

# The Impact of the Cost of Living Crisis on Undergraduate mental health

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If this project has informed your practice, let us know at [lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk](mailto:lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk)

## Introduction

This project aims to explore the impact of the cost of living crisis on the overall undergraduate experience between the 2021-2022 and 2022-23 academic year, specifically regarding the underexplored mental health aspect. It first seeks to examine which components of mental health - in both perceived terms and indicators such as sense of purpose and physical health - are the most affected, before touching on what additional support LSE could provide to enhance mental health.

## Research Questions

- (1) What areas of mental health are undergraduates most affected, in terms of their perceived rating and mental health indicators?
- (2) What can LSE do to help undergraduates with mental health?

## Methods

After considering various approaches, I decided conducting a survey, distributed to undergraduates through various channels (such as society whatsapps and department emails) would be the best way to obtain a sample representative of LSE's diverse undergraduate body. The survey not only contains multiple choice, ranking, and matrix-table questions, but also includes optional text entries aiming to generate a deeper understanding of their experiences usually capturable only in 1-1 interviews.

See [Appendix B](#) for some methodology challenges including false responses and low engagement

## Limitations

### Lack of Balance: Limited Representativeness of Participants:

Despite some efforts to generate a representative sample, there are still some imbalances between the survey and LSE student body. Most conspicuously, there is an inversion of the home/international composition; the LSE student body is actually 70% international, whereas the survey obtains a local representation in excess of 60%. However, given other background characteristics are broadly similar, this should not grossly impede result validity. In addition, the sample size is relatively small at around 40. While this is mostly fine for aggregate results, some demographic breakdowns are likely to be more unreliable (e.g. only 1 non-binary person in the whole sample) and should be taken with some scepticism. However, broader breakdowns (e.g. by education background and gender) should still contain a sufficient sample size to be somewhat accurate.

More demographic information is available in [Appendix A](#).

## **(1) What is the impact on student mental health?**

In this section, I asked students about their perceived mental health to gauge the impact of financial and time constraints on mental health indicators between 2021/2022 to 2022/2023.

Detailed results and responses are available in [Appendix C](#).

### **Key findings:**

- The average perceived mental health of survey respondents actually improved between 2021/22 to 2022/23 by over 10%, although the score remains relatively low - within 6 on a 10 point scale. There is also significant individual variance and heterogeneity between demographic categories. While average female mental health improved between 2021-2022 from 5.5 to 7.0 on a 10 point scale. However, this female mental health in 2021/2022 started from a lower base point than male students. For ethnicities, the average perceived mental health improved for Asian and White respondents, but declined for Black, Mixed, and Other. In contrast, the average score of first and non-first university entrants exhibited a near-parallel trend in improving by a similar amount, although a sizable gap in favour of non-first university entrants was present in 2021-2022 and persists in 2022-23.
- The impact of financial constraints/concerns on mental health indicators averaged around a moderate impact (3) and was relatively similar between different indicators. However, there was a lot of individual variation with average scores differing by over 1 point. Social life suffered the strongest at 2.94, followed by life goals, job hunting, accommodation experience, and physical health before studies rounded up the rear at 2.29. (closer to a minor than moderate effect on average)
- For time constraints/concerns, the results were broadly similar to financial constraints in the similarity between categories, average overall impact, and high individual variation within categories, but its relative rankings differed. Time constraints impacted social life and accommodation comparatively less (unsurprisingly), but affected job hunt and studies to a greater extent than cost of living financial constraints. Much like perceived mental health, there is also a lot of heterogeneity across demographic categories, as shown in the composite mental health indicator by demographic diagram (which took a weighted average of Q15 and Q17 answers by each category). For example, female responses suggested they were significantly more affected than male students in their life goals and sense of purpose, while male students were more preoccupied with study.

## **(2) Assessing LSE's provisions**

In this section, I asked questions aimed to gauge student opinion on the adequacy of LSE's current provisions, and what additional initiatives they should prioritise.

Detailed results and responses are available in [Appendix D](#).

### Key Findings:

- Survey respondents currently feel somewhere between somewhat unsupported and somewhat supported (2.44) by LSE's initiatives. The text entry answers suggest polar opposite experiences, with some feeling quite happy with mental health support ("For most part have been responsive to concerns and need for help") while others believe it is either 'unnecessarily difficult' or 'cosmetic' and prefer relying on their existing network for support. Overall, the text entry responses seem to suggest students rely more on their department and networks for support rather than any of LSE's mental health resources, and when those resources are lacking they suffer ("I don't think my professors and classmates understand me very well").
- In the ranking questions, LSE students seemed to value financial support over academic/career and social initiatives. Among the top 5 rated initiatives, 3 contain financial support requiring differing levels of additional commitment by LSE. (e.g. deepening existing financial support is probably more expensive than providing more information on budgeting and discounts). Nevertheless, they seemed to highly value direct academic support in the form of academic support centres, which was ranked the 3rd highest initiative. Additional mental health support by hiring more mental health advisors was also rated the 2nd most important initiative, which supports the text entries in suggesting LSE's mental health resources (particularly the number of advisors) are inadequate.
- The ranking results also suggest LSE provides sufficient career support (more info on career opportunities and career/postgraduate support ranked 7th and 8.5th, respectively).

### Recommendations

1. Given the wide variety of responses depending on demographic category, the LSE should try and provide tailored support e.g. female students feel more affected by a lack of purpose, so maybe mental health advisors/support should prioritise working through those sentiments more when compared to male students.
2. The LSE should promote their mental health services more to enshrine it as a key support pillar, alongside the department and the personal network, for students. For example, they could make the advisor [link](#) accessible on the moodle page. In Q20, students also ranked expanding the number of mental health advisors quite highly, which should help with reducing queue times.
3. The LSE should attempt some of the highly ranked initiatives in Q20 that are cost effective. In my personal opinion of cost-effectiveness and given the survey results, the LSE should prioritise (1) academic centres, (2) hiring more mental health advisors, and (3) more information and support on budgeting/financing. The LSE already has a model for implementing academic support centres from the [mathematics and statistics departments](#) and an existing mental advisory group, while providing more information on budgeting/discounts can be done by disseminating a link on a widely used platform such as Moodle (perhaps just by taking the existing [London on a budget web page](#) and updating it for 2022-2023).