



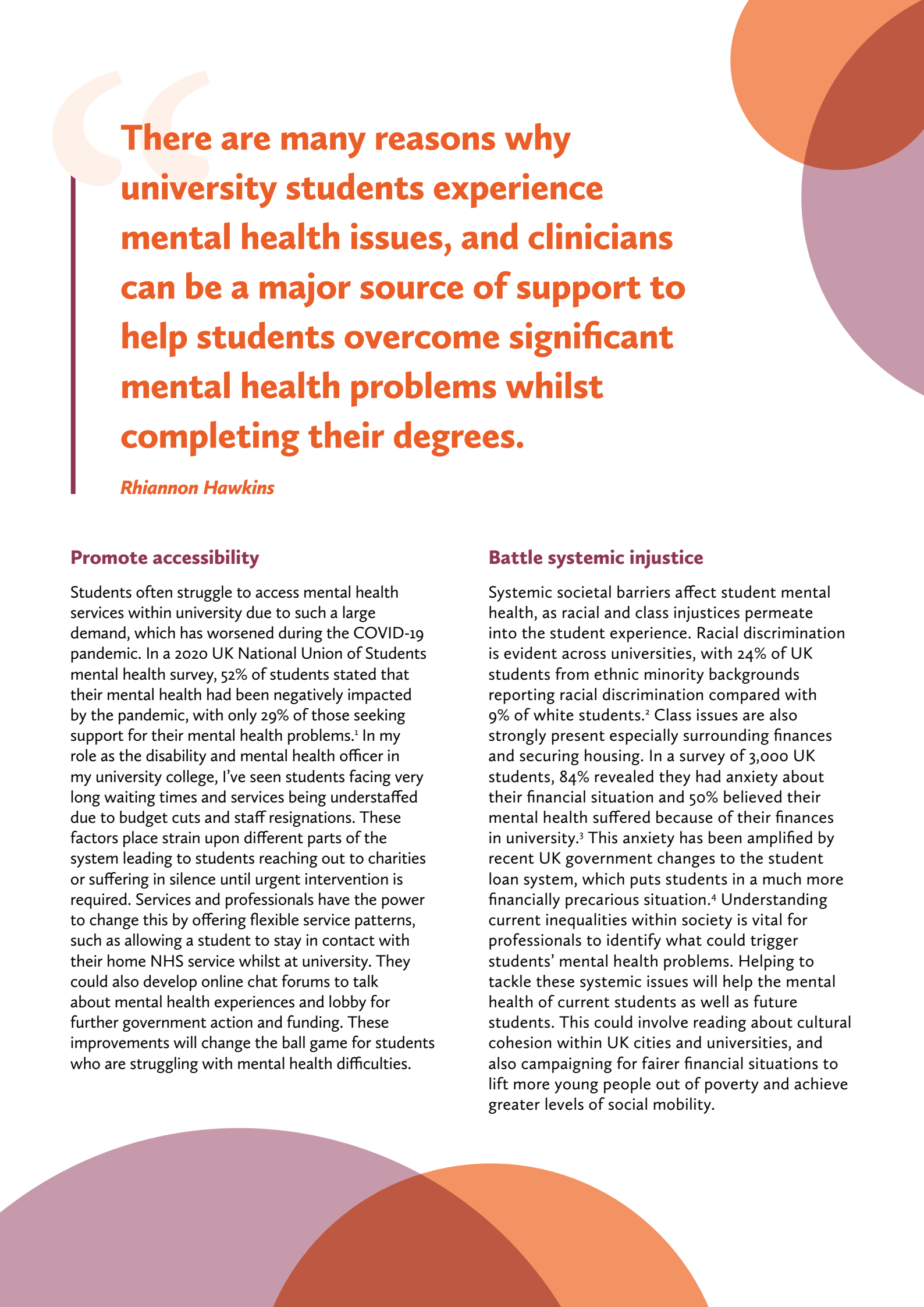
# What CAMH Professionals Need to Know About Student Mental Health

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*On University Mental Health Day, Rhiannon Hawkins discusses several factors that impact on university students' mental health, and she explains her top tips for clinician actions to address these factors and improve mental healthcare for university students.*

“This is the best time of your life!” or “You will have soooo much fun!” are common phrases young people hear repeated out of family and friends' mouths before and throughout our university degrees. For some, this is true. However for most, university is an emotional rollercoaster with amazing highs and rock bottom lows. I am unquestionably in the latter group. I've experienced the wonders of amazing friendships as well as

sheer emotional stress from the pressure I exert upon myself to achieve, which affects my mental health in several ways. There are many reasons why university students experience mental health issues, and clinicians can be a major source of support to help students overcome significant mental health problems whilst completing their degrees. Here is a quick guide of some things clinicians can do to help students most effectively.



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*Rhiannon Hawkins*

## Promote accessibility

Students often struggle to access mental health services within university due to such a large demand, which has worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a 2020 UK National Union of Students mental health survey, 52% of students stated that their mental health had been negatively impacted by the pandemic, with only 29% of those seeking support for their mental health problems.<sup>1</sup> In my role as the disability and mental health officer in my university college, I've seen students facing very long waiting times and services being understaffed due to budget cuts and staff resignations. These factors place strain upon different parts of the system leading to students reaching out to charities or suffering in silence until urgent intervention is required. Services and professionals have the power to change this by offering flexible service patterns, such as allowing a student to stay in contact with their home NHS service whilst at university. They could also develop online chat forums to talk about mental health experiences and lobby for further government action and funding. These improvements will change the ball game for students who are struggling with mental health difficulties.

## Battle systemic injustice

Systemic societal barriers affect student mental health, as racial and class injustices permeate into the student experience. Racial discrimination is evident across universities, with 24% of UK students from ethnic minority backgrounds reporting racial discrimination compared with 9% of white students.<sup>2</sup> Class issues are also strongly present especially surrounding finances and securing housing. In a survey of 3,000 UK students, 84% revealed they had anxiety about their financial situation and 50% believed their mental health suffered because of their finances in university.<sup>3</sup> This anxiety has been amplified by recent UK government changes to the student loan system, which puts students in a much more financially precarious situation.<sup>4</sup> Understanding current inequalities within society is vital for professionals to identify what could trigger students' mental health problems. Helping to tackle these systemic issues will help the mental health of current students as well as future students. This could involve reading about cultural cohesion within UK cities and universities, and also campaigning for fairer financial situations to lift more young people out of poverty and achieve greater levels of social mobility.

## Engage with technology

Finally, gaining greater understanding of how students communicate is key to understanding student mental health. Digital networks are essential for students to arrange events, form friendships and keep in touch outside term time. However, the digital landscape can also be problematic for student mental health. For example, apps such as Instagram might worsen body image and increase FOMO (fear of missing out). They might also place pressure upon students to socialise despite not feeling comfortable in specific situations, such as nightclubs. Nevertheless, digital technologies can be a good way to support students with mental health problems because students use them to seek support and find communities who are like them. Therefore, services and professionals need to engage in using social media to help provide a greater level of support and advice, by helping signpost students to find the guidance they might need, whether that's university or NHS based support.

The university student experience can be both wonderful and stressful. Professionals providing the right support and understanding of student issues will have a significant impact upon the lives of students across the UK and around the world.



*Rhiannon Hawkins is a young person representative for the Royal College of Psychiatrists, a trustee at the Green Economics Institute and currently studies Geography at the University of Oxford. She has been involved in a variety of different Royal College eco distress projects, for example: planning conferences, doing press interviews and contributed to the College's climate position statement. She has also written a debate piece within the ACAMH within their special COP26 issue. Rhiannon has also been a part of the Green Economics Institute's delegation to COP26 and helps write magazine and book contributions for the Institute. She has strong interests in Climate Change, eco distress and intersectionality.*

## References:

- <sup>1</sup> [National Union of Students \(2020\) \*NUS student survey sends clear message to government – invest in mental health now.\*](#)
- <sup>2</sup> [Equality and Human Rights Commission \(2019\) \*Tackling racial harassment: universities challenged.\*](#)
- <sup>3</sup> [McCloud T & Bann D \(2019\) \*Financial stress and mental health among higher education students in the UK up to 2018: rapid review of evidence.\* J Epidemiol Community Health 73, 977–984.](#)
- <sup>4</sup> [Waltman B \(2022\) \*Sweeping changes to student loans to hit tomorrow's lower-earning graduates.\* Institute for Fiscal Studies.](#)

## Related links



[Podcast – \*Student Mental Health and What CAMH Professionals Need to Know\* \(TRIGGER WARNING:](#)

[Please be aware that this podcast discusses personal experiences of self-harm and suicide.\)](#)



[#UniMentalHealthDay \*Shaping the Future of Student Mental Health\*](#)



[Recorded Event – \*Ecological Crisis and the Impact on Mental Health\*](#)



[Recorded Event – \*Hope and courage in the climate crisis\*](#)

