HOW ARE ACADEMIC LIBRARIES IN IRELAND PROVIDING STUDENT WELL-BEING AND MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT?

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CLAIRE MASON

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Name: Claire Mason

Registration Number: 220249298

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Abstract

Background

The mental health and well-being of students has been a global concern for some time. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted mental health and well-being. Increasing pressures on students such as the "cost of living crisis" and lack of suitable accommodation have led to increased levels of anxiety. Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are seeking ways to incorporate a "whole university" approach to tackle the perceived mental health crisis. Academic libraries are at the heart of campus life and are therefore in a unique position to provide mental health and well-being support to students.

Aims

Despite many initiatives taking place on the island of Ireland there is little in the extant literature providing evidence of this. The aim of this study is to provide an overview of the provision of mental health and well-being supports in Irish academic libraries, and drivers and barriers in doing so. In addition, this study investigates the impact that COVID-19 has had on service provision.

Method

A primarily quantitative approach was taken using a questionnaire adapted from a previous UK study. Academic librarians who were either library directors or had responsibility for student services in the library answered a series of multiple-choice questions, and two open text questions were provided for longer responses. Descriptive statistical analysis was performed on multiple-choice questions and thematic analysis applied to the open text comments.

Results

Academic libraries in Ireland are providing a variety of measures and supports for student mental health and well-being. Drivers include aligning to institutional policies and responding to student concerns. Libraries are informally involved with a "whole university approach" primarily by cultivating partnerships with other student support services on campus. Lack of resources, both in funding and with staff are key barriers to provision. Evaluation of success is mainly anecdotal with few systematic approaches reported.

Conclusions

This was a small study with relatively few respondents, therefore any conclusions drawn should be tentative. The lack of responses from Northern Ireland precludes any significant statistical analysis. More qualitative research would be beneficial to investigate the beliefs and feelings of library staff towards service provision. In addition, research involving students, and their concerns would be useful to examine what services would be most beneficial to them. Recommendations for library directors and heads of service include embedding well-being and mental health provisions in strategic plans and policies, providing library staff with adequate training and having a designated role to coordinate services.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The World Health Organization (WHO) has described global mental health as a "growing crisis" (WHO, 2022). In the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, reports of poor mental health amongst the general population suggest that Ireland is facing a mental health "crisis" with one of the highest rates of mental health illness in Europe (Cullen, 2018). A more recent, post-pandemic survey by Amárach Research also "revealed high rates of depression and anxiety with 60% of those surveyed experiencing depression and 80% experiencing anxiety" (Mellett, 2023). The pandemic has exacerbated the mental health crisis with mental health services in Ireland experiencing an increased escalation in demand which will last for many years into the future (O'Connor, et al., 2020).

1.2 Context

The mental health of students has been a growing concern worldwide with studies suggesting that students experience greater psychological strain once they start university compared to pre-university levels (Bewick et al., 2010). The correlation between student mental health and academic retention has been well documented, with poor levels of mental health contributing to high attrition rates (De Luca et al., 2016; Remskar et al., 2022). According to the University Mental Health Charter, published by Student Minds in the United Kingdom (UK), the number of students declaring a mental health issue to their university more than doubled in the years from 2014-2019 (Hughes & Spanner, 2019). Furthermore, a study of college students in the United States (US) over a 10-year period, between 2007-2017, found that the numbers of students seeking support for mental health problems increased year-on-year

(Lipson et al., 2019). In Ireland, the mental health of third level students has also been cited as a "major societal concern" (Hill et al., 2020, p.1).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on student mental health in more recent years. During the first period of lockdown 73% of students reported a worsening in their mental health (Mind, 2020). In a longitudinal study of UK students, Evans et al. (2021) found that 30% reported an increase in the prevalence of clinical-level depressive symptoms and a decrease in general well-being. Furthermore, findings from the UK Student Minds Survey of 2022, (Student Minds, 2022) indicated that 64% of students felt that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted negatively on their mental health with 61% reporting a negative impact on their university experience as a whole. In addition, the recent cost of living crisis in Ireland has impacted students negatively, and the challenge of finding suitable accommodation has caused elevated levels of stress (White, 2024).

Therefore, UK and US reports have recommended that universities should prioritise student well-being (Cuijpers, et al., 2019; Duffy et al., 2019; Gunnell, 2020). Policies in Higher Education (HE) in the UK and Ireland have been implemented to address this problem with recommendations of a "whole university approach" featuring in recent reports (Damjanovic, 2024; Fox et al., 2020).

University libraries have been responding by implementing initiatives to promote student well-being (Bladek, 2021; Cox & Brewster, 2020; Ramsey & Aagard, 2018). In view of the statistics around student mental health, and recognising the central location of the academic library, most library staff have encountered users of their libraries who are coping with well-being issues (Green, 2020). The shift in the role of the academic library has been influenced by the changing context of higher education, in addition to societal changes (Llewellyn, 2019). Furthermore, as HE provides the key operating context for academic libraries, they

must align themselves to institutional priorities in order to position themselves strategically within the organisation (J. Cox, 2023)

1.3 Aims and objectives

The aim of this study is to investigate how academic libraries in Ireland are supporting student mental health and well-being and what impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on these supports.

The research questions are:

- What are the motivating factors for libraries providing student mental health initiatives?
- What types of activities are being implemented?
- How are partnerships with other university departments and student services being utilised?
- What are barriers to providing services?
- How has COVID-19 impacted the provision of supports?

The research objectives are:

- To undertake a literature review to discover what research has previously been undertaken on student mental health services in universities and what role the academic library plays in providing support.
- To use an existing survey from a previous study to gather data on what supports Irish academic libraries are currently providing to their students, what are the drivers behind providing these supports, and how COVID-19 has impacted the provision of library supports.

- To recruit participants who are involved in providing well-being supports from approximately forty academic libraries on the Island of Ireland.

- To undertake a descriptive analysis of the questionnaire data to answer the research questions.

1.4 Definition of terms

The term "well-being" is ambiguous and is often used interchangeably with "wellness" (Bladek, 2021). According to the World Health Organization's Glossary of Terms, "Well-being is a positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic, and environmental conditions" (WHO, 2021, p. 10).

The University Mental Health Charter (2019) defines "mental health" as the "full spectrum of experience ranging from good mental health to mental illness" and "well-being" as "a wider framework of which mental health is an integral part, but which also includes physical and social well-being" (Hughes & Spanner, 2019, p.9).

It is acknowledged in this research that mental health issues such as anxiety and depression are related to well-being but are distinct in themselves (Barkham et al., 2019). This study will investigate library supports for the entire student population including, those with mental health conditions.

1.5 Dissertation structure

This dissertation will be structured in the following way: a review of the literature (Chapter 2), the research methodology (Chapter 3), the findings which will examine the results of the research and identify key themes (Chapter 4), a discussion of the findings, relating the current

study to existing research (Chapter 5) and finally a conclusion which will summarise the key findings, evaluate the aims and objectives of the study and offer recommendations for further research.

2. **Literature review**

2.1 Introduction

A review of the literature across the education, psychology and Library and Information Science (LIS) disciplines reveals several common themes relating to trends in student well-being, drivers of initiatives for academic libraries and the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Multidisciplinary databases such as Scopus and Web of Science were searched for this literature review, in addition to LIS databases such as Library and Information Science Abstracts, Emerald Insights and Library and Information Science Source.

The literature from the psychology and education disciplines suggest that public concern for the mental health of students in university or third level education is rising (Brown, 2018; McLafferty et al., 2017; Damjanovic, 2024). This has also been recognised in the library and information science literature (LIS) and an emerging body of research suggests that academic libraries are prioritising student mental health and well-being (Bladek, 2021; Cox & Brewster, 2021; Ramsey & Aagard, 2018).

2.2. Student mental health

The psychology literature indicates that young people aged 15-25 are the highest risk age group for developing a mental health illness and third level students appear to report higher levels of distress than their non-student peers (Karwig et al., 2015; Kessler et al., 2007). A recent large-scale, cross-national study found that decreased well-being and poor states of mental health were reported more frequently than non-students and the general population (Bonsaksen et al., 2022). An early report by Phippen (1995) noticed an upward trend of poor mental health in UK students. It was found that 64% of 152 counselling services had seen an increase in demand. In their systematic literature review, Storrie et al. (2010) concluded that

students with serious mental health issues had significantly risen in the years prior to their study. This trend has continued with Thorley's (2017) report on improving student well-being prompting a sector wide response in the UK to promote a "whole university approach" to improve mental health (Universities UK, 2020). The report initiated a strategic framework in the UK to include all university departments in the endeavour to promote student well-being. (Brewster & Cox, 2023). Despite these initiatives, the latest report by the organisation Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) found that elevated levels of poor mental health continue to affect students in the UK (Damjanovic, 2024).

2.2.1 Contributory factors

In their study of contributory factors of poor mental health and decreased well-being amongst university students, McIntyre et al. (2018) reported that loneliness was the strongest overall predictor of mental distress. Unsurprisingly, academic predictors included stress surrounding assessments and examinations were also key factors contributing to low mood levels. In addition, a study by Cage et al. (2021) found that the life transitions associated with starting and leaving university were acute factors of stress for students. Twenge (2020) suggests that technology, particularly the use of smartphones and social media, could account for the elevated increase in mental health decline amongst students.

It should also be recognised that students with mental health issues should not be treated as one homogeneous group. Due to national policies promoting equity in education, the student profile is diversifying (Hill et al., 2020). Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds report higher levels of poor mental health and students who experience discrimination due to race, gender or sexual orientation are more prone to psychological distress (Adler et al., 2016; Bladek, 2021).

2.2.2 Impact of COVID-19

A growing body of literature supports the argument that this situation has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. A short-term study at the start of lockdown period in the UK during 2020, reported that loneliness and isolation led to reduced levels of flourishing for British students (Kannangara et al., 2023). Furthermore, Chen and Lucock (2022) reported that more than 50% of students in the UK have experienced levels of depression and anxiety above clinical cut offs, with females being affected more significantly during the pandemic. Moreover, a study of the longer-term impacts of COVID-19 on university students in the UK found that students were still suffering from increased levels of psychological distress 12 months after the start of the pandemic (Allen et al., 2023). In addition, Bennett et al. (2022) noted that levels of anxiety and well-being worsened during data collected in 2021 compared to pre-pandemic levels in 2019.

University students in Ireland are also experiencing similar challenges with their mental health and well-being and this has also accelerated since the COVID-19 pandemic (O'Connor et al., 2020). Hargreaves et al. (2022) found that the shift to an online learning format, disrupting established interactions between teachers and students, led to increased levels of stress for Irish university students. In addition, The Irish National Learning Organisation, AONTAS, reported that 59% of students felt that their mental health was negatively impacted by the pandemic, with key factors including challenging learning environments and isolation contributing to this situation (Wilson, 2021). According to the most recent report from the Association for Higher Education and Access (AHEAD) 21.7% of students registered with university disability support services disclosed a mental health condition (AHEAD, 2021). The actual figures are believed to be considerably higher due to non-disclosure rates amongst students (Brown, 2018; Guarneri et al., 2019).

2.3 Whole University Approach – Agenda and Strategies

The literature surrounding student mental health and well-being has increasingly recommended the holistic "whole university" approach to providing support. The international Okanagan Charter (2015) promotes healthier campuses and communities by using a "joined up" approach by the different services in HE institutions working in partnership with each other. University leaders have been encouraged to ensure that well-being procedures are embedded into their institutional culture, curriculum, and support services (Riva et al., 2024; Damjanovic, 2024; Dooris et al., 2020).

The #Stepchange framework in the UK, which was initiated by Thorley's (2017) report, recognised the need to consider the university as a community with all activities of student life contributing to the promotion of good mental health and well-being. A growing number of UK universities have implemented embedded "well-being teams" to provide non-clinical support services. A recent UK study found that these types of "low intensity" models of support can be valuable when delivered alongside academic or clinical services (Bennett et al., 2024).

The National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework for Higher Education in Ireland is an example of national strategy around mental health, and it sets out policies for higher education institutions. These have been adopted in Ireland to implement the whole university approach (Fox et al., 2020; Hill et al., 2020; Surdey et al., 2022).

2.3.1. Whole University Approach – The Library

Therefore, the whole university approach determines that mental health and well-being services are embedded into all campus services and departments, including the library. Cox and Brewster (2022) argue that the academic library is central to campus life and a place

where students study and socialise, especially during stressful times such as assignment deadlines and exam periods. Thus, the library can play a crucial part in the promotion of student well-being and can partner with other university departments to do so. Furthermore, the library should be seeking opportunities to respond to university agendas and the broader social and educational landscape (Corrall & Jolly, 2019; Llewellyn, 2019 Schlak et al., 2022). In addition, J. Cox (2023) insists that by aligning to institutional strategy, libraries can strengthen their position and maintain relevance. These are important drivers for academic libraries when considering the whole university approach to student well-being and mental health.

However, lack of integration for the library within the institution for the provision of mental health and well-being services has been cited as a challenge for the implementation of this approach. A study by Brewster and Cox (2022) investigating the strategic rationale and practicalities of engaging with a whole-university approach found that although libraries were aligned to institutional agendas, integration was often lacking leading to a distribution of responsibility for providing services without inherently providing resourcing. Furthermore, the convergence with other student services could be seen as a dilution of the library's identity, thus their "unique contribution may be hidden and not appropriately credited" (J. Cox, 2023, p.272).

2.4 What is the role of the library?

Early library and information science (LIS) literature connecting academic libraries and student mental health focused on barriers to accessing information due to fears of using the library. Lack of information skills and feelings of "being lost" due to the relatively large size of academic libraries contributed to these fears. Mellon (1986) coined the expression "library anxiety" and her research into students' library fears has been the basis of this grounded

theory. This prompted a large body of research into the barriers that students experience when seeking information (Bostick, 1992; Ahmad et al., 2021; Anwar et al., 2012).

More recently, the literature has moved away from examining barriers to access and instead focused on student well-being with a range of activities reported to promote positive mental health. Hinchliffe and Wong's (2010) approach to student well-being focused on the shift away from the information commons framework of library services to the learning commons model, where the student is the focus for services rather than the library environment. Their interpretation of Hettler's (1980) wellness model has been referred to in several other studies connecting academic libraries and student mental health and well-being (Bladek, 2021; Henrich, 2020).

The university library is deemed to be a safe and neutral space in the "heart" of the campus with long opening hours thus ideally positioned to support students' mental health and well-being (Bladek, 2021). Academic libraries have demonstrated a commitment to providing well-being supports to students in recent years with student mental health becoming an emerging trend, even before the COVID-19 pandemic (Association of College & Research Libraries, ACRL, 2020); Cox & Brewster, 2020; Ramsey & Aagard, 2018).

Due to the lack of systematic evidence of library support for student mental health and well-being, Cox and Brewster (2020) conducted a study of academic libraries in the UK. From their findings a holistic model was developed providing a framework which examines how libraries can most effectively support student well-being. They identified eight distinct aspects: inherent library value, library services impact, well-being as a library service, detection, hosting, signposting, library as a good partner and library staff well-being. From this, they create a framework in which to examine how academic libraries can support mental health and well-being.

Nevertheless, there is debate in the literature regarding the role of academic libraries and librarians. For example, Walton (2018) argues whether the library's role in providing these activities is well placed in the context of other support services on campus. In addition, Cox and Brewster (2021) raise questions regarding the definition of well-being, appropriate initiatives, and meaningful evaluation of these activities. They argue that to provide an appropriate response to student well-being, the nature of the problem must be fully recognised and "a sustainable response needs to be rooted in the professional knowledge base" (p.161). Moreover, this is in agreement with earlier observations from Brown (2018) who encourages an examination of the causes and underlying issues of poor mental health before deciding upon interventions that might alleviate distress.

2.4.1 Library collections

"Traditional" library endeavours such as reading for pleasure have featured as initiatives that are inherently library activities. Dewan (2023) argues that fiction collections for pleasure reading should feature in academic libraries to promote mindfulness. Furthermore, Brookbank's (2023) study of the leisure reading habits of students in the US and the UK found that "recreational" reading collections were well received in academic libraries and provided a way for students to take a "mental break". Moreover, in a study of students in a large Canadian university, Levine et al. (2020) found that recreational reading reduced psychological distress.

Well-being collections, which are sometimes referred to as "bibliotherapy" feature somewhat in the literature. Public libraries have a long history of providing self-help and well-being literature (Hall & McAlister, 2021; McNicol & Brewster, 2018), but increasingly academic libraries are including these in their collections. Bladek (2021) sees providing wellness information as incorporating well-being initiatives into existing library functions. Examples

of academic libraries providing such collections include the Student Success Collection at the University of Southern Mississippi (Azadbakht & Englert, 2018), the Shelf Help collection at Edinburgh Napier University (Ennis, 2018), and the Texas Woman's University Well-being Initiative (Whitmer et al., 2019). Moreover, Cox and Brewster (2021) argue that "bibliotherapy represents the most substantial development of thinking about well-being in the LIS professional literature" (p.160).

Other initiatives reported in the literature aimed at student well-being are "Zine Collections". These small-scale, self-published magazines can serve as an outlet for self-expression, promoting equality, diversity, and inclusion and therefore a sense of belonging (Jocson-Singh et al., 2020). Though not scholarly publications, they can potentially be used to supplement well-being collections in collaboration with students.

2.4.2 Library activities

The literature has prominently featured initiatives that individual institutions have implemented to promote the well-being of students using library space. One of the first comprehensive accounts of student well-being activities in the UK documented some innovative approaches that the University of Warwick had taken in order to promote student well-being on campus. (Brewerton & Woolley, 2017). Novel activities appear to have gained greater attention in the literature, such as animal therapy sessions facilitated by the library including dogs (Jalongo, 2015) and even owls (Houghton, 2019). In a study of US and Canadian universities, it was found that over 50% of libraries offered interactions between students and animals in an effort to reduce stress (Rourke, 2020).

In addition, yoga (Whitmer et al., 2019), interactive mindfulness technology (Cook & Croft, 2017) and activities which feature play using Lego and Play-Doh have also featured in recent

years (Nance, 2022). Evaluation of the success of these activities is limited, however, and therefore it is difficult to make conclusions regarding benefits of including these within a library setting (Cox & Brewster, 2020). Furthermore, not all initiatives, particularly involving animals, have the intended beneficial effects, and at times, can have negative consequences regarding the inclusive nature of the library space (Frank, 2020).

2.4.3 Library space

Holder and Lannon's (2020) comprehensive volume of detailed case studies documenting well-being activities using library space in US and Canadian academic libraries adds weight to the argument of the library's increasing role in promoting positive mental health. Case studies examined "wellness" initiatives which were either organised by the library in partnership with other campus support services, or where the library played the part of a "host" in their provision of space.

Despite the digital shift from print to online resources, in the decade prior to COVID-19, library visits remained high (Cox, 2023). The literature suggests that since the pandemic, changes are taking place in the library's use of space (Appleton, 2021; Cox, 2023; O'Donnell & Anderson, 2021). Breland et al. (2023) report that during the pandemic, spaces began to be used in innovative ways, and when libraries opened fully again "it became apparent that students had developed a deeper appreciation for the usefulness of library spaces" (p.14).

Cox (2023) notes that changing pedagogies impacted by widening participation and the pandemic implicate the use of space, as hybrid teaching and learning practices continue. Libraries must provide versatile spaces with different functionalities, therefore evolving as the changing pedagogical needs of students emerge (O'Donnell & Anderson, 2021).

2.4.3.1 Well-being rooms

Creating specific spaces where students can relax, and making study spaces more pleasant with natural lighting and plants are well documented in the literature. Pionke (2020) argues that due to the shift towards the learning commons model "the day of the quiet library is long gone" (p.152). Therefore, there is a necessity to provide designated quiet rooms. Meditation rooms have been common in libraries for some time, particularly within diverse communities, for prayer and contemplation (Watcher, 2018). However, there is growing evidence in the literature of creating well-being rooms for supporting mental health and sensory issues for students (Bremer, 2019; Rourke, 2020; Walton & McMullin, 2021).

2.5 Library Staff

One of the most important strengths of the academic library is its staff. Many universities report programmes of training to support their staff in providing mental health and well-being assistance to students. Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) has featured in the literature as an initiative that universities are using to give their staff the necessary tools and confidence to provide assistance to students (MHFA Ireland, 2024). Maslowski et al. (2019) provides a meta-analysis of MFHA programmes, which concluded that these are effective in providing skills such as mental health literacy, improving attitudes and beliefs towards mental health issues and helping related behaviours. In addition, Conroy (2018) reports that the University of Arkansas library decided to train staff in MFHA, resulting in raised levels of confidence in dealing with students in distress. Although library staff are not professional mental health workers, they provide frontline support to students and therefore need to be equipped to deal with issues that students are facing. Furthermore, Throgmorton (2017) states that although library staff are frequently required to receive physical first aid training as part of their job, mental health training happens far less often.

2.6 Response to COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic saw libraries on university campuses close during early 2020 with a shift to online learning and resource provision (Chen & Lucock, 2022; Son et al., 2020). There are numerous case studies in the literature which demonstrate how libraries responded to the closure of physical spaces. These include providing innovative ways to connect students to resources, shifting services and collections to online formats and creating opportunities to engage with students in a virtual environment (Appleton, 2021; Matizirofa et al., 2021; Munip et al., 2021). Although not directly supporting mental health, these activities were providing assistance in an informal way, that of lessening anxiety in students by providing essential services online. (Cox & Brewster, 2022). In addition to this, some libraries saw their role as "sign posters" by providing information about COVID-19 and general well-being resources (Delaney et al., 2020).

Following on from their previous survey of 2020, Cox and Brewster (2022) found that 80% of respondents saw the physical space of the library as a key aspect in supporting student well-being, and the closure of library spaces became a barrier during the lockdown period of the pandemic. The whole university approach is perceived as an influencing factor of how library space can potentially be used (Cox, 2023). Furthermore, J. Cox (2023) identifies the optimal use of library space in the "Post COVID environment as an opportunity for positive change" (p.279).

2.7 Conclusion

Student mental health and well-being is a key focus for higher education institutions worldwide, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. The literature examines the whole university approach to tackling this challenging issue and emphasises the importance of

cultivating partnerships on campus. The role of academic libraries in providing well-being and mental health support is included in this, and the repositioning of the library within the institution as a valuable partner is increasingly recognised. Studies in the UK and US indicate that academic libraries are taking their role seriously, but "joined up" thinking is still not evident within institutions.

Despite many initiatives which are taking place in individual academic libraries in Ireland, there is little literature which examines the provision of student mental health and well-being support. An overall picture of how Irish libraries define the problem they are trying to address, and the types of support provided has not been documented, nor has there been research into the drivers and barriers of such initiatives. In addition, the idea of a whole university approach to student services in Ireland is underreported in the LIS literature and the impact of COVID-19 on library supports for student well-being has not been sufficiently investigated.

In this context, this study will aim to answer the following main research questions:

- What role do academic libraries in Ireland play in supporting student mental health and wellbeing?
- Has COVID-19 changed the way libraries are providing support?

3. **Methodology**

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will outline the approach and methods used to conduct this research. It will address the decisions made regarding sampling, data collection and analysis. In addition, it will examine the ethical considerations of the research, including the assessment of risk and data management. It will also consider the limitations of this study.

3.2 Approach

This research was conducted through the lens of a pragmatist paradigm. Denscombe (2021) defines this as "a problem focused approach that emphasises the value of using strategies and methods that work best in practice" (p.44). This type of approach is useful in studies of a social nature where data is collected which focuses on finding solutions to practical problems. A limitation of this approach, however, is that any knowledge found is subject to the historical and cultural context in which it is produced, therefore it must be treated as provisional rather than absolute (Denscombe, 2021).

An inductive approach was taken to link theory and research, by using the observations and findings to create some generalisations (Clark, et al., 2021). As there is so little in the literature which examines universities and mental health initiatives specifically in Ireland, it is important to capture an overview of what services are typically being provided by academic libraries and the drivers behind these (Cox & Brewster, 2021). To implement this research, a quantitative method using a survey was used, with the rationale that it would potentially reach a larger number of participants than conducting qualitative research by interviews (Clark et al., 2021).

A limitation of using this method was the lack of descriptive data that provides richer insights into thoughts and feelings. However, some open text questions were included to allow respondents to include any of their own comments or experiences. This was for the purpose of providing richer, qualitative data which could provide a context for the quantitative data. (Punch, 2013).

3.3 Data Collection

A 17-question survey was designed based on the Cox and Brewster (2022) questionnaire used in their UK study. The questionnaire was adapted with some additional questions regarding post COVID-19 activities (See Appendix i). The advantages of using an existing questionnaire as a research instrument are that it has already been assessed for reliability and validity and the data collected will contribute to a body of research. It was decided that Qualtrics survey software would be used for this project. The presentation of this software includes the University of Sheffield branding, and this was preferable to other survey software because of its professional design. An additional advantage of using Qualtrics was the potential for data analysis within the software, which was time saving.

As there were adaptations to some of the questions and the research was based in a culturally different context, the survey was piloted first amongst a group of academic librarians at the researcher's place of work. Some minor adjustments were made regarding the wording of two questions.

3.2 Sampling

A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit participants. Clarke et al. (2021) describes this as "selecting people who best fit the requirements of the study, according to predefined characteristics" (p.177). Due to the small population of Ireland, academic librarians are a relatively small community, and it was possible to reach out personally to

colleagues in the various institutions around the country. The advantages of this method are a better response rate and a more likely way of the survey reaching the person who has responsibility for student mental health and well-being activities in the library.

Due to the context of the demographic of this research, it was decided that the survey should be anonymous. Therefore, no personal data was collected, including the name of the institution that the respondent was from. This would protect individuals from being identified and encourage authenticity in the responses.

The survey was open for four weeks from 15th June 2024-11th July 2024. This took into consideration that some participants may be on annual leave as it was a holiday period. In total, thirty-seven different institutions were contacted in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, including private universities and larger colleges of further education.

The survey returned twenty-three valid responses, which represents a response rate of 62%. However, due to a recent merge of several different technological higher education colleges into regional universities, it is possible that some of the responses came from the same umbrella institution. Because the survey was anonymous, there was no method to de-duplicate any responses. Nevertheless, as these colleges have been operating separately for several decades, all responses were still considered to be useful to give an overview of what types of activities and initiatives are taking place around the country. In addition, it is also possible that there could be a non-response bias where respondents were doing more than was typical in the sector.

The overwhelming majority of respondents were from the Republic of Ireland (87% n=20) with universities being the most common type of academic sector to respond (74% n=17). Most respondents stated that they were either responsible for student mental health or that providing them was part of their role. A minority of respondents stated that they were neither

responsible for service provision nor that it was part of their role, however, these responses were still deemed to be useful, since student well-being is often acknowledged to be the responsibility of all staff, to some extent.

3.3 Data Analysis

The categorical data was analysed using simple descriptive statistics produced by the Qualtrics survey software. This summarised the frequency and percentage of types of activities undertaken in addition to the main drivers and types of evaluation processes to measure success. This was a small study, with small numbers of respondents and therefore the dataset precluded testing for any statistically significant correlations between responses.

For the open response questions, thematic analysis was applied where the main themes and patterns were identified. The data was coded and grouped into categories based on the concepts derived from the responses and from previous analysis of the literature. The six-phase process of analysis provided by Braun and Clarke (2022) was followed:

1. Familiarising yourself with the dataset

2. Coding

3. Generating initial themes

4. Developing and renewing themes

5. Refining, defining and naming themes

6. Writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 35-36).

It was decided not to use computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) as the dataset was relatively small and the responses were concise. In addition, a manual approach to coding allows for a more creative analytic process as discussed by Watts (2014). Nevertheless, the survey software Qualtrics allows for the creation of "word clouds" based on open text responses to questions, and this was a useful visualisation tool for identifying key

words. This was helpful as a starting point to develop a coding scheme to create themes in addition to the initial categories informed by the literature review (See Appendix ii). Broad themes, such as partnerships, activities and services, library space and collections and the impact of COVID-19 were established prior to data collection and further categories emerged when analysing the text responses.

3.4 Limitations

This was a small study so generalisations cannot be made. The level of demographic information was limited, such as personal information including names of institutions and job roles. The intention of conducting the research in this way was to encourage candid responses. The context of the study is a small, close-knit community and participants could be easily identified through such information. Therefore, to preserve anonymity these details were not sought in the study. The disadvantage of this approach is that more complex statistical analysis cannot be derived from the data. However, some general information, such as the type of institution and geographic location has been recorded.

Because a considerable number of respondents were mostly personal contacts of the researcher, open text responses were forthcoming and provided some richer data that could not be obtained purely through quantitative statistical data.

3.5 Ethical considerations

According to the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Policy, any project using human participants needs to obtain ethics approval in advance of any data collection (University of Sheffield, 2023). Therefore, ethics approval was sought and granted by the University of Sheffield's Ethics Committee (See Appendix iii). Although mental health is deemed to be a sensitive topic, the participants of this research were not asked to provide any information about their own mental health. The questions in the survey were regarding professional

practices and the wording of the questionnaire was designed carefully to prevent any distress to participants. Therefore, the project was assessed as "low risk" by the Ethics Committee. Nevertheless, there are well-being considerations of those providing services and support to students with mental health issues and those who conduct research into this topic, and this was acknowledged.

3.5.1 Informed Consent

A written statement was provided to all participants about the purpose of the research, the rights of the participants and the responsibility of the researcher (See Appendix i). In addition, informed consent was required by all participants and confidentiality and anonymity was maintained throughout the research process (Pickard, 2013). The participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any time before submitting the questionnaire (See Appendix i).

3.5.2 Data Collection

No personal data was collected during this survey, including the IP addresses of respondents' devices. Additionally, all data collected was handled in accordance with the University of Sheffield's research data management guidelines (University of Sheffield, 2024).

4. **Findings**

4.1 Introduction

This research explores how academic libraries in Ireland are providing students with mental health and well-being support services and will examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on providing services. To gain an overall picture of the types of services provided in Ireland, a survey was conducted using a questionnaire as the research instrument. This chapter will present the results from the survey and explore the findings related to each of these questions in detail. In addition, this chapter is structured thematically, to examine some of the key themes that emerged from the open text responses.

The main research questions were:

- What are the motivating factors for libraries providing student mental health initiatives?
- What types of activities are being implemented?
- How are partnerships with other university departments and student services being implemented?
- What are barriers to providing services?
- How has COVID-19 impacted the provision of supports?

4.2 Drivers and Motivations

The first set of questions aimed to understand the key drivers behind providing support and services for student's mental health and well-being and how libraries conceptualised the issue. Figure 1 presents the statistics for responses given when asked what was the main reason that mental health and well-being related activities were being provided by the library. Respondents could only supply one answer to this question, and a majority reported that they

were taking the initiative to align with the strategic aims of the parent institution. Smaller numbers reported that the main reason was in response to student demands. Surprisingly, no one reported formally aligning with institutional strategy to be the main driver.

From these results, it would appear that rather than passively aligning with institutional policies, as a "box ticking" exercise, libraries are taking the initiative in promoting well-being activities.

Q2 - What is the main reason that mental health and well-being related activities are being provided by the library? - Selected Choice

- Other
- We have seen other libraries undertaking similar activities
- We have been informed by research
- We are formally coordinating with institutional strategy
- We are taking the initiative to align with institutional strategy
- We are responding to student demands/concerns
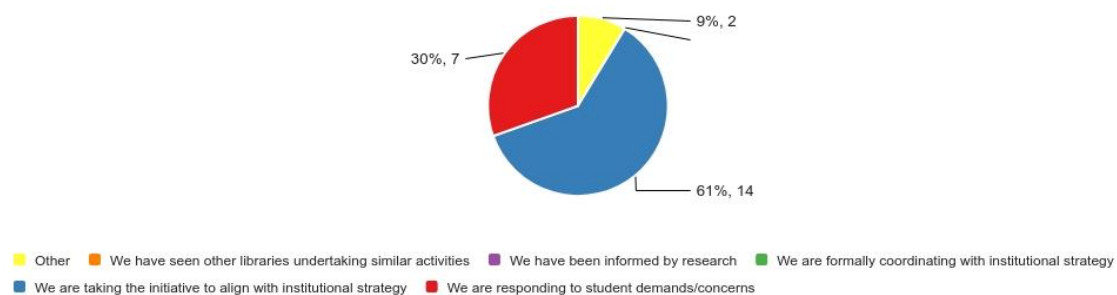
Figure 1

A comparison of the types of academic sector revealed that university libraries were more likely to have aligned with institutional strategy than the other sectors, such as technological colleges and colleges of further education who typically responded that the main motivation was responding to student concerns. (See Table 1). This could be due to the size of these institutions. It is possible that smaller colleges are more likely to have personal interactions with students, and as a result, a greater awareness of their concerns. Due to the small numbers involved in this survey, any conclusions are tentative as the data does not allow for any significant statistical testing for correlations between responses.

Table 1. Comparison of Q2. responses by sector	Total Respondents	University	Technological	College of Further Education	Private College	Other
Total Count (All)	23	17	1	2	2	1
We are responding to student demands/concern	**7**	**4**	**1**	**1**	**1**	
	30%	24%	100%	50%	50%	0%
We are taking the initiative to align to with institutional strategy	**14**	**11**	**0**	**1**	**1**	**1**
	61%	65%	0%	50%	50%	100%
We are formally coordinating with institutional strategy	0	0	0	0	0	0
We have been informed by research	0	0	0	0	0	0
We have seen other libraries undertaking similar activities	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other: Not applicable Unsure	2	0	0	0	0	0
	9%	0	0	0	0	0

When asked about how respondents conceptualised the problem, the main reasons given were to address mental health and well-being issues in general and to address concerns around study or exams, in recognition of academic workload in itself being a cause for poor mental health and well-being. Other significant numbers saw providing activities as a way to promote a sense of community or "belonging" on campus. Surprisingly, for an inherently information focused profession, a minority stated that it was about providing information about mental health and well-being issues. (See Table 2).

Table 2. Q3. How would you define the problem you were trying to address? (n=23)	%	No.
To address general mental health/wellbeing issues	65%	15
To address concerns around study or exams	52%	12
To build a sense of community on campus	43%	10
To provide information about mental health/wellbeing issues	35%	8
To address stigma around mental health	35%	8

4.3 Activities and Services

The next set of questions focused on the types of different activities and supports that libraries are providing and how these are measured in terms of success. Table 3 summarises the responses to the question regarding types of activities provided and respondents could select all that apply. Almost all respondents agreed that providing an efficient and friendly service which contributed to a positive learning environment was an inherent library activity which promotes positive mental health and well-being. A significant majority saw a role for the library as "sign posters" directing students to support services for mental health and well-being, perhaps recognising that library staff have limited expertise in this area.

Key areas for libraries revolved around the library space. Offering a designated physical or digital space was identified by most of the respondents, in addition to the improvement of the physical library environment to create surroundings conducive to well-being. Providing collections was also given importance by significant numbers; either by recommending a well-being or bibliotherapy collection or offering a leisure reading collection. More novel activities such as mindfulness, yoga and animal therapy were reported by a minority of libraries. In addition, "other" activities mentioned by respondents were library events such as hosting book clubs and movie nights and community building projects. These endeavours relate to the promotion of positive well-being by generating a sense of belonging.

Social media was seen as a useful tool for the promotion of well-being activities by significant numbers and the promotion of wider campus initiatives was perceived to be a role for the library.

Table 3. Q4. What activities are being provided by the library to promote positive student mental health and wellbeing? (n=23)	%	No.
Providing an efficient and friendly library service which contributes to wellbeing by promoting aspirations to learn	91%	21
Directing students to support services	83%	19
Offering a designated physical space for wellbeing	78%	14
Improving the library space environment e.g. sound, lighting, seating	74%	17
Offering a designated digital space for wellbeing e.g. library website, libguide etc.	61%	14
Recommending a wellbeing or bibliotherapy collection	57%	13
Promoting library wellbeing initiatives through social media accounts	57%	13
Recommending a reading for leisure collection	48%	11
Promoting wider campus initiatives	48%	11
Arts and crafting activities	26%	6
Recommending taking breaks through signs/posters etc.	22%	5
Other	22%	5
Animal therapy sessions e.g. dog petting	13%	3
Mindfulness sessions	13%	3
Yoga	4%	1

Approaches to measuring the success of activities were generally anecdotal, with a significant majority reporting that library staff observation was a key evaluation method.

Comments within general library surveys were reported frequently as instruments of evaluating success, but specific surveys after activities were considerably less common. Service measurement, for example, counting the number of books borrowed from a well-

being or reading for leisure collection was cited by just over a third of respondents. (See Figure 2).

Q5 - How is the success of the activities evaluated? Select all that apply. - Selected Choice

Response	Choice Count
Specific survey/questionnaire after activities	3
Comments within a general library survey	15
Library staff observations	20
A national student survey	2
Measuring service use e.g. number of books borrowed from specific collections	7
We are not evaluating our well-being activities	3
Other	4

Figure 2

Other methods of evaluation included engagement with other university support services:

"Comments directly from staff e.g. from Wellbeing Officers reporting on positive impacts via their conversation with students"

"Engagement with various University services" (e.g. Counselling Service)"

It is difficult from these results to gain a true understanding of how "success" is evaluated when it comes to well-being or mental health. Measuring an intangible concept presents a challenge and the findings suggest that success of initiatives is measured anecdotally through observation and dialogue. Only three respondents reported not evaluating well-being activities at all, suggesting the majority see the necessity of some kind of measurement tool for the impact of services provided, even if it is not a formal approach.

4.3.1 Staff and Training

The responses to the question of which library staff or team are responsible for services supporting student mental health and well-being are summarised in Table 4. 43% (n=10) reported that one team primarily had responsibility for providing mental health and wellbeing

services to students. This would indicate that activities for student mental health tend to be delivered by a single team, perhaps in larger institutions where a dedicated team provides front line student services. The open text comments suggest there is an assumption that these teams are best placed to give assistance. One respondent provided evidence of this in a comment:

"Training is regularly provided to desk staff in this area"

Another individual expanded on this and gave front line staff autonomy for providing services:

"Our front desk staff are experienced in things like spotting or responding to students in distress. I'd like for them to take the lead on planning how best the library can help students [mental health] ...by recommending changes or additions to the library website and adding signage advertising MH resources…"

A further 26% (n=6) stated that it was everyone's responsibility with 17% (n=4) responding that multiple teams took responsibility. Very few institutions had a specific working group (one respondent) and only one institution had a single person responsible. Therefore, it would be reasonable to assume that in some libraries it is expected that all library staff have a part to play in the implementation of promoting well-being services. However, it is less clear from these findings whether this indicates that a high or low priority is placed on these services because of this.

Some libraries reported that they had adapted or even created new roles with student wellbeing in mind:

"We have appointed a Student Engagement Librarian" and

"a dedicated LGBTQ+ liaison librarian [was appointed]"

Table 4. Q6. Which library staff/team(s) are responsible for services supporting student mental health and wellbeing? (n=23)	%	No.
One team primarily	43%	10
Everyone	26%	6
Multiple teams	17%	4
A working group	4%	1
One person	4%	1
No one	4%	1

Respondents were asked to select what type of training staff received in order to deal with student mental health and well-being issues. (See Table 5). Training is mainly provided via short, in-house courses provided by the parent institution. A third of respondents reported that training for this area came from general customer service training. Only a minority of libraries included formal training in mental health services for students for their staff.

Table 5. Q7. What training do library staff/team(s) have for supporting student mental health and wellbeing? (n=23)	%	No.
Short courses on mental health and wellbeing run by your institution	74%	17
Customer service training	48%	11
Formally credited training on mental health	17%	4
No training	13%	3
Other	9%	2

Other comments noted that although no formal training was received, observations from within the organisation and other institutions helped to inform staff of best practice.

4.4 Partnerships with other campus services

Figure 3 presents the results of the question "Which statement best describes the involvement of the library with other campus support services?"

Q11 - Which statement best describes the involvement of the library with other campus support services? (i.e. the "whole campus" approach)

9%, 2
52%, 12
39%, 9

- The library is not involved with a "whole campus" approach to student mental health and well-being
- The library is informally involved with a "whole campus" approach to student mental health and well-being
- The library is formally involved with a "whole campus" approach to student mental health and well-being
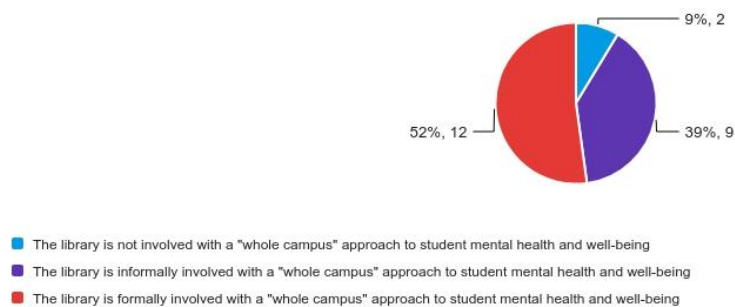
Figure 3

Over half of the respondents described their involvement with other campus supports in a formal way, whereas a significant minority described their involvement as "informal". Just two respondents stated that the library is not involved with a "whole campus" approach.

When comparing the types of academic institutions, however, almost 59% of respondents who stated they were formally involved in a whole campus approach were from the University sector (See Table 6) which could suggest that larger institutions tend to possess more structured strategic goals and policies than smaller institutions. Again, due to the low number of responses it is not possible to test any significant correlations.

Table 6. Comparison of Q11. responses by sector	Total Respondents	University	Technological	College of HE/FE	Private College	Other
Total Count (All)	23	17	1	2	2	1
The library is formally involved with a "whole campus" approach to student mental health and well-being	**12**	**10**	**1**	**0**	**0**	**1**
	52.2%	58.8%	100%	0%	0%	100%
The library is informally involved with a "whole campus" approach to student mental health and well-being	**9**	**6**	**0**	**2**	**1**	**0**
	39.1%	35.3%	0%	0%	50%	0%
The library is not involved with a "whole university approach to mental health and well-being	**2**	**1**	**0**	**0**	**1**	**0**
	8.7%	5.9%	0%	0%	50%	0%

Table 7 summarises the types of "whole campus" activities that the library is currently involved with or has been previously. A significant majority of respondents reported being involved in campus wide initiatives with staff training events also being commonly reported. It is of interest that library led initiatives were reported by fourteen respondents (64%), which is in support of previous questions regarding libraries taking the initiative to align with institutional strategies rather than being a "passive" partner.

Table 7. Q12. What type of "whole campus" activities is the library involved with, or has been involved with? (n=22)	%	No.
Campus wide initiatives for student wellbeing and mental health	86%	19
Library initiatives/activities in collaboration with other campus services	64%	14
Training/information events for staff	64%	14

Open text comments create some insight into the types of partnerships libraries have engaged in:

"We have also worked closely with the disability and learning support teams to help us connect with all our students across a wide demographic"

"Pop-up promotions on mental health and wellbeing, in line with the Institution's mental health drives"

"A key university campaign this year was on identifying and supporting vulnerable students. We now work closely with our university student support unit to make sure we are aware of key referral options and services"

"The Library is a committee member of the Health Campus Initiative [Higher Education Healthy Campus Charter & Framework for Ireland 2020-2025] *which prioritises mental as well as physical health"*

Nonetheless, there were few explicit comments regarding specific formalised approaches and policies within libraries, and formalised policies between other campus services. As one participant commented:

"The Library would benefit from a formalised approach to promoting well-being in a library context"

Another made this observation regarding the fragile nature of partnerships:

"As libraries are front-facing they interact with students across the departments and are well-placed to support students, but there isn't always joined up thinking from the university on this. Mental health and support services are very separate, and we rely on like-minded individuals in that service to work with us which is very personality dependent"

4.5 Barriers to providing services

When asked what challenges exist for providing mental health and well-being support, the majority of respondents (83%) cited lack of resources; both financial and staffing, as being key barriers (See Figure 4).

For example, one respondent stated:

"Our resources are limited in this regard. Promotion is a big expenditure and, although the library is good at promoting on social media, we don't have the resources (both money and staff) to promote campus wide…"

This view was echoed by another respondent who commented:

"It can be difficult to provide the service we may want to…due to staffing restrictions. For example, we would like to accommodate students who are commuting to campus now due to [the] accommodation crisis and high cost of living, but we do not have sufficient staffing"

Other significant numbers cited lack of staff expertise as being a difficulty when it comes to the provision and implementation of services. This is an interesting observation when compared to an earlier question regarding staff training courses. Most participants reported short training courses at an institutional level to be the main source of training, but findings from this question regarding challenges for provision of services indicate that respondents would benefit from a more formal level of training.

One respondent revealed that lack of expertise, and perhaps even the emotional capacity in this area would prevent them from aiding at all other than as an information point:

"...I'm happy to signpost students to resources but I can't take on their well-being myself"

This raises several issues that will be addressed in more detail in the discussion chapter of this dissertation.

Q13 - What are the challenges that exist for providing student mental health and well-being services? Select all that apply - Selected Choice

Challenge	Choice Count
Lack of resources - funding and/or staff time	19
Lack of staff interest	1
Lack of student participation	8
Other	3
Lack of support from senior management	1
Lack of staff expertise	12
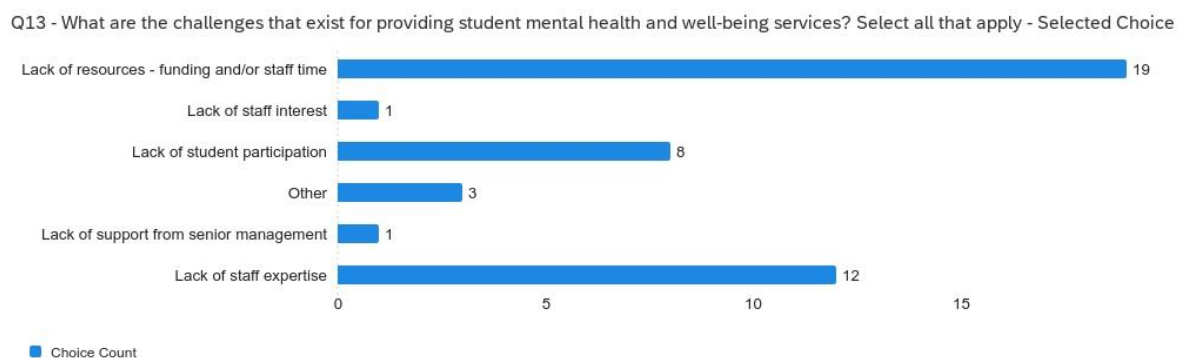
Figure 4

4.6 Impact of COVID-19

The impact of COVID-19 on the provision of mental health and well-being services was a key part of this research. When respondents were asked how they would describe the library's response to student mental health and well-being concerns since the pandemic, an overwhelming majority stated that more priority is being given to well-being and mental health activities. Unsurprisingly, no one felt that less priority was being given to student mental health since the pandemic. A small number stated that priorities towards well-being and mental health had not changed since the pandemic, suggesting that initiatives have been considered to be important for some time. (See Figure 5).

Q8 - Since the COVID-19 pandemic, how would you describe the library's response to student mental health and well-being concerns?

13%, 3

87%, 20

- We are giving student mental health and well-being activities the same amount of priority as always
- We are giving student mental health and well-being activities less priority   We are giving student mental health and well-being activities more priority
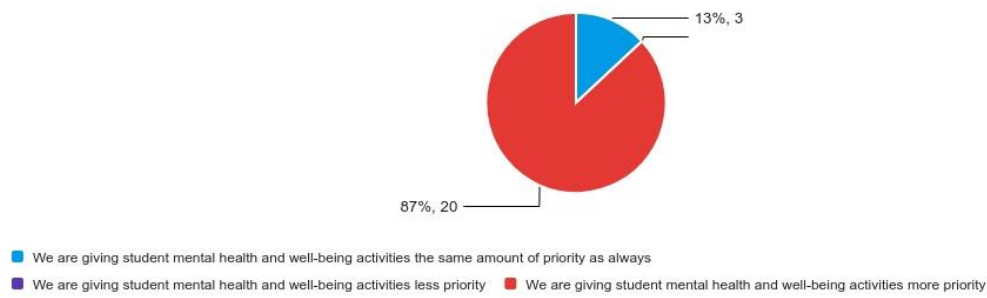
Figure 5

The open text comments in response to the question: "Since the COVID-19 pandemic, has the library implemented any new initiatives/activities for student mental health and well-being?" provided some interesting details and context in support of this.

Specific and, perhaps, novel activities included therapy dogs, installation of a "CUBBIE" (sensory regulation pod), arts and crafting activities such as mindful colouring sheets, games and puzzles were mentioned by participants. "Human Library"(Human Library, 2022) events were held in two libraries, with topics pertaining to well-being and mental health.

In addition, other new initiatives, which could be viewed as more "traditional" library services such as making more resources available online for accessibility, the creation of well-being collections either digitally or in print and new leisure reading collections were commented on.

In direct response to the ongoing cost of living crisis and student accommodation crisis, particularly in the larger cities, some institutions abolished fines on overdue materials in an effort to reduce student stress.

4.6.1 Impact of COVID-19: Space

In addition to specific measures and standalone events, the library space itself was a focus where changes could be made to create a more supportive environment for well-being. The majority of respondents, when asked if the library had changed it's use of space to support mental health and well-being activities since COVID-19, answered either "yes" to this question or selected the statement "we are planning to change our use of space in the future" (See Table 8).

Table 8. Q10. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, has the library changed its use of space to support student mental health and wellbeing activities? (n=23)	%	No.
Yes	52%	12
We are planning to change our use of space in the future	22%	5
No	17%	4
We changed our use of space before the pandemic	9%	2

Library space was a recurring theme in the open text comments with several participants commenting on the changing use of space since the pandemic. The language used to describe the spaces was of interest; respondents used the words "dedicated" or "designated" alluding to the repurposing of space with this specific focus in mind, rather than just a biproduct of a general space review. In one case, a respondent reported the major redevelopment of an entire library floor with well-being a key consideration of this redesign.

One individual commented on incorporating a "biophilic" principle to the library environment. Talking about the benefits of this for mental health and well-being another individual stated:

"We have focused on the library being a place of quiet reflection and learning and our

students have responded well to this. We have a library courtyard with a few trees and shrubs

and have seating facing this space… generally the idea was to connect with nature"

Other key themes refer to the "sensory" nature of well-being spaces, with this term being repeated in a considerable number of the open text comments. For example, several individuals referred to incorporating sensory furniture and sensory rooms, in addition to more study specific sensory computer work areas. The notion of accessibility and its link to well-being is alluded to in a number of comments. One respondent commented:

"the Library has designed a 3D online Virtual Tour and has implemented a digital

wayfinding system to reduce the stress of navigating physical spaces and to promote

inclusion and accessibility"

4.7 Future planning

The last question in the survey was aimed at understanding what initiatives participants would be interested in implementing in the future to promote student well-being and mental health as a library service. The results in Table 9 indicate that formalised campus partnerships were a priority for the majority, in addition to specific training for library staff. Significant numbers also felt that a community of practice or working group would be useful across institutions on the island of Ireland.

Table 9. Q15. What initiatives for student mental health and wellbeing would you like to see undertaken on the island of Ireland? (n=22)	%	No.
Formal partnerships with other University/College student services	73%	16
Training courses/workshops specifically for library staff	73%	16
A special interest working group/community of practice	50%	11
Other	9%	2

4.8 Summary

In summary, the results in this chapter indicate that academic libraries in across Ireland are taking an active role in the support of student mental health and well-being by providing a variety of services. The open text comments provide further insights into the motivations and drivers for doing so as well as some of the barriers and challenges that are faced. In addition, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student mental health and well-being has placed an emphasis on provisions of services with innovative uses of space and new collections in response to this. Furthermore, libraries are seeking to initiate partnerships with other student services as part of a whole campus approach. The next chapter will move on to discuss the implications of these findings.

5. **Discussion**

5.1 Introduction

Despite many individual libraries in Ireland developing well-being and mental health supports enthusiastically, there is a dearth of evidence in the literature to document and support this. The two main research questions prompted by the literature review were:

- What role do academic libraries in Ireland play in supporting student mental health and well-being?
- Has COVID-19 changed the way libraries are providing support?

This chapter will aim to delineate the approach that academic libraries in Ireland have taken in providing mental health and well-being services to students. It will provide an in-depth discussion of the findings of the previous chapter and the themes that emerged. It will also consider how the findings support or contradict previous studies and whether this research can contribute to the existing body of literature.

5.2 Conceptualisation of well-being in the library

A fundamental question posed at the beginning of the questionnaire to librarians was how they understood the problem around well-being and mental health. Without a clear definition of the issue and its causes, attempts at solutions could be misdirected. Cox and Brewster argue that it could even become damaging to the library profession if a lack of expertise on the meaning of well-being and how to address it led to confusion of what a library is, and what being a librarian means (Cox & Brewster, 2021).

A minority of librarians reported that the provision information about mental health and well-being issues was how they defined the problem they were trying to address. This was a surprising finding since the professional role of a librarian is to provide information. Cox and

Brewster (2021) contend that "a sustainable response from the profession to the "crisis" in well-being needs to be rooted in the professional knowledge base" (p.161). An alternative explanation to this finding could be that respondents viewed the provision of information to be included within the question choice option of addressing general mental health and well-being issues. The majority of librarians surveyed agreed that this was how they defined the problem.

5.3 Drivers and motivations

An initial objective of this project was to investigate why libraries are providing mental health and well-being support to students. Although some libraries are directly responding to the needs of their students, most participants reported that they were taking the initiative to align with the strategic aims of the parent institution. These results reflect those of Cox and Brewster (2020) who also found this to be the case in their study of academic libraries and well-being supports in the UK.

Rather than being passive partners, libraries in Ireland are creating opportunities to align with institutional goals. The open text comments provide some insight into the attitudes and beliefs of respondents when it comes to the key motivations for mental health and well-being provision for students. Many enthusiastic accounts of library-led activities and promotions in connection with wider campus initiatives were reported. The findings from this research indicate that strategic priorities for academic libraries are closely aligned with institutional goals. However, there is little evidence that the libraries are formalising their own policies for the provision of student mental health and well-being support. In contrast, the belief that the library is an appropriate place for providing well-being services, and that staff have a responsibility for the provision of them is evident from the open text comments:

"I think our Library places quite an emphasis on its role in supporting student mental health and well-being"

"We are working hard to investigate and respond to students' needs"

These statements are consistent with the literature that places the library in a unique position on campus to provide mental health and well-being support (Bladek, 2021; Llewellyn, 2019; Ramsey & Aagard, 2018). However, not all responses reflected the same view, one individual commented:

"We have a student experience team under which mental health services exist. We are not trained to deal with student's mental health"

There are similarities between this belief and Walton's (2018) argument that well-being services should not be duplicated on campus. In addition, it also raises an important question regarding the expectations of library staff who are providing well-being and mental health support services. Although most institutions around Ireland are providing some training for library staff, only a small number of respondents reported formally accredited training in their organisations for mental health support. This would suggest that the type of training is largely superficial, perhaps with the purpose of "detecting" or "signposting" rather than an intervention-based approach (Cox & Brewster, 2020).

This study did not require respondents to comment on their own mental health and well-being, however one respondent offered this candid observation which provides some insight into the emotional toll of providing mental health and well-being:

"I am not qualified and I have enough to deal with with [sic] my own mental health and can't take on other peoples"

Library staff well-being should be considered as an important element of Cox and Brewster's (2020) holistic model. This study did not aim to investigate this aspect of the model, but it is an essential area for research in the future. In her recent work, Rimmer (2024) states that by creating a culture of well-being in the workplace, library leaders can increase service quality and job satisfaction amongst their staff.

5.4 Activities and Services

The variety of activities the different libraries around Ireland are providing for student mental health and well-being are many and varied. The enthusiasm and enterprise in which activities are being provided is evident as revealed in the open text comments, particularly regarding new initiatives post COVID 19.

It has been useful to compare the results of this study to the holistic model that Cox and Brewster (2020) presented as a framework, through which to examine how academic libraries in Ireland are supporting student mental health and well-being. The eight dimensions of this model are: "*inherent library value, library services impact, well-being as a library service, detection, hosting, signposting, library as a good partner and library staff well-being"* (p.8). In her literature review, Bladek (2021) categorises the four main areas of library support for mental health and well-being as: partnerships, collections, services and space. The findings of this research reflect the dimensions of Cox and Brewster's (2020) holistic model and are consistent with Bladek's (2021) categories, with a significant majority of respondents confirming that the impact of COVID-19 has increased the priority of these activities.

Most importantly, almost all surveyed agreed that providing an efficient and friendly library service contributed to student wellness, indicating that this is at the heart of what academic libraries do. Supporting this view Ramsey & Aagard (2018) argue that it is the day-to-day interactions with students that contribute to well-being and promote good mental health.

Furthermore, Cheveney (2023) states that librarians have frequent, daily opportunities to create a sense of belonging, promoting well-being through small scale transactions with students, particularly through being attentive and listening to their concerns.

Many libraries reported more "novel" activities for student well-being, such as arts and crafting activities, dog therapy sessions and hosting events such as book clubs and movie nights. Despite the number of varied activities reported, it was evident from the data that the vast majority of initiatives focused on library collections and library space.

Evaluation of such events, however, was often anecdotal with few libraries reporting systematic tools to measure success. This finding is consistent with other studies:

measurement of the concept of well-being is challenging. Nevertheless, without any form of evaluation it is difficult to justify the implementation of any initiatives (Cox & Brewster, 2021). To demonstrate effectiveness of interventions, more robust metrics are essential to demonstrate value and allocation of resources (J. Cox, 2021). Moreover, Bladek (2021) states that by carefully designing evaluations which measure the impact on students' overall well-being, libraries can secure institutional support for these initiatives.

5.4.1 Collections

Consistent with the literature, this study found that library collections continue to be an important support, with well-being and bibliotherapy collections being popular as a means to contribute towards well-being (Azadbakht & Englert, 2018; Cox & Brewster, 2021; Whitmer et al., 2019). Although these types of collections have been common in academic libraries for several years, some participants saw the post-COVID period as an opportunity to "revitalise" their mental health and well-being collections with other libraries introducing alternative formats such as an electronic well-being collection.

Creating fiction or "leisure" reading collections was reported by 48% of respondents as an activity provided by the library to promote positive student mental health and well-being. In addition to supplying fiction books for lending, one library reported a new book swapping initiative since COVID that promotes "sustainable" reading for pleasure, in a designated space. This supports evidence from previous observations. Dewan (2023) recommends that recreational reading collections be housed separately rather than integrated within a main collection as this can "serve as an oasis to read, relax and de-stress" (p.10). In addition, studies have suggested that it is a cost-effective method for libraries to help improve student mental health (Levine, et al., 2020).

5.4.2 Space

University libraries in Ireland, in common with other countries, have had to adapt to the shift to digital collections, in addition to changing pedagogies which influence the use of library space. As O'Donnell and Anderson state (2021), COVID-19 has highlighted the value of the library as a physical space which can serve multiple student needs. Responses were positive to the question regarding the change of space since the pandemic to support student mental health and well-being activities, with some respondents noting that changes had taken place prior to COVID. The importance of having rooms or areas specifically for well-being purposes were stressed in the open text comments, from installing small "CUBBIE" sensory regulation pods to the redevelopment of entire library floors.

5.4.3 Equality, diversity and inclusion

The link between equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and well-being was particularly striking from the open text comments. EDI was not alluded to in any of the questions in the survey, but many participants commented on activities relating to this. For example, several

libraries have incorporated sensory spaces and furniture into their buildings as a response to student well-being:

> *"We have implemented a [NAME] project to improve the sensory environment across all Library spaces. We are also rolling out Equality, Diversity & Inclusion training to all frontline staff. We have conducted research with Occupational Therapists to inform the above initiatives"*

One library has even promoted a campus library as a *"designated autism friendly"* space to provide well-being support for students with neurodiversity requirements. Other libraries commented on their partnerships with disability support services to provide accessible technology. "Human Library" events were also mentioned by two institutions as an initiative to support mental health and well-being. These results seem to be consistent with the literature that suggests student well-being is supported by diversity and inclusion initiatives (Jocson-Singh et al., 2020; Pionke, 2020). Furthermore, Appleton (2020) places student engagement through initiatives like this as a key measure of quality and value of an institution. To attract and retain students, universities must be responsive to their requirements and needs.

5.5. Whole Campus Approach

As discussed in the literature review; to demonstrate relevance and value, libraries must align with the strategic aims of the parent institution (J. Cox, 2021). In view of this, it is surprising that none of the respondents reported formally coordinating with institutional strategy. In contrast, just over half of respondents stated that the library was formally involved with a whole campus approach to student mental health and well-being, suggesting that partnerships with other campus services are strong, but formal institutional policies governing initiatives

might not be in place. This view was reflected in one of the open text comments by a respondent who noted that:

"...there isn't always joined up thinking from the university on this. Mental health and support services are very separate..."

This supports previous research by Cox and Brewster (2022) in the UK who found that despite libraries taking initiatives to align with institutional strategy, formal integration was lacking. This has led to insufficient resources being allocated to libraries for the provision of supports, creating barriers to providing services.

Furthermore, a study by Bennett et al. (2024) reports on the growing numbers of "well-being teams" which are embedded in university departments across the UK, thus emphasising the importance of the whole university approach. The conclusion of their study was that support services "cannot work in isolation of broader pedagogical, social and even societal concerns" (p.384).

More qualitative research methods, such as interviews, would have been the preferred method to elicit accurate representations of key drivers and beliefs and this is something to be considered for further research.

5.5.1 Partnerships

Partnerships with other campus services were positively mentioned by respondents. This would suggest that libraries and other student support services actively seek ways to come together, although as previously noted, not necessarily in a formalised approach. Henrich (2020) states that by "creatively partnering with other campus units…. libraries can increase their contributions to students' holistic well-being and academic success" (p. 235).

Furthermore, Cox and Brewster (2020) argue that well-being is frequently seen as a multi-dimensional issue which requires multi-professional support.

In agreement with this argument, the connection between mental health and well-being and disability support services was reported by several respondents. This, perhaps, is a natural partnership that academic libraries tend to cultivate as it reflects an inherent goal. As Jocson-Singh et al. (2020) state "For the library profession, diversity and inclusion have increasingly become part and parcel of upholding the fundamental values that librarianship promotes" (p.93).

5.6 Barriers to providing support

The most reported inhibitor to providing well-being support was a lack of resources – both in funding and with staff. Despite the importance placed on student well-being and mental health by universities, direct funding for initiatives was rarely reported by libraries in the survey. Comparing this research to other similar studies confirms this is not a unique challenge to Irish libraries (Cox & Brewster, 2022; Hall & McAlister, 2021). Staff are frequently taking on responsibility for providing student support in addition to their formal job role, although it is encouraging to note that one library reported the creation of a "Student Engagement Librarian" under which responsibility for student well-being would fall.

Lack of staff expertise was another key barrier, and as previously discussed, although training is provided by most institutions, it is rarely in the form of an accredited course. This absence of formal training could cause staff to lack confidence in the promotion of activities or responding to a challenging situation regarding a student's mental health. This aligns with the research by Conroy (2018) who found that when staff participated in formal Mental Health First Aid courses, levels of confidence rose when dealing with students in distress. There

was no mention in any of the responses of specific courses run for library staff, and this is something that the majority of respondents felt would be beneficial in the future.

Notably, lack of staff interest and lack of support from senior management were rarely reported as barriers, suggesting that the provision of student well-being support was viewed positively at all staffing levels.

5.7 Summary and Conclusion

This research has aimed to provide an overview and analysis of the types of student well-being and mental health support initiatives that are being provided in academic libraries in Ireland. In general, the participants responses to the survey questions and their additional comments support much of the literature and confirm previous studies. Cox and Brewster's (2020) holistic model was found to be applicable in the Irish academic library context, with perhaps the exception of library staff well-being, since this was not an objective of the research.

Overall, libraries in Ireland believe that the provision of services to promote student mental health and well-being is a significant role and enthusiastically aim to create opportunities to partner with other support services on campus to do so.

The formalisation of library policy for the provision of such services is not so well documented, and some respondents felt that this was an important area to address. In contrast, most participants agreed with the statement *"The library is formally involved with a "whole campus" approach to mental health and wellbeing"* indicating that the library is included in campus wide conversations.

The next chapter will consider some conclusions derived from this study and offer recommendations for further research.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will present a summary of the key findings from this research and will examine to what extent the objectives of this study have been fulfilled. It will then give suggestions for further research, considering the limitations of this study. In addition, some recommendations will be made.

6.2 Key findings

Academic libraries in Ireland are enthusiastically providing a variety of activities and services that promote the positive well-being and mental health of their students. Although novel activities such as arts and crafting events and animal therapy sessions are popular, this research found that traditional library activities, for example providing collections and an efficient and friendly service that promotes learning, were the most common ways that libraries engage in support.

The key drivers for provision of services came from both top-down and bottom-up influences. These included the motivation to align with organisational strategy, and a concern for students and awareness of pressures impacting on student well-being at a staff level. Library well-being strategies were not always formalised, preventing a systematic approach to provision and evaluation. Initiatives were often led by one team in the library, with some institutions acknowledging that all staff have a level of responsibility to provide well-being and mental health support. It is not evident from the results of this study to what degree staff feel confident providing support.

Partnerships with other campus services were common but these often lack formality - resulting in fragile relationships between the academic library and other support services. A

natural relationship appears to be with disability support services, and well-being initiatives are often associated with the promotion of equality, diversity and inclusion. The whole university approach is acknowledged formally by most libraries, but formally coordinating with organisational strategy was not mentioned as the main driver for service provision. This suggests that despite alignment with institutional policies, the library is not fully integrated with the whole university approach to well-being and mental health provision. This finding supports previous studies in the literature.

Lack of resources, both in funding and with staff are key inhibitors to service provision, but barriers involving staff interest and lack of "buy in" from management are rarely mentioned. This is reflected in the frequency and variety of activities and services that libraries are currently involved with to support student well-being and mental health.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused many libraries to place a higher priority on the provision of activities and services, with a focus on library space; both for hosting events and designation of specific areas that promote well-being and positive mental health.

Looking towards the future, academic librarians in Ireland would like to avail of more specialised training for staff to fulfil their role in supporting students. In addition, a more formalised or "joined up" approach within institutions was frequently sought by libraries.

6.3 Evaluation of aims and objectives

The aims and objectives of this study were to answer the broad research questions: how are libraries in Ireland providing services to support student mental health and how has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted this service provision. Other research questions involved examining motivations and the conceptualisation of the problem that was being addressed.

These aims and objectives were fulfilled largely through this study. A clear overview of the types of provisions by libraries in Ireland has been achieved through the responses to the questions in the survey. It has also been possible to evaluate whether formalised policies and partnerships are common in Irish academic libraries. The open text responses provided some context to answers and through the analysis of the language used in these comments, it was possible to gain a deeper understanding of the beliefs and motivations of the respondents. Nevertheless, the approach taken towards this research was primarily quantitative and therefore the data obtained was largely categorical. In view of this, it is difficult to make general conclusions regarding the thoughts and feelings of respondents.

This study is the first to examine mental health and well-being supports in the Irish academic library context, since there is no evidence in the literature of a comprehensive overview of this service provision in Ireland. It supports the previous research that has been carried out in the UK and US and contributes to the body of literature on this topic.

6.4 Limitations

The low number of responses to the survey precludes any general conclusions, and as such, all findings should be viewed tentatively. Another limitation of this study is the lack of responses from Northern Ireland. Only two respondents identified themselves to be from libraries in Northern Ireland, therefore any significant demographic comparisons between the Republic of Ireland could not be made. Another limitation was the absence of detailed data collected regarding the different institutions. The name of the university or college was not sought in the questionnaire to protect the identity of respondents. However, this detail would have eliminated the possibility of duplicate responses from the same institutions.

6.5 Scope for further research

This study has produced a general overview of what is happening in Irish academic libraries, mainly in the Republic of Ireland. A further study of libraries in Northern Ireland would be informative since cross-border consortia exist and an overview of the entire island of Ireland was the aim of this study.

To examine and investigate the beliefs and feelings of academic librarians towards the provision of student mental health and well-being, a further qualitative study would be beneficial. It is evident from this research that individual libraries are enthusiastic about their services, but further research is important to understand why. In addition, the well-being of library staff was not examined in this study, nevertheless, this is an important aspect of service delivery and provision. An in-depth study of well-being in the workplace could provide valuable insight into how cultures of well-being are cultivated.

A significant minority of participants reported that responding to student concerns was the key driver for service provision. To understand what the concerns of students are and how best to provide support it would be beneficial to conduct research with them, perhaps with a focus group.

6.6 Recommendations

Following on from conducting this research project, the suggestions below are for consideration for library directors and heads of service:

1. **Library policy – Strategic plan**

Placing student well-being and mental health specifically within the library's strategic plan could prioritise service delivery. Policies regarding staff training, partnerships with other

support services on campus and effective evaluation of supports provided will ensure that student well-being is placed high on library business plans and agendas.

2. Designated coordinator

Create, or adapt an existing role for responsibility for student well-being and mental health. This role would include keeping policies and procedures up to date, cultivating and creating partnerships with students and other campus services and providing effective provisions in the library to promote positive well-being for students and staff.

3. Formal training for staff

Training courses specifically for library staff should be provided on a regular basis. Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) is an accredited training course which provides staff with the necessary tools to deal with situations that can occur in libraries, in addition to providing staff with background knowledge of mental health issues.

4. Community of Practice/Special interest group

Use existing consortia such as the Consortia of National and University Libraries (CONUL) or the professional Library Association of Ireland (LAI) to create a special interest group or community of practice to provide practitioners with the opportunity to share knowledge and best practices.

6.6 Concluding remarks

Student mental health and well-being provision is a strategic priority for higher education institutions in Ireland. In order to align with organisational policy, academic libraries in Ireland are taking steps to create well-being opportunities and promote positive mental health. This study has investigated how this is being done, and the key drivers and barriers. It

has provided some insight into the thoughts and beliefs of academic librarians and identified some areas which could be improved to create better service provision.

There is a necessity for continued research into this critical area since student mental health and well-being is a growing priority in higher education globally.

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Appendix i

Participant information sheet, consent form and full questionnaire

Student Mental Health & Academic Libraries in Ireland

Project Title

"How are academic libraries in Ireland supporting the well-being and mental health of students?"

Invitation

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide whether or not to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

Purpose of project

The mental health and well-being of students has been considered a priority by Universities and other third level institutions in Ireland and the United Kingdom, particularly during and since the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this research project is to gain an overview of the types of supports that academic libraries on the island of Ireland are providing for student wellbeing and to promote good mental health. The research is part of an educational project and will result in a dissertation which is in partial fulfilment of a Master of Arts in Library and Information Management Services.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen as a participant because you are working as a professional in an academic library and provide services for students.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep. You can withdraw at any time before submitting the questionnaire without any negative consequences. You do not have to give a reason. Once the questionnaire has been submitted, it will not be possible to withdraw from the research as the survey is anonymous and no personal data will be collected to identify participants. Please note that that by choosing to participate in this research, this will not create a legally binding agreement, nor is it intended to create an employment relationship between you and the

University of Sheffield.

What will happen to me if I take part? What do I have to do?

The questionnaire will take approximately 15-20 minutes of your time to complete. There will be a mixture of multiple choice and open text questions. At no stage will you be asked to provide any personal information, including your own wellbeing or mental health. The questions relate only to services provided to students. After submission, there will be no need for any further follow-up unless the participant wishes to reach out to the researcher.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part? What are the risks?

There are no anticipated disadvantages or risks in taking part in this research project other than giving of your time to complete the questionnaire. However, because of the sensitive nature of the topic of mental health, you may not wish to participate. If you have any concerns while completing the questionnaire you can withdraw at any stage before submission. Please see section 15 for contact details if you should wish to report a concern.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will document the work that is being done on the island of Ireland in academic libraries to support the mental health and wellbeing of students. It is also hoped that this will contribute to the existing body of research in this area.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that we collect during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will only be accessible to members of the research team. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications.

What is the legal basis for processing my personal data?

As participation in this research is anonymous, it is not anticipated that we will collect any personal data, however according to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis we are applying in order to process your personal data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found in the University's Privacy Notice https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general.'

What will happen to the data collected and the results of the research project?

Only the research team at the University of Sheffield will have access to your data and personal information. We may use the data from this study to inform future related research projects. Also, due to the nature of this research it is likely that other researchers may find the data

collected to be useful in answering future research questions.

Who is organising and funding the research?

This study is organised and funded by the University of Sheffield.

Who is the Data Controller?

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by the Information School.

What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research or report a concern or incident?

If you are dissatisfied with any aspect of the research and wish to make a complaint, please contact Dr. Andrew Cox, a.m.cox@sheffield.ac.uk in the first instance. If you feel your complaint has not been handled in a satisfactory way you can contact the Head of the Information School, Professor Briony Birdi b.birdi@sheffield.ac.uk. If the complaint relates to how your personal data has been handled, you can find information about how to raise a complaint in the University's Privacy Notice: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general. If you wish to make a report of a concern or incident relating to potential exploitation, abuse or harm resulting from your involvement in this project, please contact the project's Designated Safeguarding Contact Dr. Andrew Cox, a.m.cox@sheffield.ac.uk. If the concern or incident relates to the Designated Safeguarding Contact, or if you feel a report you have made to this Contact has not been handled in a satisfactory way, please contact the Head of the Department of the Information School, Professor Briony Birdi, b.birdi@sheffield.ac.uk and/or the University's Research Ethics & Integrity Manager (Lindsay Unwin; l.v.unwin@sheffield.ac.uk).

Contact for further information

If you have any questions or wish to learn more about the project please contact Claire Mason, ccmason1@sheffield.ac.uk or Dr Andrew Cox, a.m.cox@sheffield.ac.uk

Finally, thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet which you can keep. (31/05/24)

The University of Sheffield Information School Consent Form:

How are academic libraries in Ireland providing mental health and well-being support to students?

Taking Part in the Project

• I have read and understood the project information sheet dated 31/05/2024. (If you answer No to this question, please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean).

• I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.

• I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include taking part in a survey by answering questions in a questionnaire regarding mental health and well-being services to students.

• I understand that by choosing to participate as a volunteer in this research, this does not create a legally binding agreement nor is it intended to create an employment relationship with the University of Sheffield.

• I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time before submitting the questionnaire. I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.

How my information will be used during and after the project

• I understand that no personal details such as name, phone number, address and email address etc. will be collected in this project.

• I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will not be named in these outputs unless I specifically request this.

• I understand and agree that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

• I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use my data in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers

• I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield

Further information, including details about how and why the University processes your personal information, how we keep your information secure, and your legal rights (including how to complain if you feel that your personal information has not been handled correctly), can be found in the University's Privacy Notice https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general.

This project is supervised by Dr Andrew Cox: a.m.cox@sheffield.ac.uk. If you have any difficulties with, or wish to voice concern about, any aspect of your participation in this study, please contact Dr Kate Miltner & Dr Zeyneb Kurt, Research Ethics Coordinators, Information School, The University of Sheffield (ischool_ethics@sheffield.ac.uk).

I agree to take part in the research project as described above

◯ Yes (1)

◯ No (2)

Page Break

Q1 Please select the statement that best describes your involvement with student mental health and well-being activities provided by the library

○ I am responsible for student mental health and well-being activities and providing them is part of my role (4)

○ I am not responsible for student mental health and well-being activities but providing them is part of my role (5)

○ I am not responsible for student mental health and well-being activities and providing them is not part of my role (7)

Q2 What is the main reason that mental health and well-being related activities are being provided by the library?

○ We are responding to student demands/concerns (1)

○ We are taking the initiative to align with institutional strategy (2)

○ We are formally coordinating with institutional strategy (3)

○ We have been informed by research (4)

○ We have seen other libraries undertaking similar activities (5)

○ Other (6) _____

Q3 How would you define the problem you were trying to address? Select all that apply.

☐ To address student concerns around study or exams (8)

☐ To build a sense of community on campus (9)

☐ To address general mental health/well-being issues (10)

☐ To provide information about mental health/well-being issues (11)

☐ To address stigma around mental health (12)

☐ Other (13) _____

Q4 What activites are being provided by the library to promote positive student mental health and well- being? Select all that apply.

☐ Offering a designated physical space for well-being (1)

☐ Offering a designated digital space for well-being (e.g. library website, libguide etc.) (12)

☐ Providing an efficent and friendly library service which contributes to well-being by promoting aspirations to learn (15)

☐ Recommending a well-being or bibliotherapy collection (2)

☐ Directing students to support services (13)

☐ Recommending a reading for leisure collection (3)

☐ Improving the library space environment e.g. sound, lighting, seating (4)

☐ Recommending taking breaks through signs/posters etc. (5)

☐ Promoting library well-being initiatives through social media accounts (6)

☐ Animal therapy sessions e.g. dog petting (7)

☐ Arts and crafting activities (8)

☐ Mindfulness sessions (9)

☐ Yoga (10)

☐ Promoting wider campus initiatives (14)

☐ Other (11) _____

Q5 How is the success of the activities evaluated? Select all that apply.

☐ Specific survey/questionnaire after activities (4)

☐ Comments within a general library survey (5)

☐ Library staff observations (7)

☐ A national student survey (8)

☐ Measuring service use e.g. number of books borrowed from specific collections (9)

☐ We are not evaluating our well-being activities (10)

☐ Other (11) _____

Q6 Which library staff/team(s) are responsible for services supporting student mental health and well-being?

○ Everyone (1)

○ No one (2)

○ One person (3)

○ One team primarily (4)

○ Multiple teams (5)

○ A working group (6)

Q7 What training do library staff/team(s) have for supporting student mental health and well-being? Select all that apply.

☐ Short courses on mental health and well-being run by your institution (1)

☐ Formally credited training on mental health (2)

☐ Customer service training (3)

☐ No training (4)

☐ Other (5) _____

Q8 Since the COVID-19 pandemic, how would you describe the library's response to student mental health and well-being concerns?

○ We are giving student mental health and well-being activities more priority (1)

○ We are giving student mental health and well-being activities less priority (2)

○ We are giving student mental health and well-being activities the same amount of priority as always (3)

Q9 Since the COVID-19 pandemic, has the library implemented any new initiatives/activities for student mental health and well-being? Please describe below:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q10 Since the COVID-19 pandemic, has the library changed it's use of space to support student mental health and well-being activities?

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

○ We are planning to change our use of space in the future (3)

○ We changed our use of space before the pandemic (4)

Q11 Which statement best describes the involvement of the library with other campus support services? (i.e. the "whole campus" approach)

○ ⊗ The library is formally involved with a "whole campus" approach to student mental health and well-being (1)

○ ⊗ The library is informally involved with a "whole campus" approach to student mental health and well-being (3)

○ ⊗ The library is not involved with a "whole campus" approach to student mental health and well-being (4)

Q12 What type of "whole campus" activities/services is the library involved with, or has been involved with? Select all that apply.

☐ Training/information events for staff (1)

☐ Campus wide initiatives for student well being and mental health (2)

☐ Library initiatives/activities in collaboration with other campus services (3)

☐ Other (4) _____

Q13 What are the challenges that exist for providing student mental health and well-being services? Select all that apply

☐ Lack of resources - funding and/or staff time (1)

☐ Lack of staff interest (2)

☐ Lack of staff expertise (6)

☐ Lack of support from senior management (5)

☐ Lack of student participation (3)

☐ Other (4) _____

Q14 What further comments or observations would you like to express about student mental health and well-being services in your library?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q15 What initiatives for student mental health and well-being would you like to see undertaken on the island of Ireland in the future? Tick all that apply

☐ Training courses/workshops specifically for library staff (2)

☐ A special interest working group/community of practice (3)

☐ Formal partnerships with other University/College student services (4)

☐ Other (5) _____

Q16 Which type of academic sector is your library part of?

○ University Sector (1)

○ Technological Sector (2)

○ College of Higher/Further Education (3)

○ Private College (4)

○ Other (5) _____

○ Prefer not to say (6)

Q17 Which part of the country is your library located?

○ Republic of Ireland (1)

○ Northern Ireland (2)

○ Prefer not to say (3)

Q18 This is the end of the questionnaire - thank your for responses. To submit please click below:

○ Submit (1)

End of Block: Qualtrics Surveys Question Demo

Appendix ii

Examples of Coding and Thematic Analysis

"Word cloud" generated by Qualtrics

Q9 - Since the COVID-19 pandemic, has the library implemented any new initiatives/activities for student mental health and well-being? Please describe below:

Q9 - Since the COVID-19 pandemic, has the library implemented any new initiatives/activities for student mental health and well-being? Please describe below:

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, has the library implemented any new initiatives/activities for student mental health and well-being? Please describe below:

We have appointed a Student Engagement Librarian
Held VR Meditation in the Library
Promoted a range of different collections related to well being
Redeveloped one of our floors with well being in mind (included sensory spaces)

A well-being book collection and a designated space.

Unfortunately, I started working in this academic library in 2022, after students returned from the lockdowns. From what I can gather, MH and wellbeing was more at the forefront of staffs minds, and this contributed to us taking on new initiatives such as the Cubbie sensory space and book displays for MH campaigns, and widespread wearing of green See Change ribbons.

The Library introduced two spaces dedicated to well-being with pod rests, standing desks and bicycle desks.

We had therapy dogs in to visit which was a great success.

We started a craft circle.

Cubbie - sensory regulation pod

We have implemented a ▮▮▮▮▮e' project to improve the sensory environment across all Library spaces. We are also rolling out Equality, Diversity & Inclusion training to all frontline staff. We have conducted research with Occupational Therapists to inform the above initiatives.

We have focused on the library being a place of quiet reflection and learning and our students have responded well to this. We have a library courtyard with a few trees and shrubs and have seating facing this space, we have used it for poetry reading but generally the idea was to connect with nature. Our students love the idea. We have also worked closely with the disability and learning support teams to help us connect with all our students across a wide demographic. During exam time we encourage students to take a break and have jigsaws available, it's a positive distraction.

Introduced well-being e-book collection

Incorporated biophilic principle into the library environment

Launched a dedicated listening space, which both supports students academically but also provides an area for students to come and switch off from the stress of campus life

We have:
Made more library resources online, reducing the need for students to come in;
Introduced sensory furniture and sensory rooms;
Introduced a sensory computer work area;
Pop-up promotions on mental health and well-being, in line with the Institution's mental health drives;
Work more closely with the Disability department to identify needs for students, such reader pens, screen overlays, noise cancelling headphones, room screens.

Stress-relief stations around exam time with fruit, chocolate, calming teas, mindful colouring pages. Update to the Live Wise Book Therapy collection and online guide with titles that support mental health and wellbeing. Book swap carousels that promote sustainable reading and reading for pleasure. Fines for overdue books abolished to reduce student stress.

We have removed all lending fines as a direct response to student cost of living implications - fines were always a significant cause of stress for students we know.

We introduced a "live-wise lending collection" -working with our universities counselling service to identify and promote supportive material for a range of mental health areas

We are undergoing a refurbishment of our largest library with a view to providing enhanced student study spaces - lighting, decor, plants, sensory rooms, new individual/group spaces etc will make the library a more engaging and supportive space for students, we hope

We have acquired a CUBBIE (sensory space). We are looking at the physical space to see if we can make it more accessible and meeting with accessibility office to review this.

Well-being areas have been set up in every Library.
New collections of books and eBooks to support well-being
New activities such as games and colouring sheets have been introduced

Q14 - What further comments or observations would you like to express about student mental health and well-being services in your library?

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we are planning a new well being space as part of ongoing refurbishments

Our front desk staff are experienced in things like spotting or responding to students in distress. I'd like for them to take the lead on planning how best the library can help students MH, eg by recommending changes or additions to the library website and adding signage advertising MH resources or taking of breaks. Currently all signage in the stacks is directional, and MH content is presented only at the leisure book display and the information desk, where we keep student support services flyers and cards.

We have a student experience team under which mental health services exist. We are not trained to deal with students mental health and frankly I wouldn't want to take that on. I am not qualified and I have enough to deal with with my own mental health and can't take on other peoples. I'm happy to signpost students to resources but i can't take on their well-being myself.

I think our Library places quite an emphasis on its role in supporting student mental health and well-being.

The growing need for it particularly in the past few years is very noticeable

A new member of our team has experience of the use of bibliotherapy and we hope to build on this.

Potential initiatives should be identified in partnership with students.

Implementation can be more the responsibility of staff

We are working hard to investigate and respond to students' needs. Unfortunately, we don't always get the students in who desperately need our assistance. We need to be able to reach everyone, especially those who aren't aware that they may need us. Our resources are limited in this regard. Promotion is a big expenditure and, although the library itself is good at promoting on social media, we don't have the resources (both money and staff) to promote campus-wide or indeed, outside the campus community so as to attract possible future students.

It is often difficult to get students to attend in-person events that address their mental health or wellbeing. We've discovered that providing free tea, coffee and refreshments boosts engagement.

This is an area getting increasing attention during policy discussions and space reviews - we are focused on adapting our student spaces to be as welcoming and user friendly as possible.
We have extended our traditional front facing services into a new online Chat support - Social Media is also being utilized to reach out to and engage with students effectively.

A key university campaign this year was on identifying and supporting vulnerable students -We now work closely with our university student support unit to make sure we are aware of key referral options and services. Training is regularly provided to desk staff in this area

The initiative that we have set up in the last 3 years have been very successful and student participation / feedback has been positive.

Increasingly important area and one that can have a transformative impact on the student experience. Many academic staff report this to be the number one issue these days.

It can be difficult to provide the service we may want to at times due to staffing restrictions. For example, we would like to open earlier to accommodate students who are commuting to campus now due to accommodation crisis and high cost of living but we do not have sufficient staffing.

We would also like to provide kitchenette / microwave etc but this can be difficult to negotiate with Health & Safety unit.

We are struggling with lack of space

As libraries are front-facing, they interact with students across the departments and are well-placed to support students, but there isn't always joined-up thinking from the university on this. Mental health and support services are very separate, and we rely on like-minded individuals in that service to work with us, which is very personality-dependent.

The Library would benefit from a formalised approach to promoting well-being in a library context. This survey tool has given much food for thought in terms of the range of well-being initiatives a library could provide.

there does seem to be an attitude of "we're here to provide education, mental health is not our responsibility" amongst management in my place!

Code	Examples of text	Theme
Resources	Well-being collections, book displays, ebooks, book therapy, books swaps, live wise collection	**Library role: Collections**
Space	Library space, environment, area, refurbishment	**Library role: Physical Space**
Accessibility	Sensory pods, sensory spaces, disability and support, sensory furniture	**Equality, Diversity and Inclusion**
Working with other campus services	Worked closely with disability services, in line with institution, we have conducted research with occupational therapists	**Partnerships**
Attitudes towards well-being and mental health services	How best the library can help, I can't take on their well-being, our library places quite an emphasis, responsibility of staff, working hard to respond to students needs, who desperately need assistance	**Conceptualisation of well-being in the library**
Challenges	We don't have the resources, we are not trained in mental health, struggling with lack of space	**Barriers**
Staff	Front facing services, desk staff, member of our team, staff are experienced	**Library Role: Staff and training**

Appendix iii.

Ethics Approval letter

Claire Mason
Registration number: 220249298
Information School [a.k.a iSchool]
Programme: Library and Information Services Management

Dear Claire

PROJECT TITLE: How are academic libraries in Ireland providing mental health and well-being support to students?
APPLICATION: Reference Number 060546

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 03/06/2024 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 060546 (form submission date: 30/05/2024); (expected project end date: 31/01/2025).
- Participant information sheet 1138350 version 1 (30/05/2024).
- Participant consent form 1138351 version 1 (30/05/2024).

The following amendments to this application have been approved:

- Amendment approved: 13/06/2024

If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation please inform me since written approval will be required.

Your responsibilities in delivering this research project are set out at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely

Nia Hunt
Ethics Admin
Information School [a.k.a iSchool]

Please note the following responsibilities of the researcher in delivering the research project:

- The project must abide by the University's Research Ethics Policy: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/research-services/ethics-integrity/policy
- The project must abide by the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices Policy:
  https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.671066!/file/GRIPPolicy.pdf
- The researcher must inform their supervisor (in the case of a student) or Ethics Admin (in the case of a member of staff) of any significant changes to the project or the approved documentation.
- The researcher must comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data.
- The researcher is responsible for effectively managing the data collected both during and after the end of the project in line with best practice, and any relevant legislative, regulatory or contractual requirements.

Appendix iv.

Dissertation Research Diary

Meeting 1 (May) Date: 22/05/24

Work completed:

- Proposal completed and feedback received
- Initial ethics risk assessment form completed

Meeting contents: **Ethics Application Procedure and Survey Software**

- Review of ethics form: Areas of concern
- 1. Highly sensitive topic. Advice from A.C. to justify project as low risk in other areas of the form
- 2. Consent & Anonymity: personal information will not be collected, including email addresses and institution names. A.C. suggested including a question in the survey to record the type of third level institution as this might be useful data.
- Use of Qualtrics as survey software: Benefits of this are professional branding and ability to produce data analysis.

Planned goals:

- Complete and submit ethics application
- Finalise questionnaire wording
- Expand literature review

Meeting 2 (June) Date: June 2024

Work completed:

- Ethics application submitted and approved

Meeting contents: **Data collection and Piloting the Survey**

- Wording of questionnaire evaluated, changes to a few questions made
- Survey to be piloted with staff at my workplace

Planned goals:

- Pilot survey
- Distribute final survey

Meeting 3 (July) Date: 22/07/24

Work completed:

- Literature review completed
- Methodology completed

Meeting contents: **Data analysis and Reporting Findings – Advice:**

- Statistical analysis not the focus as there is little data that lends itself to complex statistical analysis. Comparisons between different academic sectors i.e. universities, technological colleges could be made.
- Focus on thematic analysis of open text comments and use these to complement the other questions to provide richer data
- Provide some level of context regarding demographic of Ireland e.g. higher education landscape, policies etc. for the background of topic, perhaps in the introduction and expand in methodology
- Presentation of findings can include tables, data visualisations etc. but be sure not to repeat information in the text that can clearly be seen elsewhere
- Make use of open text comments to quote to illustrate themes

Planned goals:

- Finish data analysis and send draft of findings for feedback
- Start work on the discussion and conclusion chapter
- Abstract, Research and reflection diary to do

Meeting 4 (August) Date: 16/08/24

Work completed:

- Data analysis and findings chapter
- Discussion chapter
- Conclusion
- Abstract

Meeting contents: **Discussion section, Appendices, Data storage**

- X storage – discussed what data needs to stored there: excel file of raw data and PDF of full Qualtrics report submitted
- Appendices – what needs to be included i.e. participant information sheet as part of the survey document, ethics approval document, example of coding for thematic analysis
- Discussion chapter – feedback on draft requested

Planned goals:

- Complete research diary and reflection
- Finish reference section
- Finish appendices
- When feedback is received from draft, edit accordingly
- Final proofread and submit

Reflection on Research

Supervisor Feedback 1: Choice of Approach

My initial choice of methodology was a mixed methods approach, using a quantitative approach with a survey, and then some interviews to gain qualitative data. The feedback provided on this approach was to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of employing a mixed methods study.

Reflection on feedback:

I had intended to take a qualitative approach to this research as I wanted to gain some rich data and investigate the beliefs and feelings of academic librarians who were providing student well-being and mental health services in their libraries. It became evident early on in the process that this would be time consuming and may not provide an overall picture of what is happening in Irish academic libraries. Therefore, my initial idea was to use a mixed methods approach.

The feedback I received was to consider the advantages and disadvantages of all approaches, and to analyse what it was that I wanted to gain from the project. A number of questions were posed by my supervisor to reflect on what approach would give me the greatest insight and what were the skills I wished to gain by using any of the methods.

I was not sure what to expect from the process of having a supervisor for a dissertation project and I had initially thought that my supervisor would advise either for or against taking a certain approach. It was somewhat daunting to have to make this decision based on my own feelings about the project as I lacked confidence in my ability. However, this feedback was extremely useful because it encouraged me to reflect on what it was that I wanted from the

project in order to make the final decision of which approach to choose. I eventually chose to take a mainly quantitative approach, based on the time that I had to complete the project, but also I included some open-text questions in my survey to elicit some richer data.

I think this important piece of feedback at the initial stage of planning the dissertation set the scene for me to be in the "driving seat" of the project. It also gave me a clearer view of what to expect from a supervisor/student partnership and gave me confidence to make decisions going forward.

Supervisor Feedback 2: Questionnaire

I received feedback regarding the questionnaire I had designed, based on an existing questionnaire by my supervisor. He suggested a few edits to some of the questions which I had not considered.

Reflection on feedback:

I had designed my questionnaire based on an existing questionnaire that my supervisor had used in a previous study. The feedback I received was to expand the options of two of the multiple choice questions and to increase the size of the text box for one of the open text questions. At first I thought that I did not need to change any of the options but on further consideration I saw the value in doing so.

I had thought that using an existing questionnaire would not require much planning but

this feedback helped me to see how careful design of a questionnaire is vital in quantitative research. The changes that I made to the questions made an important impact on the kind of data that I received from the survey. The open text responses formed the basis of my thematic

analysis and having a larger text box encouraged participants to write longer responses. This type of feedback, at the time, felt like a small detail but it proved to be significant. Although I had piloted my questionnaire with a number of colleagues, the insightful feedback from someone who had conducted a similar research project was invaluable.

This experience has taught me that even seemingly straightforward processes can involve careful planning and foresight. This proved to be extremely relevant for me in my current job role when creating effective questionnaires for the evaluation of staff induction processes.

Supervisor Feedback 3: Data Analysis

I was focused on creating statistical data analysis for my survey results. My supervisor encouraged me to look at the open text responses and focus on thematic analysis instead.

Reflection on feedback:

My most significant challenge during the entire dissertation process was analysing the data. This was the part of the research that I had least confidence in, I had not used software such as SPSS before and one of the reasons that I chose to use Qualtrics to administer the survey was the ability of this software to produce statistical data. After sending some of my Qualtrics data to my supervisor for feedback, he suggested that I did not have enough data to perform any significant statistical analysis and to focus on the open text responses instead.

This was both a relief and a challenge for me. Because I had been so focused on statistics I had mainly researched quantitative approaches for my methodology. I had not considered any type of qualitative methods in depth. My initial reaction was apprehension because I felt that I would have to change the entire structure of my methodology chapter, in addition to learning the process of thematic analysis. Fortunately, the amount of open text data was

relatively small, and I was able to review some of the online lectures and summer workshops on Blackboard which dealt with qualitative approaches and thematic analysis.

Analysing the open text responses proved to be one of the most enjoyable parts of this research, and it gave the multiple choice questions context. By extracting the rich data that these responses provided, I feel that this is what has brought my dissertation to life. Going through the process of this type of data analysis has enabled me to develop a skill that I would not have been able to do if I had focused purely on statistics. I also have learned to become more adaptable in the future when project plans need to change.

Supervisor Feedback 4: Make recommendations

My supervisor suggested including some recommendations for library directors and heads of service.

Reflection on feedback:

Although I had considered including some recommendations for best practice, I had not felt confident enough to include them. I think this is part of the "imposter syndrome" that I have felt since embarking on this Masters programme.

However, after receiving this feedback, I read through the full draft of the dissertation and realised the importance of making recommendations after conducting research, particularly if it has practical value. It also helped me to summarise the purpose of this project, which was to review the role of Irish academic libraries in providing well-being support to students and establishing what the barriers are in delivering service provision. Without making recommendations for best practice, the project is incomplete.

I reflected on what library directors could do to provide a more effective service, and after

reading back through my findings and discussion chapter, I felt more confident in making the

recommendations.