

Higher Education Monitor 2023

# **Mental health** and **substance use** among students



This fact sheet explains some of the findings of the 2023 Monitor on Mental Health and Substance Use among Higher Education Students. Presented here are the results of the second survey. The first survey took place in 2021. For a comprehensive description and discussion of the findings, plus recommendations, please refer to the accompanying [report](#).

### **Key findings**

The importance of investing in student well-being remains unchanged. The findings seem to indicate that students' mental health has improved in some respects over the past two years. However, a significant share of students are experiencing mental health issues. Although frequent cannabis use and recent use of psychedelics has gone down relative to 2021, vaping on a daily or regular basis is growing in popularity. A sizeable share of students are also excessive or heavy drinkers, with no indications that alcohol use is declining. Most students with mental health issues are receiving help or counselling within or outside their educational institution. The findings point to potential avenues for promoting student mental health and preventing or reducing risky substance use. This will require actions targeting both individuals and their environments.

### **About the methodology**

The study involved a survey among 32,558 students at 24 educational institutions (11 research universities and 13 universities of applied sciences) in April and May 2023. This represents 6.5% of students enrolled at these institutions. Students received an email from their institution asking them to complete a digital questionnaire. Though weighting was used to correct for non-response in the analyses, this does not entirely eliminate possible skewing in the results due to a selective response. This survey therefore gives only an impression of mental health and substance use among higher education students, rather than a precise picture. The survey also sheds light on changes relative to 2021 (first survey) and on how mental health and substance use may be associated with a variety of student characteristics.

# Mental health

## Some of the students are doing reasonably well in terms of mental health, but some do have mental health issues

Table 1 shows the state of mental health among respondents. Mental health was measured on nine aspects. The findings show that a share of students enjoy fair to good mental health: one-third of students score their life with a 7, and more than a quarter with an 8 or higher. On the other hand, a significant share of students are experiencing mental health issues. Of the respondents, 44% had experienced depression/anxiety symptoms in the past four weeks, with the majority experiencing mild to moderate symptoms (34%) and 9% experiencing severe symptoms.

## Half of students experience impairment due to mental health issues

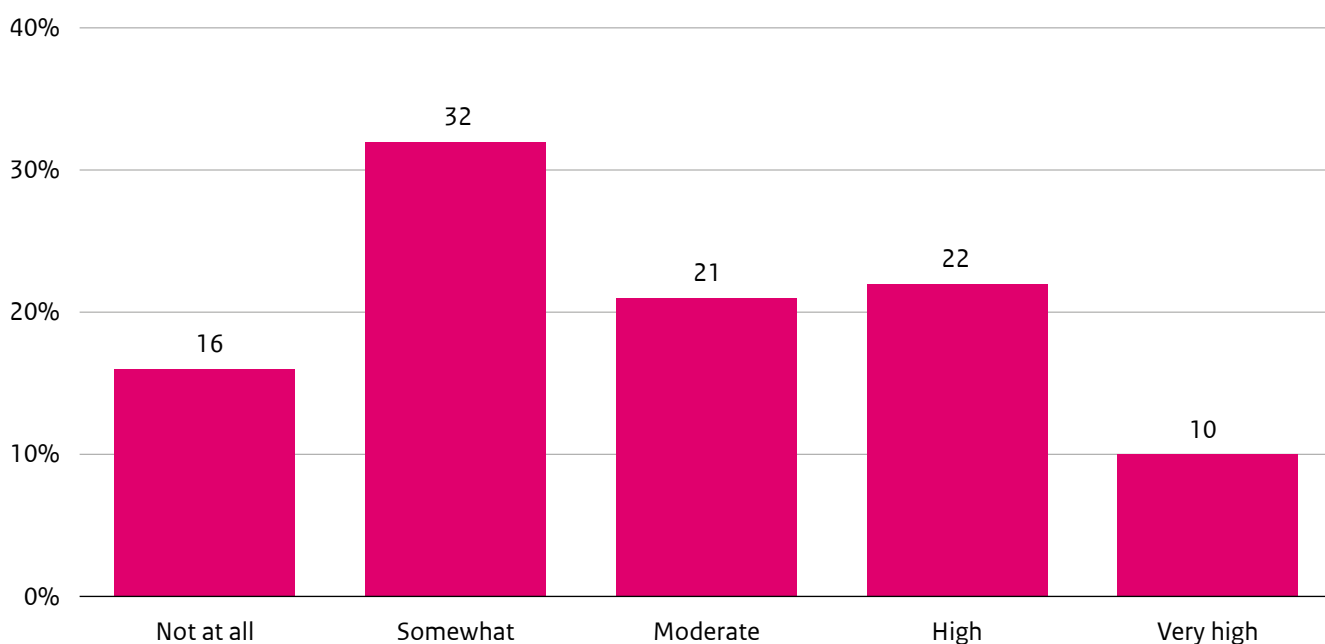
Half of the respondents reported that mental health issues had caused them to experience moderate (21%), high (22%) or very high (10%) impairment in important aspects of

their lives (study, work, social life or personal relationships) during the past 12 months (see Figure 1).

## In 2023, students' mental health appears to have improved in some aspects

A comparison between 2021 and 2023 shows that symptoms of emotional exhaustion, a frequent sense of performance pressure and feelings of loneliness are less prevalent in 2023 than they were in 2021 (see Table 1). Most other aspects of mental health also show some improvement. On their own, these differences are not large enough to indicate meaningful progress. The 2021 survey was conducted during the coronavirus pandemic. In 2023, just under half of the respondents said they are no longer experiencing impacts on mental health (41%) and loneliness (46%) from the coronavirus pandemic. Apart from the ending of the pandemic, these improvements may also be attributable to a larger number of students seeking help and a heightened focus on the mental health of young adults.

**Figure 1.** Extent to which respondents experienced impairment\* due to mental health issues, such as gloomy mood, anxiety complaints, worry, stress or nervousness in the past 12 months (n=32,558)



\* Impairment in study, work, social life or personal relationships.

**Table 1.** Mental health among respondents in 2021 and 2023

Aspects of mental health	2021 (n=28,375)	2023 (n=32,534)
Life satisfaction (M, sd)**	6.0 (1.7)	6.7 (1.4)
Average to high resilience (%)	51	54
Flourishing (above-average positive mental health) (%)	18	20
Depression/anxiety symptoms (%)	51	44
Emotional exhaustion symptoms (%)	68	59*
Tired of living (occasionally to often) (%)	25	26
High to very high stress (%)	62	56
Frequent performance pressure (%)	54	44*
Somewhat to very lonely (%)	79	62*

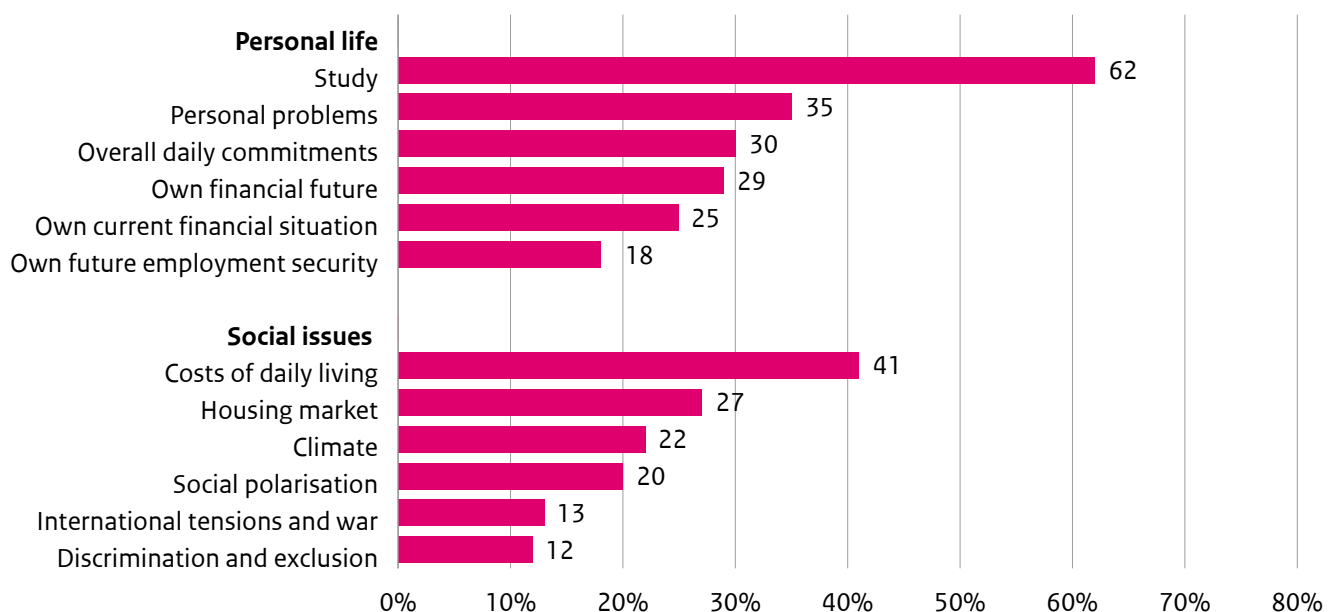
\* The difference between the two years is large enough to indicate meaningful progress.

\*\* M=mean, sd = standard deviation.

### Study and costs of daily living are important stressors for students

Students who reported having experienced at least some degree of stress in the past four weeks were asked about different sources of stress. Figure 2 shows that study and costs of daily living are the main stressors.

**Figure 2.** Percentage of respondents who experienced high to very high stress due to stressors in the past four weeks (more than one answer possible). Based on students who experienced at least some degree of stress in the past four weeks (n=31,358)



## Several factors are associated with students' mental health

Among the respondents, a range of background characteristics are associated with mental health. Women, students who identify as neither male nor female, international students and full-time students report poorer mental health. Associations were also found for other characteristics. For example, having good to very good social support, enough time for relaxation and energising activities, and a part-time job of 16 hours or more per week are associated with better mental health. Poorer mental health is associated with experiencing social problems and stressful events in the preceding 12 months. Risky social media use and gaming, frequent sleeping problems, and problems impeding concentration, reading or arithmetic are also associated with poorer mental health.

## Most students with mental health issues are receiving counselling or help within or outside their educational institution

Of the respondents who had experienced mental health issues in the past 12 months, around two-thirds had received counselling or help for this from someone within and/or outside their educational institution (see Table 2). One-third of the students with mental health issues had received counselling or help within their institution. Two-thirds of these students were satisfied (50%) to very satisfied (17%) with this.

Compared to 2021, more respondents with mental health issues had received counselling or help from someone either within or outside their institution in 2023. This may be due to the end of the coronavirus pandemic (making it easier to contact counsellors and care providers) and a heightened focus on the mental health of young adults.

**Table 2.** Counselling or help received in the past 12 months for mental health issues, 2021 versus 2023

Received counselling or help	2021 (n=21,217) %	2023 (n=17,017) %
From counsellors or care providers <i>within</i> the institution	23	33*
From counsellors or care providers <i>outside</i> the institution (professional support/care provider or someone in immediate social circle)	43	55*
From counsellors or care providers <i>within</i> and/or <i>outside</i> the institution (professional support/care provider or someone in immediate social circle)	51	65*

\* The difference between the two years is large enough to indicate a meaningful increase.

## Reasons why students with mental health issues do not receive counselling or help

The main reason for not receiving counselling or help is that students said they wanted to solve their problems themselves (almost 6 in 10 students). About 4 in 10 said they did not need counselling or help and almost 2 in 10 cited shame as a reason.

# Substance use

## Excessive and heavy use of alcohol is by far the most prevalent

Table 3 shows substance use among respondents. Alcohol is the most commonly used substance and was used by the majority (85%) of students in the past 12 months. A fair share of students drink considerable amounts. 10% of respondents qualify as excessive drinkers<sup>1</sup> and 16% as heavy drinkers<sup>2</sup>. Of the students who had consumed alcohol in the past 12 months, 39% exhibited risky drinking behaviour<sup>3</sup> and 4% may be alcohol-dependent, to the extent that referral to addiction services is recommended.

## Use of most substances remained stable in 2023

Compared to 2021, heavy alcohol use continues to be high among respondents. Daily or regular vaping has increased from 1% to 4% (see Table 3). Frequent cannabis use, recent use of psychedelics and use of non-prescription sleeping medications and sedatives in the past 12 months has actually decreased. Use of other substances does not seem to have changed.

**Table 3.** Substance use among respondents in 2021 and 2023

Substances	2021 (n=28,442)	2023 (n=32,194)
Heavy alcohol use	16	16
Excessive alcohol use		10**
Daily smoking	8	6
Daily or regularly vaping	1	4*
Frequent cannabis use (at least once a week in the past 12 months)	8	6*
Recent XTC use (past month)	3	4
Recent cocaine use (past month)	2	2
Recent psychedelics use (past month)	2.2	1.5*
Use of non-prescription concentration-enhancing medications	4	3
Use of non-prescription sleeping medications and sedatives	4	3*

\* The difference between the two years is large enough to indicate a meaningful change.

\*\* Due to an adjustment in the measurement of excessive alcohol use in the 2023 questionnaire, a comparison between 2021 and 2023 cannot be made for this aspect.

<sup>1</sup> Excessive drinking: more than 21 units of alcohol a week for men, or more than 14 units a week for women.

<sup>2</sup> Heavy drinking: more than six units of alcohol on one day at least once a week for men, or more than four units for women.

<sup>3</sup> Risky drinking behaviour: student reported experiencing problems due to drinking, such as being unable to fulfil commitments or regretting alcohol use.

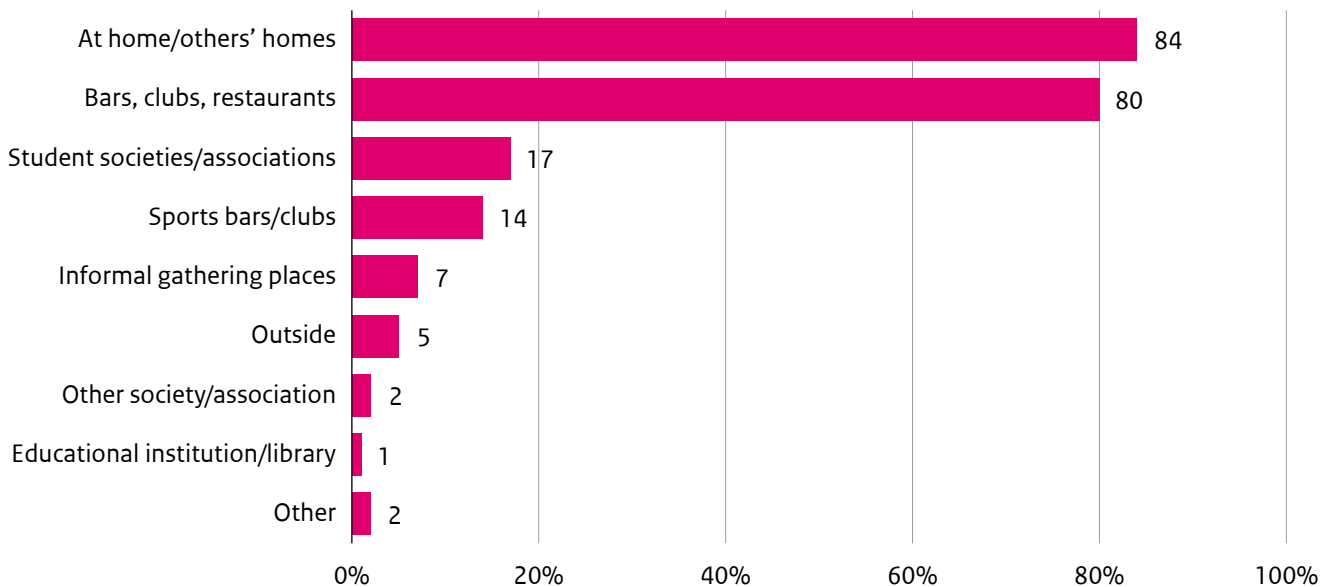
### Alcohol is most often drunk in the company of others

Respondents reported drinking alcohol primarily in social situations, such as at the home of someone they know, at bars, clubs and restaurants, in sports bars or at student societies and associations (see Figure 3), and rarely alone.

### Almost no impairment from substance use

For a majority of the respondents, substance use does not seem to interfere with their functioning in respect of study, work, social life or personal relationships. Almost two-thirds (62%) reported experiencing no impairments from alcohol use in the past 12 months. This percentage is similar (66%) for drug use.

Figure 3. Places where respondents drink alcohol



### A variety of factors are associated with excessive and heavy alcohol use, daily smoking and frequent cannabis use

Among the respondents, a range of background characteristics are associated with substance use. For example, excessive and heavy alcohol use are more common among men, students without an immigration background and full-time students. We also found a number of associations with other characteristics. Substance use is more common among students who live with others (not parents) and among students with high student debt, for instance. Daily smoking and frequent cannabis use are more common among students who experienced a stressful event in the preceding 12 months.

### Little counselling or help received within or outside educational institutions

A small minority of the respondents who had experienced substance use issues in the past 12 months had received counselling or help for this from someone employed at their institution (see Table 4). A larger share of students had received counselling or help outside their institution.

Between 2021 and 2023, the proportion of students who received counselling or help for substance use issues within their educational institution increased.

**Table 4.** Counselling or help received in the past 12 months for substance use issues, 2021 versus 2023

Received counselling or help	2021 (n=3,790) %	2023 (n=2,662) %
From counsellors or care providers <i>within</i> the institution	2	4*
From counsellors or care providers <i>outside</i> the institution (professional support/care provider or someone in immediate social circle)	11	13
From counsellors or care providers <i>within</i> and/or <i>outside</i> the institution (professional support/care provider or someone in immediate social circle)	12	15

\* The difference between the two years is large enough to indicate a meaningful increase.

### Reasons why students with substance use issues do not receive counselling or help

The main reason by far why students with substance use issues had not received help is that they said they did not need advice or help. Approximately 8 in 10 respondents cited this reason. About 2 in 10 said they wanted to solve their problems themselves and for about 1 in 10 shame played a role.

### About the monitor

The Monitor on Mental Health and Substance Use among Higher Education Students first took place in 2021 and is repeated every two years. The survey was carried out by RIVM, the Trimbos Institute and the Netherlands Municipal Public Health Services and Medical Assistance in Accidents and Disasters on behalf of the Ministries of Health, Welfare and Sport and of Education, Culture and Science.



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Published by



National Institute for Public Health  
and the Environment  
*Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport*

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November 2023



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