

brain in hand

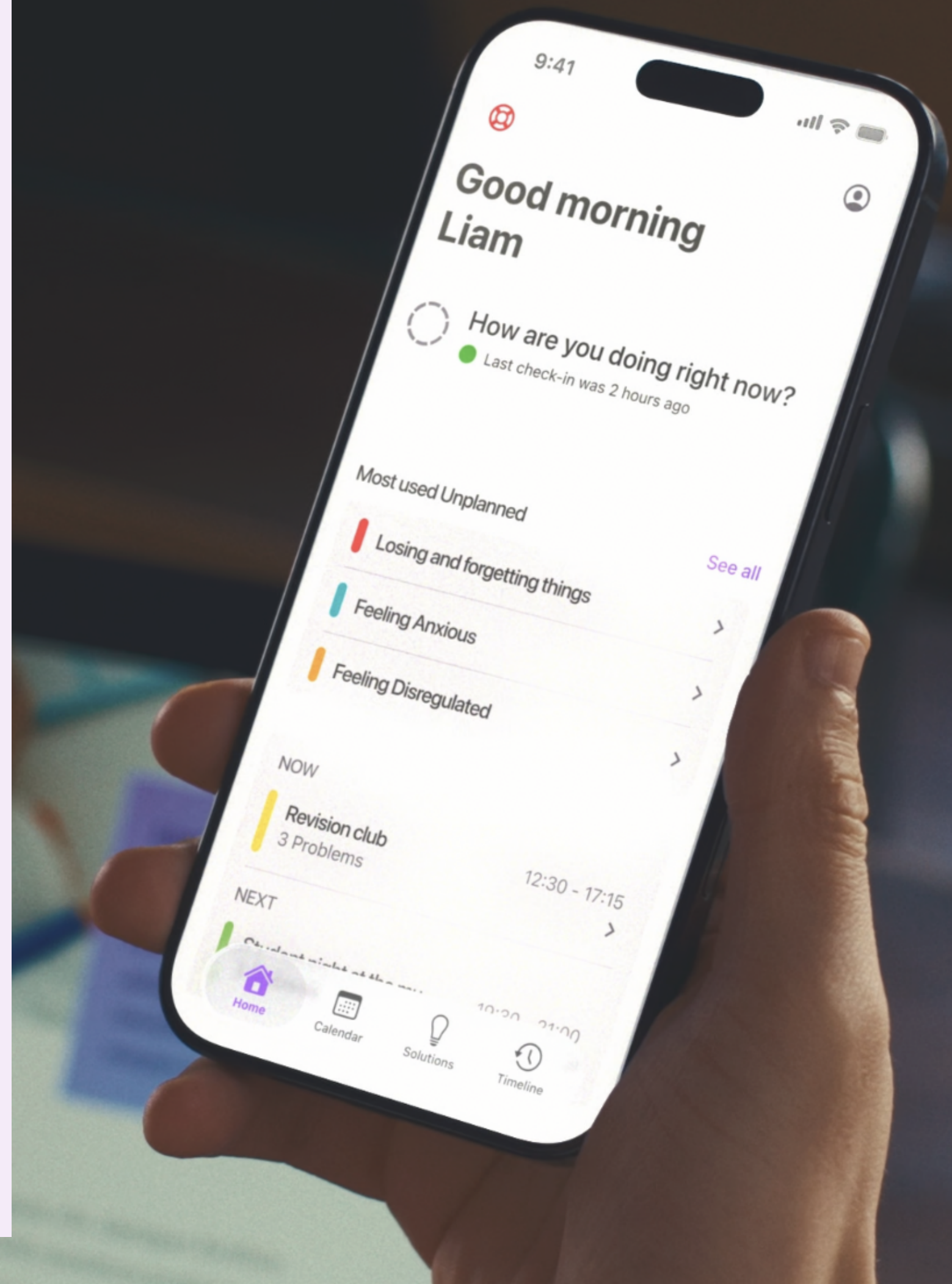
The Impact of Brain in Hand: Higher Education

This Brain in Hand report presents the impact of the Brain in Hand digital coaching platform for higher education students between October 2025 and January 2026, based on a sample of 163.

With a focus on academic success and student retention, it brings together impact data and a theory of change to show how support for mental health and organisation helps students meet the academic demands of university life. The report also highlights how timely, personalised support in moments that matter can enable students to stay engaged, progress in their studies and achieve their potential.

March 2026

Prepared by: Brain in Hand Research Team



Executive Summary

Recent evidence on the impact of Brain in Hand (BiH) shows that structured digital support tools combined with personalised guidance deliver **measurable benefits for student continuation, engagement and wellbeing**, especially for neurodivergent students and those managing anxiety or executive function challenges. Across a higher education cohort, the majority of students needing support reported that digital tools helped them **succeed in their studies, enhanced their overall university experience, and increased their confidence in completing their course**. These outcomes align strongly with institutional priorities around retention, progression and positive student experience.

What differentiates this approach from other digital tools in the market - such as task planners or study-skill apps that primarily focus on organisation, scheduling and productivity - is integrated personalised support. While many tools help students break tasks down, prioritise work and reduce overwhelm, **BiH combines these digital features with access to tailored guidance, contextual strategies, and real-time human support when students need it**. This blend supports students not just to plan, but to understand and manage the cognitive and emotional barriers that often prevent engagement.

Students using BiH **reported improvement in a range of transferrable skills, including self-awareness, emotional regulation, adaptive planning and confidence in academic and social contexts**. Reported outcomes included **better attendance, greater participation in group activities and placements, and increased ability to navigate campus life independently** (74%+ for those needing support).

Preventative support was key: students were better able to manage transitions and stressful periods before challenges escalated, resulting in **fewer crisis events and reduced demand on specialist services**. Overall, the evidence indicates that BiH strengthens student outcomes by supporting earlier intervention, building key skills for independent learning, and sustaining engagement through transitions and pressure points across the student journey. This may have further positive implications for institutional performance.

6 ways Brain in Hand helps students overcome barriers to learning and build independence



83% say they are more likely to finish their course as a result of having Brain in Hand



85% say they feel more confident travelling to and from their place of study



83% say they feel better able to manage stressful periods during the academic year



83% say they feel that they are succeeding in their studies



74% say they attend more classes and lectures as a result

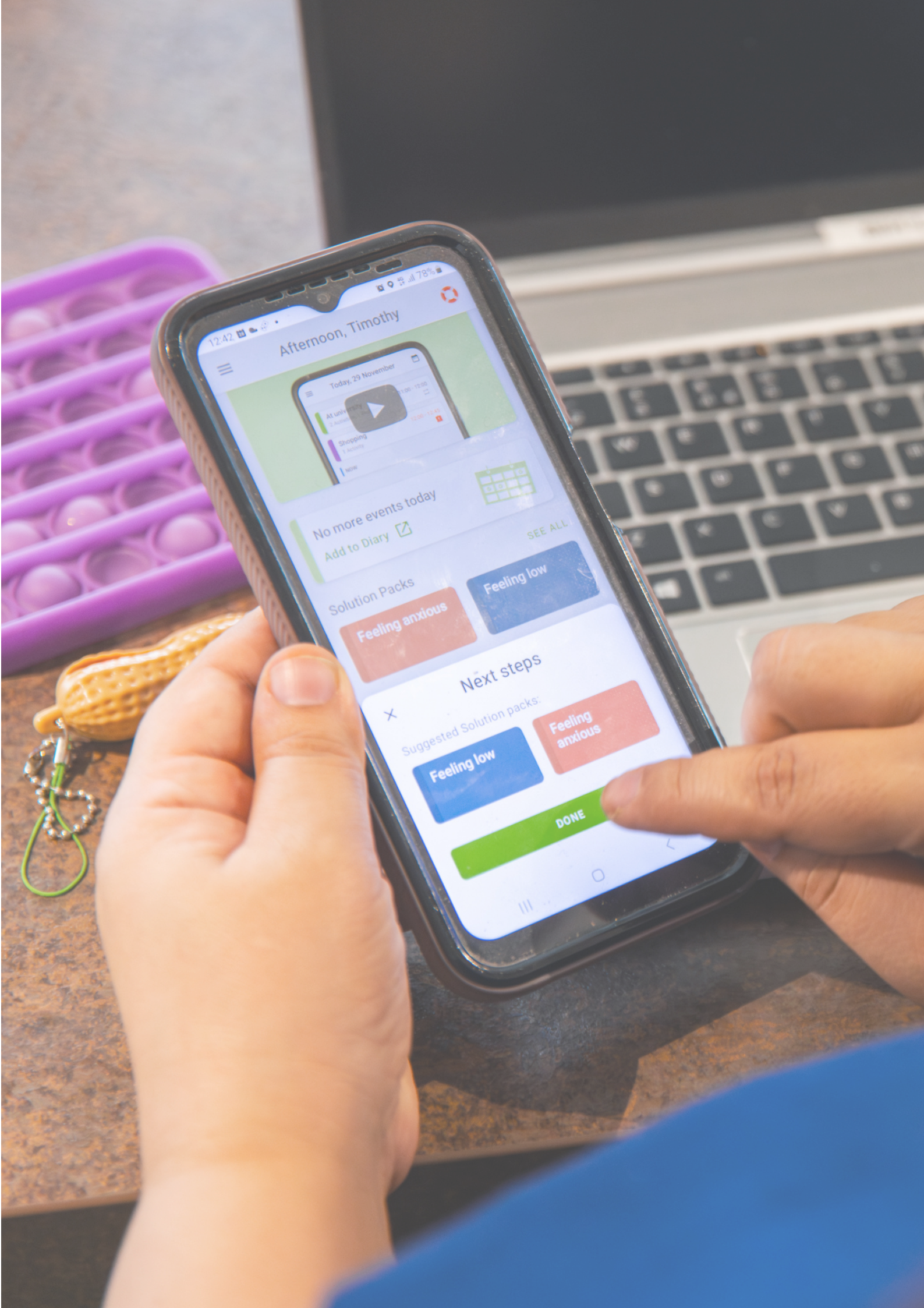


79% say BiH helps them to better manage their time

Percentages are calculated for the number of users who needed Brain in Hand to help them with one of the support areas listed as not all students interviewed needed help in all these areas.

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Higher Education Students Data - Data Collection

Every quarter since February 2024 the Brain in Hand research team has sent out a survey to users of Brain in Hand (BiH). Over time the survey questions have changed as we have understood more about how BiH supports students and the needs of both our users and the people who support them.

Our [February impact report in 2025](#) had a focus on higher education where we shared insights from surveys of over 400 students and an in-depth interview with a 51 year old PhD student who used BiH to manage overwhelm and anxiety to return to her studies.

One year later we are again focusing on higher education, but with a new set of student-specific questions that were implemented in October 2025. The updated questions explore where students feel they need support, how BiH supports them in these areas, and where students feel support is not needed. This report presents findings from October 2025 to January 2026, during which 163 higher education students responded.

Restricting the data analysis to these four months also aligns with the improvements to the BiH service since this time last year. These include new solution packs with richer content, improved calendar navigation a 5-point check-in scale with increased tags, as outlined in Box 2.

Box 1. What is Brain in Hand

Brain in Hand is a personalised digital application that helps students manage anxiety, improve organisation, and build confidence and independence in higher education. Brain in Hand is listed as assistive technology under Specialist Equipment within DSA (Student Loans Company and SAAS). It supports students with autism, ADHD, and mental health challenges.

Tool	Description
Calendar	Users can build a schedule with personalised events, problems, and effective solutions.
Solution packs	Access to a range of possible solutions relating to a wide range of day-to-day challenges. Brain in Hand users can also create their own solution packs tailored to their own experiences.
5-point check in scale	App check-ins that allow users to reflect on their mood and notice unmet needs. Option to add notes, and tags for self-reflection.
Individualised coaching	Personalised coaching sessions underpinned by a strengths based, solution focused approach that enables users to move towards their goals. Users develop unique strategies for real-world impact.
On-demand support	Access to on-demand human, solution-focused support accessible 24/7, via phone, or SMS for difficult moments.

Higher Education Students Data

- Sample and Approach

Within the group of 163 Higher Education students that responded to the survey, 68% (111/163) reported having a mental health difficulty and most reported being autistic and/or having ADHD (88%; 144/163). Of the neurodivergent group, 40% were both autistic and had ADHD (referred to as AuDHD in the following text), 40% were autistic only and 7% ADHD only.

Further demographic information on the respondents indicated that most who provided a response identified as female (60%), while 24% identified as male. Just over half were aged 18-22 years of age (58%), but there was also a significant proportion of mature students with 26% aged 30 or over.

Only 6% (9/163) of those surveyed found that BiH was not helpful for them. This small group were asked a different set of questions to better understand why BiH did not work for them and how they could be better supported. In calculating the metrics, this group was included in the analysis as those responding ‘No’ to any impact, and when determining the numbers who needed support in a specific area, the same ratio for those that found BiH helpful is applied to this group when adding them to the denominator. Annexe 1 summarises all the responses and how these calculations were conducted for each metric, with the main text focusing only on the main outcome percentages.

The survey questions are not mandatory so the denominators for some of the metrics will vary due to dropouts or non-responses. A few questions were added in November 2025 so for these the denominators are also smaller.

The impact of BiH in higher education is presented not only in term of metrics, but also through demonstrating how BiH supports students. In the latter case, more historical data (since April 2025) is drawn upon as this provides a richer qualitative database. Recent qualitative feedback (February 2026) is also included if the narrative tells a particularly compelling story. All the quotes are provided with the survey date and the diagnosis and higher education institution if known. Insights from an in-depth interview conducted in March 2025 is also shared as an example of how BiH supports in academic continuation and helping navigate key moments that matter across university and during a placement year.

“There was a time during university when I was really struggling to manage my anxiety and keep on top of everything. The transition to independent living and the demands of academic life felt overwhelming. I found it especially hard to cope with unexpected changes in routine and social situations, which often left me feeling anxious and stuck. That’s when I started using Brain in Hand, and it made a huge difference. I used the app to build a library of strategies that I could turn to whenever I felt anxious or unsure. I added reminders, step-by-step guides for situations I found difficult, like preparing for presentations or navigating busy social spaces and I tracked my mood to spot patterns in how I was feeling.

One of the most helpful features was the on-demand support. When things got too much, I could reach out and speak to someone who understood. They didn’t just listen, they helped me work through the situation using the strategies I’d already set up in the app. Just knowing that support was there gave me a real sense of security. I also had regular sessions with a Brain in Hand coach, which helped me reflect on what was working and what I could improve. Together, we set goals and adapted my strategies as I grew more confident. Using Brain in Hand helped me feel more in control of my life. I started attending more classes, felt less anxious in social situations, and even began to enjoy things I used to avoid. It wasn’t just about managing challenges, it was about building confidence and independence.” [Autistic student at Liverpool John Moores University, May 2025 survey]

Box 2. Improvements to the Brain in Hand app

Month/Year	Change to the service	Description
July 2025	Richer solutions and images for solution packs	New solution packs with increased personalisation
Sept 2025	Custom solution packs	Users can create their own solution packs
	Re-using solutions across solution packs	Users can re-use ready-made solutions or solutions they created themselves in multiple packs
Oct 2025	Increased check-in tags to provide more context	Increased selection of tags in the check-in tool
Nov 2025	5-point check-in scale	A shift from a 3-point traffic light to a 5-point scale that will provide nuance to check-ins
Dec 2025	Solutions library	A new section in the app where users can browse and search all solution packs and individual solutions
Jan 2026	Improved calendar navigation	Users can easily scroll through the week

Academic Success and Retention

For students who have embarked on higher education the key areas of success for them are succeeding in their studies, having a better university experience and feeling that they will be able to complete their course.

These three outcomes are also key priorities for the higher education institutions themselves.

Most students that were given BiH needed support to have positive outcomes at university. BiH was able to help more than 80% of them to achieve success.

Overall, **83% reported that BiH had helped them achieve more to some extent.**



Succeeding in their studies 87% of students said they needed BiH to help them succeed in their studies, and of these, BiH helped 83%	<i>“Brain in hand helps me manage my day to day schedule so I don’t get overwhelmed and behind on uni work” [Autistic student at University of Kent, April 2025 survey]</i> <i>“Feeling on top of deadlines and breaking down tasks really helped me focus” [Student with anxiety and OCD at Exeter University, August 2025 survey]</i> <i>“I have been able to focus more in lectures, manage my work loads and work on ways to better my note taking during lectures.” [AuDHD student, University of Brighton, August 2025 survey]</i> [Example of how BiH has helped] <i>“I don’t have to use my extensions for assignments” [Bipolar student at Sheffield Hallam University, April 2025 survey]</i> <i>“Has helped me by creating solution packs around motivation and help me understand what I need to do to succeed” [Student with borderline personality disorder with depression and anxiety studying at the Open University, July 2025 survey]</i>
A better university experience 89% of students said they needed BiH to help them have a better university experience, and of these, BiH helped 81%	<i>“Brain in Hand has helped me set goals for myself to try and accomplish during my time at university. I’ve used it for both academic purposes such as preparing and reading ahead for classes and for putting myself outside my comfort zone and attempting to socialise. As such, it has enabled me to be more proactive and encouraged me at times I’ve felt down, boosting my self-esteem.” [Queen Mary University of London, August 2025 survey]</i>
Completing their course 82% of students said they needed BiH to help them have a better university experience, and of these, BiH helped 83%	<i>“BiH helps me feel less alone and more supported in my challenges, and therefore more likely to finish the course.” [Autistic and self-diagnosed ADHD, University of Warwick, May 2025 survey]</i> <i>“I was struggling with the end of my time at university as it was an overwhelming process, [coach name] helped me in our coaching sessions to really route out what was hindering me and helped me keep on track to get a First at uni and get a job straight out of graduation!” [AuDHD student, Nottingham Trent University, September 2025 survey].</i>

Academic Success and Retention

Positive HE outcomes are achieved by helping BiH users fully participate, keep on track and engage in their studies and university activities. These can be through very practical day-to-day support in organisational skills and time-management, using features of the app such as the diary for planning and solution packs, for when task initiation becomes a blocker. These processes were often supported by coaches, to develop key skills such as breaking down tasks into smaller chunks to manage workload, setting realistic targets, and helping users to implement other supportive tools.

It can also work through supporting social interactions - creating content in the app to plan for events and support interactions in social settings, including conversations with new people. This is often supported during coaching sessions, and involves talking through the barriers in social settings and what users want to achieve and focus on, so they approach these interactions with confidence.

Organisational skills: Using practical tools such as checklists, routines, reminders and prioritisation methods to keep track of tasks, responsibilities and key information.

Time management: Developing strategies to chunk down time, visual cues in the calendar supporting planning, and the ability to manage multiple deadlines.

Socialising: Preparation for an event beforehand could include information about a location, identification of 'safe spaces', how to get there, timings, items needed, and strategies if the event feels too overwhelming.

Organisational skills 97% of students said they needed BiH to help them feel more organised, and of these, BiH helped 73%	“The coaching has been most helpful in supporting me to prioritise my study in order of deadlines, break things down into manageable chunks, set realistic targets and times to study, and achieve more because I was more organised. The result is that I managed to get most assignments in on time, and I didn't get overwhelmed and burned out.” [AuDHD student at University of Portsmouth, February 2026 survey] “By staying organised with Brain in Hand, I stay on top of my work and revision schedule.” [Autistic student at University of Kent, April 2025 survey] “Brain in Hand's mobile application has been deeply valuable for assisting me in helping visualise my day-to-day schedule, which in turn has helped make that schedule less overwhelming to process, and therefore easier to carry out.” [Reading College, September 2025 survey]
Time management 93% of students said they needed BiH to help with time management, and of these, BiH helped 79%	“[BiH] helped me organise time when I'm supposed to be in lectures, where they are and manage my time. Also when studying and scheduling work or scheduling tutorials with lecturers. I am able to improve my work and note down times when social activities are occurring... the calendar function, reminders, colour coding and the user-friendly website allow me to easily organise my time without being overwhelmed like I have found with other calendar websites previously.” [AuDHD student, York St John University, June 2025 survey]
Social interactions 86% of students said they needed BiH to help them socialise more, and of these, BiH helped 63%	“Using unplanned events to prepare things I could say in social situations has helped to reduce anxiety about knowing what to say.” [Autistic student at De Montfort University, September 2025 survey] “When I had an event that was new to me, I was able to use Brain in Hand to create solution packs and log what was making me feel anxious and what can be done if something feels too overwhelming.” [Autistic student at University of Coventry, January 2026 survey]

Academic Success and Retention

Indicators that users are fully participating, keeping on track, engaging in their studies and university activities include: attending more classes, feeling more confident travelling to and from place of study and feeling more able to engage in group or in-person academic activities such as field trips or placements.

Attending more classes

The BiH app and coaching together support students to attend their classes and lectures by reminding them of these appointments, helping them prepare for these in terms of what to bring and what to do if things go wrong or they find themselves in a challenging situation. Coaches work with users to better manage energy capacity to attend lectures. Users also develop a routine or schedule aligned to individual needs, while looking at strategies for managing sensory overwhelm such as bright lights, noisy environments, and high cognitive load. This helps to build an environment in which users can remain for longer and therefore reduce burnout. When BiH users need more immediate support in the moment, the on-demand service can help them to get back on track.

More confident travelling to and from place of study

The BiH app and coaching together help students become more confident in travelling to and from their place of study by supporting them in preparing and navigating their route and what to do if things go wrong or they find a situation challenging. Coaches can work with users to manage sensory overwhelm in busy train or bus stations, or public transport in general, so users have the resources they need to hand when something goes wrong, such as noting car breakdown services if they have problems with their car, or linking to train timelines if a train has been cancelled or delayed. When users need more support if things go wrong, they can call the on-demand service for additional help, helping them reset, get organised, utilise established coping strategies, and stay calm.

More able to engage in group or in-person academic activities

The BiH app and coaching together help students feel better able to engage in group or in-person academic activities such as field trips or placements by supporting social interactions and preparing for social interactions with coping strategies, solutions and scripts. Preparing questions ahead of seminars; reminders to contact peers on a regular basis when working on group work; and helping schedule group meetings in the calendar can all help users to better engage in these activities. Coaches also work with users to help them have the confidence to request adjustments, such as slides ahead of a lecture, ask questions to gain clarification, and recognise when they need to take a break or take some time out.

Attending more classes 65% of students said they needed BiH to help them attend more classes, and of these, BiH helped 74%	<i>“Brain in Hand has helped me stay on top of my coursework by sending reminders for deadlines and breaking tasks into smaller steps. When I feel anxious about attending lectures or seminars, I use the traffic light system to identify what's triggering my anxiety and work through solutions that have been personalised for me. Having a supporter I can contact during difficult moments has also given me confidence to tackle situations I would have previously avoided.”</i> [Autistic student, January 2026 survey] <i>“When I have felt anxious in a huge lecture theatre, I find it helpful that I have already found solutions to combat this.”</i> [Autistic student at University of Birmingham, July 2025 survey] <i>“I was overwhelmed by daily tasks and not having time to complete them before needing to leave for a lecture; Brain in Hand phone support helped me navigate this and I was able to go to the latter half of the lecture.”</i> [Autistic student self-diagnosed as ADHD at Falmouth University, June 2025 survey].
More confident travelling to and from place of study 73% of students said they needed BiH to help them attend more classes, and of these, BiH helped 85%	<i>“Allowing me to pre plan other routes to uni if my train gets cancelled.”</i> [AuDHD student, February 2026 survey] <i>“At one point, my train was cancelled during the journey and I ended up stranded in an area I was unfamiliar with. Brain in Hand helped me to organise myself and stay calm during that time.”</i> [Autistic student at University of Portsmouth, April 2025 survey]
More able to engage in group or in-person academic activities 81% of students said they needed BiH to help them engage in group or in-person academic activities, and of these, BiH helped 75%	<i>“I sometimes struggle when I know I need to talk to someone, especially if it's in a semi-formal setting, such as with lecturers, so it has helped me with that and knowing how to approach and deal with the situation.”</i> [AuDHD student at Newcastle University, July 2025 survey] <i>“Beginning a new situation (my internship) and the app helped me to plan ahead, remember my scripts for uncertain situations and feel calmer. I liked the ease of access and clear layout for feeling calmer or using my specific solutions.”</i> [student at University College London, September 2025 survey]

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Stress, anxiety and overwhelm

Many of the blockers linked to success at university are related to mental health and wellbeing, either directly affecting ability to perform well or engage by creating overwhelm or increasing the anxiety of interacting with peers and professionals, or indirectly by increasing the stress of not meeting deadlines or imminent exams. The BiH app and coaching together can help remove these blockers, improving students’ mental health and wellbeing, and subsequently improving their academic success.

The workload of higher education, the university experience of meeting new people, navigating new settings, and meeting academic demands, can be overwhelming. The positive effect of BiH on reducing overwhelm is something that we hear a lot from our users: coaching sessions empower students to prepare and input personalised strategies into the app, for real-world use at the right time, and students report that the 'on-demand' service offered them timely support in moments of heightened overwhelm, such as in busy social spaces, or high academic workload. The on-demand responder’s aim is to encourage users to draw on their own solutions, either as a reminder in the moment, or to explore whether past strategies can be applied to a new situation. We have found that most BiH users utilise the on-demand service for emotional regulation and recovery, though they also mention the importance of connection, reassurance, problem solving, and as a reminder of their strategies ([Brain in Hand November 2025 Impact Report](#))

100% of students stated that they needed support with mental health.

87% reported that BiH had helped them with their mental health to some extent - whether that was from reducing overwhelm, managing anxiety, preventing/recovering from burnout or having less stress - **with 63% reporting it helped very much or quite a lot.**

Of these students reporting significant improvements in their mental health: **83% said they feel they were succeeding in their studies, and 90% said they have a better university experience.**

Academic demands

91% of students said they needed BiH to help them feel better able to plan for, and manage, academic demands, and of these, **BiH helped 85%**

“Being able to plan out and make custom challenges and solutions really helps me to overcome uni-specific problems when I’m feeling overwhelmed and can’t think straight.”
[AuDHD student, February 2026 survey]

“Brain in hand helps with any sort of unexpected event I might come across, for example, changes to my routine. This can be highly stressful and overwhelming for me as I am autistic. However, Brain in Hand has been very useful in introducing me to new ways of thinking and different ways to approach my issues like taking time to breathe.” [Autistic student at Edge Hill University, June 2025 Survey]

Stressful periods

97% of students said they needed BiH to help them feel better able to manage stressful periods during the academic year, and of these, **BiH helped 83%**

“I’ve used the on-demand support twice with great success. Once was when it was too loud outside which had sent me into panic about not sleeping, the second was when exam revision became overwhelming. Both times the responders helped me to find solutions.” [Autistic student at University of Oxford, August 2025 survey]

“I was alone and completely overwhelmed and felt like I couldn’t cope because I had paperwork to do for my new uni accommodation, uni assignments and social pressure, and it made me feel like a friend was with me checking in, so I didn’t have to do everything alone.” [Student with anxiety and OCD at Exeter University, August 2025 survey]

“I was feeling very overwhelmed at the start of my coaching session, with numerous deadlines looming. The coach talked through my schedule with me and we added problems and possible solutions to my page that I could refer to when I began to feel overwhelmed again.” [Student with ADHD and self-diagnosed autistic at University of Portsmouth, August 2025 survey]

[when BiH helped] *“When I was feeling overwhelmed. Being able to access my routine through the app quickly helped to reduce the level of overwhelm I feel.”* [Autistic student at Hartpury University & Hartpury College, July 2025 survey]

Mental health

87% reported that BiH had helped them with their mental health to some extent– whether that was from reducing overwhelm, managing anxiety, preventing or recovering from burnout or having less stress - with **63% reporting it helped very much or quite a lot.**

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Supporting reduction of crisis events

In some cases, overwhelm and anxiety can lead to mental health crisis events, where students need to seek immediate or emergency support. Although BiH is not designed as an in-the-moment crisis support service, we have found that, through the use of BiH, our users report experiencing crisis events less often.

Students have shared that BiH can help directly in the moment through the on-demand service supporting them to regulate strong emotions, avoiding escalation into a crisis event. Further, less directly, users report BiH ensures that they attend appointments which support their wellbeing, even in situations where they are busy with both university and other commitments, or supports them generally with their mental health.

These changes are supported by large-scale research evaluations conducted by BiH, as outlined in Box 3 and Box 4.

73% of students said they needed BiH to help them reduce mental health crisis events, and of these, BiH helped 75%.

“It has markedly helped me with self-harm reduction and managing distressing intrusive thoughts.” [AuDHD student, January 2026 survey]

Mental health crisis events

73% of students said they needed BiH to help them reduce mental health crisis events, and of these, **BiH helped 75%**

“The app, specifically the ability to fill out the unplanned section, really helped me feel supported during moments of overwhelm or distress.” [Student that is not autistic or ADHD but has an anxiety disorder and is studying at University of Southampton, October 2025 survey]

“[BiH] helped me regulate/think of coping strategies (the unplanned events section and solutions) and helped me access support by ensuring I remembered appointments, which helped maintain my wellbeing and avoid crises. [This was] particularly beneficial as a final year student with numerous modules, assessments, a dissertation and two jobs as well as therapy.” [AuDHD student at University of Greenwich, January 2026 survey]

Feel supported

Most students, 94%, reported that BiH had helped them feel supported to some extent, with **more than half (55%) saying they felt very or completely supported.**

“My coach has helped me organise going to the GP which I had been putting off. They also gave me accountability which helped me to actually do it which was useful.” [ADHD student at University of Birmingham, December 2025 survey]

“The on-demand support can calm me down a lot.” [ADHD student, January 2026 survey]

“I’ve been going through a really difficult time, and asked for support on [the app]. I got a phone call within a matter of minutes and the person who called was really helpful.” [AuDHD student at Accrington and Rossendale College, October 2025 survey]

Reaching out for support

Most students (97%) needed help reaching out for support and of these, **BiH helped 65% in being more able, or more confident, in reaching out for support when they need it**

“The 1:1 coaching has had a massive impact on my confidence and wellbeing. I have been able to do things like talk to my tutor whereas I would have self-harmed rather than contact someone official.” [self diagnosed autistic and ADHD studying through Open University, December 2025 survey]

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Research evaluations demonstrate change

Box 3. An evaluation of BiH in students demonstrated significant reductions in anxiety and insights into the key mechanisms.

In a six-month mixed-methods evaluation of the hybrid human-digital support tool BiH, 72 university students (including 60 autistic and/or ADHD students) completed baseline and follow-up surveys of anxiety and related mechanisms.

Key findings:

Reduced anxiety linked to functional improvements: Over six months, students (predominantly autistic and/or ADHD) reported statistically significant reductions in anxiety, and improvements in coping with overwhelm, managing daily stressors, and reductions in cognitive and participation-related difficulties.

Clear mechanisms of impact: Quantitative modelling showed that students who experienced greater gains in coping skills, planning and routine management, and social participation also showed the largest decreases in anxiety, suggesting these are key pathways through which BiH supports wellbeing.

Proactive and reactive support valued by students: Qualitative findings highlighted that BiH helped students manage anxiety both in the moment (e.g. during periods of distress) and proactively (through planning, reminders, and structured support), alongside reducing isolation and enabling earlier, more effective help-seeking.

Scott, M., Jones, A., & Guyatt, H. (2025, November 4). Pathways to Anxiety Reduction in Neurodivergent and Neurotypical Students Using Digital Support Tool Brain in Hand: A Mixed-Methods Evaluation. https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/tdnh7_v1

Box 4. An evaluation suggests that use of BiH can reduce crisis events by half

A longitudinal study followed 149 adults using BiH over six months to examine how patterns of mental health service use changed over time. Most participants were autistic and/or ADHD adults and students. The study tracked self-reported use of crisis services and broader mental health support across 12-week periods at baseline, three months, and six months.

Key findings:

Substantial reductions in service use over time: Fewer participants accessed both crisis and broader mental health services at follow-up, and among those using crisis services at baseline, around half reported no crisis service use at follow-up. Around 65% of baseline service users reported reductions of more than 50% in service contact.

Reductions were greatest among those with highest initial need: Larger absolute reductions were observed among participants with higher baseline levels of service use, and reductions were also greater at higher levels of baseline depressive symptom severity - suggesting BiH may be particularly relevant for people with more intensive support needs.

Patterns suggest changed engagement, not disengagement: Many participants stopped using services, others continued, and a small number newly accessed care, indicating shifts in how and how often support was used rather than complete withdrawal from mental health support systems.

Scott, M, Jones, A, & Guyatt, H, et al. Longitudinal Changes in Crisis and Broader Mental Health Service Use Following Access to Digital Support Tool Brain in Hand: An Observational Cohort Study, 19 January 2026, PREPRINT (Version 1) available at Research Square [<https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-8613829/v1>]

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Wellbeing and self-care

Leaving home for the first time and managing the demands of academic life can leave many students neglecting their own self-care. This can include not getting enough exercise or sleep, neglecting personal hygiene and generally having an unhealthy lifestyle. The students using BiH shared how being more organised and making time for these activities in their calendar, or establishing morning and evening routines, can help them prioritise their self-care. The coaching sessions have also helped many students implement strategies during difficult periods such as tracking moods and having the confidence to reach out for the on-demand service when needed.

Most students (88%) reported that BiH had improved their wellbeing to some extent, with 38% reporting substantial or significant improvements.

“Coaching helping me to do things for myself, cooking and more focus on learning and self care.” [Autistic student at Brunel University, London, November 2025 survey]

Improved sleep 88% of students said they needed BiH to help them getting better, or more regular sleep, and of these, BiH helped 39%	<i>“Brain in Hand has supported me with staying organised and making time for mindfulness and self-care.”</i> [student at City University London, July 2025 survey]
Healthier lifestyle 91% of students said they needed BiH to help them make changes towards a healthier lifestyle, and of these, BiH helped 51%	<i>“I made morning and night routines which are helpful to follow.”</i> [Autistic student at University of Lancaster, April 2025 survey]
Life skills 94% of students said they needed BiH to help them build on life skills and of these, BiH helped 59%	<i>“I was having a difficult time with my sleep so I started tracking my moods when I was at a negative time in my life and [BiH] offered me reassurance that there was someone there for me should I need the help.”</i> [Student self-diagnosing as ADHD at Cardiff University, July 2025 survey]
Independence 94% of students said they needed BiH to help with increased independence, and of these, BiH helped 64%	<i>“I have Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, and was recently in a very severe flare-up. I used the unplanned events feature on the app to create a care plan for myself that I could use when I had very little energy, preventing both burnout and feelings of anger towards myself for not being able to do as much as I wanted to.”</i> [AuDHD student at University of Essex, January 2026 survey]
Self-care 94% of students said they needed BiH to help with self-care, and of these, BiH helped 59%	

Self-awareness as a Main Driver of Positive Change

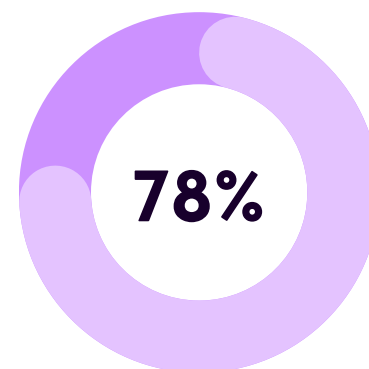
95% of students said they needed BiH to help them with self-awareness, and of these, BiH helped 66%.

A unique feature of BiH is how the combined coaching and app can support in self-awareness for users which, based on our research, is a key driver of positive change for users in higher education. In October 2025, the mood tags were expanded to tags that provide more context, including how they are feeling, who they are with, what they have been doing, and where they are. As well as working through the implementation of these with users, the coaching sessions also provide a “safe space” to increase users’ awareness of their thoughts.

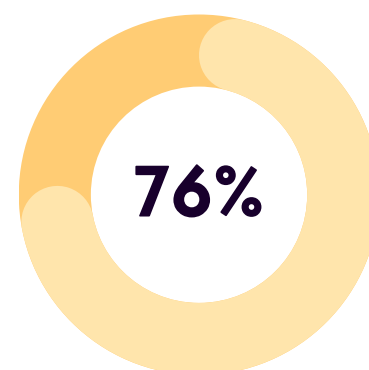
A substantial percentage of students with positive higher education outcomes also reported that BiH helped them with increased self-awareness:

- Of the students who said they attended more classes, lectures and seminars, 72% (33/46) reported improved self-awareness.
- Of the students who said they have a better university experience, 74% (46/62) reported improved self-awareness.
- Of the students who said they feel better prepared to transition into work or further education, 78% (36/46) reported improved self-awareness.
- Of the students who said they socialise more, 76% (29/38) reported improved self-awareness.

This highlights self-awareness as a key driver of positive change for students in higher education, as outlined in Box 5.



Of the students who said they **feel better prepared to transition into work or further education**, 78% (36/46) reported improved self-awareness.



Of the students who said they **socialise more**, 76% (29/38) reported improved self-awareness.



“The coaching adds another layer to the app which allows its user to feel heard and seen through whatever they are going through. Being able to talk to a coach with understanding and no judgement is extremely helpful. They have encouraged and supported me in general but also towards how I use the app best for me (particularly the traffic lights - which helps me check in with myself and take a moment to get back into my body).”

[Autistic student who self-identifies as ADHD at University College London, July 2025 survey]

“I am starting to read my overwhelm signs better in new environments and I am building strategies to help manage challenges- it is a work in progress and I am glad to have BIH to help me try and stay on track.”

[Autistic student at Sheffield Hallam University, September 2025 survey]

“She has given me a safe space to explore my thoughts and provided sound advice. [Coach name] has helped me to navigate the app more successfully than I could have done on my own.”

[Autistic student at University of Brighton, April 2025, survey]

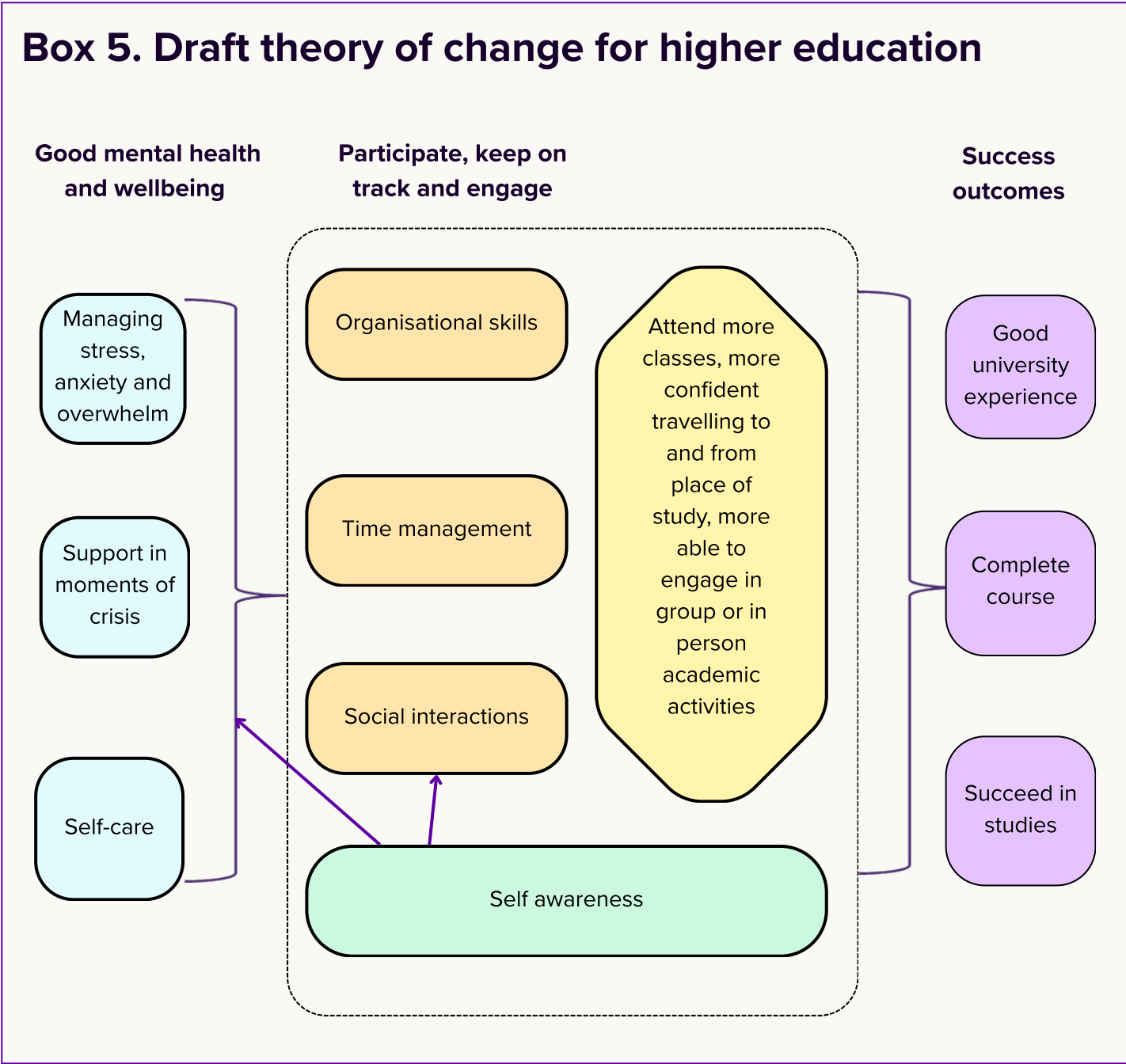
“Over the years I've really struggled with looking for help, whether that be my pride or general lack/wait for it from hospitals and GPs. Brain in Hand connected me with a coach who has really helped increase my awareness of my thoughts, conditions, actions and steps I can take to improve myself and gain more independence and a stress-free future.”

[Autistic student at Leeds Trinity University, September 2025 survey]

“It helped me listen to myself more, which meant instead of fighting my brain I worked with it.”

[Autistic and ADHD student, October 2025 survey]

Self-awareness as a Main Driver of Positive Change



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“Having the traffic light system and the reminders there helped me regularly assess how I was feeling and to stay on top of my wellbeing. Creating and looking at the solution packs I made was also very useful and helped me to come up with, and bring together, ideas and methods to cope with different situations. Knowing that there is always someone out there who can help was also reassuring.”

[Autistic student at University of Edinburgh, July 2025 survey]

“I enjoy using the traffic light system to process events and my emotions and it is very useful to have a record to reflect and look back upon.”

[Autistic student at University of Coventry, January 2026 survey]

“I was getting overwhelmed but I hadn't noticed till I got a check in from BIH that made me stop and think.”

[Autistic and ADHD student at University of Wales Trinity Saint David, October 2025 survey]

“I track my mood twice a day which enables me to notice if I am getting unwell sooner and make changes to look after myself.”

[Student with anxiety disorder at Open University, January 2026 survey]

Supporting Students in the Moments that Matter

BiH is designed to sit alongside students throughout their time at university, helping them build steady habits, recognise early signs that they are struggling, and take small, timely steps to stay on track. Whether they're settling into a new term, navigating changing routines, or balancing study with everything else life brings, BiH provides practical tools and human support that can meet students where they are.

Preparing to start university can be a challenging time. Students can be worried about this new unknown, how to prepare and how they are going to manage independently. Many are moving away from home for the first time and can be worried about whether their support needs will be met as well as how to navigate a new environment, managing social interactions and meeting new people. This is before any of the academic demands come into play.

Students using BiH have told us how, by working with their coaches, they have been able to load content into their calendars and solution packs to help them prepare for, and navigate, this new experience.

Once at university there can be high demands. Assignments and exams loom through the year and there may be expectations to go on field trip or placements and work on group assignments or projects. All these demands can cause anxiety and stress but with good planning and preparation these can be alleviated. Working with their coaches, our BiH users have told us how they break down tasks into smaller, more manageable chunks, record these in their diaries, and load up their solution packs with content that works for them when they get stuck or anxious.

85% of students said they needed BiH to help them with building relationships with peers and professionals, and of these, BiH helped 75%

"At the beginning of uni it enabled me to better adapt from college to uni study. The advice helped me cope better while studying" [Autistic student at De Montfort University, June 2025 survey]

“

"[BiH has supported me] whenever I go anywhere - I used to be really anxious that I'd forget to pack something, and it made leaving the house really difficult. Over the last three years, I've developed packing lists in the BiH app - for my handbag, for going to university or placement, for going to the gym, for going on a longer trip to visit family or friends in a different town for the day, for going to stay with family or friends overnight, for going on a multiday trip in the UK, for going abroad."

[Autistic student waiting for a ADHD assessment, University of Suffolk, April 2025 Survey]

"I had a mild panic attack at college and hit the red button on the app. Within minutes, someone responded and reminded me about my solutions I had made. It calmed me down and was able to head back to class."

[Autistic student, Sheffield College August 2025 survey]

"I have attended more events because I actually remember to attend them."

[Autistic and self-diagnosed ADHD student at Ravensbourne University London, June 2025 survey]

"Brain in Hand has been really helpful for managing the unpredictability of university life. For example, when I'm feeling overwhelmed before a presentation or exam, I can use the app to work through what's making me anxious and access the coping strategies we've built into my traffic light system. The ability to contact my Brain in Hand supporter when I need to has also been invaluable - knowing that safety net is there helps me stay calm in challenging situations. It's also helped me keep track of deadlines and break down larger assignments into manageable steps, which has made a huge difference to my stress levels."

[Autistic student, January 2026 survey]

Supporting students in the moments that matter

Leaving higher education to go into work or further study can be a challenging transition, with students often losing familiar routines and support networks while navigating the expectations of the workplace or further study. New demands such as deciding on a suitable career path, preparing for interviews, managing workloads independently, and communicating with others can feel overwhelming and increase anxiety.

BiH supports students through this period by helping them explore employment options, prepare for interviews, and build structure and coping strategies that work for them. With ongoing coaching and personalised solution packs, students are better equipped to manage change, stay organised, and feel confident moving forward.

Understanding those scenarios and situations when BiH is most useful

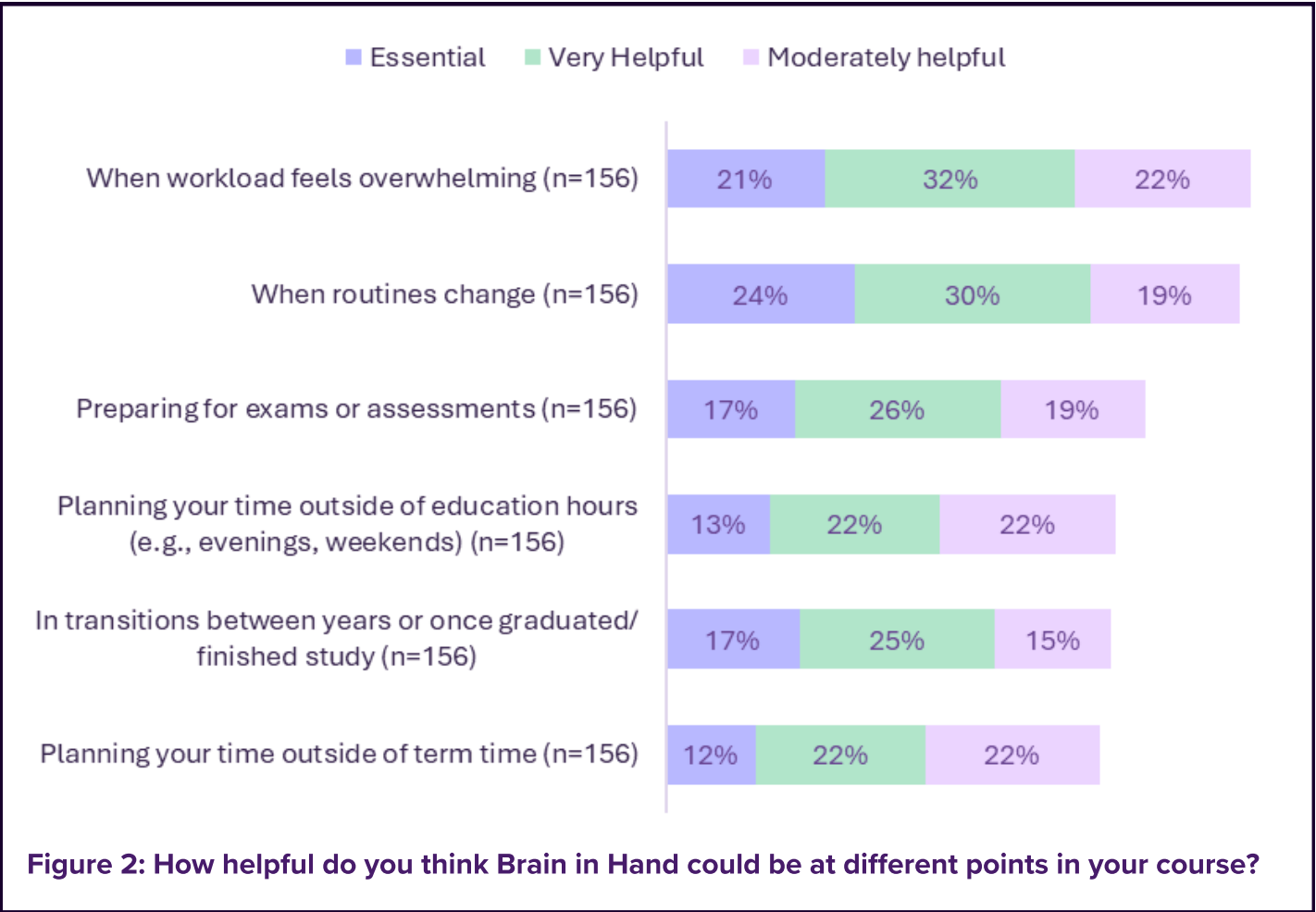
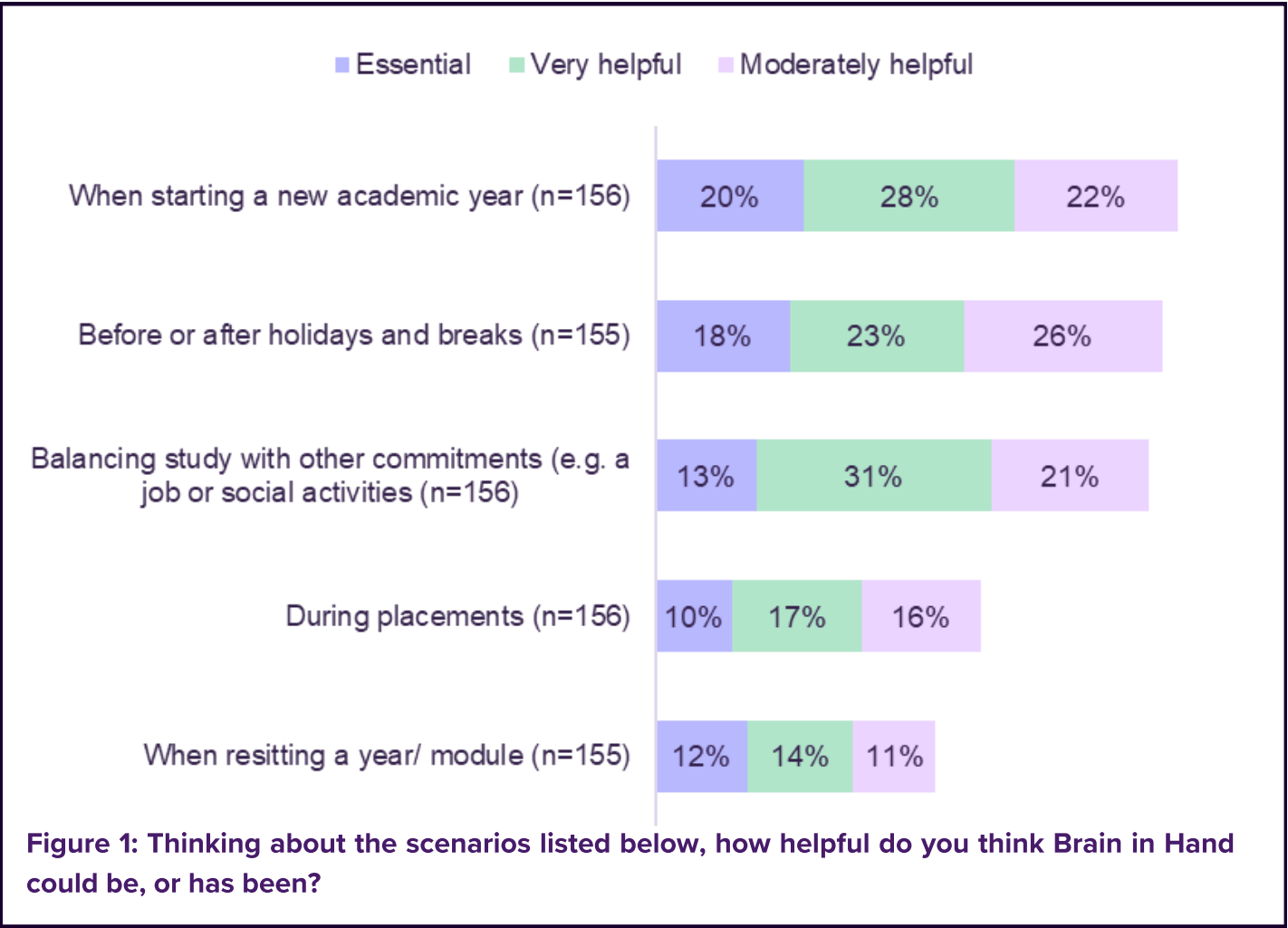
When users were asked “Thinking about the scenarios listed below, how helpful do you think Brain in Hand could be, or has been?” 60-70% responded “when starting a new academic year”, “before and after holidays or breaks” and “balancing study with other commitments” - with 40-50% noting that in these scenarios BiH would be essential or very helpful (figure 1).

When users were asked “How helpful do you think Brain in Hand could be at different points in your course?” more than 70% responded ‘when workload feels overwhelming’ and “when routines change” - with more than 50% reporting that it would be helpful to some extent across all these scenarios (figure 2).

85% of students said they needed BiH to help them feel better prepared to transition into work/ further education, and of these, BiH helped 74%

“[I] left university and lost most of my support network. [My] BiH coach helped me develop a structure and keep track of things during this time of transition.” [Autistic and ADHD student, Leeds Arts University, July 2025 survey]

[BiH helped by providing] advice about employment difficulties, particularly advice on coping techniques and future employment options. [Autistic student now funded by Access to Work, November 2025 survey]



User Insight: Sophie

How Brain in Hand supported Sophie across her student journey

Sophie first accessed BiH through Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) funding in September 2021 and describes it as her "most constant companion." Over four years, BiH supported her through multiple transitions across a full-time university degree and a year in industry. Sophie describes herself as autistic, with anxiety and a learning difficulty, and later references being dyslexic.



Academic success and retention

Sophie describes the transition into university as overwhelming, and during her first term she considered dropping out due to homesickness and adapting to a new environment. She directly links BiH support to being able to stay in study:

"I definitely think having the support of Brain in Hand and navigating my disabilities and difficulties meant I could continue and stay in study. If I hadn't had that support, I would have dropped out of study..."

BiH coaching supported Sophie to navigate academic processes and maintain progress. One key example was requesting assignment extensions: her coach helped normalise that she could ask for extensions as part of managing workload, which helped Sophie feel more confident advocating for herself academically.

Sophie also describes that proactively applying for DSA before starting university helped ensure support was in place, although she found the process time-consuming and particularly difficult as a disabled person. She also credits her university and college for being supportive and autism-aware, including an autism induction that allowed her to move into college three days before other students, helping her settle into the environment before term became busy.

Supporting students in moments that matter

Sophie describes BiH as providing continuity through major transitions and pressure points across university and work. From the outset of university, she used coaching sessions to help her navigate challenges, including identifying who to approach for specific issues and discussing a placement year, which helped solidify her decision to pursue this option.

Sophie also describes practical, in-the-moment support that helped her manage new demands, such as learning to travel independently by train to go home and recharge, something she had not done before university.

A key transition came in late 2023, when Sophie began a year-in-industry placement at a large pharmaceutical company. She describes a steep learning curve, a hot-desking environment that did not suit her needs, and the importance of reasonable adjustments such as working from home more frequently. She also describes that her employer was slow and inexperienced with the Access to Work (ATW) process, and that it took nine months for ATW support to be put in place, partly due to long wait times. During this period, Sophie's BiH licence was extended by BiH while awaiting funding being finalised, so that her support did not stop, which she describes as making the transition significantly easier:

"Thankfully my Brain in Hand subscription started immediately, which was a huge benefit from already having a subscription from my DSA to go 'I'm in work now. I'm renewing my licence. I'm doing it for access to work.' That transition was so much easier. So, it's been a huge benefit ... the Brain in Hand subscription was the thing that definitely helped me the most."

Sophie also describes BiH as supporting her with goal setting (separate from workplace deadlines) and with finding solutions that mattered to her day-to-day experience at work, such as building social connection:

"I really want to make friends with someone called [NAME] and that was what we talked about ...strategies of socialising and that was my Brain in Hand support. And then the next meeting we had I said 'oh, I went and had lunch with [NAME]' and we got to talk about that progress, which was completely irrelevant to work deadlines and productivity, but for me, as an autistic person navigating the workplace, that was so important..."

Mental health and wellbeing

Sophie describes significant wellbeing challenges early on, including homesickness and feeling overwhelmed in her first term. She also describes needing to travel home frequently during university to recharge and spend time with family, describing this as crucial for maintaining her wellbeing.

Over time, Sophie reports improvements in mental health, stability, confidence, and sense of belonging. She describes being “much happier and comfortable and less homesick, less lonely,” and attributes this to her support network and what she has been through with support along the way:

“[My] mental health is a lot better. I'm much more stable and confident... I feel much happier and comfortable and less homesick, less lonely... I've got a community, I've got resilience. I've got confidence and ability now thanks to everything I've been through up to this point and the support I had along the way.”

Sophie also describes learning to manage anxiety more effectively, including noticing anxiety earlier and taking action before it becomes overwhelming:

“Talking to my coach, I'm much more capable and competent in noticing the anxieties in myself before they manifest and become too overwhelming... How do I feel? What's making me feel this way? What can I do immediately to change that?”

She also describes that compared to her first year, she now feels she has “five times the amount of time” to socialise and take part in activities she enjoys, and notes that for the past three months she hasn't felt the need to travel home, contrasting with earlier years.

Self-reflection as a key driver

Sophie describes developing self-awareness through coaching conversations that helped her identify feelings, triggers, and immediate actions:

“Talking to my coach, I'm much more capable and competent in noticing the anxieties in myself before they manifest and become too overwhelming... How do I feel? What's making me feel this way? What can I immediately do to change that?”

Sophie also reflects on how her needs and expectations have evolved, particularly after her placement experience. She describes feeling more empowered to assess what she needs from an employer and what type of environment will support her best:

“And now that I have Brain in Hand I feel so much more empowered to go, actually, what am I looking for in the work environment? What can meet my needs somewhere where I can, even if I have a little desk set up, a home base where I can personalise things and put my fidgets on the table and post-it notes ... all those extra little things that I have at home. Which means I can work so much more productively. If I had that in the office, then I could probably come to the office more.”

Finally, Sophie reflects on her growing independence and how her relationship with BiH has changed over time. While she uses it less now, she emphasises the value of having it available and recognises its long-term impact:

“I use Brain in Hand much less now because it's given me that independence... Maybe there'll be a point in my life where Brain in Hand is just on my phone and I never open it. But the fact that it is there... means it definitely changed my life in a positive way.”

“It's given me that scaffolding that I can do things myself.”

Overall impact

Sophie's case study describes BiH as a consistent source of support across four years, helping her to remain in study during a challenging first term, navigate academic processes like requesting extensions, and build confidence over time. She also reports improved mental health, reduced homesickness, and increased stability and social connection, alongside developing self-reflection skills to notice and respond to anxiety earlier. Across key transitions - including starting university and moving into a placement year in late 2023 with a delayed nine-month Access to Work process. Sophie describes BiH as providing continuity, practical tools, and coaching support that helped her manage change and build independence.

Annex 1. Metrics and HE student sample data

	Those responding to question				Those saying BiH is not helpful		Outcome metrics	
	Yes (K)	Somewhat (L)	No (M)	Don't need BiH for this (N)	Implied "No" (O)	Implied "I need BiH for this" (P)	Need for BiH (K+L+M)/ (K+L+M+N)	Efficacy of BiH (those that got help/all those that needed it) (K+L)/ (K+L+M+P)
Succeeding in their studies I feel I am succeeding in my studies	56	56	15	19	9	8	87% (127/146)	83% (112/135)
A better university experience I have a better education/ university experience	62	50	19	16	9	8	89% (131/147)	81% (112/139)
Completing their course I feel more likely to finish my course	69	36	14	27	9	7	82% (119/146)	83% (105/126)
Time management I manage my time better	51	63	22	11	9	8	93% (136/147)	79% (114/144)
Socialising I socialise more	38	46	42	21	9	8	86% (126/147)	63% (84/134)
Attending more classes I attend more classes/ lectures/ seminars	46	29	21	51	9	6	65% (96/147)	74% (75/102)
More confident travelling to and from place of study I feel more confident travelling to and from my place of study	44	33	10	33	5	4	73% (87/120)	85% (77/91)
More able to engage in group or in-person academic activities Feeling more able to engage in group or in-person academic activities (e.g. field trips or placements)	37	39	21	23	5	4	81% (97/120)	75% (76/101)
Manage academic demands I feel better able to plan for and manage academic demands	52	44	12	11	5	5	91% (108/119)	85% (96/113)
Manage stressful periods I feel better able to manage stressful periods during the academic year	61	40	15	4	5	5	97% (116/120)	83% (101/121)
Mental health crisis events Had an impact on reducing mental health crisis events (events where you may have needed to seek immediate or emergency support)	38	45	27	40	Not applicable	Not applicable	73% (110/150)	75% (83/110)
Transition from higher education I feel better prepared to transition into work/ further education	46	53	26	22	9	8	85% (125/147)	74% (99/133)
Academic relationships I have built relationships with peers and professionals	45	55	25	22	9	8	85% (125/147)	75% (100/133)

Annex. Metrics and HE student sample data

	Those responding to question						Those saying BiH is not helpful		Outcome metrics	
	Very much (S)	Quite alot (T)	A little (U)	Neutral (V)	No (W)	don't need BiH for this (X)	Implied "No" (Y)	Implied "I need BiH for this" (Z)	Need for BiH (S+T+U+V+W)/ (S+T+U+V+W+X)	Efficacy of BiH (S+T+U)/ (S+T+U+V+W+Z)
Organisation Feeling more organised	25	56	32	21	12	5	9	9	97% (146/151)	73% (113/155)
Reaching out for support More able, or more confident, in reaching out for support when I need it	33	43	24	29	17	4	9	9	97% (146/150)	65% (100/155)
Improved sleep Getting better, or more regular sleep	9	15	31	32	46	18	9	8	88% (133/151)	39% (55/141)
Healthier lifestyle Making changes towards a healthier lifestyle	13	32	29	42	21	13	9	8	91% (137/150)	51% (74/145)
Life skills Building on life skills	20	41	28	32	21	9	9	8	94% (142/151)	59% (89/150)
Independence Increased independence	31	37	27	29	17	9	9	8	94% (141/150)	64% 95/149)
Self-care Improved self-care	20	42	27	34	19	9	9	8	94% (142/151)	59% (89/150)
Self-awareness Increased self-awareness	38	41	22	29	14	8	9	9	95% (144/152)	66% (101/153)

Annex. Metrics and HE student sample data

Individual responses to the question: Has Brain in Hand helped you to achieve more?

Achieve more	ADHD (n=12)	Autistic (n=66)	Both (n=66)	Neither (n=19)	Total (n=163)
Yes	33% (4/12)	47% (31/66)	50% (33/66)	53% (10/19)	48% (78/163)
Somewhat	60% (6/12)	38% (25/66)	33% (22/66)	26% (5/19)	36% (58/163)
No	17% (2/12)	15% (10/66)	17% (11/66)	21% (4/19)	17% (27/163)
Total	100% (12/12)	100% (66/66)	100% (66/66)	100% (19/19)	100% (163/163)

Individual responses to the question: How well supported do you feel now you have Brain in Hand? Provided by diagnosis

Feeling supported	ADHD (n=12)	Autistic (n=66)	Both (n=66)	Neither (n=19)	Total (n=163)
Completely supported	17% (2/12)	15% (10/66)	11% (7/66)	21% (4/19)	14% (23/163)
Very supported	25% (3/12)	52% (34/66)	35% (23/66)	32% (6/19)	40% (66/163)
Moderately supported	25% (3/12)	20% (13/66)	32% (21/66)	21% (4/19)	25% (41/163)
Slightly supported	33% (4/12)	12% (8/66)	11% (7/66)	16% (3/19)	13% (22/163)
Not supported at all	0% (0/12)	2% (1/66)	11% (7/66)	11% (2/19)	6% (10/163)
Blank (no response)	0% (0/12)	0% (0/66)	2% (1/66)	0% (0/19)	1% (1/163)

Individual responses to the question: Do you feel Brain in Hand has improved your wellbeing? Provided by diagnosis

Improved wellbeing	ADHD (n=12)	Autistic (n=66)	Both (n=66)	Neither (n=19)	Total (n=163)
Substantial improvement	17% (2/12)	11% (7/66)	6% (4/66)	5% (1/19)	9% (14/163)
Significant improvement	8% (1/12)	32% (21/66)	26% (17/66)	42% (8/19)	29% (47/163)
Moderate improvement	42% (5/12)	36% (24/66)	35% (23/66)	16% (3/19)	34% (55/163)
Slight improvement	25% (3/12)	12% (8/66)	20% (13/66)	16% (3/19)	17% (27/163)
No improvement	8% (1/12)	9% (6/66)	12% (8/66)	21% (4/19)	12% (19/163)
Blank (No response)	0% (0/12)	0% (0/66)	2% (1/66)	0% (0/19)	1% (1/163)

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