



lyit

Institiúid Teicneolaíochta  
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Letterkenny Institute  
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**Project Title** A retrospective study to examine the impact of pre-existing mental health conditions on Higher Education students in terms of progression, academic attainment and college life.

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**Keywords:** Mental Health, pre-existing mental health conditions, support services, Mental health awareness, vulnerable student groups, mental health promotion, empowerment, Covid-19 pandemic, students experiences.

### **Project Summary**

Elevated rates of mental health problems have been reported among college students globally. For example, the World Mental Health International College Student Initiative (WMH-ICS) found that Northern Ireland had one of the highest percentages of students having any lifetime (39.1%) and 12-month (36.9%) mental health disorder out of eight countries included in the study. As a follow-up to this study, the cross-border, Student Psychological Interventional Trial (SPIT) commenced in September 2019. First year undergraduate students from Ulster University (UU) and Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT) were recruited. Overall, 1828 students fully completed a comprehensive online survey (1,468 UU, 360 LYIT) which used the WMH-CIDI to identify students who met the criteria for mental health disorders in accordance with DSM-V criteria. A follow-up survey was conducted at the start of year 2 and a further survey is planned for Autumn 2021. Analyses revealed that many students commenced college with pre-existing mental health problems, while others developed disorders for the first time. HEIs are required to provide student data in relation to Progression rates annually. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) produce an annual report in terms of student progression and related data. Data is examined in terms of gender, age, domiciliary group origin and Social Economic groups. Pre-existing health or mental health conditions/problems are not taken into consideration but may well be a significant variable why student do not progress or drop out of their chosen college programme. The aim of this current SPIT research is to identify factors that can trigger psychological disorders or episodes, such as age, gender, sexuality and student status, and to investigate any differences in occurrence of mental health problems, such as lifetime depression or anxiety disorders and suicidal behaviour, and help seeking behaviour, between students at a university in Northern Ireland (UU) and students from a college in the ROI (LYIT).

## **Aim of study**

The aim of this research study is to explore the experiences of current student cohorts in both UU and LYIT in terms of impact of pre-existing mental health conditions on their progression, ability to achieve academic attainment, impact on college life and to ascertain views of student's experiences of the covid-19 pandemic across the two Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). A number of research objectives have been identified including:

- To ascertain how mental health has affected students in terms of progression or non-progression since commencing their course.
- To identify how their pre-existing mental health condition has impacted on academic attainment.
- To establish if there is a relationship between students with a pre-existing mental health conditions and non-progression rates registered on particular courses.
- To ascertain the impact, if any, of the Covid-19 pandemic on students existing mental health or ability to progress on their chosen course.
- To identify the feelings and experiences of students before, during and post the Covid-19 pandemic in two HEIs.
- To provide recommendations to stakeholders including HEI providers how academic managers, student support services, interventions and policies in students commencing college with pre-existing mental health conditions in terms of minimising non-progression or drop-out rates especially for vulnerable student cohorts.

## **Methodology**

The methodology proposed is a mixed methods approach. As part of the SPIT project, available data which dates pre, mid and post Covid 19 pandemic in relation to students registered on courses at UU and LYIT since 2019 with pre-determined mental health conditions. It is envisaged that by collecting further data on existing students this will help to triangulate the data from the SPIT project in a more qualitative manner. Whilst the Covid-19 pandemic may have impacted on students' progression or non-progression, it may also have contributed to exacerbation of pre-existing mental health condition due to on-line learning, lack of social engagement and virtual platform prelogical approaches. The study will consist of two phases. The first phase will be a quantitative approach using a questionnaire to the 2019-2020 intake, and identify how pre-existing mental health conditions has impacted on their progression, academic attainment and quality of college life. As the onset of the pandemic occurred since the cohort were registered in 2019, the questionnaire will evaluate the impact of COVID19 in terms of their mental health also.

Access and ethical approval would need to be obtained via the Ethics Committee and management of the selected UU and LYIT. Students will be informed of the study and asked to sign consent forms with assured of confidentiality and GDPR. The questionnaire will consist of Likert type scale including some open-ended questions. Whilst it is determined that a questionnaire is best suited to ascertain data and the experiences of college students, the quantitative data gleaned from the survey obtained may be deemed sufficient due to the sensitivity of interviewing individuals for the purpose of the study. This data can be analysed using a software package for statistical analysis (SPSS) and answers from the open-ended questions will be retrieved manually, coded and put into themes using Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis Framework (2006) or with NVIVO software package. A second qualitative phase approach will be used where the researcher will undertake semi-structured interviews with students. This purposive sample will include approximately 10-15 participants or until data saturation occurs from both HEIs. For the purpose of this study, the student will be registered or have deregistered from the course at UU or LYIT since 2019 intake. As little information is known at present about the experiences of why students deregister and/or drop out, they may not be a homogenous group and the experiences may differ depending on age, location, pre-existing mental health conditions, or other additional learning/health needs, thus it is felt that these methods are best suited. Qualitative data will be retrieved manually, coded and themed using Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis Framework (2006). Interviews will be conducted via telephone or online platforms.

### **Candidate Qualifications/Requirements**

- An honours (first or second class) in Nursing Studies degree (level 8) or related Healthcare degree (level 8) from a QQI awarding body.
- Applicants should be eligible to register with NMBI, CORU or relevant body.
- Have relevant or related experience/interest in the area of mental health and wellbeing.