

1.2 English summary

Studies in several countries show that the **COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying measures** taken by governments had a **negative impact on the mental well-being of students**. In this current report, we examine the situation among students at the University of Antwerp (UAntwerp), in Belgium. This report describes both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis and integrates this information to communicate the identified guidelines and recommendations to stakeholders.

The quantitative data collection concerns a second wave of the International Student Well-Being Study (C19 ISWS), which specifically focuses on UAntwerp, and sampled over 2000 students in May 2021. These data show that **45% of these students struggles with depressive feelings**, and almost 70% of the students felt lonely at least sometimes. In addition, more students reported having insufficient financial resources. Alcohol consumption, binge drinking, and cannabis use, by contrast, decreased compared to before the pandemic.

The focus group discussions with students (N: 48) and student-centered staff (N: 24) revealed that mainly two aspects played an important role: first, **the limitation in freedom in terms of face-to face social interaction** – particularly with fellow students – which led to students feeling they were on their own, and reduced peer support between students on both academic and personal, emotional levels. Second, **the lingering of the pandemic**, which led to the students feeling of being in constant ‘cramming mode’. Students indicated that they felt a constant pressure to study, given that their daily structure was lost in the absence of on-campus classes, hobbies, and/or work. There was "nothing else to do" but study. As one student put it: "I really just feel like someone who sits in a box and has to study".

However, the truth is more nuanced. The majority of students indicated that the pandemic negatively impacted their well-being, yet for others, it resulted in positive outcomes. For example, students had the **opportunity** to discover new interests, to adopt a healthier lifestyle, to make a switch in their work or study field, and so on. Students also showed a lot of understanding towards policy-making institutions. They understood that they weren't a top-priority group. However, they found it unfair that they received so little attention from the government. They expressed the need for **recognition** that the pandemic was a difficult period for them as well.

Based on this research, we formulated three pillars, which function as guidelines towards a UAntwerp with mental well-being as a structurally embedded theme. We argue that efforts should be made to organise 1) UAntwerp as a **connecting meeting place**, 2) a **blended** future as an opportunity for **inclusiveness** and 3) an **integrated support offer** in terms of well-being.