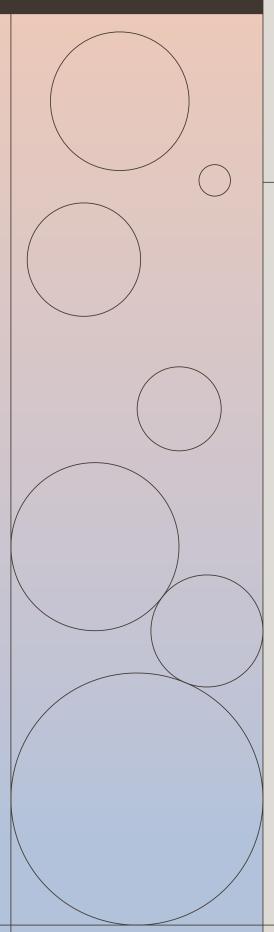


Office of Student Affairs





# Student Wellbeing Pulse

2024

Insights on MENTAL HEALTH, CONNECTION, and RESILIENCE on Campus

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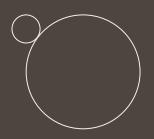
21 Actionable

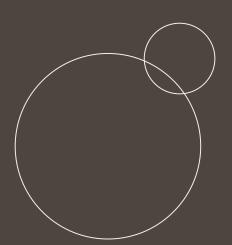
Insights

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We extend our gratitude to the AY23/24 Student Life and Wellness Survey (SLWS) team for their dedication to developing and conducting the survey. We also appreciate the AY24/25 SLWS publication team for their creativity and commitment to producing the resources that support this initiative.

Printed on FSC® certified paper.





#### **Foreword**



In an increasingly complex world, maintaining mental wellbeing is no longer a personal endeavour — it must be a shared commitment.

This publication, *Insights on Mental Health, Connection, and Resilience on Campus*, comes at a pivotal moment. It not only unveils valuable data on resilience-building and coping strategies but also sheds light on the deep sense of belonging that anchors us within our university community. These insights are not just numbers or theories; they are reflections of our collective efforts and the individual stories that define our shared journey.

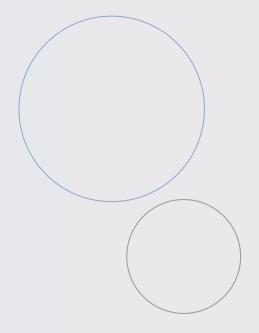
The call to action is clear: let us reframe how we think about wellbeing at NUS. Let it not be an afterthought, but the very foundation on which we build a vibrant, inclusive campus culture. By centring wellbeing in our lives – through meaningful connections, and active engagement – we not only nurture ourselves but also strengthen the bonds that hold us together as a community.

I encourage each reader to take this report as both a resource and a challenge. Together, let us ensure that our learning environment is not just a place of academic excellence but a sanctuary of growth, resilience, and belonging for all.

#### Associate Professor Ho Han Kiat

DEAN OF STUDENTS

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE



#### Introduction and Overview

The Student Life and Wellness Survey (SLWS) is an annual survey conducted by the NUS Office of Student Affairs to better understand various aspects of the student experience, including the overall wellbeing of NUS students.

It covers areas such as co-curricular participation, physical activity, volunteerism, mental wellbeing, and sense of belonging within the University community.

The 2024 survey was conducted from March to April 2024 and received responses from **8,049** full-time students. Responses were analysed to examine relationships between sociodemographic variables and wellbeing indicators and identify trends across 2022–2024.



#### Key findings

#### MENTAL WELLBEING

- Based on the PHQ-4<sup>1</sup> and PSS-4<sup>2</sup> scales, about 32% of students are at risk of anxiety and depression, and 53% report elevated stress.
- When faced with stressful situations, students typically turn to their friends (59%), family (36%) or religion (8%) for support. A quarter reported not turning to anyone for support.
- Half of surveyed students rely on adaptive coping strategies such as engaging in hobbies or spending time with others.
   Adaptive coping is associated with improved mental wellbeing and resilience.

#### CAMPUS PARTICIPATION AND CONNECTEDNESS

- 62% of students report feeling a sense of belonging to the community, a 3% increase from the previous survey. Strong social networks and student life were key contributors to belonging.
- Students reported a high rate of participation in cocurricular activities (CCAs) with 70% participating in CCAs and 61% doing so regularly, with those doing so also showing a greater sense of belonging and lower anxiety
- 31% of students volunteer at least monthly, a 7% increase since 2022, and volunteering was associated with higher resilience and belonging

#### RESILIENCE

 Based on the Brief Resilience Scale<sup>3</sup>, 74% of students report medium to high resilience, while 26% fall into the low resilience category. Students with higher resilience are less likely to experience anxiety and depressive symptoms in the face of higher stress.

#### Methodology and Demographics

#### Methodology

All NUS students (N=48,744 students) were invited to take part in the 2024 SLWS during the Academic Year 2023/2024. The survey, conducted from March 21 to April 18, 2024, received 8,049 responses, representing 17% of the full-time student population across 19 faculties, schools, and institutes. The 15-minute online survey covered key aspects of student life, including:

#### MENTAL HEALTH



- Anxiety, depression and stress
- Coping strategies and sources of support

#### CONNECTION



- Co-curricular participation and engagement
- Volunteering
- Sense of belonging

#### RESILIENCE



- Ability to cope with challenges and setbacks
- Relationship between resilience and wellbeing

#### The SLWS aims to:

a holistic assessment of

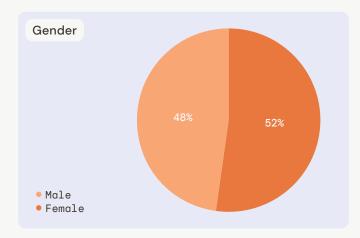
mental wellbeing:

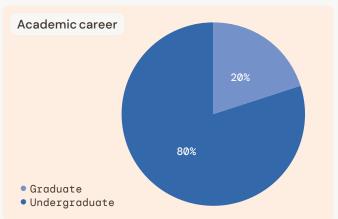
- Four scales (self-reported measures) were used for
- Assess students wellbeing: Evaluate students' mental wellbeing, assess the effectiveness of existing support infrastructure, and identify emerging needs.
- Understand campus belonging and engagement: Understand students' sense of connectedness to the university community, and participation in campus life activities.
- PHQ-4: A four-item questionnaire identifying individuals at higher risk for anxiety and depression.
- PSS-4: A four-item scale measuring perceptions of stress.
- Brief Resilience Scale: A six-item tool assessing the ability to bounce back or recover from stress.
- Sense of Belonging Scale<sup>45</sup>: A four-item measure of inclusion and acceptance in the university community.

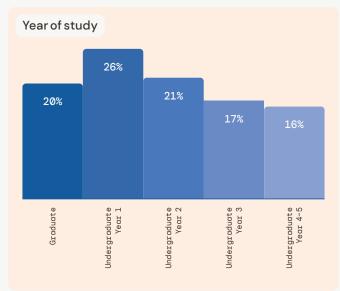
In this report, statistical significance is defined as p-value < 0.05, meaning that the likelihood of the observed relationship occurring by chance is less than **5%**.

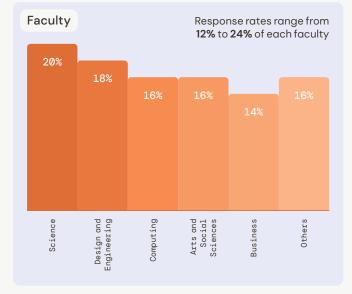
- 1 Kroenke, K., Spitzer, R. L., Williams, J. B., & Löwe, B. (2009). An ultra-brief screening scale for anxiety and depression: the PHQ-4. Psychosomatics, 50(6), 613-621
- 2 Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., & Mermelstein, R. (1983). A global measure of perceived stress. Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 24(4), 385. https://doi.org/10.2307/2136404
- 3 Smith, B. W., Dalen, J., Wiggins, K., Tooley, E., Christopher, P., & Bernard, J. (2008). The brief resilience scale: Assessing the ability to bounce back. International Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 15(3), 194–200. https://doi.org/10.1080/10705500802222972
- 4 Gehlbach, H. (2015). User Guide: Panorama Student Survey. Boston: Panorama Education. Retrieved from https://www.panoramaed.com/products/surveys/student-survey
- 5 Imperial College London. (2022). Sense of belonging scale. https://www.imperial.ac.uk/education-research/evaluation/what-can-i-evaluate/sense-of-belonging

#### **Demographics**









Of the **8,049** respondents, **52%** were female and **48%** male. Undergraduate students made up **80%**, with **26%** in their first year, **21%** in their second, and **33%** in their third year or beyond. Graduate students accounted for the remaining **20%**. Local students made up over **70%** (**69%** Singapore Citizens, **5%** Permanent Residents), and international students represented **27%**.

The largest groups were from the Faculty of Science (20%), College of Design and Engineering (18%), and both the School of Computing and Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (16% each). Business students comprised 14%, with the remaining 16% from other faculties or interdisciplinary programmes.

**43%** of students lived on campus. When asked about their academic workload, **56%** took the recommended load, **34%** managed an overload, and **10%** an underload.



FINDINGS

# Mental Wellbeing



University life is an exciting time for growth and exploration, yet it also presents unique challenges that can impact students' wellbeing.

This section explores several dimensions of mental health relevant to NUS students, specifically anxiety, depression, and stress. We also delve into coping strategies and the support systems students rely on during stressful times.

#### Anxiety, depression and stress

Feelings of anxiety, depression and stress are common as students navigate academic pressures, social expectations, and the transition to adulthood.

Research indicates that university students are in an age group that is highly vulnerable to mental health challenges, with the highest incidence of mental illness in Singapore occuring between ages 18 and 29<sup>6</sup>.

One-third (32%) of students are at risk of anxiety and depressive moods<sup>7</sup>, while 53% report elevated stress. Since 2022, these rates have declined slightly – by 4% for anxiety and depressive moods and 3% for stress – accompanied by reductions in mean anxiety (PHQ-4) and stress (PSS-4) scores (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4).

FIG. 1
 Prevalence of Anxiety and Depression (PHQ-4 ≥ 6)

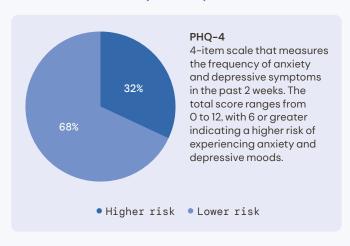
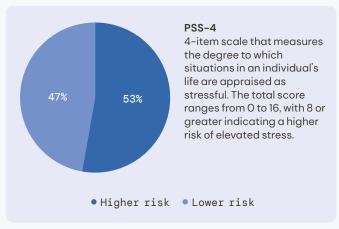
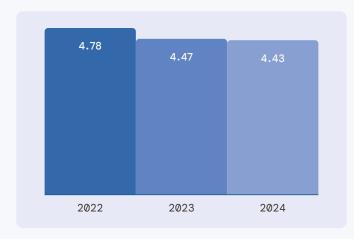


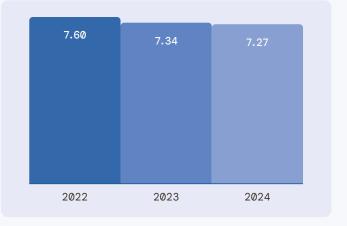
FIG. 2Prevalence of Elevated Stress (PSS-4 ≥ 8)



• FIG. 3
Mean Anxiety and Depression (PHQ-4) scores



• FIG. 4
Mean Stress (PSS-4) scores



- 6 Ministry of Health (MOH). (2023, September). National Population Health Survey (NPHS) 2022 report. Ministry of Health. https://www.moh.gov.sg/others/resources-and-statistics/nphs-2022
- 7 Regional and local studies on university students' mental health report similar prevalence rates, with about 30% to 40% of students experiencing some form of psychological distress.

#### Factors associated with anxiety and depressive moods (PHQ-4)

Analysis of the survey responses highlighted several factors associated with anxiety and depressive moods. The findings mentioned in this section are associations that were analysed to be statistically significant.

- Demographic factors: Females, first-year undergraduate students, and those with overloaded academic schedules were more likely to experience anxiety and depressive moods.
- Sleep: Poor sleep quality and inadequate sleep less than 7 hours each night were significant correlates of anxiety and depressive moods.

- Physical activity: Physical activity was protective, students who regularly exercised reported lower PHQ-4 scores compared to sedentary students.
- Campus participation: Students actively involved in campus activities, student organisations, or clubs tend to report lower PHQ-4 scores.
- Social support: Strong social networks emerged as a key protective factor. Students who turned to their friends or family members during difficult times reported lower PHQ-4 scores.
- Coping strategies: Adaptive strategies like socialising with others or exercising correlated with lower PHQ-4 scores compared to maladaptive approaches.

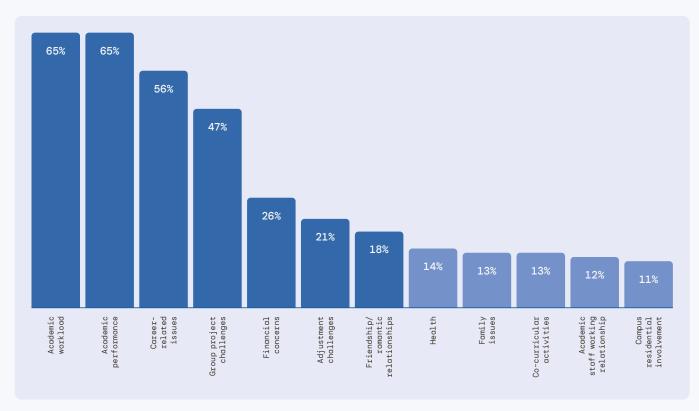
#### Sources of stress

The primary stressors are academic, with 65% of students citing a heavy academic workload and pressure to perform well as significant stressors. Additionally, career-related concerns, such as securing internships or full-time employment, affect 56% of students. Group projects (47%) are also a major stressor, as they often bring

challenges in coordination, time management, and collaboration.

Financial concerns affect **26%** of students, while **21%** of students – especially first-years and international students – struggle with adapting to university life and its demands. Lastly, **18%** reported stress from managing friendships and romantic relationships.

• FIG. 5
Sources of stress



#### Coping strategies

Individuals respond to stress in different ways, either by addressing the source or reducing emotional distress associated with the situation.

 Adaptive coping: Constructive stress management strategies such as engaging in hobbies, socialising, exercising and practising mindfulness.

grouped into three categories:

over time.

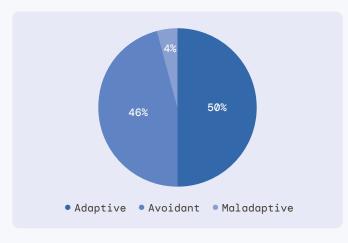
exercising and practising mindfulness.
Avoidant coping: Strategies like sleeping, comfort eating, social media, online gaming, or shopping, provide temporary relief but may exacerbate stress

In our survey, students indicated how frequently they engaged in 13 coping behaviours, which were

 Maladaptive coping: Harmful methods like withdrawing from people and/or activities, consuming alcohol and/or nicotine, and using medication or sedatives.

Half of the surveyed students used adaptive coping methods, 46% relied on avoidant coping, and 4% used maladaptive coping.

• FIG. 6
Coping strategies



#### HOW DOES ADAPTIVE COPING BENEFIT STUDENTS?

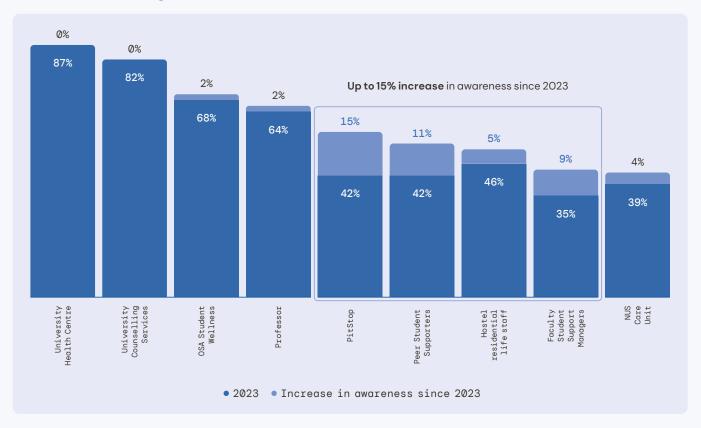
- Enhanced emotional wellbeing: We found that adaptive coping promotes greater sense of control and competence, with students significantly less likely to be at risk for anxiety and depressive moods.
- Increased resilience: Adaptive coping was associated with significantly higher resilience scores.

## Awareness of wellbeing resources

University resources, including counselling services, peer support programmes, residential life initiatives, and faculty support staff, play a vital role in supporting students' wellbeing. Awareness of these resources, including the PitStop, Peer Student Supporters (PSS), Student Support Managers (SSMs), and residential life staff, has risen by between **5%** and **15%** since 2023.



• FIG. 7 Awareness of wellbeing resources

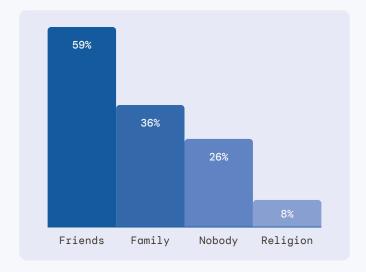


#### Sources of support

Strong social support can improve psychological wellbeing by promoting positive emotions and mitigating stress.

Within the University, social support facilitates adaptation to university life and serves as a protective factor during challenging situations. Friends (59%), family (36%), and religion (8%) were the main sources of support. In contrast, 26% of students reported not seeking support during stressful events.

• FIG. 8 Sources of support



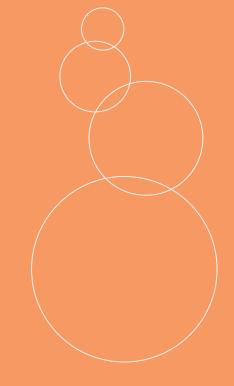
FINDINGS

# Campus Participation and Connectedness



Active campus participation is key to a vibrant university experience, offering countless opportunities to grow, connect, and thrive.

From diverse student organisations to volunteering and community engagement projects, these opportunities can foster a strong sense of belonging and a campus community where every student feels valued. This section examines co-curricular participation, volunteerism, and the importance of cultivating a sense of belonging on campus.

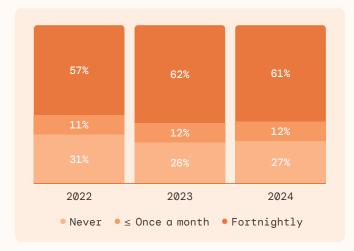


#### Co-curricular participation

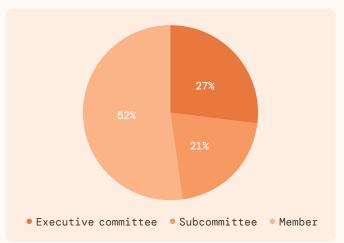
From meeting new people to developing leadership, communication and teamwork skills – joining a student organisation is a quintessential and rewarding part of university life.

Outside the classroom, a large number of student groups and organisations ranging from sports, arts and culture to community engagement, provide opportunities for an enriching campus experience. Over 70% of students participate in co-curricular activities, with 61% engaging regularly and 12% occasionally. However, 30% report no involvement. Since 2022, regular participation has increased by 4%, while non-participation decreased by 4%. Nearly half of active participants hold leadership roles in executive committees or subcommittees.

• FIG. 9 Co-curricular participation



• FIG. 10 Co-curricular engagement



"Being actively involved in campus life has deeply enriched my university experience. The sense of community I found in the residential college and through participating in community programmes has allowed me to connect with others while developing valuable skills. Being part of the dance CCA and serving on the Business School's Orientation Week committee further enhanced this by providing creative outlets and fostering inclusivity."

YEAR 3 NUS BUSINESS SCHOOL UNDERGRADUATE

#### WHY JOIN A STUDENT ORGANISATION?

- Sense of connectedness: Joining a student organisation fosters belonging and connection to the university community, through shared activities and interests.
- Improved mental wellbeing: Participation provides a constructive outlet for stress, enhancing mood and wellbeing. Students regularly involved in cocurricular activities were significantly less likely to be at risk of anxiety and depressive symptoms and reported higher overall life satisfaction.

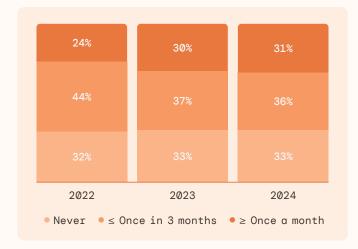


#### Volunteering

Community service is integral to NUS' mission and has been incorporated into the General Education curriculum since Academic Year 2021/2022.

**Two-thirds** (67%) of students surveyed volunteer regularly, with 31% doing so at least monthly – a 7% increase since 2022.

• FIG. 11 Frequency of volunteering



#### WHY VOLUNTEER?

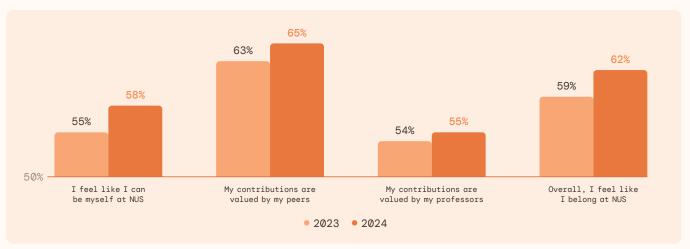
 Apart from the known benefits of volunteering, such as the potential to contribute to meaningful causes and develop valuable skills, we found from this survey that more frequent volunteering is significantly associated with higher levels of resilience in our students.

#### Sense of belonging

A sense of belonging includes feelings of being valued, included, and accepted at university.

Research demonstrates that this connectedness enhances psychological adjustment<sup>8</sup> and academic achievement<sup>9</sup>. Among survey respondents, **62%** of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "Overall, I feel I belong at NUS" and between **58%** and **65%** responded positively to three other statements on being accepted and valued.

FIG. 12
 Sense of belonging questionnaire – percentage of students who agree to these statements

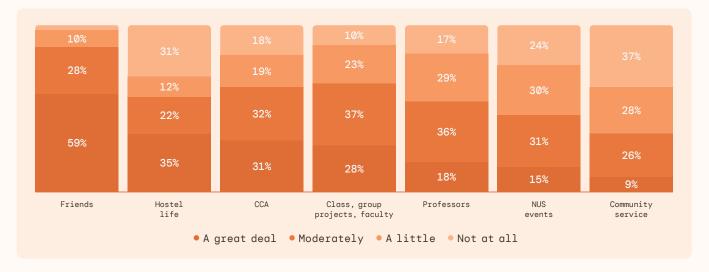


Social interactions and participation appear to be key to fostering belonging at NUS. Friends play a significant role, with **59%** of students stating they contribute "a great deal" to their sense of belonging, followed by hostel life (**35%**) and co-curricular activities (31%). Academic interactions also matter, with 28% citing course mates and group project partners, and 18% identifying interactions with professors, contributing to their sense of belonging.

"NUS offers many opportunities for students to connect with likeminded peers through academic societies, interest groups, and clubs. These have truly helped me feel a sense of belonging on campus. While balancing academics and extracurriculars can be challenging, those were also some of my most enriching and rewarding experiences. I'm grateful for the chance to engage in these vibrant communities and look forward to finding new ways to stay involved."

YEAR 3 FACULTY OF SCIENCE UNDERGRADUATE

#### • FIG. 13 Contributors to sense of belonging



#### WHY DOES SENSE OF BELONGING MATTER?

- Fosters resilience: Students who report stronger belonging demonstrate significantly higher levels of resilience.
- Enhances emotional wellbeing: A sense of belonging within the university community – whether through connections with peers, professors, or the broader campus environment – significantly reduces feelings of isolation and loneliness. This survey also showed that belonging was inversely related to risk of anxiety and depressive symptoms.
- 8 Slaten, C., Ferguson, J., Allen, K., Brodrick, D., & Waters, L. (2016). School Belonging: A Review of the History, Current Trends, and Future Directions. The Educational and Developmental Psychologist, 33, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1017/EDP.2016.6
- 9 Hoffman, M., Richmond, Y., Morrow, J., & Salomone, K. (2002). Investigating "sense of belonging" in first-year college students. Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 4(3), 227–256. https://doi.org/10.2190/DRYC-CXQ9-JQ8V-HT4V

FINDINGS

### Resilience



University students often face competing demands ranging from academic pressures to social anxieties and financial concerns.

Resilience is vital in navigating these obstacles and achieving success during and beyond university. This section delves into the resilience of students and the importance of cultivating resilience.



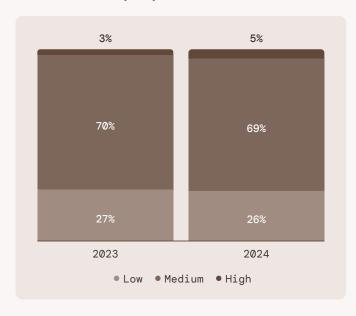
#### Overcoming challenges

Resilience, defined as the ability to bounce back or recover from stress, is key to overcoming diverse challenges faced by students.

Using validated cut-off points for the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS), we found that **5%** of students have high resilience, **69%** medium, and **26%** low.

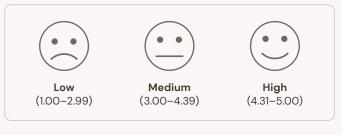


• FIG. 14 Mean resilience (BRS) scores



#### Brief Resilience Scale (BRS)

This is a 6-item scale that measures the ability to bounce back from stress. The total score ranges from 1 to 5 with cut-off points defined based on numerous studies across many populations.



"University life presents challenges that **go beyond academics**, involving balancing coursework, personal growth, and wellness. The transition can be daunting, but it is essential for both **personal and professional development**. Engaging with the university community, seeking support from peers and mentors, and utilising wellness resources are key to **managing stress** and **fostering resilience**."

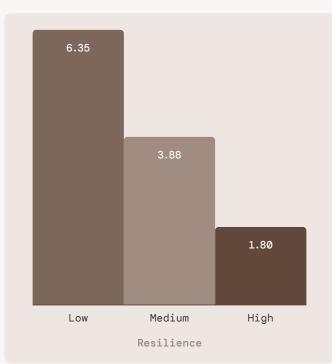
• YEAR 1 SCHOOL OF COMPUTING UNDERGRADUATE

#### Why is cultivating resilience important?

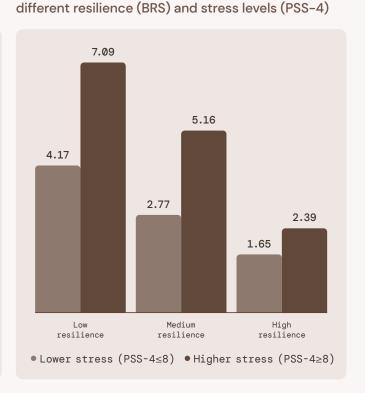
Our findings show that resilient students are better equipped to cope with stress and adapt to setbacks, and that resilience can act as a protective factor against mental health challenges.

Differences in stress levels have a greater impact on students who have low resilience scores, in terms of the risk of anxiety or depression, than those with higher resilience. Students who are highly resilient are less likely to experience anxiety and depressive symptoms compared to those with low resilience.

#### • FIG. 15 Mean anxiety and depression (PHQ-4) scores across different resilience levels (BRS)



#### ● FIG. 16 Mean anxiety and depression (PHQ-4) scores across





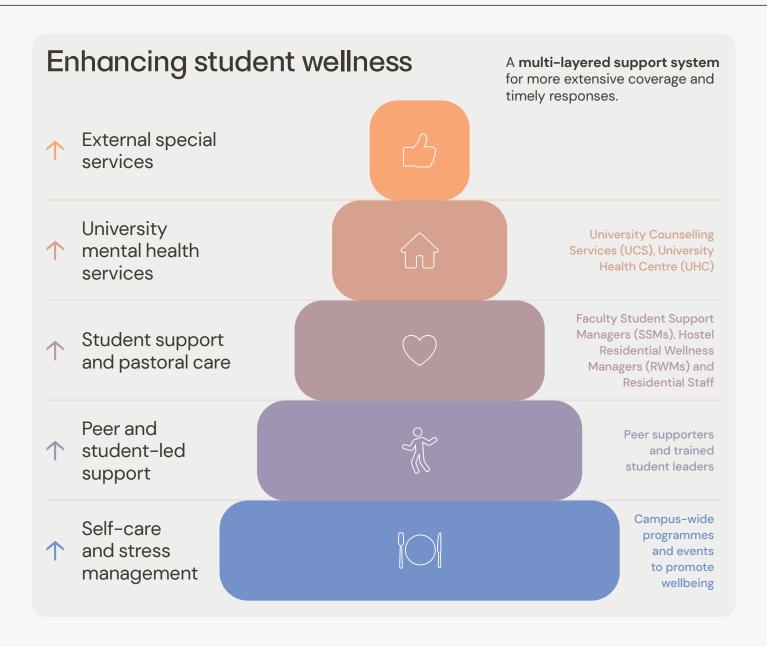
# Supporting Students' Wellbeing



University is a transformative period of personal and intellectual growth, characterised by newfound independence. Supporting student wellbeing is key to ensuring students flourish at NUS.

Recognising the demands of university life, NUS has embraced a comprehensive approach to wellness, providing resources that encompass self-care practices, stress management programmes, peer-led initiatives, and professional mental health services.





#### Self-care and stress management

"NAVIGATING YOUR WELLBEING AT NUS" COURSE FOR FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

The transition from pre-university to university is a significant life change for students.

University life often demands a deeper engagement with complex ideas, exposure to global perspectives, and the ability to manage greater autonomy. This period brings not only exciting opportunities but also challenges as students take on more responsibility for their education and personal growth.

Recognising these challenges, the "Navigating Your Wellbeing" course is designed to help first-year students manage this transition effectively. The online, interactive course, which all first-year students are encouraged to read, prioritises academic success and personal wellbeing. It equips students with the skills to recognise when and where to seek support. It aims to create a strong foundation for students to navigate the unique demands of university life successfully.

#### PITSTOP: SPACES TO RECHARGE

PitStops around NUS provide cosy spaces for students to pause and recharge amidst busy campus life.

They offer a quiet environment where students can unwind, relax, and take a moment to care for their mental wellbeing.





#### WELLNUS FESTIVAL: A CELEBRATION OF WELLBEING

The WellNUS Festival, held annually in October, is a signature event dedicated to holistic student wellbeing.

Through workshops, activities, and talks, the Festival integrates education with wellness, promoting physical, mental, and emotional health across campus. This initiative reflects NUS' commitment to fostering a supportive and balanced environment for students, guided by the 7 PitStop Principles for stress management and self-care.

#### THE 7 PITSTOP PRINCIPLES

At NUS, the 7 PitStop Principles serve as a practical framework for stress management and self-care.

These principles form the foundation of NUS' mental wellness approach, offering actionable strategies for stress management:















- Personal Skills: Practice mindfulness, set priorities, and maintain a positive mindset to manage stress effectively.
- Interaction: Stay connected with friends and family, offering and receiving support in times of need.
- Timeout: Take breaks from the demands of daily life by engaging in hobbies or self-care activities.
- Sleep: Aim for **7–8 hours** of sleep nightly to enhance mood and productivity.
- Thoughtful Eating: Make healthier food choices, stay hydrated, and avoid processed foods.
- On the Move: Engage in at least 20 minutes of physical activity three times a week to boost happiness and relieve stress.
- Purpose: Volunteering and giving back provide a sense of purpose and fulfilment.



#### Peer and student-led support

NUS promotes a supportive community through peer-led initiatives, where students can offer or receive support through dedicated platforms across faculties and hostels.

- Collaborations Across Campus: Peer support systems, developed in partnership with academic faculties, student residences, and the Students' Union, create inclusive spaces where students can find guidance.
- Equipping Student Leaders: Programmes such as Suicide Awareness & Prevention and Mental Health Literacy Workshops empower student leaders with the skills to support their peers.
- Peer Supporting Peer Training: A dedicated course equips Peer Student Supporters (PSS) with essential skills to assist their fellow students effectively.

#### Professional support services

NUS provides comprehensive support services for students dealing with academic stress, personal challenges, or mental health concerns.

- Student Wellness & Residential Wellness Managers:
   Mental health professionals available for confidential
   chats at PitStop and Hostels. This service is useful
   for students who are not ready or unable to see
   UCS counsellors.
- University Counselling Services: Licensed professionals offer in-depth mental health support.
- Lifeline NUS: A 24/7 helpline for urgent emotional support.
- Faculty Student Support Managers: Available to assist students in navigating academic and personal challenges.

# Actionable Insights

At NUS, understanding and supporting student wellbeing is a key priority.

Each year (before the launch of the new SLWS), the Office of Student Affairs provides students with valuable insights from the previous year's survey relating to the evolving experiences, habits, and challenges faced by students. These findings guide our efforts to create a supportive and enriching university environment.

The 2023 survey edition, which saw a significant 54% increase in responses compared to the previous year, reflects the perspectives of over 8,300 students. The data sheds light on how students are navigating university life, from co-curricular engagement and self-care practices to managing academic workloads. While the findings are rooted in the NUS experience, they speak to universal themes that resonate across educational institutions, including the vital role of community, personal wellbeing, and balanced lifestyles in fostering student success.

By publishing these findings, we aim to empower students with actionable insights and strengthen the culture of care within our university community.

#### Engagement in Co-Curricular Activities (CCAs)



Participating in co-curricular activities (CCAs) is a key factor in enhancing student wellbeing and creating a sense of belonging within the university community.

Students who engage in these activities weekly report a stronger sense of inclusion and greater emotional wellbeing compared to those who do not. Beyond fostering personal growth and skill development, CCAs provide a valuable support network, helping students manage stress and maintain a balanced lifestyle. Regardless of the institution, exploring and participating in such activities can significantly enrich the university experience, contributing to both personal and social development.

#### Healthy Coping Strategies and Resilience



Around **70%** of students utilise healthy coping strategies, such as exercise, mindfulness, socialising, and seeking support, which greatly improves resilience and overall wellbeing. Fostering a culture of self-care at NUS is vital for both mental and emotional health. The **7 PitStop Principles** offer useful guidance to help students manage stress and enhance their wellbeing.

#### Managing Course Load



Balancing academic responsibilities is another critical factor in maintaining student wellbeing. The survey shows that students who follow a **recommended course load** – the standard number of modules or courses suggested per semester – report lower levels of anxiety and better overall moods.

To maintain a healthy balance, it's crucial for students to consider their capacities and consult academic advisors when considering a heavier workload. This guidance helps ensure that students can achieve their academic goals without compromising their mental and emotional health.

## A Universal Approach

We hope that the findings from the NUS Student Life and Wellness Survey provide insights that are relevant to students at universities around the world. Through participation in co-curricular activities, adopting healthy habits, or managing academic workloads, these practices highlight the importance of a balanced approach to university life. By fostering a supportive environment and encouraging students to prioritise wellbeing, institutions can empower individuals to thrive both academically and personally.



Office of Student Affairs