The Mental Wellbeing of Architecture Students

Prepared March 2022

Contents

Foreword

The Student Organised Network for Architecture (SONA) is the student body within the Australian Institute of Architects. SONA aims to listen and respond to the issues that students are facing; to foster their growth and enhance their architectural education. With over 1300 active student members nationally, SONA represents a broad range of student experiences and aims to capture these through engaging, listening and reacting to their concerns.

Mental Health has been a longstanding concern for SONA and became a particular area of concern following the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to online learning. In 2020, we launched a survey which focused to address the mental wellness of architecture students. This project presents the results of rigorously analyzing the findings of the survey along with further research into mental health to understand the key issues and the factors driving them.

This project aims to communicate the current state of the Mental Wellbeing of Architecture Students to the profession and encourage proactive and constructive discourse on how we can holistically work together to minimize the effect of these drivers.

We recognize that is this is a problem that requires input from everyone; students, graduates, practicing professionals, academics and retired professionals in understanding this issue further and finding potential solutions. As such we would like to hear the response of the architectural community to 4 key questions outlined at the end of this presentation and on the SONA website.

Please share this project amongst your community and reach out to us if you have any further thoughts on what we have presented here. We thank you sincerely for your time in considering these thoughts and ideas.

Warm regards,

Leanne Haidar and Nicole Mesquita-Mendes

SONA President 2021 , SONA President 2022

Executive Summary

The analysis of the 2020 SONA Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Survey can be summarized with the following: (1) What are the key areas of concern expressed by students in the survey data? (2) What are the drivers of these issues and how can we understand them further with additional research and knowledge? (3) How may we minimize the effect of these drivers?

The analysis found that 93% of respondents indicated a moderate to high level of stress: 70% indicating they were stressed to very stressed and the top 4 reasons for stress in 2020 were cited as: competing priorities, feeling you can do more, high university workload and associating your work with our own self worth.

65% of respondents stated that the transition to online learning has negatively impacted their mental health. The top reason impacting mental health for both international and domestic students was stated as a lack of studio culture and connection to peers.

Only 28% of respondents believe their university faculty is good to very good at addressing mental health. 53% of respondents are unaware (22%) or unsure (31%) of what resources exist and how to access them to support their mental health. Improved faculty led communication, mentoring programs and facilitated student connections were the top 3 reasons cited as resources which students agreed would support their mental health at their university.

The following factors may be having an impact; studio culture, self-concept, the accessibility of mental health resources, students' perceived and/or actual value of education, work-life balance and understanding and managing expectations.

We would like to ask the following questions to the architectural community; (1) How can we promote healthy work/study habits? (2) How can we destigmatize Mental Wellbeing in the Architectural Community? (3) How can we instill students with confidence in themselves and the value of their education? (4) How can the relationship between the profession and architectural education be strengthened to support student wellbeing?

Respondent Profile

There were a total of 323 respondents. The survey ran from approximately 15ᵗʰ October to 19ᵗʰ December 2020.

AGE
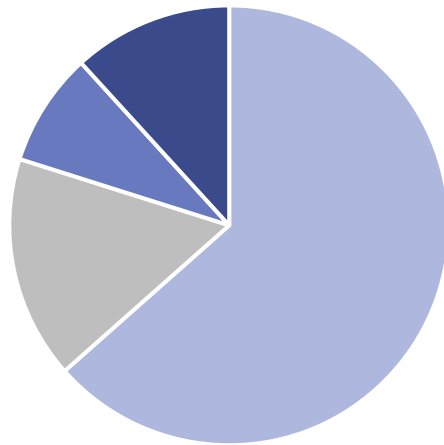
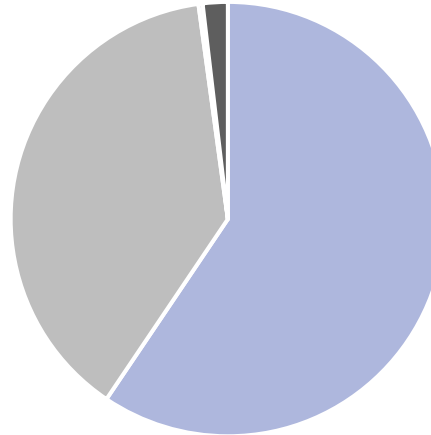■ 18-24 ■ 25-29 ■ 30-35 ■ 36+

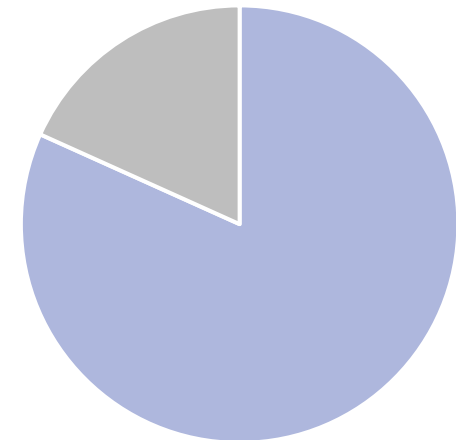The largest group of respondents by age where 18–24-year old's (205; 64%).

GENDER

■ Female ■ Male ■ Non Binary ■ Withheld

The largest group of respondents by gender were female (192; 59%); followed by males (124; 38%).

DOMESTIC/ INTERNATIONAL

■ Domestic ■ International

82% of respondents were domestic students; of which 50.5% are aged 18-24 years.

Respondent Profile

YEAR OF STUDY
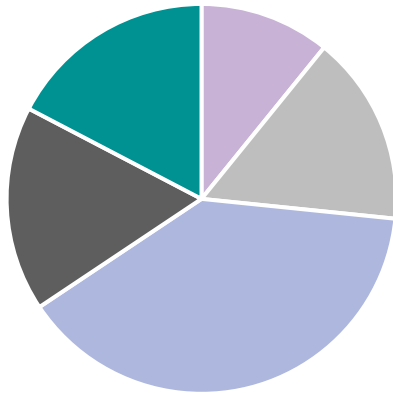
- Bachelors Y1 - Bachelors Y2
- Bachelors Y3 - Masters Y1
- Masters Y2

39% of respondents indicated they were/had completed their third year of a bachelors; these respondents forming part of the 65.6% of respondents currently completed or having completed a bachelors at the time of taking the survey.

LOCATION
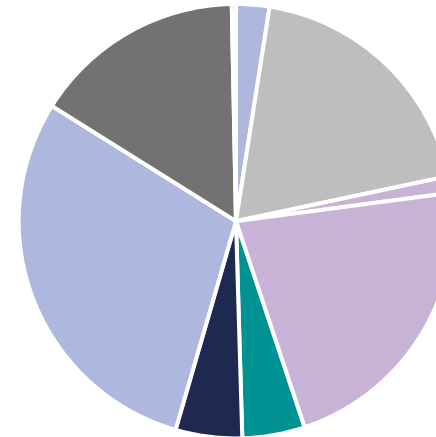
- ACT - NSW - NT - QLD - SA - TAS - VIC - WA - Unknown

Most respondents (166; 51%) are located or are attending Universities located in Victoria and Queensland.

DEGREE

The majority of respondents are studying **Architecture (284; 88%).** Other fields of study included Architecture & Environments (5.3%), Interior Architecture (1.9%), Architecture & Civil Engineering (1.5%), Architecture & Construction Management (1.2%), Interior Design (0.9%), Building Design (0.3%), Construction Management (0.3%) and Environmental Design (0.3%).

What does Mental Wellbeing mean to us?

Mental health is about wellness rather than illness.

Mental health is about being cognitively, emotionally and socially healthy – the way we think, feel and develop relationships – and not merely the absence of a mental health condition.[1]

Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices.[2]

A focus on mental health will contribute to the prevention of mental health conditions, and support people who have experienced these conditions to get as well as they can and lead full and contributing lives.[3]

The benefits of mental health wellness:[3]
• A state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential.
• can cope with the normal stresses of life.
• can work productively and fruitfully.
• is able to make a contribution to her or his community.
• increased learning, creativity and productivity, more pro-social behaviour and positive social relationships, and with improved physical health and life expectancy.

It should be noted that we recognize that there are a large number of broader socio-economic factors that could impact the mental health of students. This project discusses mental health within the context of the architectural profession and its education.

Sources:
1. "What are mental health difficulties and when to seek help," Headspace.org, Last reviewed June 25, 2020,https://headspace.org.au/young-people/what-is-mental-health/.
2. "What is mental health?," Mentalhealth.gov, Last updated August 25, 2020, https://www.mentalhealth.gov/basics/what-is-mental-health.
3. "What is mental health," Beyond Blue, Last accessed September 22, 2021, https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/what-is-mental-health.

Studio Culture

Studio culture is a contributing factor to students' mental health[1].

Studio is a valuable part of architectural education. It is a social environment which enables students to collaborate, review, support and present their work.

Review.

Presentations.

Collaborate.

Support.
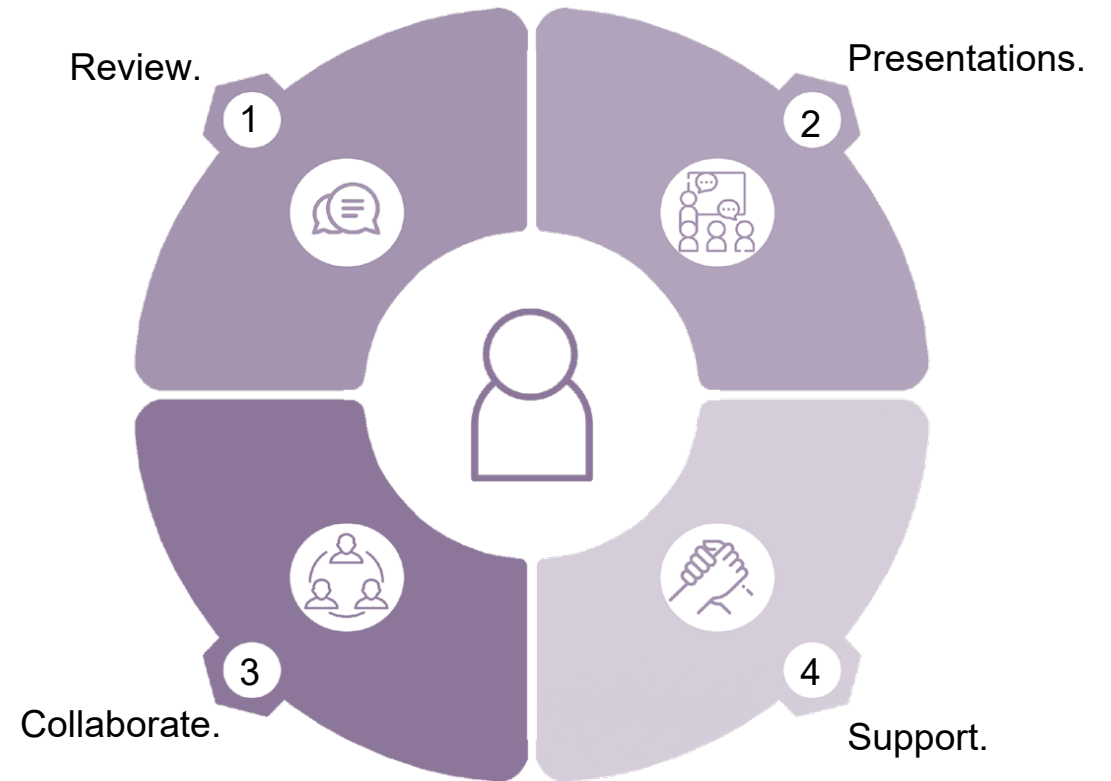
Sources:
1. "Depression Proof Studio Culture," GDC Vault, Last Accessed September 22, 2021, https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1024106/depression-proof-studio-culture-a.

A studio culture which is inclusive is important for students' mental health.

Social environments enable students to develop vital skills including confidence and communication[1]. This is supported by the 38% & 43% of students that chose social events and mentoring programs, respectively, to support mental health[2].

However, some demographics, including mature aged students, international students and students with disabilities may experience feelings of exclusion from these events, which could poorly impact their mental health.

Q: What additional resources would you like to see available at your university to support students mental health? (*N* = 297)

Please choose up to 3 resources.

Category	%
Other	7%
I am satisfied with the resources at my university	13%
Improved faculty led communication	47%
Open and transparent forum for student feedback to university	33%
On campus social events to facilitate student connections	38%
Kitchenette facility	15%
Easily accessible counselling sessions	29%
Mentoring Program	43%
Time management	33%
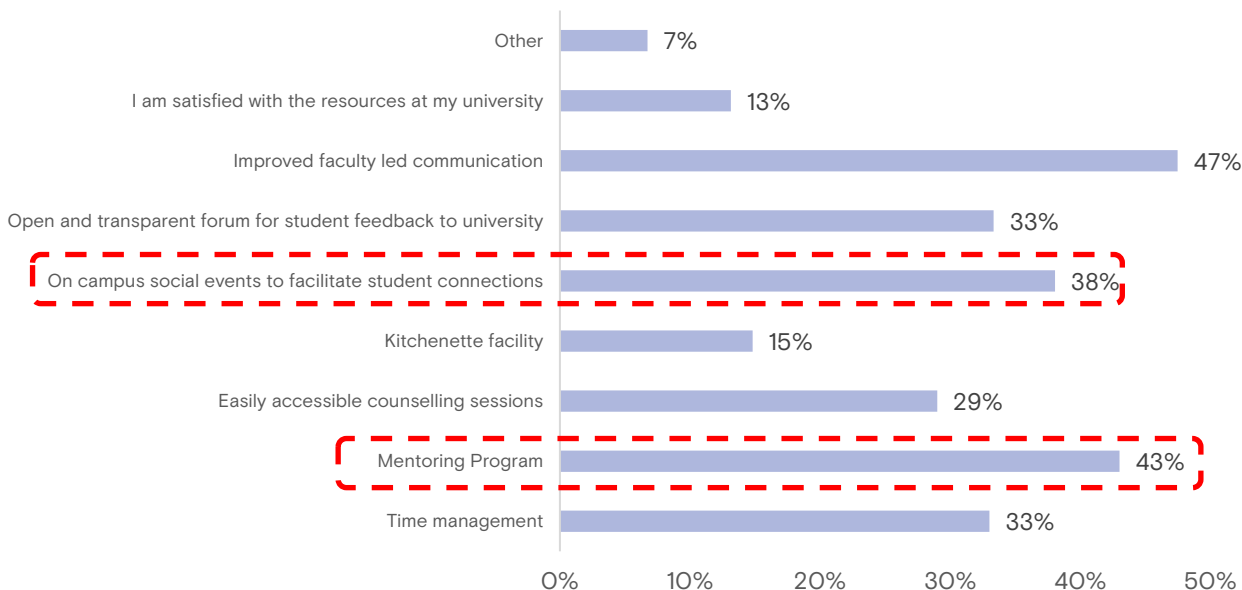
"**Most resources are aimed at young students and mature age students don't have a place within the social systems within university setting**"[2] – *Selected survey response*

Sources:
1 Australian Institute of Architects, Acumen Notes, 2014.
2.SONA Student Health & Wellbeing 2020 Survey Q: What additional resources would you like to see available at your university to support students mental health?

# Online learning may have negatively impacted studio culture and made it even more important for students to manage the social aspect of work-life balance.

Studio culture is a core element in architectural development. Studies show that this social and collaborative environment influences the type of architect students become[3].

69% of students believed that the lack of studio culture and connection to their peers due to online learning has affected their mental health and well-being.

Q: Has the shift to online learning affected your mental health and wellbeing this past year? (*N* = 283)

Yes	71%
No	25%
Other	4%

■Other ■No ■Yes
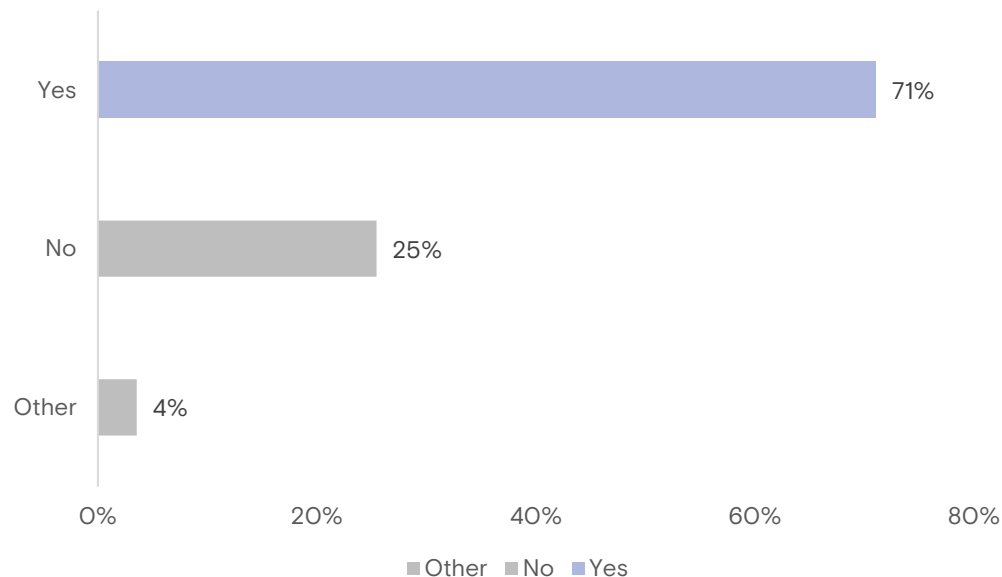
Q: How do you feel the shift to full-time online learning affected your mental health and well-being? (*N* = 286)

Other	7%
I feel my mental health and well being has not been…	16%
Access to feedback	42%
Access to software&/or computer	31%
Family pressure	20%
Lack of studio culture and connection to peers	69%
Access to workshop space	37%
Increased isolation	64%
Lack of access to resources	37%
Difficulties caused by language barriers	8%
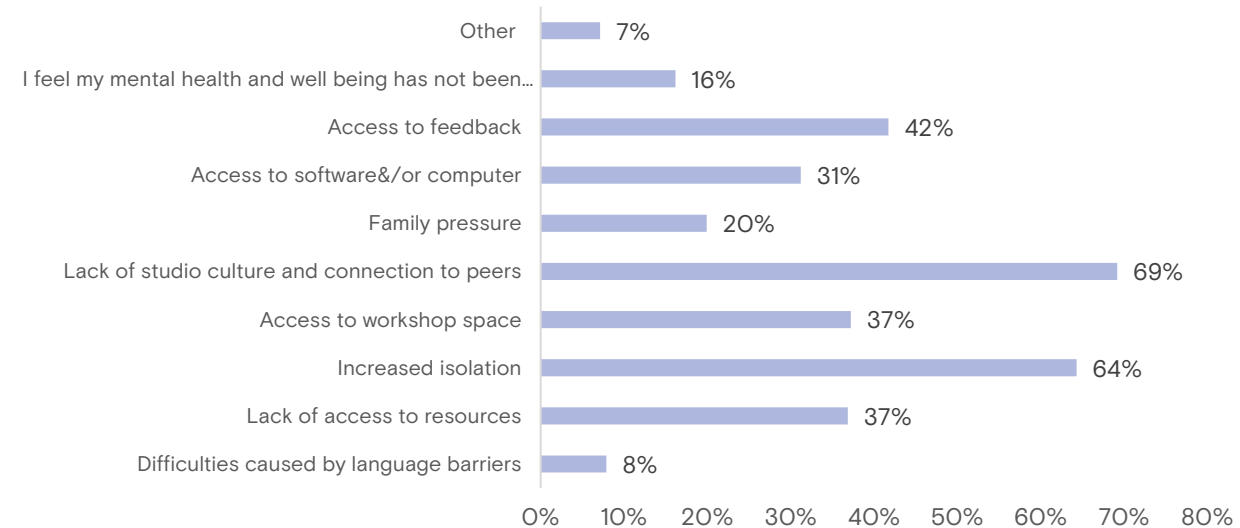
Sources:
 SONA Student Health & Wellbeing 2020 Survey
1. Folorunso, Clement Oluwole, and Moromoke Oluwadunsin Ajulo. "effect of studio culture on architectural pedagogy in Nigerian universities." International Journal of Arts & Sciences 9, no. 1 (2016): 243,
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326723558_effect_of_studio_culture_on_architecture_pedagogy_in _Nigerian_universities.

A more collaborative and inclusive environment amongst peers could improve studio culture, especially during isolation.

"Better solution to collaborative studio sessions; ability to cross collaborate with students from other tutor groups."
− Selected Survey Response

"(show) how (we can) work in teams remotely, add some social aspects for students ."
− Selected Survey Response

"Some sort of casual chat/catch up forum to try and replace the collaborative studio nature."
− Selected Survey Response

A more inclusive and collaborative environment amongst peers could be facilitated with peer review of work, cross collaboration across tutor groups and casual catch-ups.

Sources:
SONA Student Health & Wellbeing 2020 Survey: Q: What do you think your institution could do to improve in the delivery of online education?
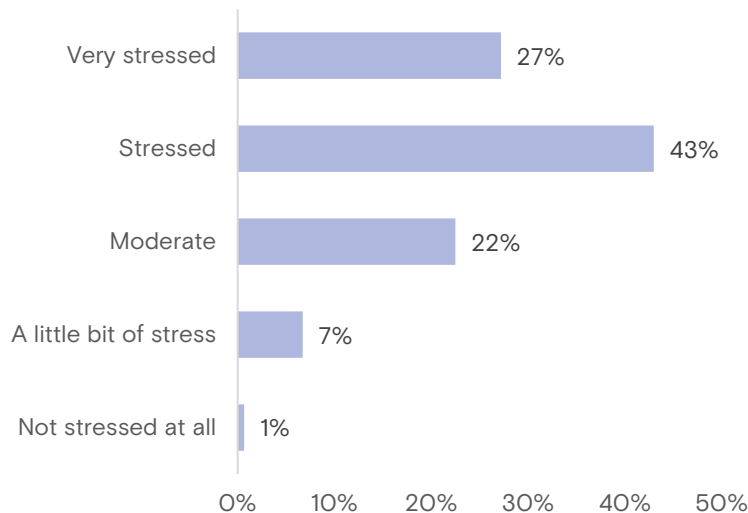
"All-Nighters"

Students' high levels of stress could be leading to the occurrence of "all nighters".

92% of students are feeling moderate to high levels of stress as a result of their studies[1]
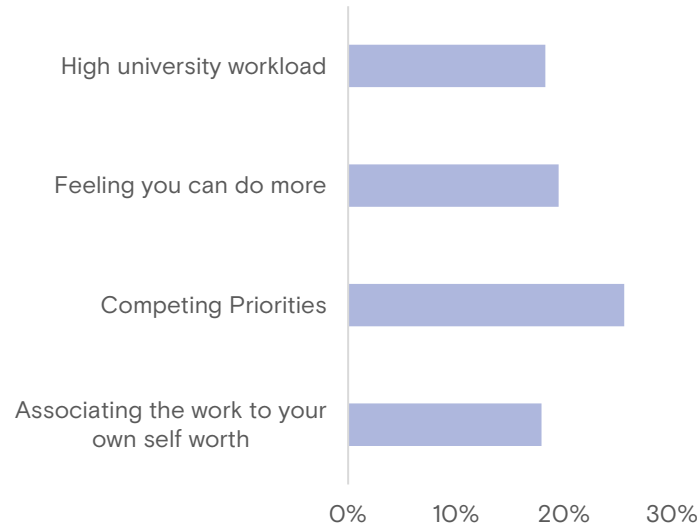
Competing priorities, university workload and students' self evaluation are factors that could lead to challenges in managing time[2].

Studies have shown "all nighters" are a common theme in architectural education[3]. In 2018, 86% of students reported that they sometimes to always went without sleep in order to finish a project[4]

How stressed would you say you have been as a result of your studies throughout the past year? (*N*= 283)

Very stressed	27%
Stressed	43%
Moderate	22%
A little bit of stress	7%
Not stressed at all	1%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50%

Top four reported stress factors
(*N* = 296)

High university workload	
Feeling you can do more	
Competing Priorities	
Associating the work to your own self worth	

0% 10% 20% 30%

Do you go without sleep in order to finish a project? (*N* = 134)

14%
50%
36%

■ Never ■ Always ■ Sometimes
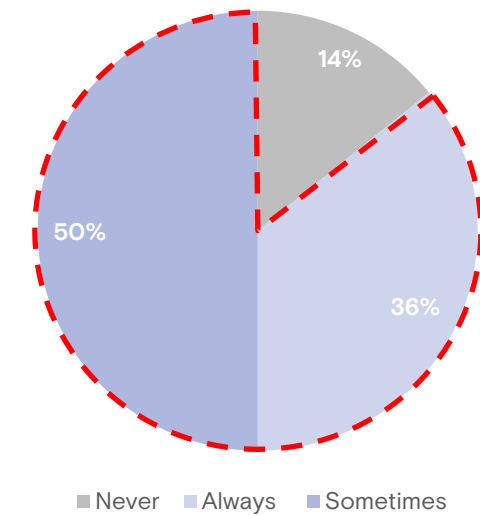
Sources:
SONA Student Health & Wellbeing 2020 Survey
1. SONA Student Health & Wellbeing 2020 Survey Q: If you have felt stressed in the past ear what factors contribute to you feeling this way? Choose up to 3 contributing factors
2. Rory Scott, "For and Against All-Nighter Culture: ArchDaily Readers Respond," Archdaily, published April 07, 2015, https://www.archdaily.com/616567/for-and-against-all-nighter-culture-archdaily-readers-respond .
4. 2018 SONA Student Health & Wellbeing Survey

The occurrence of "all-nighters" amongst students could be driving a studio culture which enables a 24 hour work ethic.

Competing priorities,
High university workload,
Feeling you can
do more

5

Challenges in
time management
1

2 Leading to students
undertaking
'all-nighters'

Poor mental health
and well-being

Potential impact on Post-
Graduation Work Habits

4

3

Students undertaking 'all-nighters'
because it seems 'normal' to do so
and
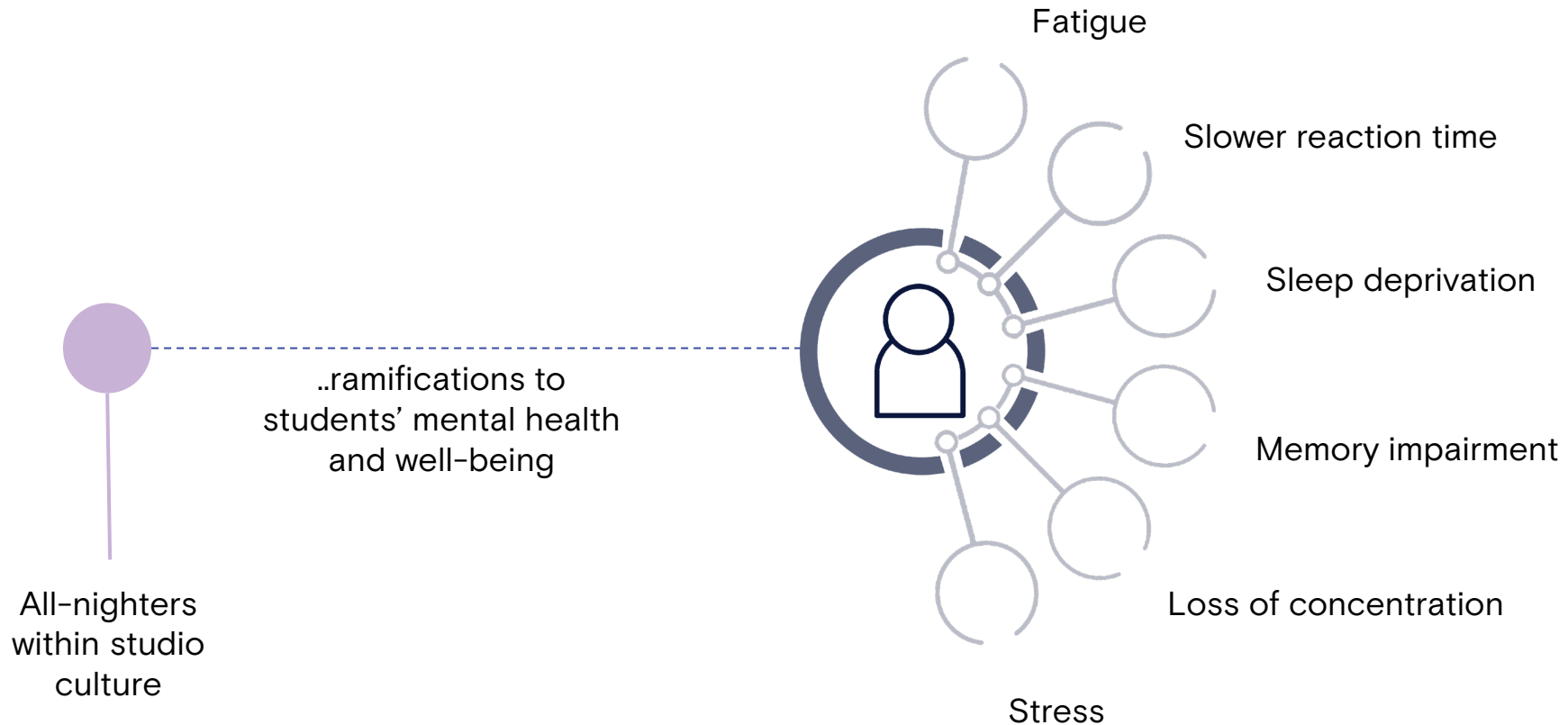all-nighters become embedded
Into studio culture
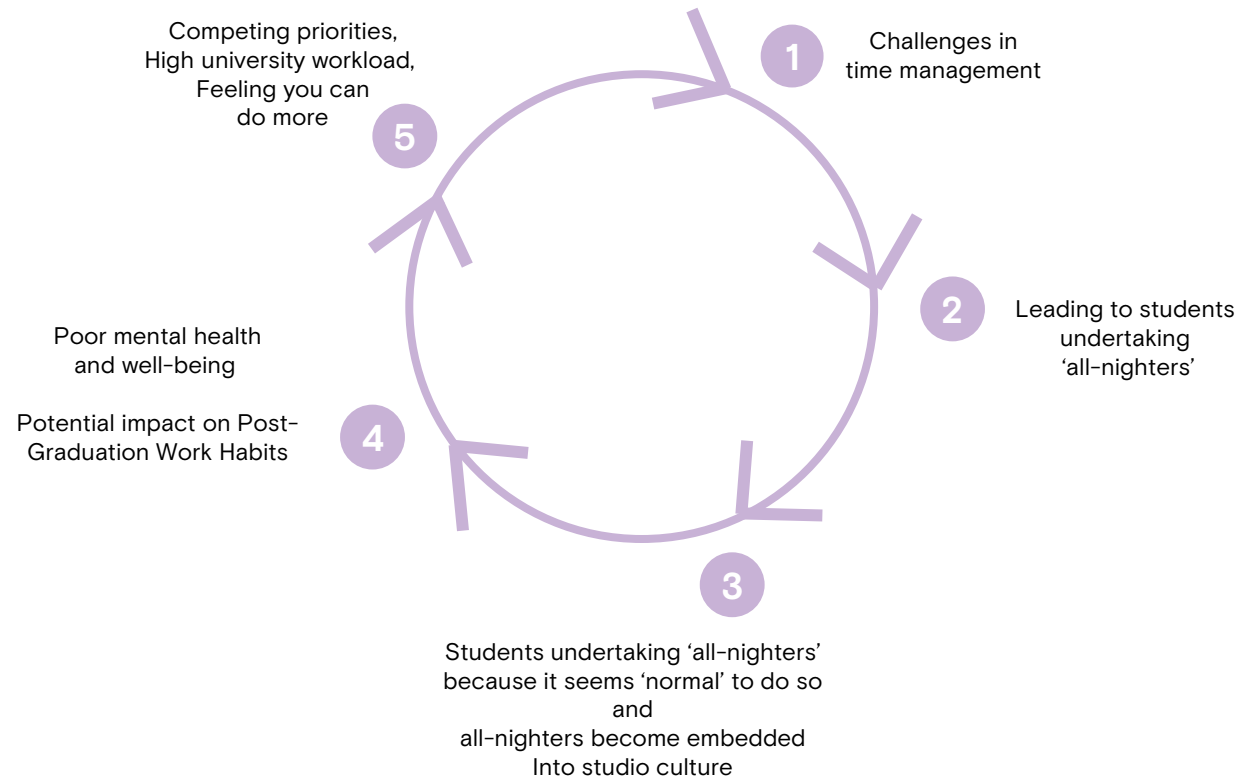
24 hour studio culture could be negatively impacting students' mental health and well being.

The occurrence of "all-nighters" amongst students could be driving a studio culture which enables a 24 hour work ethic….

A studio culture which enables all-nighters could have serious ramifications to students' mental health and well-being[1].

..ramifications to students' mental health and well-being

All-nighters within studio culture

Fatigue

Slower reaction time

Sleep deprivation

Memory impairment

Loss of concentration

Stress

Sources:
1. https://www.archdaily.com/616567/for-and-against-all-nighter-culture-archdaily-readers-respond

"Whatever the origin of this studio culture, its continued presence has less to do with cultural inheritance and more to do with the fact that conditions of society at present compel its continued existence...sleeplessness in the name of constant productive or consumptive activity is part and parcel of the neoliberal economy, is not a unique feature of architecture school"[1]

Sources:
1.   Keefer Dunn, 'Against Employability' *Berkeley Architecture Journal* no.1006 (2018): 117–124

Access to Mental Wellbeing Support Resources.

Lack of awareness of resources may be contributing to high levels of stress.

40% of students which were not aware of the mental health resources available to them were under high levels of stress

…whilst only 24% of students which were aware of the mental health resources available to them were under high levels of stress….

Level of stress of students which are not aware of the mental health resources available to them (*N* = 65)

0% 6%
12%
40%
42%
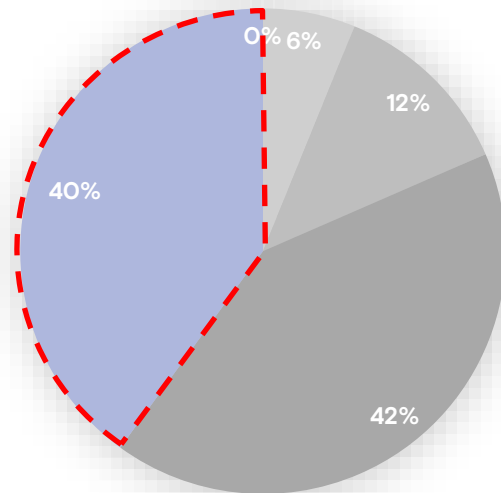
■ not stressed at all ■ a little bit of stress ■ moderate ■ stressed ■ very stressed

Level of stress of students which are aware of the mental health resources available to them (*N*=137)
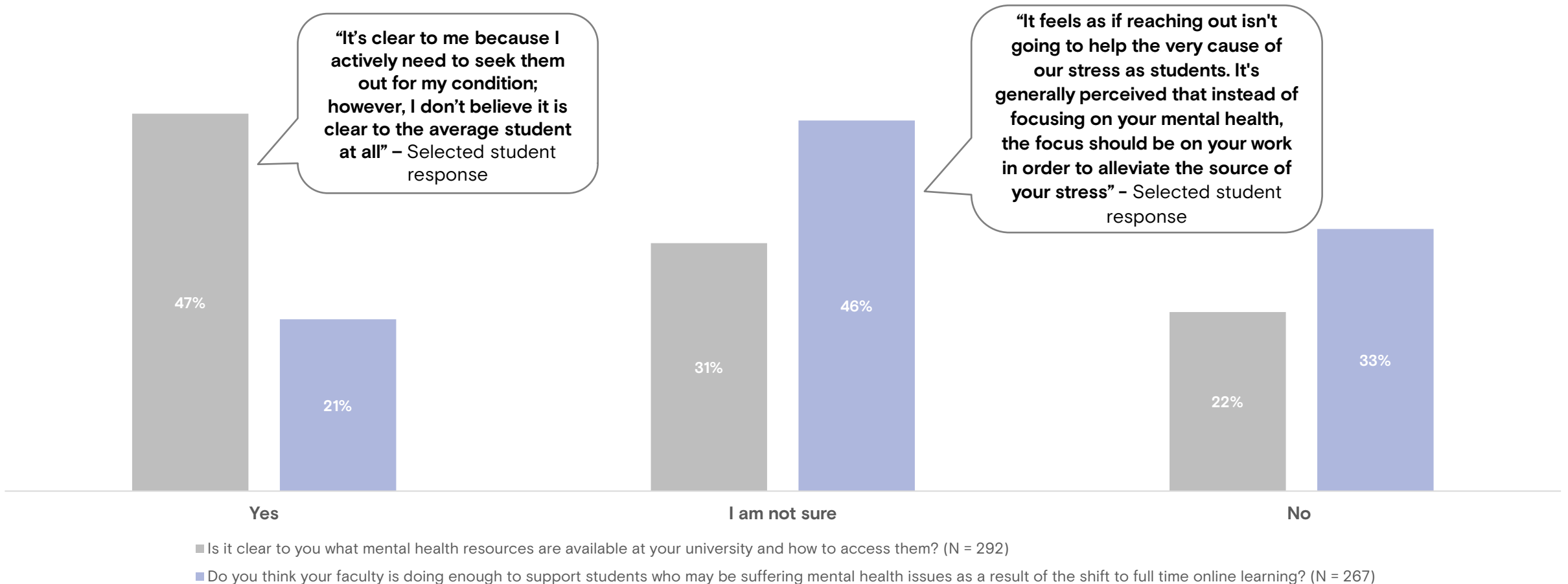
1% 7%
24%
21%
47%
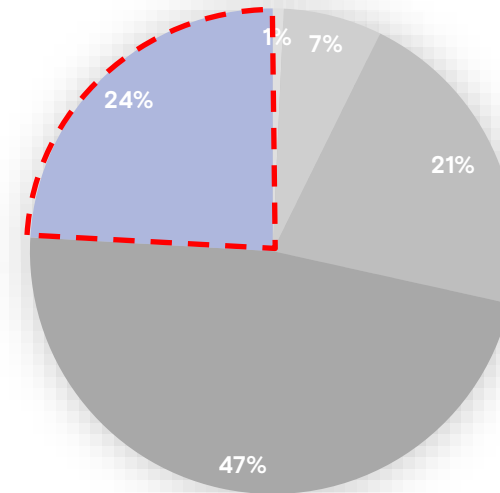
■ not stressed at all ■ a little bit of stress ■ moderate ■ stressed ■ very stressed

Accessing mental health resources could provide students with support to cope with the normal stresses of life, which is defined as a benefit of positive mental health[1].

A significant number of students were uncertain or unaware of the availability and accessibility of mental health resources.

"It's clear to me because I actively need to seek them out for my condition; however, I don't believe it is clear to the average student at all" – Selected student response

"It feels as if reaching out isn't going to help the very cause of our stress as students. It's generally perceived that instead of focusing on your mental health, the focus should be on your work in order to alleviate the source of your stress" – Selected student response

Yes — 47% / 21%

I am not sure — 31% / 46%

No — 22% / 33%

■ Is it clear to you what mental health resources are available at your university and how to access them? (N = 292)
■ Do you think your faculty is doing enough to support students who may be suffering mental health issues as a result of the shift to full time online learning? (N = 267)

Although there might not be a lack of resources available to architecture students, there may be barriers present to their accessibility.

Sources:
SONA Student Health & Wellbeing 2020

Students believed that improved faculty communication is a key way in addressing students' mental health.

Students tended to report that improved faculty led communication is the most wanted resource to support mental health…

… and there was reference made to a desire to see a more proactive approach of communication from faculties

Q: What additional resources would you like to see available at your university to support students mental health? *(N = 297)*
Please choose up to 3 resources.
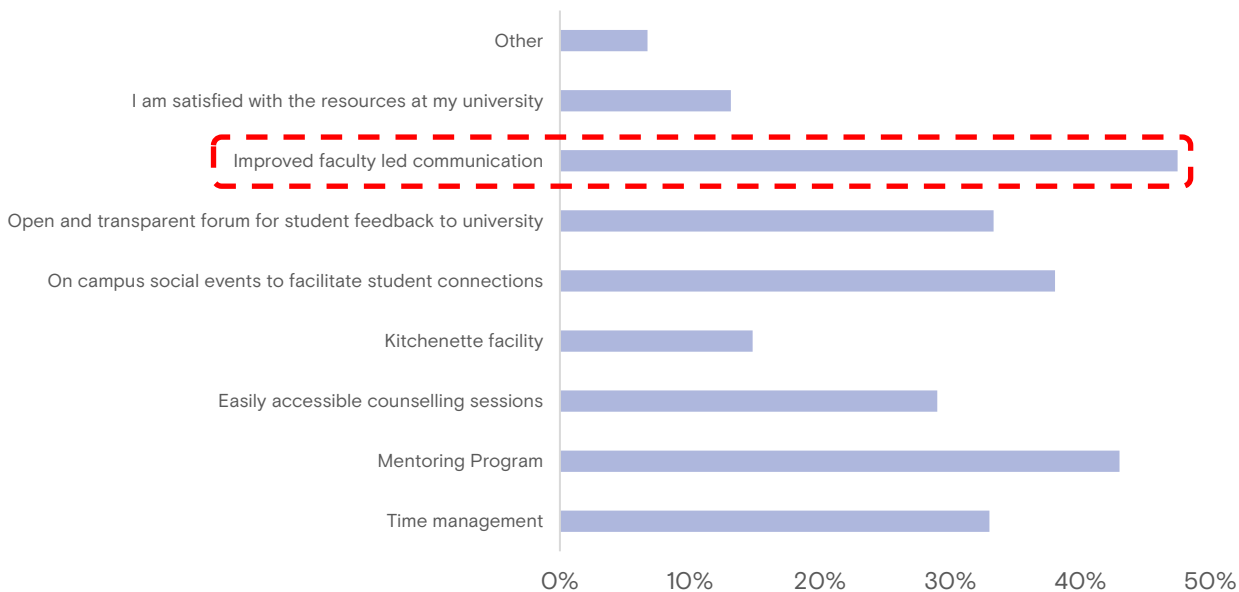
"**The thing is, people who are struggling are less likely to come out and seek help, perhaps figure out a system that reaches out rather than expect those who are struggling to come forward, it is difficult to break that cycle if there isn't a system that reaches out**"[1] – Selected survey response

A more proactive approach towards the communication of mental health resources may help break a cycle of inaccessibility of resources

A stigma that mental health is about mental illness may be stopping students from seeking help

Negative Mental Health

1 Negative Mental Health

2 Thinking that resources are only for those with a mental health illness

3 Not seeking help

4 Feeling unaware and uncertain of what they can do to feel better

5 Increasing negative mental health

Increasing time where help is not retrieved

"I don't think they are doing anything, there is a stigma around architecture that if you can't handle the stress of university then you aren't cut out for the industry, when in reality university is not like the real world at all." – Selected survey response

Are faculties communicating resources for mental *wellness* rather than mental *illness*?

Heads of Schools of 8 Australian universities were asked how their faculty supports students in addressing issues of mental health specifically within the architecture faculty

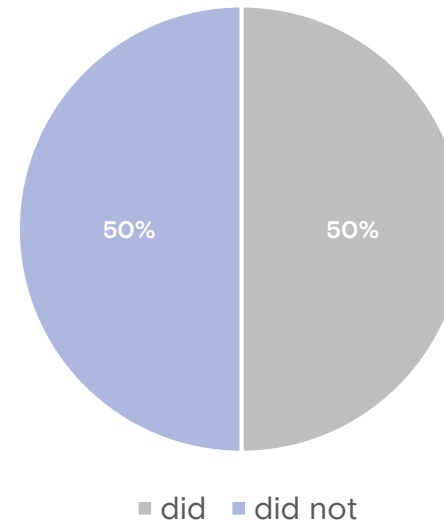**How many of the responses discussed mental health in terms of prevention rather than intervention?**

37%

63%

■ did ■ did not
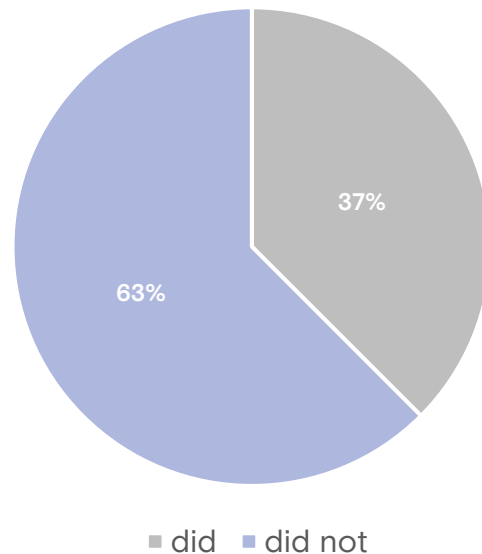
How many of the responses indicated a proactive approach towards mental health? Rather than – the student seeks out themselves?
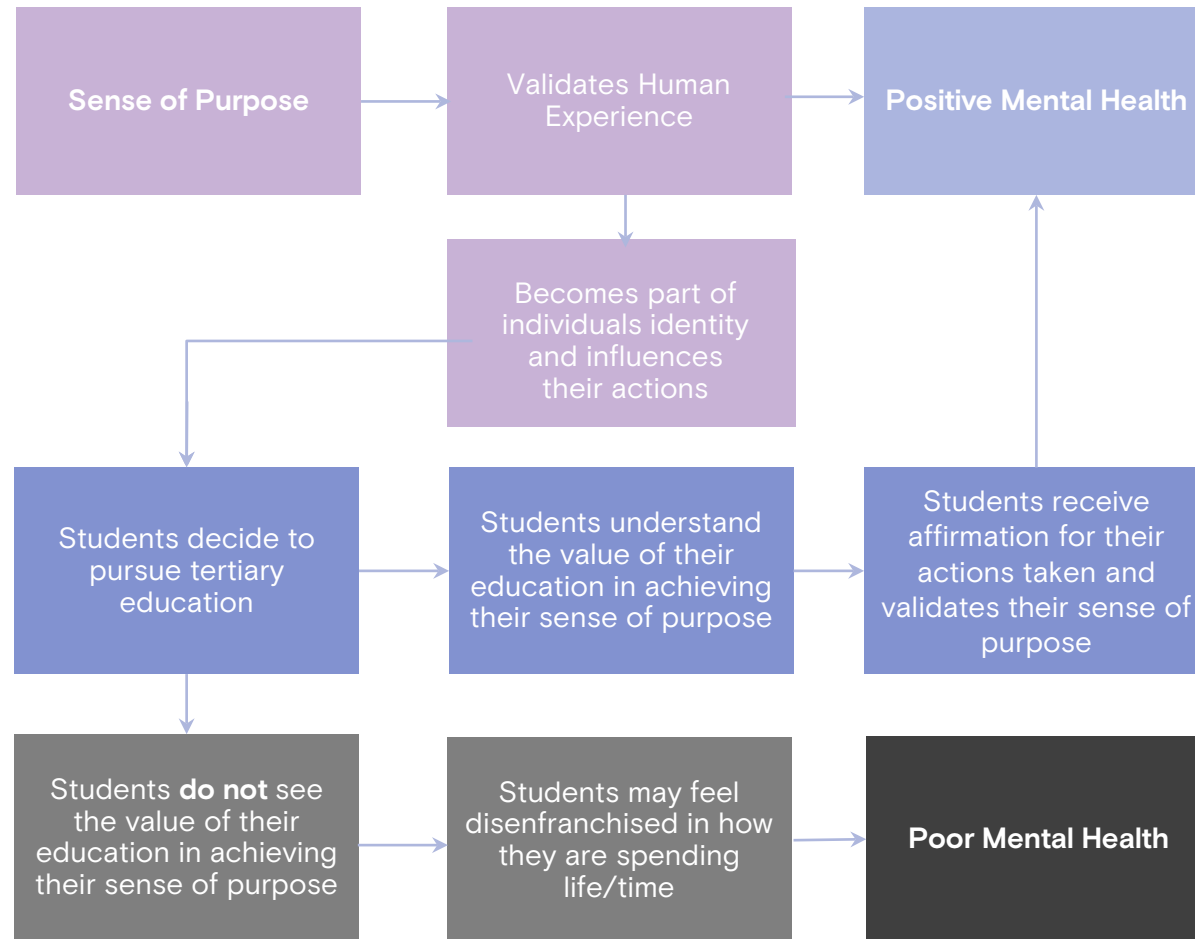

50% 50%

■ did ■ did not

Could communicating mental health resources for *wellness* rather than *illness* assist in reducing the stigma around proactively seeking help?

Sources:
1. SONA 2020 Heads of Schools Survey

The Perceived Value of Architectural Education

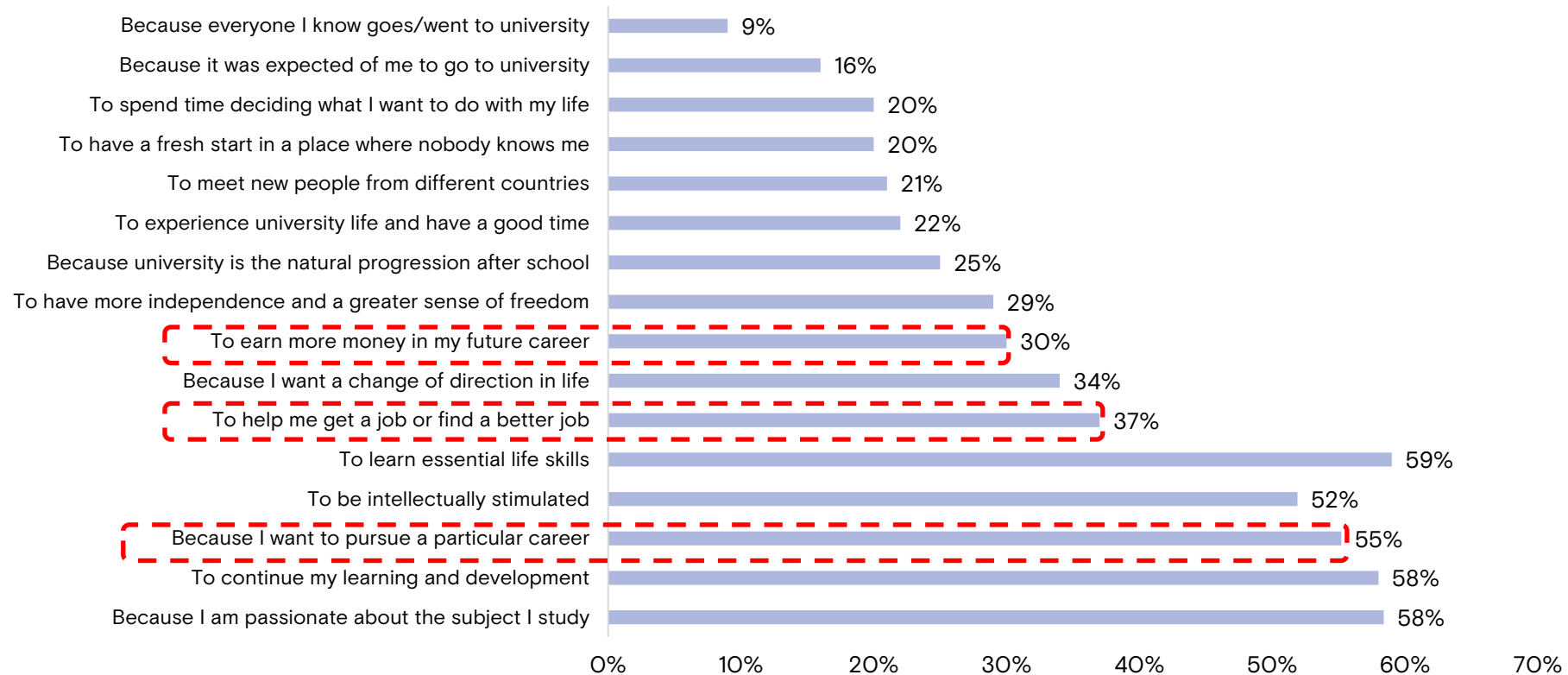# The perceived Value of Education assists in affirming an individual's sense of purpose[1].


```
Sense of Purpose → Validates Human Experience → Positive Mental Health
                            ↓
                   Becomes part of
                   individuals identity
                   and influences
                   their actions
                   ↓
Students decide to → Students understand → Students receive
pursue tertiary       the value of their    affirmation for their
education             education in achieving actions taken and
                      their sense of purpose validates their sense of
                                             purpose
↓
Students do not see → Students may feel → Poor Mental Health
the value of their    disenfranchised in how
education in achieving they are spending
their sense of purpose life/time
```

Sources:
1.   'Meaning and Positive Psychology,' Reach Out Australia, *ReachOut.com*, 2021, https://schools.au.reachout.com/articles/meaning-and-positive-psychology

Employability and finding a job are linked to key reasons for students deciding to go to university or contributing elements to 'sense of purpose'[1]

What are/were your most important reasons for wanting to go to university?

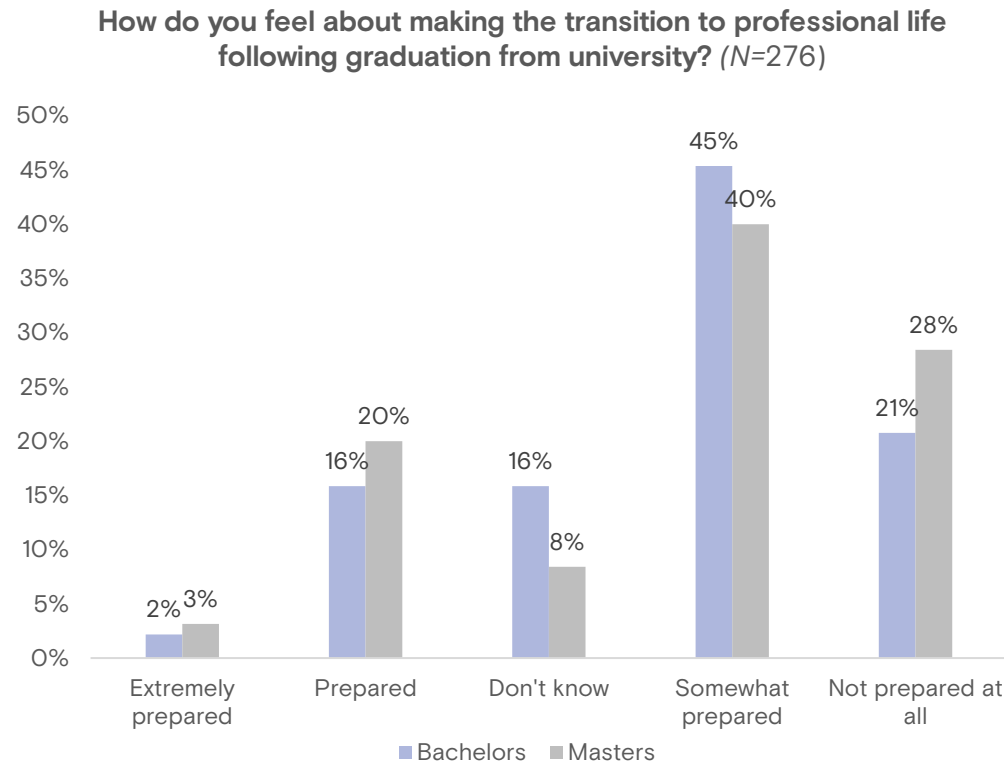| Reason	%
Because everyone I know goes/went to university	9%
Because it was expected of me to go to university	16%
To spend time deciding what I want to do with my life	20%
To have a fresh start in a place where nobody knows me	20%
To meet new people from different countries	21%
To experience university life and have a good time	22%
Because university is the natural progression after school	25%
To have more independence and a greater sense of freedom	29%
To earn more money in my future career	30%
Because I want a change of direction in life	34%
To help me get a job or find a better job	37%
To learn essential life skills	59%
To be intellectually stimulated	52%
Because I want to pursue a particular career	55%
To continue my learning and development	58%
Because I am passionate about the subject I study	58%

Sources:
1. 'Why do students go to university and how do they choose?" Bhardwa Seeta, *Times Higher Education*, June 6, 2017 (*N* = 62,366, 65 universities around the world*)* https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/news/why-do-students-go-university-and-how-do-they-choose-which-one.

This link between student's mental health and their sense of purpose is problematic when student's lose confidence in their education being able to support it.

- A key factor for students to pursuing tertiary education is to gain employment.

- Overall, less than 20% of students feel prepared to extremely prepared for profession life[1].

- When students lose confidence in their education, in preparing them for the transition to professional life, this endangers their sense of purpose.

How do you feel about making the transition to professional life following graduation from university? *(N=276)*

Bachelors   Masters

"It feels as if I have very little to offer as a graduate or a student to a studio" –
Selected Masters Student Response

Students reported a demand for practical job skills to improve their employability.

The top reasons universally cited by of participants for not feeling job ready was an unclear understanding of expectations on graduates (17.8%) and documentation practice (16.8%)[1].

Which of the following options do you think might allow you to feel more prepared? *(N=270)*
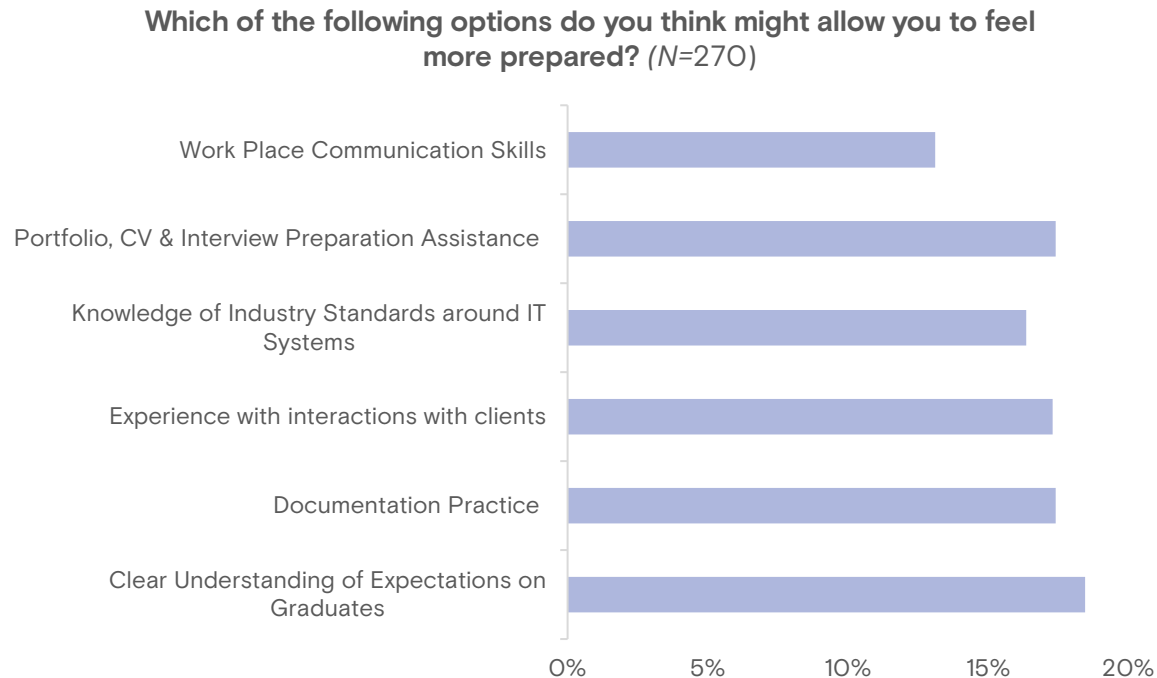
"I am fortunate enough to have worked in the industry for my entire degree, which has meant I see how poorly the course prepares students for professional life, there is obviously still a place for the abstract and creative but there needs to be an implementation of skills that will directly assist students, <u>like teaching documentation and standards, not just expecting students to work it out for themselves</u>" – Selected Student Response

"Focus more on what is expected in <u>real life practice</u> instead of just asking us to produce Picasso stuff to just satisfy some of the lecturers" – Selected Student Response

"<u>More focused and detailed understanding of the architectural details and how to build things</u>, not just touching on it without care of the student understanding or not" – Selected Student Response

Students tend to report that learning practical skills that prepare them for practice is a requirement for their education.

Should students be feeling this way?

"Students go to university with the expectation that it will bolster their prospects in life and opportunities to get a well-paying job. It is not an unreasonable expectations, but it risks overshadowing the other functions of education, namely nurturing well-rounded, passionate and worldly citizens" [1]

"In the face of concerns about employability, we should not simply submit to the demands of the market, aka, 'the real world'. We cannot as a discipline lose the widespread desire to work towards the social good" [1]

Sources:
1.   Keefer Dunn, 'Against Employability' *Berkeley Architecture Journal* no.1006 (2018): 117-124

How can the architectural community improve the mental wellbeing of its students?

Summary of key findings

- Studio culture is a key contributing factor to students' mental health.
- Online learning has negatively impacted studio culture and has made it even more important for students to manage the social aspect of work-life balance.
- A more inclusive and collaborative environment amongst peers could be facilitated with peer review of work, cross collaboration across tutor groups and casual catch-ups and could aid in improving studio culture.
- The occurrence of "all-nighters" amongst students could be driving a studio culture which enables a 24 hour work ethic and negatively impacting students' mental wellbeing.

- A significant number of students were uncertain or unaware of the availability and accessibility of mental health resources. Although there might not be a lack of resources available to architecture students, there may be barriers present to their accessibility.
- Studio culture may be dismissive of mental health issues and stigmatising the use of mental health resources, and students reported desires of improved faculty led communication.
- Faculties may not be effectively communicating resources for mental *wellness* rather than *illness*

- The perceived Value of Education assists in affirming an individual's sense of purpose
- Employability and finding a job are linked to key reasons for students deciding to go to university and contributing elements to their 'sense of purpose'
- Students tend to report that learning practical skills that prepare them for practice is a requirement for their education.

What Next?

1) How can we promote healthy work/study habits?

- What steps can be taken by students and faculty to promote a collaborative studio culture?
- How can we equip students with the skills to better manage expectations?
- How can this be achieved in the physical and digital space?
- Are there policies that can assist in fostering these habits?

2) How can we destigmatize Mental Wellbeing in the Architectural Community?

- How can conversations about mental wellness be normalized within teaching?

- How can we encourage students to be more proactive about recognizing and addressing their mental health?

- How can we proactively communicate resources for mental wellness rather than illness?

3) How can we instill students with confidence in themselves and the value of their education?

- Is architectural education lacking or is it more about communicating the value of architectural education?

- Do the expectations of Graduates from Practices acknowledge the holistic value of an architectural education?

- Do students need to focus more on learning than employability?

4) How can the relationship between the profession and architectural education be strengthened to support student wellbeing?

- What do we believe the role of an Architect is and will be?

- Do job description focus primarily on practical skills such as documentation, drafting and software use?

- Does the profession need to further support and embrace the unique and diverse skill sets of students?

- What responsibility do practices have to teach graduates?

- Should there be greater consideration for life-long learning?'

- How can architectural practice set an example?

https://aiaforms.wufoo.com/forms/m1f6dydk141a1gn/

SONA wants to hear from you!

Mental Wellbeing Resources

Lifeline: https://www.lifeline.org.au/

Beyond Blue: https://www.beyondblue.org.au/

The Architect's Mental Wellbeing Forum Toolkit

Headspace: https://www.headspace.com/covid-19

Heads Up: https://www.headsup.org.au/

R U OK? Day: https://www.ruok.org.au/

Open your World: https://www.wellbeingsa.sa.gov.au/

Your Local GP (for Medicare funded referrals to specialists)

Your University Counselling Services (Most universities offer this for free)

Contributors

SONA National President 2021 and Co-Chair of SONA National Advocacy Working Group, Leanne Haidar

SONA National President 2022 and Co-Chair of SONA National Advocacy Working Group, Nicole Mesquita-Mendes

SONA Representative of Griffith University 2021 and SONA National Advocacy Working Group member, Aiswarya Nair

SONA Representative of The University of New South Wales 2021 SONA National Advocacy Working Group member, Ashley Dube

SONA Representative of Monash University 2021, Jemima Savage

SONA Representative of University of Adelaide 2021, Nhi Trinh

SONA Member, ACT 2021, Noah Watson

Australian Institute of Architects National Membership Programs Officer, Madelynn Jenkins

Australian Institute of Architects National Membership Services Manager, Claudia McCarthy

About SONA

SONA is the Student Organised Network for Architecture

The SONA Committee represent the interests of and advocate on behalf of student members of the Australian Institute of Architects.

W: **https://www.architecture.com.au/sona**
Instagram: **@sona_australia**

The views and opinions expressed within this report are those of the authors and not of the Australian Institute of Architects represented by SONA, the Student Organised Network for Architecture. Similarly the Australian Institute of Architects makes no representation about the conclusions drawn or the way in which the collated data has been interpreted by the authors.