



WE TELL YOU: YOUNG PEOPLE AND MENTAL HEALTH IN FURTHER EDUCATION

42nd Street were commissioned to consult with young people attending Further Education (FE) establishments in Greater Manchester to find out what challenges they have experienced in relation to Mental Health & Emotional wellbeing during their time in education and how support can be improved. This is a summary of the findings and recommendations.



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Introduction

Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through to adulthood.

Around 1 in 10 children and young people experience issues relating to their Mental Health, which is often a response to what is happening in their lives.

42nd Street were commissioned by the DfHSC – Health & Wellbeing fund, to consult with young people attending Further Education (FE) establishments in Greater Manchester with the aim of hearing what challenges they have experienced during their time in education.

The goal of this research is to ensure those responsible for providing support to young people in education and post education understand the different issues young people experience and the impact of these issues on young people's education & life opportunities; with a desired outcome of **improving Greater Manchester support services** for young people aged 16-25 years both in education and in the community.



Methodology

The research has been youth-led by **5 young people** who volunteer for 42nd Street. The research has been completed in two stages.

The first stage involved the 5 volunteers consulting through online sessions with **93 students** aged 16-25 years from 3 colleges in Greater Manchester. As part of the consultation students were asked questions relating to support with mental health & emotional wellbeing.



The second stage involved 4 of the volunteers compiling an online survey which was sent to all FE colleges and 6th Forms in Greater Manchester and shared with students who had the opportunity to complete the survey voluntarily and anonymously. The survey focused on Mental Health & Emotional Wellbeing including challenges and support students have experienced whilst in education.

The online survey was also shared on 42nd Street social media.



110 students completed the online survey bringing the total number of individual consultations to 203.

An analysis of the data obtained from the consultations has been completed by the volunteers and **4 key themes** have been identified. One of the themes relates to Mental Health issues but the remaining 3 themes will also impact on Mental Health & Emotional Wellbeing.

Following each theme is a **list of recommendations** which come from student's responses to what they have found helpful with emotional wellbeing and mental health support whilst in education and what they feel could be improved.

We feel it is important to note that a small but notable number of students did not have anything that they felt had been helpful or suggestions as to how this could be improved and appeared to feel that people don't really care and only appeared to show interest because they have a professional duty to do so. A small number of students appeared to feel there was no point in them offering suggestions as it is unlikely they would be acted upon.

We have included direct quotes from student's using either speech marks or speech bubbles to reflect their words.

Theme 1: Issues relating to Mental & Physical Health

A number of different issues relating to Mental Health & Emotional Wellbeing were named including; Anxiety, Depression, Suicidal Thoughts, Self-Harm, low self-esteem and BPD (Borderline Personality Disorder)

In relation to physical health, a high number of students spoke of feelings of tiredness using terms such as; “exhausted”, “physically & emotionally drained”, “no energy physically”. Other students named specific physical health issues such as Epilepsy or physical disabilities such as those that impact on mobility.

A significant number of students identified the following as issues that increase mental health distress:

→ **Waiting times** to access support with Mental Health & Emotional Wellbeing difficulties. One student said they had been on a waiting list throughout their time in High School without ever receiving support before finally being referred to a specialist organisation once they started attending college. Other students cited waiting times of over a year.

“Not had help. Done everything on my own and struggled and almost killed myself”

→ **Confidentiality breaches** for some students who had accessed support within college. Examples; information that had been shared with a therapist/counsellor, pastoral support or teacher being uploaded onto the education setting’s computer system for all staff to see; non-safeguarding issues being shared with other education staff or parents/carers without the student’s consent or safeguarding issues being shared inappropriately.



Support not advertised appropriately so students not being aware of what support they could or have the right to access. Students named that support at times was inappropriate or they felt school/college mishandled a particular issue which for one young person put them off attending the school altogether and them moving to a “much better school”.



Validation was cited by a number of students who expressed that teaching staff didn't listen and/or take seriously issues relating to a student's mental health for example dismissing the student as being “lazy” and refusing to offer support. One young person said they felt “Gaslighted” by teachers.

“Don't gaslight young people into believing they're the problem., a warm bath does not help.”



Overwhelmed by Mental Health difficulties, students feeling difficulties are too severe to continue in education, or education staff advising young people that they are not fit to study due to their poor mental health.

“I know I could do better in my college work if I wasn't messed up at the moment.”

“I have a lot going on for me. College is just adding to my stress.”



Recommendations

1) Increased and easy to access Mental Health & Emotional Wellbeing support with much shorter waiting times. Many students cited a 2 week wait as a maximum. Better promotion of support services including; posters advertising support, links to websites and other resources including signposting students to specialist organisations that support young people with mental health & emotional wellbeing.

"I think there needs to be a way where there is less waiting time and if that can't be avoided, then some temporary support should be put in place whilst students are waiting."

"I have found counselling sessions, one to one sessions extremely useful as I can discuss private home matters in a comfortable place."

"There could be more than one councillor making the list shorter."

2) A significant number of students requested being able to access support anonymously including the suggestions of QR codes made available across campus so students can make initial enquiries discretely.

3) Tutorials for students about managing and coping with mental health distress and to normalise mental health difficulties.

4) Being able to access informal support with mental health related difficulties from tutors, teachers and other trusted staff members.

- 5) Tutors & Teachers accessing courses specific to Mental Health & Emotional Wellbeing so they can better recognise the signs that students are struggling and how to provide appropriate support. This would mean “less judgement and embarrassment” for students.
- 6) Change the conversation between staff and students so students feel more in control e.g. how does the student want to be supported by staff; who else do they want to be made aware of the mental health difficulties they are experiencing; do they want to be referred for more specialist support.

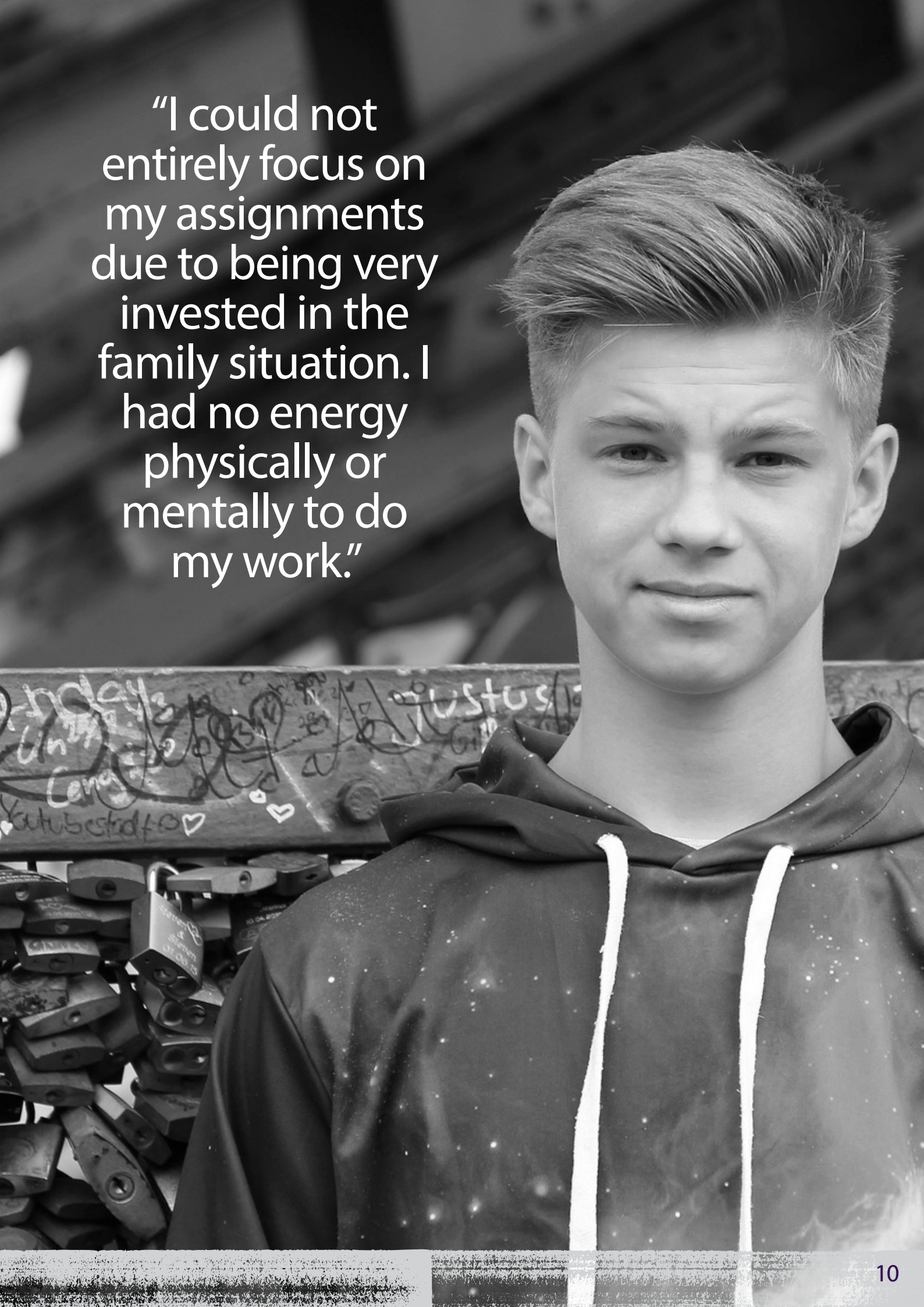
7) Having specialist Mental Health & Emotional Wellbeing professionals from external organisations within education settings for students to speak to who are independent to education staff and/or having non-teaching education staff with Mental Health & Emotional Wellbeing training, e.g. Safeguarding officer, available for students to speak to.

“Maybe have teachers who are experts in dealing with mental health e.g two mental health nurses per college/school. This will support students mental health as they feel they have someone to talk to and know they could get help from a member of staff who isn't a teacher and knows how to help us.”

8) At University students can access Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) that means they can access additional support such as equipment to support learning e.g. a recorder to record lecture notes

“I wish that I had access to these programs when I was younger, I think its unfair that you have to apply for a DSA to obtain access to these, I think the government should be making these types of programs more accessible to the general public.”

“I could not entirely focus on my assignments due to being very invested in the family situation. I had no energy physically or mentally to do my work.”



Theme 2: Social Issues

A high number of students spoke of issues/events affecting them outside of school/college with many believing these were not taken into consideration by education staff:



Family issues; examples given by students include; being LAC (Looked After Child), Bereavement, experiencing abuse such as physical or sexual, harassment from family members, managing general difficulties in the family home and/or general personal difficulties, family having a low-income, being a carer for a family member

"If something has happened in my family it's harder to focus in college when doing my work and also doing work at home."

"I think my biggest challenge has been to not let my worries outside of college affect my time in college."

"During my time in education I have had to deal with social services since the age of 6. I have moved house 11 times, moved households 6 times, been the victim of sexual abuse and had severe family issues because of it."



Attitudes towards academia; some students highlighted having family members who are skilled in manual work and don't have academic qualifications and this being a pressure for them to follow in their family's footsteps and not pursue academic qualifications. Others cited living within communities that "judged" their academic success believing people wanted to keep them "down" or resulting in feelings of disloyalty.

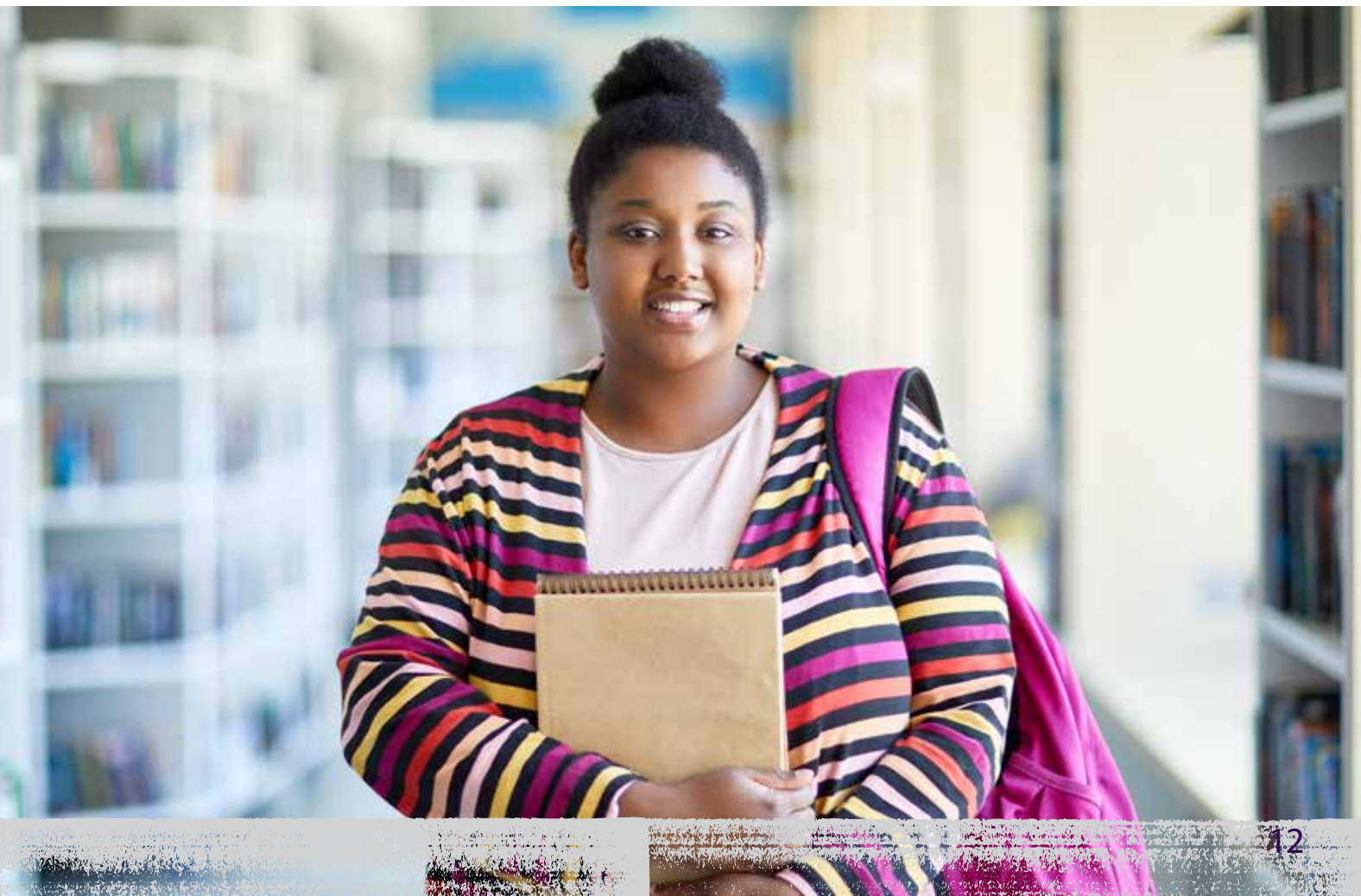
"If I succeed then I'm not sure I will fit in anymore."



Relationship difficulties with peers; a significant number of students cited experiences of being bullied past and present as a key factor in difficulties associated with their Mental Health & Emotional Wellbeing.



Feeling unsafe; some girls expressed feeling discomfort and generally unsafe when travelling between public transport stops and their school or college and receiving unwarranted attention from large groups of non-students hanging around outside education premises. The students want more action to be taken by schools/colleges to ensure they feel safe and/or are not at risk of harm.



Recommendations

1) Being given the time to access informal support through network of classmates and friends.

“Being around friends has really helped me get through the tough times.”

2) An increase in leisure activities that help reduce mental health distress as an alternative to talking therapies such as different fitness classes, sports teams, social clubs, dance classes. Students may not want to or be ready to engage with talking therapy .

3) When education staff are aware of a social related issue for them to periodically check in with a student as opposed to the student having to approach staff (appropriate time scale to be pre-agreed with the student).

4) Students being given “time out” from Assessments and college related work.



Theme 3: Challenges within Education settings

Difficulties within education settings was a major theme identified by the majority of students. Difficulties in keeping up with the demands of college life were made worse by how education staff managed these demands, with students citing their “problems were often made worse”. Whilst there were mentions of positive support from teachers, tutors and other education staff, this was mostly in a social sense and very few students offered examples of how education staff helped them improve their grades or catch up with work.

“It made me want to drop out of the course and completely stop all progression of what I wanted to do.”

Well over half the students mentioned something about how the impacts of challenges within education had led them to attain lower grades than they had hoped and some even mentioned giving up entirely on their aspirations due to the challenges they’d faced and the lack of support around them.



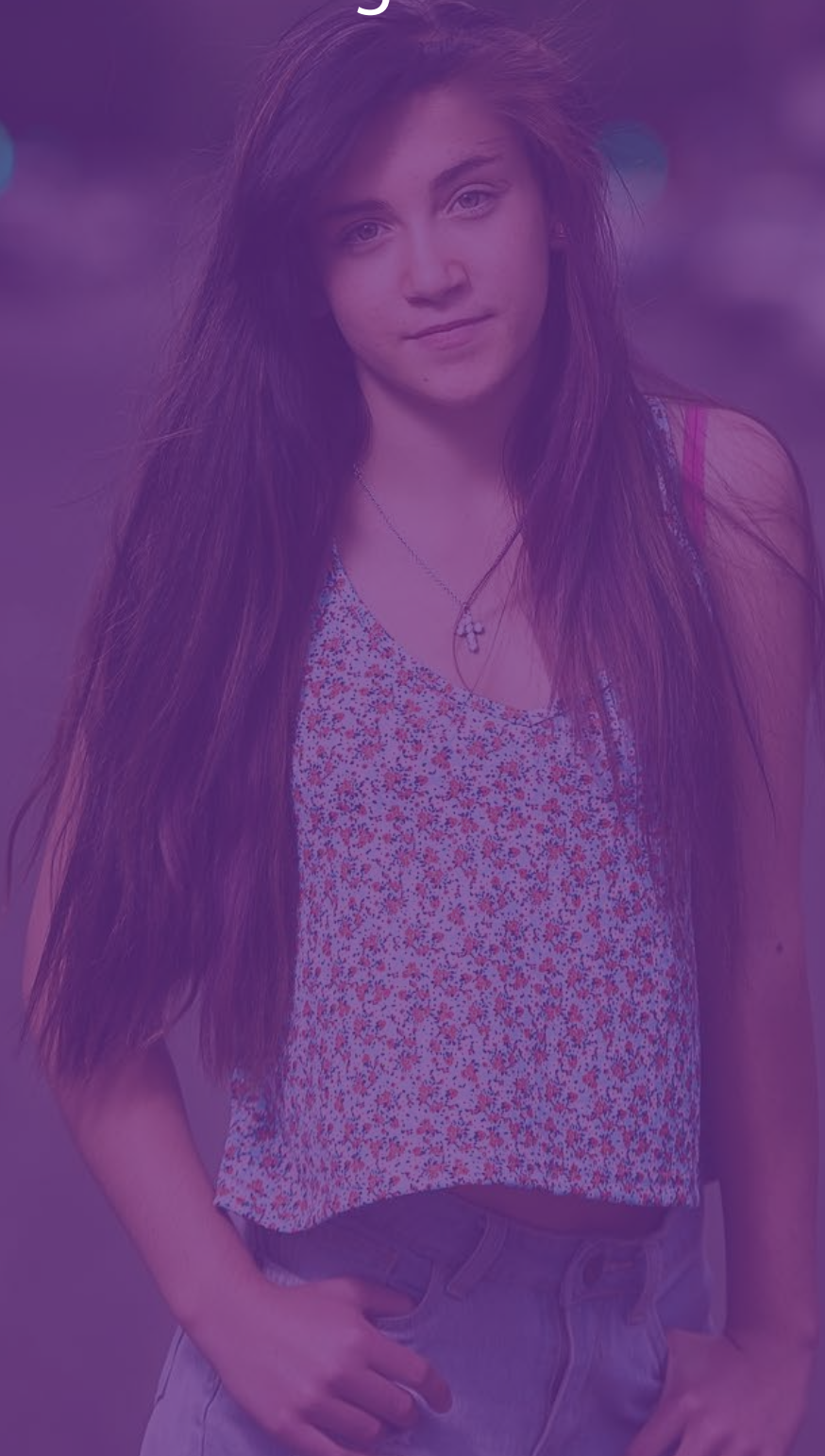
General relationship difficulties with teachers; some students felt

some teaching staff do not understand them with one student stating “teachers do not understand issues relating to Generation Z”.

“A lack of understanding from teachers, and how much pressure we are actually under.”



“As I try to catch up on work I am falling behind learning other things. I don’t have a great understanding of some areas due to having to teach it to myself.”





Teacher Conduct; students detailed a general negative attitude from teachers towards students which decreased people's motivation to academically achieve and/or attend classes or college. Many students said teachers don't explain things properly.

"Makes me feel like I can't complete anything and get far in life the teachers attitude towards some students is disgusting."

"Teachers not explaining assignments correctly so stressed out that I won't complete it."



Workload; many students cited the workload in education is too high with students often falling behind and/or leaving little time for other things such as socialising, relaxing or managing non-education issues. Students appear to believe education staff make "far too many demands" of them leaving students struggling to keep up.

"I am struggling to balance work/life and problems at home."

"Piles of assessments building up over time."

"Some teachers not being able to adapt to different learning styles/needs. The timetables are not designed for young people, but for teachers."

Recommendations

1) Teachers being more approachable to students, providing a more understanding and flexible learning environment whereby the teacher recognises the issue of overwhelming workloads for students and offering immediate support rather than assuming “students are lazy” particularly when approaching deadlines. Students who are struggling with workload to be given extensions.

“To at least think about people’s mental health when handing out so much work.”

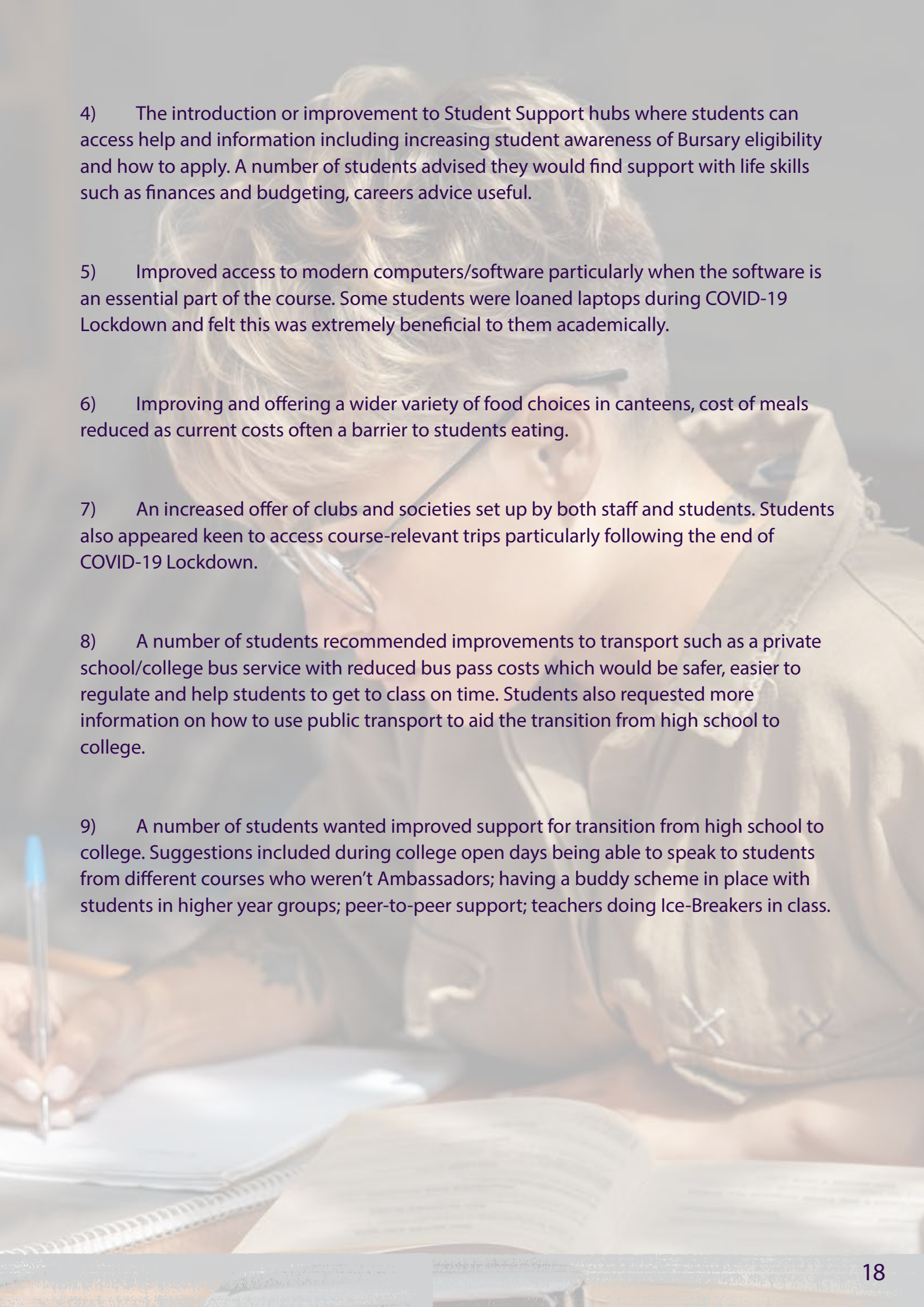
“Being more understanding and asking more questions and letting us know the teachers are there.”

“Teachers need to be more understanding and flexible they act if it is the end of the world if work is a little late.”

2) Teachers to make students aware “well in advance” of timelines for work, expected deadlines and provide support with creating revision timetables, tutorials on managing exam stress.

3) Increased availability of spaces for different purposes e.g. separate spaces for study rooms, socialising, and “Calm Spaces” to reduce stress. Students included suggestions that “Time Out Passes” could be used during class to enable students when feeling overwhelmed to access calm spaces.

“Make clear deadlines and not tell students that their place at the college is at very real risk because their assignments aren't handed in because students haven't had the necessary support provided.”

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- A student with blonde hair and glasses is sitting at a desk, writing in a notebook. The background is a soft, out-of-focus image of the same student. The text is overlaid on the image.
- 4) The introduction or improvement to Student Support hubs where students can access help and information including increasing student awareness of Bursary eligibility and how to apply. A number of students advised they would find support with life skills such as finances and budgeting, careers advice useful.
 - 5) Improved access to modern computers/software particularly when the software is an essential part of the course. Some students were loaned laptops during COVID-19 Lockdown and felt this was extremely beneficial to them academically.
 - 6) Improving and offering a wider variety of food choices in canteens, cost of meals reduced as current costs often a barrier to students eating.
 - 7) An increased offer of clubs and societies set up by both staff and students. Students also appeared keen to access course-relevant trips particularly following the end of COVID-19 Lockdown.
 - 8) A number of students recommended improvements to transport such as a private school/college bus service with reduced bus pass costs which would be safer, easier to regulate and help students to get to class on time. Students also requested more information on how to use public transport to aid the transition from high school to college.
 - 9) A number of students wanted improved support for transition from high school to college. Suggestions included during college open days being able to speak to students from different courses who weren't Ambassadors; having a buddy scheme in place with students in higher year groups; peer-to-peer support; teachers doing Ice-Breakers in class.

Theme 4: COVID-19

The recent global pandemic was cited by a large number of students as impacting further on mental health difficulties and challenges within education.

➔ **Lockdown;** students report feeling significantly stressed by the experience of being in Lockdown including anxieties with online learning; anxiety about Lockdown ending; challenges of accessing Mental Health support during Lockdown.

➔ **Online learning;** students said they struggled with motivation, concentration, and adjusting to online learning. Some students did express positivity about online learning but this was a very small number.

➔ **Communication difficulties** with teachers due to being online and not in college.

➔ **Returning to in-person teaching** and having to readjust to routine & socialising again.

➔ **Workload increase** due to being online which has caused difficulties with meeting deadlines, fatigue & general negative health effects.

➔ **Lack of understanding from teachers** on how COVID-19 related issues have impacted on students.

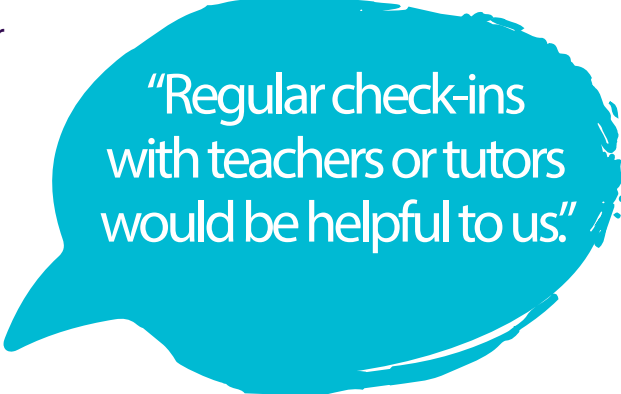
➔ **Student confusion** due to teachers not being clear enough with the information being provided to students, for example students who want to go onto University feeling stressed about the process of exams, assessment and grading and will this impact on them being able to attend University.

"I genuinely think the biggest challenge at the moment is getting into the same routine again after months ... After a day at college, I feel drained and don't get enough time to go over work or revise"

"It's made me feel unwell"

Recommendations

- 1) Students citing difficulties with mental health as a result of COVID-19 identified that support for students needs to be of a higher quality, more widely available and accessible to all students.
- 2) Students who preferred online learning have requested this being a more long-term option for studying as they found they were able to learn and manage workload more effectively.
- 3) Students who were able to access confidential online support meetings during COVID-19 lockdown found this helpful and would like this offer continued.
- 4) Students advised that they felt much better supported by teachers and staff who responded to student emails quickly during lockdown and didn't "leave you waiting".
- 5) Students cited confusion during lockdown including changes to exams and grading systems and highlight a need for clear, consistent instructions and information from staff and teachers.



"Regular check-ins with teachers or tutors would be helpful to us."



"I saw a lack in my motivation because the tutors weren't there in front of me telling me what I needed to do."

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