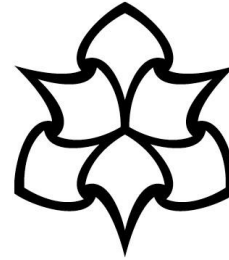




SRHE



**Manchester
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'A perfect storm': Under pressure in Higher Education

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Student Experiences During And Beyond COVID-19

Under pressure (Jones & Bell 2024)



- *Under increasing pressure in the wake of COVID-19: a systematic literature review of the factors affecting UK undergraduates with consideration of engagement, belonging, alienation and resilience**
- Aim: identify insights into the tensions faced by students in HE following their experiences of educational interruptions due to COVID-19
- Systematically analysed **n=59** publications and articles related to the COVID-19 pandemic in HE, specifically identifying **personal, professional, academic** and **societal** pressures that students are experiencing
- Included literature relating to **student engagement, sense of belonging, alienation** and **resilience** in a post-pandemic context

* Jones, C. S. and Bell, H. (2024) *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, pp. 1–11.

Findings: overview



- Effects of COVID-19 have seriously increased pressure on HE students in multidimensional and interconnecting ways
- Post-pandemic, students' mental health and wellbeing is significantly reducing academic resilience, mental health and wellbeing
- Disadvantaged demographic most severely affected

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1 in 4 students are at risk of dropping out of their university course, with some students skipping meals due to the current UK financial crisis (ONS 2023)

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HE students report higher costs of living, impacting wellbeing and ability to focus on studies, with increased stress and a greater need to work to sustain themselves (Sutton Trust 2023a)

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While COVID-19 may not be the sole or direct cause of the cost-of-living crisis, it is clear that the timing is exacerbating the pressure on HE students in the post-Covid context (Jones and Bell, 2024, p3)

Implications



- Issues facing the cohorts of students currently at school will inevitably filter through into HE if not addressed...
- ...so government and HEIs need to address aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic at macro, meso and micro levels by alleviating the pressures affecting students' mental health/wellbeing and financial difficulties
- Further research is needed into post-pandemic HEI support systems and practical strategies

Ongoing study



- Our current project is a small-scale, 360° qualitative study, with data collected using semi-structured interviews and focus groups across:
 - Central Service Teams and wider student support services n=13
 - Academic staff n=10
 - Students n=11
- Total sample n=34
- Academic staff and students from School of Education at MMU

Qualitative data highlights



- Reinforces first-hand the effects of the pressures of the cost-of-living on student mental health, particularly for those from widening participation, commuter or first-generation demographics, and/or those from low socio-economic backgrounds
- These effects exacerbate existing inequalities, negatively affecting social mobility and student engagement
- In summary, the results confirm that COVID-19 has had an exponential impact on students' mental health and wellbeing, which is further exacerbated by the current cost-of-living crisis

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Mental health



- Students are presenting with **more complex conditions**, requiring more interactions with systems
- Additional contributory pressures include physical health, caring duties, worry about family, finances, accessibility
- Mental health support improves outcomes but **treatment is delayed or unobtainable** (Holt-White et al., 2023); increased provision in this economic/political climate seems unlikely
- Pastoral support provides many benefits, esp. **a trusting and established relationship** with a personal tutor (Jones 2021, 2023) to help alleviate anxieties and support stability
- Some WP students report navigating their studies **more effectively** by accessing resources and assessments online, reducing pressure to attend on-campus (Ferrer et al., 2020); some students did **better during the pandemic**

Cost of living



- **Housing and accommodation:** difficulty securing housing, also to pay rising costs
- **Clothing:** students need support initiatives such as charity events to help with placement clothing (considerable shift from pre-COVID times)
- **Travel costs** also add pressure on students especially if timetables are not condensed and students are actively choosing not to attend wider university events due to the additional costs involved
- **Home and international students** are affected; international students' access to financial support varies across the sector
- **Interrelation:** finances have significant reciprocal impact on mental health:
eg fees & costs → homelessness → mental health
- **Need to work** for students to balance the cost-of-living effects alongside their studies; this impacts on their engagement and attendance as they weigh up the cost/benefit of each
- Students are dropping out mainly due to mental health and the cost-of-living crisis

Discussion:

Student Experiences During And Beyond COVID-19

- Striking and powerful relationship between cost-of-living crisis and student mental health, further inequalities for disadvantaged/SEN students
- Direct impact on student engagement and attendance
- Change is needed at macro, meso and micro levels
- Macro (govt): eg improved financial aid for disadvantaged students, NHS support for students with mental health difficulties... (slow, politically unviable?)
- Meso (university): financial aid, better communication of available help, integrated wellbeing support, better staff awareness, improved PT systems
- Micro (staff-student): better reporting, better PT training and delivery, attention

Questions and comments

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