
GetAHEAD Student Mental Health Project: Capturing the Student Voice and Engagement

Mental health is the topic on everyone's lips, and students are right out in front leading the conversation. This year, AHEAD's research, which examines the numbers of students with disabilities in higher education in the academic year 2016/17, found an increase in the number of students registering with disability support services with a mental health condition. For a number of different reasons, the inclusion of students with mental health conditions in higher education is on the rise. Although central to the discussion, the student voice can often be left behind when it comes to mental health. GetAHEAD wanted to change this and really listen to what students are saying and experiencing in an ever-changing and unpredictable economic and political climate.

GetAHEAD: Student Mental Health Video

With the help of PleaseTalk, a student-led organisation that works within the mental health movement, we reached out to students and graduates asking them a simple question. **What is mental health like on campus?** We used social media platforms to send a call out to students and graduates to have their say. Our aim was to start a conversation, identify areas of concern for students and allow students to lead the conversation. To capture this best, we asked for entries to be a photo or short video clip, accompanied by a caption the student felt summed up a challenge or barrier to good mental health on campus.

To accompany the photos and captions, GetAHEAD invited student ambassadors from PleaseTalk and ReachOut, an online youth mental health service, to be part of an interview, the audio part would be used in the video. We based the interview with the ambassadors around three broad questions:

1. What unique pressures do students experience?
2. Is there a difference in being a student now than in the past?
3. What are the top pressures on student mental health?

Unsurprisingly, the interview and the photo entries had the same theme running throughout and we were able to identify 6 major issues on mental health that students were concerned about:

1. **Competition:** Students identified a constant feeling of competition, both with their peers and from an increasingly globalised marketplace which meant the world was in competition for the graduate jobs they aspired to.
2. **Isolation:** Students discussed a feeling of isolation during college years as all around them are busy setting up their own careers.
3. **Finance:** Students felt there were under unique financial strain with limited time for part time work alongside the need for college materials.
4. **Stress:** Often the financial pressure puts stress on students to hold down a part time job alongside studying, which creates a time pressure that causes stress while also trying to manage exams, assessments and projects throughout the academic year.
5. **Expectation:** Almost all entries and the interview with ambassadors highlighted the pressure of being 'the

perfect student'. They felt employers wanted to see a graduate who as a student was able to achieve high grades, hold down a part time job, excel in extracurricular activities and have experience in the field they were looking to make a career in. This meant they had to live up to this expectation from employers while in college.

6. **Uncertainty:** Underneath all of the other pressures mentioned above, it is important to mention modern students are now dealing with an uncertain economic climate. They study often not sure there will be a job in their field of study for them once they leave college. This heightens the feeling of pressure to perform in college and only increases the feeling of competition with peers.

Having noticed a common theme running through both the photo and caption entries and the ambassador interviews, GetAHEAD focused on these 6 themes and produced a three and a half minute video which showcased these struggles, spoken in the students' own voice. The resulting video aimed to display a powerful message about the pressure students are facing and to shed some light on the increasing numbers of students with mental health conditions being represented in third level education.

WAM

On the 7th December 2017 in the Aviva Stadium, Dublin, the WAM programme of AHEAD, with the support of ESB, organised a conference on mental health, '**Mental Health on the Move, from College to Work: Staying AHEAD of the Stress**'. Employers, disability support staff and students gathered to discuss mental health in college and work. The video created by GetAHEAD was played to the room to open the discussion. This served as an important opportunity for employers to hear directly from students what they are concerned about. From that, the conversation was opened to projects and initiatives in place in colleges and businesses around the country which aimed to tackle the growing numbers experiencing poor mental health in Ireland.

Partnership working: USI and GetAHEAD

Both USI and GetAHEAD have been working on this issue in their own capacities, but have decided to work together to start creating a space where students can continue to have their voice heard. Having worked together in presenting their work to date on this topic at the AHEAD annual conference in March 2018, USI and AHEAD partnered to provide a National Conference for Students with Disabilities at the end of March 2018. The aim of this conference was to give students the floor, let them voice their options and to lead GetAHEAD and USI on their next steps.

GetAHEAD are committed to establishing a student network, where students can find training, peer support and a group environment in which to continuously have their voice heard and acted upon. To get involved with the network of students please contact hannah.kelly@ahead.ie.



Hannah Kelly

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Hannah (she/her) is the Student and Graduate Engagement Officer in AHEAD. Her role involves working to include the student voice in the work of AHEAD and creating inclusive environments for disabled students in extracurricular settings. As part of her role, she was the co-founder and now coordinator of the USI/AHEAD Students with Disabilities Advisory group. This group helps to inform the strategy and policy of AHEAD and USI concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in HE and FE. Outside of her work with AHEAD, Hannah is a volunteer with Dublin Lesbian Line and is a public speaker, particularly in the areas of intersectionality and inclusion.

This article appeared in the AHEAD Journal. Visit www.ahead.ie/journal for more information
