

## B1: Mental Health & Supervision

1. Background information		
Strand	A: Black British students	
	B: Disability/Mental Health student	X
Topic	Undergraduate supervision: Student mental health perspective	
Specific research question	How do experiences and challenges of supervisions and supervision work differ between students with and without mental health problems?	
Student co-researchers	Imogen Arden-Jones, Medicine/Psychology, 3rd Year, St John's College	
	Eleanor Dunstone, PhD Bioscience, Clare College	
	Anna Freed, Archaeology, 2nd Year, Newnham College	

2. Executive summary
<p>This project investigated the undergraduate supervision system, which our team identified as one of the most important educational interactions experienced by undergraduate students at the University of Cambridge. We were particularly keen to explore the impact of supervisions on the mental health and wellbeing of students, and to identify the supervisory practices that most effectively supported students to enable them to achieve their full academic potential. We collected quantitative and qualitative data from our student peers through an online survey, that was distributed within the team's three Colleges and the Disabled Student Campaign's social media network. The strongest themes that emerged from student comments related to workload and work-related pressure, with students noting that they felt burnt-out by pressure to manage their supervision and that this had the most negative impact on their wellbeing. Students reported that they experienced uneven amounts of work across the term, that their workload expectations differed per supervisor even with students studying the same course within the same College, that it was difficult to negotiate flexibility or adjustments to this work, as the processes to address this were opaque and relied on students' self-advocacy which, in turn, took time and had a negative impact on mental health.</p> <p>Our recommendations focused on providing specific guidance and training for supervisors for them to support their students more effectively. While we argue that this is particularly important for the wellbeing and academic performance of students with mental health conditions, more inclusive supervisory experiences will improve the educational experiences for all students. We also found that a more coordinated student-supervisor feedback system would alleviate stress and confusion about</p>

expectations, including about workload, deadlines and learning outcomes, while providing students with an opportunity to contribute to planning around supervisions.

### 3. Rationale

The co-researchers of this project hypothesised that workload could be potentially more challenging for students with mental health conditions, which when left unsupported can negatively impact the wellbeing of these students. The undergraduate supervision system at Cambridge, i.e., the supervision experience and the supervision task, make up a significant proportion of a student's workload, and therefore warranted an investigation into its effects on students with mental health conditions.

In light of the pandemic, the issue of overwhelming workload and burnout has become increasingly prominent in the student population - as reported in the extant literature (e.g., Farrell et al., 2019; Gurbuz et al., 2019; Smith, 2019; Zabuska et al., 2018), or the myriad of alarming anonymous posts on the Cambridge students Facebook page 'Camfess' (Fisher, 2021). It is also often accompanied with a reluctance to voice this to staff - one co-researcher noted that, whilst they had sought a reduced workload in the form of fewer supervision essays, students who consulted them as a student representative would not feel able to ask for the same, despite acknowledging it would help them.

Thus, the aim of this project was to ascertain the prevalence of supervision-related challenges among students, whether there is a significant difference between students with and without mental health conditions which could be contributing to the awarding gap, as well as gathering qualitative data on how students felt the negative effects of these challenges could be alleviated.

#### Reference list:

- Farrell, S. M., Kadhum, M., Lewis, T., Singh, G., Penzenstadler, L., & Molodynski, A. (2019). Wellbeing and burnout amongst medical students in England. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 31(7–8), 579–583. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2019.1675960>
- Fisher, E. (2021, February 6). *Camfesses about mental health issues have tripled in the last year and we need to talk about it*. The Tab. <https://thetab.com/uk/cambridge/2021/02/06/camfesses-about-mental-health-issues-have-tripled-in-the-last-year-and-we-need-to-talk-about-it-144575>
- Gurbuz, E., Hanley, M., & Riby, D. M. (2019). University Students with Autism: The Social and Academic Experiences of University in the UK. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 49(2), 617–631. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-018-3741-4>
- Smith, A. P. (2019). Student Workload, Wellbeing and Academic Attainment. *Communications in Computer and Information Science*, 1107(October), 35–47. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-32423-0\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-32423-0_3)
- Zabuska, A., Ginsborg, J., & Wasley, D. (2018). A preliminary comparison study of burnout and engagement in performance students in Australia, Poland and the UK. *International Journal of Music Education*, 36(3), 366–379. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761417751242>

#### 4. Contextual information

There has been minimal academic literature surrounding the supervision/tutorial system of Oxbridge, despite, as Beck (2007b) points out, being frequently cited as a reason for the excellence of Oxbridge. A supervision/tutorial, as defined by Ashwin (2005), is a small group session – of one to six students – with an academic or postgraduate student acting as a ‘supervisor’ or ‘tutor’, which involves ‘intensive’ preparatory work. Although the purpose and experiences of supervisions/tutorials have been discussed in several publications (e.g., Beck, 2007a; Palfreyman, 2001), systematic studies are limited.

Most of the research on supervisions has gathered data by conducting interviews with a relatively small number of participants. Two studies by Ashwin (2005, 2006), examined student and academic perspectives on the purpose of Oxford tutorials. The 2005 study interviewed 28 students, and the 2006 study interviewed 20 academics. In all the student interviews, when asked about their typical work week, there were significant discussions about tutorials and tutorial work (Ashwin, 2005), highlighting how central supervision/tutorial work is to the student workload at Oxbridge. Based on the student responses, four different conceptions of tutorials and pre-tutorial work were identified, ranging at different levels of sophistication. For example, tutorial systems ranged from being a space where the tutor corrects the students’ understanding, to a more balanced learning environment where both the tutor and student share and develop their knowledge. Similarly, four conceptions were developed from the tutor interviews, which are broadly comparable. A quantitative survey with 155 respondents from one Oxford college found that more sophisticated conceptions of tutorials were more likely perceived as supportive learning environments (Trigwell and Ashwin, 2003).

Other studies have focused on the performance and power dynamics in the Oxbridge tutorial/supervision systems. Brooks and Everett’s (2008) research on lifelong learning touches on the impact of gender on perceptions of Oxbridge tutorials/supervisions, where seven of the 15 Oxbridge graduates interviewed raised experiences of discomfort and intimidation in supervisions/tutorials. Women were almost exclusively negatively affected in supervisions/tutorial (Brooks and Everett, 2008). Indeed, a more recent study by Gaston and Duschinsky (2020) found similar results. Looking at power dynamics and the performance requirements of Cambridge supervisions, they interviewed 15 students at Cambridge, who were selected randomly from a volunteer pool of 82. They found a key demand was the need to appear intelligent, appear as though they understood, and as such would feel the need to avoid asking ‘stupid’ questions. Students from working-class backgrounds reported increased anxiety and uncertainty with how to act in the supervision environment. All female students, unprompted, shared experiences where male supervision partners had negatively affected their experience in a supervision and their ability to contribute; no male interviewees raised this. The intersection of these two identities, in three participants, saw supervisions negatively and as an exhausting performance. The anxiety and need to perform associated with being from a low socioeconomic background or being female should be considered when looking at the differences between students with and without mental health conditions.

Issues relating to workload and work-related pressure have been raised in student surveys at Cambridge, although they did not specifically investigate supervision workload and pressures. In the Big Cambridge Survey 2016-17 by Cambridge Students' Union (Cambridge SU), only 44% of undergraduates thought their workload was 'manageable and healthy', dropping to 28% among those who self-identified as disabled (Cambridge SU, 2017). In the most recent published Big Cambridge Survey, for 2018, 44% of disabled students disagree with the statement that their workload was manageable and healthy; only 27% of non-disabled students disagree with the statement (Cambridge SU, 2018). The 'Feeling Blue' report (Hussein, Naylor-Perrott, Richardson, 2019), discussed the mental health and wellbeing concerns at Cambridge, and found workload and academic pressure to be major stressors. This data is asking about work in general, but, as stated, one of the unique aspects of work at Oxbridge are supervisions/tutorials, so these results were likely affected by the increased work at Cambridge due to the supervision system. Such reports have been the basis for calls for a reading week, such as the campaign by the Cambridge SU (Margolis, 2021), which gained a student mandate at an all-student meeting attended by 215 students (Stephens, 2021).

**Reference list:**

- Ashwin, P. (2005). Variation in Students' Experiences of the 'Oxford Tutorial'. *Higher Education*, 50, 631-644.
- Ashwin, P. (2006). Variation in academics' accounts of tutorials. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31 (6), 651-665
- Beck, R. J. (2007a) 'The Oxford Tutorial: A Learning Theory', *Oxford Magazine*, Eighth Week, Trinity Term, 13-17.
- Beck, R. J. (2007b) 'Towards a pedagogy of the Oxford tutorial.', in. *Conference on the Oxford Tutorial*, Appleton: Lawrence University.
- Brooks, R. and Everett, G. (2008) 'The impact of higher education on lifelong learning', *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 27(3), 239-254.
- CUSU (2017) *The Big Cambridge Survey 2016-7*.
- CUSU (2018) *The Big Cambridge Survey 2018*.
- Gaston, A., & Duschinsky, R. (2020). Students' experiences of the Cambridge supervision system: performance, pedagogy and power. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 41(8), 1218-1234.
- Hussein, N., Naylor-Perrott, L. and Richardson, J. (2019) *Feeling Blue: Mental Health at Cambridge University*.
- Margolis, B. (2021) 'Student Workloads: A New Approach', *Cambridge SU*, 3 February.
- Palfreyman, D. (ed.) (2001) *The Oxford Tutorial*. Oxford: Blackwells.
- Stephens, A. (2021) 'Reading week update: Cambridge SU receive student mandate to change Cambridge term structure', *The Tab*, 15 March.
- Trigwell, K. and Ashwin, T. (2003) 'Evoked conceptions of learning and learning environments', in Rust, C. (ed.) *Improving Student learning Theory and Practice-Ten Years On. Proceedings of the 2002 10th International Symposium on improving student learning*, Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and learning Development, pp. 183-193.

## 5. Generation of evidence

### Stage 1: Data collection via online survey

We designed an online survey on Qualtrics to collect data about respondent characteristics and both qualitative and quantitative assessments of their experience of supervisions. Prior researchers, such as Ashwin (2005), had noted that their sample sizes were too small to draw conclusions on statistical data. Therefore, an online survey was selected with the goal of having a larger sample size to improve the strength of any quantitative findings. We collected the following respondent characteristics: college, year of study, subject, and mental health status (mental health condition declared to the university, mental health condition not declared to the university, no mental health condition, or prefer not to say).

We collected quantitative data using Likert scales on manageability of supervision workload, helpfulness of supervisions, and the impact of supervisions on mental health. We collected data using tick-boxes on the volume of supervision workload, which aspects of supervisions are found to be helpful, which aspects of supervisions are found to be challenging, which adjustments supervisors have made and whether they are helpful, and preference for online or in-person supervisions. Opportunity for elaboration on these questions was provided in free-text questions, and additional free-text questions were asked regarding the differences between online and in-person supervision experiences, the impact of mental health on supervision experiences, and ideas about what could be done to improve supervisions for students with mental health conditions.

The survey was distributed via email, using the undergraduate and postgraduate mailing lists of the Colleges of the three student researchers (Clare College, St John's College, and Newnham College), with the aim of collecting data from a broad group of Triposes. We also advertised the survey on two Facebook groups set up by the Disabled Students' Campaign, aiming to increase the number of responses from students with mental health conditions. Individual consent for the collection and use of the survey data was obtained at the start of the survey.

### Stage 2: Quantitative analysis of survey responses

Responses were included in the analysis if the respondent had answered the initial questions about their characteristics, plus at least one other question. Quantitative data were analysed and plotted in R studio. Statistical differences between ordinal data (Likert scales and volume of workload) were analysed using the Kruskal-Wallis test with Dunn's post-hoc test. The threshold of statistical significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ .

### Stage 3: Qualitative analysis of survey responses

Qualitative data was analysed by theme using methods outlined in Braun & Clarke (2006) and drawing on the framework from Srivastava & Hopwood (2009).

### Reference list:

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Srivastava, P., & Hopwood, N. (2009). A Practical Iterative Framework for Qualitative Data Analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 76-84

## 6. Small project research findings

### Respondent characteristics

We had 102 respondents, of which 74 provided usable data. Students from St John's College made up 34.2% of respondents, 31.7% were from Clare College, 6.1% were from Homerton College, and the remaining colleges made up less than 5% of responses each. Responses were fairly evenly spread between first-, second- and third-year undergraduates (29.3%, 19.5%, and 25.6%, respectively), alongside 6 responses (7.3%) from fourth-year undergraduates and 15 (18.3%) from postgraduate students who previously completed their undergraduate degree at the University of Cambridge. The most common subject studied by respondents was Natural Sciences (25.6%), followed by Mathematics (9.8%), Medicine (7.3%), History (7.3%), and Modern and Medieval Languages (7.3%).

We had similar number of responses in each of the three main mental health categories (see Figure 1). Notably, nearly half (45.5%) of students with mental health conditions have not declared this to the university. This demonstrates the importance of the findings of this report being available to all students, rather than just those who have declared mental health conditions.

Mental health status of respondents

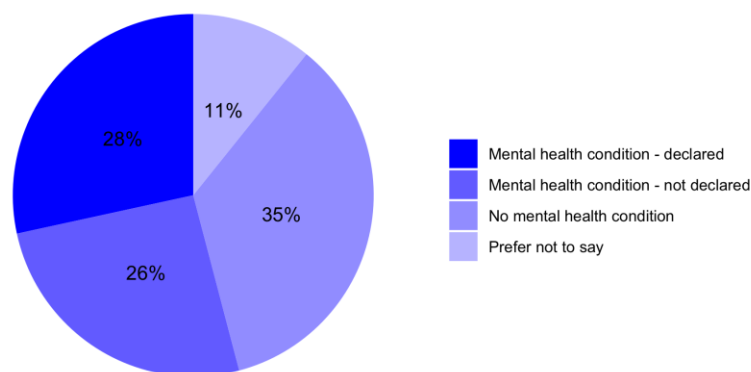


Figure 1: The mental health status of the student respondents.

### Helpfulness of supervisions

Overall, most students found supervisions either helpful or very helpful (87.0%), and this value did not differ much with mental health status (see Figure 2). Around one quarter of students found pre-supervision work and discussing course content useful (22.8% and 23.2%, respectively), while discussing pre-supervision work, being tested on course content, and discussing the subject more widely were found to be helpful by 20.7%, 10.6%, and 18.7% of students, respectively.

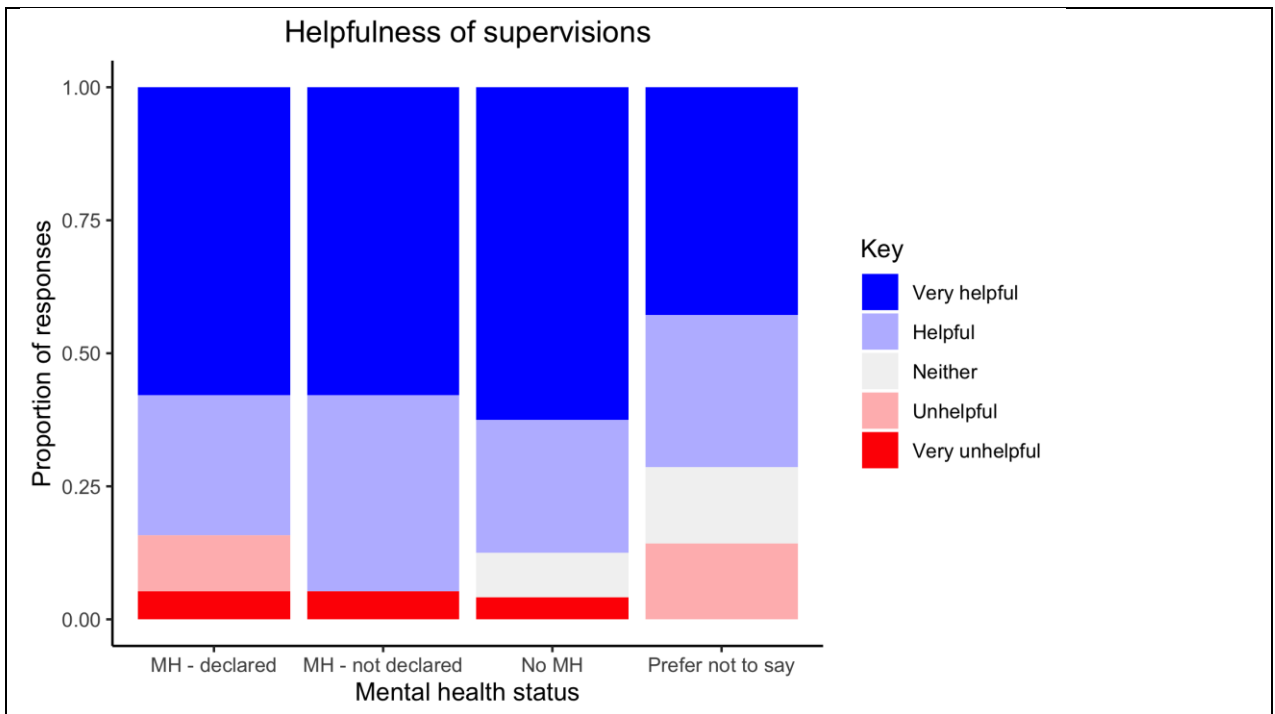


Figure 2: Responses on the helpfulness of supervisions based on mental health status of student respondents.

### Workload

The volume of workload (including both times spent in supervisions and on supervision work) varied among the participants, with most students spending either 10–20 hours (40.5%) or 20–30 hours (25.7%) on supervision-related activities (see Figure 3). This did not significantly differ between mental health status of the respondents.

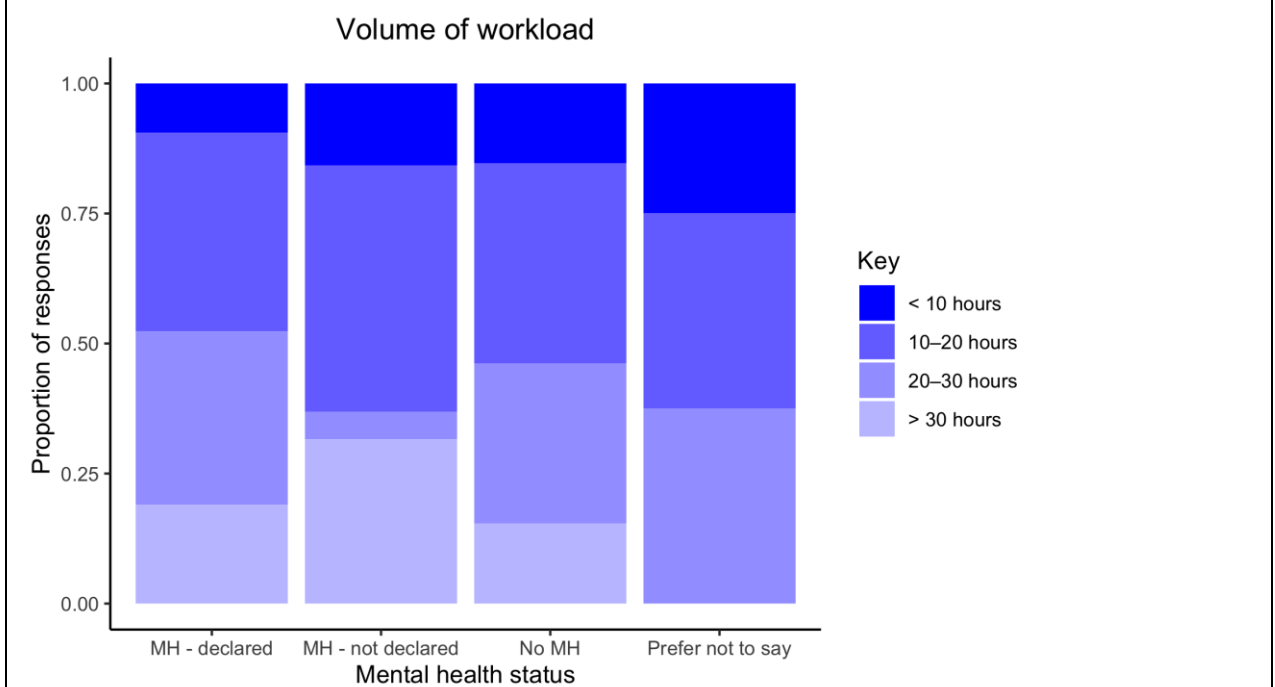


Figure 3: Volume of workload perceived by student respondents based on their mental health status.

Despite this consistency in workload volume, the perceived manageability of the workload differed dramatically between the groups (see Figure 4). Only 11.5% of students who do not consider themselves to have a mental health condition found their workload to be unmanageable, and none found it to be very unmanageable. In comparison, over half (57.1%) of students with declared mental health conditions found their workload to be unmanageable or very unmanageable, and ≈15% of students with mental health conditions found their workload very unmanageable, regardless of whether they had declared their mental health condition or not. The responses to this question were significantly different between the mental health status groups ( $p < 0.01$ , Kruskal-Wallis), with post-hoc testing showing a significant difference between the declared mental health condition group and the no mental health condition group ( $p < 0.05$ , Dunn's test).

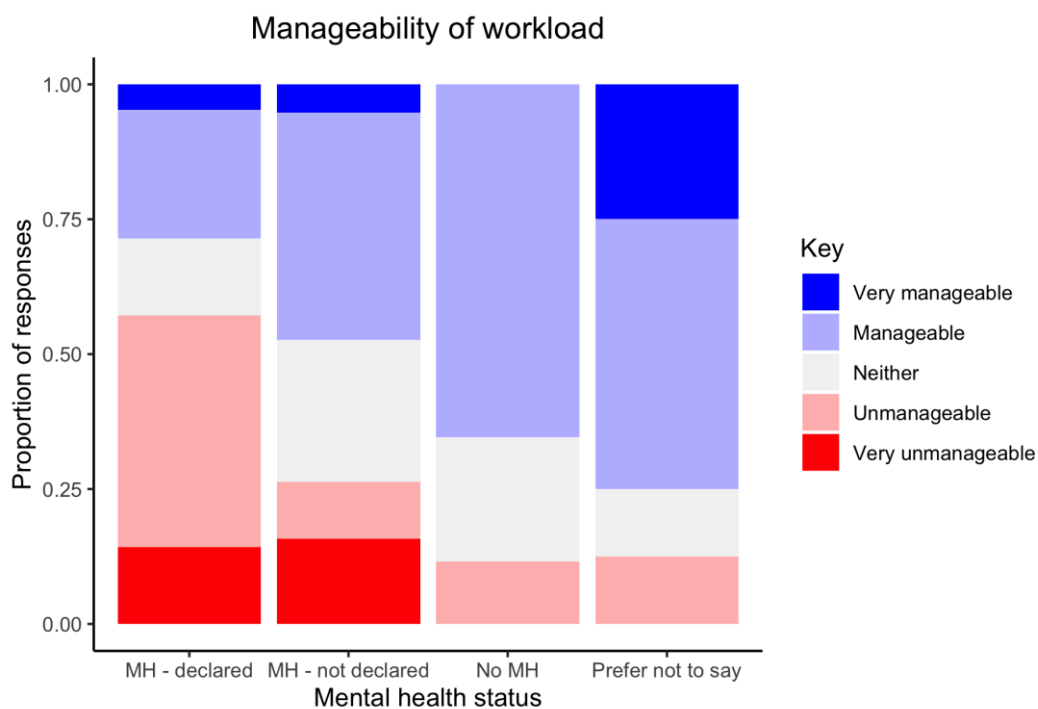


Figure 4: Perceived manageability of workload of student respondents based on their mental health status.

### Challenging aspects of supervisions

Respondents found a variety of aspects of supervisions to be challenging, with the most common issues being the volume and uneven distribution of workload (see Table 1).

Table 1: Responses to the aspects of supervisions found to be challenging by student respondents.

Volume of supervision work	26.14%
Managing uneven workload i.e. lack of coordination	18.75%



Relationship with supervisor/teaching style	17.61%
Discussing your work/thoughts in front of your peers	11.93%
Lack of opportunity to prepare i.e. being 'put on the spot'	13.07%
Disturbing content e.g. lack of content notes	5.11%

The concerns over uneven workload were shared through the open-ended questions. Students raised concerns over the lack of time to produce good work due to the frequency and volume of supervisory tasks.

*“Often, the difficulty in completing supervision work on time came from the fact that the 8 week term gives us so little time to do it well, and not from the academic difficulty of the work itself. I would often find myself having to make quite significant sacrifices in my social life or general wellbeing (not talking to people for several days straight, not sleeping much) in order to overcome this completely artificial and non-academic time-related difficulty.”*

*“First year medicine was unmanageable (4/6 supos per week, each with work due in, which always included content before we'd covered it in lectures / formal teaching).”*

*“If the supervisors have co-ordinated what weeks to set work with the Director of Studies they are evenly spread; however, this rarely happens so there are often clashes having multiple supervisions within a single week, each of which requires an essay which requires hours of reading and writing.”*

### **Impact of supervisions on mental health**

The impact of supervisions on respondents' mental health varied markedly between the different mental health status groups (see Figure 5). Students who do not consider themselves to have a mental health condition mostly found supervisions to have a neutral or very positive effect on their mental health, with only 10% finding them to have a negative effect. However, 38.8% and 44.4% of students with declared or undeclared mental health conditions found supervisions to have a negative or very negative effect on their mental health, respectively.

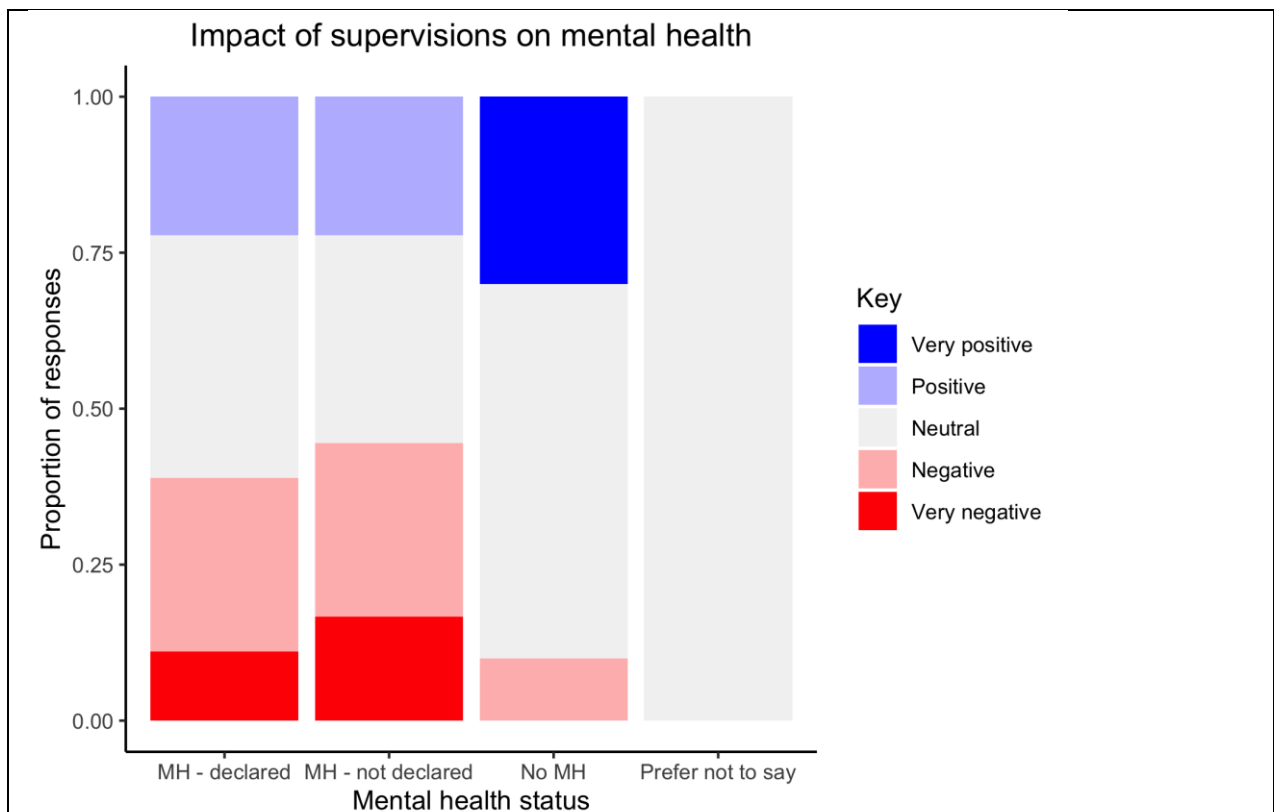


Figure 5: Students responses to the impact of supervisions on their mental health.

The student respondents expanded on their experiences of supervision through the open-ended/open-text questions. Some of the quotes below, from different respondents, highlight the experiences of the supervisory workload.

*“This term I had all my supervision[s] at the start of term (I had two weeks with three supervision[s] in each week) ... there was literally no way I could have done enough work for three supervision[s] in one week.”*

*“I work at least six hours a day on supervision work, including weekend, so minimum 42 hours a week, usually more, plus lectures. I’m a first year and I already feel burnt out, I don’t know how people manage.”*

*“It’s manageable in the sense that I work really hard all week and always hand everything in on time. However, this has made me a very anxious perfectionist and I never feel good enough.”*

Students shared the importance of having an understanding supervisor who can foster a supportive environment. Conversely, an absence of judgement from the part of the supervisor can exacerbate negative feelings of oneself.

*“I think it’s incredibly important that supervisors are appreciative that some students will be suffering from mental health conditions. One of my previous supervisors just treated me like I was lazy and didn’t want to do the work rather than seeing it that I was ill.”*

*“Being told off for lack of work (when I’m already feeling really low), has affected my mental health very negatively and made me for anxious to attend supervisions with the supervisor ... it would be better for supervisors to first ask if everything is okay (without asking for specific details) rather than assume that students just haven’t tried.”*

*“Experience w supervisors varied greatly for me, I had really understanding supervisors who were helpful, creating good learning environment and giving good feedback and unfortunately, I had bad experiences with others who were not caring at all and I felt uncomfortable.”*

Students also shared the issue of inconsistency between supervisors and how inconsistencies these inconsistencies can make the supervisions more taxing. Long-term supervisors help to develop a rapport and an understanding, however, a lack of coordination between supervisors has a negative impact.

*“I think it has been easier to address [adjustments] with long-term supervisor ... whereas if you only see the person once or twice, you put up with whatever they do, even if it’s clearly bad for you, such as not paying attention to your Student Support Document.”*

*“The biggest problem is that these [adjustments] are not consistent across different supervisors; some would for example be understanding about stress whereas others would exacerbate a situation.”*

*“I have been very unlucky: my supervisors do not coordinate between themselves, so I have some weeks with eight or more hours of supervisions (and all the deadlines) and weeks with zero. If we ask to reschedule, we’re met with an angry no, because they’re very busy. I work at least six hours a day on supervision work, including weekends, so minimum 42 hours a week, usually more, plus lectures. I’m a first year and I already feel burnt out, I don’t know how people manage.”*

Students shared some of the good practices that they had experienced in supervisions and suggested some ways to make the supervisions more inclusive. For example, students supported the need for more interactive interactions which supported the learning experience, rather than constantly being made to feel like they were being assessed.

*“I preferred supervisors who did not treat the supervision as a test but rather as a learning experience. These supervisions could include test activities such as translation and vocab tests, but they were treated as informative and educational tools for accountability. In contrast, a few supervisors made every supervision feel like a test and even a competition between them and me. This was not conducive to learning and made me dread attending them.”*

*“Two of my supervisors moved away from making us describe and explain our essays to each other – instead, they allowed us to read each other’s essays prior to the supervision so we did not have to be put on the spot during the supervision.”*

Such forms of inclusive practices can foster a healthy group dynamic between supervisees which can support informal conversations between them. These informal conversations before/after supervisions can also help to develop informal peer learning opportunities and support networks for each other.

Students also discussed the importance of flexibility with regards to the workload and deadlines for assignments, and making it clear whether different kinds of work, e.g., essay plans and incomplete work, may be accepted. Flexibility with deadlines was shared to be very helpful to produce better work without compromising on academic rigour.

*"I think that requesting less essays ... would be immensely helpful. When I have to hand in an essay and I know my supervisor will disapprove if I don't, I often spend the day paralysed and unable to work. If there is less pressure, I focus on understanding the content in order to have interesting inputs in the supervision."*

*"Rescheduling supervisions has been the most helpful ... when this hasn't happened, I often feel like I just want to supervision to be over as I'm not understanding anything and often I end up feeling even worse afterwards."*

*"I think it's important for supervisors to understand that doing well academically and mental illness are not mutually exclusive: I've been at the top of my cohort when I am suffering the greatest from my depression, but I'm also produced my best work when I was free to complete it when it suited me due to a flexible deadline and was significantly happier."*

*"Flexible deadlines should not be seen as a cop-out or lacking academic rigour, but actually they have given me the opportunity to do my best work and not just complete it, but actually to thrive in my subject."*

*"The other supervisor was very considerate and said I could hand in essays during the holidays or when I was feeling better but that my health was more important. That made me feel much less guilty about missing deadlines and feeling sick. I really appreciated it."*

Students also appreciate clear communication and expectation setting for each supervision. This includes content notes, instructions on how much time should be spent on each assignment, and which reading list/problem sheets should be prioritised. Helping students to prioritise reading lists was also shared to be helpful.

*"One supervisor went above and beyond to send me helpful passages from texts when I was really struggling."*

*"One of my supervisors lets me know which questions they think are the most important and only requires they be done which was helpful when I couldn't complete the whole sheet."*

*"I prefer when supervisors can tell us upfront all the supervision timings/deadlines for the term (or at least for the next 3 weeks or so), as it helps with planning and preventing clashes, but not all arrange it so far in advance."*

Students also expressed an interest in diversified forms of tasks and topics, i.e., shifting beyond essay tasks. More personalised support, e.g., offering individual supervisions or online/in-person sessions based on the students' needs, also can help students work on their own pace without feeling pressured.

*"Where I have been offered individual rather than paired supervisions, this has been quite helpful as it allows me to work through questions at my own pace and I don't have to feel embarrassed or guilty about holding my supervision partner back."*

*"...most issues come from my disability, which affects my executive functioning and makes some tasks harder to get started with. my supervisors so far have been very understanding and helped me by way of extensions and more detailed information on the task."*

*"Also one of my supervisors lets me know which questions they think are the most important and only "requires" they be done which was helpful when I couldn't complete the whole sheet (but my supervision partner and I usually complete the whole sheet anyway and the supervisor goes through it all so this isn't a work avoidance thing)."*

In-person online sessions were also preferred over online supervisions by most student respondents. Some reasons were based on their comfort, ability to have more free-flowing conversations, less isolation, less distractions, and issues related to poor technology.

*"I think discussion is more open and free flowing in in person supervisions. More importantly I often get distracted and there is very little to pull me or force me back in during online ones as I can browse the internet or whatever and no one would ever know until I am asked a question or directly addressed where as in in person supervisions I am both less distracted and more prompted to pay attention."*

*"It can feel very isolating having all your contact hours online, especially supervisions that used to feel very personal."*

*"I preferred in-person supervisions mostly because it gave me more opportunities to socialise with my peers and discuss the topic with them after the supervision was over."*

Conversely, the flexibility of the online space helped some students with their productivity and mental health.

*"We seem to cover more content in online supervisions (which I think is good) and teaching via PowerPoints make it easier to follow the content of the supervision. I also like how I can attend a supervision in a comfortable environment (even on days where I find it difficult to walk / if I am having a bad day with asthma). Also, the time spent physically going to a supervision has been cut out, so I have much more time during the day. Furthermore, I find it easier to review any content, as I take better notes and it's easier for supervisors to send extra links / provide further resources which will help with the course."*

*"I don't feel social anxiety about going outside, having to negotiate on public transport, or anything else which can be an issue for those with depression, anxiety & other MH conditions."*

### **Limitations**

Due to small sample sizes, any differences between groups would have to be large to be statistically significant. Therefore, the absence of significance of many of our results does not necessarily indicate the absence of any difference. Our collection method led to a bias in the colleges of the respondents. There was also a bias in the subjects studied by our respondents, with the majority studying science, medicine, and mathematics. This may mean that this data is less representative of adjustments or

challenges specific to arts and humanities subjects. It is also worth noting that many of the respondents will have had no or very little experience of in-person supervision due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It would be possible to overcome these issues in future with a larger survey on this topic, conducted once in-person supervisions have resumed.

## **7. Outcomes of research/implications for Cambridge practices and processes.**

The quantitative strand of this project indicates that supervisions have a statistically significant negative impact on students with mental health conditions. The implication of this findings is that an improved (i.e., more inclusive) undergraduate supervision is key in reducing the awarding gaps.

The qualitative strand of this project brought out the nuances of the undergraduate supervisory experience wherein good practices have been identified. These include: 1) the importance of creative a supportive environment to facilitate informal peer support; 2) the supportive role of flexibility with deadlines and scheduling on students' productivity and quality of work; 3) clear communication about the expectations about supervisions and supervision tasks. Tailored support and a welcoming space can help students' feel like they belong and can contribute to the discussions without feeling pressured.

A large proportion of the respondents considered themselves to have a mental health condition but had not declared this to the university. This emphasises that inclusive and accessible supervisions is beneficial for all students.

## **8. RECOMMENDED ACTION**

For the final question of our survey, we asked students for their recommendations - our recommendations have been synthesised from theirs.

### **1. Supervisor Development/Training**

- Guidance and training provided to both new and experienced supervisors about how to effectively support students with mental health conditions.
- This guidance should be developed at the University level and endorsed by senior committees and developed alongside students with mental health conditions.
- Given the importance of this training, we think it should be mandatory rather than self-selecting (so it should be factored into supervisors' workloads).

→ with the ultimate aim of all supervisions being accessible and inclusive, not just those for students with formally declared conditions.

### **2. Supervision Feedback System**

- That enables clearer bi-directional communication between supervisors & students, particularly around deadlines and feedback.
- That provides students with opportunities to provide feedback about their experience of supervision.