
The National Standard for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)



Mental Health Commission of Canada
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1. What is a standard?

A standard is an expected level of performance that is considered by an authority, an expert, or by general consent to be an approved model. It stipulates minimum requirements for the use, safety, and/or design of products, processes, and services. Standards are living documents, regularly revised and refreshed to address changing requirements. As part of CSA Group’s process of continuous improvement (and to ensure relevance), the standards it has developed are reviewed at least every five years. The National Standard for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students (the Standard) is unique due to its voluntary, flexible guidelines and because it is considered a “process.”

2. What is CSA Group?

[CSA Group](#) is a global organization dedicated to safety, social good, and sustainability. It is a leader in standards development and in testing, inspection, and certification around the world, including Canada, the U.S., Europe, and Asia.

3. What is the Standard?

The Standard provides voluntary guidelines to help post-secondary institutions develop policies, procedures, and practices that support, promote, and continually improve the mental health and well-being of students. The first of its kind in the world, its October 2020 release followed nearly two years of engagement and dialogue. Based on holistic and upstream¹ approaches, the Standard is meant to influence, shape, and guide post-secondary institutions in setting benchmarks — to help them measure success — for creating healthy and safe environments.

The Standard is adaptable for any post-secondary institution: each can decide what is achievable based on its specific situation, resources, and local context, and each can determine priorities based on the most pressing opportunity or challenge. Using a knowledge-informed framework, the Standard can serve as a platform for institutions’ key messages and priority setting while helping them to focus their energy and resources on assessing capacity and priorities. Because it is grounded on the principle of continuous improvement, regardless of where an institution starts, advancements in student mental health and well-being can be made over time.

4. Why was the Standard developed?

Addressing post-secondary student mental health is critical. Three out of four mental health problems begin by age 24, which includes the period when many are studying at the post-secondary level. The 2019 National College Health Assessment by the American College Health Association found that 52 per cent of post-secondary students in Canada felt so depressed that it was difficult to function (an increase from 46 per cent in 2016). About 69 per cent reported feeling overwhelmed by anxiety (up four per cent since 2016).

While many post-secondary institutions have implemented student mental health and well-being strategies, sharing knowledge-based best practices through a systematic, countrywide framework can lead to further benefits.

5. How can the Standard support institutions that are dealing with the impact of COVID-19?

The pandemic has heightened many of the mental health-related concerns students were already

¹ “Holistic approaches look beyond addressing individual mental health concerns. They consider the complex interplay between individual, interpersonal, institutional, community, and social system factors that shape mental health and well-being and can support or hinder one’s ability to flourish. Upstream approaches focus on the prevention of less than optimal mental health.”

facing, making it even more challenging for institutions to support them. To help institutions align with the Standard while acknowledging pandemic realities, the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) developed the [Starter Kit: For the National Standard of Canada for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students](#).

6. What benefits are available for institutions that align their efforts with the Standard?

Post-secondary institutions can leverage the Standard to reaffirm their commitment to creating a healthy and safe environment for their students.

The Standard's guidelines emphasize the following outcomes:

- more awareness around mental health and decrease mental illness-related stigma
- greater levels of relational connection and a sense of belonging within the learning community
- increased access to student supports on and off campus
- life and resiliency skills students can use at school, at work, and in daily life
- healthier and safer institutional environments
- improved opportunities for student success and flourishing

7. Who will be impacted by the Standard?

Post-secondary students, colleges, universities, polytechnic institutions, CECEPS, staff, faculty, administration, and campus unions will be directly impacted by the Standard. Indirect impacts related to improved student mental health and student success in post-secondary institutions are also expected within students' social networks and support environments, such as families, caregivers, faith-based groups, and other community members.

8. How does the Standard address the diverse needs of students?

The Standard promotes the involvement of every student, regardless of their ability, age, ancestry, culture, disability, ethnicity, family status, gender, gender expression, gender identity, geographic location, language (or linguistic background), marital status, nationality or national origin/place of origin, political beliefs or association, race, religion, religious beliefs or association, sex, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, source of income, student status, other relevant characteristics, or any and all intersections of these characteristics.

9. Who should implement the Standard?

The Standard is voluntary, and any college, university, institute, polytechnic or CEGEP could consider implementing it. Because it is based on a collective approach model, successful implementation will require input and feedback from students, staff, faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders. The process of implementing the Standard will likely be led and supported by the administrative office most concerned with student success.

10. How can I access the Standard?

Access your complimentary copy of the Standard (till October 2025) through the [CSA Group website](#). To download, create a CSA Store account and add it to your cart.

11. Is the Standard available in both official languages?

Yes. Both can be downloaded from the [CSA Group website](#), once you create a CSA Store account and add them to your cart.

12. If an institution wants to get involved, are additional supports and resources available?

Yes. The MHCC [website](#) includes regular updates with relevant project information and timely resources.

Visit the MHCC's Standard web page to

- [Access your copy of the Standard](#)
- [Download the Starter Kit](#)
- [Join the community to access supportive resources](#) (Create a separate account to access the CSA community, where related resources are available in the Centre for Outreach, Resources, and Engagement (CORE)).

13. Where should post-secondary institutions start?

Starting points will vary depending on an institution's circumstances and priorities. Some examples include:

- reviewing policies with a mental health lens
- setting up a task force to look at opportunities
- using the sample internal audit tool (Annex A in the Standard) to assess gaps
- narrowing in on a priority area
- focusing on getting support and buy-in
- allocating resources to start the work

14. Does the Standard take a “whole-campus approach” (involving faculty, staff, and students)?

The Standard promotes shared responsibility in student mental health, which means that all members of the post-secondary community have a role to play. That said, the focus of the Standard is the mental health and well-being of post-secondary students. We encourage institutions to also consider the [National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace](#),² which can be implemented simultaneously with or before the Standard for post-secondary students.

15. Is the Standard voluntary?

Yes, unless it is being used in legislation or regulations.

16. Who funded this project?

The MHCC led the Standard project, in collaboration with CSA Group. Funding was also provided by Bell Let's Talk, The Rossy Foundation, the RBC Foundation, and Health Canada.

17. How does the Standard differ from a mental health strategy?

A mental health strategy provides a road map on how to improve current programs, develop new ones, and address existing gaps. The Standard offers a national framework and measurements to benchmark such a strategy. For example, in implementing the Standard an institution may identify a gap around access to mental health support. Its mental health strategy may then set a plan for closing that gap. The Standard can also inform an existing mental health strategy to ensure that all elements of student mental health are being considered.

² The Workplace Standard was released in 2013 to help employers in Canada build psychologically safe and healthy workplaces for staff and volunteers.

18. Will the Standard be referenced in legislation, regulation, licensing, and accreditation?

Much like the Workplace Standard, this Standard is voluntary. It is possible that this Standard will be referenced in future legislation, regulation, licensing, and accreditation.

19. How will the Standard ensure that students have the support they need when they need it?

By itself, the Standard cannot ensure that students have the support they need when they need it. This result can only be achieved through sustained efforts by the entire post-secondary community. The Standard offers a framework to ensure that institutions know what is expected (at a minimum) to support the mental health and well-being of their students.

20. Is this Standard *only* for students living with a mental illness?

The Standard applies to all students throughout their time at a post-secondary institution, whether they are living with a mental illness, have not yet experienced a mental illness, are in recovery, or are currently experiencing optimal mental health. It also applies to students who are on or off campus, distance learners, international and domestic, living with disabilities, etc.

21. Who was involved in developing the Standard?

For nearly two years, the MHCC worked with partners and leaders in the mental health sector in various engagement efforts, such as developing research and holding dialogues across the country. Over 7,500 stakeholders were involved, including students, administrators, people with lived and living experience of mental illness, post-secondary institutions, and service providers. Informed by these broad engagements (e.g., surveys, dialogues, a public review), a technical committee of 35 experts created the content for the Standard.

22. How were post-secondary students defined and involved in the development of the Standard?

Post-secondary students were defined as individuals enrolled in a post-secondary educational institution. This baseline group could have included emerging adults between 16 and 25, mature students, and returning students. Others may also have included those who were

- transitioning into post-secondary phases (first year)
- progressing through their post-secondary tenure (intermediate year)
- moving beyond the post-secondary experience (graduates, including graduate students with typically higher age ranges than students from the baseline group).

Post-secondary students were represented through various student organizations' participation in the executive advisory committee; the Technical Committee; and through community dialogues, student surveys, and focus groups. A guiding principle was student-centredness, highlighting the importance of involving students in all phases of the Standard.

23. Will faculty and staff need to become mental health “professionals” for students?

No. The Standard recommends tools, supports, and resources that enable faculty and staff to promote and encourage psychological health and safety on campus. Post-secondary community leaders have an opportunity to be agents of change by aligning their work with the Standard, which provides a framework of best practices and continuous improvement for creating and sustaining psychologically safe and healthy environments.

24. We already have programs and support services at our institution. How can we avoid

duplication?

A scoping review conducted in 2018 (see Question 26) highlighted some of the many outstanding programs and promising practices used by post-secondary institutions, which are referenced in the Standard. The Standard's evidence-informed best practices are meant to complement existing services, programs, and frameworks rather than duplicate them.

If you know of any exemplary practices, programs, and supports, we invite you to share them with us at studentstandard@mentalhealthcommission.ca.

25. How was the Standard developed?

The following steps were taken:

- An executive advisory committee, a project team, and a technical committee were formed to provide oversight and planning and to develop the Standard.
- A [scoping review](#) of the current literature was completed to define the current state of post-secondary students' and institutions' experiences of mental health and well-being. This included identifying new and emerging strategies and best practices, both nationally and internationally.
- A series of countrywide dialogues were conducted, and various public engagement activities were held to encourage input and feedback.
- The results of the scoping review and the dialogues were included in a working document, which provided guidance to the CSA Group Technical Committee for developing the Standard.
- The Technical Committee created the Standard using a consensus-based approach during six (two-day) meetings over a two year period. Formal communications between meetings supplemented this process.
- In the fall of 2019, a draft version of the Standard in both official languages was made available for public input over a 60-day period. All interested parties and individuals in Canada were invited to review and comment.
- The final version of the Standard was published in October 2020.

26. What is the Scoping Review of Current Literature?

A research team, under the guidance of Dr. Heather Stuart at Queen's University, conducted a literature review and examined current best practices in post-secondary institutions. This information was provided to the Technical Committee responsible for developing the Standard.

27. What is the Technical Committee?

The Technical Committee is a diverse team of about 35 experts and stakeholders consisting of students, family, administrators, faculty, staff, and union leaders from colleges, universities, institutes, polytechnics, and CEGEPS. They were responsible for developing and authoring the Standard.³

28. How will the success of this initiative be measured?

Success will initially be measured by the extent of uptake and implementation. The Standard is supported by a commitment to continuous improvement so that advancements can be made to student mental health and well-being over time. The Standard also suggests that post-secondary institutions develop an evaluation plan that includes strategies for disseminating and sharing results

³ The Standard includes a list of Technical Committee members.

within the post-secondary community and broader stakeholders (as appropriate). It is important that post-secondary institutions celebrate progress on the action plan.

29. Will an institution that implements the Standard earn a credential?

No credential is available for implementing the Standard, which is not the same as an accreditation. Institutions are not obligated to report their efforts, and they have complete control of and autonomy over how they implement the Standard.

30. How can I contribute?

You can reach the MHCC team overseeing the work of the Standard at studentstandard@mentalhealthcommission.ca.

31. How can I get more information?

Go to the MHCC's National Standard for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students [web page](#).



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