Creating a *"more visible soft approach"* towards student mental health

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Aim

To identify key staffs' understanding and perceptions of the best approach for implementation of student mental health supports & services across eight campuses within Atlantic Technological University (ATU) and St. Angela's College, Sligo.

Introduction

There are significant concerns for student mental health within higher education institutes.[1] Reactive mental health services cannot meet all the demand and fail to address institutional and cultural processes influencing individual student mental health.[2]

This research strongly aligns with the recently published National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework (2020).[3] The framework addresses the needs and issues of students in a structured and planned way. This research gathered data from identified key staff deemed to have a mental health role formally or informally within ATU and St. Angela's College, Sligo.

Methodology

Participants

Staff who play a **key mental health/pastoral care role** were identified and invited to participate across campuses within the Atlantic Technological University (ATU) and St. Angela's College, Sligo. Thus, staff with the following job roles were invited to participate:

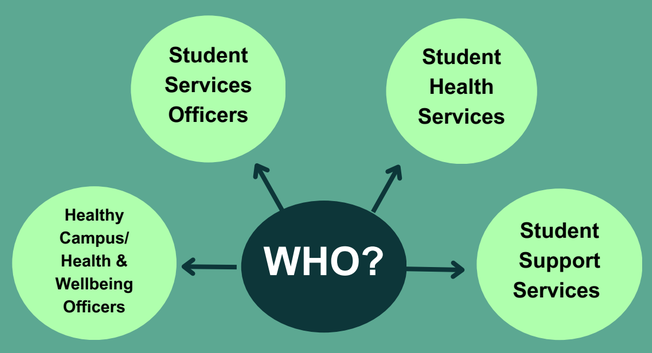

Figure 1: Identified Staff MindMap

Data was collected by means of an online questionnaire (Qualtrics). Ethical approval was granted by the ATU Research Ethics Committee, Sligo (IREC Reference No: 2021007).

Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was utilised to analyse data while using NVivo 12® for data management software. Additionally, inter-rater reliability was conducted to measure consistency within the analysis. Figure 2 below, provides a brief overview of the data analysis process.

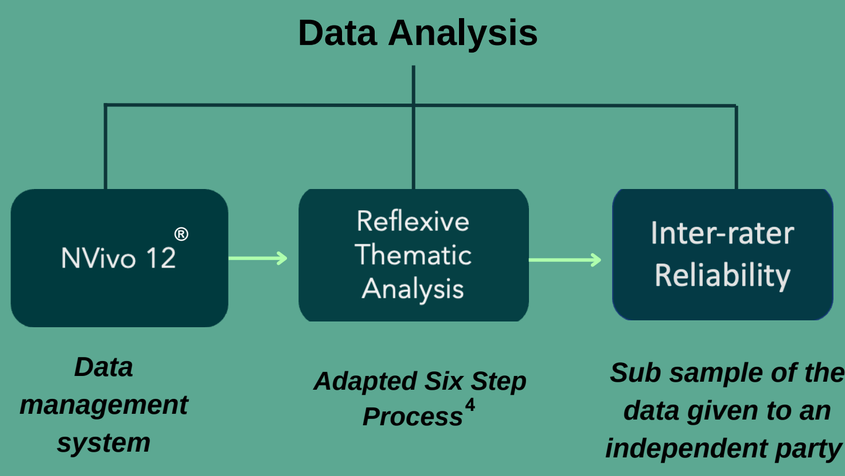

Figure 2: Overview of Data Analysis Process

Results

The response rate from the online staff questionnaire was 51% *(n=27)*.

Results demonstrated that 92% of participants reported having **at least one mental health support service** based on their campus. Whilst 8% reported having no mental health support service on their campus.

Over half of participants (56%) feel that current supports and services are **not adequate** for student mental health as illustrated in figure 3.

Did staff feel supports and services for student mental health were adequate on their campus?

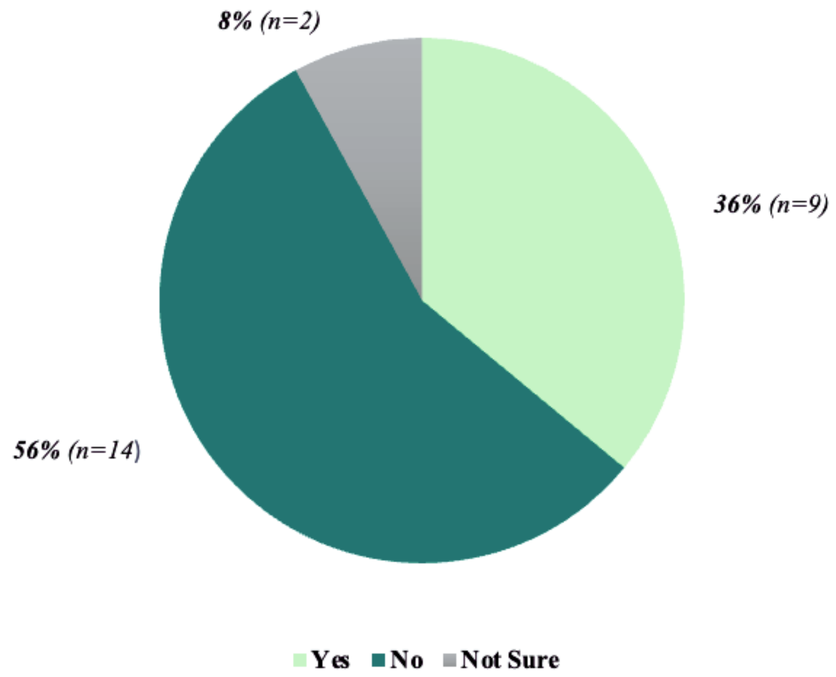

Figure 3: Staffs' Response to the Adequacy of Supports & Services

Findings

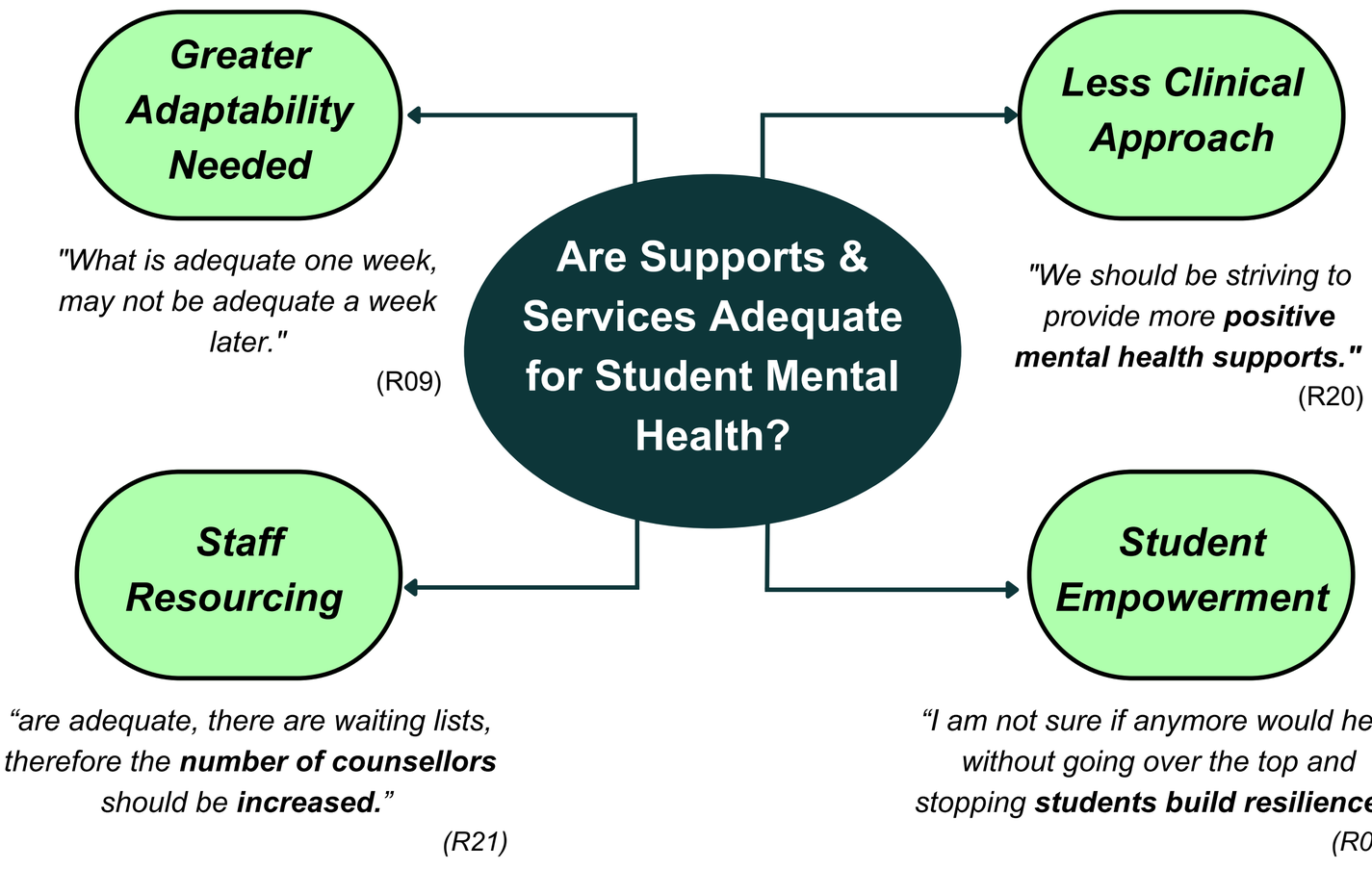

Figure 4: Findings Overview of Key Themes that Emerged from Reflexive Thematic Analysis

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Recommendations & Conclusions

The key recommendations made by staff were:

- HEIs *"should be striving to provide more positive mental health supports"* (R07) in order to shift the emphasis from 'treatment' to 'prevention'.
- The need for an integrated approach towards mental health among campuses.
- The need for the promotion of health protective and maintenance behaviours amongst students to support their mental health.

- Overall, it can be established that support and services depend on the specific need of the specific college campuses. Though recommendations can be implemented and put into place, as a participant expressed: ***"Will there ever be adequate mental health supports anywhere?"*** (R20)
- It is crucial that mental health is kept high on the agenda within the third level setting. As ***"adequate leads to complacency, mental health supports must always be evolving.."*** (R03)