

COVID-19 and Student Mental Health – The Silent Pandemic

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As international students navigate more uncertainty in their study plans due to COVID-19, there is a surging demand for mental health support services across this sector in Australia. Allianz Partners Australia is taking a pro-active approach to mental wellbeing, offering app-based, early intervention tools and access to care. The mental wellbeing of international students is a top priority for us and our education institution partners - it has never been more important to support students in an engaging, relevant and accessible way.

After nearly two years of disruption and distance learning due to COVID-19, planning for the new academic year is underway with a renewed sense of optimism. The vaccination rate in Australia has reached an important milestone of 70 percent first dose, a crucial step in ensuring the safe return of in-person classes. Alongside other protective measures, high vaccination rates will be our best defence against any further restrictions in higher education.

The mental wellbeing of students is a global concern as evidenced by research conducted by Allianz Partners across the world. Christophe Aniel, Global head of international student mobility at Allianz Partners discusses these impacts, and how students will be supported into the future.

As international borders open up we are also seeing the return of international student mobility. The sector's revival is being fuelled by pent-up demand from students who put their international study plans on hold for a while, and are now eager to enjoy an immersive experience overseas with all the cultural, academic and social benefits that entails.

While the virus hasn't dimmed the appeal of studying abroad, the pandemic is transforming how students plan and prepare in these uncertain times. Before embarking on an overseas study trip, students want to ensure that they are prepared for a resurgence of the virus with comprehensive health cover, telehealth GP consultations and a range of well-being supports. It is clear that apart from the threat of future lockdowns, students looking to study overseas are concerned about their overall health and well-being. I'm also very mindful of the continuing impacts of COVID-19 on university students' mental health. While student mental health has long been a growing concern for university administrators, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated mental health issues among vulnerable student populations. 46% of Gen Z (ages 18-25) are worried about suffering from mental health problems (stress, depression, and burnout), according to our latest survey* which aimed to shed light on the mental health of young people in the context of the pandemic.

At the beginning of the pandemic when lockdowns were enforced around the world, university students reported feeling depressed, isolated, stressed, anxious and disengaged. This grim picture of young people's mental state runs counter to the popular notion that "university is the best four years of your life". Under normal circumstances, the higher education path is full of opportunities; meeting

new people, participating in clubs and societies, pursuing personal growth and achieving academic goals. However, it can also be a source of tremendous stress and anxiety.

For many students the return to 'normal' is a life adjustment that requires additional support. Some have been adversely impacted by traumatic experiences such as bereavement, social isolation, loss of routine as well as rising living costs and uncertainty about their future. In light of the lingering effects of COVID-19 on students' mental wellbeing, it's important that students have access to early treatment and psychological support that is tailored to their needs, whether that's peer-to-peer support, online mental health modules or face-to-face counselling. Mental health support services can be even more important for students studying abroad, who don't have access to their usual support networks. An interesting data point from our survey showed that 55% of Gen Z (ages 18-25) have high interest in using digital mental health solutions, with 29% of Gen Z reporting to have already used online or app based therapy services (including 15% before the pandemic). A further 27% confirmed they would think of using online or app based in the future. This underlines the importance of providing mental health supports in diverse and accessible formats that reduce barriers to help-seeking.

One of the ways young people are taking proactive control of their health is by using wearable and smart technologies to monitor a range of health metrics. While these devices are predominantly used to monitor physical activities and heart rate, there is a clear expectation among consumers that more features will be available on their connected devices in the future – our survey shows that 29% of Gen Z would use a wearable device to monitor their emotional state.

By promoting a culture of mental and emotional well-being in higher education we ensure that all students have access to the supports they need to thrive, we make a positive impact on student quality of life and we retain students who might be at risk of dropping out.

Hopefully, this pandemic will serve as a wake-up call to tackle the scale of the mental health crisis in the higher education sector. This year, more than any other, we need to ensure that student well-being is placed at the heart of higher education.

**Customer Lab Research from spring 2021 surveying 11K consumers across Mexico, Thailand, Switzerland, Austria and Singapore, and including questions related to COVID emerging new behaviours.*