

PANDEMIC TRANSITIONS

GRADUATING FROM UNIVERSITY INTO THE
WORKFORCE IN HONG KONG DURING COVID-19

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE

The COVID-19 pandemic has had negative impacts on many different demographic groups in society, including university students and new graduates. This report has been produced for universities, career departments and support services to highlight the challenges faced by university students and graduates during the last few years. This report presents quantitative and qualitative data from a large-scale interdisciplinary study on the various impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the university-to-work transitions of students and graduates in Hong Kong.



FINDINGS

- Students and graduates reported poor mental health and low confidence in talking about their mental health problems with other people at their university.
- Students and graduates viewed the mental health support provided by their universities as not easily accessible, possibly not effective, and lacking in scope.
- In relation to their career plans and preparedness, students and graduates reported positive outlooks, and an awareness of both the job market and their place within it.
- Most students and graduates reported taking an internship in the last year. Furthermore, internships were viewed as important stepping-stones into the workforce.
- Findings from interviews with university staff suggest that they differed in their perceptions of whether it is their role to prepare students with the skills they need for the workplace. Specifically, those in professional degree programs such as nursing and law viewed it as essential to equip students for the workforce. In contrast, those in non-professional degree programs did not view it as their role to equip students with work-related skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- We recommend that universities make their mental health support resources easily accessible for students and that students are regularly made aware of how to access such support. The mental health needs of the student population should be assessed regularly so that resources can be tailored and updated as needed.
- Universities should foster and promote internship opportunities with external businesses and organizations in order for students to gain the relevant skills needed for the workplace.
- We recommend that non-professional degree programs incorporate concrete transferable skills into their curriculum to ensure that students are well-prepared for their future careers.

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic changed many aspects of the world around us and profoundly affected every kind of education. University students in Hong Kong experienced extended periods away from campus as classes were moved online and contact with university staff was reduced to Zoom and other online mediums. University students also had to deal with changes to their study plans, cancelled exchange programs and delayed graduations. Other complications included graduating into an uncertain economic climate and unstable job market. In addition, many companies were radically downsizing or closing all together. For the companies that remained 'in business,' employees had to navigate shifting workplace modes, including working remote, in-office, and in hybrid modes. New university graduates were thus encountering a radically different working world from what they might have envisioned prior to commencing on their university studies.

In this report, we present quantitative and qualitative findings from an interdisciplinary research project examining the various impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the university-to-work transitions of graduates in Hong Kong. Specifically, we present findings from surveys and interviews with students, graduates, employers, and university staff that provide insights for university staff about the needs of students' and graduates' as they transition into the workforce. We also provide recommendations for support and future development that can be provided by universities.



OUR DATA AND SAMPLE

Our findings come from an online survey of 418 participants who graduated university in Hong Kong between 2020 and 2023. In the survey, we measured a range of different variables such as experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, career preparedness, financial satisfaction, mental health, and psychological wellbeing.

Our sample of respondents can be summarized as follows:

- 33% of our survey sample were men and 64% were women.
- The average age of the respondents was 22.7 years.
- 82% of respondents in the sample identified as Chinese and 8% as Asian (non-Chinese).
- The majority of our sample's respondents were from the University of Hong Kong (56.8%), followed by City University of Hong Kong (10.7%), the Chinese University of Hong Kong (8.0%), Hang Seng University of Hong Kong (5.1%), and the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (3.6%).
- Students from the Arts and Humanities faculties were the largest group of respondents in our sample (32%), followed by those from the Science (12%), Social Sciences (11%), Business and Economics (9.8%), and Law (8.5%) faculties.
- 53% of survey respondents graduated between 2020 and 2022, with 47% due to graduate in 2023. 55% of respondents indicated that they had taken up an internship at some point between 2020 and 2023.

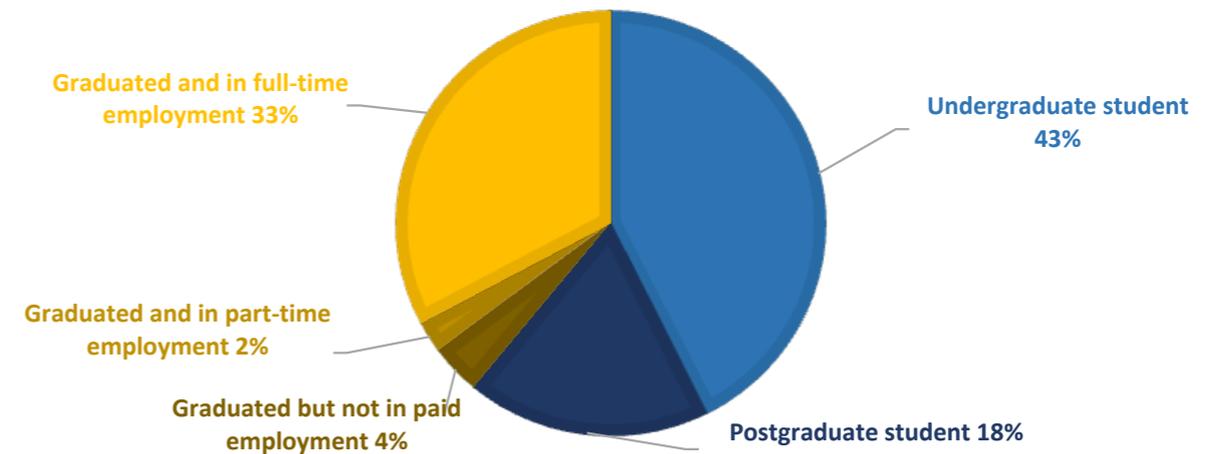


Figure 1. The study and work status of our survey respondents.

The graph above depicts the proportion of students and graduates within the sample. Most respondents were current students (61%), with 43% undergraduates and 18% postgraduates. The rest of the sample (39%) had graduated university.

We also undertook qualitative interviews with students, graduates, employers, and university staff and incorporate the findings from these interviews into our results below. In total, we interviewed 68 students and graduates (approximately 25 hours of recorded interviews), 40 employers (around 20 hours) and 41 university staff (over 21.5 hours).

MENTAL HEALTH

A large part of our project has focused on understanding students' and graduates' mental health and psychological well-being. In our survey, we measured symptoms of mental ill health using the widely-validated Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21)^[1]. Figure 2 at the right summarises the results. Survey respondents largely reported 'normal' levels of symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. However, the results also indicated mental ill health concerns amongst the sample. For example, 21% of respondents reported symptoms equating to severe or extremely severe levels of depression, and 29% reported severe or extremely severe levels of anxiety.

These observations should be treated with caution given the fact that our survey sample is not representative of this population. However, the proportion of respondents with "severe" and "extremely severe" levels of symptoms of depression^[2] and stress appears to be higher than the wider university population, and thus, further investigation is warranted.

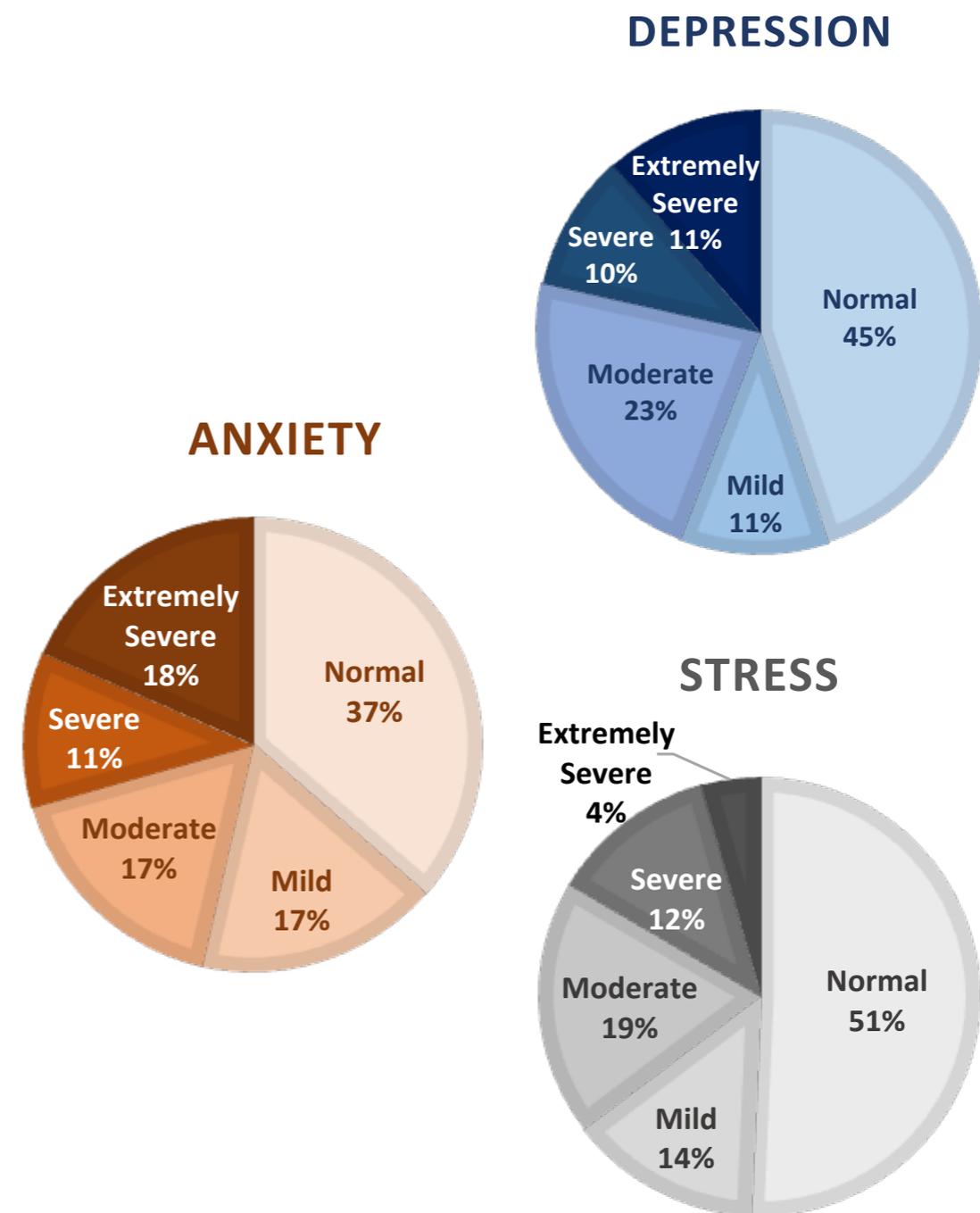


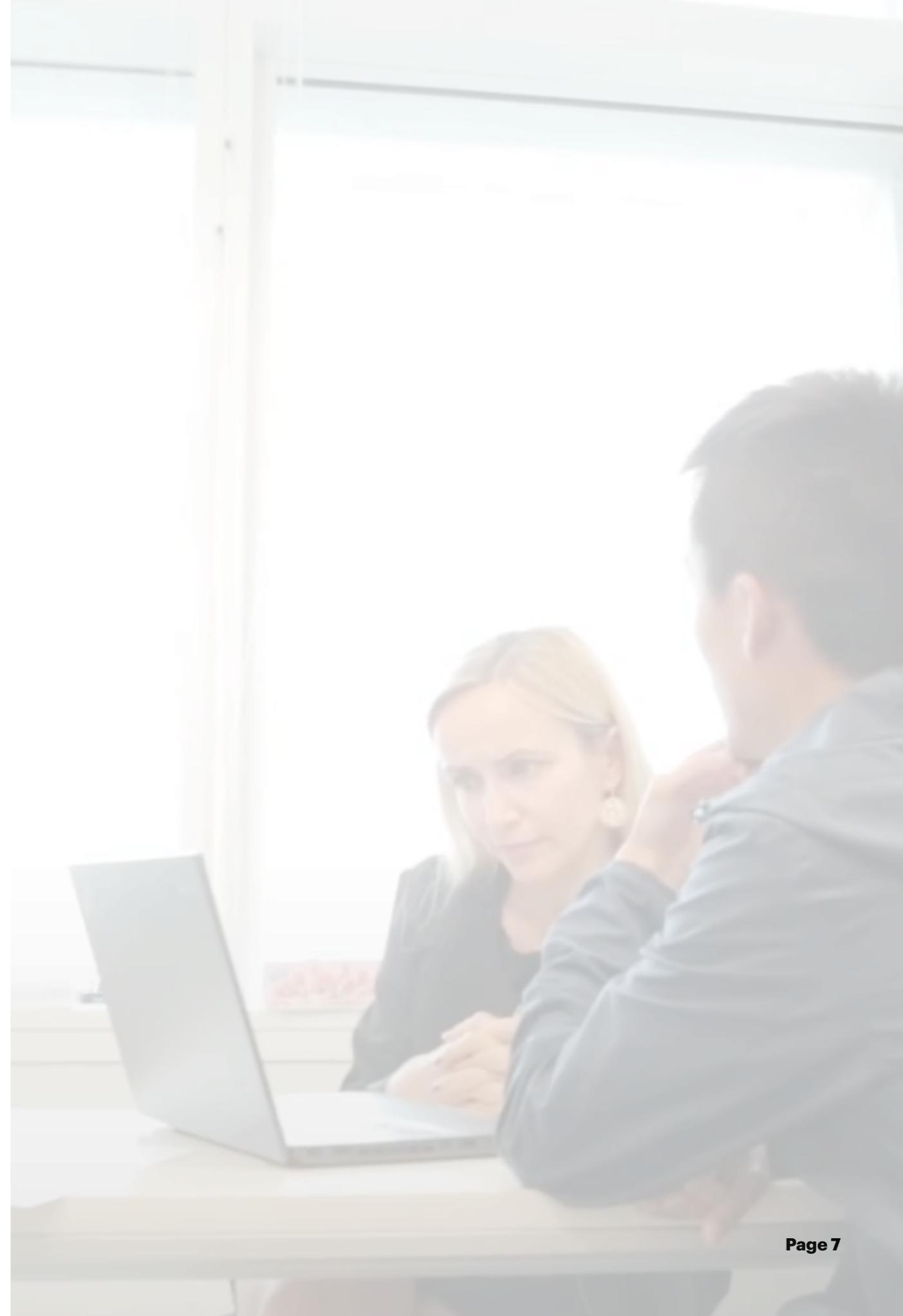
Figure 2. Depression, anxiety, and stress symptom levels for respondents as measured by the DASS-21.

[1] Lovibond, S., & Lovibond, P. (1995). Manual for the depression anxiety stress scales (2nd ed.). Psychology Foundation.

[2] Xiang, L., Shek, D.T.L., & Shek, E.Y.W. (2021). Psychological morbidity among university students in Hong Kong (2014–2018): Psychometric properties of the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS) and related correlates. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18.

MENTAL HEALTH

Despite high levels of symptoms of adverse mental health, our respondents did not generally report having a clinical diagnosis. Only 7.7% of participants reported that they had been diagnosed with a mental health problem in the last year. We can make a tentative observation that any mental health difficulties that our respondents experience either do not reach the level of clinical significance (i.e., a clinical diagnosis), or, that they do not seek out professional help. Indeed, with regards to this latter point, 37.8% of our respondents indicating experiencing mental health problems in the last year, but this clearly does not map onto the relatively low amount with a reported diagnosis. These findings need to be investigated further as this discrepancy could be linked to a lack of access to help and support, and possibly stigma around mental health issues.



MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Open communication and support from other people are important components of mental health and are also related to help-seeking during times of need. We, therefore, asked survey respondents about their confidence levels in talking to other people in their lives, universities, and workplaces about their mental health.^[3] The graph below (Figure 3) shows that 34% of the respondents were either moderately or extremely confident talking to people at university about their mental

health, compared with 19% who were “not at all” confident in speaking to someone at their university. Notably, students and graduates were more comfortable speaking to someone in their life about their mental health than someone at university, with 57% of respondents feeling “moderately” or “extremely comfortable” in doing so.

The interviews with students and graduates revealed that they viewed the mental health support provided by their universities as lacking and as in need of expansion. Indeed, some students were of the opinion that during the pandemic, universities had not provided sufficient resources to help bolster their mental wellbeing,

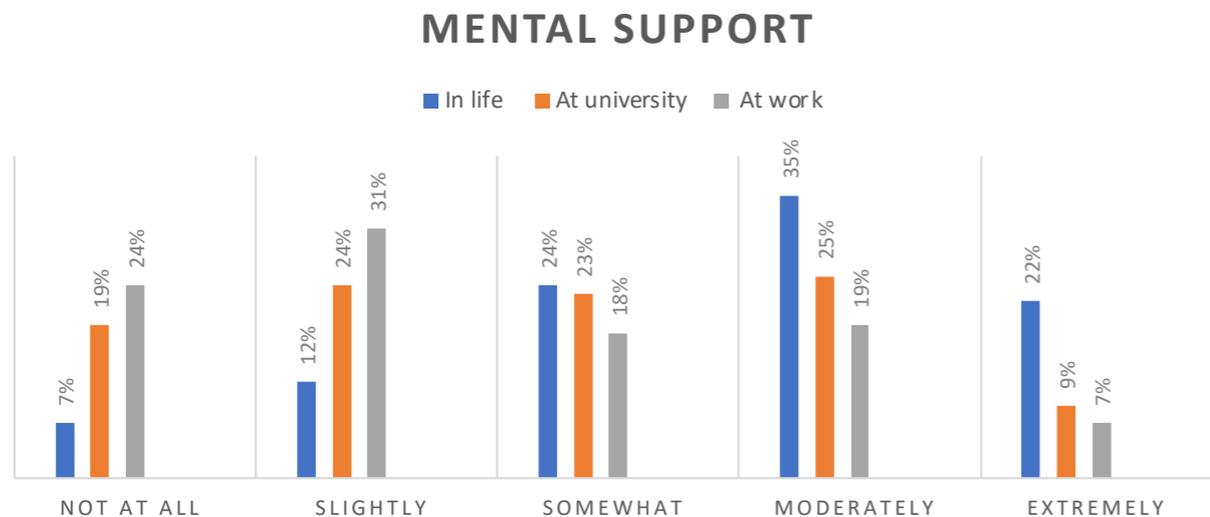


Figure 3. Self-reported confidence in talking about mental health to other people.

- *I feel like maybe they [universities] should spend more time working on providing support for students, whether that's you know counseling or whatever. It seems like they're more concerned with following government policy than the well-being of their students, if that makes any sense (Student 22).*

[3] Reino, V., & Byrom, N. (2017). Graduate mental wellbeing in the workplace: A report on graduate mental wellbeing for Student Minds. Student Minds. https://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/graduate_wellbeing_report_full_interactive.pdf

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

The kinds of support that universities provided was framed as “debatable” (see below). Students had to actively seek out these resources as they were not immediately easily accessible,

- *Well, I think they provided us with some seminar, seminars, or that's what they're called, and I think those are about how to cope with stress ... But then it really depends on whether if you want to join these kinds of programs or webinar. So, I think the usefulness of these programs or webinars, I think it's debatable. It really depends on the students to join these programs to help themselves (Student 26).*
- *I think because it was online, the communication part was a bit difficult because, like I said, I'm sure there was some resources available. It was just not very easy to find or access (Student 51).*

However, it was not only students that found the mental health support provided by universities lacking. Indeed, university staff that we interviewed also voiced similar concerns. The staff provided additional insights into the

insufficiencies of such support systems with problems including resourcing, promotion and potential inefficiencies,

- *We have some hotlines for students who have this depression problems ... So, they have counsellors helping students. So, I know that some of my students have used the service. I remember I come across a student who said the service was not as good ... So, there might be a need for the university to have more manpower or more counsellors to help students, maybe (Staff 14).*
- *They have counselling services, wellbeing events, meditation etc. But the question is whether these macro-level things can affect micro-level. That is, things related to the individual. I think you might have to better promote these events and think about how you should increase participation and engagement from students and colleagues. Because a lot of the time, you create these events, but people don't go. I think you should think more about the effectiveness of these events and services (Staff 23).*

CAREER PREPAREDNESS AND SUPPORT

In order to assess student and graduate preparation for the workforce, our survey also measured a range of career-related variables including preparedness, employability, and adaptability. We used a range of questions including the Career Futures Inventory-Revised which measures different facets of career adaptability^[4]. Scores on each item in this scale range from one to five, with higher scores indicating more agreement with each statement. The results from this part of the survey below (Figure 4) indicated that both students and employed graduates have a strong understanding of their life priorities (M= 3.84 and M=3.97 respectively) and work values (M=3.83 and M=3.86).

In addition, both groups of respondents also reported a relatively strong understanding of the impact of the economy on their job opportunities (M=3.91 and M= 3.96). Based on these results, we can surmise that students have a positive career outlook, awareness of the job market and their place within it.

It is also important for students to understand the job market and the career that they are planning to enter. The majority (55%) of students and graduates surveyed indicated that they had taken up an internship and both university staff and employers stated that internships were important. Reasons for this included that it is easier for students to understand and assimilate to workplace expectations,

- *Well, I think one thing we have done more of is internships ... I think this is really great and the students are crying out for this actually. So, I think that's something that could be built on further...I think every student should take an internship if possible and I think the students want it (Staff 19).*
- *So, for candidates that have less intern experience during university time, I do find that it takes them more time to actually get into the workplace pace (Employer 13).*

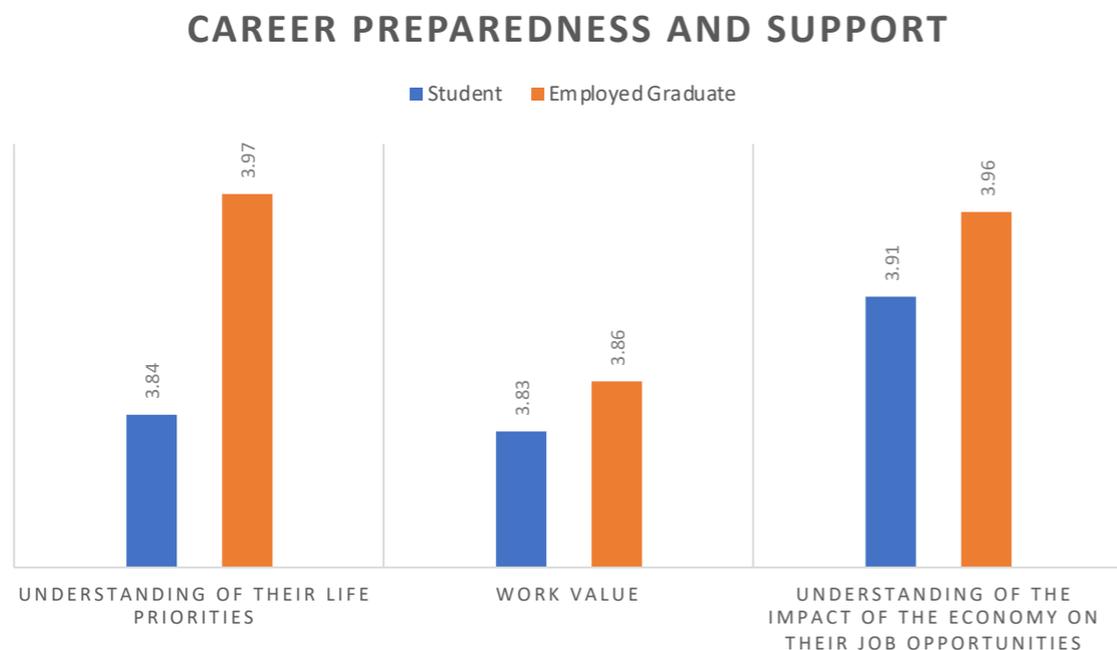


Figure 4. Self-reported confidence in career preparedness and support.

[4] Rottinghaus, P. J., Eshelman, A., Gore, J. S., Keller, K. J., Schneider, M., & Harris, K. L. (2017). Measuring change in career counseling: Validation of the Career Futures Inventory-Revised. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, 17(1), 61-75.

CAREER PREPAREDNESS AND SUPPORT

Our interviews with university staff revealed a tension in relation to whether tertiary education institutions were responsible for preparing students for the workforce. Staff teaching in professional degree programs such as law, medicine, and teacher education held the view that it was the role of the university to ensure its graduates were ready for their career. Notably, this role extended to both the technical and specialised skills of a job and interpersonal skills more generally,

- *Because we're a professional degree, I think for us, as well as dentistry and nursing and also law, these are professional degrees. So, the relationship between their degree and their occupation is stronger than others ... We know what skills they need to become a doctor in the future, and so we'll use these 6 years to train them. We have a very clear target (Staff 35).*
- *I think that's part of your role as a university is that you should teach them how to engage socially so that they can succeed in any job that they do, because most jobs require some sort of social interaction (Staff 10).*

In contrast, staff teaching in non-professional degree programs such as literature, sociology, and mathematics held different views; namely, that it is up to the students to take on board what they learn in university and apply it in the workplace. Specifically, students should use the knowledge, critical thinking, and writing skills (amongst others) as a 'toolbox' for whatever career in which they end up,

- *I think, in theory, it is the students' responsibility. I think the university should give them a helping hand, but it is up to the student themselves to take the initiative... (Staff 7).*
- *It's like, no, university is not about on the job training, but it is about how to think (Staff 4).*
- *We can give them what we know. We can teach students academics do and know and all the stuff that we engage with, and then they go off and apply that to their own context (Staff 11).*

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

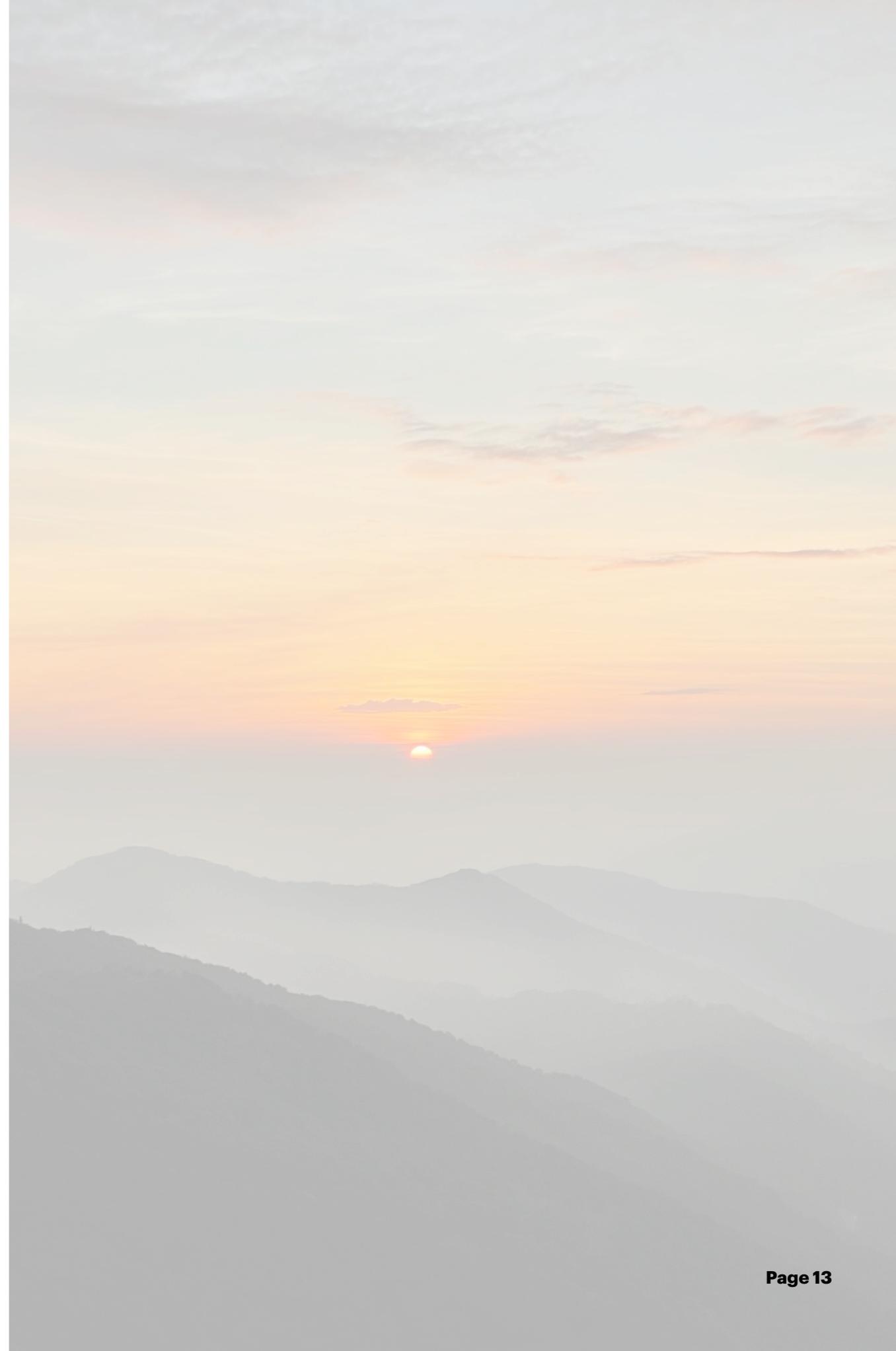
CONCLUSIONS

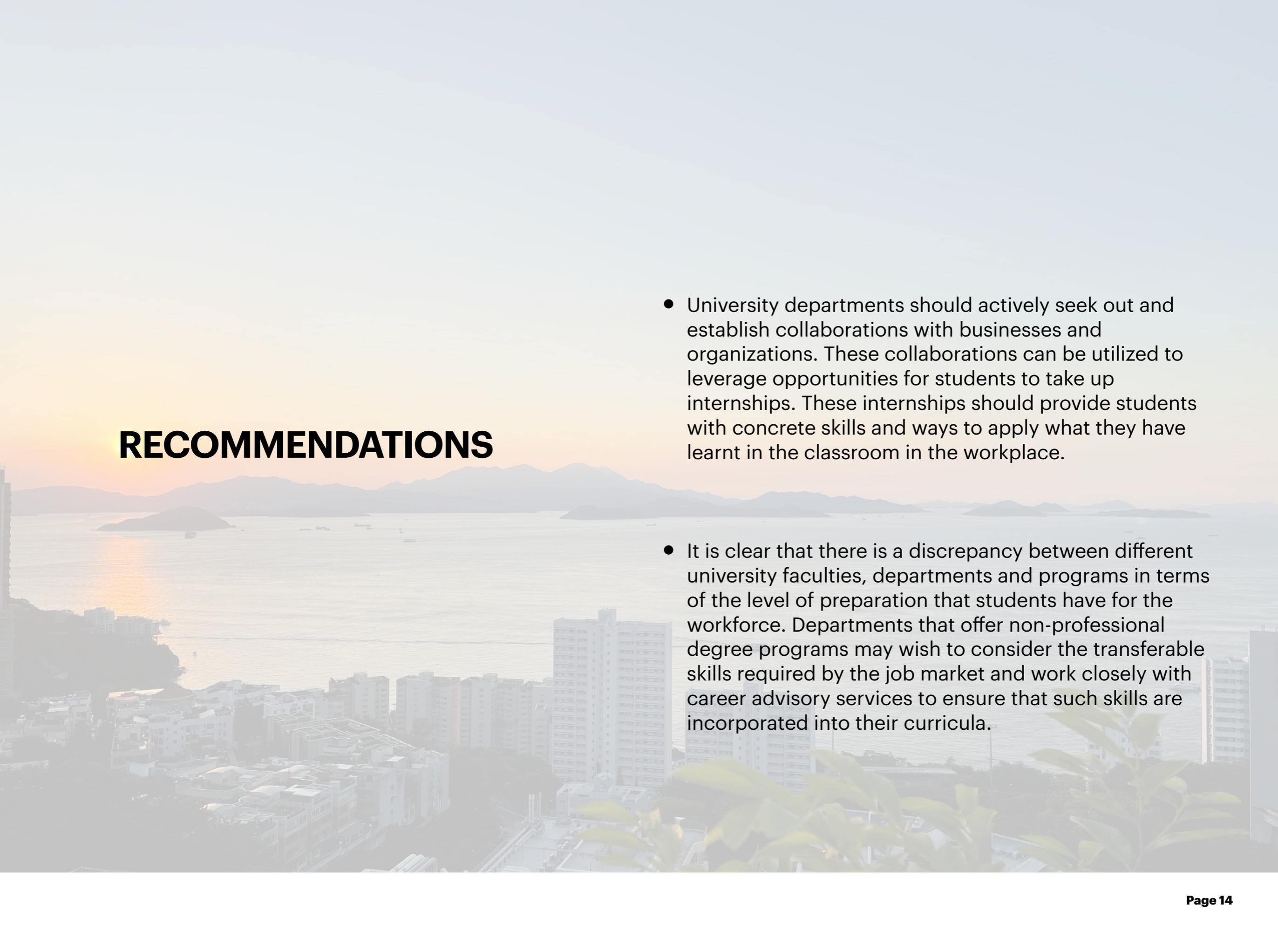
- Students and graduates entering the workforce report concerning levels of symptoms of poor mental health. In addition, students do not appear to be comfortable in talking about their mental health problems with other people at their university.
- Students and university staff hold negative views toward the resources and mental health support systems provided by tertiary education institutions.
- Students and graduates feel that they have a solid understanding of their life and work-related values, as well as how external forces such as the economy can shape the career opportunities available to them.
- Internships are viewed as providing a valuable route into the workforce.
- University staff differ in their views about whether their institutions are ultimately responsible for preparing students for their careers.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Universities need to ensure that the mental health resources and forms of support that they provide to students are widely publicized and easily accessible. In addition, universities should be aware of students' needs, so that they can ensure that the resources and information provided is up to date and tailored correctly to the demands of the student population. Finally, universities should carry out regular surveys and interviews with students to investigate the effectiveness of their support services and if any adjustments need to be made.
- Universities should consider the mental health and career needs of students within different disciplines and departments and tailor the support and resources that they provide accordingly.





RECOMMENDATIONS

- University departments should actively seek out and establish collaborations with businesses and organizations. These collaborations can be utilized to leverage opportunities for students to take up internships. These internships should provide students with concrete skills and ways to apply what they have learnt in the classroom in the workplace.
- It is clear that there is a discrepancy between different university faculties, departments and programs in terms of the level of preparation that students have for the workforce. Departments that offer non-professional degree programs may wish to consider the transferable skills required by the job market and work closely with career advisory services to ensure that such skills are incorporated into their curricula.

CONTACT US

FOR MORE INFORMATION

This report forms just one part of the project. We are also in the midst of developing an online hub called Graduate Mindmap which will contain a wealth of resources for all stakeholders to help improve the university-to-work transitions of Hong Kong graduates. We also hope to further collaborate with universities to provide tailor-made and empirically grounded resources to help support students and new graduates preparing to enter the workforce.

If you are interested in research or training opportunities with us, please contact us at: riich@hku.hk

If you are a university staff member, please scan the QR code below and take our survey.





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