

How can academic libraries help support students' mental health?

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Abstract

The topic of mental health and wellbeing amongst students has become more and more widely discussed in recent years with a noticeable increase in students requesting mental health and wellbeing support. To try and meet this need many universities are trying a whole university approach to mental health and wellbeing where all sections of the university play a role in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of students. This poses the question of what role does the academic library play in this whole university approach? Despite a significant number of academic libraries already offering support there are significant gaps in the research into the attitudes and opinions of both academic library staff and university students towards academic libraries providing mental health and wellbeing support.

The aim of the research was to investigate how academic libraries can positively impact on student mental health and wellbeing. This was done through a phenomenological mixed methods research which included student focus groups and a survey of UK academic library staff.

The results of the student focus groups, and staff survey showed that both students and staff felt positively towards the idea of mental health and wellbeing support in libraries, however, both students and staff did express concerns about what the support would entail and how it would be enacted.

Students gave a variety of suggestions for how the academic library could improve student mental health with library staff agreeing that these ideas would be effective. However, these proposals were not necessarily feasible for all academic libraries. Most staff survey respondents felt management support was there, but many lacked the funds, and staff time to support mental health and wellbeing of students. This research will contribute to best practice on how academic libraries provide mental health and wellbeing support.

Keywords

Academic libraries, mental health, wellbeing, student perceptions

1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction to the topic

This research aims to examine out how best the academic library can support mental health and wellbeing in students. The research will build on previous studies in this area and fill the gaps by looking at what students want in terms of mental health and wellbeing support from their libraries and what library staff feel is achievable in their institutions.

The results of the research will have practical applications for academic libraries as they can be used to create best practice, which can give guidance on how academic libraries can best support the mental health and wellbeing of their students. It will also help show the role that academic libraries and their staff can play within a whole campus approach to mental health and wellbeing.

There have been reports on mental health and wellbeing initiatives in academic libraries, these have mainly been case studies which trialled specific initiatives, with the main monitor of success being user

numbers or anecdotal positive feedback (Brewerton, Wooley 2016). Some studies have also looked at which proportion of libraries in a particular area run these initiatives, and which initiatives were the most commonly found in academic libraries (Borchard, Meyers-Martin 2015). This shows a significant gap in the research, as little research has been done on what students want from the library in terms of mental health and wellbeing support.

The topic of mental health and wellbeing has become increasingly prominent in recent years, particularly in higher education institutions (Universities UK 2018). Everyone experiences mental health and wellbeing throughout their lives, and it can vary in whether it is positive, negative, or somewhere in between. In discussions of mental health and wellbeing it is important to understand what is meant by those terms, and that poor mental health or poor wellbeing can affect people in different ways. A person is said to be suffering from mental illness when they have the symptoms of a clinically diagnosable mental health condition. If someone experiences negative mental health, but it does not necessarily meet the clinical threshold it is known as mental distress. Wellbeing relates to the extent to which someone is feeling good and functioning positively, but poor mental wellbeing does not always indicate a mental health condition (Institute for Public Policy Research 2017).

Students are increasingly seeking further support such as counselling and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), or taking up activities to improve wellbeing such as yoga and meditation. Studies have shown an increase in the number of students reporting mental health difficulties in recent years with one showing an almost five times increase since 2006/7 (Institute for Public Policy Research 2017). Universities are increasingly aware of this problem and many are seeking to make improvements to facilities and programmes to meet demand, so their students remain safe and healthy. In the past few years, these improvements have expanded beyond student support and counselling services. Many universities have implemented a whole campus approach to mental health and wellbeing, introducing campus wide policies that include other services such as sports facilities, academic departments or working with the student's union. Recent policy documents from Universities UK (Universities UK 2015) and the Institute for Public Policy Research have both emphasised the need for a whole campus approach. This approach is already starting to be taken on board by UK universities with 29% of universities in the UK now having an institution wide mental health and wellbeing policy (Institute for Public Policy Research 2017).

Libraries are an important place on campus. They are visited frequently by students, are a convenient place to meet and have good reputations as information providers and community centres (Ramsey, Aagard 2018). It is therefore important to consider what role they would play in a whole campus approach to mental health and wellbeing. Some academic libraries are already offering programmes to encourage de-stressing or to improve wellbeing. These have ranged from pet therapy (Lannon, Harrison 2015), to craft, music, yoga and meditation (Brewerton, Wooley 2016).

Despite enthusiasm from some, there has been concern about the effectiveness of such programmes being undertaken by library staff who may not be experts in mental health and wellbeing. There are concerns that already stretched academic libraries will not have the staff time or finances to spare on mental health and wellbeing initiatives (Walton, Graham 2018).

This research will look further into both staff and student perspectives on mental health and wellbeing in the library and how best it can be implemented.

1.2. Aim and Objectives

The aim of the research is to investigate how academic libraries can positively impact on student mental health and wellbeing. This will consider the opinions of both library staff, what would benefit

students but what library staff feel would be feasible. This will be achieved through the following four objectives:

1. Determine whether students are interested in academic libraries helping to support their mental health and wellbeing
2. Establish services would students think it was useful for libraries to provide to help their mental health and wellbeing
3. Determine whether academic library staff feel that providing mental health and wellbeing support in the library would be appropriate
4. Establish whether librarians feel that providing such support would be feasible

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This purpose of this section is to review research literature relevant to the research topic and to detail the research gap which provides the rationale for the research. It is divided by theme into three sections starting with a broad overview of the problem of mental health and wellbeing amongst students. The second section focuses on what role the academic library can play in solving this problem, with the third looking specifically at mental health and wellbeing projects that academic libraries have already undertaken.

2.2. Mental health and wellbeing issues amongst students

The mental health and wellbeing of students has become of increasing concern to higher education institutions with rising numbers of students reporting problems. This increase in mental health and wellbeing issues amongst students show that this is a rich area for research. This upward trend was first noted by a report by Phippen (1995), which found that 64% of 152 services had seen a noticeable increase in demand, stretching their resources. This trend has continued in recent years, with a study by the Institute for Public Policy Research (Institute for Public Policy Research 2017) finding that 94% of universities have experienced a sharp increase in the number of people trying to access support services, with some institutions noticing a threefold increase.

Mental health problems are particularly common amongst young adults, the age group that make up the majority of students. Incidences of mood, anxiety psychotic, personality, eating, and substance use disorders peak in adolescence and early adulthood, with 50% first exhibiting symptoms by age 14 and 75% by age 24% (Universities UK 2018). Not only are mental health issues more common amongst young people, students are often under an increased number of difficulties such as academic, social and financial pressures. According to Unite Student's insight report 2016, students scored between 15% and 22% lower than the total UK population on all four wellbeing measures (life satisfaction, life worthwhile, happiness, low anxiety)(UNITE 2016).

Despite the increase in numbers of students reporting mental health and wellbeing issues, it has been suggested that the numbers dealing with such problems are higher than reported due to students not choosing to report their problems to university staff either due to the stigma that surrounds mental health and wellbeing (Guarneri, Oberleitner et al. 2019, Martin 2010), or because they see them as part of the normal stresses of university life (Salzer 2012). This suggests that there could be a significant number of students receiving little or no wellbeing or mental health support, despite needing it.

Mental health or wellbeing issues in students not only affect students' lives outside of university but can have a significant impact on their studies. Universities UK (2018) found that students with mental

health problems are more likely to experience disruption to their education through taking time off, attempting to continue their studies without the support they need or dropping out altogether. Research by Andrews and Wilding (2004) has shown a significant increase in students who were previously symptom free developing certain mental health conditions by half-way through their course and that this can have an impact on their academic success. Additionally, a small number of interviews showed that the pressures of university life themselves can increase pre-existing mental health conditions (Tinklin, Riddell et al. 2005).

However, students with mental health or wellbeing problems cannot be treated as a single, homogeneous group. Students may experience higher education differently depending on the type or severity of their mental health condition or wellbeing problem. Some students find the ability to be included in further study an important step in their recovery from previous mental health and wellbeing problems. Giving those with serious pre-existing mental health problems the opportunity to complete further study can assist in recovery, by making them feel included, less isolated and more hopeful (Davidson, Stayner et al. 2001). This suggests that for some students with mental health problems being supported to complete their studies would bring the greatest benefit and that university can have differing effects on the mental health and wellbeing of students. The increase in request for support and the complexity of the problem shows that there is a need for further investigation into ways that universities can help support their students' mental health.

2.3. The role of the academic library

With the problem of student mental health and wellbeing continuing to rise, the role of other campus institutions outside of the student health and wellbeing services should play has been considered. Universities UK, the collective organisation of universities in the UK, advocate a whole campus approach, in which all university campus services work together to try and improve student mental health and wellbeing, normally with the involvement of the university's wellbeing or counselling teams (Universities UK 2018). This has already been added to the mental health and wellbeing strategy of a number of UK universities including, University College London (University College London 2019), the University of York (University of York 2017) and the University of Bristol (University of Bristol 2018). The whole campus approach can help to reduce the burden for student counselling services by providing support for students with more low-level problems and preventing them from becoming more serious. This support can be vital as many students do not seek support from counselling services in the first instance, but instead talk to close family or friends, or other members of staff such as academic or administrative staff (Grant 2002).

The introduction of the whole campus approach poses the question of the specific role of the academic library in this strategy. Some researchers feel that the academic library possesses many important qualities that mean that it is a good candidate to provide extra mental health and wellbeing support. The academic library plays a central role in student's lives, with library staff having excellent reputations as trusted information providers. Inherent strengths which could be beneficial in supporting wellbeing. Work by Boise State University in the U.S has collected examples of how these inherent strengths can be used to better support student mental health and wellbeing (Ramsey, Aagard 2018). The academic library is often seen as being a safe space or sanctuary for students. It provides opportunities for socialising but also allows for users to work alone amongst other people, both of which make students more comfortable, and could increase wellbeing (Demas 2005). Public libraries have been shown to be a therapeutic environment, by providing a familiar, welcoming, comforting, and calming space with helpful staff they can talk to when feeling isolated (Brewster 2014). Little research been done on whether the academic library environment could provide similar benefits. It would be valuable to see if students obtain similar feelings of comfort from visiting their

academic library as this could show that the library would be a suitable space for mental health and wellbeing initiatives.

Other studies have pointed to the mental health and wellbeing benefits of reading itself, most commonly known as bibliotherapy. This can involve a wide variety of activities involving books specifically dealing with mental health and wellbeing issues or simply reading for enjoyment. This process has been shown to be an effective approach and works best when facilitated by councillors working in conjunction with library staff (FORREST 1998). This has already been used successfully by a variety of different libraries including public, academic and healthcare libraries (McNicol, Brewster 2018). However there have been issues found with bibliotherapy. A study by Brewster found that many health and public library staff did not have a good understanding of Bibliotherapy, despite providing the service. Something that could easily impact the effectiveness of the service for readers (BREWSTER, SEN et al. 2013).

Another strength the academic libraries could use to support of student's mental health and wellbeing are their staff, as they play an important front facing role in many campuses. However, the training of non-mental health professionals providing mental health and wellbeing support is something that is currently considered poor. A literature review by Hartrey, Denieffe et al. (2017) identified the lack of mental health literacy of university staff as a barrier to the participation of those with mental health difficulties. A survey of academic staff at Australia University discovered that though many of the staff felt that they were confident with helping those with lower levels of emotional distress, 60% did not feel that they were equipped to supporting students with mental health and wellbeing issues with almost half reporting that they did not have access to formal training (Gulliver, Farrer et al. 2018).

However, when universities do set up programmes to improve staff knowledge of mental health and wellbeing issues amongst students, they prove popular. A programme provided by the University of Leicester (Grant 2002) was well attended by staff from numerous departments, suggesting that there are staff who are willing to gain these skills. Information sheets on the same topic also were found to meet a real need for staff who were unsure of how to respond to students' problems and what their role should be when dealing with students with mental health and wellbeing problems. It was suggested that university staff could play a vital role in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of students as long as they were clear about their boundaries and the limits of their expertise, and know when to refer students to mental health and wellbeing professionals where necessary.

The Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) Qualification which allows staff to be able to provide first aid to students and staff in mental health distress has also been used to train staff in mental health issues. A specific training programme aimed at those who work or study in higher education has already been introduced (Mental Health First Aid England 2020). A meta-analysis of MHFA programmes showed that overall the training was successful in improving mental health literacy, attitudes, and helping-related behaviours (Maslowski Amy K., LaCaille Rick A. et al. 2019). This has been used already in higher education institutions, with a Canadian University finding that giving student affairs staff this training met its objectives of increasing knowledge of mental health, enhance sensitivity, and raise confidence to intervene and assist individuals experiencing a mental health issue successfully (Massey, Brooks et al. 2014). This shows that the training of staff who are not mental health or wellbeing practitioners can be positive. However there has yet to be any research on attitudes of library staff or students on library staff taking on a mental health and wellbeing role.

The above examples show that diversification of academic library services into the related areas of mental health and wellbeing could be effective as the library could have inherent benefits for creating health and wellbeing programmes. Management theory shows that this type of diversification into related areas, known as horizontal diversification, is often successful, bringing positive effects to both

the library and the higher education institution. Examples of academic libraries using this method of diversification include working with academic departments to create study skills sessions (Walton, G. 2007), building on strengths the library already has. It would be valuable to know if academic libraries diversified in this way to help support student mental health and wellbeing it would be similarly successful. Diversification can also bring risks, there is no guarantee of success and some fear that diversification might cause existing services to suffer, lowering the quality of the library. An editorial by Walton (2018) detailed concerns that staff may have insufficient funds or staff time to offer mental health and wellbeing services and concluded that collaboration with university wellbeing providers is essential for effective wellbeing services. It would therefore be useful to ask library staff whether they have similar concerns about supporting student's mental health and wellbeing.

2.4. Mental health and wellbeing programmes in the academic library

There have not been large amounts of detailed research into academic libraries providing mental health and wellbeing support. However, there are academic libraries which already offer such support. A survey of North American university libraries showed that around 40% of institutions collaborated with on campus and off-campus groups to provide exam time wellbeing support (Borchard, Meyers-Martin 2015).

Some university libraries have taken the approach of training their staff to be able to provide basic mental health support to students in times of difficulty. The University of Arkansas trialled training their library staff in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) to assist students, help fight mental health stigma and diffuse difficult situations. They found that 93% of those who participated in the MHFA course had encountered a mental health concern whilst working in the library. The MHFA course made library staff who participated more knowledgeable and comfortable dealing with students reporting mental health problems (Conroy 2018). Despite being a small sample, this study shows that library staff do deal with students experiencing mental health and wellbeing difficulties and that MHFA training staff can help staff deal with these types of situations in an empathetic and professional manner.

Other academic libraries have done small trials of a variety of student activities or programmes to help support student mental health and wellbeing. The University of Warwick have trialled a 'study happy' campaign involving a range of activities from craft, yoga and meditation, to pet therapy. These activities were designed to encourage students to de-stress whilst in the library and improve wellbeing. The activities proved immensely popular with much positive feedback on social media and was extended to subsequent years (Brewerton, Wooley 2016). A similar programme by Keele university library during the stressful exam period to provide relaxation activities was also successful (Smith 2019).

These schemes have extended beyond the high stress period of exam season. With many focusing on relaxation and mindfulness activities. Several libraries have offered yoga, with a trial by Casucci and Baluchi (2019) in a health science library receiving praise from both staff and students. As well as offering staff and students a chance for relaxation and time to focus on wellbeing. It provided additional benefits by providing opportunities for networking and to promote the library and its collections. Despite this success there was some difficulty in finding a suitable permanent location for the class.

Other libraries have tried innovative relaxation and mindfulness technologies such as labyrinth walking. Labyrinth walking allows students to follow along a computer-generated maze, projected on to a floor. This activity is designed to make students more mindful and relaxed by moving away from their computer screen and engaging their whole body with a new problem (Cook, Croft 2015). The study by Cook et al. (2015) showed that 65% felt more relaxed after completing a labyrinth. Additional studies showed that labyrinth walking reduced systolic blood pressure and pulse rate, as well as

receiving increased satisfaction scores from participants (Zucker, Choi et al. 2016).

Pet therapy has also been a popular wellbeing activity run by libraries, involving animals such as specifically trained dogs to be brought into the library for students to interact with to help improve their wellbeing. These have proved popular amongst the institutions that have studied them (Lannon, Harrison 2015, Reynolds, Rabschutz 2011, Jalongo, McDevitt 2015) with large numbers attending sessions and providing positive feedback. For this activity staff time was found to be the only difficulty in libraries providing the pet therapy, though it was important to make sure that the pet therapy sessions took place in a suitable area of the library, that was well cleared of anything that could be easily damaged, and where those with pet allergies or phobias could avoid the sessions. (Reynolds, Rabschutz 2011).

Some libraries have instead used their reputation as informational hubs and provided bibliotherapy schemes to help improve student wellbeing and mental health. Edinburgh Napier University, Scotland, achieved positive results through reading programmes, using a wide variety of reading materials chosen in conjunction with their wellbeing team (Ennis 2018). This programme provided a useful stopgap between a student requesting to see a councillor and their appointment. A U.S. university similarly managed to create a “student success” collection to provide help and basic bibliotherapy for students using a limited budget. This project was with popular with many of the books in the collection being checked out (Azadbakht, Englert 2019). This shows that the bibliotherapy approach can be affordable and effective.

Other libraries have tried a more active approach by introducing an active learning space which introduced standing, treadmill and cycling desks to encourage physical activity whilst studying (Clement 2018). Physical activity is widely known to be beneficial for physical and mental health and the study found library users found both physical and mental health value when they tried the active space.

Not all have library programmes have been as popular. Despite receiving positive feedback from students, a study found that offering a mediation or relaxation space did not prove more popular than the study room that preceded it, with finding a location of the room and maintenance of the space causing additional difficulties (Bremer 2019).

Despite most of these schemes being popular and widespread, there has been little research on student opinions on these programmes, with the only evidence for the success of most of these programmes being based on numbers or anecdotal positive feedback. This shows a clear gap in the research. It has been advocated that students should have a greater say in mental health and wellbeing programmes, stating that collaborating with students would be beneficial for such programmes (Querstret 2019). One academic library applied a user-centred programming model to involve students in creating their library de-stress activities (Robison, Muszkiewicz 2018). Suggestions were taken from students informally using a whiteboard. Suggestions included blanket-forts, Play-doh, markers, bubble wrap and punching bags. The most popular activities were those that were passive, activities that the students could just pick up anytime. These were preferable to those that were active, where students would have to actively attend at a specific time. Uptake of these activities were high for a small university and focus groups of students from the university established that students were more likely to take part in activities that they had suggested or voted for. This shows that involving students in mental health and wellbeing programming in the academic library could be a successful approach that merits further research.

2.5. Summary

The literature review shows a clear need for investigation into how best academic libraries can support student mental health and wellbeing, and how it can be practically implemented. The central role of the academic library in campus life means it could play an important role in creating these new programmes and services. Despite a significant number of academic libraries already offering support, the literature shows significant gaps in the research into the attitudes and opinions of both academic library staff and university students towards academic libraries providing mental health and wellbeing support. The research in this area will contribute to best practice for academic libraries providing such support. This will then help to create successful and effective programs by gathering information on what students would find most helpful and what library staff feel is feasible. The subsequent chapter will discuss which methods this research will use to investigate this problem.

3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This section details the research methods that were used to fulfil the aim and objectives of the research. It is divided into five sub-sections, the first provides the research strategy and why it was chosen, drawing on relevant previous research and theory, with the second detailing the sampling strategy. The third part shows the data collection strategy, with the fourth showing how data was analysed. The fifth section deals with the ethical issues of the research.

3.2. Research Strategy

A phenomenological approach was adopted as the research aimed to examine the real-life problem of mental health and wellbeing amongst students and understand their lived experiences (Creswell 2009b). Mixed methods were used to investigate the topic as it fits with the phenomenological approach (Mayoh, Onwuegbuzie 2015) and allows the objectives of the research to be achieved. Mixed methods research collects and analyses both qualitative and quantitative data rigorously and integrates both forms of data and their results (Creswell, Plano Clark 2018). A mixed methods approach is used to reduce the weaknesses that either the qualitative and quantitative approaches have, or when one of those methods is thought insufficient to understand a problem (Creswell 2009a). Although mixed methods research is not yet commonplace in Library and Information science research, it has been used successfully in a number of scenarios and is growing in popularity (Fidel 2008).

Mixed methods research is underpinned by the assumption that collecting diverse types of data provides the best way of understanding a problem. This means it can generate more new insights and possibilities than only one method would by itself, resulting in richer and more complex findings (Fidel 2008). It allows for multiple worldviews and paradigms, making it a flexible approach (Creswell 2009a).

One of the principle justifications for using mixed methods research offered by Creswell and Plano-Clark (2018) is the need to first explore before administering instruments, This was applicable to this research, as student opinions on this specific topic had not been explored by previous studies and the aims of the research required the sourcing students' opinions before moving to the border examination of staff attitudes. To enable this exploration to take place an exploratory sequential approach was adopted.

The exploratory sequential approach is a form of mixed methods research which incorporates qualitative and quantitative methods one after the other, which allows the initial qualitative phase results to shape the second, quantitative stage of the research. This builds up a broader picture of the issue by exploring it through qualitative data and which can then be then to create generalisable

qualitative data. (Teddlie, Taskakkori 2002). For this project, this involved using focus groups to explore student views on how academic libraries can support student mental health. The data collected from the focus groups was then used to inform a survey of academic library staff, which gathered quantitative data on their opinions of the recommendations of the student focus groups and whether they felt they were feasible. This allows for the thoughts of students and Academic Library Staff to be included in the research, creating a better understanding of the issue.

3.3. Sampling Strategy

As the research was exploratory, a self-selection approach was used with any relevant parties being welcome to participate. This ensured that participants would have an interest in the topic and be able to contribute useful data (Saunders, Lewis et al. 2015).

Due to time constraints, participants for the focus groups were recruited from the student population of the researcher's own institution. Recruitment took place around the campus ensuring that participants were students, so would have opinions that were relevant to the topic and the objectives of the project. Students of all levels of study were considered to gain as many perspectives as possible. The questionnaires were aimed at all UK academic library staff as they have opinions relevant to the research objectives. All levels of staff were invited to participate via a country-wide academic library mailing list to get a broad range of opinions. The questionnaire was limited to UK participants to eliminate any differences in higher education in other countries.

A non-probability sampling approach had to be used in both cases due to the inability to obtain a specific list of all possible participants for either group that was sampled.

3.4. Data Collection

3.4.1. Focus Groups

Student focus groups were chosen as the first method for collecting data to allow the gathering of subjective opinion and the reasons behind them. It allowed for direct interaction with students to get a better understanding of their thinking (Stewart, Shamdasani et al. 2007). Working with focus groups as opposed to interviews meant that the researcher gained both individual insight and collective experience, with participants building on each other's responses. This enables the collection of richer data and a better understanding of the collective student experience. This approach has been used successfully, with research by Anna Fagerheim, and Weingart (2005) determining what students wanted from their library using focus groups where students helped library staff plan for and design new intellectual and physical spaces in the library. However small groups like these are unlikely to be fully representative of students at the university so it would not be appropriate to make generalisations about the student population from the focus groups. The aim of the focus group was to gather a range of views and suggestions which could be used to put forward to the next phase of the research, the library staff survey.

The original intention was to recruit for two focus groups with around 4-8 participants in each. This ensured that the groups were numerous and large enough to provide enough data but not so large that participants did not have a chance to contribute to the discussion. Small incentives of snacks and drinks were offered to encourage participation.

Initial attempts to recruit for participants by advertising via a poster campaign and on an online student notice board did not provide a high enough uptake so other strategies had to be employed. To increase numbers academic department staff were contacted to get in touch with students directly and encourage participation. A sign-up stall was set up in the library, a central location on campus. This allowed the researcher to talk to students in person, explain their research, and encourage sign-up. The stall was set up during the busy lunchtime period over one week to reach as many students as possible. It was manned by the researcher with a supply of sweets and flyers to attract students.

This was the most effective method of encouraging student participation, with over forty students stating their interest in participating. Students who signed up for the focus groups were directed to an online polling tool, Doodle, to establish when they would be available to attend focus groups. At this point the response rate declined with most people who signed up not providing an indication of when they were available. Enough students signed up for two focus groups to be organised with six participants signing up for each. Not all who signed up attended with the first focus group having four participants and the second only one. It was felt that this would not have produced enough data, so all students who had stated their interest but did not attend were contacted again, and further participants were sought via the sign-up stall over another two lunchtimes. This provided enough students to hold a third and final focus group with all seven who signed up attending.

The focus groups took place on campus, as it was a familiar, comfortable space for participants, making them feel more relaxed in the unnatural setting of the focus group. The focus groups followed a semi-structured format, allowing the main points of the discussion to be covered, whilst giving participants the freedom to discuss what they felt was important about the topic (Morgan 1998). The semi-structured nature of the focus groups ensured that the results from the groups could easily be compiled and compared. The focus groups were facilitated by the researcher who directed the conversation with the use of schedule of important questions that was used of across all groups. The schedule was used to minimise the influence of the facilitator and help reduce facilitator bias. The discussions in the focus groups were based around meeting the first two objectives of the research, determining whether students are interested in academic libraries helping to support their mental health and wellbeing and establish which services they feel would be the most useful to achieve this. Initial questions of the schedule were behavioural, focusing on understanding the participants normal library usage habits, before expanding to include attitudinal questions to determine their opinions on the topic, establishing what they would like the library to offer both as a space and in terms of services to help support mental health and wellbeing. Questions were mainly open ended to generate discussion. Before the focus groups took place, the questions were piloted with three members of Royal Holloway Library Services, who were also part-time students to make sure the questions made sense and were likely to provide the information required. Due to feedback from the pilot group, adjustments were made to the information provided to participants about the research to make the purpose of the research clearer and one of the questions was simplified to make it more understandable.

3.4.2. Questionnaire

Once the data from the focus groups was analysed, the themes and ideas raised were used to create a survey. The survey was created to meet the second two objectives of the research by gathering the opinions of academic library staff on whether they agreed with the suggestions received from the student focus groups and whether they were feasible, as well as how they feel about their library helping with student mental health and wellbeing. Using a survey was decided to be advantageous as it is an efficient way to gather the opinions of a large number of people. It allowed library staff to respond to the ideas of students from the focus groups anonymously, reducing the chance of bias and encouraging respondents to answer honestly.

The survey took the form of a short questionnaire of about 5 principal questions, with most questions containing sub-questions, these were presented in the form of a grid. These questions were identified by looking at the main themes that had come out of the focus group analysis. A smaller number of questions were chosen to make it easier for respondents to fill in and make them more likely to complete the entire questionnaire. The main bulk of the questions were closed questions with two taking the form of taking the form of a Likert scale, allowing respondents to show the strength of their feeling about the issues raised. This produced ordinal data. Dichotomous yes/no questions were used to determine facts such as which resources they had access to for health and wellbeing activities.

Some free-text questions were added to allow respondents to add their own ideas or mention anything they thought had been missed out. This produced additional qualitative data and context for the quantitative data.

Before the survey was sent out, a pilot group of the researcher's academic librarian colleagues were invited to test the questions and give feedback. The questions were made clearer based on this feedback.

The survey was created using the online tool Surveys Online. Surveys Online was chosen because it was easy to use, allowed the questions to be formatted in a way that was aesthetically pleasing, and was compliant with the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). An online method of dissemination was decided upon so the survey could be sent to as many recipients as possible, and to make it convenient for respondents to fill in and return at their own leisure. The survey was shared to members of the JISC mailing list LIS-LINK which is a popular email list of library and information professionals. This allowed for a large number of relevant people to be made aware of the survey. It was thought that by sharing the survey online, that a large enough number of people would respond to make the findings build a meaningful picture of the opinions of academic librarians. The survey was left open for three weeks to give people enough time to respond, with a reminder email being sent a week before the closing date to encourage people who has forgotten or who had missed the initial email to respond.

3.5. Analysis

The contents of the focus groups were recorded using a Dictaphone. The voice recordings were then transcribed and coded. A thematic analysis approach was used where the main themes and patterns in the data were identified (Braun, Clarke 2006). This allowed for flexibility in the analysis and for the important points of the data to be summarised appropriately. Themes were identified through observations of repeated ideas and topics during the coding of the data. As the focus groups were exploratory and little could be assumed about what the students will say, open coding was used. This meant the initial codes were built up from the analysis of the first focus group, with new codes added when they were found in subsequent focus groups. The data was organised thematically by code and then reduced so it could be analysed more easily. This sorting was done using the analytical software NVivo, with appropriate quotes from the focus group being sorted into nodes which represented the theme. The entire section of speech from one person that contained a quote relevant to the theme were sorted into the node, this was to ensure that quotes were not removed from their context. If a section contained references to more than one theme, the quote was placed in both. The main themes were then further divided into sub-themes based on the data in each node. The sorted data was then able to be used as the basis for the questionnaire in the quantitative stage of the research.

The responses to the closed questionnaire questions were analysed using descriptive statistics. The nominal and ordinal data was organised into frequency bar charts to allow for easy comparison of question responses. Percentages were also calculated to allow the results to be compared with other data sources. The responses to the open questions were collated to establish the major trends. They were coded using the same coding themes as the focus groups for consistency and to allow the data from both forms of data collection to be merged. The survey data was then be compared with the original focus group data to build up the complete picture, giving both generalisable statistical data and rich qualitative data.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was achieved for both focus group and questionnaire participants, ensuring compliance with the university's ethics policy. Before the focus groups commenced participants were required to read an information sheet about what their participation in the research would involve

and sign a consent form. This ensured that all participants were able to understand what was required of them, and how data they provided would be stored and used. An introduction was added to the start of the questionnaire to ensure respondents were sufficiently informed of the nature and purpose of the research and could be said to have given informed consent to participate.

Another important ethical consideration was anonymity and confidentiality. All questionnaire participants could complete the survey anonymously with no identifying data being gathered. Participants from the focus groups could not be anonymous from each other but all participants were asked to treat information heard in the group confidentially. All data including recordings, transcripts, and responses were anonymised and kept securely on a laptop.

The topic involved sensitive issues which could cause mental distress for participants. To mitigate this, questions asked in the focus group and the questionnaire avoided asking about specific details of mental health difficulties they may have experience of. Sources of help were indicated to participants in case they did become distressed.

3.7. Summary

This section has detailed the phenomenological, mixed methods approach design of the research, including why it was chosen and how it was enacted, as well as the ethical issues that had to be considered. The following section will explore the results obtained from these methods.

4. Results

4.1. Introduction

This section reports the results of the both the focus groups and the staff questionnaire, with the results being grouped together by theme. The student focus groups were completed with four, one, and seven participants, respectively. The academic library staff survey received 139 completed responses in total. A review of the results identified three principal themes: The academic library as a location for mental health and wellbeing support for students, Ideas for the library to help support mental health and wellbeing, and mental health and wellbeing schemes already in place in academic libraries.

4.2. The Academic Library as a location for mental health and wellbeing support for students

4.2.1. General feelings towards the library

Students reported a variety of feelings when asked to discuss how the library made them feel. Several of the focus group participants mentioned the welcoming environment of the library commenting that using the library made them feel 'relaxed' and 'cosy'. Being surrounded by books and having comfy furniture were influential features in this.

I think it makes me feel cosy and I dunno ...relaxed.? Except when I am working then stressed, but still cosy. I find the library really comforting as it is full of books and I love books. (Focus group participant 1.1).

Additionally, the library café was mentioned a couple of times as something that made the library more relaxing and welcoming. A couple of students mentioned that they did not feel judged harshly for their behaviour in the library, making it seem a more welcoming space.

Others mentioned that using the library made them feel more productive and focused, preferring to use it over other locations such as their own home. With one user describing how the lack of distractions in the library space pushed them to focus on work.

I am more productive in the library with my work. Yeah obviously fewer distractions and that you can't listen to music out loud forces me to be... to actually focus on your work. (Focus group participant 3.2).

Not all respondents agreed with this assessment, with several mentioning that they found working in the library to be a stressful experience. The most common cause of this stress amongst the participants was that they often found the library environment distracting with multiple complaints of noisiness in silent areas.

It's so busy, it's so noisy and everyone is stressed and freaking out and panicking. (Focus group participant 3.6).

Another reason given for feeling stressed when using the library was non-functioning equipment or services. One user pointed out that for him the library would always be stressful because he associated it with his deadlines.

The library makes me feel) stressed. Library means work, work means deadlines; deadlines mean stress. (Focus Group Participant 1.2).

Several participants also stated that they found approaching the help desk and the library staff to be a cause of stress and tried to avoid it where possible. Several students commented on the atmosphere in the library. One student mentioned how impressed they were with space and the services that the library provides, likening it to a sci-fi movie. However, another participant stated that they felt the library did not have the atmosphere they were looking for, stating that the modernity of the building and the way it is run made it feel like not a real library. Another described the atmosphere of the library as feeling claustrophobic due to the lack of openable windows. These insights from the students show that they have a range of opinions on how they feel about the library, with some feeling it is a comfortable environment, which could then also be used as a safe place for mental health and wellbeing support but others disagreeing.

4.2.2. How the library is used

The responses from the students also shed light on the many ways that the library is currently used. Some participants in the focus groups were keen to stay in their favourite spot when they visited the library whilst others were keener to move around and try different spaces to prevent boredom or because they were using the library for a different purpose. This even extended to using other spaces on campus outside the library for studying such as cafés. Some used the library as base where they could leave things and go out to other activities and return, whereas others preferred to stay put for larger periods of time.

Sort of everyday my go to thing is to go to the library ... that's how I centre my day. I think oh I'm going to campus, obviously I am going to the library and I see that as a base in a sense. (Focus group participant 1.3).

As well as using the library space differently, the participants also chose to use the library for different purposes. Some participants frequently studied in the library, whereas others mentioned simply popping in to use specific resources such as the printers. Several participants also reported using the library for purposes outside of university work such as meeting up with friends or completing 'life-admin' such as emails, organising activities, online shopping and checking social media.

I think when people ask where do you actually socialise on campus, people end up saying the library because it's a place where people come, and kind of get together. (Focus Group participant 1.3).

This shows that although the library is used differently by different students, the library is a well-used space. Therefore, it could be considered somewhere that would be convenient to run activities or provide information on mental health and wellbeing because it would be seen by numerous students.

Several focus group participants brought up the library's 24 hour opening as a reason that library would be an appropriate location for mental health and wellbeing initiatives. The students noted that there were few other spaces open on campus in the evenings and overnight, leaving them with few options of places to go if they needed support, or to simply be around other people. However, one of the other focus group participants expressed more scepticism about the library's extended opening hours, saying that this encouraged students to develop unhealthy habits. This was supported by several of the respondents to the questionnaire who mentioned at the end of the questionnaire that they were concerned about the negative effects their library's extended opening was having on student mental health and wellbeing.

4.2.2. Feelings towards mental health and wellbeing schemes in the library

Most participants in the focus groups were positive towards the idea of the library providing health and wellbeing support. Several said that they saw the need for increasing support for these issues, having observed difficulties amongst other students or having experienced problems themselves.

I have noticed that some people who upload (on social media) some really sad and depressed messages... I think it's a great idea to just organise some activities for them. (Focus Group Participant 2.1).

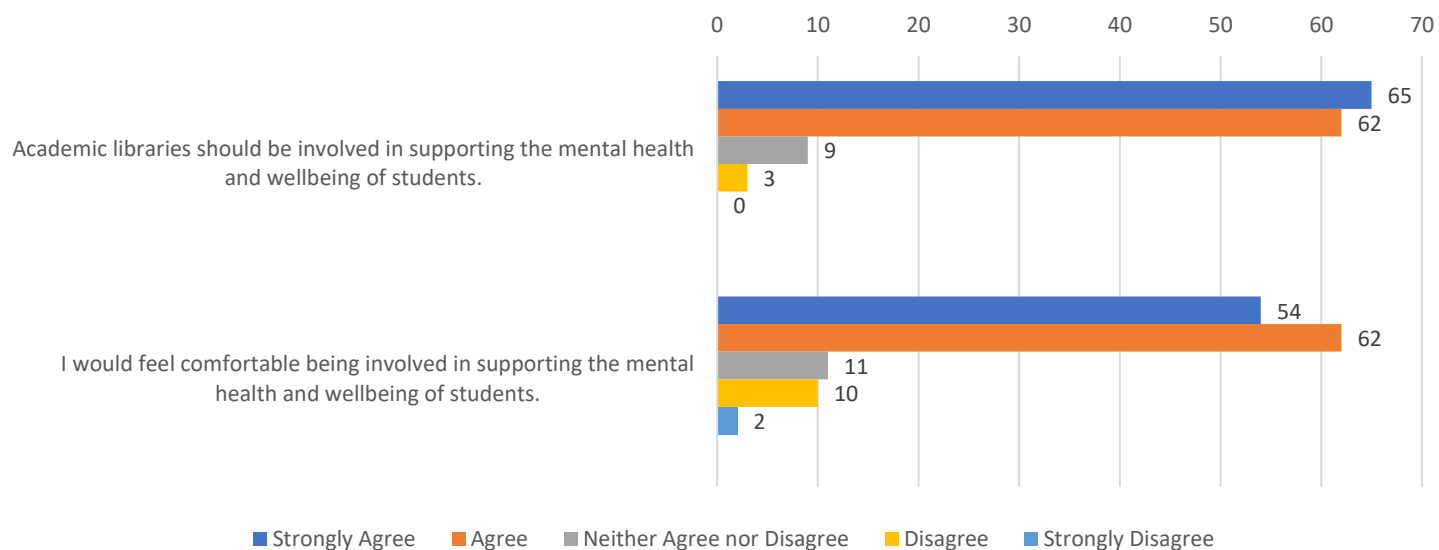
Several mentioned that they thought the library could be a convenient location to help provide this support as it is a popular space for students and is the only 24/7 space on campus.

I think it would be really good addition because I think in many ways it is a really supportive place, just in the way it's designed, with an all-night, well most of the night cafe and with the silent study space and the allocated DDS user space and stuff like that, I think it is a really nice space but I think introducing more wellbeing activities and support that would be really good. (Focus Group Participant 1.1).

This point of view was shared by the majority of staff who completed the questionnaire, responding that they strongly agreed (65 participants/46.8% of participants) or agreed (62 participants/44.6% of participants) that academic libraries should be involved in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of students (Figure 1). The majority of staff surveyed also indicated that they would feel comfortable being involved in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of students with 54 (38%) responding they strongly agreed with the statement and 62 (44.6%) responding that they agreed (Figure 1). These responses from the student participants of the focus groups and the staff responses to the survey show significant support for the idea of the academic library being involved in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of students.

Figure 1 – Bar chart showing how strongly academic library staff agreed or disagreed with whether the academic library should support mental health and wellbeing and how comfortable they would feel doing so. N=139

Figure 1: Responses from Q1 of the staff questionnaire - *Please read each statement and indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with each one.*



However, some approached the idea with more caution. One of the participants in the student focus groups questioned what exactly the library could provide in terms of mental health and wellbeing support and how this would be different from other services provided on campus.

Stress and students go hand in hand, and I don't feel like I'm necessarily going to go to the library for mental health activities, but signposting it and saying you can go to this one and this one is going on than that could be a good thing. (Focus Group Participant 3.1).

Another focus group participant remarked that the library signposting to mental health and wellbeing services on campus such as the university wellbeing service and the university health centre might be of limited effectiveness when there is a poor opinion of these services amongst the student population. This suggests that encouraging people to seek support in principle may be a good idea but may not work if the local support services provide little or poor-quality help.

I think it depends on which kind of resources as I know for a fact that there are a lot of people who aren't very happy with the GP centre, the wellbeing and DDS service, so if the library is just there going - go to these guys - even though everyone knows that they are terrible... That's the problem you don't want to be seen pointing towards a brick wall because then people will say of you say you are into mental health yet you are just sending us back to where we have already been rejected from. (Focus Group Participant 1.2).

There were some amongst the staff survey respondents who also mentioned concerns about academic libraries providing mental health and wellbeing support. Even though the numbers who disagreed or strongly disagreed that Academic libraries should be involved in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of students (3 and 0 respondents respectively, 2.1% of the total) or who disagreed or strongly disagreed that they would feel comfortable being involved in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of students (10 and 2 respondents respectively, 8.6% of the total) were small, some respondents did express concerns in the final free text question of the survey. Several mentioned that they would only feel comfortable providing this support if they had adequate training to do so. With two respondents mentioning that they would be afraid to make mistakes. One respondent was concerned that academic library staff themselves require support due to the toll providing support for students was having on their own mental health and wellbeing. Two respondents also questioned the appropriateness of the library providing mental health and wellbeing

support for students. One respondent felt that it was important that more serious problems should be passed on to specialists and that that any activities and programmes offered by the library for mental health and wellbeing support should be proven to be helpful. There were also concerns about what providing these extra services would mean for the library’s existing services with one respondent stating that they felt that the academic library should do what it can but that it should not be at the expense of the vital library services that are already provided. Another pointed out that different students have very different mental health and wellbeing needs and that it would not be possible for the library to provide for all of them.

When staff were asked whether their library would have the resources to provide support for student mental health and wellbeing, the responses where more mixed. Most respondents answered no when asked if the library where they work had funds to provide support for student mental health and wellbeing with 55 of the 138 (39.9%) respondents saying that their library did not have the funds, but the responses overall were mixed, with 48 (34.5%) saying that they did and 36 (25.9%) saying that they did not know (Figure 2).

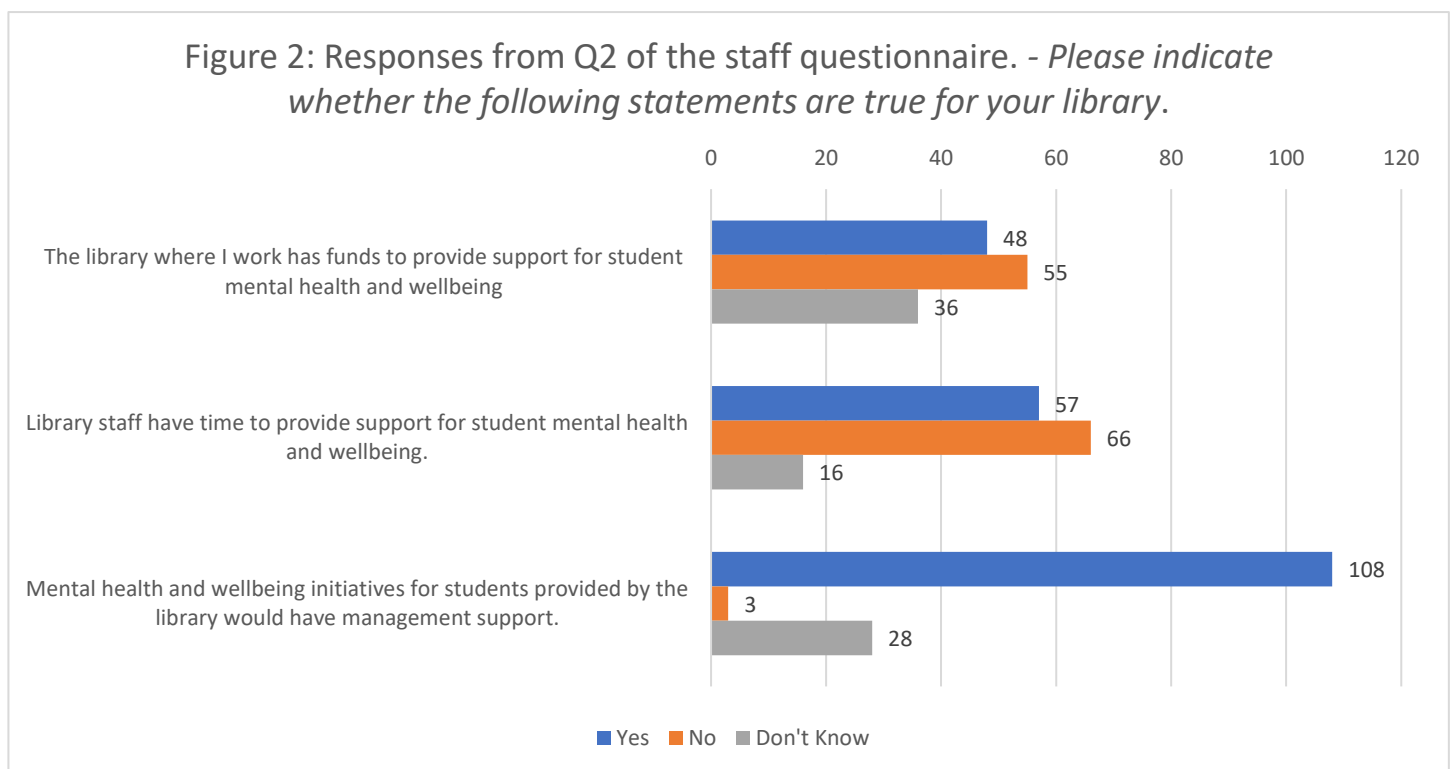


Figure 2 – Bar chart showing whether academic library staff felt they had the funds, staff time and management support to implement mental health and wellbeing activities in their library. N=139.

Similar responses were given when the library staff were asked if staff have time to provide support for student mental health and wellbeing. 66 respondents (47.5%) said they did not have the time with 54 (38.8%) saying that they did and 16 (11.5%) saying that they did not know.

The outcome was different when the library staff were asked about whether their library would have management support. A vast majority of staff responded that they would have management support for such programmes, with 108 of the 139 participants (78.2%) responding yes.

Another factor that might affect an academic library’s ability to provide mental health and wellbeing support that was not asked about in the survey but was mentioned by respondents in the free text

question at the end of the survey was space. Several respondents mentioned space as a limiting factor for creating wellbeing spaces or running mental health and wellbeing events.

The responses overall from the student focus groups and the staff survey show that most of the students and staff viewed the idea of the library providing mental health and wellbeing support as a good idea. Many of the focus group members raised points on why the library could be a good location to have this support. However, both students and staff expressed some concerns over what this support would be and how it would be provided with the staff survey showing that a significant number of institutions might be limited by staff time or finance in what they could provide.

4.3. Ideas for the library to help support mental health and wellbeing

4.3.1. Environmental Changes

Most of the ideas given by the focus group participants were improvements to the library environment. This varied from suggestions of different furniture such as pods you could close yourself off in, comfy sofas and bean bags to introducing more plants, artworks, light and air to make the library space feel more pleasant and less claustrophobic.

Maybe just have like windows that you can open like listen to the birds and stuff that would be nice. Study rooms feel a bit claustrophobic at times. (Focus Group Participant 1.2).

Another suggestion was to make the library help desk look more inviting and less intimidating so students would feel more comfortable asking for help and be less likely to choose to struggle on their own if they encountered a problem in the library.

Then at the help desk because you only go there if you really, really need help with something. Or I do anyway. So, I figure the helpdesk could look more inviting and give advice on support services and things like that, rather than just library stuff. (Focus Group Participant 3.5).

Figure 3: Responses from Q3 of the staff questionnaire - *Each of the following suggestions for the library were obtained through student focus groups. For each suggestion please indicate whether you believe that they will help support student mental health*

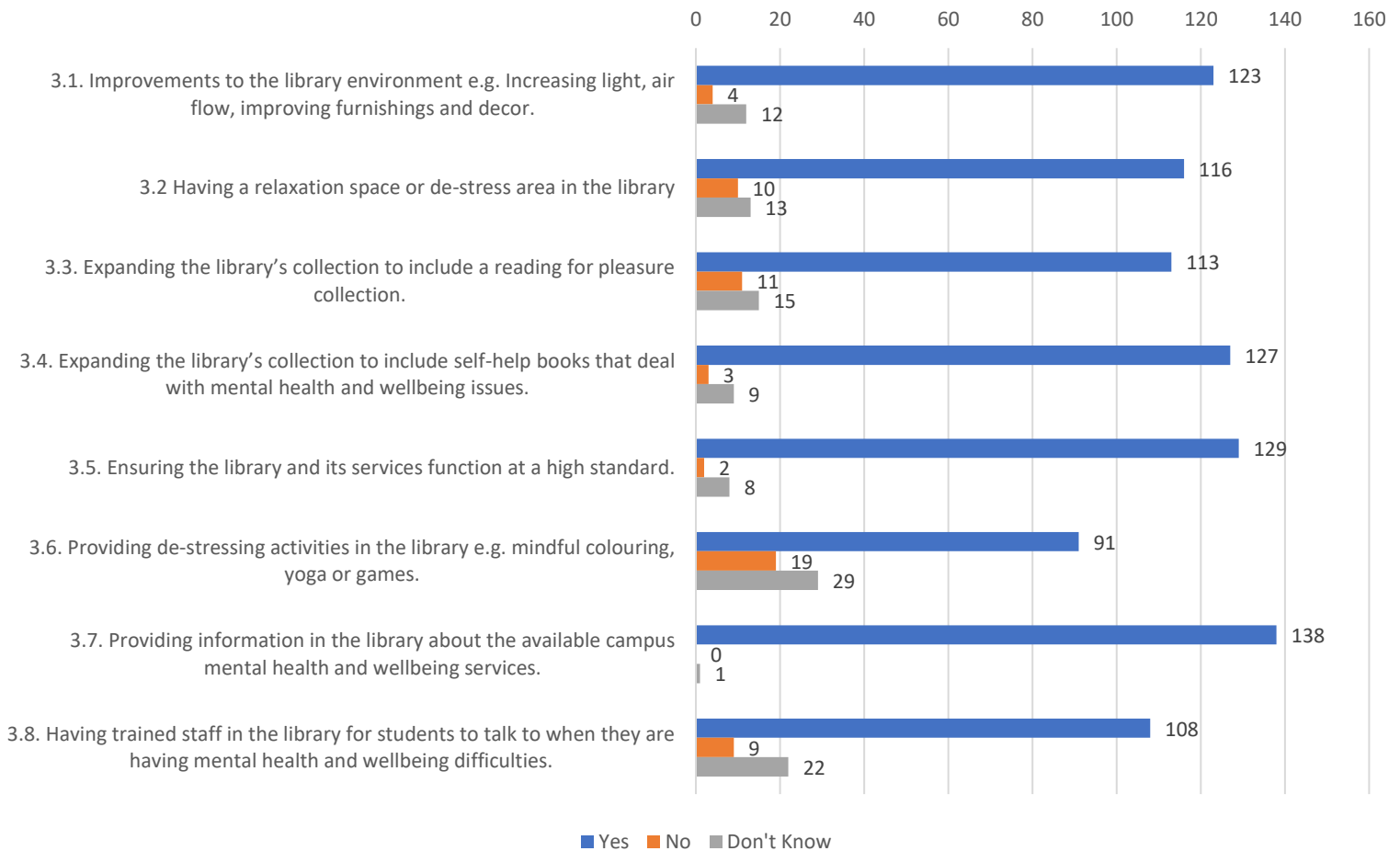


Figure 3– Bar chart showing whether academic library staff agreed whether a variety of suggestions from the student focus groups would improve mental health and wellbeing. N=139

This idea was strongly supported by the outcome of the staff survey with 123 (88.5%) of the academic library staff responding that they felt that improvements to the library space would help improve student mental health and wellbeing (Figure 3). The idea was also generally considered feasible by the majority of those who responded to the staff questionnaire with 66% of respondents having either already implemented environmental changes or that their library would be able to so (figure 4).

Figure 4: Responses from Q4 of the staff questionnaire - *For each of the suggestions below please indicate whether you think that the library where you work would be able to provide it.*

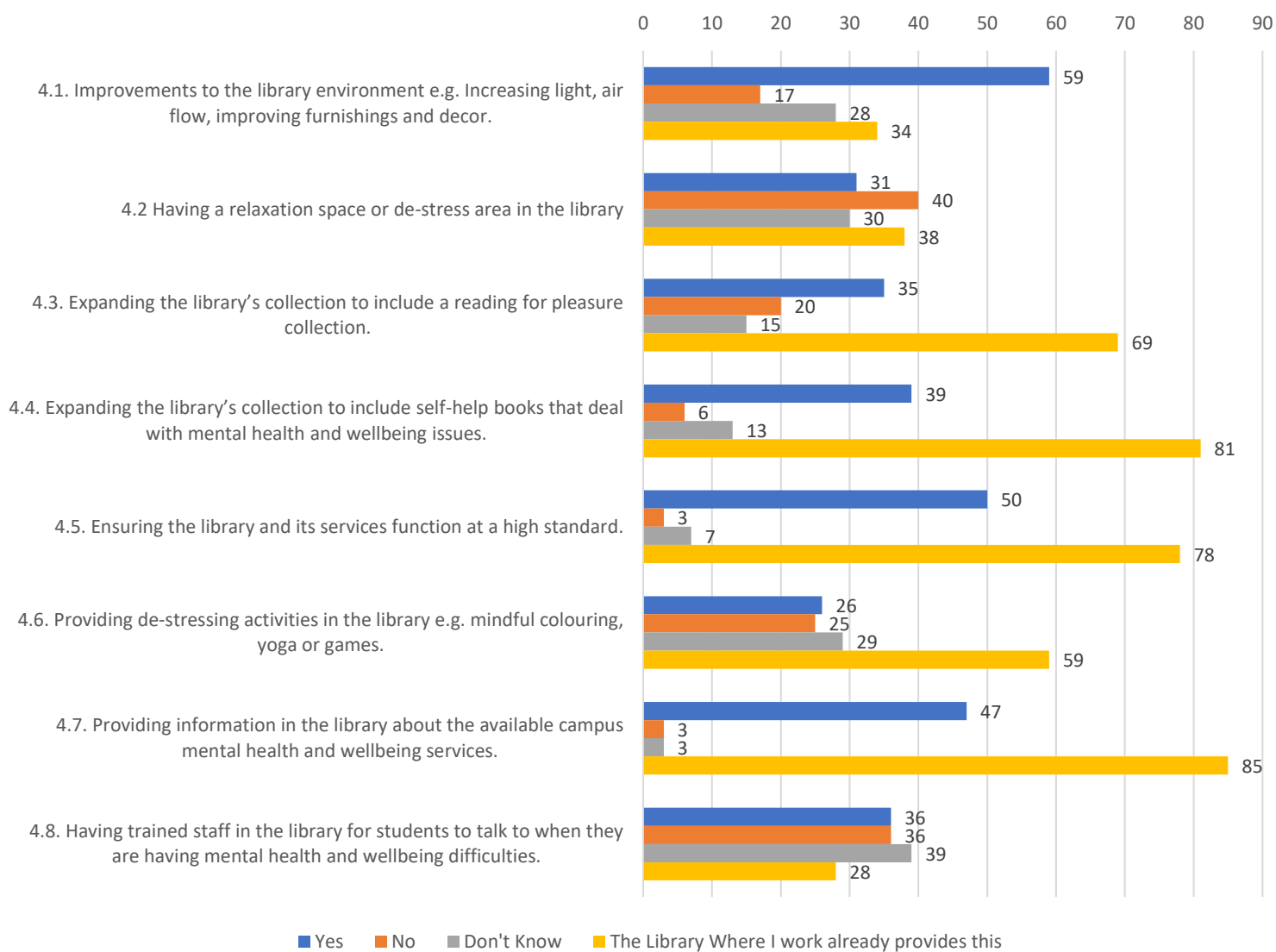


Figure 4– Bar chart showing whether academic library staff thought that their library could provide a variety of mental health and wellbeing suggestions from the student focus groups, or if they were already providing them. N=139

4.3.2. De-stress areas

There were also multiple suggestions of adding extra spaces for a variety of different purposes. A couple of participants in the 3rd group suggested having an area that was neither silent nor a group study area. This would allow students to study in quiet but not feel anxious that they may make some sound. Others across the groups suggested various types of non-workspace where they could get away from their studies and chill out. Suggestions ranged from a relaxation area, to a multi-faith prayer room or even a nap space. A couple of other participants suggested crying or screaming areas for venting frustrations without disturbing others. Other ideas for additional library spaces included a dedicated space for making phone calls when you need to call someone for help. The idea of a kitchen area with a microwave for food preparation was mentioned by one participant with the idea of free

fruit, free hot drinks and more water fountains to help productivity and encourage people to keep fed and hydrated being suggested by many more.

My ideal library would have like a 24 hour wellbeing safe space so that people could just go there in the middle of the night whether they are having a crisis or just really stressed out about their work and they're spiralling and they just need someone to talk to and a comfy place to sit and maybe a free cup of tea or something like that and cushions, bean-bags...just somewhere to go when they are stressed out and not coping and something that is open all night even if there is only one person staffing it. (Focus Group Participant 1.1).

The respondents of the staff survey agreed that the idea of having a relaxation space or de-stress area in the library would be effective with 116 saying that they believed it would help support student mental health and wellbeing. However only just under half (49.6%) of the respondents thought that their library could provide this service, or already had this service in place with 28.7% responding that their library would not be able to provide it. This shows that thought it is seen as an effective initiative to support the mental health and wellbeing of students, there is a significant number of institutions who will not have the resources to implement a wellbeing space.

4.3.3. De-stress activities

New activities organised by the library were frequently suggested ideas for improving mental health and wellbeing for students given by the focus groups. These included reading groups to encourage reading for pleasure, sports activities such as yoga, mindfulness sessions, and cultural activities such as comedy, music or talks that could be for entertainment but could also be themed around mental health and wellbeing.

Sometimes I find that I have been spending the whole day in the library on the weekend, and I just don't speak to anyone the whole day because I am just sitting at my desk and because I know I have the whole day there some hours that are a bit unproductive so maybe having activities, and having different spaces might encourage you to not sit in the same space for a long time.. it's very difficult to work intensely for say, for more than 45 minutes. So even just having those resources would be good. (Focus Group Participant 1.1).

There was also support for this idea amongst library staff with most respondents to the survey (91 respondents) saying that they thought that providing de-stressing activities in the library would help student mental health and wellbeing. However, despite significant support, this was the least popular suggestion of all the student suggestions amongst the staff surveyed. It was also seen as a something that could be enacted by libraries with 61.1% of respondents saying that their library could provide this service or were already providing this service.

4.3.4. Expanding the library's collections

Expanding the library's collections beyond typical academic texts were another popular topic for student suggestions. Proposals included more books that could be read for pleasure, fiction and non-fiction books that dealt with mental health and wellbeing issues and fiction that had themes of social issues or issues around identity. Several in the 3rd group put forward the idea of a recommended book of the month or a section curated by librarians that they could pick up and browse at their leisure.

It would be really nice to have a section of books tied into that, which maybe have mental health and wellbeing themes so you can find it helpful to identify with the people in the stories and stuff. (Focus Group Participant 3.6)

The response to this idea from the library staff surveyed was positive. 113 respondents (81.2%) felt that expanding their library's collection to include a reading for pleasure collection would help support student mental health and wellbeing. 127 respondents (91.4%) felt that the idea of including self-help books that deal with mental health and wellbeing issues would be helpful in this area. Both ideas were

also seen to be feasible by library staff, with 74.8% of respondents saying that they could implement a reading for pleasure scheme or were already providing it. 86.3% of staff surveyed had already implemented or felt their workplace could implement the inclusion of self-help books that deal with mental health and wellbeing issues.

4.3.5. Ensuring the library works at a high standard

Several students across the groups advised that a useful way for the library to improve mental health and wellbeing amongst students would be to make spend additional time to make sure systems and equipment work as well as possible and that rules are enforced. Broken equipment and difficult to use services can create extra stress and anxiety for students on top of what they are already experiencing.

What I think would help with mental wellbeing in library is like the library functioning very well because the thing that stresses me out is when you can't find the book you need. (Focus Group Participant 3.1).

Digital technologies were also proposed with a way for students to check the number of free seats before coming in and an easier way to browse collections being proposed as ways to make students' lives easier and therefore reduce stress and anxiety. Putting an app on the library computers that encouraged students to take breaks or provided easy access to mental health and wellbeing resources was also suggested.

You could even have some kind of touch screen type screen where you can look through the books as if they were there on the shelf, then you could have a database that sorts them in the way you want to sort them. So when you log in you have your own personal data that you've collected and how you sorted all your books, and then it could just give you print out of where all your books are, so you don't get stressed about finding them you can just go straight there. (Focus Group Participant 3.7).

The staff survey showed that the library staff agreed with the students with 129 (92.8%) of those who completed the survey responding that they thought ensuring the library functioned at a high standard would help mental health and wellbeing. This was an idea that was seen to be feasible as well as popular with 92% of respondents saying that their library would be able or had already started to ensure that it could run at a high standard, causing less stress for students. This was further noted by one of the responses to the free-text survey question who said that what was important was to 'make sure that the library doesn't cause any additional stress'.

4.3.6. Signposting to other services

Several students suggested the library could provide better signposting to help services for mental health and wellbeing, such as the university wellbeing team and nightline. More prominent posters and the provision of basic information sheets about mental health and wellbeing issues were mentioned as possible solutions to the problem.

But I think maybe even just having more across the library. Even, and I know this sounds quite strange, but even in the bathrooms... there are always advertising posters for like dial-a-donut and gardening and scrunchie sale and I always find myself looking at those, so I think that's quite good. (Focus Group Participant 1.3).

This was the most popular idea amongst respondents to the staff survey with 138 respondents (99.3%) saying that they thought providing information in the library about the available campus mental health and wellbeing services would be helpful for ensuring student mental health and wellbeing. 94.9% of respondents also stated that their library already provided or would be able to provide such information, showing that staff see this idea as achievable for their libraries or have already achieved it.

4.3.7. Specialist Staff

The final group of suggestions involved the introduction of specialist staff located within the library who students could go to talk to about mental health and wellbeing difficulties or even library problems at a place and time that was convenient for them.

Or even just having someone to talk to outside of hours, like the accommodation services have that. Where you have someone available, even just to like talk to whether you are having questions about the library or resources, but also just someone to talk to as well if you have any issues. (Focus Group Participant 1.3).

Some 108 respondents (78.2%) who completed the survey agreed that having trained members of staff to talk to students when they are having mental health and wellbeing difficulties would be effective for improving mental health and wellbeing. When asked whether they felt their library could provide this service the results were more varied with less than half of respondents (46%) saying that their library could or already provide specifically trained members of staff.

Overall the comparison of the focus group data and the staff survey results show that the library staff agree that the suggestions for ways that the library could help support student mental health provided by the students could be effective for supporting student mental health and wellbeing. However not all the ideas proposed by the focus groups were thought to be feasible by most staff surveyed. This showed that some ideas such as the introduction of specially trained staff or a 'de-stress' area might not be an achievable aim for a significant number of libraries.

4.4. Mental Health and wellbeing schemes already in place in academic libraries

When asked about their experience of mental health and wellbeing support that was already provided by the library most of the students in the focus groups were able to name some of the initiatives their library services were providing. The specialised quiet area with specialist software for students registered with the disability and dyslexia service was mentioned as a useful resource.

I do think that what is already offered is really good, like the DDS (Disability and Dyslexia Services) registered spaces... when the entire library is full, it's still a quiet space in the silent area, and there are always spaces there. (Focus Group Participant 1.1).

The 'take a break' scheme that encourages students to take a break and enables them to leave belongings in the library whilst they take a short break was also popular amongst participants.

Recent displays in the front of the library which promoted the 'shelf-help' collection and reading for pleasure books were well received with several participants mentioning finding good books from these displays and expressing a keenness for more of these displays in the future.

I've found a few which I have read like from that display outside, but yeah more of that would be good. (Focus Group Participant 3.5).

This shows that existing schemes for improving mental health and wellbeing were noticed and appreciated by students at the university.

The staff survey showed a variety of schemes and activities that were already in place in the respondent's institutions. Of the suggestions from the student focus groups, including self-help books that deal with mental health and wellbeing issues and providing information about available campus mental health and wellbeing services were the ones that the highest numbers of respondents said were already running in their libraries. In addition to responding to the proposals made by the student focus groups, staff used one of the free text box questions to add other ideas that they had put in place to help support student mental health and wellbeing in the library that had not be previously

mentioned by the survey or give examples of how they had already put the students' suggestions in place.

Some of these involved activities of staff on campus, with some respondents mentioning their collaboration with either the chaplaincy or mental health and wellbeing team. Two respondents mentioned that they worked within a shared service with the mental health and wellbeing team, meaning all staff, including library staff could respond to basic mental health and wellbeing queries and book counselling appointments. One respondent instead had a specific member of library staff who liaised with the mental health and wellbeing team. Some instead collaborated with counselling services for events and for book purchasing. Others mentioned that their staff use learning advisors or liaison librarians to help build students skills and confidence, which they felt would help their mental health and wellbeing. Some respondents mentioned providing additional support to students with mental health and wellbeing difficulties to help them manage their library accounts and fines to help reduce library related stress.

Many survey respondents detailed the events they offered events to improve mental health and wellbeing these included offering drinks and healthy snacks, visits with therapy dogs, wellbeing workshops, and quiet tours and introductions. Others mentioned specific environmental changes to improve student wellbeing that they had already made such as introducing lockers, plants, displays of appropriate resources, and generally creating a welcoming atmosphere. Some of the initiatives mentioned by survey respondents did not fit directly into the categories given by the survey itself. These included encouraging students to take a break, the introduction of a wellbeing thesis or online wellbeing guides, giving out wellbeing advice via social media and induction packs, and allowing automatic renewals to make life easier for students. This shows that there are a wide variety of library initiatives to support student mental health and wellbeing already in place and gives examples of how libraries have already put some of the student focus group suggestions into practice.

4.5. Summary

This has shown the results of the qualitative and quantitative data, giving the opinions of both students and staff around mental health and wellbeing in the library, the ideas the students have for how the library could better support student mental health and wellbeing and how feasible library staff think they are. The subsequent section will examine the results of the research and place them in the context of previous research literature on the topic presented in the literature review.

5. Discussion

5.1. Introduction

The discussion contains a brief overview of the research problem and the aim and objectives of the project, followed by the main part of the discussion which is divided by theme. It will look at the results of the research and place them in the context of previous research literature on the topic presented in the literature review.

The issue of mental health and wellbeing of university students has been of increasing interest in recent years. Despite recent initiatives to get all parts of the campus involved in improving student mental health and wellbeing in a 'whole university approach', little focus has been on how the academic library can play its part. There are multiple examples of reports of academic libraries that have tried initiatives to try and help support mental health, but little in-depth research has been done on this topic. The aim of the research is to investigate how academic libraries can positively impact on student mental health and wellbeing. To achieve this, and meet the first two objectives of the research, focus groups were established to determine whether students would be interested in mental health and wellbeing support from their library and if so what sort of support they would find useful. The other objectives of the project were to determine whether academic library staff would

think that such mental health and wellbeing support from the library would be appropriate, and whether they think that the ideas for mental health and wellbeing support provided by the students would be feasible. These were achieved through an online survey of academic library staff. This research was undertaken to inform best practice in mental health and wellbeing in academic libraries and inform future research in this area.

5.2. The Academic Library as a location for mental health and wellbeing support for students

5.2.1. General feelings towards the library

The results from the focus groups showed that students had mixed views about how they felt about the library as a place. Many of the students saw the library as cosy, welcoming space, where they were happy to work and felt productive. This supports the work by Demas (2005) which proposed that the library is a valued sanctuary of learning and teaching which offers security and quiet. It also suggests that some of the students feel that their academic library holds some of the therapeutic qualities described in research into public libraries (Brewster 2014) such as providing a comforting, calming space. This shows for that the academic library does have the potential to be a safe, calm space that students could go to seek comfort when they are stressed and a suitable location for hosting certain health and wellbeing initiatives.

However other members of the focus group disagreed, feeling that the library carried more negative associations. Some felt that the library was too busy or too noisy to be a good working environment, with several other focus group members complaining that the space was claustrophobic. One student particularly pointed out that the library would always be associated with stress since they go there to complete their university work. Something they saw as an inherently stressful task. This shows that though there were many students who saw the library space comfortable, productive space, not all the students saw same space the same way. This further suggests that the academic library may not be a suitable calm space or location for hosting health and wellbeing initiatives for some students and that what students view as comfortable space may differ on an individual by individual basis. The idea that students might differ in what they want from the library space or that the library spaces might not be comfortable was not discussed in the previous research that was examined for this project.

5.2.2. How the library is used

The data from the focus groups also showed the variety of ways that the library is used. Some were frequent users, using it as a base during their day, often staying for long studying sessions. Others were more infrequent users, popping in only to find resources or print. None of the focus group participants did not use the library at all. Not all the ways the students used the library were linked with their studies, with several students mentioning it as a popular place to meet and socialise with others. This supports work by Ramsey and Agard (2018) which described academic libraries as both information providers and community centres. The fact that all students questioned use the library shows that it is a central part of student life, making it somewhere they are likely to visit and where they would be likely to come across mental health and wellbeing activities or information if they were provided. That the students use the library for a variety of purposes suggests that they could be open to other activities and initiatives available in the library that are not study focused such as those involving mental health and wellbeing.

5.2.3. Feelings towards mental health and wellbeing schemes in the library

When the idea of mental health and wellbeing schemes in the library was put to the focus groups, most students responded positively, giving different reasons as to why they were supportive of the idea. Many of the students noticed that there was a need for further mental health and wellbeing

support across campus, with numbers of students facing difficulties increasing. This increase was also reported by research by Universities UK (2015) and UNITE (2016). Some students were positive towards the idea as they saw the library as a convenient place for mental health and wellbeing activities due to the central location of the library and the fact that it is open 24 hours. The students also provided a variety of ideas that could be put in place to provide support for student mental health and wellbeing in the library, showing their enthusiasm for the idea and their willingness to collaborate, which was also found by research by Querstret (2019) who found that students wanted to collaborate on this issue and Robison and Muszkeiwicz (2018) who trialled a successful student driven library de-stress programme. Although most of the focus group participants were positive towards the idea of mental health some did not necessarily see the library as a place that they would usually think of when looking for this kind of support. Others had reservations about the type of support that would be available through the library and if it would be effective.

When the same question was put to the academic library staff in the survey to determine whether they felt that providing such support would be appropriate, 93.3% said that they agreed or strongly agreed that the library should be involved in mental health and wellbeing support for students. This shows that the academic library staff agree with the idea of the whole university approach to student mental health and wellbeing and that the library should play its part. The comments left at the end of the survey showed that many staff had an awareness of the issue of mental health and wellbeing amongst students and that some of the staff had already experienced dealing with these issues first-hand, showing that they, like the students, see the need for mental health and wellbeing support in the library. This aligns with research by Conroy (2018) who found that many front-line library staff were already dealing with students having mental health and wellbeing issues. 83.4% of the staff surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed that they were comfortable supporting mental health and wellbeing of students, with some mentioning training they had already undertaken to achieve this. This shows that most of the library staff surveyed were happy to help support student mental health wellbeing, this was similar to the findings of research by Grant (2000) into mental health and wellbeing training of academic staff which found that academic staff were positive about being involved in mental health and wellbeing support. The library survey also showed that the library staff supported most of the ideas that the students proposed and that many had already been put in place. This further shows that there is support amongst academic library staff for mental health and wellbeing programmes in the library.

Despite most of the surveyed staff being supportive, some mentioned some concerns about library mental health and wellbeing programmes. Some shared the concerns found by research by Brewster (2013) into librarian perspectives on Bibliotherapy that they would make mistakes or that they might not have sufficient training to play a mental health and wellbeing role.

Others shared the concerns raised by Walton (2018), that introducing new services to the library such as those for mental health and wellbeing could cause a decline in quality of the vital services already provided by the library. When asked about the feasibility of whether their library could provide mental health and wellbeing services, the results were more mixed. Most survey respondents felt that they did have management support to implement mental health and wellbeing initiatives. However, when asked about funds for such initiatives 39.9% said they felt their workplace did have the funds, 34.5% said they did not. Fewer respondents felt that staff at their institution would have the time to implement these initiatives with 38.8% saying that they did and 47.5% saying they did not. Space was another limiting factor in the implementation of library mental health and wellbeing schemes that was mentioned at the end of the story.

These results show that most students and staff were supportive of the idea of mental health and wellbeing support for students in the library, but both groups had members with significant concerns

about this idea. The staff survey also showed that not all library staff surveyed felt that their institution would have the resources to implement mental health and wellbeing support programmes.

5.3. Ideas for the library to help support mental health and wellbeing

The second objective of the research was to establish forms of support students think it was most useful for libraries to provide to help their mental health and wellbeing. The data was then used to form questions for the staff questionnaire to establish whether they agreed with the ideas offered by the students, and whether they felt they were feasible, to meet the fourth objective of the research. Many of the suggestions given by students as to how the library could support student mental health and wellbeing concerned improvements to the library environment. These were mainly ways to make the environment more comfortable or to ensure that they could focus better. These included improvements to seating, lighting, air flow, and the introduction of plants. However, that fact that students mentioned a diverse range of environmental adjustments suggests that there could be individual differences in the environmental changes that the students prefer, making it difficult to create an environment in the library that would make everyone calm and focused. The idea that the library environment might have an impact on student mental health and wellbeing is something that has not been discussed previously in academic research.

Another notable suggestion from the student focus groups was that having well run library services would help ease stress and improve their mental health and wellbeing. Malfunctioning equipment such as computers, Wi-Fi and printers were reported as common causes of stress amongst the students, as was the lack of adherence by other students to the library rules. In addition, several students made suggestions for new technologies for the library to adopt, not just to directly give them information on mental health and wellbeing, but to help make the library easier to navigate and use. This further suggests that the students felt that a well organised library system would improve their mental health and wellbeing by removing the stress that occurs when the library itself is difficult to use. This idea has also not been greatly discussed in previous research literature and could be an area for future research.

The idea of a specific de-stress spaces was also popular amongst the focus groups, with suggestions ranging from a quiet chill-out space with comfy seating to somewhere where students could cry or scream to vent their frustrations. This is contrary to research by Bremer (2019) who trialled a library relaxation space but found that the space became no more popular amongst students. It was also the suggestion that the fewest library staff had either already implemented or felt that they would be able to implement, suggesting that it might not be feasible for a significant number of institutions to create a de-stress area.

The expansion of the library collections to include non-academic texts was popular amongst the student focus groups. Students offered many suggestions of which types of books that they would like to see which included non-fiction such as a 'shelf-help' or bibliotherapy collection that would allow them to read about mental health and wellbeing and support themselves, and fiction that touched on mental health and wellbeing issues through which they could address any difficulties they had in a more informal way, or simply books they could read for pleasure. The fact that students were already aware of the shelf-help collection in their library and spoke positively about it further suggests that this is something that students find useful. Bibliotherapy has been discussed positively in the literature, having been found to be affordable and effective in a higher education setting (Azadbakht, Englert 2019). Both the ideas of self-help books and a reading for pleasure collection were supported by library staff. Slightly more of the staff surveyed thought that the self-help books would be effective for improving the mental health and wellbeing of students than the reading for pleasure books, whereas the students showed more enthusiasm for fiction, showing a slight difference in views between staff and students about which books would be more useful to have in their collections.

The student focus group participants also suggested a wide variety of de-stressing activities. These ranged from cultural activities such as music and drama, to colouring, talks, yoga, and meditation. These involved both active, where the attendees must turn up at an appointed time and passive activities, where the attendees can complete the task when they like, as described by Robison and Muszkiewicz (2018). However, unlike the research by Robison and Muszkiewicz (2018) where the students showed a preference for the passive activities, the student focus groups showed no preference between the active and passive activities, mentioning suggestions for both. Despite significant support from students and staff, and much literature being written about de-stressing activities in university libraries, when library staff were asked if they thought these activities would improve student mental health and wellbeing, it received a lower number of positive responses than the other student suggestions. This could suggest that staff had a more mixed view than students about the effectiveness of de-stress activities.

Better promotion and signposting of the mental health and wellbeing services on campus was another commonly mentioned suggestion, with students mentioning that there should be information in more prominent places such as on library displays and bathrooms, where students would see them. This was the student suggestion that received the most positive responses on the staff survey as well as the service that most of the respondents said their library already provided showing strong staff support of this idea and that it is feasible for most institutions to implement. Although many libraries already provide this service, and that the staff and students surveyed supported it, the effectiveness of signposting to other services from the library has not been examined by previous research.

The idea of having specialist trained staff in the library to help students deal with mental health and wellbeing difficulties was another popular suggestion in the student focus groups. Many students feeling that having the opportunity to have someone who was available in the library to talk to when they needed would be useful. Most of the suggestions which came from students specifically mentioned having members of the wellbeing team which differs from the research by Conroy (2018) which investigated the Mental Health First Aid training of library staff. This could suggest that students do not expect the library staff themselves to be able to help them with any mental health or wellbeing difficulties, but collaboration with trained professionals from other departments of the university. There were several mentions of working with other teams such as chaplaincy or wellbeing services in the staff survey, showing that this collaboration between staff does happen in some institutions. This is supported by research by Borchard and Meyers Martin (2015) which found collaboration on wellbeing support was undertaken by 40% of HE institutions surveyed.

The research aimed to discover whether the library staff feel that the suggestions of the focus groups were achievable. Staff were supportive of all the ideas from the student focus groups when surveyed, with most respondents saying that each idea would help support student mental health and wellbeing. Providing information about mental health and wellbeing services available on campus received the most positive responses, with providing de-stressing activities received the fewest. This shows that the staff agreed with the students on whether their suggestions would be good for student mental health and wellbeing, but that they thought some would be more effective than others. Research on the opinions of academic library staff on which library mental health initiatives would be effective was not something that was found in previous literature.

When asked if their library could provide the services suggested by the students, the responses were more mixed. Some of the suggested initiatives such as providing information about campus mental health and wellbeing services or providing self-help books about mental health and wellbeing issues were seen as achievable or something their institution was already achieving by most respondents. However less than half of the respondents thought their library would be able to provide specially

trained staff or de-stress area or had already implemented these schemes. Several respondents to the staff survey also expressed concern that they would not be able to provide all the mental health and wellbeing services suggested by the students in their library. This shows that many libraries may not be able to implement all the suggestions offered by the student focus groups. This shows that some of the concerns raised by Walton (2018) about the ability of academic libraries to provide these services might be well-founded.

5.4. Mental Health and wellbeing schemes already in place in academic libraries

The student focus group participants were found to be aware of the mental health and wellbeing programmes already offered by their university library, which further supports student interest in these programmes. The staff survey also showed that many university libraries had already implemented mental health and wellbeing programmes showing that there is already support for these services and that they are feasible in some cases. This supports research by Borchard and Meyers-Martin (2015) which showed that many academic libraries were already providing activities to support student wellbeing. 'Providing information in the library about mental health and wellbeing in the library' being the one that most of the survey said had already been implemented in their library suggesting that is popular and easy to implement. The efficacy of this information is something that has not been found in previous literature. Trained staff was the service that the fewest of libraries had already implemented suggesting that it is more difficult to implement.

5.5. Summary

This section has provided a discussion of the main findings of the research placing them in the context of previous research literature on the topic. The subsequent section will provide the final conclusions of the research.

6. Conclusions

6.1. Introduction

This section provides the main conclusions of the research, and evaluation of the aims and objectives of the research, the limitations of the study, and scope for further research.

6.2. Conclusions of research

From the findings and discussion of this research there are several points that can be concluded. The student focus groups, and staff survey showed that both students and staff felt positively towards the idea of mental health and wellbeing support in libraries, and that the library would be a good location for mental health and wellbeing support. However, both students and staff did express some concerns about what the support would entail and how it would be put in place.

Students gave a variety of suggestions of what they thought the library could do to improve student mental health ranging from environmental changes to de-stressing activities, relaxation spaces and service improvements, showing that students have many different ideas of what they want in terms of mental health and wellbeing in the library.

The staff survey showed that the library staff thought that all the ideas given by the students would be effective, with the most positive response being for the suggestion that the library should provide information about available campus mental health and wellbeing services.

The question of whether providing mental health and wellbeing support in the academic library was feasible generated a more mixed response. Most staff survey respondents felt management support was there, but many lacked the funds, and staff time. There were also varied responses on whether

they could provide the specific suggestions offered by students. Most respondents thought their library could provide some of the suggested services or that their library was already providing them, such as a self-help collection. Other suggestions such as the relaxation area were less feasible with many respondents saying that their workplace could not provide them. This showed that not all mental health and wellbeing support schemes would be feasible for all university libraries.

6.3. Evaluation of aim and objectives

The aim and objectives of the research were fully met. The focus groups and surveys showed the variety of ways that academic libraries can support mental health and wellbeing with input from students and library staff, meeting the aim of the research. Objective one, which was to determine whether students are interested in academic libraries participating in Mental health and wellbeing support was met by the student focus groups which generated rich data and insights into how the students felt about the library, how they used it, and how they felt towards the idea of their mental health and wellbeing being supported by the library. Objective two, which was to establish which services students think it would be useful for libraries to provide to help their mental health and wellbeing was met through the focus groups which gave the students the opportunity for to discuss their ideas and build on each other's. This resulted in a wide variety of suggestions being gathered. Objective three was to determine whether librarians feel that providing mental health and wellbeing support would be appropriate for the library, was met by the staff survey, which reached a large number of library staff and was able to determine their positive feelings towards the issue. Objective four, which was to establish whether librarians feel that providing such support would be feasible was also met by the library staff survey which showed there were limiting factors to the provision of mental health and wellbeing services and that not all libraries were able to provide all the services suggested. Although the research aims and objectives were met, more data would be required to validate the findings.

6.4. Limitations of study

There were several ways in which this research study was limited which could have had some bearing on the results. Due to difficulties in recruitment, there were small numbers of focus group participants which could have limited the amount and depth of results gathered. Time constraints limited the study by giving less time to source participants, conduct more focus groups and have longer focus group sessions which could have generated a broader range of ideas. Additionally, the participants for the focus groups were sourced from one university due to time constraints. This could affect the results as students from other institutions may have different opinions on their library and mental health and wellbeing services within it due to differences between libraries. An independent moderator was unable to be found for the focus groups which led to the focus groups being moderated by a member of library staff. This may have impacted the results as participants might not have wanted to appear critical of the library in front of a member of staff of the library where they studied. There were a large number of respondents to the staff questionnaire but it is possible that only those who were interested in the issue discussed would have responded to the survey so it may not have provided an accurate representation of the views of all library staff.

6.5. Scope for further research

The research has generated several possible ideas for future research. The research could be expanded to students of other institutions and the number of library staff surveyed could be increased to gather more data and create a better picture of the issue. A more detailed study could be done on the effectiveness of the services proposed by the student focus groups and how they are implemented. It would be most useful for these to focus on the suggestions that had not previously been researched in depth such as the provision of information about campus mental health and wellbeing services. Due to the lack of resources many universities face it would also be beneficial to

investigate student preferences towards the suggested mental health and wellbeing support initiatives using a ranking exercise, enabling library staff to decide which initiatives they should focus their resources on. Collaboration between libraries and other campus services was mentioned by staff as way that mental health and wellbeing support could be provided, which also merits further investigation.

6.6. Concluding remarks

Academic libraries can play an important role in the whole campus approach to mental health and wellbeing as they are a central part of students' lives. The enthusiasm staff and students for mental health and wellbeing initiatives is high, but universities will have to ensure such programmes are effective and within the limits of the library's resources. Collaboration with other campus services such as counselling may be necessary to make mental health and wellbeing in the library successful.

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Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank all the students from Royal Holloway, University of London who gave up their time to participate in the focus group, and all those from the academic library community who filled in my questionnaire. Without their kindness and fantastic insights there would have been no research project. I would also like to thank my dissertation supervisors Professor Simon Burnett and Professor Adrienne Muir for their help and guidance throughout the project which has been invaluable. Additionally, I would like to thank all my fantastic colleagues at Royal Holloway, University of London library services who have supported me throughout my MSc. I am so grateful for all their kindness, encouragement, advice, and for being willing guinea pigs for my questionnaire and focus group questions, being part of such a supportive team has been so important to me. Finally, I would like to thank my family for their love and support which has helped to keep me going throughout this process.