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Healthcare Intervention Trials
in Ireland Network

Could the Mental Health of Students be Linked to the Subject they Study?

Dr Margaret McLafferty

Interreg
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European Regional Development Fund

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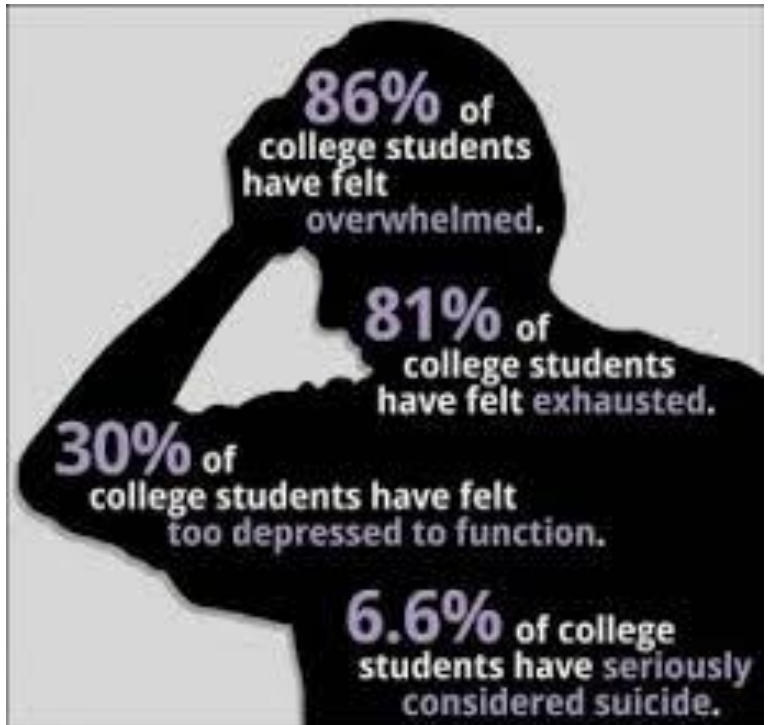
Higher Education Network
Mental health: a university crisis

It's time for universities to put student mental health first

‘There is a tsunami of third-level students with mental health problems’

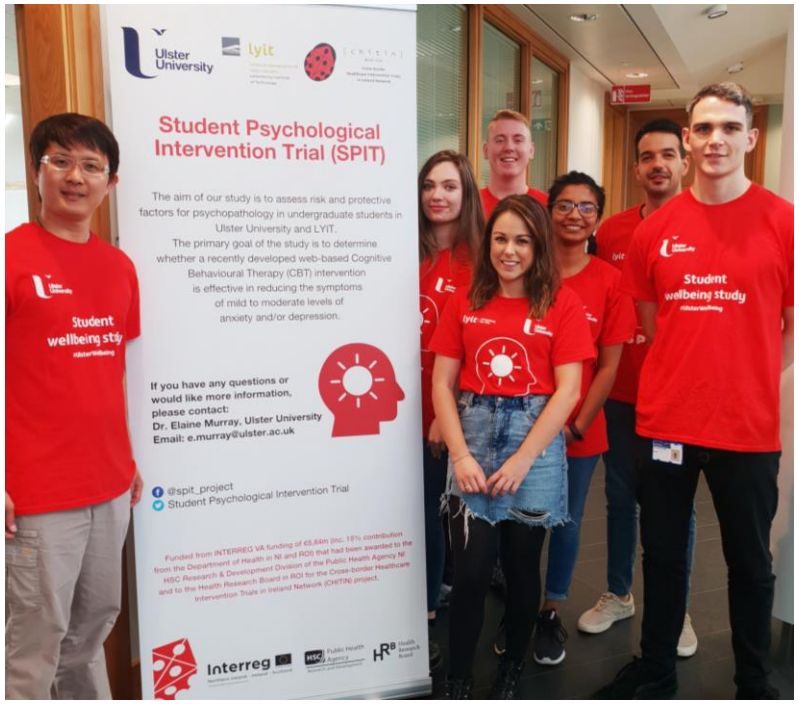
Demand for counselling in colleges has jumped 40% in the past decade



SPIT Project
Overview

Student Psychological Intervention Trial (SPIT):

- Cross-border project conducted at UU and LYIT funded by Chitin.



Ulster University

lyit | Institiúid Teicneolaíochta Leitir Ceanainn
Letterkenny Institute of Technology

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SPIT Project - Methodology

First year students

Saliva sample Oragene OG-500

Online survey WMH CIDI

Year 1 – Sept 2019

1,984 consented

1,829 fully completed responses

72% female, 28% male.

Average age 21

Year 2 – Sept-Dec 2020

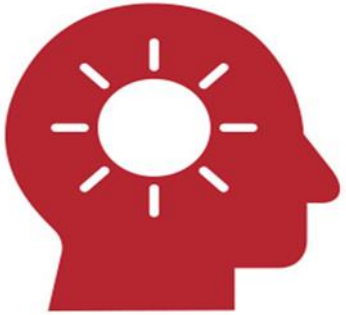
Follow up survey; 939 fully completed responses

Year 3 – Sept-Dec 2021

Follow up survey; 739 fully completed responses

SPIT Project

Mental Health and Wellbeing



Year 1

- **15.7%** depression
- **8.6%** panic disorder
- **3.9%** bipolar disorder
- **11.3%** alcohol use disorder
- **11.6%** drug abuse or dependence

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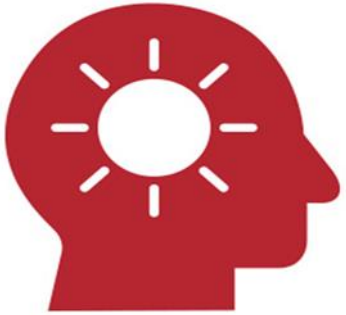
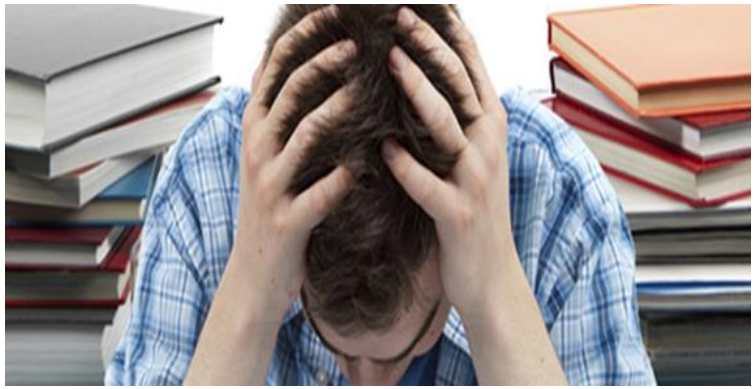
SPIT Project – Phase 1

Suicidal Behaviour



Did you ever

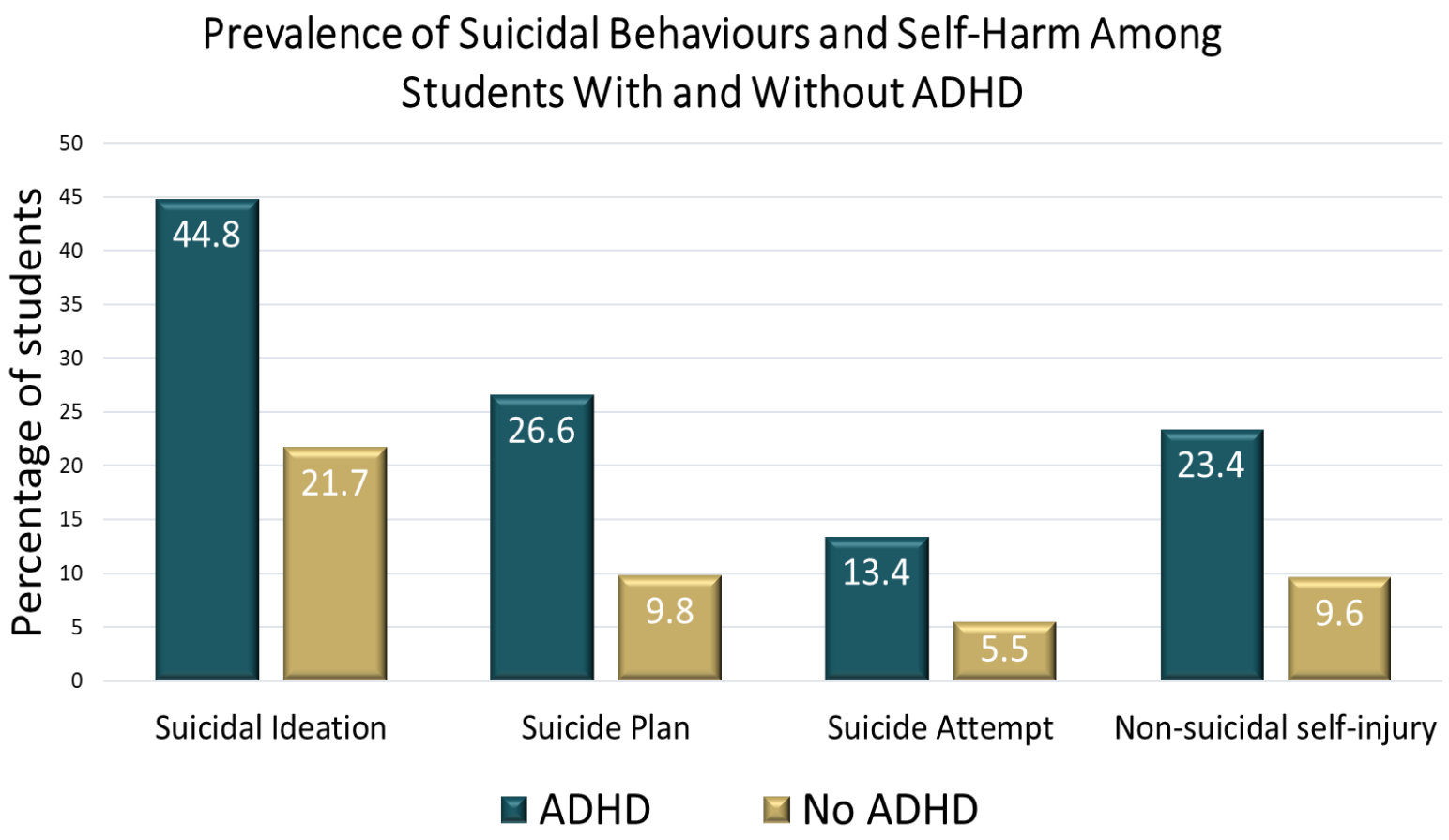
- have thoughts of killing yourself? **28.0%**
- make a suicide plan? **14.3%**
- engage in self-harm? **13.4%**
- attempt suicide? **7.7%**

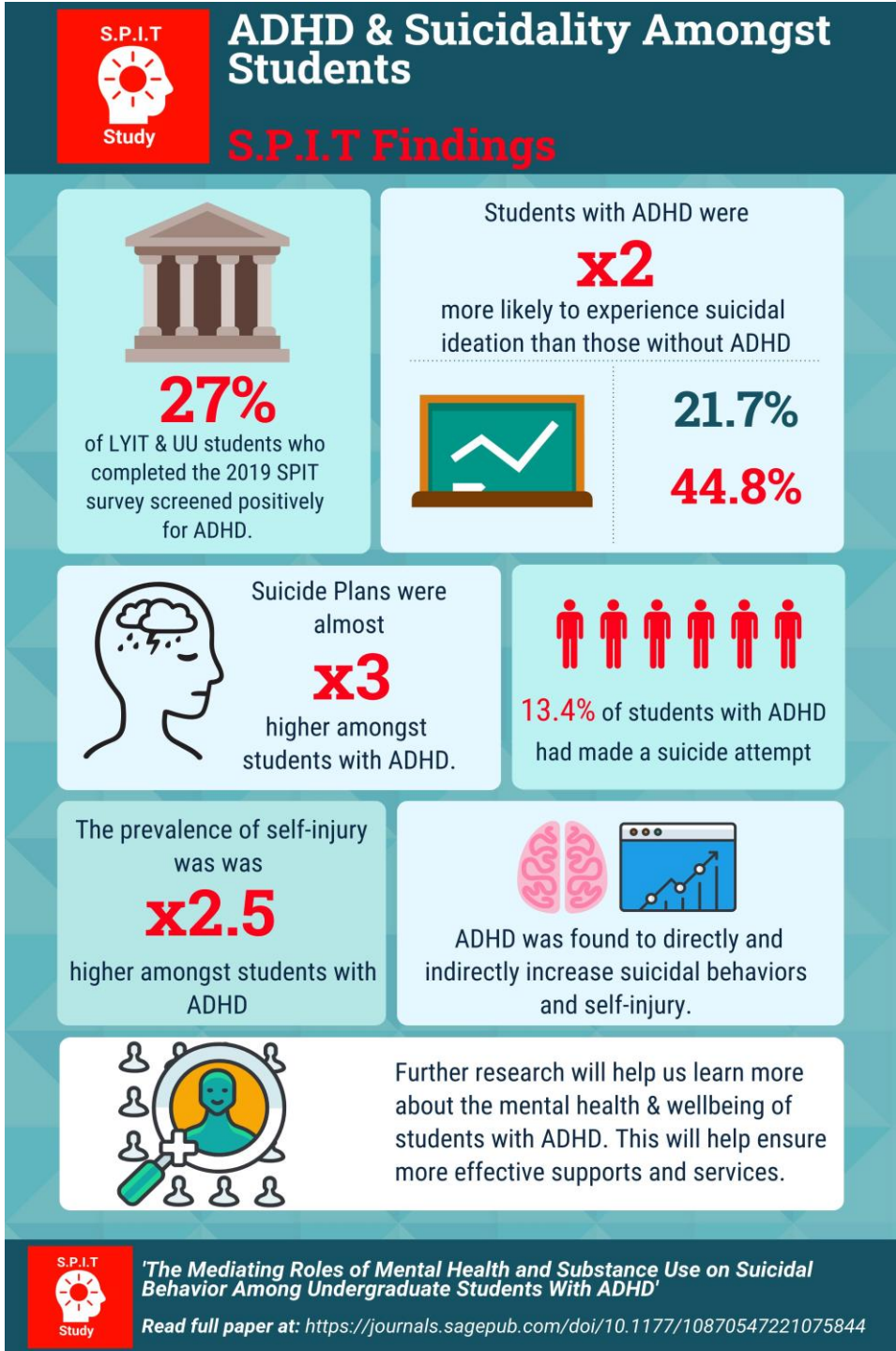


144 student participants triggered a high-risk alert and were contacted by Student Wellbeing or an accredited counsellor

SPIT Project – Phase 1

ADHD and suicidal behaviour





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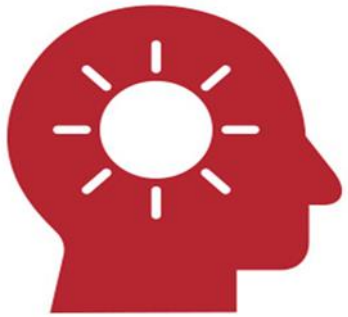
Risk Factors



Gender

Females – higher depression and self harm

Males – higher drug dependence

Age

Over 21 – approx. 2.5 time more likely to have depression, drug dependence, suicide plan and attempt (not self-harm)

Sexuality

Non-heterosexual students – 2 to 3 time more likely to have a range of mental heath problems

Courses

Art – depression, bipolar disorder, self-harm, suicide attempt

Law – alcohol abuse, suicidal ideation and suicide plans

Psychology – panic disorder, social anxiety

PLOS ONE

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Variations in psychological disorders, suicidality, and help-seeking behaviour among college students from different academic disciplines

Margaret McLafferty[1], Natasha Brown[2], John Brady[3], Jonathon McLaughlin[1], Rachel McHugh[4], Caoimhe Ward[1], Louise McBride[2], Anthony J. Bjourson[1], Siobhan M. O'Neill[4], Colum P. Walsh[5,6], Elaine K. Murray[1]*

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Abstract

- **Students are starting courses with pre-existing mental health problems**

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Prevalence of 12-month mental health problems, ADHD, substance abuse, suicidal behaviour and help seeking reported by students from different courses

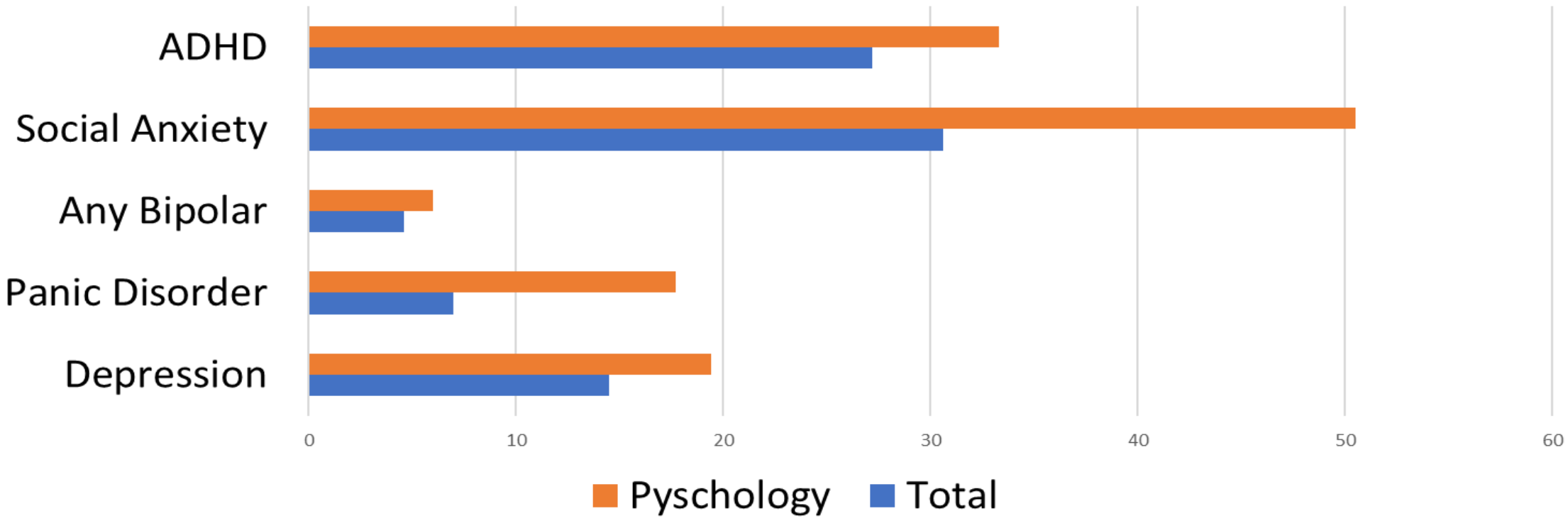
	Total		Psychology		Mental Health Nursing		Nursing		Business		Art		Law		Engineering		Computing		
Participants	1829		84		65		255		99		144		84		83		135		
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	χ 2
Depression	**268**	***14.5***	**19**	***19.4***	**4**	***5.6***	**24**	***10.2***	**13**	***11.9***	**30**	***19.6***	**15**	***17.4***	**7**	***8.8***	**24**	***18.0***	**18.902 ****
Panic Disorder	**145**	***7.0***	**16**	***17.7***	**7**	***11.1***	**7**	***7.7***	**8**	***8.4***	**19**	***11.8***	**9**	***10.6***	**1**	***0.6***	**7**	***3.7***	**41.170 *****
Any Bipolar	**84**	***4.6***	**5**	***6.0***	**3**	***3.9***	**4**	***1.5***	**5**	***5.1***	**12**	***8.3***	**3**	***3.8***	**0**	***0***	**7**	***5.4***	**16.729 ***
Social Anxiety	**576**	***30.6***	**40**	***50.5***	**18**	***24.4***	**46**	***16.1***	**33**	***31.7***	**66**	***46.5***	**28**	***31.7***	**19**	***24.5***	**41**	***30.9***	**53.699 *****
ADHD	**502**	***27.2***	**27**	***33.3***	**18**	***28.6***	**53**	***19.8***	**24**	***21.8***	**53**	***34.9***	**27**	***32.1***	**18**	***19.6***	**37**	***27.9***	**17.586 ****
Alcohol abuse	201	*11.3*	4	*6.6*	7	*10.2*	20	*6.5*	14	*15.3*	11	*8.4*	13	*16.1*	9	*11.0*	15	*9.8*	11.842
Drug abuse	98	*6.0*	3	*8.0*	3	*5.3*	7	*2.3*	10	*10.5*	10	*6.6*	6	*8.7*	6	*8.1*	10	*6.6*	12.329
Suicide Ideation	**320**	***17.2***	**19**	***22.3***	**10**	***15.7***	**27**	***11.5***	**18**	***15.5***	**34**	***20.3***	**21**	***25.8***	**14**	***15.0***	**26**	***20.2***	**14.691 ***
Suicide plan	**133**	***7.4***	**7**	***9.5***	**5**	***7.8***	**8**	***3.9***	**5**	***4.3***	**14**	***8.1***	**12**	***14.9***	**6**	***7.3***	**12**	***9.5***	**14.591***
Suicide attempt	38	*1.9*	2	*2.1*	2	*3.5*	2	*1.4*	1	*0.8*	8	*4.9*	4	*3.9*	0	*0*	3	*2.2*	9.955
Self-harm	97	*4.9*	5	*4.9*	2	*3.5*	3	*1.2*	6	*5.0*	10	*5.4*	3	*3.9*	4	*3.8*	6	*4.4*	6.998
Currently in treatment	**103**	***5.4***	**9**	***11.1***	**6**	***11.3***	**5**	***2.1***	**6**	***5.2***	**19**	***11.0***	**4**	***4.8***	**3**	***2.6***	**10**	***8.4***	**19.277 ****
Felt they may have needed treatment	**191**	***11.3***	**16**	***21.7***	**5**	***7.7***	**21**	***7.9***	**9**	***10.9***	**19**	***17.6***	**12**	***16.5***	**1**	***1.3***	**14**	***10.3***	**29.174 *****

Note: n = unweighted, % = weighted, χ 2 tests show significant differences in prevalence rates

SPIT Project – Phase 1

Psychology students

Prevalence of 12 month mental health problems



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Press releases

By Robbie Meredith

BBC News NI Education Correspondent

A student's risk of mental ill-health, drug or alcohol abuse could be linked to the subject they study.

New research said many students begin university or college with pre-existing mental health problems.

The findings are from Ulster University (UU) and the Atlantic Technological University (ATU) in Letterkenny.

The report also suggested some students may be attracted to subjects "such as psychology or law, due to negative early life experiences".

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'We want struggling students in Northern Ireland to come to us and get help'

A major new scientific study has put the spotlight on student mental health here

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Student mental health risk 'varies by course'

By Fiona McIntyre

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Help seeking

Prior to starting college:

- **23.1%** received counselling previously
- **13.1%** took medication for an emotional problem
- Only 5.4% of participants were currently receiving treatment
- 11.3% felt they may have needed treatment (21.7% psychology students)

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Help Seeking

Students from some courses reported that they were afraid that seeking help might do harm to their college or professional career - psychology (22.9%) nursing (22.8%), mental health nursing (20.7%) and law (20.3%)

Main Reasons for not seeking professional help

- Wanted to handle the problem on their own
- Talked to family or friends about it
- Were unsure where to get help

Addressing the Issue

Student Wellbeing Programme

A pilot study of a student-led peer support wellbeing programme

Ulster University have adopted several initiatives to help address the transition to university, including Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS).

- Semester 1 – focused on academic skills
- Semester 2 - include wellbeing materials and activities

The main **objectives** of this pilot study were to enhance the **wellbeing and resilience** of students.

-resilience, optimism, mental wellbeing (scores increased)

-depression anxiety and stress (scores decreased)

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Randomised Control Trial

Aim:

- Test the efficacy of an online, CBT-based, guided intervention to reduce symptoms of mild/moderate levels of anxiety/depression.

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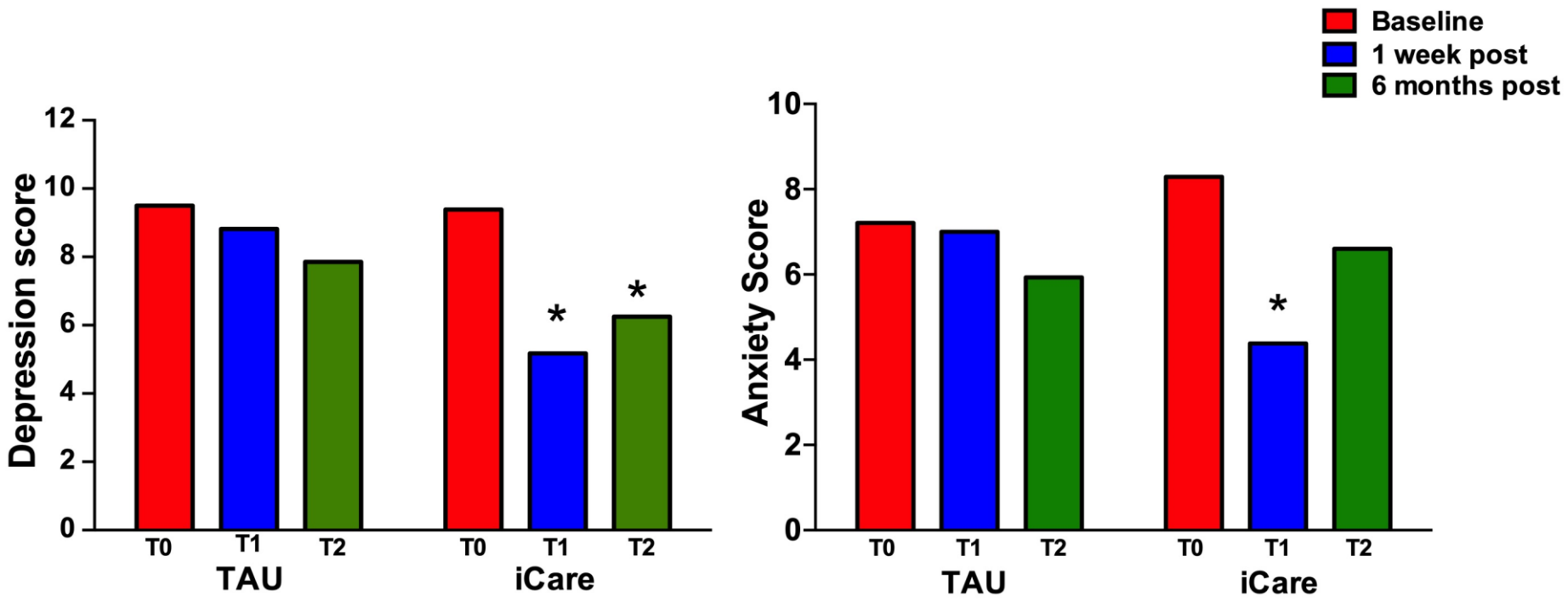
Time 1 (pre), Time 2 (post) and Time 3 (6 month follow up)



Decrease in depression scores remained significant 6 months post intervention but decrease in anxiety scores were no longer significant.

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Irish Student Wellbeing & ADHD Project
(I-SWAP)

Students living with ADHD

Mental Health and Wellbeing Survey

Focus groups exploring the transition to university

Mental Health Literacy and Wellbeing Sessions

- 1-hour sessions - 8 weeks
- Weekly evaluations
- Focus groups with participants
- Interviews with facilitators

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Recommendations

- Many students are coming to university with a range of mental health problems.
- It is important for educators to be aware of such issues and for colleges to provide information and support to students at risk.
- When promoting help-seeking behavior among those in the health professions it is important to be mindful of their fears.
- Tailored interventions and prevention strategies may be beneficial to address the needs of students from different academic disciplines.

SPIT Project

Publications to date

- McLafferty, M., Brown, N., M., McHugh, R., Ward, C., Stevenson, A., McBride, L., Brady, J., Bjourson, A.J., O'Neill, S.M, Walsh, C., & Murray, E. (2021). *Depression, Anxiety and Suicidal Behaviour Among College Students: Comparisons Pre-COVID and During the Pandemic. Psychiatry Research Communications, 1(2).* doi: 10.1016/j.psycom.2021.100012
- Ward, C., McLafferty, M., McLaughlin, J., McHugh, R., McBride, L., Brady, J., Bjourson, A.J., Walsh, C., O'Neill, S.M., & Murray, E.K. (2022). Suicidal behaviours and mental health disorders among students commencing college. *Psychiatry Research, 307,* 114314. doi: 10.1016/j.psychres.2021.114314
- Brown, N., McLafferty, M., O'Neill, S. M., McHugh, R., Ward, C., McBride, L., Brady, J., Bjourson, A. J., Walsh, C. P., & Murray, E. K. (2022). The Mediating Roles of Mental Health and Substance Use on Suicidal Behavior Among Undergraduate Students With ADHD. *Journal of Attention Disorders*, 10870547221075844. doi: 10.1177/10870547221075844
- McLafferty, M., Brown, N., Brady, J., McLaughlin, J., McHugh, R., Ward, C., McBride, L., Bjourson, A.J., O'Neill, S, Walsh, C.P., & Murray, E.K. (2022). Variations in psychological disorders, suicidality, and help-seeking behaviour among college students from different academic disciplines. *PLoS ONE* 17(12): e0279618. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0279618

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