

ADOLESCENT MENTAL WELLBEING

Adolescent mental wellbeing has become a growing concern in the UK, with recent NHS data indicating that around 1 in 5 children and young people aged 8 to 25 now have a probable mental health disorder, a substantial rise compared with a decade ago.¹ Against this backdrop, understanding how sport and physical activity relate to wellbeing is increasingly important for education and sport systems.

Guddal et al.'s (2018) population-based Young-HUNT study in Norway found clear associations between physical activity, sport participation, and better mental health among adolescents. Higher overall physical activity levels were linked with lower odds of psychological distress and higher self-esteem and life satisfaction, particularly in senior high school students, even after accounting for potential confounders. Team sport participation stood out: adolescents involved in team sports showed more favourable mental health outcomes than those not participating, especially among girls, highlighting the social benefits of being part of a group. The study also identified gender and age differences, with the lowest engagement (and consequently lower mental health benefits) among older adolescent girls, reinforcing the importance of supporting continued PA and sport involvement through late adolescence. These findings underline that sport participation during teenage years is not only physically beneficial but associated with significant psychological wellbeing advantages, supporting broader public health and engagement strategies.

Barbieri et al. (2024), using a population-representative survey of 4,525 young people aged 7 to 19 in post-pandemic northern Italy, found that adolescents' psychosomatic complaints, such as headaches, sleep difficulties, irritability and feeling low, have remained elevated rather than returning to pre-COVID levels. Higher screen time and school-related stress were the strongest predictors of poorer psychosomatic health, with digital media use linked to more frequent somatic and emotional complaints. Participation in sport showed a protective association, particularly for boys, while girls and older adolescents reported the highest symptom levels overall. The findings suggest that many young people are experiencing chronic, stress-related health symptoms shaped by academic pressure, digital lifestyles and reduced physical activity, indicating that current adolescent mental wellbeing challenges are structural and likely to carry forward into later education stages.

Importantly, the relationship between activity and mental health appears to be reciprocal rather than one-directional. Ersoz (2017), in a study of 552 university students, found that poor mental health can itself become a barrier to participation, while inactivity can further worsen mood and wellbeing. This highlights that students experiencing distress may be the very group least likely to engage, reinforcing the need for supportive, low-pressure entry points into activity during vulnerable transition periods.

Within this broader wellbeing landscape, institutional support structures also matter. Nestor (2025) shows that structured academic and pastoral support systems play a vital role in

¹ <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2023-wave-4-follow-up/>

UNDERSTANDING THE NEXT GENERATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS



supporting young people's wellbeing alongside their sport participation. The case study shows that access to academic advisors, tutors, and study support helped student-athletes manage dual demands, reducing stress and supporting confidence and persistence. Strong, trusting relationships with staff and administrators were described as particularly influential, with students linking consistent support to more positive academic and personal experiences. Three elements were identified as especially helpful: dedicated support services, knowledgeable networks of staff and peers who understand student-athlete pressures, and protected spaces or time for study. Comparisons between contexts suggested that more formalised and integrated systems provided clearer support structures, whereas reliance on informal arrangements created variability in experience. The study concludes that institutions can strengthen student wellbeing and sustained sport engagement by better coordinating existing resources, clarifying support roles, and intentionally integrating academic and sporting pathways.

Universities are increasingly recognised as key settings for supporting student mental health through sport and physical activity, and there is emerging guidance on how to do this effectively. For example, resources co-produced by *BUCS* and *Student Minds* outline best practice for designing sport and activity programmes that explicitly support mental health, emphasising the importance of inclusive, peer-led opportunities that build shared identity, confidence, and social support alongside physical benefits. These guidelines recommend empowering sports staff and student leaders to create supportive environments, integrating wellbeing considerations into club culture, and tailoring activities to be accessible for students experiencing mental health difficulties.²

Strategic frameworks like *StepChange: Mentally Healthy Universities* further encourage higher education institutions to adopt a whole-university approach where mental health is a foundational priority across academic, social and physical domains, including sport and activity provision.³ Evidence from systematic research also suggests that many UK universities currently offer physical activity interventions to promote mental health, but these are often limited in scope; expanding opportunities that enhance capability, opportunity and motivation to be active could strengthen universities' role in supporting student wellbeing.

Overall, these sources suggest that universities can leverage sport and physical activity not just as a leisure offering but as part of integrated wellbeing strategies, for example, by embedding movement into campus culture, training staff to recognise mental health needs, measuring and demonstrating impact, and ensuring activities are safe, inclusive and responsive to individual student needs.

² https://hub.studentminds.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/university_sport_mental_health_resource.pdf

³ Universities UK (2020). *Stepchange: Mentally Healthy Universities*. London: Universities UK.