

**Increasing Anxiety awareness
in higher education during (post)
Covid-19 pandemic**



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Policy Report – Recommendations



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Introduction

Policy recommendation is a document that includes simply written policy advice and suggestions prepared for some group that has the authority to make decisions (Karakosta & Papapostolou, 2020). It is a key tool for presenting research and recommendations to non-specialist audiences and policymakers. It is used to provide evidence-based policy advice to help decision-makers make informed decisions (IDRC, 2024). The document is intended to inform decision-makers about the various options, possibilities and scenarios on a given issue, as well as the potential consequences and outcomes of their decisions. A policy recommendation is a tool to facilitate evidence-based policymaking, as it is based on solid evidence, research and strong arguments (Musandu, 2013).

This document - The Policy Report - Recommendations - deals with policy recommendations in the area of mental health of staff and students of higher education institutions in the consortium countries (Poland, Cyprus, Greece, Ireland and Spain) of the AWARE project “Increasing Anxiety Awareness in Higher Education during (post) Covid-19 Pandemic”. The project’s main objective is to increase anxiety and mental health awareness among HE institution staff and students. The Policy Report - Recommendations is addressed to policymakers involved in the implementation of mental health and higher education policies in the consortium countries.

Policy recommendation - Poland

1.1 Recommendations for increasing mental health awareness in Poland

Faced with the growing problem of the poor state of mental health of Poles, experts and institutions dealing with this topic propose various recommendations. During the ‘One Health’ conference held on the 25th of March 2024 in the Polish Senate, the recommendations of experts participating in the 5th Congress on the Health of Poles (in 2023) were presented. A part of them also concerned mental health and were presented by Professor Janusz Heitzman, Vice President of the Polish Psychiatric Association. He stated that in Poland, mental disorders are found in more than 25 per cent of the adult population, i.e. in about 8 million people. He explained that there is no public health without mental health and that preventive actions are needed to improve the mental health of Poles, among which maintaining a work-life balance is important. It is crucial to recognise that mental disorders are not normal psychological reactions, but have their biological dynamics and need to be treated at the



earliest stages of development. He also stressed that early treatment of neglected psychological disorders, such as insomnia, anxiety and depression, is crucial (Lisowska, 2024).

Recommendations for a way out of the collapse of the mental health system have also been developed by the Ombudsman for Civil Affairs together with the Expert Commission on Mental Health Care (2020). These include (Ombudsman, 2020):

- Continuing the piloting of Mental Health Centres (MHCs) - a model for comprehensive care for mentally ill people in a residential setting;
- Ensure public funding of psychiatry at 5-6%;
- Comprehensive amendment of the Mental Health Act;
- Improving the availability of psychiatric treatment for children and adolescents;
- Guaranteeing all students the possibility of psychological and pedagogical assistance at school.

In 2020 the Social Dialogue Committee of the National Chamber of Commerce also proposed recommendations for psychiatric care in Poland. These included: increased funding for psychiatric care, the preparation of a law on mental health care and the establishment of a national mental health centre (National Chamber of Commerce, 2020).

Moreover, experts at the 9th Congress of Health Challenges in March 2024 discussed systemic needs for mental health in Poland. They pointed out the need for a coordinated services model, the construction of mental health centres and the adaptation of care standards to the regional diversity and individual needs of patients in Poland. In addition, they stressed the importance of the mental health of children and adolescents as a public health domain, requiring intersectoral cooperation and transparency in the processing of personal data. They also pointed to the need to complete the pilot and implement permanent solutions based on a solid legal basis and uniform standards, taking into account the diversity of patients' needs (Health Market, 2024).

1.2 Mental Health Awareness in HEIs in Poland

Dorota Włodarczyk, PhD, and Magdalena Łazarewicz, PhD, in the Patient Ombudsman's Report 'Mental health at Polish HEIs' (2020) recommend increasing the prevalence of activities aimed at improving the mental health and well-being of members of the academic community and making them a standard in Polish higher education institutions. According to the researchers, formal questions remain to be solved, including whether mental health promotion activities are part of the statutory



goals of the HEI, wherein the structure of the HEI should be units offering psychological support (help centres, counselling centres) and organising or coordinating mental health promotion programmes, and from which source they should be financed. The practical question of where to refer people in need of long-term professional psychological support is also important.

It is also good practice for Polish universities to introduce recommendations on mental health. In 2021 University of Wroclaw introduced recommendations for dealing with and supporting a mental health crisis. The document contains concrete, useful tips to help when facing such a situation. Recommendations indicate how to provide emotional support, ensure safe conditions, alleviate the symptoms of the crisis and suggest where to look for specialised institutional help. They should not be seen as a prescriptive document, obliging you to take any action. Rather, they contain hints and guidelines that may prove helpful in crises (University of Wroclaw, 2022).

Policy recommendation - Cyprus

1.1 Policy Recommendations

Recommendation: To effectively address mental health issues among students in higher education institutions, the following strategies are essential:

- Regular campaigns utilising platforms like social media, workshops, and seminars can educate both students and staff about mental health issues and available resources. Such initiatives help reduce stigma and encourage students to seek help when needed (Campbell et al., 2022).
- Incorporating mental health education into the curriculum normalises discussions around mental health, enhances coping skills, and improves academic performance and social interactions among students (Lister & Allman, 2024; Osborn et al., 2022).
- Equipping faculty and staff with the skills to recognise and respond to mental health issues is crucial. Constantinou et al. (2022) propose the CReATE circular pathway model, which includes creating awareness, recognising symptoms, accessing mental health resources, training faculty and staff, and enabling sustainable practices.
- Increasing funding for mental health services can address shortages in professionals and support services. Establishing on-campus counselling centres and offering telehealth services



ensures that students have accessible support and therapy options (Osborn et al., 2022; Inside Higher Ed, 2020).

- Developing peer support initiatives where students assist each other under professional supervision fosters a sense of community and reduces isolation. Training peer supporters to recognise signs of mental health issues and provide appropriate referrals is essential (Pointon-Haas et al., 2024; Osborn et al., 2022).
- Introducing policies that allow for mental health days without academic penalties, offering options for part-time study, or extending deadlines for those facing mental health challenges can alleviate stress and promote a healthier learning environment (Osborn et al., 2022; Häfner et al., 2015).
- Allocating sufficient funds from governments and institutions supports mental health services, awareness campaigns, and training programmes. Seeking external funding from private organisations and international bodies can supplement these efforts (Liese et al., 2019).
- Collaborating with local mental health organisations, hospitals, and clinics enhances services by providing students access to specialised care and expertise. Such partnerships can also facilitate joint events and initiatives to promote mental health awareness (Broglia et al., 2021).

Benefit: Implementing these recommendations can significantly improve students' mental well-being. Increased awareness and education reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking behaviour. Trained faculty and staff can identify and support students effectively, while expanded services and flexible policies alleviate academic pressures. Peer support programmes build a supportive community, reducing feelings of isolation. Adequate funding ensures the sustainability of mental health initiatives, and partnerships with healthcare providers enhance the quality and accessibility of services. Collectively, these strategies improve emotional resilience, reduce absenteeism due to mental health issues, and create a supportive educational environment that acknowledges and addresses students' mental health needs.

1.2 Legislation Mandating Comprehensive Mental Health Services in HEIs

Recommendation: To support the implementation of these mental health initiatives, the following legislative changes are necessary:

- Enact legislation requiring all higher education institutions to have mental health professionals on staff and to provide accessible mental health services to students. Legislating



these requirements ensures that all students have access to the support they need, regardless of the institution they attend (Broglia et al., 2021; Osborn et al., 2022).

- Advocate for increased mandatory training of university staff and educators in mental health. Educators play a vital role in supporting students' mental health, and equipping them with the necessary knowledge and skills is essential for creating a supportive learning environment (Reis et al., 2022). Training should focus on enabling staff to recognise and respond to mental health issues among students. Research indicates that training programmes can significantly improve staff confidence and competence in handling mental health crises (Campbell et al., 2022).
- **Example:** The University of Nicosia's Centre for Therapy, Training, and Research (KESY) already provides valuable resources and training seminars. Expanding these programmes to include mandatory mental health training for all university staff can help reduce stigma and ensure that students receive timely and appropriate support.

Benefit: Implementing these legislative changes ensures that all students have equitable access to essential mental health support services, enhancing their overall well-being and academic success. Mandatory mental health training for educators fosters a supportive academic environment, enabling staff to effectively recognise and address students' mental health needs. This approach not only reduces stigma but also ensures timely intervention, potentially preventing minor issues from escalating into serious problems.

1.4 Expanding Workplace Mental Health Support for University Staff

Recommendation: Supporting the mental health of university staff is as important as supporting students. Universities in Cyprus should expand workplace mental health support by offering regular mental health check-ups, counselling services, and stress management workshops (Rahman et al., 2024).

Benefit: Implementing these measures can address job insecurity, burnout, and psychological distress among university staff, ultimately enhancing their well-being and productivity. Flexible work policies, promotion of work-life balance, and access to mental health resources contribute to a healthier, more supportive work environment.



Policy recommendation - Greece

1.1 Establish a national mental health policy for higher education

Recommendation: Increasing access to mental health services means that schools and HEIs should have qualified mental health professionals available to support students' emotional and psychological well-being. This includes one-on-one counselling, group therapy sessions, and mental health workshops. Early identification and intervention can prevent minor issues from developing into more serious problems. A supportive environment that prioritises mental health can help reduce stigma, encourage students to seek help when needed and promote coping strategies for stress and anxiety. (Legislation and Policy | European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, n.d.-b).

Benefit: Improves emotional resilience, and creates a supportive environment that acknowledges and addresses students' mental health needs.

1.2 Strengthen university mental health support services

Recommendation: Increase funding and resources to improve mental health support services within universities, ensuring that they are accessible and capable of meeting the growing demand among students and staff.

- Adopt a multidisciplinary team approach to provide holistic mental health care. This involves the employment of a diverse group of mental health professionals - including psychologists, social workers, and psychiatrists - to adequately support the university population (Holm-Hadulla & Koutsoukou-Argyaki, 2015; Bitsios et al., 2017).
- Confirm that services are not limited to students but are available to all university employees (Bitsios et al., 2017). It is also important to conduct annual psychological assessments for all members of the university community to identify issues early and provide timely interventions.

1.3 Promote mental health awareness, education, and training

Recommendation: Organise mental health awareness campaigns and integrate mental health education into university curricula to enhance understanding, reduce stigma, and empower the university community.



- Educate staff on self-care practices and stress management techniques to maintain their mental health, and provide training to recognise at-risk individuals and respond effectively (Gallagher et al., 2006). With this training, both academic and administrative staff can manage their well-being. Additionally, they can identify early indicators of mental health issues in students and direct them to appropriate resources. This proactive approach not only promotes a positive campus atmosphere but also helps prevent future crises by addressing issues before they escalate.
- Stamouli and Maniatakou (2022) suggest that students can establish peer support groups within their universities to inform fellow students about available mental health networks, initiatives, and resources. By doing so, students in need gain a reliable space to access essential information and support.

1.4 Promote a supportive and inclusive university environment

Recommendation: According to the policies outlined by the Greek Ministry of Education, promoting collaboration between different sectors is essential for inclusive education. Through the union of educators, healthcare professionals, and social workers, schools can develop better support plans tailored to each student's needs. This interdisciplinary approach ensures that health-related issues are promptly addressed, minimising their impact on learning and promoting a more inclusive educational environment.

- Develop programmes that promote connections among students and staff - such as mentoring and support networks - and facilitate the formation of clubs and groups that encourage social interaction and community engagement (Baik et al., 2019; Feldman, 2011; Holm-Hadulla & Koutsoukou-Argyaki, 2015).
- Facilitate cooperation between schools, healthcare providers, and social services to support students with special educational needs.

Policy recommendation - Ireland

1.1 New Policies to Promote Mental Health Awareness in Ireland

Recommendation:



- Adopt a whole-college approach for effective mental health promotion in higher education institutions. This approach involves embedding mental health awareness into every aspect of campus life, ensuring that mental well-being is considered core to the academic environment rather than an add-on.
- Aligning new policies and initiatives to existing national frameworks like the National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework (NSMHSPF) and the Healthy Campus Charter to ensure consistency and accountability across institutions.

1.2 Recommendations for Legislative Changes

Recommendation:

- There is a need for stronger legislative alignment between existing frameworks such as Stronger Together (2022-2027) and Connecting for Life (2015-2020). This alignment would bridge gaps between suicide prevention efforts and broader mental health promotion.

1.3 Advocacy for Increased Training in Mental Health Awareness

Recommendation:

- Implement continuous professional development programmes recognising the importance of training for staff at all levels in HEIs to promote mental health literacy, stigma reduction, and trauma-informed practices.
- Training should extend beyond those key people in designated support roles and should include faculty and administrative staff, thereby creating a supportive environment where mental health is the responsibility of all staff, underpinning the whole-college approach.

1.4 Recommendations to Improve Funding and Partnerships for Mental Health Programmes

Recommendation:

- Ensure that sufficient funding is directed towards programmes focusing on prevention and awareness to sustain and expand mental health initiatives in higher education. Funding is critical for the effectiveness of these programmes.
- Provide financial support for both universal and targeted interventions, as well as evidence-based programmes that have proven successful within academic institutions.



- Fund peer-led mental health groups and enhance on-campus counselling services to offer accessible support for students.
- Promote collaborations between government and private sector entities to co-fund mental health awareness campaigns, ensuring a broad reach and diverse resources for addressing mental health in various college communities.
- Foster partnerships between higher education institutions, healthcare providers (e.g., HSE Mental Health & Wellbeing services), and community organisations specialising in mental health to build a supportive ecosystem.
- Improve national collaboration by forming a working group dedicated to student mental health. This group would allow best practices to be shared and ensure a unified approach across national campuses, addressing gaps in service delivery and building a cohesive network of support for students.

Policy recommendation - Spain

1.1 National Framework for Mental Health Awareness and Education

Recommendation: Establish a national mental health awareness framework specifically for higher education institutions. This framework should be implemented in collaboration with the Ministry of Universities and the Ministry of Health to provide standardised guidelines and best practices for mental health education and awareness campaigns across all HEIs. This framework should include:

- Mandatory mental health awareness programmes integrated into the first year of study for all university students. These programmes should cover basic concepts of mental health, strategies for managing stress and anxiety, and how to access support services both within and outside the university (Martínez-Riera et al., 2022).
- Campus-wide awareness campaigns using various media, including social media, posters, and events, to normalise conversations around mental health and reduce stigma. Universities should celebrate mental health days and create peer-led initiatives (Sánchez-Carracedo et al., 2022).



- Involvement of student associations and mental health organisations to co-design these campaigns and ensure they are relatable and effective for the student population (Ministerio de Sanidad, 2021).

Benefits: Implementing a national framework ensures consistency across universities and guarantees that mental health awareness reaches every student, regardless of their field of study. This can lead to early recognition of mental health problems, reduce stigma, and create a more supportive environment across Spanish campuses (Casañas & Lalucat, 2018).

1.2 Legislation Mandating Comprehensive Mental Health Services in HEIs

Recommendation: Enact legislation that requires all higher education institutions in Spain to provide comprehensive mental health services. These services should be readily accessible to both students and staff and should be provided by qualified professionals. Key elements of this legislation would include:

- On-campus mental health centres that offer free or low-cost psychological counselling and mental health support. Each university should be equipped with a team of mental health professionals who can provide individual and group therapy, crisis intervention, and preventative services (Ato-García et al., 2021).
- 24/7 mental health helplines and online counselling platforms to ensure access to support at all times, particularly during crises.
- Peer support programmes where students are trained to offer basic mental health support and guide their peers towards professional resources when necessary (López et al., 2022).
- Annual mental health screenings for students and staff, particularly during high-stress periods like exams, to identify those in need of further support (Rodríguez et al., 2020).

Benefits: Mandating comprehensive mental health services ensures that every university is equipped to provide accessible, reliable support for mental health. It would reduce barriers to help-seeking behaviour and ensure early interventions for students and staff, thereby improving academic and professional outcomes (Rodríguez & Berrios, 2012).

1.3 Mandatory Mental Health Training for University Staff and Educators

Recommendation: Develop a national programme of mandatory mental health training for educators, academic counsellors, and administrative staff. The Ministry of Education and Vocational Training



should oversee the implementation of this training programme in coordination with universities. Key components of this training should include:

- Basic mental health literacy: Staff should learn to identify early signs of mental distress in students and peers, such as changes in behaviour, academic performance, or social interaction (Benavides et al., 2021).
- Mental health first aid: Equip staff with skills to provide immediate support and refer students or colleagues to professional services when necessary.
- Regular professional development: Training should not be a one-time requirement but should include ongoing opportunities to stay informed about new mental health challenges, such as those exacerbated by digital learning or social isolation (Organización Mundial de la Salud, 2021).
- Specialised training should be offered to academic advisors, who are often the first point of contact for students experiencing stress or burnout. This training should help them address academic-related pressures that contribute to mental health issues.

Benefits: By training educators and staff to recognise mental health issues and offer initial support, this policy can significantly increase the chances of early intervention. Staff members who are equipped with the right knowledge and tools can play a crucial role in creating a proactive, supportive university environment (Levav, 1992).

1.4 University Governance and Mental Health Policies

Recommendation: Incorporate mental health as a key issue in university governance by mandating that HEIs develop internal mental health policies and allocate dedicated budgets for mental health services. This policy would include:

- Creation of mental health committees within each university, comprising students, faculty, and mental health professionals, to oversee the implementation of mental health initiatives and evaluate their effectiveness (UNESCO, 2021).
- Inclusion of mental health support in strategic planning: Universities should integrate mental health as part of their institutional objectives, ensuring that mental well-being is considered in all aspects of university life, from curriculum design to campus infrastructure.



- Regular monitoring and evaluation: Universities should collect and report data on the usage and effectiveness of their mental health services, using this information to adjust and improve their programmes.
- Dedicated mental health funding: A specific percentage of the university's annual budget should be allocated to mental health initiatives to ensure the sustainability and growth of services over time (Ministerio de Educación, 2021).

Benefits: Ensuring that mental health is integrated into university governance elevates its importance at the institutional level. It ensures accountability, guarantees that sufficient resources are allocated to mental health services, and creates a feedback loop where universities can continually assess and improve their mental health offerings.

1.5 Expanding Workplace Mental Health Support for University Staff

Recommendation: Introduce legislation that requires all Spanish universities to provide mental health support for academic and administrative staff. Staff mental health is crucial for maintaining a healthy and productive academic environment, and policies should recognise this by mandating appropriate support systems. Key aspects of this policy would include:

- Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) that provide free, confidential counselling services for university employees facing work-related stress, burnout, or personal challenges (Álvarez & Márquez, 2022).
- Flexible work arrangements: Universities should offer flexible work schedules and mental health days to help staff manage stress and maintain a work-life balance, particularly during high-pressure periods such as exam seasons (OECD, 2022).
- Regular mental health check-ins: Annual mental health assessments should be offered to staff, with follow-up support where necessary, to ensure their well-being and prevent burnout.

Benefits: Supporting the mental health of university staff has a direct impact on overall university performance. It reduces absenteeism, improves job satisfaction, and creates a healthier work environment. By focusing on staff well-being, universities can foster a more resilient and motivated workforce, which in turn benefits the student experience (Kelloway, & Day, 2005).



Conclusion

In conclusion, the report identifies four major recommendations to increase mental health awareness in higher education institutions in the consortium countries. First, the implementation of mental health services is essential. These services must be supported by adequate funding and resources to ensure that students and staff have accessible and effective support systems. Second, widespread mental health awareness campaigns are crucial for normalising discussions around mental health and reducing stigma. Additionally, the integration of mental health education into academic curricula equips the university community with important coping mechanisms. Third, providing specialised training for faculty and staff to recognise and respond to mental health issues is vital for early identification and intervention. Through this strategy, universities promote a supportive and proactive educational environment. Lastly, establishing legislative frameworks that mandate comprehensive mental health services ensures consistent and sustained efforts across all institutions. Furthermore, integrating mental health into university governance supports the ongoing implementation and effectiveness of these services. Together, these recommendations form a solid foundation for creating a more resilient, inclusive, and mentally healthy academic environment.



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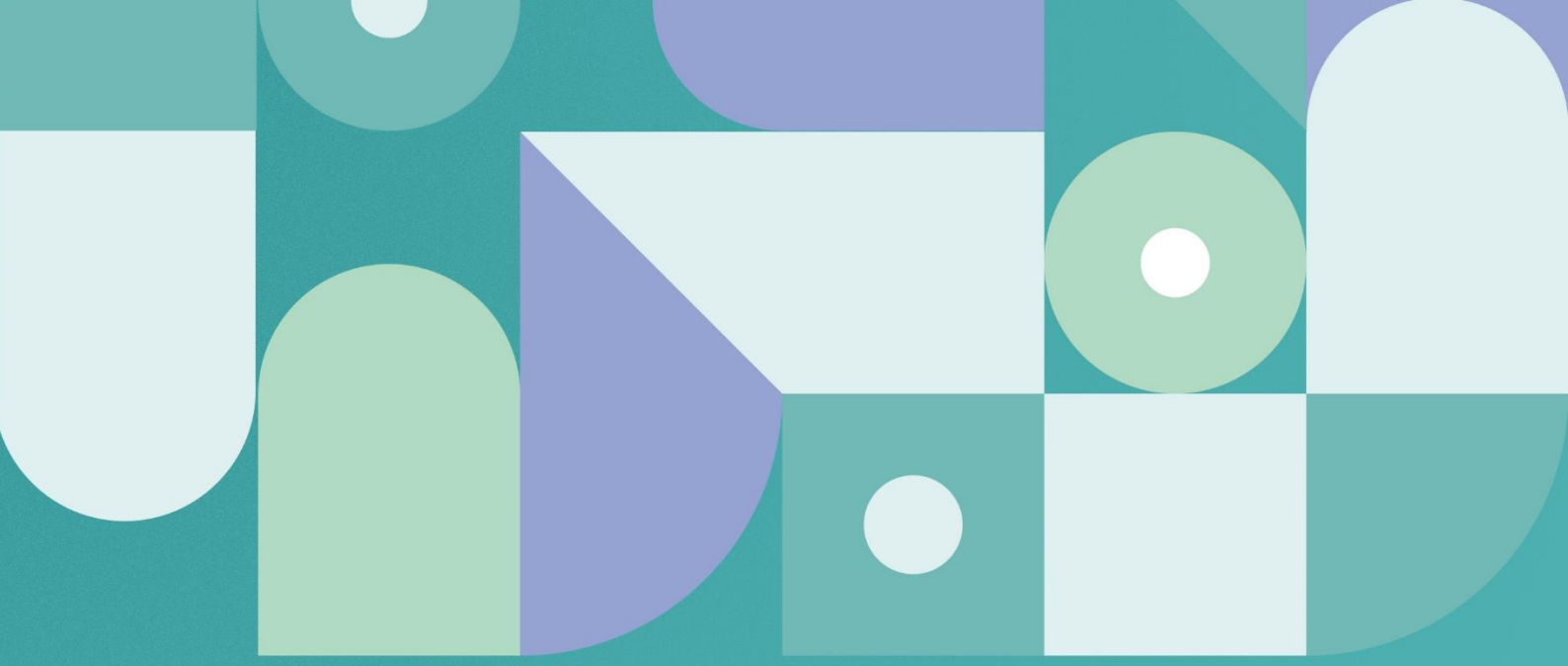


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