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Further Reading: Cullinan J, Walsh S, Flannery D, Kennelly B (2022) A Cross-sectional Analysis of Psychological Distress Among Higher Education Students in Ireland. *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 1-9. doi:10.1017/ipm.2022.2.

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Disparities in Psychological Distress Among Higher Education Students in Ireland

Psychological distress among higher education students is a growing concern, both in Ireland and internationally. As well as the personal consequences for students themselves, which can include diminished wellbeing, unhappiness, social isolation, and decreased enjoyment of life, the high prevalence of mental ill-health amongst students also has implications for the higher education sector. Poor mental health can affect academic performance and student retention, while the demand for student counselling services is rising. This research examined psychological distress among a representative sample of 5,201 higher education students in Ireland across a range of personal, higher education, and socio-economic characteristics. The survey, conducted prior to the pandemic, collected information on depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms among student respondents.

Key Findings

High levels of psychological distress were found in the student population in Ireland. Overall, 19.1% of the sample were classified in the severe to extremely severe range for depression, with corresponding proportions of 20.7% for anxiety and 14.8% for stress. Considerable variation was also found in these prevalence rates across student groups. In particular, higher levels of psychological distress were found among transgender and female students compared to males, gay/lesbian/bisexual students compared to heterosexual students, undergraduates compared to postgraduates, students from lower social classes compared to professional classes, as well as particularly high levels of distress for students having financial difficulties. Levels of psychological distress were lower for those studying at university relative to ITs.

Policy Implications

Robust and detailed data on the prevalence and correlates of psychological distress among higher education students is vital so that campus counselling services and HEI managers, faculty, and administrators can better support students who are experiencing mental health issues. Such information can also help support policymakers at a broader sectoral level. For example, the findings of significant differences in the prevalence of psychological distress across student groups bolsters the case for more targeted services and suggests that consideration could be given to prioritized or ring-fenced supports for particularly vulnerable groups. At a wider sectoral level, the results show higher levels of mental ill health amongst students in ITs/TUs compared to universities, suggesting a need for increased relative investment in the former. In addition, previous research showed that among counselling service attributes, shorter waiting times are particularly valued by students. Given the high rates of psychological distress identified in the current study, this strengthens the case for further investment in counselling services to increase service capacity and reduce waiting times. In addition, it was also found that undergraduate students have higher levels of distress relative to postgraduate students, as well as evidence of a very strong socioeconomic gradient in mental ill health. Previous research showed that both groups place a high value on information provision relating to mental health services and supports. Again, the findings here strengthen the case for more targeted information for both of these cohorts.