

ANXIETY AND ITS EFFECT ON UNIVERSITY CHOICES



TSR

MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

The TSR mission includes a commitment to “fly the flag for students” - understanding the issues that matter to them most, and making sure decision makers in government and Higher Education hear them.

We see students discussing the realities of mental health and the support available each day on on TSR and decided to survey over 3,000 students to determine how widespread anxiety, stress and depression are for applicants, and how they feel about the support available to them.

With 26% of applicants experiencing frequent anxiety issues that severely impact all areas of their life, and 41% of current students strongly ranking the process of going to university as the most anxious they have ever felt, we ask what this means for HE leadership.

This isn't solely a pastoral and welfare issue, in recruitment terms, 35% said anxiety strongly influenced their choice of university.

“I didn't apply to the University of Cambridge because I didn't think I was good enough (retrospectively, I probably had a decent chance), and I didn't want to go through the interview process.”

We pose two questions: is your mental health provision sufficient to help those in need? And does it offer the reassurance that will **make young people feel confident applying to you?**



KEY FINDINGS

Of those suffering from anxiety...

20%

say it is putting them off going to university altogether



35%

say it has strongly influenced their choice of university



25%

say it has impacted their choice of course



75%

of students report loss of sleep



78%

struggle to concentrate on studies



61%

experience panic attacks



The transition period from school or college to higher education is challenging for students suffering with anxiety.

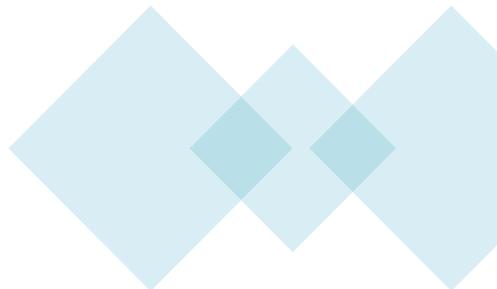
“The stress of the course, the inadequacy of the support at my university, the stress of not getting along with housemates, feeling like everyone struggles less with money than I do.”

“My usual anxiety around how I’m doing academically and with people around me has been exacerbated by living away from my support network at home (old friends and family) and having to manage all the day-to-day stuff like doing all my own shopping and bills.”

“Being a student who does not drink or go clubbing - I felt like I was missing out by not joining my course mates when they went out during Freshers’ Week.”

Our research demonstrated other factors driving anxiety at university include:

- Pressure to pass and do well
- Challenging or unenjoyable courses
- High tuition fees and worry of debt
- Relocating and high expectations of a new city
- Finding a job post university



FROM RESULTS DAY TO FRESHERS

The pressure of making that final decision and the stress of actioning change can have a major influence on anxiety. Some of the key worries for university freshers are:

- *“The course will be super difficult”*
- *“I’m not going to make friends”*
- *“Will people accept me for me?”*
- *“I’m going to be broke”*
- *“I’m going to get lonely”*
- *“If I get really anxious how will I cope?”*

What can your university do to make students feel more at ease during this transition period? Try revisiting your student journey and analyse if you’re doing enough before your freshers start.

Ensure you’re using your CRM to its full potential and connect with students using more personalised communication. This allows you to target students by variables, such as subject and accommodation.

Other great ways to showcase university life is through case studies and testimonials. Students want to hear from their peers so use these to demonstrate how most freshers share similar anxious feelings but are still able to thrive in their university environment. Help freshers feel part of your community before they have even arrived.

IMPACTING THE INDUSTRY

The increasing awareness of mental health has already made waves in the sector with the university application process evolving. UCAS has changed their application form to support mental health, enabling students to disclose any difficulties before they start so you know they need access to relevant additional support.

With this knowledge, we're going to look at how institutions can differentiate themselves to aid recruitment and retention.



RETENTION AND STUDENT SUPPORT

Only **19% of students surveyed felt there is enough support provided to help students cope with their transition to university**, so where are institutions going wrong?

Is there simply not enough support? Do students want more options? Or are universities struggling to get the most use out of their mental health services? Students took to TSR to share their experience with university mental health services, one user stated:

“At my first uni the less they said about it, the better. I wasn’t told I was eligible for disability support/DSA.

I had no idea there was a disability office for my uni (as naïve as that sounds), where it was, or that I was eligible for it. So, I dealt with other people instead.”

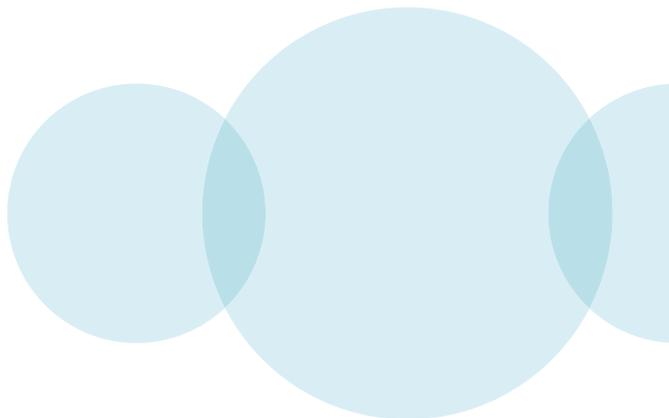
Accessibility is key here. Consider the way you are making your services known, provide the relevant sign posts, and practice open and honest marketing to encourage students to seek support.

If students aren't using your services, where are they turning to for advice? We asked students 'What was the most useful support you received at university?' Some of the responses included:

- *“My friends assuring me that they have had moments of doubt and anxiety also”*
- *“Parents and family”*
- *“Counselling”*
- *“Internet and online advice forums like TSR”*
- *“One-to-ones - anyone listening”*
- *“Teacher support”*

We found students are becoming increasingly reliant on their friends for support. So, if more students are craving peer interaction, consider how you can work with your Student Union to review your current provision.

Do you have a student helpline or nightline? Is there anything you can do to advance these offerings or help spread the word they are available? This could be crucial to raising awareness and getting the most out of the services you pay for.



RECRUITMENT – IS FLAWED THE NEW FLAWLESS?

Has the success of slick and twisted marketing fizzled out? In a world of targeted technology and easily available research, the outdated tactic of pushy spam and sleazy messaging has been trumped by brand honesty, building reassurance and trust.

With **41% of students strongly ranking the process of going to university as the most anxious they have ever felt**, it's important to understand and support how students are feeling during this journey. Honesty is an ongoing theme for more young people; gone are the days of winning your audience over with fake smiling Shutterstock images. Millennials are tech savvy, smart and self-informed.

So, ensure you are giving students a genuine picture of what life is like at your university. Build reassurance and advocacy through honest messaging and relatable imagery. Speaking up about hard to address topics like mental health encourages an open and trustworthy relationship right from the start.



INHALE
THE FUTURE,
EXHALE
THE PAST.

FLAWED IS THE NEW FLAWLESS IN PRACTICE: 2017 GENERAL ELECTION

As the dust settles on the 2017 General Election we begin to dissect the youth vote, what it means and where it came from.

We were faced with a narrative that suggested Corbyn was entirely unelectable and young people were so disenfranchised and apathetic that they simply wouldn't vote. Yet we woke up on 9th of July to stories of a youth turnout of c.70%, with around 70% voting Labour.

Our survey of over 15,000 young people on TSR put Corbyn's Labour party on 75% of our audience's vote. Our busy political threads also show a real appetite for political engagement, with students making over 17,000 forum posts during the campaigning period.

WHY CORBYN?

| *“People want an honest, principled leader, and Corbyn is both”*

There was a perception that Corbyn wasn't polished enough to be successful in altering the youth vote, that his otherness and non-conformity put him at a disadvantage compared to 'slicker' politicians.

We believe that Corbyn's success reflects our longstanding claim that “flawed is the new flawless”, that young people respond to real people, not idealised and sanitised versions of reality. Suggesting young people wouldn't respond to Corbyn because he doesn't eat meat and they don't like his coat was patronising and naïve, and was ultimately proven to not be the case.

Our advice to the sector is that the youth market requires authenticity and honesty. In a world of increased anxiety, perfection fails to resonate and actively alienates young people.



CASE STUDY: ASOS MOBILISE THE YOUTH MARKET

“Flawed is the new flawless” recently gained traction with big youth brand ASOS, who have embraced the concept too with their use of untouched photos of models on their fashion retail site.

The support of this body positivity movement has been praised by its audience and has gained traction with youth consumers. Some taking to social media to share their delight for the support of ‘natural is normal’.

This newfound authenticity is reassuring and empowering to millennials, who have made it clear they empathise with vulnerability, imperfections and insecurities. Mobilise your audience and inspire engagement, interaction and loyalty through honesty.

Search “ASOS untouched” for more details.

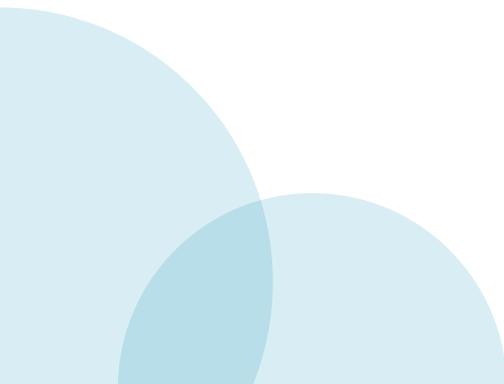


UNDERSTANDING YOUR AUDIENCE

Generation 'snowflake' has become a popular media term, portraying millennials as weak, easily offended and sensitive. This negative conceptualisation of youth is not only inaccurate, but deeply unhelpful to marketers.

Whether through our research, or through election results, we keep seeing evidence of young people fighting back. They are resilient, ambitious and curious. They shouldn't be characterised as timid or helpless; as ever the next generation want to move mountains. Our research repeatedly shows millennials from all backgrounds to be aspirational, altruistic and extremely well-informed.

Our advice to the sector, based on our understanding of our audience, is not to underestimate their drive and resilience, or downplay their fears. Reassure young people with depictions of flawed brilliance, and engage and inspire them by putting them front and centre. Capture their aspirations, share empowering stories of motivational, flawed people and issue a call to arms that resonates with their fears as well as their dreams.



ABOUT THE STUDENT ROOM

The Student Room is the largest, most useful and best-loved online student community in the UK. With over 1.9 million members, students turn to us first for information, advice and support on their educational journey and life around learning.

That means we're uniquely privileged to connect educators to switched-on young people actively seeking answers and meaningful connections.

WANT TO FIND OUT MORE?



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