

ON CAMPUS

Mental Health a Worry for Student Affairs Worldwide*

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Mental health has in recent years emerged as an issue of concern for university students globally, obstructing the completion of studies, according to delegates attending the 2016 Global Summit on Student Affairs and Services.

“We are seeing increases in mental health challenges worldwide – more stress, more anxiety, more depression and more suicides,” Kevin Kruger, president of the Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education or NASPA, told *University World News*.

He was unsure about what triggered the increases, but in almost every country mental health challenges were creating barriers for students to learn. “Our role is to see how we support students during this challenging period of life.”

Kruger was at the third global summit, held at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study, at Stellenbosch University in South Africa from 27–28 October. The first summit was held in Washington, United States, in 2012 and the second was in Rome in 2014.

Country Cases

Ming Qi, vice-president of Shanghai University of International Business and Economics, said higher education professionals in China were equally concerned about the mental health of university students.

“We have about 10% of our younger university students suffering from psychology-related problems,” he told *University World News*. Ming Qi attributed the problem among younger students to intense pressure to succeed.

To tackle the growing problem and promote the integrity of students, he said, many universities in China were offering courses, counselling and professional help.

Barbra Pansiri, director of the department of student welfare at the University of Botswana, said mental health issues varied, as students had different needs.

“Youths today live according to the demands of fast life, and if their demands are not met, they become frustrated and depressed,” Pansiri told *University World News*. Research would help to understand the depth of the problem.

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Birgit Schreiber, senior director of student affairs at Stellenbosch University, said in South Africa students with mental health challenges tended to struggle to get through primary and secondary education, before the additional hurdle of getting into higher education.

“The university population has very few suicidal cases, depression issues, cases of substance abuse or psychological issues, compared to the general population in any country,” said Schreiber.

Student Affairs Challenges

Student Affairs staff help students to be successful, to develop the skills needed to succeed in the job market, and to cope with academics and adjustment to universities and colleges—but the profession is fraught with challenges.

As NASPA’s Kevin Kruger said: “We are a kind of a safety net. We help you when things don’t go well.”

Kruger said universities were grappling with making higher education accessible to students from poor backgrounds, creating pathways that help students receive more study support, and providing financial and academic backing.

“This generation of youth is much more socially active than previous generations,” he added. Student Affairs needs to find a balance between the operation of student freedoms and responsibilities, and to identify ways university governance could be changed to be more responsive to student needs.

Pansiri of the University of Botswana said student affairs staff are often asked what their office does. “The work we do is not visible enough, and there is little awareness of student affairs as a profession.”

Kruger agreed, and said there was an imperative for student affairs to be treated more as a profession, particularly in Africa. He praised South Africa for having among the most advanced student affairs worldwide, and for publishing a *Journal of Student Affairs*.