

University Mental Health: Life in a Pandemic
Listening to higher education communities throughout
2020/2021

By Nicola Frampton and Dom Smithies

With contributions from Myles Smith-Thompson and Chloe Maughan

FOREWORD

Dear colleagues,

We're proud to introduce you to this report. It has been both a great challenge and privilege to have the space and time to reflect on how this past year-and-a-half has impacted students and staff across the higher education sector. We have to start with a heartfelt thank you to everyone across our university communities for their endurance, resilience and their efforts through what has, to understate it significantly, been a challenging couple of years. We'd also like to give space to acknowledge and commend the students on a number of healthcare-related courses who rushed in to support our amazing NHS and their local communities with the pandemic response - applause doesn't do justice to the sacrifices and work that you've done to keep us all safe and supported.

The pandemic has impacted students, staff and their loved ones in so many ways, but the pandemic isn't an isolated issue. We have seen pre-existing inequalities widen, isolation & loneliness become an increasing concern, students' material conditions severely impacted and a desperate need for even more mental health support. Few of us could have anticipated the challenges we'd face this past 18 months. However, as we look to a new academic year, we hope that we can do so with the ambition and drive to ensure students and staff across university communities are getting all the support they need to thrive.

This report shares the insights we have acquired from across our listening work since March 2020, our research with Alterline and our reflections as an organisation doing what we can to support students and the higher education sector through the pandemic. Whether you're a senior leader of a university, a students' union (SU) staff member or sabbatical officer, student support service staff member, a policy maker, a campaigner, an academic, or an external partner working in the health or higher education sectors, our hope is that the insights, data and learning in this report will help you in some way to reflect on this past year-and-a-half, to understand where we're positioned right now and to plan for a future where we have healthy and happy university communities.

We feel that it would be remiss of us to not forewarn that some of the reading in this report can be quite stark. Listening to the experiences of students and staff who have been struggling can be challenging. But listening and understanding are essential to ensure we can learn and make the changes we need to to move forward. At this point we'd like to thank all of the students and staff who have taken the time to share their experiences - we hope this report does justice in representing the challenges you've had to navigate and endure. We also thank all of our colleagues in the Student Minds team and across our wider network, members of our Student Advisory Committee, and all of our partners, particularly Alterline, who have so expertly worked to ensure we have this clear picture of what the higher education community is experiencing.

We hope this report finds you well in these uncertain times, and that this report is a helpful resource for us all to reflect and plan for the future together.

Best wishes,

Dom Smithies (Student Voice and Equalities Lead) & Nicola Frampton (Insight Manager)

ABOUT STUDENT MINDS

Student Minds is the UK's student mental health charity. Our goal is to transform the state of student mental health so that all in higher education can thrive. We support students to develop the knowledge, confidence and skills to look after their own mental health, support their peers and create change. We also work collaboratively with institutions, students' unions and other organisations involved in higher education, supporting them to take a whole-university approach to mental health. In addition to providing well-resourced mental health services, a whole-university approach recognises that all aspects of university life should support and promote positive mental health and wellbeing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Student Minds

Zoe Maggs and Pete Gaffney for managing the listening and insights work at various points during the pandemic. Without your exceptional efforts in gathering, analysing and summarising thousands of sources, this report would not exist.

The Listening Team, for supporting on the listening and insights work during the pandemic. Jenny Smith for delivering helpful and informative policy briefings throughout the pandemic and for your support in developing the recommendations in this report.

Krishna Lad for designing this report and bringing our findings to life.

The wider Student Minds team, for supporting the listening and insights work through sharing sources and capturing individual accounts and experiences. Also for your operational support, for reviewing this report and for utilising our learnings to best support students.

Student Advisory Committee

Michael Priestley, Julia Alsop and Amy Wells for reviewing this report and offering honest, thoughtful and detailed feedback.

Isobel Bros and Sophie Churchill for supporting the development of our research with Alterline, by sharing vital reflections and experiences.

Members of the 2019 and 2020 Student Advisory Committees, for all of the rich conversations we've had which have helped to inform and shape our work.

Student Space

The services commissioned through Student Space to offer both universal and tailored support to students: The Mix, Shout, Black People Talk, Mermaids, RECLAIM, OCD Action, Taraki Wellbeing, The Muslim Youth Helpline and Voice Collective.

Student Space funders (the Office for Students and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales).

Members of the Independent Governance and Programme Advisory Groups.

Alterline

In researching this report, we worked with Alterline to further develop our evidence base and ensure all of our work is grounded in the student voice. Alterline produced a survey which perfectly captured our research needs, whilst also sharing our passion for supporting university students. We're excited to be sharing some of our research findings in this report.

Co-Authors

Chloe Maughan, who has written the Background section on Women's Safety at University.

Myles Smith-Thompson, who has written the Background section on Black Lives Matter:

Looking at the Black and Ethnic Minority Experience in the Last Year.

University students

The university students who have taken the time to share their experiences over the past year, despite the additional challenges you have faced. We wrote this report to highlight these experiences and ensure your voices are heard.

University and Students' Union staff

The university and students' union staff who have shared their experiences and reflections over the past 18 months, allowing us to build a fuller picture of what HE communities have experienced. Also, for your continued hard work and commitment in supporting students throughout the pandemic.

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INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, as coronavirus (Covid-19) spread across the UK, Student Minds began a period of listening. We gathered insights from across the higher education (HE) sector in order to understand what students were experiencing and how we, as the UK's student mental health charity, could support them. We listened to the concerns of students and staff and analysed social media posts, research findings and news articles to identify the key issues for students. We saw key themes shifting as restrictions and case numbers changed and student concerns fluctuated between immediate needs and longer-term issues. Recognising the unique and quickly-changing situation for students, Student Minds also developed and shared information and guidance.

In August 2020, building on the information and guidance we'd shared over the previous five months, Student Minds launched Student Space. Student Space was developed to offer a combination of psycho-educational content and real student stories alongside text, phone and email support provided by Shout and The Mix. Since then, Student Space has also launched further services for students from backgrounds which have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, and/or who otherwise have limited access to tailored support.

Now, over a year on from the first national lockdown, we have collated our learnings about students' experiences since March 2020 into this report. Along with the findings of our broader insights and listening work from throughout the year, this report also includes data from some of our own primary research (see Methodology).

In recognition of the need for a whole-university approach to mental health and wellbeing, the report has been structured using the themes from Student Minds' University Mental Health Charter (2019): Live, Learn, Work and Support. The final section, Inequalities and Intersectionality, focusses on the disproportionate impact of the past 18 months on particular groups - an issue we wish to examine in more depth in the near future.

METHODOLOGY

Student Minds' approach to Listening and Insights

Throughout the pandemic, the Student Minds team have collected and analysed over 2000 news articles, social media posts, individual accounts and secondary research sources. From the outset, our aim has been to develop a well-informed understanding of what the university community has experienced and how this has changed. Through ongoing informal, inductive analysis, we identified common themes in students' experiences and also saw these shift over time. This work has enabled us to ensure that our support for students during the pandemic has been relevant and helpful.

Pulse Surveys

At the beginning of the pandemic, Student Minds ran two 'pulse surveys', designed to offer a space for members of the university community (both staff and students) to share their experiences.

The first pulse survey (open between April 29th and May 11th 2020) received 143 responses, and the second (open between 18th May and 9th June 2020) received 96 responses. The surveys focussed on student experiences, staff experiences and individual experiences of the pandemic and included questions relating to engagement, support and challenges.

Alterline Research

Our research, run with Alterline, was live between April 30th and May 10th 2021. The sample was made up of 877 undergraduates, 167 postgraduates and 66 foundation year students (1100 total). Most (n=966) of these students were directly recruited by Alterline using their database of students willing to take part in research. Some respondents were also recruited by a sample provider, to achieve a sample broadly representative of the UK student population, and through Student Minds' own channels.

The online survey explored a range of topics relating to the impacts of the pandemic, including mental health and wellbeing, finances, social connectedness, academic experience and experiences of accessing support. The survey also included some questions from Alterline's independent 'Being Well, Doing Well' survey, which has previously ran in 2017/18 and 2019/20, in order to offer a comparison between years and cohorts.

Call for Evidence

In total, we received 10 responses to our call for evidence, which was open from May 18th to June 10th. Five of these were from university staff, one was from a students' union staff member and the remaining four were current university students.

The call for evidence included a series of optional, open-ended questions about the experiences of students and staff during the pandemic, as well as questions about future concerns or challenges for the higher education sector.

Challenges and Limitations

In order to be responsive to the fast-moving situation and the needs and experiences of students, we prioritised breadth and timeliness in collecting data and secondary sources. Thus, data and sources were not collected systematically (with the exception of our Alterline research), and we were not selective with regard to sample size, reliability or representativeness. Though we noted relevant limitations of sources wherever possible during our analysis, we felt it most important to capture what was being said or felt, by who, and where or how it was being reported.

The intensity of our listening and insights work has also varied throughout the year. Although we have endeavoured to capture an accurate picture of students' experiences over the past year, much of our own listening and insights work has focussed on periods of change or transition as the Covid-19 situation has changed - in spring 2020, at the beginning of the 2020/21 academic year and in winter 2020/21.

It's important to also recognise the inherent difficulties of exploring potentially sensitive issues such as health and wellbeing. We know that for some, it can be difficult to disclose personal challenges or experiences, and this can also feel exacerbated for particular communities. Additionally, those who do have lived experience of mental illness or mental health problems may be more likely to participate in research about the topic of mental health, creating a self-selection bias. Equally, individuals with lived experience may be more likely to proactively engage with our work (as a mental health charity) or to express their views or experiences of their mental health online. As such, we encourage readers to view our findings critically, with consideration of systemic inequalities, stigmas and biases and the ways in which these may present in the issues we explore.

Definitions

Finally, we wish to share some helpful definitions of terms we've used throughout this report, in order to facilitate a transparent, shared understanding of what we mean when we use these terms. These are taken from the University Mental Health Charter (2019).

Mental Health - a full spectrum of experience ranging from good mental health to mental illness.

Mental illness - a condition and experience, involving thoughts, feelings, symptoms and/or behaviours, that causes distress and reduces functioning, impacting negatively on an individual's day to day experience, and which may receive or be eligible to receive a clinical diagnosis.

Mental health problems/issues or poor mental health - a broader range of individuals experiencing levels of emotional and/ or psychological distress beyond normal experience and beyond their current ability to effectively manage. It will include those who are experiencing mental illness and those whose experiences fall below this threshold, but whose mental health is not good.

Wellbeing - a wider framework, of which mental health is an integral part, but which also includes physical and social wellbeing. This uses a model provided by Richard Kraut (2009), in which optimum wellbeing is defined by the ability of an individual to fully exercise their cognitive, emotional, physical and social powers, leading to flourishing.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Month / Year	National	Student-specific
February 2020		UCU announces 14 days of strike action, beginning Thursday 20th February
March 2020	18th - 23rd: The first restrictions announced in England, with 'lockdown' commencing on 23rd.	Students told to remain where they are. Some accommodation providers begin to release students from contracts. Healthcare students drafted in to support the NHS.
April 2020		'No-detriment' or 'safety net' policies introduced at many universities across the country
May 2020	10th: Plans to ease the first lockdown are announced. 25th: George Floyd is murdered by police in the USA, prompting Black Lives Matter protests across the world.	
June 2020		Universities begin to make announcements about the 2020/21 academic year. Approaches vary - some announce face-to-face teaching only, others a 'blended' approach, and some online-only.
July 2020	4th: Face coverings are made mandatory on public transport whilst pubs, bars and cinemas reopen. Two households can meet in any setting.	
August 2020		Student Minds launch Student Space 13th August: A level results day. 40% of teachers' A-level grades are downgraded by an algorithm which tends to favour privately educated students in advantaged areas 17th: The Government u-turns on exam results and accepts centre-assessed grades as final.

September 2020	<p>14th: Gatherings of more than 6 made illegal amidst rising case numbers</p> <p>22nd: 10pm curfew announced for pubs, bars and restaurants</p>	<p>Students return to University campuses.</p> <p>Cases of Covid-19 rise. The 7-day average increases from 2,180 to 11,158.</p> <p>In the second half of September, universities begin to introduce student lockdowns as outbreaks are reported on campuses.</p>
October 2020	<p>14th: The three-tiered system is introduced in the England</p> <p>31st: The second lockdown in England is announced, to commence on November 5th.</p>	<p>Data from UniCovid shows that 100 UK Universities have reported Covid-19 outbreaks by early October.</p>
November 2020	<p>5th: Second UK lockdown comes into effect</p> <p>7th: The UK Covid-19 death toll exceeds 50,000</p>	<p>Students are told to remain where they are until winter break.</p> <p>11th: The government announces the plan for students to return home over the Christmas period.</p>
December 2020	<p>2nd: The UK returns to the three-tier system following the national lockdown. The first vaccine is approved for use in the UK.</p> <p>19th: The PM announces changes to Christmas plans. London and South East England are placed in Tier 4 amidst concerns about a new strain.</p>	<p>3rd: The student travel window opens, enabling students to get home for Christmas</p> <p>18th: The OfS gives details of additional, one-off funding for students experiencing hardship (total £20m)</p> <p>31st: Only students on health, social or education courses will be allowed to return to University. Others will face staggered returns from Jan 25th at the earliest.</p>
January 2021	<p>1st: Britain leaves the EU</p> <p>4th: A third national lockdown is announced</p> <p>22nd: The UK Covid-19 death toll exceeds 100,000</p>	<p>Students on courses training for health, social care or education roles can return to campus despite the national lockdown. All other students are told to remain where they are.</p>
February 2021	<p>21st: The PM announces the 'roadmap' out of lockdown</p>	<p>2nd: The Government announces an additional £50m of hardship funding for students in England</p>

March 2021	9th-13th: Campaigns and protests across the country following the murder of Sarah Everard. 29th: The 'Rule of Six' returns for outdoor gatherings	8th: Students on 'practical' courses are allowed to return to university for in-person teaching.
April 2021	12th: Stage 2 of lockdown restrictions easing - outdoor hospitality and non-essential retail reopens.	
May 2021	17th: Stage 3 of lockdown restrictions easing - indoor hospitality and social distancing guidance relaxed.	10th: The Prime Minister confirms that all university remaining university students can return to on-campus study from the 17th May

BACKGROUND

In writing this report, we have spent time reflecting on the events of the past year and the ways in which these have impacted the higher education (HE) community. Whilst the Covid-19 pandemic has dominated our listening work since March 2020, we also felt it vitally important to reflect on two other long-standing issues which received renewed societal attention during this time: the Black Lives Matter Movement and activism about women's safety.

We therefore wanted to give space in this report to highlight the ways in which these impacted (and continue to impact) the HE community, and particularly ethnic minority and racialised students and women students. We therefore invited individuals with lived experiences and/or expertise of these areas to write background sections, included below.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The first cases of the Covid-19 virus were identified in Wuhan, China at the end of 2019. The first UK cases were then confirmed at the end of January 2020 - one of which was a University of York student who had travelled from China at the beginning of the year (Weaver, 2021). By the end of March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) had declared Covid-19 to be a pandemic, with the virus spreading quickly across the world and particularly throughout Europe.

Since then, the UK has seen multiple peaks in case numbers, occurring in spring 2020, autumn 2020 and winter 2020/21 (Gov.uk, 2021). The situation has resulted in widespread disruption to everyday life, with the UK Government introducing legal restrictions on social contact and travel, encouraging the public to 'stay at home' at several points over the past year.

As the timeline (pages 10-12) shows, restrictions were first introduced in March 2020 and at the time of writing, are due to be relaxed almost completely by July 2021. Over the course of this 16 month period, levels of restrictions have varied. Though social distancing measures have been in place throughout, limitations on social contact and travel have changed with case rates. At times, the public has been urged to stay at home, limiting all travel and social contact. At other times, groups have been allowed to socialise indoors, travel for holidays and, most recently, hug loved ones.

Mental Health and Wellbeing Impacts

At Student Minds, we recognise that emotional responses such as stress, fear and anxiety are normal and expected responses to the pandemic and its impacts. We

also recognise that for some, the pandemic has led to challenges which have contributed to or exacerbated more serious mental health issues. Through our listening and insights work, we are aware of the unique challenges to mental health which have stemmed from the pandemic and subsequent restrictions, including the knock-on changes to support provision.

Though the lasting impact of the pandemic on mental health remains unclear, research from over the past year has shown an overall deterioration in mental health and wellbeing for most (Mind, 2020; Public Health Wales, 2021). However, there is evidence that this has fluctuated over time, with trends possibly linked to restrictions being introduced and eased (Fancourt et al, 2020-2021; Mental Health Foundation, 2020-2021). Our insights and listening work has also shown that for some, the pandemic has led to positive mental health impacts. For instance, 10% of respondents in our research with Alterline reported that the pandemic has had positive effects on their mental health and wellbeing.

The pandemic has undoubtedly led to mental health and wellbeing challenges for many, but it's important to recognise that not all have been impacted equally. Evidence has shown the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on particular groups, such as women, young people, individuals from low-income households, ethnic minority and racialised individuals, and people with disabilities (Mental Health Foundation, 2020; Fancourt et al, 2020-2021; Citizens Advice, 2021; Centre for Mental Health, 2021; ONS, 2021). We feel it is vital to highlight these discrepancies and encourage both the mental health and higher education sectors to recognise them as we move forwards.

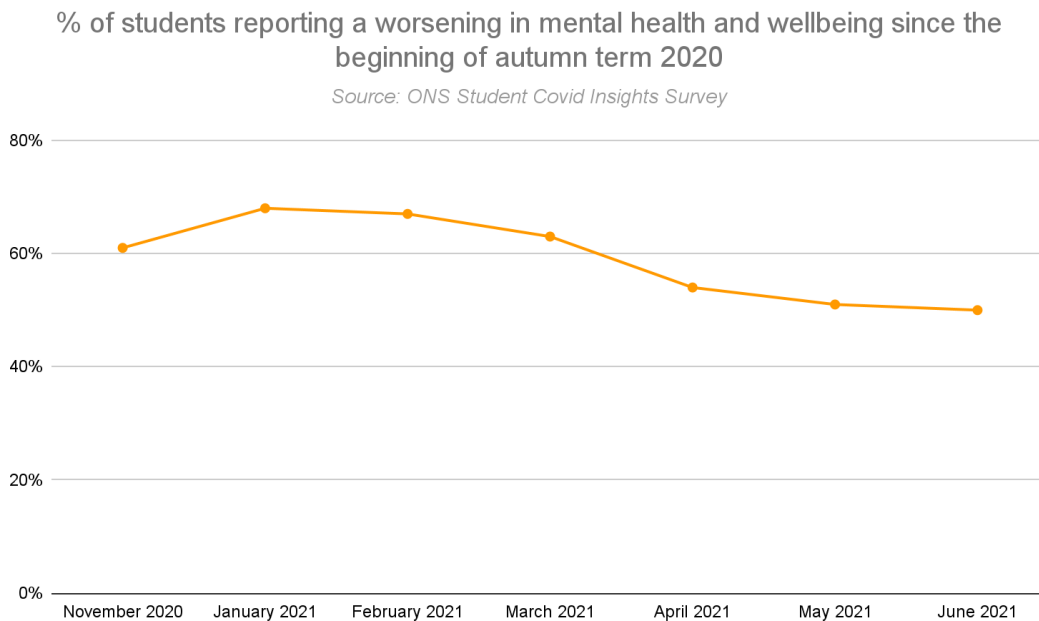
Students and Young People

“Young adults have been especially badly hit during the pandemic with a triple whammy of curtailed education, diminished job prospects and reduced social contact with peers” (Mental Health Foundation, 2020: 7).

During the first national lockdown, research by Mind (2020) found that 60% of adults reported a worsening in their mental health. This figure increased to 68% of young people and 73% of university students.

The impact of the pandemic on the mental health of students and young people has been documented consistently through research by organisations like the Office for National Statistics (ONS), Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), National Union of Students (NUS), the UPP Foundation, the Mental Health Foundation, and Save the Student, as well as through the media and our own research.

Since November 2020, the ONS Student Covid-19 Insights Survey (2020-2021) has captured changes in student wellbeing. In each monthly wave of the survey, at least 51% of students have reported a worsening in their mental health and wellbeing since the beginning of autumn term. This figure was at its highest (63%) in January 2021, shortly after the third national lockdown came into effect. In contrast, the figure was at its lowest in June 2021 (50%), following the relaxation of many restrictions across the UK (see Graph 1).



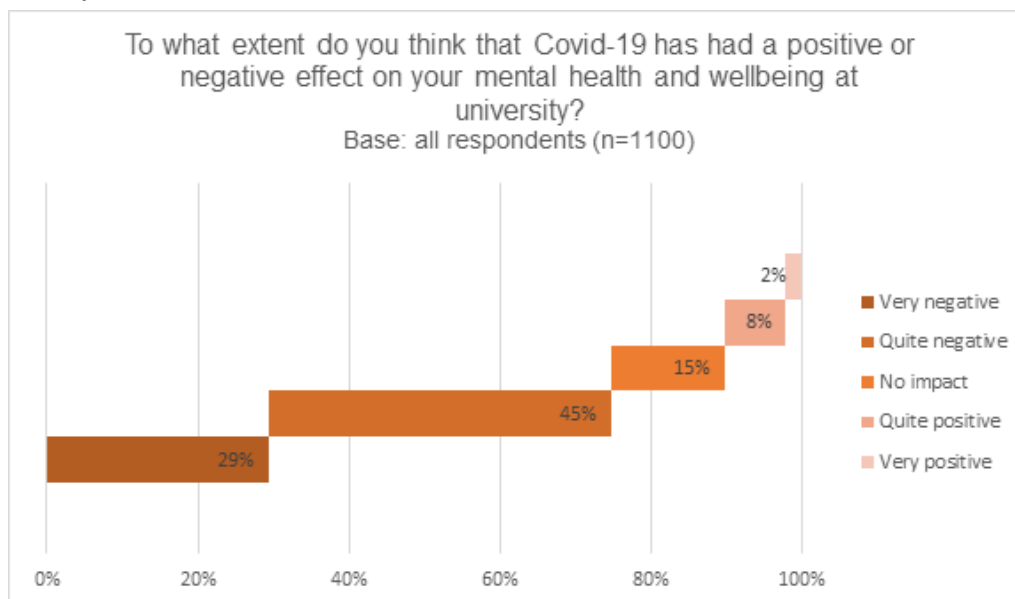
Graph 1. Source: ONS Student Covid Insights Survey.

Similar figures have also been observed in research by HEPI (2020, 2021), NUS (2020, 2021) and Save the Student (2020):

- In a survey of over 2000 university students from October-November 2020, 66% said their mental health had been impacted by the pandemic (Save the Student, 2020)
- A HEPI (2021) survey from April 2021 found that 63% of students reported experiencing worse mental health as a result of the pandemic.
- NUS' third phase of the Coronavirus Student Survey (2020) found that in September 2020, 59% of students were concerned about their own wellbeing.

Our own research with Alterline, as well as research by the UPP Foundation (2021), has found even higher proportions of students reporting worsening mental health and wellbeing due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In our survey, 74% of students said that Covid-19 has had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing, with just 10% reporting a positive impact (see Graph 2). These figures are broadly consistent with the findings of Alterline's 'Being Well, Doing Well' 2020/21 survey,

which found 77% of students had been negatively impacted. Similarly, in the UPP Foundation’s survey (2021) 78% said that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on their mental health.



Graph 2. Source: Student Minds’ research with Alterline.

These findings are, of course, concerning. It’s evident that the pandemic has created additional mental health and wellbeing challenges for students and young people who, as a community, were already at a heightened risk of experiencing mental health issues (The Mental Health Foundation, 2020; Mind, 2021; Department for Education, 2021). It’s vital that the sector continues to monitor student wellbeing and offer a range of accessible and timely support options as we move beyond the initial impacts of the pandemic.

The Higher Education Sector

At the beginning of 2020, as Covid-19 began to spread in the UK, the HE sector was facing the impacts of continued, widespread industrial action. Following eight days of strike action in November/December 2019, the University and College Union (UCU) announced a further 14 days of action in February/ March 2020. This action ended on Friday 13th March, days before pandemic restrictions were first introduced, meaning that approximately 1.2 million students experienced just 1-2 months of uninterrupted teaching during the 2019/20 academic year. The strikes resulted from disputes largely around staff pay, working conditions and pensions (UCU, 2019; UCU, 2020).

Since then, the HE sector has been responding and adapting to the wide-reaching challenges presented by the pandemic. At various points, these have included changes to how universities could function operationally with social distancing and home-working in place, as well as concerns about staff wellbeing, student

recruitment, student satisfaction and financial security (Clow, 2020; Office for Students, 2020; Department for Education, 2021b; HEPI, 2020; HEPI, 2021). Universities across the country have faced diminished income through accommodation fee reductions and a lack of on-campus commercial activity whilst also managing drastic shifts to remote working and the delivery of online education and support. For staff, this has led to periods of additional uncertainty and stress, as well as increased workloads and challenges juggling work and home life (see 'Work', from page 44). For most students, these changes have also meant adjusting to new methods of learning and assessment, as their university experience quickly changed from largely in-person and on-campus to online, at distance.

As the timeline (pages 10-12) and the remainder of this report reflect, both the 2019/20 and 2020/21 academic years have been impacted by the pandemic, from assessment periods to graduation ceremonies and Freshers' Week events. At the time of writing, reports are beginning to emerge about continued impacts into the 2021/22 academic year, with some universities announcing online-only lectures for autumn term (Coughlan, 2021).

During the pandemic, students, staff and higher education institutions have frequently voiced dissatisfaction with the way in which the UK Government has approached restrictions and guidance for universities and students. On numerous occasions, students have reported feeling 'forgotten and ignored', as higher education has been left out of formal announcements and guidance, with limited support made available for students (Miller, 2020; Sheffield SU, 2021; LSE SU, 2021; Durham SU, 2021; NUS, 2021). Particular dissatisfaction was voiced following the announcement of a delayed return after the Christmas period, following a late change in Government advice. Similarly, dissatisfaction was then later voiced in spring 2021, when students on non-practical courses were told they had to wait until May 2021 to return to on-campus teaching, by which point teaching had largely concluded for undergraduates (Russell Group, 2021; Coughlan 2021b; ITV, 2021).

The uncertainty felt across the higher education sector throughout the pandemic has been a recurrent underlying theme in our insights and listening work with both students and staff. Often, this uncertainty has underpinned concerns about academic experience and performance, work/life balance, accommodation, finances, future employment opportunities and social connections. For some, this has led to feelings of increased stress and anxiety.

"[I have] felt very anxious and sometimes alone, uncertainty about future causing more anxiety" (Respondent in Student Minds & Alterline survey, 2021)

"[Students] have faced challenges such as the uncertainty of events around Covid 19, how they study, where they will stay and how they store any belongings they can't take with them." (Respondent in Student Minds Pulse Survey II).

LOOKING AT THE BLACK AND MINORITY ETHNIC EXPERIENCE IN THE LAST YEAR

BY MYLES SMITH-THOMPSON

“One significant thing that I've had to face this year as a minority student is the impact of the most recent Black Lives Matter movement across the world. This also concerns dealing with the spur of social media reports and footage of police brutality around the world, as well as increased hostility and racial tensions. This year has been tough for black people on another level, and we've had to deal with vicarious racism and racial trauma at a time where we might be isolated from our own communities.” (Kezia - Student Space)

“Racism is a weapon used against us, and we experience it's debilitating violence everyday. Whether it's a gun, whether it's systemically keeping us from achieving in life or whether it's outright discriminating against us; these are all just weapons we experienced as attacks. Whether it's in the U.S or whether it's [in the UK], these attacks have a tendency to mirror each other throughout varying contexts and degrees; and the common denominator is the major impact it has on us. What I want to stress the most about this is that the impact hasn't passed. We are still impacted. We are being impacted right now and it's ongoing.” (Yannick Yalipende, Founding Director of Black People Talk).

Black Lives Matter, Summer 2020

On the 25th of May 2020, the world stood still and tragically witnessed the killing of George Floyd, a Black American who lost his life as a result of deep-rooted hatred, unfounded discrimination and rampant prejudice. In the weeks following Floyd's passing, people around the globe came together with a collective passion and unity to stand against systemic and structural racism. These powerful demonstrations were not just momentary, but a response to generations of oppression experienced by minority ethnic communities. Similarly, the calls of this protest were not new, but the contemporary reiteration of movements calling for Black liberation dating back to the Civil Rights period and earlier. Floyd's death has made a tangible impact both locally and globally, which had to be acknowledged. While this incident was deeply upsetting, it cannot be reduced to a singular instance. We have to see this as a catalyst for change, and a representation of injustice experienced by communities around the world.

In the months following May 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement erupted; taking over our streets, campuses, screens, and homes. Coffee catch-ups and video calls became the setting for conversations, confrontation, teaching and comfort. Ignorance had become unacceptable, and silence was viewed as complicity. We were really living in a world where our leaders and institutions were forced to take accountability. The infectious spirit of hope,

and the message that “enough is enough” had meant that where protests are usually limited to the site of an incident, communities and towns that have historically been very quiet on issues of inequality have demanded their voices be heard. From the UK to Syria, to Palestine, the solidarity movements were visible, vocal and active.

Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, Spring 2021

With the realities of racism high on the public agenda, nationally, a phenomenon occurred. Britain was forced to reckon with its history, head-on. This history underpins inequalities in law enforcement, education, healthcare, welfare and sentencing until this day. While similar patterns of inequality exist in other countries, Britain’s racism had long been considered “not as bad”, allowing Britain to fly below the radar. However, with minds open and eyes peeled this was no longer deemed sufficient.

As a response to these calls, the government commissioned further research into the inequalities experienced by Black people in Britain. In March 2021, the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (CRED) published a report that was designed to investigate racial and ethnic disparities in the UK. For many, the findings of the report were incredibly disappointing. The report concluded:

“... we no longer see a Britain where the system is deliberately rigged against ethnic minorities. The impediments and disparities do exist, they are varied, and ironically very few of them are to do with racism. The evidence shows that geography, family influence, socio-economic background, culture and religion have a more significant impact on life chances than the existence of racism.” (CRED, 2021; p.8)

For many ethnic minority communities, particularly Black communities, this report has been deeply hurtful and has caused much pain. The findings were perceived as an attempt to invalidate the experiences of racialised groups and reinforced outdated and problematic perceptions of the racial landscape in the UK. Thinkers, academics, business leaders and even the United Nations were quick to discredit this report due to its questionable selection of data, and the poor grasp of race and race theory incorporated into the report. Since then there have been calls to move away from debates about whether racism exists or not. These conversations distract us from the real work; to dismantle and challenge systemic racism within our institutions.

“The very serious function of racism ... is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and so you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn’t shaped properly

so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says that you have no art so you dredge that up. Somebody says that you have no kingdoms and so you dredge that up. None of that is necessary.” (Toni Morrison 1975)

Higher Education

Following this tumultuous period of state violence and social organising, students have been at the forefront of conversations and demonstrations for race equality in the UK. Through this, we have also been a focal point for active change. It is important to remember that the radical power of student movements is not new but long-established. Though it can be difficult to remember in a time when students have been so adversely impacted by the pandemic, we have the power to make change and a privilege – through our education - that many others in our society may not have.

Within higher education, substantial evidence tells us institutional and systemic racism is rife and rampant. Running contrary to the findings of the CRED report, we have seen numerous papers published exploring race as an issue within higher education. Looking at the work being done by students and academics, it is clear that a truly equitable response is needed to bring about meaningful change.

Professor David Richardson (Vice Chancellor, University of East Anglia) has articulated that:

“We must acknowledge the institutional racism and systemic issues that pervade the entire higher education sector, in all institutions, if we are to bring about meaningful change” (p.4), in Universities UK (UUK) paper, ‘Tackling Racial Harassment in Higher Education’

As a society, we tend to evaluate success based on comparing ourselves to others. In the case of anti-racism, this often looks like comparison to other countries or institutions. These comparative metrics have become so embedded that they now determine our satisfaction of response to an issue. Consequently, the UK and many other countries around the world have not invested a proportionate or adequate amount of time into working towards true racial justice. In more simple terms... Being less racist, or not being as racist as our neighbour, does not mean we are not racist. A more healthy approach calls us to monitor our progress based on where we were, where we are now, and most importantly where we want to be. This would require us to dream freely about what an equitable future could look like and strive towards it.

So what next?

Students! We want you to know that you are seen, and you will continue to be heard. In the last year, the world has begun to witness and understand just the surface of what Black and

Minority Ethnic people have experienced and continue to experience. For many, the last year has amplified the complex and nuanced barriers and disadvantages that have been overlooked for too long. Moving forward, we ask that Universities do more to understand the diverse needs of their student communities. We must begin to prioritise the health and wellbeing of those who chose to work and study within our virtual walls and campuses. It is not enough to be 'not racist', but we must actively strive towards being 'anti-racist'.

Remember... We all have a part to play, a responsibility to act.

Recommendations:

- The higher education sector must step away from thinking of anti-racist work in comparative terms where being "less racist" than another body is sufficient, and instead frame their anti-racism work around the world they want to see, with complete racial equity and justice. This approach can be applied to every level of university activity, from individual staff behaviour right up to institutional strategy.
- While the evidence base surrounding the experience of mental health support for BME students is growing, further exploration in this area should be encouraged. This work should be overseen, if not entirely co-produced or led, by BME students and researchers. Institutions can make designated funding available to pilot new services, extend existing ones, or deliver research into the area of BME student mental health.
- Black and Minority Ethnic students are experts by experience and should be compensated fairly for their time and emotional labour in unpacking experiences of racism at their institution, and beyond. Meaningful co-production to find solutions to achieve racial equality at university must take place with the experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic students centred at every stage. Institutions must engage with co-production in good faith and a willingness to acknowledge past and present racism if they are to meaningfully move forward.
- Institutions should seek to understand and respond to societal injustices, material conditions and health inequalities which affect BME student mental health. Examples of factors to investigate could include police brutality, financial inequalities, access to opportunity or lack thereof, housing inequalities, safety on campus, and more.

WOMEN'S SAFETY AT UNIVERSITY

BY CHLOE MAUGHAN

“Since NUS started campaigning against sexual violence on campus over a decade ago, we have fought for a culture of consent, for community safety and collective care. Alongside FemSocs, Women’s Officers and student activists across the country we have called for proper support through trauma-informed counselling, survivor-centred support services and for the devastating cuts to domestic violence services to be reversed.” (Sara Khan, NUS VP Liberation and Equality)

“Across the world young people who have the ambition and opportunity to progress to higher education embark upon a phase of their lives where new ideas, skills, friends and networks can beckon. For many, this period can be marked by excitement and possibilities but for too many these are stolen through the experience of sexual violence.” (Humphreys and Towl, 2020: xxi).

Background

Over the 2020-2021 academic year, attention has been cast on women’s safety, with a particular focus on the prevalence of sexual harassment, assault and 'rape culture' in UK universities. It should be emphasised that these are not new issues - women’s safety has long been the focus of high profile campaigns including:

- **Reclaim the Night**

The first UK-based Reclaim the Night march was held in Leeds in 1977. The marches were inspired by the “Take Back the Night” movement in Germany which saw women march against sexual harassment. In Leeds, the movement was further prompted following the murders of women by Peter Sutcliffe, and the subsequent police responses which urged women not to go out after dark. Other marches were held across several UK cities, and continue to run annually to this day (Reclaim the Night, 2021). Many of these are led by student organisers with events also often run by students’ unions.

- **The Everyday Sexism Project**

Founded in 2012 by Laura Bates, the campaign draws attention to women’s everyday experiences of misogyny, and has catalogued thousands of women’s experiences of harassment and rape culture.

- **The #MeToo movement**

#MeToo rose to prominence in 2017 following allegations of sexual misconduct perpetrated by former Hollywood producer, Harvey Weinstein. However, the origins of the term trace back earlier to 2006, when the term was used by Tarana Burke, an activist who adopted the term to raise awareness of the pervasive nature of sexual assault and harassment.

“[Rape culture] describes a culture in which dominant social norms belittle, dismiss, joke about or even seem to condone rape and sexual assault. It describes a culture in which the normalisation of rape and sexual assault are so great that often victims are blamed, either implicitly or explicitly, when these crimes are committed against them...It’s part of rape culture when “I’m feeling rapey” T-shirts are put up for sale on eBay. Or when a member of a university sports team goes out in a “casual rape” shirt, or another team plays a game called: “It’s not rape if ...”” (Laura Bates for The Guardian, 2014).

2020/21

This year, pressure has been placed on UK universities to act on women’s safety, fuelled by the growth of ‘Everyone’s Invited’ (founded in June 2020) and the murder of Sarah Everard in March 2021.

Everyone’s Invited, founded by UCL student Soma Sara, is a movement that is “committed to eradicating rape culture”. The platform, which started as an Instagram account but also has a dedicated website, has cast a particular focus on experiences of ‘rape culture’ in educational settings including schools and higher education institutions. Since March 2021, Everyone’s Invited has recorded over 16,000 testimonies of individual experiences of sexual harassment, assault and rape culture. So far, 119 universities have been named within testimonies, the vast majority of which are located within the UK. Students, parents, activists and staff have all argued that the sector is not doing enough to tackle rape culture and keep young people safe.

Activism and campaigning about women’s safety also accelerated following the disappearance of 33 year old Sarah Everard, who was abducted whilst walking home on 3 March 2021. Sarah’s body was later discovered by police, and a Metropolitan Police Constable was subsequently arrested and charged with her kidnap, rape and murder. Sarah’s death sparked an outpouring of grief from women, many of whom took to social media to share their own stories. Women documented how they had feared for their own personal safety, especially whilst walking alone, and many spoke of being unable to walk the streets in the wake of Sarah’s disappearance. Vigils were organised across several UK cities and by university societies and students’ unions, many under the banner of ‘Reclaim These Streets’.

- 1 in 10 people aged 16 to 24 experienced sexual assault in the last year. (ONS, 2021)
- 62% of students and recent graduates experienced sexual violence (Revolt & The Student Room, 2018)
- 93% of full-time students are victim-survivors of some form of sexual harassment (APPG for UN Women, 2021)

How does women's safety relate to student mental health?

Sexual violence can have lasting effects on victim-survivors, who may experience physical, psychological, emotional, behavioural and practical impacts (Humphreys and Towl, 2020). Common psychological impacts include experiences of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (Tarzia, Thuraisingam, Novy *et al*, 2018; Humphreys and Towl, 2020). These mental health problems can result in symptoms such as panic attacks, dissociation, flashbacks, avoidance behaviours and hyper-arousal (such as feeling on edge) (RAINN, 2021). In some cases, these symptoms may impact upon the extent to which women feel able to fully participate in university life.

For example, whilst suffering from PTSD at university myself, I developed avoidance behaviours around walking alone after dark. These avoidance behaviours resulted in me avoiding attending social events or going out with friends, where attending might mean having to walk alone. This had a disruptive effect on my ability to enjoy the social side of university life, and often led to feelings of isolation.

Due to the prevalence and normalisation of sexual harassment in schools (Gov.uk, 2021), many women are arriving at university as victim-survivors of sexual violence. The prevalence of sexual violence at universities also means that many more young women are at risk of becoming victim-survivors of sexual violence before they graduate, with full-time students more likely to have experienced sexual assault in the last year than people in any other occupation (Office for National Statistics, 2021). And whilst some of these incidents may happen in the community or be perpetrated by unknown strangers, most are perpetrated by men known to women (Humphreys and Towel, 2020). Often, the perpetrators are also other university students (Brook, 2019).

Despite this, many universities still do not have specialist staff to support survivors of sexual violence, and even where universities do offer counselling services these are often limited to six weeks of support. For many, this is too short-term to safely and effectively address complex issues like sexual violence. Women who have reported sexual misconduct or violence to their universities have also often complained of processes that are slow and that do not provide adequate support for complainants. In some cases, processes have lacked transparency, and victim-survivors have not

been informed of the outcomes of their complaints (UUK, 2016). Whilst some universities are delivering sector-leading support, across the UK support is more of a postcode lottery.

In the wake of testimonies shared by students about their experiences of sexual harassment and violence, the Office for Students (OfS), has released new guidance for higher education providers setting out their expectations for universities to respond to and prevent harassment and sexual misconduct. This includes improving dialogue and implementing robust procedures to report and respond to sexual misconduct. The OfS acknowledged that the sector has made progress over the last decade but this has been “uneven” with a “lack of consistent and effective systems, policies and procedures across the sector” (Dandridge, 2021).

Vision for the future

Sexual misconduct and violence can be prevented. Schools and universities should be at the forefront of this objective, working to develop preventative measures that help to create healthy communities and reduce the prevalence of sexual violence. Alongside this, it is critical that universities, schools and colleges continue to implement responsive measures to support students now.

With appropriate support, victim-survivors of sexual violence can effectively manage the impacts of trauma and have fulfilling university experiences. But universities and schools have a pivotal role to play in supporting victim-survivors and preventing sexual misconduct on their campuses.

Recommendations:

- Schools, universities and colleges should work together to develop measures to help prevent sexual violence and misconduct. This includes ensuring all young people receive comprehensive sex education at an early age that teaches respect and provides comprehensive consent education. Research conducted by University of Bristol Students' Union in 2018 found that only 35% of students felt their sex and relationships education had given them a comprehensive understanding of consent.
- Ensure victim-survivors of sexual violence have timely access to support, which could be delivered by universities in partnership with specialist local services.
- Provide reporting tools and procedures for reporting sexual misconduct at university that are clear and minimise barriers for victim-survivors. Universities should actively seek feedback on these processes and work in co-production with students to make improvements. Related to this, universities should be clear from the out-set about what kind of redress may be available.
- Take swift action where misconduct is reported, conducting trauma-informed investigations and ensuring that support is embedded throughout the process.

DISCUSSION

In this section of the report, we draw on the findings of our listening and insights work to explore the impact of the pandemic on students' everyday lives, learning experiences and support needs. We also consider the impact of the past 18 months on university staff, who have faced unique challenges during the pandemic, against a backdrop of wider issues around working conditions and industrial action. Finally, we offer some reflections on the unequal impacts of the pandemic and the ways in which existing inequalities have been exacerbated within wider society, and more specifically within higher education.

LIVE

Students' everyday lives have been impacted immensely since the beginning of March 2020. The pandemic has disrupted students' living arrangements, financial situations and social lives. Although this level of disruption is not unique to the student community, there is evidence to suggest that students and young people have faced a disproportionate impact (APPG on Youth Affairs, 2021; ONS, 2021). Research conducted prior to the pandemic found that residential accommodation, social integration, and financial security were already vital factors in students' mental health (NUS, 2018; NUS, 2019; University Mental Health Charter, 2019; Save the Student, 2020; Blackbullion, 2021). Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that disruption to each of these factors over the course of the past year has resulted in widespread discussion and campaigning about the impacts on mental health, wellbeing and support (see NUS' *Students Deserve Better* campaign or PGRs UK's *Pandemic PGRs* campaign, for example).

Accommodation

“Residential accommodation can have a major bearing on student experience, mental health and wellbeing” (University Mental Health Charter, 2019: 54).

The cost and quality of student accommodation were widely acknowledged issues across the sector even before the pandemic (NUS, 2018; NUS, 2019; Save the Student, 2020b), but during 2020, these issues became increasingly important.

As the pandemic has continued over the course of two academic years and multiple university vacation periods, trends in *where* students have been living have shifted. This, coupled with the unique challenges of different groups within the student community (such as international, LGBT+ and low-income background students), has meant that students' experiences in their accommodation have been varied. However, despite this, common and consistent themes have been observed in

relation to students' living arrangements and accommodation. These have been broadly identified as 'cost' and 'space', and are discussed below.

Cost

An argument which has dominated many student-led campaigns since March 2020 is the issue of whether students *should* have had to pay for their accommodation during the pandemic. Given that at several points during the pandemic travel was not permitted, students have voiced their dissatisfaction at having to pay for accommodation they could not legally return to. Although some providers did offer refunds or reductions, responses from accommodation providers have been varied. It's thought that in total, students have spent around £1bn on accommodation they've not had full access to (Save the Student, 2021).

"[My accommodation provider] refunded us for [the] reduction in bills they've had as bills are included, but that's minimal and we're still paying for accommodation the government has stopped us living in, despite being in private accommodation where we wouldn't meet with anyone else." (Student living in privately rented accommodation - Save the Student, 2021).

"Hundreds of thousands of students have been forced to pay for accommodation they were then told not to live in for much of this year. Many are struggling to make ends meet and now getting into debt just trying to access education - the injustice is astounding." (Larissa Kennedy, NUS UK President).

On average, students spend £146 per week on rent, with this figure ranging from £119 in the West Midlands to £152 in London (Save the Student, 2021). Throughout the pandemic, student campaigners have lobbied for rent reductions, rebates and tenancy cancellations for students who are either no longer using their student accommodation or can no longer afford to make full rent payments. As noted above, the response from providers has been varied: during the initial lockdown in March 2020, universities and private, purpose built student accommodation providers (PBSAs) largely agreed to terminate contracts or offer rent reductions to students who had left their accommodation. However, the response from private landlords was far more inconsistent, and with little support or guidance from the Government, many students were expected to continue full rent payments.

As restrictions continued into the 2020/21 academic year, inconsistency remained across the sector. Research by both Save the Student (2021) and HEPI (2021) has found that around one third of students have received a financial reimbursement or discount from their university or accommodation provider. However, Save the Student's research clearly demonstrates the inconsistency between different providers, with just 6% of students renting from a private landlord having received a

discount, compared to 32% in private halls (PBSAs) and 63% in university-owned accommodation.

The cost of rent has represented a continued concern for students during the course of the pandemic. The fourth phase of NUS' Coronavirus Student Survey (April 2021) found that over two-thirds of students living in privately rented accommodation or university-owned halls had some level of concern about continuing to make rent payments. Our own research with Alterline in 2021 also found that of the 49% of students whose financial situation had been negatively impacted by the pandemic, 30% had experienced difficulties in paying for their accommodation. This figure was higher for those living in a student house or flat (46%) compared to those in private halls/PBSAs (38%) or university-owned accommodation (30%).

“Having no rent discount or refund made me feel stressed, worried and anxious about money. My mum being recently made redundant due to Covid couldn't help either. It just caused quite severe anxiety and stress at the time” - Daniel in Express & Star

The mental health implications resulting from concerns about financial hardship (often linked to accommodation costs) are explored in greater detail in 'Finances', below.

Space

Another key issue with regard to students' residential accommodation since March 2020 is access to adequate space to study and access support, as well as space to relax and access outdoor spaces. The quality of the spaces available is also important, particularly given the amount of time spent indoors during the pandemic.

Research by a range of organisations has consistently found that roughly one fifth of students have **not** had adequate space to study since March 2020:

- Research by Jisc (2021) found that 19% of students lacked a safe, private area to work in.
- The Sutton Trust found that 23% of students did not have access to what they deemed to be a suitable study space (Montacute and Holt-White, 2021).
- Our own research with Alterline found that 19% did not feel they have adequate space to study

“In the first lockdown I was coming to the end of my degree and I was doing all of my assessments from the same tiny room in my student house. I remember feeling exhausted and strung out every day.” (Jessica Davies, 2021 in Wonkhe).

Our research with Alterline also found that students who were living in private student halls (PBSAs) were least likely to have adequate space to study, with just

57% agreeing that they do and 24% disagreeing. Students who were living with parents or guardians were most likely to have adequate space to study, with 71% agreeing and 18% disagreeing. This was followed by students living in university-owned accommodation and other student housing, with 70% of both groups agreeing they had adequate space to study.

We also explored students' access to outdoor spaces and private spaces. Evidence suggests that access to outdoor/green spaces during the pandemic has had positive mental health benefits (Mental Health Foundation, 2021; Hubbard et al, 2021). However, the findings of our research with Alterline show that 18% of students did not have access to outdoor space in their accommodation, increasing to 26% of students in private halls (PBSAs), 22% of students in a student house/flat and 20% of students in university-owned halls. In addition, 1 in 10 students did not feel able to have private conversations (e.g. to access support via phone or video call) whilst in their accommodation. This may be due to concerns that they would be overheard by family or house/flat mates, or due to a lack of a quiet space free from distractions, for instance.

Notably, the Government in England allowed exceptions for students without adequate space to study to return to their term-time address in early 2021. Thus, our research findings are likely to reflect this, and it's possible that these figures were higher prior to this exception being in place (as seen in the Sutton Trust's research). However, our findings do highlight the value of shared study spaces, such as libraries, given the relatively high numbers of students who cannot study effectively in their student accommodation. Given that many of these have been closed at various points throughout the year due to restrictions, the importance of appropriate and effective mitigation procedures is clear.

Finances

Another recurring theme in discussions about students' experiences over the past 18 months has been finances. Similarly to the cost and quality of accommodation, the cost of higher education and a 'full' student experience has long been debated within the sector (Save the Student, 2020c). Student leaders, campaign groups and activists have, in recent years, led several campaigns calling for increased financial support for students and cuts to rent and tuition fees (NUS, 2019b; Rent Strike, 2021). These calls have intensified during the pandemic as the university experience has changed due to the pandemic and students have faced increasing financial pressures and concerns. For example, research has shown that students' financial situations have been impacted in numerous ways due to the pandemic. Given the restrictions placed on the hospitality and retail sectors, many students had their existing or planned employment disrupted (NUS Phase II, 2020). Students have also reported that family members who would usually provide financial support have had their incomes reduced (NUS Phase III, 2020).

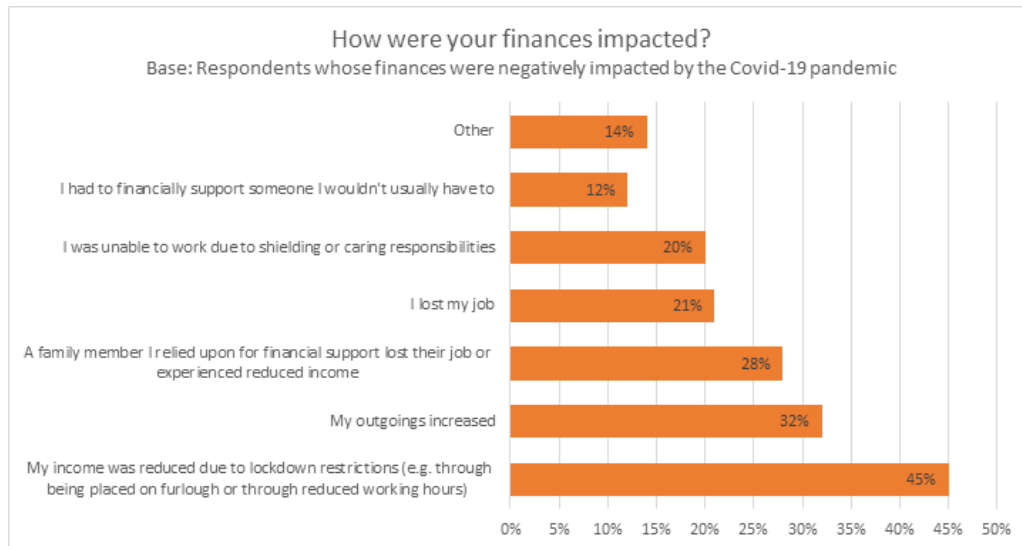
A survey by the Sutton Trust (Montacute and Holt-White, 2021) in November 2020 found that just over half (54%) of students had experienced some form of financial hardship during autumn term, with one third (33%) finding it difficult to cover their basic living and course expenses. Similarly, a survey by Save the Student (2020d), found that 48% of students were concerned about money, with 42% having experienced financial issues and 25% having experienced income issues. In our own research with Alterline, carried out in April/May 2021, 49% of students said their financial situation had been negatively impacted by the pandemic.

Income and Employment

In 2020, Save the Student's Student Money Survey found that 74% of respondents had a part-time job and 68% received money from their parents. A larger survey of higher and further education students by NUS in March/April 2020 found that 62% of respondents had some form of employment, which they held alongside their course. Anecdotally, and based on research from over the past 20 years, we know that students often rely on employment in sectors such as retail or hospitality and commonly work more hours over seasonal periods such as Christmas and summer (Barke et al, 2000; Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013; Gil, 2014; Warrell, 2015; Gilbert, 2018; NUS Phase II, 2020). During the pandemic, opportunities to take on such jobs have been limited due to Government restrictions and economic downturn, resulting in some students facing a lower-than-anticipated income and increased financial concerns.

Research conducted over the past year has found that roughly between one half and two-thirds of students have had their income impacted by the pandemic (NUS Phase III, 2021; Blackbullion, 2021). The third phase of NUS' Coronavirus and Students survey found that 1 in 5 students had experienced reduced working hours, 1 in 10 were placed on furlough and 1 in 10 had lost their job. Over half of students also reported that someone they relied on financially had had their income impacted by the pandemic. Similar findings were also reported by the Sutton Trust (Montacute and Holt-White, 2021), who found that 27% of students had been unable to find a job, 19% had parents who were less able to support them financially and 16% had experienced reduced hours in a job, or hadn't been paid.

Our research with Alterline uncovered similar levels of impact on students' income. Graph 3 (below) displays the ways in which students were negatively impacted by the pandemic:



Qualitative responses from our research with Alterline also showed that students had struggled to find employment. This was the case for half of the 14% who responded 'Other'.

"I was hoping to find work during my free time between each university year, but was unable to do so." (Respondent in Student Minds & Alterline Research, 2021)

"I was unable to find a job at a time where I needed funds due to everything being closed"(Respondent in Student Minds & Alterline Research, 2021)

National data from the ONS (2021c) further shows that young people have been disproportionately impacted by job loss during the pandemic. For instance, in December 2020 - February 2021, the employment rate amongst 16-24 year olds dropped by 5.1 percentage points on the year. This is compared to a smaller drop of 1.4 percentage points amongst all adults aged 16-64.

The impacts of financial hardship

"I remember crying on the phone to [my lettings agent] as I literally had no means to pay the rent at that time, and I didn't want to put my dad in a financial situation." (Lisa, in Express and Star)

"I considered deferring a year this year, with everything going on and not having a part-time job and my maintenance loan not covering my rent. I worried about finances, but I realised if I deferred this year, I would struggle to go back into education." (In Blackbullion, 2021).

Research has also shown that the majority of students have worried about their finances during the pandemic. For instance, research by NUS (Phase III, 2020) found that almost 3 in 4 (73%) of students had concerns about managing financially due to the pandemic. Similarly, Blackbullion (2021) and Save the Student (2020d) also explored students' concerns and found high proportions of students were worried about their finances. According to Blackbullion's research, this figure was 75%, whilst Save the Student found that 4 in 5 (81%) were worried about money.

The impacts of financial hardship can be wide-reaching. Research prior to the pandemic has shown that students' mental health, diet, social life, academic performance, relationships and sleep can all suffer as a result of financial hardship (Save the Student, 2019). With high numbers of students experiencing financial hardship due to the pandemic, such impacts have been reported widely.

For instance, findings relating to students' experiences of financial hardship were reported by Blackbullion (2021), following their survey of 1000 university students in January 2021. This research found that 75% of students worried about their finances and, of these, 67% said this negatively impacted their mental health. Further, almost half of all respondents (48%) said they had considered dropping out or deferring their studies due to financial constraints, whilst over 1 in 3 had skipped a meal due to lack of money.

The third phase of NUS' Coronavirus and Student Survey (November 2020) also highlighted similar issues. 63% of students said they had cut back their spending on luxury/non-essential items, whilst almost 1 in 3 students (29%) said they had cut back on spending on food.

Our own research with Alterline also explored the impacts of financial hardship. We asked students who said their financial situation had been impacted negatively (49%; n=547) to tell us about what this has meant for them:

- 58% had difficulties paying for a 'full' student experience (e.g. going out, participating in sports/societies, attending events)
- 40% had difficulties paying for study resources
- 35% had difficulties paying for basic living needs
- 30% had difficulties paying for accommodation
- 16% had difficulties paying for tuition fees

Clearly, the impacts of financial hardship are varied, and are felt differently by different people. These findings highlight the importance of financial support for students, explored further below.

Financial Support

“The scale of the problem is incredibly alarming and clearly shows how the measly amounts of hardship funding offered to students in England haven’t made a dent. Just to match what the governments in Wales and Northern Ireland have offered to students, this figure should be upwards of £700 million ... The government must step in with direct payments to students to avoid an entire cohort of students getting into financial ruin.” (Larissa Kennedy, NUS UK President).

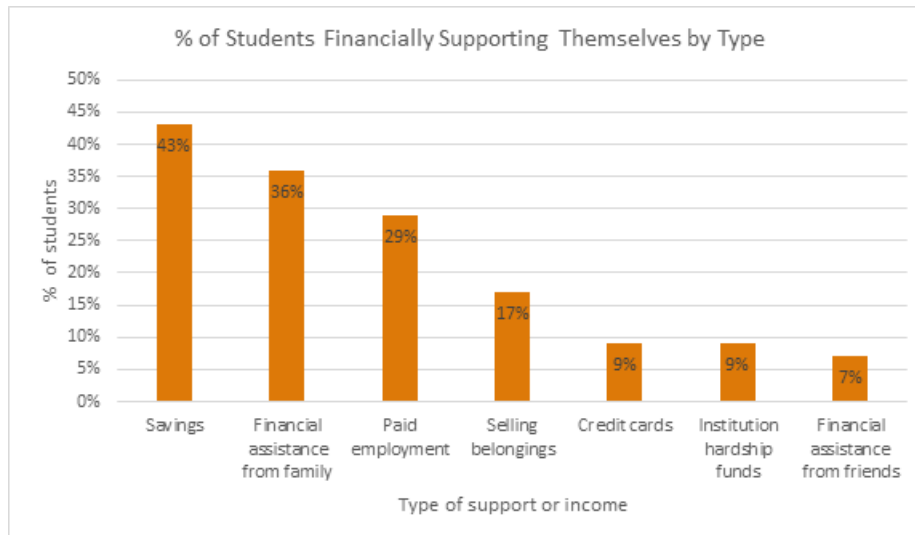
Since the beginning of the pandemic, the government in England has made an additional £85m available in hardship funding, distributed through individual higher education institutions to students most in need. This is compared to, at time of writing, an additional £20m in Northern Ireland, £50m in Wales and £40m in Scotland. These funding allocations work out to an approximate per-student spend of £41 in England, £339 in Northern Ireland, £366.69 in Wales and £154 in Scotland ([calculated using 2019/20 HESA figures](#))*. This has led to continued lobbying from campaigners, who do not believe this amount of support for students is sufficient.

Nation	Hardship funding allocation	Student numbers (2019/20 figures)	Spend per student
England	£85 million	2,076,465	£40.93
Northern Ireland	£20 million	59,075	£338.52
Scotland	£40 million	260,490	£153.56
Wales	£50 million	136,355	£366.69

*It should be noted that these hardship funds have not been made available to all students and differing eligibility criteria, such as whether a student is full-time or part-time, have been put in place by each national government.

Research by the Sutton Trust in November 2020 (Montacute and Holt-White, 2020) found that just under half (49%) of students were satisfied with the financial support in place for students experiencing hardship during the pandemic. 28% were not sure what support was on offer, or were unsure of how satisfactory it was. Almost one quarter (23%) reported being dissatisfied by the support on offer.

Our own research with Alterline also explored the ways in which students have supported themselves financially during the pandemic. Of all respondents, 75% said they had used some form of financial ‘support’ during the pandemic. The most common ways students supported themselves are displayed in Graph 4, below:



Graph 4. Source: Student Minds' research with Alterline.

Other ways students supported themselves during the pandemic included bank loans (4%), using food banks (3%), gambling (3%) and sex work by phone or online (1%).

“Nobody is hiring, student finance doesn't even cover half the cost of my rent. My parents can't just fund my life. How is it okay to leave students with no help and no money during a pandemic?” (respondent in Alterline research by Student Minds, 2021)

Social Connectedness and Isolation

“I was never the most extroverted person, but suddenly relying on my unstable internet connection at home for all communication and interaction had a huge negative impact on my mental health.” (Faith Pring, 2021 in LeftLion)

The pandemic and resulting lockdowns have led to restrictions on social interaction and travel for over a year. This, coupled with more general concerns about catching or spreading the virus, has led to marked changes in how students socialise and connect. Research by NUS (Phase I, 2020) shows that in March 2020, 82% of students were connecting with their friends and family online to support their wellbeing. However, this dropped to 65% in July 2020, when students also reported interacting with friends, coursemates, other students in their institution and clubs/societies less or much less, whilst almost half were interacting with family more (NUS Phase II, 2020).

Over the course of the pandemic, and even before, students have reported feeling isolated and lonely at disproportionate levels. However, the student community has,

in places, also been able to combat social isolation and continue to offer opportunities for social interaction despite the pandemic.

Loneliness and isolation

“Student loneliness has been shown to be the strongest overall predictor of mental distress in the student population” (University Mental Health Charter, 2019: 57).

Over the past 5 years, loneliness amongst students and young people has been highlighted as an issue by several pieces of research (Sodexo & YouthSight, 2017; BBC Radio 4, 2018; Unite Students, 2019; Wonkhe, 2019). Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that over the course of the pandemic, studies have found loneliness to be a continuing issue within the student community, with some finding that the pandemic may have exacerbated the problem.

In March 2021, one year after restrictions were first introduced, the Student Covid Insights Survey by ONS found that 29% of students felt lonely often or always. Data from the same survey collected a month earlier also found that loneliness was more pronounced for younger students, with 33% of students aged 16-29 saying they felt lonely often or always. In stark contrast, this figure was only 7% of the British adult population in March and 12% in February 2021.

Research by Save the Student (2020d) carried out in October/November 2020 also found the extent to which loneliness has been an issue for students. 49% of respondents said they were worried about loneliness - the third most common issue - with only 15% of respondents saying they were not worried about feeling lonely.

Our own research with Alterline found that since March 2020, two-thirds of students have often felt isolated or lonely. This figure was higher for first year students (70%), second year students (72%), students aged 21 and under (71%) and students living in university halls (71%). Notably, there's likely substantial overlap here, with first year students also more likely to be 21 and under *and* live in university halls.

Feelings of loneliness and isolation can have clear mental health implications, as highlighted in research by NUS. The findings of the third phase of the Coronavirus Student Survey, carried out in November 2020, showed that “loneliness appears to be having a huge impact on students’ wellbeing”. The research also noted that “students who feel the impacts of Covid on their mental health have had a multitude of negative experiences. Not being allowed to see people is causing isolation and loneliness, leading to increased anxiety, stress and worry.”

“Loneliness, social isolation and staying at home the whole day cause me more stress, anxiety, sudden drops of self esteem and loss of confidence.” - student respondent in NUS Coronavirus Student Survey: Phase III.

Other research by organisations including Love Energy Savings (2021), Jisc (2021) and Sinn Fein (2021) have also highlighted loneliness and isolation as key issues for students during the pandemic. For instance, Jisc's research into the digital student experience found that isolation and loneliness were commonly highlighted as negative aspects of online learning. Sinn Fein's survey of 551 Third Level students in Northern Ireland also found that over 90% felt increasingly lonely, whilst Love Energy Savings noted that the qualitative responses to their research indicated that students were feeling 'lonelier than ever' (although no further analysis was offered).

"[I feel] disconnected, as I can't seem to make meaningful friendships through online classes. You don't have that camaraderie with other students who are as stressed/defeated as you are" (in Love Energy Savings, 2021).

Student-led Activities and Opportunities

Within the higher education sector, the terms student-led 'activities' or 'opportunities' typically refer to societies, clubs, student media, fundraising and volunteering, usually supported and coordinated by students' unions. Such groups can play a pivotal role in students' experiences of university, by enabling them to connect with others with shared interests or backgrounds, to build communities and share experiences, and to develop new skills.

According to research by the Office for Students (Barber, 2021), just over two-thirds of students (67%) felt that social interaction with peers could not be replicated online. Despite this, over the course of the pandemic, we've seen the student community come together to offer continued peer support and social opportunities online. Many student societies and sports teams have endeavoured to continue to run events for their members and offer social opportunities to stay connected.

"We've been running weekly socials as well as strength and conditioning sessions which happen on Zoom. We've also been sending out rugby sessions which people can do in small groups or with their households or by themselves so they can still follow Covid guidelines but they can keep on training." (Leeds University Women's Rugby Society on ITV, 2021)

However, despite the creative efforts of executive teams, research by the Sutton Trust (Montacute and Holt-White, 2021) shows the impact of the pandemic on student engagement with extra-curricular activities. In autumn term 2020, 39% of students reported having taken part in a sport or non-sport student society. This is down from 54% of students participating in autumn term 2019. The vast majority of students (87%) reported barriers to participating in extra-curricular activities in autumn term 2020, including online activities. Barriers included the lack of social interaction during online activities (29%) and 'Zoom fatigue' (24%).

Similarly, the second phase of NUS' Coronavirus and Students Survey (September 2020) found that 74% of students were interacting with clubs and societies less than they were before the pandemic, with 47% saying they were interacting 'much less'. By November 2020 (Phase III), the percentage of students interacting with clubs and societies less was 65%. The Student Futures Commission (The UPP Foundation, 2021) also found that more than half of all students hadn't participated in any extracurricular activities over the last year – with nearly 8 in 10 saying they participated less than they were expecting to.

Through speaking to students' union staff, Dickinson and Hunnam (2021) found that the number of student-led groups had declined by just over one quarter from 2019/20 to September 2020. By second term in 2021, just 57% of these groups had been active during the academic year, with concerns that student group numbers could drop further by September 2021. The qualitative feedback from staff suggested that smaller and specialist groups have been hardest hit by the pandemic, and there are concerns about the disproportionate impact on particular marginalised communities, exacerbating existing inequalities.

“[I’m] also concerned that the impacts of Covid will spill over into increasing the inequalities in our engagement in student opportunities. We already have a high proportion of BAME and students from low-economic backgrounds that statistically are less likely to engage.” (SU Staff in Dickinson and Hunnam, 2021).

“Faith & Cultural Societies quieter than usual, particularly for international students time-zone differences makes a lot of activities nonviable; worried about the impact on current international students.” (SU Staff in Dickinson and Hunnam, 2021)

LEARN

“My PhD research and lived experience indicate some positives from increasing accessibility and flexibility of online learning. However, the experience has been variable and some students have found difficulties engaging, with limited access to staff, unequal access to technology, and isolation making it difficult to concentrate or develop practical skills.” (Michael Priestley, PhD Student at Durham University via Student Minds’ Call for Evidence)

“Long lectures (3 hours) make it hard to stay motivated when staring at a laptop screen and juggling poor Wi-Fi, lack of privacy and disruptions within the home. These issues make it difficult to concentrate.” (Student quote in the Student Digital Experience Survey by Jisc, 2021)

Throughout the 2019/20 and 2020/21 academic years, as a result of industrial action and the impacts of the pandemic, university students have experienced a significantly different learning experience to what they likely expected. Since March 2020, university students have seen their learning experiences shift from largely in-person teaching and assessment to mostly online or ‘blended’ approaches. This has had a huge impact on how students engage with their learning, including how they experience teaching, academic discussion with peers and staff and practical experience, as well as how they are assessed.

Some students have also faced different or additional challenges based on their year, course and level of study. For instance, some postgraduate research students have faced significant disruption to their planned fieldwork, with policy changes relating to funding also leaving some PhD students feeling confused and frustrated (McRae, 2020). Additionally, during the UK’s first peak of Covid-19 cases, almost 15,000 second and final year students on medical and healthcare courses joined frontline NHS teams (NHS, 2020), placing themselves at additional risk in order to support the NHS.

Though there are some disparities in experience based on individual circumstances, this section of the report focuses on the general findings of our insights and listening work around students’ experiences of learning during the pandemic.

Experiences of Online Learning

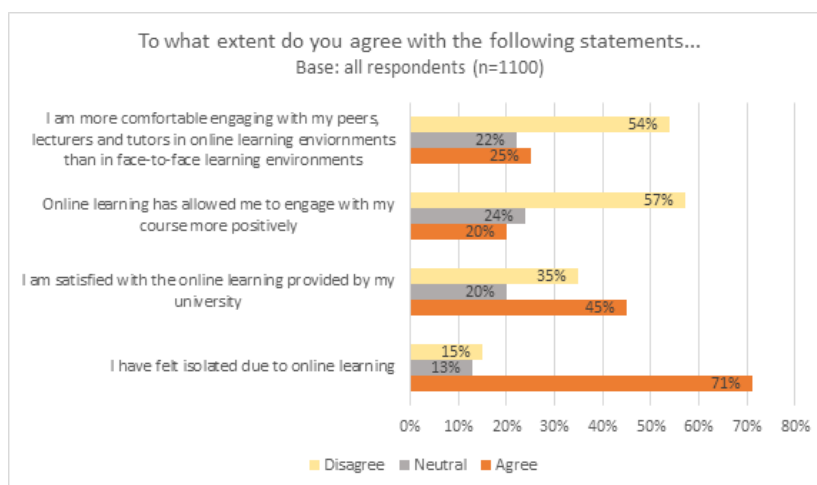
Research from over the course of the pandemic has shown a varied picture of students’ experiences of online learning. Satisfaction levels have peaked and troughed over time, and findings have consistently shown that students are divided in their experiences.

The ONS Student Covid-19 Insights Survey has captured students' satisfaction levels between November 2020 and May 2021. Most recently, in June 2021, 36% of students said they were dissatisfied with their academic experience, compared to 44% who were satisfied. Dissatisfaction with academic experience peaked in January 2021, when 45% of students reported being dissatisfied. Over the course of the survey, the most common reasons for dissatisfaction have consistently been 'learning delivery', 'quality of learning' and 'access to resources or facilities'.

Similarly, a poll of 1000 students by HEPI in April 2021 found that only 54% of students were satisfied with their online learning. Research by the Sutton Trust (Montacute and Holt-White, 2021) also found that satisfaction rates dropped to 59% in February 2021, down from 68% in the autumn.

However, a larger survey by Jisc (2021) between October and December 2020 found that students were broadly happy with the quality of online teaching they'd received. 68% said the overall quality of online and digital learning was either 'best imaginable', 'excellent' or 'good' whilst just 11% said it was 'poor', 'awful' or 'worst imaginable'. Jisc reported that student respondents 'enjoyed a range of different online activities and were positive about being able to access lecture recordings and participate live online'. These figures are also similar to those of the Office for Students (Barber, 2020) who found that 67% were content with the teaching and learning they'd received.

Evidently, students' experiences of online learning have been mixed, and satisfaction levels have varied over the course of the academic year. The findings of our own research with Alterline also reflect a mixed picture of students' experiences of online learning. Although overall, 82% of respondents felt that the Covid-19 pandemic has negatively impacted their academic experience, the specific issues and individual experiences were relatively mixed, as shown below in Graph 5:



Graph 5. Source: Student Minds' research with Alterline.

Below, we explore the challenges and impacts of online learning in further detail. However, in recognising the mixed experiences of students, we also feel it important to highlight some of the positives of online learning reported by some students. The following are just some responses to the question, 'has the Covid-19 pandemic impacted your learning experience? Please explain your answer' from our research with Alterline:

“Allowed me to get a job and manage my time more effectively. No need for sitting in lecture theatres and spending 1+ hours per lecture typing it up prior to the lecture - instead I can now do it in one go in a shorter amount of time. No need to travel and waste hours in the middle of the day when I can study at home instead. More time spent with my partner and more time spent doing fun things.”

“Covid-19 has actually positively impacted my studies since I prefer online learning and, if possible, I would like to continue studying online, not in person.”

“I would say it's impacted it in a positive way in terms of it being taught online - I think it's a lot easier to engage with, especially with my learning style and because of memory problems I have because of mental health issues, having lectures recorded is really beneficial for me. I think also it helps with my anxiety in comparison to in-person teaching as I can engage with the class more.”

“I felt more comfortable to voice my opinion online than in person. It also meant I could actually hear and understand people, something I struggle with in-person. Being able to snack/drink/wear comfortable clothes whilst on my weekly three hour seminars was much more comfy and less pressure than sitting in a seminar room.”

Clearly, there is no single, shared experience of online learning during the pandemic. Though for some, it has presented clear barriers to engagement and accessibility, for others, it has removed such barriers. Thus, moving forwards, this nuance must be recognised by the higher education sector when planning future teaching, learning and assessment.

Challenges and Impacts of Online Learning

In considering the challenges associated with online learning, our listening and insights work has found that common issues relate to space, technology, resources, associated financial costs and social isolation.

The Student Digital Experience survey by Jisc (2021) found that most students had encountered poor Wi-Fi connection (62%), whilst almost one third had experienced problems accessing online platforms or services (29%). Other issues included mobile data costs (22%), the need for specialist software (21%), the lack of a safe,

private area to work (19%) or the lack of a suitable computer or device (15%). Analysis of over 17,000 free text responses in the same survey also identified common themes relating to the 'most negative aspects' of online and digital learning. The top themes were:

- Difficulties in accessing lectures or online resources
- Timeliness, scheduling and timetabling
- Overwhelming, larger volumes of independent work, without timely support
- Difficulty concentrating due to extended screen-time, long lectures and intensity of delivery method causing fatigue and mental health concerns
- Communication issues
- Isolation and loneliness

Similar findings were also reported by the Student Futures Commission (the UPP Foundation, 2021). In this research, 75% of students said a lack of access to a stable internet connection created challenges for participating in home learning, whilst 49% reported issues due to lack of hardware.

The findings of our research with Alterline also highlight many of the above issues. 18% of the students we surveyed did not have the resources they needed to access online learning effectively, and 24% did not have the space to. 22% of respondents said they didn't feel they have the support they need to complete their course, whilst 44% did not feel well equipped to manage the pressures of their course. In the survey, we also asked students whether they felt the way they were being taught and assessed suited their learning styles. Students were more likely to agree that the way their course is being assessed suits their learning styles, compared to the way their course is being taught (45% to 34%).

The impacts of online learning reported by students have been varied, with some noting an impact on connectedness and wellbeing, as well as academic engagement and performance. For instance, the ONS Student Covid-19 Insights Survey found in June 2021 that 67% of students feel that a lack of face-to-face teaching has had a 'major' or 'moderate' effect on the quality of their course. 53% also report a 'major' or 'significant' impact on their academic performance. Our own research with Alterline also found that most students (71%) have felt isolated due to online learning.

When asked how the pandemic had impacted their learning experience, respondents in our research with Alterline (2021) said:

“Not being able to physically go to campus and interact with people in person has had a monumental effect on my mental as well as my physical health. It's made me feel isolated, lonely and that it's groundhog day”

“I have found it hard to ask tutors and lecturers for help because nothing is in person meaning I do not feel I can open up over a screen or ask for help.”

2019/20 vs 2020/21

With the pandemic causing significant disruption to two academic years already, we felt it important to also offer a comparison of how this disruption has been experienced and what support has been put in place for students.

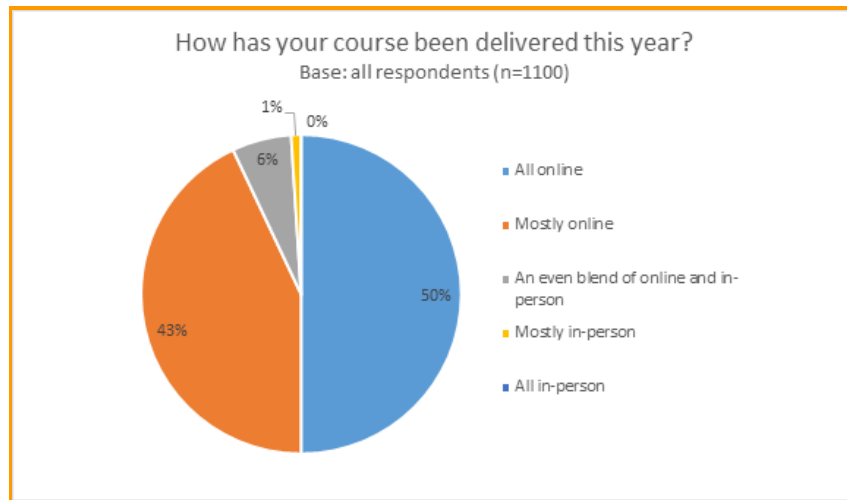
“Covid-19 is undoubtedly exacerbating already existing struggles with mental health and the longer this goes on, the more it feels as though university students have been forgotten about. In the initial lockdown there were many things available to students who were struggling: safety nets, no detriment policies, extenuating circumstances just for Covid-19 related situations and hardship funding. Now it feels as if we’re just expected to get on with it.” (Jessica Davies, 2021 in Wonkhe)

The higher education sector first experienced widespread disruption due to Covid-19 in March 2020, when restrictions on social contact and travel were first introduced. Students had completed (or almost completed) two academic terms prior to the disruption caused by the pandemic (although as noted above, they had experienced disruption due to industrial action). Teaching and assessments were moved online for the remainder of the academic year, and student leaders successfully lobbied most universities to introduce ‘safety net’ or ‘no detriment’ policies. This enabled students to complete the academic year without the additional concern that the pandemic would negatively impact their final grades. The majority of providers (86.1%) saw their attainment rate increase in the 2019/20 academic year compared to in 2018/19, likely as a result of these policies and/or changes to assessments (OfS, 2021).

From the summer of 2020, universities began to announce their plans for the 2020/21 academic year, with the assumption that restrictions would continue to ease throughout 2020. Most universities adopted a ‘blended’ approach, with plans for both in-person and online teaching, as well as a residential, on-campus social experience. However, by October, several UK universities reported outbreaks of the Covid-19 virus and by November, a second national lockdown was brought in to tackle rising case numbers. Students’ academic experiences were once again largely shifted to online-only teaching and assessment and this continued into the new calendar year.

In January 2021, students on courses training in health, social care or education were invited to return, followed by students on practical courses in March 2021. The remainder of students were invited to return to campus in mid-May. Graph 6 (below) shows how students’ courses have been delivered this year, according to our own

research with Alterline. 93% of students reported that they had been taught either mostly or entirely online at the time of our survey in April/May 2021.



Graph 6. Source: Student Minds' research with Alterline.

However, despite calls from student representatives for blanket 'no detriment' policies to continue for the 2020/21 academic year (NUS, 2021), many universities (including all in the Russell Group) ruled this out (Rao, 2021). Instead, common approaches have included adapting existing mitigation policies, introducing new classification calculation options, comparing cohort results for moderation and expanding reassessment opportunities (see, for instance, the University of Kent's 'no detriment measures 2021' or Newcastle University's 'safety net' policy).

WORK

“People have moved mountains. Our teams have shown agility, flexibility, creativity, and sheer dogged drive and determination. Many of our colleagues – in estates, as just one example among many – are maxed out in terms of what they can give... The ongoing effort from so many people in our universities has been extraordinary.” (Joanne Marshall - Director of People and Campus Services at the University of Bradford, and chair of UHR in Wonkhe, 2021).

“Staff have been overwhelmed, over-worked, stressed, anxious and are exhausted... We have had to learn new technologies, often without access to any specialist advice or training, though that is in place now... The time to prepare and produce synchronous materials has often meant that we have had to do some of this in our own, unpaid time. However, asynchronous takes even longer to prepare, record, edit (if we know how), upload and make accessible to our learners. Colleagues are working between 40 and 70/80 hours a week to try and stay on top of all these expectations AND ensure that our students' quality of learning and support is not negatively affected by us. Staff are stressed; on the verge of burnout; picking up illnesses/infections; have had no real time off/break since March 2020 - not if we are to keep up with everything and meet our students' needs and try to manage the expectations the university has of us.” (Anonymous university staff member via Student Minds' Call for Evidence)

“Staff were already stressed and overworked before Covid, and over the past year they have had to deliver ‘blended learning’, while being forced to endlessly readjust their teaching plans” (Jo Grady, UCU General Secretary in Hall, 2021b).

The learning environment of students is also the working environment of staff. The University Mental Health Charter (2019) makes clear the importance of staff wellbeing in taking a holistic approach to student mental health, with evidence indicating a clear relationship between staff and student wellbeing (Salimzadeh, Saroyan & Hall, 2017). As such, the impact of the pandemic on staff is explored in this report. Though our focus is generally given to staff who have interacted with students most over the past year (such as educators and support staff), we recognise the widespread impact of the pandemic on all higher education staff and the importance of a whole-university approach to support and pandemic recovery.

It's notable that issues relating to staff working conditions were already at the centre of many UK students' 2019/20 experience, due to the impacts of industrial action. The most recent industrial action ended on March 13th 2020, just days before restrictions were first introduced, with disputes centred around working conditions, pensions and pay (Weale and Al-Khalaf, 2020). Since then, the pandemic has led to huge shifts in how universities operate, including how students are taught and

supported, as well as how accommodation and campus buildings are managed. This has, of course, impacted staff, who have largely shifted to at-home, online working.

Experiences of Online Teaching and Working

“For many, the relentless pace of change and spiralling workload has fundamentally changed their approach to teaching. There isn’t time for perfection and over-thinking; good enough just has to be good enough (and it is).” (Phipps and Whitton, 2021 in Wonkhe)

“For many academics the pandemic has [been], and continues to be, a time of great stress, insecurity and pressure.” (De Gruyter, 2020)

Since March 2020, much of the academic university experience has been delivered online, with lectures, seminars and assessments all taking place outside of traditional in-person settings. With this shift has come huge working demands for university staff to adapt their methods, content and systems for effective online delivery and engagement. Equally, professional services staff have also experienced marked differences in how they work. With the UK government encouraging home-working wherever possible since March 2020, huge proportions of university staff have adapted to remote working.

A survey by AdvanceHE (2021) found that staff working in UK higher education reported that remote working had helped them to engage with their administrative work, departmental meetings, internal and external committee meetings, conferences and career development activities. Notably, AdvanceHE also identified a gender difference in responses, with women more likely than men to report that remote working has enabled them to attend more conferences and take on career development activities. In comparison, men were more likely to report that remote working had helped them to engage with their research and teaching.

The University and College Union (UCU) also surveyed over 12,000 university and college staff to explore experiences of the pandemic. Their findings show that most (57.5%) staff reported that their workload had increased ‘a lot’ while 23.3% were working ‘a bit’ harder. Again, differences were observed in relation to staff’s identities, with BAME women, LGBT+ and disabled staff all more likely to report higher workloads and resulting stress (Hall, 2021b).

A Wonkhe (2021) survey of 630 higher education staff members involved in teaching or the delivery of teaching, carried out in January/February 2021, identified a wide range of impacts. Teaching staff reported making extensive changes to the curriculum to make it ‘suitable for online or blended delivery’ during Covid-19, including: changes to course structure, the provision of learning resources,

assessments, formative assignments and/or guidance for independent study time, and curricula content.

The same Wonkhe survey also found that staff confidence in the usefulness of digital technology and willingness to experiment with digital technology have both increased during the pandemic. Similarly, research by the OfS (Barber, 2021), carried out at the end of 2020, found that teaching staff were broadly open to continuing some aspects of online working beyond the pandemic. However, whilst there was a consensus that not all elements of teaching should continue online, teaching staff were divided on which aspects should. 51% said they'd like to continue student one-to-ones online, whilst 41% wanted to continue uploading recorded lectures. 37% of teaching staff hoped to continue 'online student engagement' and 34% said they would like to continue delivering live, online lectures beyond the end of the pandemic.

Research by Watermayer et al (2020) also explored the experiences of university staff in shifting to online learning, teaching and assessment (LTA). Their findings show that although most university teaching staff felt confident in their abilities to facilitate online LTA (60.6%) and had access to appropriate technologies to support this (81.7%), only half (49.5%) felt prepared to deliver this. Furthermore, the same research also showed that staff anticipated prolonged increases in workload due to Covid-19, with the greatest increases being felt in the immediate aftermath of restrictions being introduced.

Watermayer et al's (2020) research also highlighted the compounding impact of home-working and teaching whilst also juggling caring or parenting responsibilities. Staff submissions to our Call for Evidence also raised this as a clear issue for some staff, who have struggled to balance multiple commitments whilst working from home.

"Balancing teaching online - 24 hours a week with a 2-year-old at home on my own is a huge challenge. This is disrupting the learning environment not only for my students, but also my son. My professional and personal roles are blurring and I have not got time to successfully do both to the best of my ability." (in Watermayer et al, 2020).

Staff Wellbeing

"The wellbeing of staff is a crucial component of any genuine whole university approach to mental health" (University Mental Health Charter, 2019)

"These wide-ranging changes in working practices and the nature and extent of demands experienced by academic staff have placed an additional burden on a

group of professionals who were already at high risk of work-related stress and mental health problems.” (Wray and Kinnen, 2021)

Many of the factors often cited as impacting student’s wellbeing over the past year are also true for staff, including a lack of clarity about a return to campus, major changes to teaching and learning methods and the shift to online, at-home working. Our broad listening and insights work, along with the responses to our pulse surveys and call for evidence, has identified numerous challenges to university staff’s mental health and wellbeing resulting from the pandemic. These have included increased workloads, burnout, lack of support, unfamiliarity with new technologies and difficult work/life balances. In Wonkhe’s (2021) survey, 63.1% of teaching staff and 65.7% of staff supporting teaching agreed that it’d been a ‘real struggle’ to manage the demands of their role alongside other commitments.

Through our pulse surveys, we also explored staff wellbeing and the impacts of the pandemic. Overall, staff respondents reported broadly negative impacts on their health and wellbeing, with issues such as isolation, stress, workloads and work-life boundaries all commonly mentioned challenges. For instance, responses to the question ‘*what impacts have the changes to working life had on you/ your wellbeing?*’ included:

“I find it more stressful trying to communicate electronically. I miss speaking face to face with students and colleagues and miss the personal interactions... I feel less efficient, and more trapped.”

“Been really hard to work remotely and conduct home schooling. Boundaries between work and home life can blur and need to manage this effectively ”

“I’ve felt increasingly anxious about my own future - worried about my job security, my mortgage, my family’s health. This is really difficult as I’m expected to support individuals in my day job with these concerns, and then I’m battling my own at the same time - I’m worried I’m not going to have the emotional strength to help others with their own worries.”

However, responses to our pulse surveys did also highlight some positives reported by staff regarding their experiences of home working. For example:

“I’ve enjoyed not being in the office and the change in my working hours. I no longer have a stressful commute, my working hours have improved drastically and the ability to do exercise in my lunch break has been a welcome addition”

“Less stress due to the fact that my daily commute to and from the university no longer exists as such have gained 10 hours back per week - a lot less stressful and kinder to our beautiful planet; in terms of productivity time not spent travelling has enabled me to make progress with projects I've been trying to get to for a long time!!”

“I really enjoy working from home, so I feel like my wellbeing has massively improved. To be honest, I feel quite anxious about the prospect of working from home ending. I hope I can continue working this way as I feel it suits me far better.”

SUPPORT

“We saw a 150% increase in use of our Advice Service in the three months following the announcement of national lockdown in March 2020. One month (April 2020) saw over 100 new advice cases. This resulted in the expansion of the service.” (Durham Students’ Union via Call for Evidence)

Our research with Alterline shows that just under half (48%) of student respondents had used some form of support or advice for their mental health during their time at university. The most common of these were university counselling or wellbeing services (25%), Doctor/GPs (24%) and ‘other’ healthcare professionals such as psychiatrists, psychologists or counsellors (16%). However, other forms of support also used by students include peer support groups, telephone, text or email helpline services and online forums. The ONS (June 2021) also found that 29% of students have engaged with mental health and wellbeing services since the start of autumn term 2020. Again, the most common of these were GP or primary care services (49%) and online university services (40%).

At Student Minds, we want to make clear that seeking support is always a positive and courageous thing to do. We recognise that it isn’t always easy, and at times, it can feel difficult to know where to turn.

In discussing support in this section, we refer to service usage data (both self-reported and institutional). This data can be helpful to understand help-seeking behaviours or patterns, but is not always a helpful reflection of the prevalence of mental illness or mental health problems. We want to make clear that although the pandemic may have led to or exacerbated poor mental health, many services were already struggling to meet demand and provide support to those who need it.

Support Provision

When restrictions on social contact and travel were first introduced, many student support services (such as university counselling and disability support services, and students’ union advice services) shifted to a remote-only offering.

The NHS also made changes to its services, in order to best protect the safety of both patients and staff during the pandemic. For mental health services, this included adapting to offer remote support over the phone or online (NHS, 2020). Amongst the general population, it’s been reported that this shift has worked well for some, whilst for others a lack of face-to-face support options has resulted in additional challenges (Rethink Mental Illness, 2020). Considering the specific impact of these changes for students, it’s possible that the online and remote provision of support enabled some

students to continue to access NHS support, despite moving to their non-term time address during the pandemic.

In addition to central support services offered by universities, students' unions and the NHS, the pandemic has also impacted student-led peer support groups and services. For instance, prior to the pandemic, Student Minds had nine peer support groups running across the country during the 2019/20 academic year. All groups were running 'in-person', but due to restrictions introduced in March 2020, were unable to continue running, and peer-support provision was paused, with alternative support put in place via the Student Space programme. Similarly, other peer support groups and services, such as Nightline, also had to adapt their provision in light of the pandemic restrictions.

Accessing Support

In Save the Student's November 2020 survey, 3 in 5 students said they had needed to ask for help with issues relating to Covid-19. Findings from NUS' third phase of the Coronavirus Student Survey (November 2020) found that 20% of students had sought support specifically for their mental health during the pandemic. Common forms of support were listed as counselling, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and medication. Students also said they'd sought support from their institution's support services, their GP or a psychiatrist.

"During first lockdown, I contacted my GP who prescribed me antidepressants and got me in contact with mental health support services. I have also had a counselling session with my university wellbeing service." (Student in NUS phase III research)

Institutional data from both Durham and Oxford universities has indicated an increase in students accessing support from their university, including mental health services such as counselling. Both universities recorded increased demand for counselling during the 2019/20 academic year (39% and 8% respectively), with both citing the impacts of the pandemic as a reason for the increase (McHardy and Mosheim, 2021; Hancock, 2021).

Barriers to accessing support

Unfortunately, barriers to accessing support have existed since long before the pandemic. These include issues such as the stigmatisation of mental health issues, the availability of public mental health services (e.g. long waiting times) and a lack of awareness about mental health and the support services available (YouGov, 2021). For students, only being able to access non-emergency care through the GP they are registered with can also present a barrier when trying to access support whilst away from their home or university address (depending on where they are registered

with a GP) (Brown, 2016). During the pandemic, we have also seen new barriers emerge, and existing barriers become exacerbated.

Save the Student (2020) found that of the 60% of students who had needed to ask for help during the pandemic, 39% had found this difficult or very difficult. In our own research with Alterline we found that almost half (45%) of students felt they needed additional help/advice during the pandemic but did **not** get it. Of these students, the most common reasons for not accessing support were:

- I felt my circumstances were not serious enough to ask for help (56%)
- I felt too embarrassed to ask for help (46%)
- I did not know how to find the help/advice I needed (36%)
- The right type of help/advice was not available (22%)
- The advice/help I needed was not available quickly enough (21%)
- The help/advice I needed was not available at the time I needed it (20%)
- I tried to access help/advice but was turned away/ told I wasn't eligible (16%)

These findings reflect a range of issues, from the stigmatisation of mental illness, to mental health literacy, to the availability and promotion of mental health services. They highlight the importance of mental health education, the need for well-resourced services and the value of effective service promotion.

With more students living at their non term-time addresses, there have also been concerns throughout the pandemic about students having appropriate space to access support from. The findings from our research with Alterline suggest that whilst most (76%) students *were* able to have private conversations whilst in their accommodation (e.g to access support via phone or video call), 1 in 10 did not feel able to. Though a minority of students, this is still a concerning number of students who may not feel able to reach out for support. Notably, the survey was carried out in April 2021, when a majority of students had already returned to their term-time accommodation (ONS, 2021).

Student Space

In August 2020, Student Minds launched Student Space. We wanted to make it easier for students to find the help and support they needed during the pandemic, at a time when many aspects of students' lives were disrupted. Student Space, funded by the Office for Students and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, provides trusted information, services and tools to meet the challenges of being a student during the pandemic.

Student Space is made up of a range of free and confidential support services, video-based student stories and psycho-educational content, as well as a directory of support available at universities across England and Wales. Through the website,

students can access support via phone, email, text or webchat, whilst specific communities can also use a range of new and tailored services, in recognition that the pandemic has not impacted all students equally.

Since launch, over 170,000 users have visited the Student Space website. Anxiety and stress, as well as depression and low mood, have been the most common issues students have contacted the Student Space services about. Other common issues include relationships, isolation and loneliness, coronavirus and education.

INEQUALITIES AND INTERSECTIONALITY

The final theme of this report focuses on the unique and disproportionate impacts of the past year on specific communities. Not all students have been impacted equally: some communities have faced disproportionate levels of mental distress throughout the pandemic due to pre-existing structural inequalities, many of which have been exacerbated by the pandemic and its impacts. We know that because of inequalities, individuals from marginalised groups are already more at-risk of experiencing negative health outcomes, face challenges accessing effective support and are less likely to have their voices heard and represented. Throughout our listening we have therefore been mindful to ensure that we strike the balance between capturing issues that are widely felt and/or deeply felt.

We also feel it's important here to reflect on the growth in hateful, discriminatory and intolerant attitudes and behaviours which has seemingly occurred over the past few years. We recognise that it's challenging to determine whether or not this perceived growth is reflective of an actual increase in the prevalence of these attitudes and behaviours, or the increasingly visible platforming and sharing of them through traditional means, social media and political discourse. Regardless, it is clear that tensions and hate result in the continued oppression of marginalised communities. At Student Minds we grow increasingly concerned about rising division and hateful rhetoric across society. Through our work we will continue to challenge and address the systemic and structural inequalities which cause and exacerbate mental health difficulties across all student communities.

The inequalities and intersectionality we've observed in our insights gathering over the past year warrant further exploration and discussion. Thus, although we give an overview in this section, we also hope to publish a series of shorter, focussed reports throughout 2021 and 2022 which will offer the necessary space for a more in-depth analysis of these issues.

Ethnic Minority and Racialised Students

“Coming to university as a person of color, you'd usually want to take advantage of all the relevant groups, societies and associations, which foster a safe space for you to identify with people of similar backgrounds. But another thing I've dealt with in general at university is imposter syndrome, not feeling like I belong, or that I'm supposed to be there. But usually having access to these inclusive and diverse spaces alleviates this. However, because of lockdowns and social distancing this year, it's been really hard” (Kezia's experience - Student Space).

Even before the pandemic, the university experience presented unique challenges for ethnic minority and racialised students. Discrimination, disproportionately low numbers of BAME university staff, a lack of culturally competent support services and a curriculum based in colonial ideas are all notable barriers to liberation and equality in HE (Arday, 2018; Campbell et al, 2021).

Since March 2020, many of these structural inequalities have become exacerbated whilst new issues have emerged. Evidence has shown that ethnic minority and racialised individuals have been disproportionately impacted by the Covid-19 virus itself, with non-white individuals becoming infected and dying at disproportionate rates in the UK (Stripe, 2020). Furthermore, Asian people have experienced increased anti-Asian racism and xenophobia during the pandemic, with reports of such hate crimes tripling in London at the start of the pandemic (BBC News, 2021). The Black community have also experienced the difficult impacts of renewed societal attention around racial injustice across the world, including vicarious racism, collective trauma and increased hostility. The impacts of this are discussed further in the Background section (page 18).

In higher education, ethnic minority and racialised students have also been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and subsequent 'lockdown' restrictions. For instance, according to the Sutton Trust (Montacute and Holt-White, 2021), BAME students were more likely than white students to be living at their family home during autumn term 2020 (54% to 40%). This research also found that BAME students were more likely to report having insufficient study space (27% to 20%) and more likely to be unsatisfied with the financial support on offer (27% to 21%). Similarly, our own research with Alterline also found that Black/Black Mixed students and Asian/Asian Mixed students were more likely to report that their financial situation had been negatively impacted by the pandemic (62% and 59% respectively) compared to white students (45%).

However, in 2019/2020, Black student attainment increased more than white student attainment, thus narrowing the attainment gap to 18.3 percentage points (Office for Students, 2021). Reasons for this difference are difficult to pinpoint, but it's possible that either Black students disproportionately benefited from changes to assessment, or from no-detriment/safety-net policies. In either instance, it's vital that this is explored further so that any positive learnings can be applied moving forwards.

In April 2021, as part of the Student Space programme, Student Minds commissioned a number of organisations to offer tailored support to communities disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. These included Black People Talk (BPT), the Muslim Youth Helpline and Taraki Wellbeing, who all offer support for students from racialised and minoritised backgrounds. Since April, each service has recorded information about common themes and issues being reported by students accessing their support. Through the 10 workshops delivered so far, Black People

Talk (BPT) have identified common themes including feelings of pressure to 'fit in' or meet particular standards, as well as the impacts of navigating mental health issues whilst at university and concerns about the absence of safe spaces. Similarly, Taraki Wellbeing also identified the importance of safe-spaces during their student support sessions. Other common issues included isolation and loneliness, experiences of imposter syndrome, struggles with mental ill-health and the role of relationships and social connection. Finally, the Muslim Youth Helpline also highlighted similar common themes emerging through their support service: relationships, mental health and faith and spirituality were all identified as primary concerns.

International Students

“Being an international student during the pandemic is a unique and somewhat unexpected experience of higher education. I think by this point, I'm not alone in having felt anxious that this will be my university experience for the next few years, or having had to set my alarm at 3am to wake up for a lecture in a different time zone, or felt my eyes being extremely fatigued and craving more screen free interaction.” (Natalia’s experience - Student Space).

The pandemic has led to unique challenges for international students studying across the world. As countries led individual responses to the pandemic, many international students had to make difficult decisions about returning to their home country or remaining at their place of study. Others were faced with limited opportunities to return home, either due to quarantine or border restrictions, the cost of travel, or fears about safety. Additionally, as different countries have faced different impacts at different times, levels of uncertainty, anxiety and stress have also varied within the international student community over the course of the pandemic.

Throughout our insights and listening work, international students have reported practical difficulties, such as studying in a different time zone, having access to the necessary resources from abroad, and difficulties in travelling to or from university due to both UK and international restrictions. Amongst international students who stayed in the UK during the pandemic, there were also reports of home overcrowding due to high rents, and food insecurity, with international students seeking support from local food banks due to visa restrictions and a lack of paid employment opportunities during lockdown (Popp, 2020). Sadly, we also identified that some international students were experiencing or concerned about increased xenophobia and racism during the pandemic, with a particular growth in discrimination against East and South East Asian individuals reported in the UK (ITV, 2020; Grierson, 2020; End the Virus of Racism, 2021; Khan, 2021).

However, our research with Alterline captured some interesting differences in how international students reported their experiences of community belonging and

isolation during the pandemic, compared with their UK-domiciled counterparts. We found that international students were more likely than UK-domiciled students to agree that they'd felt part of the student community at their university in 2020/21 (21% to 14%) and were less likely to report having often felt lonely or isolated since March 2020 (58% to 67%).

It's also vital to recognise that, over the course of the last year, many countries have also been impacted by crises which have been unrelated to, or exacerbated by, the Covid-19 pandemic. These crises will have affected international students from across the world in different ways and at different times, again highlighting the importance of recognising that international students are not a homogenous group. Though commentary and analysis of these crises is beyond the scope of this report, we feel it important to highlight here that members of our international student community continue to be impacted by ongoing conflicts, injustices and political events from around the world, in addition to the Covid-19 pandemic.

LGBTQ+ Students

“Lockdown has limited ease of access to support, affirmative spaces and queer peers, all of which can be vital to LGBTQ+ students. Being disconnected from the LGBTQ+ community is difficult and isolating. This, for many students, has been paired with the toll of having to live in toxic, unsafe or even dangerous home environments during lockdown.” (Clarke, 2021)

Student Minds recognises that for many LGBTQ+ students, it's not always possible to be open about their sexuality and/or gender identity whilst at their family home or around family, and this can have an additional strain on their mental health and wellbeing. For some, staying at their family home is no longer an option. Similarly, the negative impact of restrictions on the accessibility of safe spaces and supportive communities for individuals who would typically access support (whether formal or informal) in-person is clear.

Furthermore, it's vital to recognise the role that Government decisions over the past 18 months have played in the continued marginalisation of the LGBTQ+ community, particularly the trans community. For instance, the decision not to support the introduction of self-identification in changes to the Gender Recognition Act (Gov.uk, 2020) means that members of the trans community will continue to face medical barriers to having their gender legally recognised. The non-binary community and under 18s will also continue to be denied the opportunity to have their gender legally recognised. Similarly, the Government has further marginalised members of the LGBTQ+ community by disbanding its LGBTQ+ advisory committee (Parker, 2021) and through the formal recognition of the LGB Alliance as a registered charity by the Government's Charity Commission (Weakley, 2021).

Research has shown that young LGBTQ+ individuals have reported disproportionately high levels of mental distress since the beginning of the pandemic, and this is particularly true of LGBTQ+ students and young people. For instance, research by Just Like Us (2021) and DIVA, Stonewall and Kantar (2021) has found that LGBTQ+ young people are experiencing higher levels of mental distress when compared with both their older LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ counterparts.

Our own research with Alterline has found similar disparities in responses from members of the LGBTQ+ community and heterosexual / cisgender students. We found that LGB+ students were more likely to say the pandemic has had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing compared with heterosexual students (84% to 70%). Similarly, trans students were also more likely than cisgender students to say that their mental health had been negatively impacted by the pandemic (84% to 73%).

In April 2021, as part of the Student Space programme, we commissioned Mermaids to expand their support provision to include trans, non-binary and gender-diverse students up to the age of 25. Since then, Mermaids has been able to offer support to over 80 students via phone call, webchat and through their private and secure community forum.

Disabled Students

“With mostly online learning I have found it easier to manage my disability and work in my own time and pace using the online resources.” (Respondent in our research with Alterline, 2021).

“Being dyslexic I have struggled with the online learning style finding it extremely difficult to engage with the work” (Respondent in our research with Alterline, 2021).

The pandemic has led to changes in the higher education sector which the disabled student community have been campaigning for for years, including the use of online, recorded lectures as standard, along with the introduction of more flexible assessment styles (Disabled Students UK, 2020; Low, 2020). However, as with all groups of students, it's vital to recognise that the disabled student community is not a homogenous group, and therefore the changes resulting from the pandemic have shaped disabled students' experiences in different ways. For some, the pandemic has had a positive impact on the way in which they access their learning, whilst for others, the pandemic has led to the exacerbation or creation of barriers to learning.

A report by Disabled Students UK (2020) outlined some of the common challenges faced by disabled students during the pandemic. These included financial hardship, mental health issues, inaccessible teaching, and the impacts of shielding. However,

the report states that based on an informal survey conducted by Disabled Students UK, 'the most common issues were related to anxiety, fatigue and concentration. This included problems with using screens for long periods of time, taking in information online, planning work and coping with change and unclear demands' (p.5).

In contrast, articles such as Ruby Jones' for Wonkhe (2021) or Amy Low's (2020) for UUK have outlined the opportunities and benefits of the shift to remote learning for some disabled students. For instance, avoiding long and exhausting journeys to and from campus for in-person teaching, as well as reduced stress and anxiety due to untimed and at-home assessments and access to recorded, online lectures, have all been reported as beneficial for some disabled students. These positives were also echoed on social media:

"Online classes meant I was able to attend all my university classes and actually take things in and learn instead of my disabilities getting in the way. And if I needed to, I could re-watch them and my grades have never been better" (@Gh0st_Toast on Twitter, 18.06.2021)

"Attending lectures online means I don't have to struggle to get to lectures in different buildings and turn up late, exhausted & in pain. I can use my energy to study. My grades have improved as a result." (Holz1_LPSoldier on Twitter, 17.07.2021).

The findings of our research with Alterline broadly support the argument that disabled students have experienced disproportionate negative impacts during the pandemic, although the nuance discussed above was reflected in qualitative comments.

Overall, disabled students were more likely than students with no disability to report that the pandemic has had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing (86% to 70%) and academic experience (85% to 81%). When breaking these figures down further by type of disability, we also found that the negative mental health and wellbeing impacts were more common for students with mental, learning or cognitive disabilities (88%) compared to students with physical disabilities (81%). Similarly, respondents with a mental, learning or cognitive disability were also more likely to report negative impacts to their academic experience (86%) compared with respondents with a physical disability, who were no more likely than respondents with no disability to report a negative impact on their academic experience (81%).

When asked to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement '*online learning has allowed me to engage with my course more positively*', respondents self-reporting a disability were more likely to disagree (59% to 55%). There was minimal difference between respondents with a mental, learning or cognitive disability (59%) and respondents with a physical disability (60%).

Women Students

Throughout the pandemic, research into mental health and wellbeing has consistently found that women have reported facing disproportionate impacts (Kaur-Ballagan, 2020; Ahmed, 2020; Fancourt et al, 2020-2021; ONS, 2021; Public Health England, 2021).

The findings of our research with Alterline support this, with 77% of women students reporting that the pandemic has had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing compared to 70% of men students. Women students were also more likely to report having a current mental health problem and were more likely to have sought some form of help or advice for their mental health and wellbeing during their time at university. However, it's important to note that these self-reported levels of mental health problems and help-seeking behaviours are not directly indicative of a difference in the prevalence of mental health problems.

In addition to the disproportionate mental health and wellbeing impacts of the pandemic, women have also experienced the impacts of high-profile cases and discussion of violence against women over the past year. This is explored further in the background section, 'Women's Safety at University' (page 22).

Students from low-income or working class backgrounds

“From what I could see, the switch to online learning only widened the educational inequality between affluent and low-income students. The former group, I witnessed, were able to buy printers, faster laptops, multiple monitors, etc, for their rooms. Affluent students also had the funds to pay for larger, more comfortable housing – no small factor when you are only meant to leave the house once a day for essential journeys.” (Aidan Hall, 2021 in LeftLion)

Since the introduction of Government restrictions in March 2020, our listening and insights work has found that students from lower-income and working class backgrounds have faced unique challenges, including having limited access to adequate resources, technology and space for at-home online learning, as well as lost income and financial hardship.

Research by the Sutton Trust (Montacute and Holt-White, 2021) found that working class students were less likely to participate in extracurricular activities during the pandemic compared with middle class students (33% and 44% respectively). The same research also found that working class students were more likely to have

experienced financial hardship (57% to 52%) and were less likely to have access to adequate study space (24% to 21%).

In April 2021, as part of the Student Space programme, we commissioned RECLAIM to expand their support for working class students. Since then, RECLAIM have hosted two student webinars: *'Discussing mental health of black working-class students'* and *'Is there space for working-class students?'*, and have also launched a podcast.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, this report has sought to outline the ways in which students (and the higher education sector generally) have been impacted over the course of the past 18 months. Clearly, the disruption caused by the pandemic to students' education, social lives, relationships and finances (amongst other things) will have lasting impacts. As current students go on to complete their courses and enter the workforce as graduates, new students will enter higher education with a host of varied experiences. Staff will also continue to experience changes to the ways they work, as universities continue to adapt, learn and develop their post-Covid approaches.

With this in mind, throughout this report we have included particular learnings and recommendations for the sector, which are also noted in full below. As we adapt to a 'new normal', both in higher education and in wider society, we must commit to offering continued support for students and staff. We must also recognise that challenges will continue to emerge. In facing these, we must place student and staff needs at the centre of our solutions. Equally, challenges from before and during the pandemic will continue or re-emerge. In responding to and managing these, we must effectively prioritise students' needs by listening to them and co-producing ways forward.

A whole university approach to mental health and wellbeing is arguably more important now than ever, as we *all* enter a period of transition in higher education.

“The pandemic is not over, but I am still standing strong and looking forward for good days to come” (Juhi Aishwary in Student Minds Blog, 2021).

RECOMMENDATIONS

LIVE

- Students must be provided with a universal support payment to help them recuperate from the financial impact of the pandemic. Student Minds recommends a minimum £500 payment per student, which can be used by the student on their terms, for instance to support their studies, tackle digital poverty, access support, or cover rent. This should be funded by the national government, noting the significant financial losses incurred by students in addition to the need to ensure students receive fair, consistent support regardless of institution.
- Acknowledging that every student has been impacted differently by the pandemic, Student Minds recommends means-tested “top-up” hardship funding available to those who have been particularly affected. This could be administered through institutions' existing financial hardship systems and

ought to be available to all students, not just those currently on the approved fee cap list.

- o Based on our listening and insights work, we also recognise that many students are unaware of the financial support available to them, or face barriers in accessing this. Targeted efforts should be made to ensure that all students are aware of the financial support available to them and how they can access this.
- Accommodation providers (university-owned, private purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) providers, and individual landlords) should put flexible protections in place (beyond *force majeure* clauses) to protect students from significant financial losses in the event of future disruption.
- Universities and students' unions should increase funding and support for student-led activities to facilitate the establishment and maintenance of student social spaces, enabling students to develop a sense of belonging and healthy social support networks.

LEARN

- Approaches to pedagogy should be co-produced wherever possible, to ensure that students can engage with teaching, learning and assessment in ways which set them up to succeed. Particularly, thought should be given to curriculum design, assessment design, and mode of delivery (remote versus face-to-face or a hybrid approach).
 - o Recognising that students are not a monolith, and will have different needs and preferences when engaging with their learning, flexibility and sensitivity to individual circumstances should underpin this thinking.
- Measures must be taken to ensure no student is affected by digital poverty. At the pre-arrival stage (and prior to the commencement of each academic year) institutions should engage students to understand their ability to access remote learning, and ensure students can access the tools they need to succeed, taking steps to remove barriers to access (e.g. affordability). This can be facilitated by, among other things, the universal student support payment and means-tested funding top-up described in the “Live” recommendations (above).

WORK

- Institutions must empower staff to accommodate these recommendations by providing the appropriate resourcing, including protected staff time, compensation, and training. The additional workload required to deliver quality, flexible, co-produced provision should be reflected in capacity planning, to allow staff to maintain healthy workplace behaviours.
- Universities and students' unions should seek to eliminate precarious working conditions among staff. In the University Mental Health Charter (2019), Student Minds describes the negative impact on workplace mental health that job insecurity entails. Casual and temporary contracts should be limited in use only to where they are absolutely necessary.

SUPPORT

- Universities and students' unions should ensure that support services are equally accessible to all students, as recommended by the University Mental Health Charter (2019). Culturally competent approaches to promoting mental health literacy must be taken – while not all students may appear to hold a white, British understanding of mental health and wellbeing, they may in actuality be highly literate in mental health and wellbeing topics as are relevant to them.
- Prevention and early intervention must continue to be prioritised for students at every stage of their university journey.
 - The national government should allocate greater funding for early support hubs for children and young people, with the aim of tackling emerging mental health conditions in their early stages.
 - This is supported by a whole-university approach as articulated in the University Mental Health Charter (2019), which recommends the creation of “a culture in which individuals feel safe and supported to disclose when they are experiencing poor mental health”.
- Institutions must plan for the pandemic's impact on mental health to outlast the pandemic itself. Even when the immediate threat of the coronavirus has subsided, the cumulative stress, grief and mental health impact of the pandemic will potentially have a negative impact on students and staff for years afterwards if not properly managed.

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