

# The Finnish Student Health Survey 2016

## SUMMARY

The University Student Health Survey 2016 was conducted to investigate students' physical, mental and social health, certain key aspects of health-related behaviour, as well as the use of health services and opinions concerning the quality of the services. In addition, the study explored a range of factors related to health, health behaviours and study ability, such as social relationships, studying and subsistence. Of the special themes investigated in 2012, the following were included in this year's survey as well: pain in the head and facial area (bruxism), Internet use, and experiences of bullying, stalking and violence. New questions concerning mental health were included (SCOFF eating disorder screen, obsessive thoughts/compulsive behaviour, CORE-10 scale). Other new themes included dental fear, the use of wellness-related mobile applications, sitting, sexual orientation and the reconciliation of family and studies.

The survey was designed so as to allow for comparison with the earlier nationwide health surveys among university students carried out in 2000, 2004, 2008 and 2012. The study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Turku, and the participating students gave their informed consent by voluntarily responding to the questionnaire.

The target population consisted of Finnish undergraduate students, aged under 35 years and studying in Finnish universities. The sample covered 4.8% of the target population. The sample included 5,004 students from the universities of applied sciences (UAS) and 4,996 students from academic universities (Univ). A total of 47.7% of the sample were male. The self-report survey was implemented as a combined online and postal questionnaire. Potential respondents received an initial invitation and four reminders by e-mail. The third reminder also served as a repeat survey and was sent as a posted questionnaire in paper format.

The overall response rate was 31% (UAS 25%; Univ 39%). The response rate was 22% for men (UAS 16%; Univ 29%) and 39% for women (UAS 32%; Univ 45%). Except for the underrepresentation of males, the respondents represented well the target population. In this publication, the results are reported as direct (unweighted) distributions by age group, gender and educational sector (type of university). In the report, the current results are compared against those of the earlier nationwide university student health surveys.

In addition, the results are reported online by duration of studies, study location (or region) and field of studies. The results are also published online as weighted by university and gender; these are well in line with the unweighted results.

## Health status

A major proportion of students (72%) suffered from a chronic, long-term or frequently recurring illness, handicap or injury diagnosed by a physician, dentist or psychologist, which has shown symptoms or required treatment over the past 12 months. The prevalence of various diseases has remained rather unchanged from year to year, but the proportions of diagnosed depression and anxiety syndrome have almost tripled since the year 2000. For Univ students, the proportions in this survey were 10.2% for depression and 7.4% for anxiety syndrome. While 76% of the respondents perceived their physical health as being good or very good, only 66% did so for mental health. One third of men and one half of women had experienced a particular symptom on a daily or almost daily basis. The most common symptoms were tiredness/fatigue, sleep problems, upper back symptoms, skin problems, runny/blocked nose, gas pains/feeling bloated and mental symptoms. Of the respondents, 16% suffered, on a daily basis, from a psychological symptom (sleep problems, concentration difficulties, tension, depression, anxiety), 14% from a general symptom (headache, dizziness, tiredness/fatigue) and 10% from an abdominal symptom (stomach pain, nausea/vomiting, gas pains, constipation, diarrhoea).

Of the respondents, 8% had a diagnosed learning difficulty or illness/disability that affects their learning. The most common diagnoses were reading and writing disorder/dyslexia (5%) and attention deficit disorder (0.9%). Learning difficulties were more common among UAS students.

According to the results of the GHQ-12 questionnaire, 30% of the respondents (men 25%; women 33%) suffered from mental problems. The most commonly experienced problems included continuous overstrain, a feeling of unhappiness and depression, difficulties in concentrating on the tasks at hand, and loss of sleep because of worries. According to the mental health screen, 33% of all students experienced considerable stress. The most frequent causes of stress were performing in public and difficulties in getting a grip on one's studies. More than every fifth student had a negative perception concerning their mood, their plans for the future, as well as their own resources and capabilities. Empowering factors included human relationships and sexuality. For the majority of respondents, the process of planning for the future, personal resources and mood were also perceived as positive. Getting a grip on one's studies was positively perceived by one half of the students, whereas performing in public was positive for only 37% of the respondents. Experienced mental problems and stress did not differ between the two educational sectors (Univ and UAS students). Mental problems have

become increasingly common among students since the year 2000, and especially so among men. The CORE-10 scale is a measure of mental well-being, and it yielded similar proportional results as those instruments that have earlier been applied for the assessment of mental ill-health (28% for men; 34% for women). The CORE-10 instrument also included a question about suicide plans, and 5.7% of students answered positively to this particular question.

Of women, 2% had been diagnosed with some type of eating disorder. According to the SCOFF eating disorder screen, 14% of women and 3% of men had eating-related issues. Non-normal attitudes towards food were reported by 11% of women and 5% of men.

A total of 36% of male students and 26% of female students were overweight. Major obesity (BMI 30kg/m<sup>2</sup> or over) was found in 8% of male and 7.5% of female students. Overweight was more common among UAS students as compared to Univ students. Overweight and obesity have continued to become increasingly common among all UAS students and female Univ students, whereas among male Univ students the trend has turned downward. Underweight was reported by 7% of women and only 3% of men. Women estimated themselves as being overweight more frequently than they actually were; in men, the trend was the opposite.

## **Health service**

The question about the use of health care services reflects not only the need for health care services among the student population, but also the availability and accessibility of services. The use of services question covered visits/appointments as well as phone and online consultations. Students at academic universities had used the services offered by the Finnish Student Health Service more frequently than the students at universities of applied sciences had used municipal student health care services. This was true across all services, including general health care, oral care and mental health care. In addition to and in place of student health services, the UAS students more often used the general services provided by municipal health centres. When considered in the long term, starting from the 2000 survey, the number of appointments with a nurse, general practitioner or specialist has declined, but on the basis of the current survey, it appears that actual physical visits have been replaced by phone consultations and digital services. The use of oral hygienist services has increased in terms of actual visits. The proportion of students using mental health services has continued to gradually increase. In both sectors of higher education, students were quite commonly satisfied with the contents of the realised student health care appointments (UAS 82-83%; Univ 87–88%).

Over one half of students had used or tried the use of a health or wellness-related mobile application, most frequently an application related to physical activity and nutrition.

The respondents were asked to identify matters in which they would like to receive help. The responses were well in accordance with the impression concerning the need for assistance, as obtained through other questions in the survey, suggesting that the students are well aware of the problematic issues in their lives. In line with the earlier results, matters related to studies and mental well-being, such as stress and time management, the need for support in study-related problems and study skills, social anxiety, human relations, and self-esteem emerged as the most important issues. Women hoped to receive help and support more frequently than men did. The UAS students hoped, more often than Univ students, for help in matters related to weight management and physical activity.

## **Health behaviours**

As regards physical activity and exercising, 26% of all students trained for fitness at least four times a week, 34% trained two to three times a week, and 10% did not train at all. Exercising for fitness was equally common in both educational sectors. A total of 42% of male and 54% of female respondents reported that they exercise in connection with daily activities for at least 30 minutes per day. Over an hour a day was reported by 12% of Univ students and 17% of UAS students. Among male Univ students, exercise in connection with daily activities has declined since 2012.

The most significant difference between the two educational sectors was seen in the use of services provided by the university in question. As many as 36% of female Univ students took advantage of facilities or services offered by their university, whereas the corresponding percentage among female UAS students was only 8%; for male students, the proportional shares were 17% and 8%, respectively. Irrespective of this, the Univ students also used commercial or municipal services or those offered by various clubs or associations as often as UAS students did. The current survey included, as a new item, a question about the time spent sitting on weekdays. The median for sitting was 10.75 hours per day. Only 16% of students were sitting less than 8 hours per day. A total of 45% of men and 34% of women estimated that they sit at least 12 hours per day. A high proportion of sitting was more common among UAS students as compared to Univ students.

Healthy eating is reflected by a question that asks if a person considers the healthiness of food already when buying food. A total of 70% of students responded that they do so often (55% for men; 78% for women). Only 3.5% answered that they never or only very rarely think of the healthiness of food. Awareness of and consideration for the healthiness of food had become more common in both men and women. The increase was the greatest among male UAS students, of whom 52% now reported that they often consider the healthiness of food (in 2008 the proportion was 37%). The current survey included, for the first time, a question about

having lunch at a student restaurant. About every fifth student did not use the student restaurant services much, one third had their lunch at a student restaurant every day during the weekdays, and one third on 3–4 days a week. Men had lunch at student restaurants slightly more frequently than women did. Lunch habits did not differ between the two types of universities.

According to the Index of Diet Quality (IDQ) measure, students at academic universities follow a health-promoting diet more commonly (Univ: 46% for women and 43% for men; UAS: 41% for women and 29% for men). In comparison to men, women were more often eating healthy foods that are recommended for use on a daily basis, such as fruit, berries, vegetables and wholegrain products. Of the students, 24% did not drink milk or cultured milk at all; the proportional share has doubled in four years. From the year 2012, there has been a decline in the use of other liquid milk products as well. Over 60% of all students had some sort of wholegrain products nearly every day. For bread, the recommendation is at least 4 slices a day, and this level was achieved by 42% of men and 25% of women. The most frequently used spread on bread was a butter-vegetable oil mixture, which was used by 47% of students, and the second most common was a low-fat spread (made with vegetable fat), which was used by 16% of students. Butter was used by 5% of students.

The recommendation is to eat fish at least twice a week, but the average consumption among students remained below the target and was the same as four years ago (mean 1.3 days/week). Of men 19% and of women 11% had red meat on 6–7 days a week. Women avoided eating red meat more frequently than men did; every fifth woman ate red meat less than once a week (women 20%; men 8%). The use of sugary drinks was rare, with a declining trend seen since 2008. Sweets were eaten by 3% of men and 7% of women practically daily, and no clear change could be seen in this respect.

Dental hygiene habits were poorer among men than among women, and poorer among UAS students than among Univ students. Differences were observed in the tooth brushing frequency as well as in the use of toothpaste and dental floss. Altogether 80% of female Univ students brushed their teeth twice a day, as is recommended, whereas only 57% of male UAS students did so. The use of dental floss is still scant. The changes in the dental hygiene habits are minor but positive. One third of men and one fifth of women snack, in other words, eat or drink something at least 7 times a day. Teeth grinding (bruxism) was reported by 27% of the respondents. Nearly one half of the students responded that they are afraid or anxious about dental care, and every tenth student was highly afraid or anxious. Dental fear was more common among women than among men.

Of the respondents, 3.5% of Univ students and 11% of UAS students smoked on a daily basis. A total of 88% of Univ students and 78% of UAS students were non-smokers. This proportion also includes those who have quit smoking. The favourable trend of reduced smoking has continued both in Univ and UAS students. Chewing tobacco (snuff) was used by 6.5% of males on a daily basis and occasionally by 10%, whereas women use snuff only rarely. The use of snuff has gradually increased; a total of one quarter of male students has used it at some point of time. Electronic cigarettes had been tried by 12% of men and 4% of women, and daily use was reported by 2% of male students. When asked to assess their use of various intoxicating agents, the proportion of those who reported that they smoked or used tobacco products too much was in line with the proportional share of smokers and snuff-users.

Of all students, 9% were teetotallers. The share of non-drinkers among Univ students has doubled since 2000 (from 5% to 10%). Self-reported alcohol consumption was 3.6 kg per year for men (UAS 4.3 kg/year; Univ 3.2 kg/year) and 1.8 kg per year for women. Of male students, 14% reported significant use of alcohol, while the corresponding percentage for female students is 10%. One third of men and one half of women used very little alcohol. The percentages for heavy drinkers were 2.0% for men and 1.4% for women. When drinking, 30% of men and 36% of women drank with the intention to get drunk (that is, men had at least 7 and women at least 5 portions at a time). Having 10 portions or more on an occasion was rather common, especially among male UAS students (UAS 17%; Univ 13%). In terms of the AUDIT scores, alcohol consumption was within the safe limits (0-7 points) for 57% of male and 73% of female students. However, 24% of males and 14% of females scored 11 points or more. On the basis of both the self-reported alcohol consumption and AUDIT scores, alcohol consumption has continued to decrease among men since the year 2008.

Only 2% of males and 1% of females, however, estimated that they used all too much alcohol. One fifth of men and 13% of women felt that they drank slightly too much. Social pressure towards using alcohol is more or less at the same level as in 2008, for example, choosing non-alcoholic drinks still draws attention.

Of all respondents, one fifth (24% for men; 18% for women) had experimented with or used a drug (narcotic), a medicine, or medicines together with alcohol for intoxication purposes. There were no differences between the two types of universities. While cannabis was the most commonly used drug, use of all the different narcotics presented in the question was reported. The use of and experimentation with narcotics became more common among Univ students from 2000 until the year 2008, but has since then returned to the previous level.

Eight percent of male and 3 % of female students had a risk of becoming addicted to gambling. Of the respondents, 25% reported that the time spent on the web hampered their studies and

23% (30% for men; 20% for women) reported it had caused problems in their daily rhythm. Problems in daily rhythm had become more common as compared to the previous two surveys. Every tenth student felt they need help to reduce the use of the web.

## **Studies**

As for the field of studies, 69% of all students felt they were in the right field and 7% thought they were in the wrong field. Nearly 25% of male students reported their study success had been worse than expected, as compared to their own personal aims (for women, the corresponding figures were 13% for UAS and 20% for Univ students). In terms of study guidance and counselling provided by the university, the situation has improved from the previous years for Univ students. Now, 36% of them rated the guidance and counselling they had received as being good or very good, whereas in the previous surveys, the corresponding figures varied from 21% to 28%. The share of those who found the guidance and counselling as totally inadequate was now lower than ever (7%). Experience of good guidance and counselling has become more common also at universities of applied sciences.

Women experienced study burnout more frequently than men did. Students are commonly worried about their studies, every fourth of all students reported they brood a lot over matters related to the studies even in their free time. Of the respondents, 17% felt overwhelmed by the work related to their studies. This was more usual among women, and, in particular, among female UAS students (23%), whereas male Univ students (9%) reported the experience rarely. Although the proportion of students facing a risk of burnout has increased from 2012, the average score of the burnout measuring instrument had not increased. To measure study enthusiasm, students were asked, among other things, if they find their studies to be highly meaningful. A total of 42% of students agreed, and 27% were clearly enthusiastic about their studies. While slightly more than 25% of students were inspired by their studies, only every tenth felt energetic and vigorous when studying.

## **Subsistence and working**

Of the respondents, 44% estimated that they are doing well financially, while 16% viewed their livelihood as scarce and uncertain. The Univ students assessed their own financial situation as being decent more often than UAS students did. The proportion of those assessing their livelihood as scarce or uncertain was highest among female UAS students (20%). Of the respondents, 56% reported that they had to go to work to ensure their subsistence, and 61% of students received economic support from their parents or relatives. The rise in housing costs is reflected in the results: 61% of students reported that housing expenses took up to more than half of their available means, whereas four years earlier the corresponding proportion was 53%.

Altogether 64% of the students had had a full-time job during the past 12 months. One fifth had worked for a total of 4-6 months and 14% for more than 6 months, so apparently a significant part of students' full-time work takes place during the academic year. Naturally, being employed in a full-time job for more than 6 months is more common in the oldest age groups. A total of 51% of the respondents had worked part-time on a regular basis. Shorter work periods of less than one month were also commonly reported. Of all those in some form of employment, 57% responded that their work had been related to their studies; this was most common among students at universities of applied sciences (UAS 63%; Univ 53%).

## **Human relations**

Of the respondents, 41% lived alone in their own household and 10% lived in a commune or shared a household. A total of 35% lived together with their spouse but without children, 5% with spouse and children, and 1% alone with children. While only 5% of all students lived at their parents' home, up to 18% of the males in the youngest age group did so.

Two out of three students had a steady partnership, and the proportion was higher in older age groups. In the oldest age group (30–34 years), however, approximately 34% of men and 23% of women did not have a steady partnership. Of the respondents, 6.4% had children and 1.2% were expecting a child. A total of 55% of the students were planning to have a child or more children in the future, while about one third had not thought about it or could not say, and 11% did not intend to have any children.

The following reasons for not having children emerged most frequently as being very or rather important: having one's own studies still in progress (81%), unwillingness to commit oneself to small children (75%) and desire to do other things (73%). Career aspirations were also a common reason, more often among women than men. Another common reason was one's financial situation. Young age or perceived immaturity was given as a reason by more than one half of respondents. Those with children were asked about which aspects related to the reconciliation of studies and family had actualised in their lives. One half of the respondents felt that the financial support from society was insufficient, and every fifth had had difficulties in finding a student residence intended for families. Slightly over one third of respondents felt it was possible to conduct studies on a part-time basis. A total of 40% reported that flexible examination practices were a reality for them, while 44% reported that was not the case. An opportunity to follow lectures online was rather rare.

As to the self-reported sexual orientation, 89% were hetero, 6% bi, 1% homo, 1% lesbian and 1.6% other. Both women and men were sexually aroused by different genders regardless of the reported sexual orientation.



Every tenth male student lacked dialogical support, while the corresponding figure for women was 4%. Altogether 70% of men had proper dialogical support, in other words, they could openly discuss their matters and problems with someone close to them, if they wished; the corresponding figure for women was 84%. Various scales indicated that 4–10% of the students were lonely. A total of 69% of all students felt they belong to a study-related group, and 22% felt they did not belong to any group. The feeling of belonging to a group was most frequent among those under 25 years of age. Among Univ students, the experience of belonging to a study-related group has become more common since the year 2000; the proportion has increased from 48% to the current 70%.

A total of 7.5% of respondents reported that, during their university studies, they had been bullied by other students and, correspondingly, 5.8% by staff members. Of the respondents, 8% had been subject to stalking by a stranger, and a similar proportion had been stalked by a friend or someone they know. Stalking by a current or ex-partner was reported by 5% of the respondents. A total of 43% of men and 24% of women had experienced physical violence at some point of their lives, and 42% of men and 27% of women had been threatened with violence. Sexual violence had been experienced by 14% of women and 2% of men. In most cases, the experiences of violence had taken place before university studies.

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