

Mental Health Promotion in Higher Education

Report on Roundtable Discussions,
25th April 2023



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Introduction

In April 2023, Jigsaw, in collaboration with HSE Mental Health & Wellbeing, co-hosted a roundtable discussion event on mental health promotion in higher education, with a particular emphasis on connectedness and belonging. The objective of this event was to further the following action in HSE's National Mental Health Promotion Plan, Stronger Together (2022-2027):

“Develop, implement, and evaluate mental health promotion initiatives focused on promoting connectedness and belonging in further and higher education settings aligned to the Healthy Campus Framework and the HEA National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework”

(Action 10, page 43)

This event brought together over 40 key stakeholders, representing almost all major Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), as well as key national stakeholders. A full list of stakeholders represented can be found in Appendix A. Crucially, the event embedded the voice of students with Jigsaw Youth Advocates, students and Welfare Officers attending. A group of Jigsaw Youth Advocates in higher education co-created and co-facilitated the event.

This event explored the concepts of connectedness and belonging and provided a collaborative and interactive platform for roundtable discussions focusing on:

- **sharing current good practice,**
- **exploring gaps and challenges and**
- **considering next steps.**

To support the event, Jigsaw presented a literature review on the topic (Appendix B).

This report provides a summary of the discussions under each of the six themes emerging at the event as follows:

- 1. Whole-college approach**
- 2. Clear pathways for student supports**
- 3. Collaboration and communication**
- 4. Structural challenges**
- 5. Specific target groups**
- 6. Accommodation shortages**

In collaboration with the Higher Education Authority (HEA) these themes have been mapped onto the National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework (see Appendix C).





SUMMARY OF THEMES

1. Whole-college approach

Senior leadership buy in is critical for success.
Mental health and wellbeing is the business of all staff.
Students are key partners and must be involved.
Curricular based approaches, extra-curricular approaches and peer support are all important opportunities to consider.

2. Clear pathways for student supports

The continuum of care needs to be clearly established.
Students need clear information about how to access the right support at the right time.
All potential signposters also need this information.

3. Collaboration & communication

Cross HEI collaborations are valuable.
National collaborations with key stakeholders are valuable.
Building the evidence base will support this work.
Effective communication is essential.





4. Structural challenges

There are ways that the curriculum, timetables and other academic structures impact student wellbeing.

There are opportunities for us to influence these to best support students.

5. Specific target groups

While we aim to benefit the wellbeing of all students, some groups may benefit from tailored or targeted supports to ensure they can benefit.

Orientation programmes are a critical time to influence connectedness.

6. Accommodation shortages

We can report the wellbeing impacts of accommodation shortages, and advocate for positive change.

We can support students to advocate.

We can also consider these when planning events so that students living far away can benefit too.





Foreword by Dr Joseph Duffy

CEO Jigsaw

Multiple and new voices are at last contributing to decision making in many aspects of Irish life. We have come a long way from a view of education as something that is imparted to a model of active engagement, dialogue, exploration and real learning. It is with this open lens of listening to all, that the round table discussions, reported on here, took place focusing on mental health promotion in Higher Education.

Bringing the various stakeholders together, enabling a sense of connectedness and belonging to occur in the room, and then to feel the commitment for this to ripple out across the colleges and campuses of Ireland is a wonderful thing. This report and the work that went in to its compilation and synthesis is a positive step towards the common goal of holding the wellbeing of students in Higher Education at the centre of what we do. This goal is so important as it has a direct impact not only on the quality of the education qualifications that students emerge with, but also influences, for the better, the person they are as they begin, and in many cases continue, their positive contribution to society.

This report, in addition to recognising the policies already in place and the work being undertaken by the HEA, HSE, PCHEI, Jigsaw and others, brings together a cogent set of themes and outlines practical next steps. This work together has already influenced thinking. I have no doubt it will impact positively on and contribute to future policy and practice on well-being in Higher Education settings.

I am hopeful that we have prioritised the right approach – having an honest and engaged dialogue around a shared goal. It is clear a spirit of mutual cooperation exists. The recognition of the unique contribution we all can make to achieving better mental health for students is there. In building on this work we can achieve so much more together. I look forward to reading the next chapter in this work in promoting mental health in Higher Education and want to thank all for guiding us at this stage of the journey.



Foreword by Dr Aleisha Clarke

National Programme Manager for Mental Health and Wellbeing, HSE

Higher education is increasingly recognised as a critical setting for supporting the mental health and wellbeing of young adults and helping all students to reach their full potential. Discussions around mental health in the context of higher education tend to focus on students experiencing mental health difficulties such as depression and anxiety. However, we know that mental health is more than the absence of mental health difficulties. It is about promoting optimal functioning and creating supportive environments for all students.

We are seeing growing recognition across higher education institutions for the need to move beyond traditional forms of student mental health support to the provision of supports and services aimed at improving mental health and wellbeing and as part of this students' sense of connectedness and belonging. Alongside this we have started to see an emerging evidence base on the impact of universal



mental health interventions delivered in higher education settings (e.g. Worsley et al., 2022; de Pablo et al., 2022; Conley et al., 2015).

Bringing together key stakeholders as part of the roundtable discussion in April of this year provided a real opportunity to share examples of best practice currently being rolled out across several of our higher education institutes. It also enabled us to discuss what's needed to ensure that mental and wellbeing, in its broadest sense, is at the core of higher education. The key recommendations emerging from the event (see Figure 1) are in line with international reviews of best practice including the need for a whole college approach which includes the provision of evidence based universal and targeted interventions that are student-centered, support equity, diversity and inclusivity and foster connectedness to the broader learning community (e.g. Duffy et al., 2019; Thornley, 2017).

The HSE Mental Health and Wellbeing Programme look forward to supporting the work of Higher Education Authority in advancing the work that already commenced through the Healthy Campus Framework and Charter and the HEA National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework.



Foreword by Dr. Ross Woods
Senior Manager, Health and Wellbeing,
Higher Education Authority.

In October 2020, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) launched Ireland's first ever national policy document on student mental health and suicide prevention in higher education. The National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework (NSMHSPF), which was developed in collaboration with students, mental health and suicide prevention specialists, academics, researchers and institutional staff, provides higher education institutions (HEIs) with guidelines to address the issues of student mental health and suicide prevention in a structured and planned way. Since then, the HEA has allocated €20.9m to colleges to facilitate the delivery and enhancement of student mental health supports including service delivery and whole campus initiatives.

Supported by this funding, HEIs have made significant and sustained progress in improving front line mental health services and implementing the NSMHSPF. However, despite these advances, this Jigsaw and HSE Mental Health and Wellbeing report on Mental Health Promotion in Higher Education is timely. Given the increased need for mental health supports, an issue that is national and not simply confined to higher education campuses, HEIs have placed an emphasis on enhancing and expanding service provision while putting less focus on mental health promotion and whole campus initiatives.

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The NSMHSPF advocates for a holistic approach to addressing student mental health and suicide prevention which encompasses the delivery of counselling services and support services and broader initiatives such as the promotion of positive mental health among our campus communities. This report highlights many of the issues identified in the Framework, which in turn offers a clear roadmap for HEIs to follow in addressing the suggestions made by stakeholders who participated in the roundtable discussion.

While a number of themes emerged from the roundtable, I would like to focus on one that I consider to be central to the success of improving the health and wellbeing of higher education students. Stakeholders highlighted the need for HEIs to take a whole of campus approach to mental health promotion. Interestingly, the NSMHSPF and the HEA Healthy Campus Framework and Charter both emphasize the need to understand health promotion in a holistic manner. In this regard, two key points need to be made: this work will only succeed if fully supported by senior HEI management and health promotion is the responsibility of all staff, not just those in designated roles. With the move to more hybrid modes of learning, student belonging, and connectedness must also become a priority for HEIs.

I would like to commend Jigsaw and HSE Mental Health and Wellbeing on taking a proactive approach to bringing key HE stakeholders together. Most importantly, this report rebalances the national conversation about mental health in Irish higher education and allows us to understand the critical role that mental health promotion has to play alongside mental health service provision. The recommendations in this report have the potential to support the whole of campus approach that is essential to the successful implementation of the NSMHSPF and the HEA Healthy Campus Framework and Charter. The HEA looks forward to continuing collaboration with Jigsaw, HSE Mental Health and Wellbeing, and HE stakeholders to advance the important work to promote positive mental health on Irish campuses.



Foreword by Jigsaw Youth Advocates



“It was a real joy to be a part of this event as several people from different backgrounds and experiences all came together with the goal of helping people feel like they belong in Higher Education. This, I believe, is a particularly important issue as we attempt to return to normal after a global pandemic. Many students, and young people in general, have had their lives turned upside down and it’s encouraging to see organisations outside of Jigsaw want to invest in giving them the best experience possible anyway.”

Neil Moore Ryan, Jigsaw Youth Advocate and Higher Education Student.

Today, the 11th September, thousands of students including ourselves are heading back to college. While some of us crave the sense of routine and connection college brings, we can’t ignore that there are students dreading today.

For stakeholders reading this report, you might feel overwhelmed with greater responsibility to meet the changing needs of students. But as students we know what works best, as seen in the various successful projects in the report that are student led. Our message to you is to take on these findings, whilst being aware that plenty of students are keen to support and advise your projects, as well as serving as a reminder of the students you will directly impact as a result of your work- the students who are not looking forward to going back today. A good example of creating opportunities to learn from student experiences was at the event in April.

Aisling Dillon, Jigsaw Youth Advocate and Higher Education Student.







Theme 1

Whole-college approach

Participants agreed that for initiatives to be effective, a whole-college approach to student mental health and wellbeing is essential.

Senior leadership buy-in

There was extensive discussion on the crucial need for buy-in at senior leadership level. It was agreed that belonging and connectedness need to be prioritised, and that student mental health and wellbeing needs to be seen as everyone's business, from top down as well as bottom up. It is critical that this is done in a genuine and meaningful way, "not bolted on, but baked in". Mental health promotion needs to be embedded in the curriculum in a meaningful way, not tokenistic. Senior leadership plays a key role in prioritising a cohesive approach to student mental health promotion and in directing essential resources to this area.

It was broadly agreed that several policies can support this, namely the HEA's National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework (2020), on which every HEI is accountable through regular reporting, and the Healthy Campus Charter and Framework (2020-2025). However, some also highlighted the importance of joining up policies to better support this area. One example given was bringing together policies such as Connecting for

Life (2015-2020) and Stronger Together (2022 – 2027) to bridge gaps and demonstrate the continuum between suicide prevention and mental health promotion. It was agreed that stronger and wider outcome measures would further support the buy-in of senior leadership.

The role of staff in promoting mental health and wellbeing

More broadly, it was agreed that staff at all levels need to feel that this is 'core business for all'. Staff support and training on mental health literacy, the social determinants of mental health, stigma reduction and mental health promotion is recommended as part of this approach. Staff may require support on how to embed health and wellbeing effectively into the curriculum. The HEI's physical and social environment and supportive culture were viewed as essential to student belonging, breathing life into frameworks such as the National Framework for Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention. All staff are central to this, regardless of their role. Trauma-informed practice was identified as a good guiding practice for promoting belonging for all students.

Students as partners

Students need to be seen as the most important partners in student mental health promotion initiatives. Best practice is for student voice to be embedded in the development of all initiatives aimed at them – “nothing about us without us”. It was agreed that the most successful interventions and initiatives include student voice in a truly meaningful way, through consultation, co-design and actively seeking student feedback at all stages.

The importance of student access to social spaces was also discussed, with examples of good practice cited to include commuter hubs, student spaces and community gardens. Again, a trauma-informed lens was viewed as a helpful tool in creating such spaces. It was broadly agreed that the social side of HEIs needs to be valued and prioritised, and not seen as merely an add-on to academic life.

Curricular based approaches

Participants identified the importance of mental health promotion interventions being embedded as part of the core curriculum. Content and approach both need to be evidence-based, incorporate youth voice in the planning, and be an embedded part of core course content. Some discussed having accredited modules as helpful, some examples of which are in postgraduate programmes such as MTU’s Health and Wellbeing postgrad certificate. Others noted digital badges such as that provided for UCC’s Everyday Matters Healthy Habits for University Life course. Participants widely agreed that it is crucial to firmly embed the content in order to ensure maximum reach and effectiveness.

Extra-curricular based approaches

It was also identified as important to provide opportunity to enhance connectedness and belonging through supports and activities outside of the curriculum. Opportunities for this present

through clubs / societies and campus-wide mental health promotion campaigns such as mental health week messaging and Social Prescription. The social environment of the higher education institution was seen as an important focus for mental health promotion initiatives, and investing in upskilling clubs, societies and support staff within the HEI, was viewed as an effective approach. Examples of this include Jigsaw’s One Good Friend and One Good Coach courses. One Good Friend is a free elearning course supporting students to develop knowledge, confidence and skills in supporting a friend’s mental health and wellbeing. One Good Coach is another free elearning which supports club and society coaches to similarly build knowledge, confidence and skill in supporting the mental health of students, within the boundaries of their role. This can be promoted in universities, while One Good Friend has also been embedded in some course reading, admissions office materials and peer mentoring training within certain HEIs. Peer mentoring / support was viewed as a particularly effective means of supporting connectedness.

Peer support

Multiple strong examples of peer mentoring and peer support services nationally were noted, particularly the work of 3Set. However, national discrepancies in peer support and peer mentoring programmes were noted, along with a desire to fully implement 3Set recommendations and align all programmes to the same standard. Many expressed the view that volunteers are carrying a lot of the heavy work on promoting connections, and the importance of sufficiently supporting volunteers was noted as an area requiring focus.

Mandatory social events were discussed as a potential option, with some participants strongly supporting these and others suggesting that this approach would not be suitable for every student.

Theme 2

Clear pathways for student supports

Communication to students

While there are often quite extensive supports available to students, multiple stakeholders identified that the range of offerings can be unclear to students in general, and particularly to those struggling to connect. It was agreed that there needs to be clear and cohesive communication for students, including outlining and signposting to the supports available in each HEI and explaining how to access these supports. Students need to be clear on how to navigate the multiple and varied support systems within their HEI and have ease of access to same.

Continuum of care

It was also agreed that the continuum of care and stepped care process needs to be clearly communicated to students i.e., ‘the right support at the right time’, in order to maximise effectiveness and resources.

Signposting to the right support

Clear pathways to the right supports need to be available, not only to students, but also to all potential signposters, including but not limited to all staff, regardless of their role, to students with a support role (such as peer mentors), residential assistants, welfare officers, student health, disability and counselling services, senior leadership and those in student clubs and societies, etc. All potential signposters need to fully understand the continuum of care and be equipped to support students to navigate the support systems available to them.







Theme 3

Collaboration & communication

A consistent theme throughout the event was the importance of effective collaboration to achieve the best outcomes for our shared objective of improved belonging and connectedness, and hence improved mental health and wellbeing outcomes for students in higher education.

Cross-HEI collaborations

Participants spoke of the value of collaborating across multiple HEIs on the development of initiatives to enhance student belonging, to share learning, and to increase the amount of data being produced regarding the effectiveness of such initiatives.

National collaboration of key stakeholders

National collaborations were discussed broadly, with an interest in initiatives and content that promote belonging being made available nationally where possible. Some examples identified include Psychological Counsellors in Higher Education,

Ireland (PCHEI) staff training for supporting distressed students, Jigsaw's One Good Friend online training programme, Spunout's Text About It messaging service (previously 50808) and online tools such as Silvercloud and TogetherAll. The importance of collaboration with other key stakeholders outside of HEIs was emphasised here. This includes government bodies, HSE, Jigsaw, NOSP, etc. The value of national working groups collaborating on specific mental health and wellbeing objectives was discussed in this regard, for example on the development of a Mental Health & Wellbeing module for peer mentoring / peer to peer support. Finally, it was suggested that national stakeholder representation, such as Jigsaw, on HEI mental health and wellbeing steering groups could further enhance national collaboration.

Building the evidence base

Many stakeholders spoke of the importance of collaborations that allow for the amalgamation of data. This was deemed essential to building a business case for the universal benefit of mental health and wellbeing for students. It was noted that data is key for making the case for funding for health promotion initiatives. Participants agreed on the importance of promoting and supporting further research in this area.

It was felt that such data would support the diversification of HEI objectives beyond academic to include wellbeing outcomes. It is essential that the right data is collected, and this is an area that would benefit from national collaboration. Problems with traditional measures such as dropout rates were identified (a student may drop out of a course for many reasons, including the course not being the right fit for them). Alternative measures were suggested including measures of belonging and connectedness (see Table of Outcome Measures, linked by QR code from literature review in Appendix B), and wellbeing measures including subjective wellbeing, mental wellbeing, and social capital measures, such as those found on www.whatworkswellbeing.org ([link to outcome measures](#)). Using the same outcome measures across HEIs would support the creation of a shared language to measuring student wellbeing.

Communication

Multiple discussions noted the importance of strong communication in establishing connections and collaborating. It was agreed that such collaborations can, in turn, enhance communication. Effective communication was cited as critical in facilitating information sharing, in order to avoid duplication and maximise the use of scarce resources. The benefits of regular events, such as this one where all key stakeholders are represented, was discussed in the context of improving communication. It was felt that having representatives from national organisations such as Jigsaw, participating on HEI mental health and wellbeing steering committees, could further enhance communication at a national level.





Theme 4

Structural challenges

This theme captures discussions regarding the challenges experienced in terms of structures and pressure points relating to timetables, exams and other academic practices, and their impact on student mental health and wellbeing. Examples cited include extensive curricula, which have no space to embed health and wellbeing input, challenges with timetable structures which can add pressure to students e.g. clashing classes or back to back exams, the impact of assignment deadlines on students, (e.g. Sunday evening deadlines can mean that students do not benefit from a break over the weekend), and the impact of 24-hour library access.

Many participants identified that there is an opportunity for mental health and wellbeing leads and champions (within and external to HEIs) to influence the thinking in relation to these challenges by providing advice to key decision-makers from an evidence-informed, mental health and wellbeing perspective. This would, again, require senior leadership buy-in to be most effective.



Dr. Susan Greenwald
Director
Office of Student Support

Christie Allen
Director
Office of Student Support

Theme 5

Specific target groups

Most upstream mental health promotion work aims to reach a universal audience and benefit the health of many/all. However, it was broadly acknowledged that some specific student groups might require more targeted or tailored initiatives to promote belonging and connectedness. While this is by no means a comprehensive list, the groups specifically identified included:

- Postgraduate students
- Students from other countries or cultures
- First generation students
- Neurodivergent students
- Classes with larger student populations, e.g., very large arts courses.

Orientation programmes

Multiple discussions focused on the importance of transitions, and in particular targeting new students during their initial transition into a HEI. This is a crucial time to support students to achieve a sense of belonging and connectedness.

Orientation programmes were discussed as being a particularly opportune time for enhancing belonging for new students. Participants noted the challenges that exist for student orientation programmes with the later leaving certificate results timeline and the subsequently condensed first semester. Participants were strong in their belief that the later leaving certificate results timeline has a hugely negative impact on the mental health, wellbeing and sense of belonging of first year students, and that it is important that we advocate for the results to be released as early as possible.

It was also highlighted that orientation is an important time to influence students' expectations of college, beyond academic aims, and for reassuring them that their experience is valid. Many have very high expectations of college and can be surprised if they do experience difficulties adjusting and connecting.

Potential role of second level

Participants identified the potential for second level schools to have a more active role in supporting students in their preparation for transition to third level, beyond preparing them for the leaving certificate. This is a particular interest area for Jigsaw in continuing to evolve a whole-school approach for mental health promotion in post-primary schools.





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Theme 6 Accommodation shortages

The extensive current challenges relating to the lack of student accommodation, the increasing number of students required to travel long commutes to their HEI, and the impacts of these issues on the sense of belonging to the HEI was discussed.

Advocacy

While this is a broader systemic issue, it was agreed that we as a group could advocate for improvements in this area, by providing a mental health and wellbeing lens. There is a critical role here for student welfare to advocate. It would also be beneficial to support and empower students to advocate.

It was also agreed that the design of initiatives to promote belonging and connectedness in 3rd level need to be mindful of these challenges for students in terms of their availability to engage. Examples include commuter social groups and social activities occurring at breakfast or lunchtime as opposed to evening time.



Participants' Reflections

At the end of the event, participants were invited to share one thing they will take away from this event, creating this word cloud.



Their feedback here is very representative of the themes emerging across the event. It also reflects the motivation and energy gained from a collaborative event such as this, as the benefits of shared learning and examples of good practice.

Participants were also asked to identify what they felt the most important next steps are. Key themes from this question are captured in the following word cloud, and are again reflective of the themes outlined in this report.



Digital Belonging Tree created by participants from Higher Ed Event



Conclusion

The collaboration and networking opportunities afforded by this event were positively received by participants, and the roundtable format was extremely popular and worked well. This report provides a summary of the themes identified and discussed on the day, highlights valuable examples of current good practice shared and points out key challenges which demand our attention. It also includes potential next steps, as identified by the wide range of key stakeholders in higher education represented at the event. The report acknowledges the significant amount of work in the area of mental health and wellbeing already being provided in higher education. In order to build further on this great work, those present identified key themes where further work is needed, i.e. a whole-college approach, clear pathways to appropriate support, effective collaboration and communication, addressing structural challenges, needs of specific target groups and accommodation shortages. There was overwhelming agreement on the need to prioritise mental health promotion in higher education, and to strengthen the focus on connectedness and belonging. There is a clear desire by this group of stakeholders to progress this work collaboratively, and a keen interest to meet again to progress the actions identified in this report.

This report is the result of the generous input of many key partners and stakeholders. A huge thank you to all those who contributed to this event and to the production of this report.





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Next Steps

All mental health promotion activity in higher education settings should sit within the strategic frameworks already in place, i.e. Higher Education Healthy Campus Charter and Framework and the National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) retains oversight of the implementation of both of these frameworks across Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

Jigsaw and HSE Health & Wellbeing have worked collaboratively since this event with the HEA to consider how the outcomes and recommendations from this event can inform next steps and add value to promoting mental health and wellbeing in higher education going forward. The following recommendations and actions have been jointly prepared by Jigsaw, HSE Mental Health and Wellbeing and the HEA in direct response to the feedback captured within this report. These recommendations closely reflect many of those in the National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework (see Appendix C).

HEA National Steering Group on Student Mental Health

The HEA is currently reviewing national advisory structures in relation to student and staff health and wellbeing. It is envisioned that this will include a national group to advise on the progression of both the National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework and the Healthy Campus Charter and Framework across Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

Report Recommendations

Ongoing open dialogue

There is clear value in ongoing knowledge exchange / follow up sessions with interested members of the attendees of this event, plus additional stakeholders, to progress the recommendations identified in this report. This could take the form of a second conference style event, a series of webinars etc. One resource which would be beneficial to share are ways in which HEIs are communicating their continuum of care and how to access the right support at the right time to students and those who may signpost student.

National Collaboration

There was a strong interest from stakeholders at this event on having national working groups on several areas, and this would benefit from further exploration. Topics for potential working groups include:

- Shared outcome measures to capture the need for, and effectiveness of mental health promotion initiatives across HEIs, and an approach for gathering and sharing outcome measures
- Curricular and structural approaches to embedding mental health and wellbeing in higher education.
- Approaches to influencing structural challenges and supports for student mental health and wellbeing

Senior Leadership Buy in and Staff Support

Participants at this event felt these were strong areas of need, both of which are also captured in the National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework.

It is recommended that the proposed HEA national advisory group consider the above recommendations in the context of the broader body of work being undertaken across the sector to support student and staff health and wellbeing.



Actions Jigsaw will lead on

Report circulation

This report outlines the need to prioritise mental health and wellbeing in higher education settings, and the health promoting value of connection within this objective. It will be circulated as widely as possible to share learning and add value to mental health promotion in higher education. Circulation will include senior leadership in HEI's, given the prominent theme of the importance of buy-in from the most senior levels of leadership, in order to ensure success in mental health promotion for students.

Student voice as central

Jigsaw's Youth Voice and Engagement Team will collaborate with relevant stakeholders to deliver a webinar on how best to include student voice in mental health promotion initiatives.

Peer Mentoring

There is already a significant amount of resources and programmes for training and supporting peer mentors, including the resources developed by 3Set. Jigsaw is currently working on developing specific mental health and wellbeing content for training and supporting peer mentors and peer supporters to complement existing resources. A steering group of students and professionals is currently engaged in a series of consultations to inform this development. This content will be made available nationally on completion of a pilot and evaluation phase.

One Good Friend

Jigsaw have developed a free and fully evaluated self-directed online mental health promotion course to equip higher education students with the knowledge, confidence and skills needed to support a friend's mental health and wellbeing. This can be widely promoted in all higher education settings, and Jigsaw can make available a suite of promotion materials to support this. <https://jigsawportal.learnupon.com/store/3368448-one-good-friend>

One Good Coach

Jigsaw have developed a free self-directed online mental health promotion course for those who work or volunteer with young people within a coaching context. We are currently reconfiguring this for delivery specifically in higher education including to those with leadership positions in student clubs and societies. This will be launched in October 2023 on Jigsaw's LearnUpon Platform <https://jigsawportal.learnupon.com/store>



We invite other national groups to respond to this report and to share information on other current or future initiatives arising from these themes.





Report Endorsement

Professor Margaret Barry

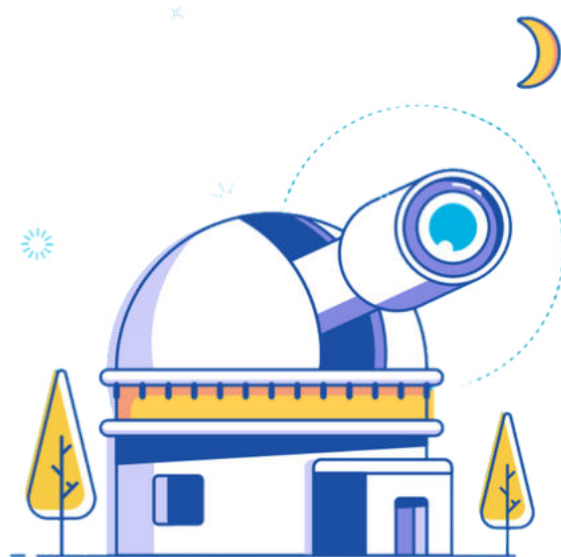
Established Chair in Health Promotion and Public Health at the University of Galway in Ireland; Director of the World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Health Promotion Research.

Jigsaw and HSE Mental Health & Wellbeing are to be congratulated for their leadership in organising this roundtable discussion on advancing mental health promotion in higher education. Higher education is a unique setting for promoting the mental health and wellbeing of students and staff. National strategic frameworks, such as the National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework and the Healthy Campus Charter and Framework across Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), have been developed to guide and support action by higher education institutes on promoting the mental health and wellbeing of campus communities in Ireland. This roundtable event with key national stakeholders addressed how to strengthen action on implementing the Stronger Together - HSE National Mental Health Promotion Plan (2022-2027), with a particular focus on mental health promotion initiatives that promote connectedness and belonging in further and higher education settings, aligned to the strategic frameworks.

While the critical importance of advancing this work is widely acknowledged, integrating a focus on promoting good mental health and wellbeing into the culture, everyday operations, practices, and academic matters of further and higher education settings is challenging. Progress on implementing these initiatives requires an inclusive, coordinated, and whole campus approach, building on evidence-based mental health promotion actions that can be embedded at every level into the core business of the university/college. This requires significant collaboration and buy-in from across the sector and especially from senior leaders in further and higher education.

The themes that emerged from the roundtable discussions capture the critical issues that need to be addressed in taking this forward, namely adopting a whole-college approach, effective communication and collaboration across sectors and different actors, addressing structural challenges and issues such as accommodation, and providing clear pathways for a continuum of support that is proportionate to need.

The recommendations, produced by Jigsaw, HSE Mental Health and Wellbeing and the HEA in response to the feedback, underscores the value of ongoing dialogue and knowledge exchange among key stakeholders and greater collaboration and cross-sector partnerships at the national level. The evidence-base for effective mental health promotion action at a whole campus level needs to be developed further to inform policy and practice concerning what works best for whom in the local context, and as clearly illustrated by the recommendations arising from this roundtable event, there is great value in meaningfully engaging key stakeholders in co-designing and shaping the best way forward. Advancing these collaborative next steps at the national level will be critical in moving to a more system-level approach and the implementation of sustainable evidence-based actions that will empower staff and students and create supportive further and higher education environments for promoting good mental health and wellbeing for all.





Appendix A: Stakeholders represented

Lead Partners:

Jigsaw – National Centre for Youth Mental Health
HSE Mental Health and Wellbeing

Youth Voice Partners:

Jigsaw Youth Advocates – all current higher education students
Student Welfare Officers

Key Stakeholders (alphabetical):

Creative Ireland
Department of Health
Healthy Campus
Higher Education Authority (HEA)
HSE Health Promotion and Improvement Officers
HSE Mental Health
National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP)
Peer Mentoring / 3Set
Psychological Counsellors in Higher Education in Ireland (PCHEI)
Student Disability Services – Occupational Therapy
Student Health – Nursing
Union of Students Ireland- (USI)

HEIs represented (alphabetical):

Higher Education Colleges of Ireland (HECA) - representing 12 private colleges, Maynooth University (MU), National College of Art and Design (NCAD), Technological University Dublin (TUD), Technological University of the Shannon (TUS), Trinity College Dublin (TCD), University College Cork (UCC), University College Dublin (UCD), University of Galway, University of Limerick (UL).

Appendix B: Literature Review

Sense of Belonging in Higher Education Students in Ireland – Evidence Summary

Why are we interested in student belonging?

Having a sense of belonging and connectedness to the people around us has long been identified as an important human need (Maslow, 1943). Research has linked a strong sense of belonging to positive outcomes such as physical and mental health, wellbeing, healthy relationships, and career prospects. Conversely, lack of belonging or belonging uncertainty has been linked to issues such as low self-esteem, alienation, and mental ill-health (Arslan, 2021; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty et al., 2002; Strayhorn, 2008).

Interest in student belonging grew out of a desire to improve retention, especially amongst increasingly diverse student populations (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Research showed that disengagement, isolation, and feelings of not fitting in strongly influenced many students' decisions to drop out (Thomas, 2012; Tinto, 1975). Identifying the shared academic and wellbeing benefits of improving belonging in students, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners began to focus on this area (Fox et al., 2020).

This brief, scoping review encompasses key findings from the academic literature, Irish context such as relevant statistics, and messages from a February 2023 consultation with a group of Jigsaw's Youth Advocates who are currently students.

What is belonging?

Belonging comprises individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors (Napper et al., 2022). While studies explore similar concepts, there is no universal definition of the term.

Definitions frequently refer to social support, connectedness, fitting in, feeling cared about, valued, and respected, and feeling in some way like an important part of the college community, both academically and socially (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Hoffman et al., 2002; Murdock-Perriera et al., 2019; Strayhorn, 2018).

For this review, we discussed some definitions from the literature with Youth Advocates, and refined the following definition:

“Students’ subjective feelings of connectedness, fit, and being valued, supported and accepted within their academic and social contexts.”

How can we measure belonging?

Measures vary considerably, but they tend to cover one or more core aspects of belonging:

- Social (relationships, social life, acceptance, etc.)
- Academic (academic engagement, classroom comfort, etc.)
- Relationships with faculty (pedagogical caring, faculty support, etc.)
- Institutional (college identity, institutional support, etc.).

Most cover at least two of these domains (Arslan, 2021; Goodenow, 1993; Hoffman et al., 2002; Rovai, 2002; Yorke, 2014). Some measures explore issues of diversity, equity and inclusion (Maestas et al., 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Others address specific contexts, such as departments or online learning (Bolliger & Inan, 2012; Knekta et al., 2020).

Why does belonging matter to students?

Students reporting a higher sense of belonging at college tend to do better academically, engage more in class, and are more likely to finish their degree (Berger, 1997; Davis et al., 2019; Strayhorn, 2018).

Stronger belonging has been identified as a protective factor against anxiety, depression and loneliness (Arslan, 2021; Raniti et al., 2022). One study found college belonging to be a mediating factor against suicidality (Van Orden et al., 2008). It is also linked to greater wellbeing and community engagement in later life (Brady et al., 2020).

What influences students' sense of belonging?

The extent to which certain factors are (or are perceived to be) present or absent contributes to students' sense of belonging at college.

Social connections and relationships with other students:

having meaningful relationships and friendships is amongst the strongest predictors of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Jorgenson et al., 2018; Maunder, 2017). Research since the onset of Covid-19 suggests a need for focus on this area, as restricted social contact has contributed to loneliness and reduced social connectivity in students (Arslan, 2021; Hehir et al., 2021; Napper et al., 2022). Extracurricular activities such as sports clubs, societies and student politics can contribute to students' social networks and feelings of community (De Sisto et al., 2021; Strayhorn, 2008).

Connections and relationships with college staff:

this includes perceptions of instructor warmth and openness, and pedagogical caring (i.e. student-centred, caring learning environments) (Freeman et al., 2007). Some research has suggested that students have equally important relationships with non-academic college staff, such as administrators and catering staff (Jorgenson et al., 2018).

Feeling of support from the institution: for example, support to navigate college systems or challenging periods in a student's personal life (Hoffman et al., 2002; Russell & Jarvis, 2019). Hoffman and colleagues (2002) describe students' need to feel more than "just a face in a crowd"; to feel the institution cares about them as an individual and will actively take steps to ensure their wellbeing.

Sense of institutional identity: i.e. feelings of 'fit' within an institution, and of being a part of a wider college (or departmental) identity or community (Hoffman et al., 2002; Kirby & Thomas, 2021). 'Belonging' does not always mean 'fitting in' with wider social groups (Bettencourt, 2021); Strayhorn (2018) argues belonging should involve acceptance of difference and freedom to be one's authentic self.

Diversity, equity and inclusion: i.e. the extent to which students perceive the institution as open, welcoming, and non-exclusive. Sense of belonging tends to be weaker in 'non-traditional' students, such as ethnic or racial minorities (Barringer et al., 2022; Maestas et al., 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2011),

those who are the first generation in their family to attend higher education (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Pedler et al., 2022), and those from low-income backgrounds (Ahn & Davis, 2022; Bettencourt, 2021). Access to higher education can reduce socio-economic inequalities, but inequalities can be perpetuated if minority or disadvantaged students do not feel they belong (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021).

Surroundings and living situation: i.e. having a positive relationship with a campus, town or city, and having a comfortable living situation (Ahn & Davis, 2019; Garvey et al., 2017; Napper et al., 2022). Students living off-campus report lower levels of connectedness to their departments and greater isolation than on-campus students (Irani et al., 2014; Jorgenson et al., 2018; Whitten et al., 2017). These issues are pertinent to Ireland, as accommodation for students is an ongoing challenge (White et al., 2022), and the proportion of students who do not leave their family home while attending college is very high, at around 65% (O'Mahony et al., 2021).

What interventions can improve belonging?

A review of interventions to improve retention through belonging and engagement (Thomas, 2012) identified some characteristics associated with effectiveness, including:

- Mainstream (not 'opt-in'), led by the institution, and proactive about encouraging participation
- Well-timed and not once-off, start pre-entry and continue at key points (e.g. before long breaks)
- Focus on developing peer networks and friendships, and create links with academic staff
- Relevant to students' lives; appropriate media
- Give information on structures and processes, and shape realistic expectations of student life.

Another review on interventions combatting loneliness in students found group-based approaches to be most effective (Ellard et al., 2022).

References**Measures**

Appendix C: Report Themes mapped to Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework

HEA – National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework Implementation Guide

Theme 1: Whole-college approach

Lead (1) - Build and support national and institutional strategies for student mental health

Educate (3) - Build campus knowledge and skills on student mental health and suicide prevention

Engage (4) - Create campus communities that are connected, safe, nurturing, inclusive and compassionate

Identify (5) - Establish a culture of mental health awareness, recognition, and compassion

Theme 2: Clear pathways for student supports

Identify (5) - Establish a culture of mental health awareness, recognition, and compassion

Support (6) - Provide students with safe, accessible and well-resourced mental health support

Theme 3: Collaboration and communication

Collaborate (2) - Develop partnerships on campus and in the community with health services to support student mental health

Support (6) - Provide students with safe, accessible and well-resourced mental health support

Improve (9) - Frequent data collection and analysis to ensure an effective improvement in student mental health

Theme 4: Structural challenges

Lead (1) - Build and support national and institutional strategies for student mental health

Theme 5: Specific target groups

Transition (8) - Establish student supports throughout the higher education journey

Engage (4) - Create campus communities that are connected, safe, nurturing, inclusive and compassionate

Theme 6: Accommodation shortages

Lead (1) - Build and support national and institutional strategies for student mental health

Appendix D: Themes infographic; version for young people

MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Round-table discussion report

THEMES

- 1** **WHOLE-COLLEGE APPROACH**

Mental health and wellbeing is everyone's business. Students are the main stakeholder and must be involved. Buy in is needed from senior leadership and staff too. Mental health promotion should be part of the core curriculum. Clubs, societies and campus campaigns are also important.
- 2** **CLEAR INFORMATION ON STUDENT SUPPORTS**

Students need clear information about how to access the right support at the right time. Anyone who a student may approach for support also needs this information.
- 3** **COLLABORATION & COMMUNICATION**

Colleges want to collaborate with each other, and with national bodies such as Jigsaw, to share learning and build up evidence of what works to promote mental health. Effective communication is essential. Let's keep the conversation going!
- 4** **STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES**

There are ways that the curriculum, timetables and other academic structures impact student wellbeing. There are opportunities for us to influence these to best support students.
- 5** **SPECIFIC TARGET GROUPS**

While we aim to benefit the wellbeing of all students, some groups may benefit from tailored or targeted supports to ensure they can benefit. Orientation programmes are a critical time to influence connectedness.
- 6** **ACCOMMODATION SHORTAGES**

We can report the wellbeing impacts of accommodation shortages and long commutes. We can also consider these when planning events so that students living far away can benefit too.



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**Mental Health Promotion in Higher Education
Report on Roundtable Discussions, 25th April 2023**

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