Delivering Mental Health Education to University Students in China

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I n the past two decades, university students' mental health has become a matter of increasing public concern in the rapidly changing Chinese society. The ongoing pandemic and campus-wide quarantines have further raised alarms over student well-being. Many Chinese universities have endeavored to promote mental health education and have made counselling services widely available for students. In July 2021, the ministry of education (MOE) reiterated the importance of student well-being in a note titled "Strengthening Students' Mental Health Initiative," and further developed mandatory mental health courses for all undergraduate students. Despite a strong top-down policy push, and efforts at the university and faculty levels, challenges still exist.

Mental Health Education in the Chinese Higher Education Context
In China, university students are considered a "vulnerable group," prone to experiencing mental health challenges. Studies have found that depression and anxiety were prevalent among Chinese university students, and their mental well-being is considered more at risk than among the general population. A meta-analysis of 113 studies, mainly conducted between 2005 and 2020, with nine studies before 2004, estimated the overall prevalence of depression among Chinese university students to be 28.4 percent (n=185,787, with a 95 percent confidence interval from 25.7 percent to 31.2 percent). Another study conducted in 2020 reported that 41.1 percent of university students in China (n=89,588) experienced anxiety symptoms during the COVID-19 outbreak. Research suggested that students' mental distress and disorders were associated with various factors at the individual (personality, interpersonal relations, ineffective coping strategies), family (living away from home amid many life changes, parenting), school (academic stress, future employment and career planning, achievement expectations), and societal (dramatic social, cultural, and economic changes, fierce competition) levels.

In response to these issues, both the Chinese government and universities have endeavored to promote student well-being since the early 1990s. Over the past three decades, a range of government policy documents have been issued to expand and deepen the mental health education reform and regulate its goals, approaches, and curriculum. To meet students' mental health needs, a "four-in-one" working model is currently adopted in Chinese universities to integrate mental health subject teaching and learning, practicum, counselling services, and crisis prevention and intervention. Further, the MOE advocates strengthening the role of classroom teaching and instruction in developing mental health education.

Similar to many higher education systems in the world, mental health education and services are an integral part of university education in China. They are usually organized and managed under the division of student affairs. One notable feature of mental health education in China is its focus on nurturing a "holistic person" (*quanren*). These educational courses and services intend to raise students' awareness of mental health problems, improve their coping strategies in case of a mental health crisis, and guide them in the design of their own growth paths and in preparation for challenges in an increasingly complex world. Essentially, mental health education, complementary to moral and civic education, should equip students with moral values, intellectual skills, physical capabilities, as well as with aesthetics, which has been considered the core value of Chinese university education.

Abstract
Over the past two decades, the mental health of university students has become a matter of increasing public concern in China. Universities have been developing mental health education and services to support students. A recent notice from the ministry of education reiterates the importance of mental health education and promotes such courses as a core module for all students. This article reviews strategies, challenges, and implications related to promoting student well-being at Chinese universities.

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Effective mental health education should put students in the center and understand the causes and roots of their anxiety.

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Challenges in Promoting Mental Health Education

One of the biggest challenges is ensuring a sufficient number of qualified teachers to deliver mental health education and services. A 2018 policy document by the MOE advocated for more qualified teachers with counselling and professional backgrounds, and for a teacher–student ratio for mental health education of no less than 1:4000, with at least two full-time teachers at each university. In practice, however, the supply of qualified instructors and counsellors varies widely among universities. Due to the large size of the student population, universities are still lacking qualified instructors and counsellors to deliver programs and provide counselling services to the whole campus. Currently, most of the counsellors and course instructors are recruited on a part-time basis from other departments within the university, and not necessarily with backgrounds in mental health or behavioral science.

A second major challenge concerns the tendency, among students, not to seek help. This is largely related to the lack of systematic education on mental health, which in turn limits students' understanding and awareness of mental illnesses, possibly resulting in diagnosis and treatment delays. Students' hesitation, if not resistance, concerning professional healthcare is also caused by cultural stigma, which views mental health and related issues as a source of shame. Students may also be afraid of possible consequences in terms of their academic evaluation and career development if they admit to suffering from, or being diagnosed with, mental health conditions.

In the past decades, various strategies have been adopted to tackle these challenges, including diversifying mental health education and services, increasing the number of professionally trained counsellors and instructors, and providing on-the-job training on student well-being to faculty. In addition, in recent years, the MOE has encouraged offering mandatory mental health courses to all undergraduate students to enhance mental health awareness and understanding.

Delivering Mandatory Mental Health Courses

China is believed to be one of the first higher education systems to deliver mental health courses as a compulsory module (consisting of two credits with 32 to 36 credit hours) for all undergraduate students. Based on information from the MOE in November 2021, more than 2,000 out of 2,738 regular higher education institutions (HEIs) in China are now offering mental health courses as a compulsory module. Among these HEIs, more than 1,600 also provide elective courses in related areas.

Though still at an early stage, initial evaluation and research show that after taking these compulsory courses, the majority of students find themselves equipped with basic knowledge and literacy on mental health, which raises their awareness of possible problems and challenges. As a result, they are willing to seek professional help, and their communication skills and coping strategies for stress and emotion are improved to some extent. However, there are still questions and doubts on the effectiveness of the course modules and mental health services in general. In particular, the course content is not entirely up-to-date to meet students' actual needs and issues, and the teaching is largely "one size fits all" and does not go into great depth, in part due to the large size of classes.

Effective mental health education should put students in the center and understand the causes and roots of their anxiety. Educators need to understand the drastic effect on students of the uncertainty that they face concerning their future prospects, in the context of the country's rapid socioeconomic development. The COVID-19 pandemic has inevitably caused stress and impacted on university students' physical and emotional well-being over the past two years. Educators need to keep an open mind, reflect on students' needs, set clear goals, and explore innovative and rigorous teaching approaches when delivering mental health education and services. ◢