



*This article is co-authored by members of the IAU HESD Cluster on SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing*

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a rise in mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, particularly among already vulnerable student populations. At the same time, institutional awareness around these challenges has increased and mental health is now high up on university agendas.

This situation has underscored the critical need for universities to reassess their role in addressing mental health challenges. Since October 2023, IAU SDG3 sub-cluster, comprising seven universities across five continents and spearheaded by the eHealth Center of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, within the IAU Global Cluster on HESD (Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development) has been exploring how higher education institutions can support both staff and students in fostering good mental health. The article looks at examples of emerging good practice, challenges, and ways forward, coming out of these discussions.

On one hand, **existing good practice** emerging from institutions included:

Having an integrated approach to mental health by focusing on the full individual and their context.

Conducting systematic evaluations of mental health burdens in institutions for a comprehensive understanding of current challenges in the university community, further segmented by specific collectives, such as academic staff, administrative and management staff, and students.

Enhancing mental health literacy in the university community.

Appreciating soft skills and their contribution to building resilience.

And finally, going beyond providing basic psychological services towards offering more holistic, preventive, cross disciplinary and community-oriented approaches to foster health and wellbeing more widely.

On the other hand, **common shared challenges** were the following ones:

An imbalance between the demand for mental health services and their availability, with demand for services sometimes outstripping supply due to funding constraints. In some cases, access barriers such as lack of awareness of offer, competing priorities, stigmatization, or preference for alternative support further hinder service utilization.

## 17 Addressing Mental Health Challenges in Universities: Insights from the IAU SDG3 Cluster



by **Liv Raphael** (Head of IAU SDG3 Cluster), and **Marta Aymerich** (Director of eHealth Center), eHealth Center, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Spain\*



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- Socioeconomic, cultural, and geographical factors contributing to disparities in access to mental health services, exacerbating existing inequalities.
- Focusing excessively on individual risk factors without sufficiently considering the broader social and environmental contexts, potentially contributing to further stigmatization.
- Insufficient funding and resources limiting the quality and reach of mental health support services within universities.
- Aspects of work demands, and institutional expectations can sometimes negatively impact on wellbeing and mental health problems.

### Strategies for Improvement

Building on existing good practice, and considering current challenges, to enhance mental health support, universities should consider:

4. **Fomenting Preventive, Integrated and Cross-Disciplinary Approaches.** A shift towards more preventive, and integrated cross-disciplinary approaches to mental health, health, and well-being more widely.
5. **Increasing Awareness and Literacy.** Continuing to increase awareness and enhancing mental health literacy among staff and students to improve early detection and the ability to identify and seek out appropriate support.
6. **Supportive Environments.** Creating inclusive and supportive environments through well-designed physical spaces, promotion of healthy lifestyles, and integration of mental health concepts into the curriculum.
7. **Targeted Strategies.** Developing specific strategies to reach, engage and prioritize vulnerable populations and those most in need of support.
8. **Leadership and Advocacy.** Strengthening advocacy efforts to ensure mental health remains a priority on institutional and governmental agendas, securing necessary resources for sustained intervention.

9. **Measuring Impact.** Establishing key performance indicators and robust mechanisms to evaluate the effectiveness of mental health initiatives, ensuring accountability and continued investment in mental health programs.

As mental health challenges continue to rise in the post-pandemic era, universities must adopt a proactive and comprehensive approach. To transition from being service providers to active agents of change, universities must commit to cross-disciplinary collaboration and sustainable resource allocation. A comprehensive university-wide approach should be paired with targeted strategies focusing on vulnerable populations. Furthermore, differentiated support should be provided for students, academic staff, management, and administrative personnel based on a characterization of the burden. A comprehensive approach to mental health should also consider the built environment and the broader community context. By prioritizing prevention, early intervention, and community empowerment, universities can become catalysts for societal resilience aligning with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 3.4 on mental health and well-being. By embedding mental health strategies within their core institutional frameworks, integrating resilience-building into curricula, and fostering supportive social environments, universities can play a transformative role in advancing mental health and well-being and in building some of the skills and capacities required for navigating complexity. Leadership, sustained advocacy, and an ongoing commitment to innovation will be crucial in ensuring long-term management of mental health within higher education institutions. A healthy university community is, in turn a critical factor in fostering active engagement and leadership in pursuit of the broader sustainability agenda.

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