Investigating Support Measures That Could Help Students Succeed at Kingston University, London

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Abstract

Students face a diverse range of academic and non-academic challenges throughout the duration of their course and universities offer a wide mix of support. For example, because of the diversity of students at Kingston University, London, many have complex responsibilities outside their degree programme; for example, financial obligations to work, long-distance commutes and family care. This small-scale project used a questionnaire to investigate undergraduate students' experiences of support needs and their take-up of support. Responses revealed that most students had not accessed university support services, despite the many challenges. This paper considers possible reasons for why they hadn't; it discusses students' views of what would constitute 'effective support'; it concludes that further exploration of both student and staff perspectives of what kind of support is needed, expected and offered could well improve future provision.

Introduction

Many factors – academic, personal and socio-economic – influence students' attainment in higher education (HE). Previous research has identified barriers that hinder their academic success; for example, financial pressures, commuting challenges and caring responsibilities (Fellingham *et al*., 2024). Such challenges are particularly pronounced in diverse student populations, where non-traditional learners – such as mature students, part-time students and those with dependents – are increasingly common. As universities strive to foster inclusive learning environments, they must evaluate whether current support mechanisms adequately address the needs of their students.

We used a broad definition of 'student support' in this small-scale study. We were interested in a wide range of support practices aimed at helping students to overcome what hampered their full learning potential; for example, those directed at their mental health and wellbeing, specific learning needs, financial circumstances and academic progress, as well as at the particular challenges of having to commute or being in employment (Li et al 2025; Moores and Burgess 2022; Stalmirska and Mellon 2022).

Mental health/wellbeing has recently been a matter of scrutiny. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing mental health issues among students, increasing demand for university

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counselling and wellbeing services (Chen and Lucock, 2022). Despite efforts to enhance and expand these services, institutional backlogs and resource constraints often deprive students of timely access to support, which in some cases may be critical (Worsley *et al*., 2022) and especially so for those balancing academic responsibilities with part-time work or caregiving duties, as they are more susceptible to stress, anxiety and burnout (Remenick and Bergman, 2021).

In response, some HE institutions have offered more flexible deadlines, financial aid and peer mentoring schemes. However, there is limited evidence to assess their impact – particularly a lack of cross-discipline studies – and, though mental health support has in many cases been expanded, reliance on centralised services can lead to bottlenecks. One proposed solution is to train academic staff as mental health first aiders, enabling them to provide immediate, low-level support and clear signposting; though this may seem promising, concerns about staff workload, boundaries and the adequacy of training (Payne, 2022) make it controversial.

The role of academic staff in supporting student wellbeing is increasingly recognised as critical. Students often turn to familiar teaching staff when facing difficulties, yet many academics report feeling out of their depth when asked to support students with mental health concerns (Payne, *2022* and their own wellbeing may consequently suffer. The embedding of 1) mental health literacy into staff development programmes and 2) wellbeing support into the curriculum is now emerging as best practice. Collectively, these approaches align with the principles of the University Mental Health Charter, which advocates a whole-institution approach to student wellbeing[2].

Good work-life balance positively affects student mental health and academic performance. Students who struggle to balance academic demands with their employment or caregiving responsibilities are at higher risk of developing anxiety and depression (Sprung and Rogers, 2021). Family caring responsibilities, particularly where cultural and religious expectations are powerful, certainly indicate that institutional holistic support strategies considering the full spectrum of student experiences are a must: flexible learning options, accessible support services and fostering a culture of empathy and inclusion within academic departments.

Furthermore, the importance of an empathic understanding of the student perspective cannot be underestimated in the adopted approach. Descals-Tomás *et al*. (2021) found that students who received both practical support and encouragement from academic staff were more likely to persist and succeed in their studies. This underscores the need for academics to build relationships with their learners: if they know the personal circumstances of each student, they may more readily understand individual lateness or failure to attend timetabled sessions and so help students to feel valued, not criticised.

So, it is imperative that we do offer support and that that support is effective; our understanding of the pressures students face must be nuanced. Only then will each learner thrive and succeed academically. Our project thus explored the views of students drawn from a range of different academic disciplines across two faculties at Kingston University, London, on the support offered to them.

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[2] More information on mental health to support students can be found here: https://mentalhealth-charter.co.uk.

Method

Preparation for the project

Following interviews, we selected a team of student researchers representing all levels of undergraduate study on life science courses at the University of Kingston, London. By so doing, we put the emphasis on the student perspective and on comfortable and honest peer interaction, thus eliminating our own possible assumptions. The researchers gained an opportunity to work on a research project outside their academic discipline, gathering experience and transferable skills for their career. They comprised a second-year biochemistry student with whom (Fellingham et al., 2024) we had previously worked, three further second-year biochemists, a final-year biochemist, a first-year biomedical scientist and a second-year biomedical scientist. Student partners arranged their own communication means. Full ethical approval for the project was approved by the Kingston University CHERP (Centre for Higher Education Research and Practice).

Questionnaire

The staff and student partners collaborated to prepare a paper-based questionnaire to explore students' experience of support at Kingston University, London. The questions were developed through consultation with the student researchers, who informally discussed relevant topics with their peers and gathered a range of opinions on areas to investigate. The questionnaire consisted of three main sections:

1. Demographics (*e.g.*, gender, age, ethnicity, course of study, level of study and disability status);
2. Experience of support at Kingston University (e.g. university support services accessed, current support needs based on personal circumstances);
3. Course engagement and support (*e.g.,* support form academic staff, perceived level of independence required on the course and barriers experienced).

Most questions had a multiple-choice format (*e.g.*, a numerical rating scale) while five were open-ended. The multiple-choice questions required one response only, except for 'Who provides the most support at university?' to which participants could choose more than one response as their answer. This method of data collection was used to keep the questionnaire easy to complete and simplified to encourage completion, while covering the range of topics that were of interest.

Data collection

Dissemination of the questionnaire took place at core lectures for each year group on the life science courses and the accounting and finance degree at Kingston University, London. A participant information sheet and consent form were provided along with the questionnaire. In line with our ethics approval, students were informed that they could withdraw without prejudice at any point before completion of the study. Responses were stored securely and analysed to identify the descriptive data presented below.

Results

195 questionnaires were completed in full, approximately evenly distributed between Life Sciences and Accounting and Finance. Within Life Sciences, a range of courses was represented, including Biomedical Science, Biochemistry, Pharmacology and Nutrition. Most participants (85%) were aged 18-21 years, with the remainder being 22-25 years of age (12%), or 26+ years (3%). In terms of gender, 54% of participants were female and 44% male. 87% were from the global majority.

Course					
BSc Accounting and Finance	BSc Biomedical Science	BSc Biochemistry	BSc Pharmacology	BSc Nutrition	BSc Psychology
93 (47.69%)	83 (42.56%)	15 (7.69%)	1 (0.51%)	2 (1.03%)	1 (0.51%)

Age			Gender		
18-21 Years	22-25 Years	26+ Years	Male	Female	PNTS
163 (84.9%)	23 (11.98%)	2 (3.13%)	86 (44.33%)	105 (54.12%)	3 (1.55%)

Ethnicity					
White	Black/Black British	Asian/Asian British	Mixed	Other	PNTS
43 (22.28%)	29 (15.03%)	92 (47.67%)	8 (4.15%)	19 (19.84%)	2 (1.04%)

Table 1. Demographics (1): course, age, gender and ethnicity

Most participants (55%) were studying at level 4, with 25% at level 5 and 19% at level 6. 10% of participants identified themselves as having a disability or chronic condition, of which mental disability (31%) was most prevalent. Participants tended to enter Kingston University with A-Levels as an entry qualification (58%).

Which level are you in?			Do you consider yourself to have a disability or chronic condition?		
L4	L5	L6	Yes	No	PNTS
107 (55.44%)	49 (25.39%)	37 (19.17%)	18 (9.57%)	165 (87.77%)	5 (2.66%)

Would you identify your disability as:				First generation university student	
Physical disability	Learning disability	Mental disability	PNTS	Yes	No
8 (27.59%)	5 (17.24%)	9 (31.03%)	7 (24.14%)	90 (47.12%)	101 (52.88%)

Entry Qualifications					
A-Levels	BTEC	Foundation at Kingston University	Foundation Other	International Baccalaureate	Other
140 (58.09%)	62 (25.73%)	27 (11.20%)	3 (1.24%)	4 (1.66%)	5 (2.07%)

Table 2. Demographics (2): level of study, disability status and entry qualification of participants

Current support and the support needs of students

22% of students surveyed had accessed support services at Kingston University, of whom 47% rated the support as good, while 42% rated it as average. When asked who provided the

most support, only 2% selected the mental health and wellbeing services while 34% said that a lecturer offered the most support, followed by course leader at 28% and personal tutor at 23%. On overall support, 85% of respondents rated this as 'very helpful' or 'ok' suggesting that, on the whole, students were not unhappy with the support received across Kingston University.

Have you accessed any support during your time at university		Please rate your current university support				
Yes	No	Excellent	Good	Average	Bad	Terrible
40 (21.86%)	143 (78.14%)	14 (7.29%)	91 (47.4%)	80 (41.673%)	6 (3.13%)	1 (0.52%)

Who provides the most support at university						
Course Leader	Personal Tutor	Course Representative	Careers and Employability	Mental Health and Wellbeing	Lecturer	Other
73 (27.76%)	60 (22.81%)	5 (1.9%)	14 (5.32%)	4 (1.52%)	89 (33.84%)	18 (6.84%)

How helpful was the support your received at university				
Very Helpful	Okay	Adequate	Not Helpful	Not Helpful
27 (38.03%)	33 (46.48%)	8 (11.27%)	3 (4.23%)	0 (0%)

Table 3. Experience of support

Working students

We next wanted to explore the experience of the 51% of students who were working alongside their degree. Of these students, 23% work between 11-19 hours per week and 22% work at least twenty hours per week. The majority (61%) felt only moderately socially integrated on their course, suggesting that course cohesion is affected by their workload, and 70% felt only moderately supported on their course, indicating a need for further or more effective support. Participants suggested that streamed lectures (37%), sessions on how to revise and take notes (24%) and multiple lecture sessions to provide different timings (17%) and lectures which start late (15%) would be beneficial for them.

Do you work alongside your degree		How many hours do you work per week?			
Yes	No	0-5 Hours	6-10 Hours	11-19 Hours	20+ Hours
95 (51.35%)	90 (48.65%)	13 (12.5%)	24 (23.08%)	44 (42.31%)	23 (22.12%)

If you are a working student, how socially integrated do you feel on your course			How supported do you feel on your course		
Very integrated	Moderately integrated	Not integrated at all	Fully Supported	Moderately Supported	Not supported
30 (25.64%)	71 (60.68%)	16 (13.68%)	44 (24.31%)	126 (69.61%)	11 (6.08%)

What measures could we introduce to support you at university				
Later Lectures	Streamed Lectures	Multiple Lecture Sessions	Extra Sessions on how to revise and take notes	Other
27 (14.59%)	68 (36.76%)	32 (17.3%)	44 (23.78%)	14 (7.57%)

Table 4. Responses of working students

The next aspect was to understand students' experience of receiving support from the two academics they might interact with most frequently on their course – their personal tutor and their course leader. When asked if it was easy to speak to their personal tutor, 29% answered

'no' and when asked how supportive their course leader is, 51% responded that they are moderately supported by their course leader. These findings suggest that, in terms of meeting the needs and expectations of students, this support could be enhanced. While 62% of participants felt there was an expectation for them to be very independent compared to what was expected at further education institutions, over two thirds (77%) of students said they study independently for ten hours or less per week, significantly less than recommended by our university. This suggests that the importance of students' engaging with independent learning during their course requires reinforcement.

Is it easy to speak to your Personal Tutor			How supportive is your course leader?		
Yes		No	Very Supportive	Moderately Supportive	Not supportive at all
128 (71.11%)		52 (28.89%)	83 (47.16%)	89 (50.57%)	4 (2.27%)
What is the degree of independence required in your course compared to college/6th form			How many hours do you set aside each week for independent study			
Very independent	Moderately independent	Not independent	0-5 Hours	6-10 Hours	11-15 Hours	16+ Hours
108 (62.07%)	63 (36.21%)	3 (1.72%)	61 (33.33%)	80 (43.72%)	35 (19.13%)	7 (3.83%)

Table 5. Student perception of independence required and support offered by key academics

Qualitative data

In response to the open question 'What are the main barriers you face while on your course?', the most frequent responses were finance/expenses, travel, mental health, time, resources and organisation. Participants also had the option of responding to a free text question: 'How can we improve our current support system?' In response, participants stated a range of support measures which included recorded lectures, lecturers' offering mental health support, more workshops, enhanced signposting to support services, lecturer support and support specifically designed for commuter students.

Discussion

Project findings

This project explored how students in two faculties at Kingston University, London experienced the support available to them, with the aim of better understanding how we may enhance provision. 'Support' included university services addressing such matters as mental health and wellbeing, academic and financial concerns and disabilities; it covered also what was offered by key academics from the students' academic course. Overall findings include that most participants: had not accessed support services; found the level of support average; found that lecturers offered the most support. In addition, a focus in the questionnaire on working students revealed that most of those worked more than eleven hours per week and felt that they would benefit from such helpful means as recorded lectures and sessions on how to revise and take notes.

Current support systems in place at Kingston University, London

The finding that 78% of students had not accessed any support services may indicate a gap in awareness, accessibility or perceived usefulness of the services. This accords with research by Thomas (2012), which highlights that students often underuse institutional support services, either because they are unaware of them or perceive stigma in accessing them. Despite this, many students still approach academics directly, indicating a preference for informal, relational support over formal structures. However, what also needs to be considered is that this finding does not differentiate between students who have not felt the need to access support and those who had need of support but for some reason (stigma, lack of awareness, lack of time) did not access it. To expand the project further, we need to distinguish clearly between these two populations if we are to understand exactly why students don't use available support.

The fact that 47% rated support as 'good' and 42% as 'average' suggests that, while services are functional, they may not be meeting the full spectrum of student needs. Chetty and Kepkey (2023) emphasises that support services are linked to better academic outcomes and student retention, suggesting that Kingston University could benefit from a more integrated and visible support framework.

The reliance on lecturers (34%) and course leaders (28%) as primary sources of support reflects the importance of academic relationships. According to Kift (2009), establishing support within the curriculum and via trusted academic figures can significantly enhance student engagement and success.

Working students and support received

The data showing that 52% of students do paid work alongside their studies (with 42% working 11-19 hours per week and 22% working 20 hours or more), is consistent with national trends in student employment. McGregor (2015) found that over half of working students reported their physical health was affected, and just under half reported mental health issues associated with working while studying. This may explain why only 24% of working students felt fully supported, and 70% felt only moderately supported. Perhaps the next stage of research should be an exploration of 1) the student definition of 'being supported' and 2) what precisely leads students to deem support more or less effective.

The moderate levels of social integration (61%) among working students also reflect the time constraints and competing priorities they face. More flexible learning options seem necessary. The suggestion for streamed lectures (37%) and study skills sessions (24%) aligns with Ryan and Tilbury's (2013) belief in flexible pedagogies that accommodate diverse student lifestyles and responsibilities.

Support access and independence

That most students clearly found it easy to speak to their personal tutor is encouraging and suggests that the personal tutor system is largely accessible. Yale (2020) notes that effective personal tutoring is crucial for fostering academic confidence and a sense of belonging, but this requires adequate training and institutional support, which can be lacking. However, the fact that fewer than half the participants found their course leader 'very supportive' indicates that further research might examine whether there is a discrepancy between how staff and

students respectively regard the concept of student-facing support, particularly their expectations of the course leader role.

Regarding 'independence', most students reported needing to be 'very independent' compared to their previous study environment. While independence is a typical expectation of HE environments, Wingate (2007) argues that many students are not adequately prepared for this shift from structured learning to self-directed study. The reported study hours (44% doing 6-10 hours per week) may not be sufficient for success in many courses, suggesting a need for clearer guidance on expectations and time management.

Free text comment summary

The qualitative feedback reinforces the quantitative findings. Requests for recorded lectures, mental health support and better signposting indicate a desire for more accessible and holistic support. Jisc (2020) highlights the importance of digital learning tools, especially for commuter and working students. The call for commuter-focused support is particularly relevant in urban universities such as Kingston University, London, where many students live off-campus and may struggle with engagement.

The emphasis on lecturer support and workshops also suggests that students value practical, embedded support over standalone services. This echoes Tinto's (1993) model of student integration, which emphasises the importance of academic and social engagement in student success. The findings from this project offer valuable insights that can inform strategic improvements across the university sector, particularly in enhancing student support, engagement and academic success.

Implementing the study findings for the university sector

The key finding from this project is the underuse of formal support services, with most students not accessing them despite facing academic and personal challenges. This suggests a need for universities to improve the visibility, accessibility and perceived relevance of these services. Thomas (2012) argues that embedding support within the academic experience, rather than offering it as a separate entity, can significantly increase student engagement and retention.

The reliance on lecturers and course leaders for support highlights the importance of relational and embedded support. Kift (2009) advocates a 'transition pedagogy' that integrates academic and support services, particularly in the first year, to foster a sense of belonging and academic confidence. Training academic staff to recognise and respond to student needs and equipping them with referral pathways could enhance the consistency and effectiveness of this support.

The high proportion of working students and their moderate levels of social integration and academic support point to the need for more flexible learning environments. Ryan and Tilbury (2013) recommend adopting flexible pedagogies, such as recorded lectures and asynchronous learning, to accommodate diverse student lifestyles. These approaches are particularly beneficial for commuter and part-time students, who often face additional barriers to engagement (Jisc, 2020).

Furthermore, the findings on independent study suggest that many students are not fully prepared for the self-directed nature of HE. Wingate (2007) emphasises the importance of explicitly teaching learning strategies, such as time management, note-taking and revision

techniques, to support students in developing autonomy. Embedding these skills into the curriculum, rather than offering them as optional workshops, may ensure broader uptake and impact.

Finally, the qualitative feedback underscores the importance of holistic and inclusive support systems. Universities should consider co-designing with students better initiatives for support to ensure they are relevant, accessible and responsive to evolving needs.

Challenges faced and taking the findings forward

One of the biggest challenges in defining the perfect support measures at university is catering for the diversity of the student populations and deciphering what students mean by 'barriers'. An intersectional approach may be valuable. For example, students from a global majority background may be more likely than their peers to have additional pressures, such as responsibilities to care for older relatives and siblings. While it can be useful to offer support in the form of hybrid lectures, recording of material or flexible scheduling, these measures cannot address all needs and can bring further challenges and a sense of isolation. In terms of barriers, this is also an issue that needs further reflection in future studies. Barriers at university can refer to something as basic as data poverty (which could be rectified with support in the form of data packages and/or loan laptops) or to something as complex as serious mental health problems which require intervention by the mental health and wellbeing team. A strength of the study was the use of student researchers to encourage honest responses from their peers; an academic-only investigation would probably not have worked as well. However, in a future study, refinements could be made to the questions and response options to get a more detailed picture of the student perspective. By implementing these evidence-based strategies, institutions can work towards more supportive, flexible and engaging learning environments that promote student success across diverse populations.

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