IUN also suggested that students be granted more autonomy in planning their own academic pathway so they can choose modules that are a better fit for them.

"This reduces chances of a mental burnout, an issue that several students have highlighted in their responses," said the IUN.

The IUN also proposed increasing communication avenues between students and the school administration, as this will make students' concerns heard. In order to support students, however, faculty members and administrators must be trained to listen to students with empathy.

"In order to properly tackle mental health within universities, efforts must be committed by both decision makers at the top, and sentiments from the ground," said the IUN.

Silver Ribbon Singapore's executive director Porsche Poh shared that it would be unwise to force students into seeking help, as they would typically need space and time to weigh their options and decide upon a trusted source of support. In addition, it sometimes takes a while before someone is ready to confide in others.

"It's about providing a safe space for everyone to share their struggles and speak up," she said.

Mental health stigma prevents students from seeking help

Another notable finding from the study was that few students use available resources to seek support for their mental health, despite many demonstrating awareness of both professional and student-led resources in their universities.

A major reason for this is fear of judgement from others, cited by one in five respondents overall and nearly one in three of those who prefer to deal with their problems on their own.

Ms Poh said that students may be unwilling to speak to their school counsellors due to a negative impression of them from childhood, when children with disciplinary issues in primary and secondary schools are sent to the school counsellor.

Additionally, they may not be able to seek help outside of school due to the scarcity of affordable mental health support.

However, Ms Poh takes an optimistic view towards the direction that society is currently moving in. When she founded Silver Ribbon to fight for mental health awareness back in 2005, many refused her collaboration requests as they did not want to be associated with a mental health organisation.

“Now that the local government is focusing on mental health and is willing to invest in it, this is a blessing. Of course we are not there yet. But at least we are moving, slowly but surely,” said Ms Poh.

Peer support can be the most valuable mental health resource

Despite the fear of judgement, the report also found that two in three respondents would confide in their friends when distressed. Moreover, 98 per cent of respondents were willing to help and support someone in distress. This indicates that peer support has high potential to be a reliable resource for mental health aid, said the IUN. Therefore, it recommended that peer support networks be offered and expanded upon in all universities, with proper training given to peer helpers.

Panelist Syed Harun Alhabsyi, visiting consultant psychiatrist at the Institute of Mental Health, suggested that a tangible change schools can make is to make good mental health practices mainstream by engendering them within student groups.

He explained that this could be done by aligning co-curricular activities (CCAs) and interest groups with mental health practices. This would build a dedicated peer support network that one can access readily in times of need.

“You might get more people coming forward to get support because they’re among friends and people they trust, and maybe that’s the way to go forward,” he added.

On how to provide support to others as a peer helper, Mr Harun and Mr Pang both stressed that peer helpers have different skill sets and do not have to do it all alone. Even if you do not have the capacity to help someone directly, you can also redirect the person to a more suitable resource, or simply be there as a listening ear.

“Just by listening, just by being a friend, you are already bringing it one to two notches down.. And recognising that each and every one of us, with or without formal training, is still better than the person having no one at all, that’s the starting point,” said Mr Harun.

During the panel discussion, National Youth Council (NYC) CEO David Chua also discussed the Government’s direction in addressing the relevant mental health concerns above.

He noted that the education system needs to strike a “fine balance” between recalibrating itself towards learning for discovery, and maintaining the academic rigour and discipline needed to cultivate a skilled workforce.

Mr Chua added that the NYC is working with the Ministry of Education (MOE) and relevant agencies to better understand how this shift can be done.

In his speech at the forum, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Edwin Tong also emphasised that action at every level, from the ground to policymakers, would be needed to address the issues given the strong hustle culture present in Singapore.

“We must continue strengthening the heart of our community and building a culture of care that goes beyond a daily slogan,” said Mr Tong.