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‘They are being squeezed left, right and centre’: Higher Education students in England, UK, are under pressure following COVID-19

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Abstract

Qualitative understanding of the pressures students are under post-COVID-19 are limited. Therefore, the aim of this research was to investigate, ‘what are student and staff perspectives on the pressures students face at university?’ This research collected qualitative data from students, professional service staff and academic staff via semi-structured interviews and focus groups. All participants ($n=34$) were from a post-92 higher education institution in England, UK. They were asked about student pressures relating to personal, professional, academic and social domains. Responses were analysed using thematic analysis, which revealed three major pressures: mental health, cost of living, and academic pressures, and two additional concerns: perceived lack of future and relationships. We make recommendations to alleviate these pressures that include wider societal changes, university service infrastructure (e.g. financial hardship relief, personal tutoring systems), and areas where tutors and students can act locally in relation to pedagogic practice.

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Practitioner Notes

1. Pressures on students included mental health, cost of living, and academic pressures, as well as more general concerns relating to perceived lack of future and relationships.
2. Staff-student and student-student relationships may be key to minimising some impacts of the pressures facing students.
3. The introduction of condensed teaching timetables and hybrid (online and in-person) teaching and learning methods could help alleviate student pressures.

Keywords

Higher Education Students, Pressure, COVID-19, Mental Health, Wellbeing, Cost of Living.

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Introduction

In this article we explore the pressures higher education students in England, UK, are under post-COVID-19 from the perspectives of both staff and students. We do this first by exploring what those pressures are, and second by identifying areas for practice development for dissemination across the higher education community. The term pressure in this study was defined as 'excessive or stressful demands, imagined or real, made on an individual to think, feel or act in particular ways' (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2018). This definition was used during the data collection to aid participant understanding relating to personal, professional, academic and societal influences. The research took place at a post-92 university in England, UK with a student population of over 40,000. 'Post-92' refers to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) which achieved university status in 1992; they are also known as 'new universities'. The university has a high proportion of students from widening participation (non-traditional) backgrounds (Department for Education, 2023). This category includes students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, students who are first in their families to enter higher education (first generation students), students who live in the family home while studying rather than moving away (commuter students), students who come from care backgrounds, mature students, and disabled students, as well as those from minoritised groups and refugees. These students typically encounter higher levels of challenge throughout their educational experiences (Santamaria & Bell, 2018; The Sutton Trust, 2021; 2023; 2023a; Universities UK, 2024). It seems likely that COVID-19 will have increased the challenges for these students, for example, COVID lockdowns resulted in many people being laid off work, and the resulting financial difficulties will have disproportionately affected those from relatively poorer backgrounds.

Many problems existed prior to COVID-19, but there is evidence that these were exacerbated during the pandemic (e.g. Geranios & Kim, 2022) and given the fiscal difficulties of the UK economy and subsequent pressures on public services, it seems likely that any pre-existing problems will have worsened since (McGivern & Shepherd 2022). There is, therefore, a need to investigate the pressures experienced by students in the post-COVID-19 context to address educational inequalities. Our research questions focused on student and staff understandings of the pressures students face, and how these affect their engagement with their studies.

Literature

There is currently a crisis of mental health, wellbeing and poverty that is affecting higher education students that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (McGivern & Shepherd, 2022; Jones & Bell, 2024). This crisis is likely to continue for many years as cohorts from the widening

participation, commuter, and first-generation demographics progress through their education in the now post-COVID-19 climate (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Burns et al., 2020; Department for Education, 2023; Jones & Bell, 2024; Khan, 2021; McGivern & Shepherd, 2022; Nunn et al., 2021; Price, 2023).

Several studies in the Global North have demonstrated the impact of the pandemic on mental health. For example, Killingback et al.'s (2024, p1) scoping review found that in the UK post-COVID-19, 'there is strong evidence to suggest that the undergraduate student population have lower levels of wellbeing, particularly in terms of anxiety, than young people as a whole'. Heim and Heim's (2021) Australian paper also highlight that during and after COVID-19 university students' mental health difficulties grew substantially. Furthermore, Evans et al.'s (2021) UK longitudinal study reported that there was a significant rise in student depression and worry, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and called for urgent mental health support. The literature discussed here demonstrates the continuing significant impact of COVID-19 on student mental health and wellbeing internationally.

According to The Sutton Trust (2021) higher education is a 'key driver' of social mobility in the UK, particularly for those students from widening participation backgrounds similar to the student population of the participating post-92 HEI (Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018). This emphasises the wider societal importance of understanding the aftermath of the pandemic in a complex economic and political climate. Furthermore, the pressures that existed prior to the pandemic, e.g. mental health, finance, accommodation – appear to be continuing to affect students' ongoing higher education experience and progression (Jones & Bell, 2024). Dougall et al. (2023) report that those students from low socio-economic demographics typically present with poorer mental health, exacerbating inequalities. Additional inequalities in the UK are highlighted by the Sutton Trust (2023; 2023a) who acknowledge that students from low socio-economic backgrounds need to work alongside their studies in response to the cost-of-living crisis. The higher education think tank HEPI (2024; 2024a; 2024b) inform that students studying outside of London need at least £18,600 (approximately 21,500 Euros, 38,250 Australian Dollars, 24,800 US Dollars) per year to achieve an acceptable standard of living. Furthermore, The Sutton Trust (2023) state that 24% of students from lower socio-economic demographics are less likely to finish their degree as a direct result of the cost-of-living crisis. The literature here implies that socio-economic status and mental health financial pressures are interconnected in higher education student populations post-COVID-19, and that these are impacting progress and achievement at university. Investigating these pressures is, therefore, an important endeavour (Chapman, 2019; Leach, 2016).

Whilst the pandemic has been researched widely in higher education, the literature based specifically and qualitatively on 'pressures' students are under post-COVID-19 is limited. Therefore, we undertook a systematic literature review in 2024 and analysed 59 (UK and International) publications investigating factors that are contributing to increasing pressures higher education students are experiencing in the post-COVID-19 context (Jones & Bell 2024). The results found that COVID-19 increased the pressure on higher education students in multilayered and intersecting ways, which in turn is having an impact on student engagement, sense of belonging, alienation, and resilience. In addition, in 2024 we undertook a qualitative study which focused on the pressures that academic staff were experiencing following COVID-19 and found that staff were encountering substantial pressures when supporting students presenting with higher levels of mental health and wellbeing challenges (Jones & Bell, 2025). That study identified that these pressures were having a direct impact on academic staff, with increased responsibilities (duties and time related) but also contributing to staff's increased emotional labour and burnout (Jones & Bell, 2025). Furthermore, that investigation found that neoliberal marketisation working practices are affecting staff ability to provide students with the increased support needed post-pandemic, particularly affecting relational pedagogy (Boncori et al. 2020; Gravett & Ajjaw, 2022; Gravett et. al. 2021; Jones & Bell, 2025). The discussion here demonstrates the wider literature aligned to the notion of 'pressures' post-COVID-19 in higher education and identifies the challenges for academic staff. This also highlights the absence of the student voice within this debate and discussion.

In 2020, Jones and Nangah explored the relationship between barriers to student engagement and the influences of traumatic experiences in student groups, introducing the psychosocial and academic trust alienation theory. As COVID-19 was a worldwide traumatic event (Kaubisch et al., 2022), it is likely this would be an additional negative factor impacting students already under socio-economic, financial and mental health pressures (Farcnik et al. 2021). Farcnik et al, (2021) also recognise the potential links between these factors and higher education attrition. This literature acknowledges the traumatic effects of the pandemic further exacerbating inequalities for those students from widening participation, commuter and first-generation demographics, similar to those from the participating institution.

The literature discussed so far demonstrates that the notion of 'pressures' post-COVID-19 has been investigated within a systematic literature review (Jones & Bell, 2024) and qualitatively relating to academic staff (Jones & Bell, 2025) but not yet empirically focusing on students. The current qualitative study adds further insight by including perspectives from both students and the staff who work closely with them. This study presents results, which contribute to the body of

knowledge of the significant pressures post-92 students are currently experiencing. We also use the findings of our research to make recommendations for improvement. Our research question was what are student and staff perspectives on the pressures student face at university?

Method

This research is rooted in a phenomenological approach, which ‘...focuses on people’s subjective experiences and interpretations of the world’ (Daniel & Harland, 2018, p38). Working within interpretivist, qualitative research traditions, we carried out semi-structured interviews and focus groups with students, academic staff and professional services staff to gain first-hand empirical insight while acknowledging trajectories of time, place, and effect.

Participants

Participants were from three areas: undergraduate students ($n=11$); professional service staff in student-facing roles in student health and wellbeing, student services, student support and the Students’ Union ($n=13$); and academic staff ($n=10$). Academic staff and students were from the education department, and all students were from a single programme, with a cross section of year groups. Students included Black, Asian and minority ethnic students, as well as students from first generation, commuter, mature, and care backgrounds. Specific demographic data is not reported for both staff and student in alignment with ethics and to aid the non-identification of participants as outlined in the institutional ethics application and specifically to protect the anonymity of the participants. We used a small sample to gain deep, rich data rather than a representative sample. A purposeful sampling strategy was used to identify cases which could provide detailed insight (Hoepfl, 1997).

Data Collection Procedure

Prior to data collection, a student advisory group was formed to review the student semi-structured interview questions; its feedback allowed us to maximise the psychological safeguarding, relevance and accessibility of the questions. This contributes to the credibility of the main data collection. Students were recruited using advertising posters, pre-recorded video explanations, and promotion at lectures. Staff were recruited during staff events and via posters.

The data were collected in the academic year 2023/24 using focus groups or semi-structured interviews that took place either in-person or online via TEAMS, depending on participant preference. Nine students were interviewed individually, and two as a pair. For professional service staff, there were three focus groups with three participants in each, and four individual interviews. Academic staff were interviewed individually (ten).

We asked students for their view of both the pandemic and the post-pandemic periods to identify key themes around the concept of 'pressure', including personal, professional, academic or societal. They were asked to reflect on their academic journey, and specifically to explore the pressures they had experienced or were experiencing. We gave students freedom and did not specify what type of pressures these might be. We prompted them to talk about the timing and effects of the pressures they mentioned and the impact on their studies. Staff were asked for their views on how the pandemic had affected students in general, changes in student behaviour, contributory factors post-COVID-19 to pressure on students, with a focus on how these impacted their studies.

Ethics and Reflexivity

Institutional ethical approval was received in July 2023 (ID 55391V4). Participants were given information documents and provided informed consent. To protect anonymity, participants were identified using pseudonyms

The authors conducted the interviews. Participants were offered the opportunity to be interviewed by either investigator to minimise power positioning and in the interests of integrity and participant choice. Jones interviewed students and academic staff and Bell interviewed professional service and student union staff. The researchers met weekly throughout the planning, development, collection, and analysis stages either online or in person. In these meetings we reflexively monitored progress to minimise bias, maintain research integrity, demonstrate researcher accountability and evaluate at each stage. This allowed critique of the research process itself that enabled scope for adjustment or reconsideration of actions or plans (Blaikie, 2014). Throughout the data analysis we adopted an 'openness towards self, others and the world...' (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2020, p111) refraining from prejudiced interpretations and pre-determined outcomes. This adds to the authenticity, validity, and transparency of the research processes adopted as we continually questioned our methods and processes and thus the results.

Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis provided a strong rule-based procedure for reducing large amounts of data and, whilst time consuming, proved valuable in the reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data went through 6 stages of iterations, from analysing individual data to combining participant responses to identification of significance of key themes. Following verbatim transcription, each transcript was read closely by both investigators before proceeding through the stages of successive iterations of coding and refinement of themes. We shared and compared in detail our initial categories and themes, allowing us to explore the responses before collaboratively deciding

on key themes. Participants were identified using pseudonyms and with a bracketed suffix to indicate whether they were professional services staff and student union staff (P), academic staff (A) or students (S).

Results and Discussion

The most substantial themes that emerged from all participants related to mental health and the cost-of-living crisis, followed by academic pressures, perceived lack of future and strong relationships (see Table 1). This section discusses these overarching themes and sub-themes where these are supported by the data.

Table 1

Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subthemes
1. Mental health and wellbeing pressures	Mental health (general) Anxiety Support Internal pressures
2. Cost of living pressure	Employment pressures Financial costs of university attendance Accommodation
3. Academic Pressure	Time Grade pressure
4. Perceived lack of future	n/a
5. Relationships	n/a

1. Mental Health and Wellbeing Pressures

This theme covers students' mental health, isolation, anxiety, support and internal pressures.

1:1 Mental Health (general)

Responses from all participant groups were in agreement about the scale and severity of the impact of the pandemic on student mental health and wellbeing. Professional service staff pointed out that many of the issues experienced by students were in existence pre-COVID-19. The pandemic exacerbated pre-existing mental health conditions as well as causing new mental health problems such as increased fear, anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive behaviours and grief.

Professional service participants reported more students contacting them: at the authors' institution, student contacts with mental health support services more than tripled between 2019-20 (~11,000 contacts) and 2021-22 (~35,000 contacts). Professional service staff also reported an increase in both the number of repeat referrals post-COVID-19 and the number of severe

cases (e.g. with suicidal ideation). In short, the number of students seeking help rose dramatically, and cases worsened for students with existing conditions. Similar increases are faced by the UK National Health Service (NHS) (Brimelow, 2023; CQC, 2024), . What this evidence demonstrates is the sheer scale of and impact of the pandemic on students' mental health, and the increased need to access health and support services. When reflecting on COVID-19, participants described the overwhelming pressures experienced by students linked to mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic. One student said 'COVID affected me [negatively] in a way that I couldn't even explain' (Neil, S). Professional service staff described the situation as 'a perfect storm on mental health and wellbeing [with] longer and longer waiting lists for the NHS' (Parva, P).

1:2 Anxiety

The effects of isolation and interruption to education were cited by all participants as a significant influence on student mental health both during the pandemic and afterwards, with negative consequences for social skills, life skills and resilience. An academic explained that they 'recognised bubbling anxiety prior to first lockdowns' (Rhian, A), and a point independently raised by a student in more depth:

I think pre [COVID] I was always very anxious. But I think during COVID and after COVID it kind of like definitely got worse because even though you're anxious before COVID you're still constantly going out and you're constantly building the confidence and you're constantly doing those things like you don't really have the option to kind of stay at home and hide (Lia, S).

One student explained about their feelings of isolation and how their anxiety causes them to self-isolate:

Yeah, I have felt that a lot, because I get worried about what people might think of me? So I'd have to say, let me pull away and I cannot handle this. Let me just pull away and then eventually I'll come back in and then something happens and I'll pull back out again (Van, S).

Professional service and academic staff were particularly concerned by the loss of life skills amongst students and the subsequent effects on their mental health. One academic commented that the pandemic was horrific for lots of people in lots of ways, but [students] really have been robbed of so, so much' (Rhian, A).

Professional service and academic staff theorised that increasing anxiety in the immediate post-pandemic period led to avoidance and withdrawal as students holed themselves up in their rooms, with many finding it difficult to leave without excessive anxiety. This anxiety appears to have had lasting impacts on a wider scale as academic staff frequently reported difficulties supporting

students to attend on-campus activities, post-pandemic with higher levels of withdrawals, deferments, or suspension of studies. This exhibits that post-COVID-19 mental health and wellbeing is a significant barrier to on-campus engagement and to students' progression (Killingback et al. 2024; Bhowmik et al., 2024). A student participant explicitly confirmed this, reporting that during COVID:

'it was very easy [...] to hide and not have to push myself and not have to leave the comfort of what I feel safe in. And then post-COVID I think because it lasted so long, that kind of stayed and now it's like avoidance. I find it easy to find ways to avoid things that push my anxieties' (Van, S).

Professional service staff also confirmed that many students presenting at referrals just did not have the tools to self-regulate as anxiety levels heightened during the pandemic, this had subsequent effects once lockdowns eased. Results confirmed the loss of social and life experience skills because of the pandemic and subsequent isolation lockdowns hindering students' integration into university life, for example,

'first year students coming back into halls did not have a clue how to operate with each other... they didn't know how to regulate themselves' (Gavin, P).

However, the picture from students is not one-dimensional. A student who had struggled to attend all year due to high levels of anxiety as a direct result of the pandemic still managed to submit the work needed, by accessing the resources and assessments using online platforms. Despite the pressures of mental health and wellbeing many students are finding ways to navigate these difficulties and online studying options appears to be an academic lifeline.

'I feel like much more comfortable if it's online rather than like in person. Sometimes if like you're having a baddish day with anxiety and stuff it's a bit harder to go into a lesson in person, you can just, you know, sign in [online] and participate' (Thea, S).

This appears to illustrate a counter-intuitive finding: several students described how lockdowns and the resulting move to online learning actually *supported* their mental health (Ferrer et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2025). Academic staff reported students saying they liked the lockdown periods as they did not need to worry about their appearance or being judged, and had nothing to miss out on during that time; the simplification of life had a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing. A student explicitly stated that the forced slowing down of university life helped considerably:

'I was suffering really badly mentally, so COVID helped me reset and become better in who I was. Because of COVID I had time to rest and there wasn't school, there wasn't the stress of I've got this exam now and I've got that exam now' (Aoifa, S).

Professional service participants reported a similar unexpected outcome, that award and progress gaps for students with special educational needs closed significantly during lockdown (Anfilogoff, 2024). They attributed this to the move to online learning which increased accessibility. However, they also confirmed that they felt that these gains are now widening again post-COVID-19 as universities move closer to a full return to campus.

1:3 Support

Professional service staff reported that students are presenting with more mental health difficulties as their lives post-pandemic have returned to their usual complexity. One gave the following example of an interaction with a student;

...and then all of a sudden, like there I was, I couldn't get out of bed. I didn't want to brush my teeth, I didn't want to shower, I just wanted to lay in bed because what was the point of life and then all of a sudden, I have 3 final exams this week, I don't care about these exams, I don't even want to live, never mind take exams, you know' (Parva, P).

This example provides evidence of the profound impact on life for students' post-pandemic. Leavey et al. (2020) state that could be particularly so for those from poorer households and those with caring responsibilities; and Holt-White et al.'s (2023) COSMO study confirmed that students from deprived areas were likely to have not received the support they applied for. However, it was acknowledged by professional service participants that students accessing mental health and wellbeing services seem to be doing well. However, students who are on waiting lists or who do not get the support are the concern; the pressure of accessing support or waiting for support can also affect engagement in learning (Deahl, 2023; CQC 2024). It was also reported by professional service staff that the increase in referrals could be connected to students' increased knowledge and awareness of mental health and wellbeing through social media and online platforms. Results presented a mixture picture in relation to mental health pressures.

1:4 Internal Pressures

Students discussed the powerful negative impact of their own internal pressures, such as intrusive thoughts and how these can affect their ability to concentrate on their studies. Other students reported that a good relationship with a personal tutor, who they knew well and who knew them well, would help to alleviate these thoughts, calm them, and improve their mental health.

Academic and Professional Service Staff did not specifically comment on this theme, but students presented powerfully about 'holding' pressures in their head, for example:

'Whether that be family, society, peers, deadlines, lack of tutor relationship', [all of this affects concentration as] them pressures, they're still in your mind every single day, whether you're walking, you're sitting, you're eating, you're doing anything, that pressure is still there in your head' (Kai, S).

Academic staff also reported students 'masking' more than before, i.e. students say they are doing well when they are struggling, not sharing their struggles, or seeking help. However, with staff reporting heavier academic workloads, they often do not have time to build firmer relationships with students to provide the support needed to unpick internal pressures when presenting with masking (Jones & Bell, 2025).

To summarise this theme, the results suggest that COVID-19 has an ongoing impact on mental health and wellbeing for many students. Additional pressures that contribute to student mental health difficulties are related to their own health, caring duties, worry and concern about family members and finances (Defeyter, 2021). For students with special educational needs this is affected by higher education accessibility issues (Anfilogoff, 2024). Students can access help from the university, but those from less privileged areas are likely to face longer than average waits for mental health support (Holt-White et al., 2023), given that the health service is struggling to cope in many areas (Deahl, 2023; CQC 2024). It was found that students are increasingly presenting with more complex and serious mental health conditions, and it is hardly surprising that many students are still struggling to cope, and that these pressures affect their ability and/or willingness to fully engage with their studies (for a detailed review of the literature, see Jones & Bell 2024, p143). Defeyter et al. (2021, p1) also reports on the negative impact of the pandemic and how 'low levels of mental health and wellbeing can reduce motivation, diminish concentration and hinder academic achievement'. This demonstrates the continuing significant impact of COVID-19 on students' mental health and wellbeing which is adding to the pressures they are experiencing whilst at university.

2. Cost-of-Living Pressure

2:1 Employment Pressures

Responses from both academics and professional service staff reported students post-pandemic having to work part-time and increasingly full-time alongside their studies. They felt that this worsened an existing trend:

'They're skint and they also very often need to work' (Alan, A).

‘Students were already beginning to need to work pre-pandemic, but post[-pandemic] they are *having* to work’ (Elizabeth, P).

Academic and professional services staff also felt that the pressures on finances were worse for students from non-traditional backgrounds, as these groups are vulnerable to financial pressures (HEPI, 2024; 2024a; 2024b), which contribute to drop-out (Aina et al., 2022). Furthermore, participants recognised that for those students and their families who lost jobs or had work hours cut during the pandemic and who did not receive additional government support, there were significant ongoing financial pressures. Our data supports Neves and Stephenson’s (2023) finding that students, especially those from low socio-economic demographics, are using earned income to fund their studies, and a report by London Economics (2024, p10) states that ‘in England most of the cost of higher education is borne by the student/graduates’, with ongoing challenges relating to a stagnant economy, inflation, policy, and public understanding.

2:2 Financial Costs of University Attendance

Balancing the needs of academic study with family responsibilities and/or the need to work for income is forcing students into making decisions on where to alleviate pressure (Aina et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2025). This means attending university is one of the main areas students forgo, as they prioritise work commitments due to financial pressures (Thomas et al., 2025). Participants from all three groups commented on students weighing up of the costs and benefits of attendance:

‘Just the pressure of trying to balance the course with family and work, that’s been quite a lot of pressure. I think I’ve learned over the year how to kind of alleviate some of the pressure and what to let go of and what to fixate on’ (Rose, S).

‘Students are making that decision. Do I pay travel costs to come in and sit in a lecture or do I pick it up online after my shift?’ (Rhian, A).

Rather than dropping out completely, this decision can be made on a case-by-case basis, as students timetabled to attend for part of a day (e.g. one lecture) decide whether to attend. Academic Staff discussed how they try to timetable full days of seminars and lectures with later start times to enable carers, parents, and workers to better balance their time (Money et al., 2017). This does not always alleviate the overall financial pressure, but it can help with travel costs and swing a student’s decision in favour of attending.

Academic staff described supporting students who were struggling with finances right at the beginning of term, suggesting that Student Finance England (SFE) payments do not cover living costs. Phoenix (2024) explains ‘maintenance loans were increased by just 2.8% in England for

the 2023–24 academic year, despite inflation averaging 9% last year'. Our participants confirm how early in the term students are feeling the effects bite. In one example:

'A student's [bank] card was declined and they couldn't travel and they had to phone their parent to ask them to transfer money, and this is right at the start of term after SFE payments have just been paid'. (Sian, A)

All participants discussed travel costs as an additional barrier to attending, and again another balancing decision for students to make, particularly for non-essential events. The current cost-of-living crisis is having an impact on attendance decision-making as students weigh up the cost/benefit affecting student engagement in their course or wider university initiatives (Thomas et al. 2025), as this student made clear:

'I don't feel the need to [come in], it just costs quite a bit and there's a lot of time to travel and stuff' (Abebi, S).

2:3 Accommodation

An additional pressure for students is trying to secure accommodation, as rents have increased significantly since the pandemic (HEPI, 2023a) and the pool of available housing is limited (Weale, 2023). Professional services and academic participants cited student homelessness as a growing issue: one participant commented that student housing was 'sold out and filled up before Christmas, way earlier than they ever were before. It's just a housing crisis' (Barbara, P). And another noted that:

'We've had reports this year of students sleeping in the library. It's not like they're working in the library and having a nap. They've brought their sleeping bag and they're laying down for the night. (Parva, P)

Lack of disposable income and inadequate accommodation means some students struggle to find appropriate clothing. Professional service respondents discussed an initiative to provide students with appropriate clothing for professional placements through staff donations which were made available at a pop-up stall. The event was extremely popular with students, demonstrating a clear need for support with clothing; it was the first time they have ever had to put on such events, demonstrating a significant shift in student needs. The data supports a cost-of-living survey (National Union of Students, 2022) which stated that 'students can't afford to do their laundry and are cutting back on showers to make ends meet', further revealing the desperate times that students are encountering, and which are affecting their ability to concentrate and engage in their university programmes (Defeyter et. al., 2021).

Professional service participants also highlighted the significant impact of the global economy on international students, and how there are currently increasing numbers of international students' struggling to pay fees. Whilst international students may have funds to start their courses, they are increasingly struggling to continue, due to rising living costs in the UK and often economic problems in their home countries as well; 'students from overseas are also having to begin to factor in increases in visa fees and the healthcare surcharge' (HEPI, 2023). Both home and international students are affected by the impact of the economy, which affects their ability to live and continue to study on their courses. Inevitably, financial pressures have a significant impact on student mental health (Defeyeter et al., 2021).

Overall, the insights from our participants powerfully assert the enormous impact of the cost-of-living crisis and the student housing crisis post-pandemic (HEPI, 2023; 2024). One participant stated bluntly: 'I don't have much money and it's suffocating' (Rose, S); a professional services colleague noted that 'the whole societal context has become harder so we are seeing many more students with financial and housing issues and social issues' (Gavin, P).

3. Academic Pressure

This section presents 'academic pressures' of time and grades.

3:1 Time

Academic and professional services staff reported that time pressure at university is nothing new around assessment deadlines, but academic staff reported that students appear to be more stressed than usual, suggesting increased anxiety under pressure of time. Students also commented that academic timelines and time management contribute to pressure, but this is challenging to address in a higher education context. Academic staff felt that an effective personal tutoring system can help students during these pinch points in time, but only if there is time and space to build trusting relationships, which depends on adequate protected time (Jones & Nangah, 2020). Students who appear to be leaving assessments to the last minute find that this contributes negatively to their mental health. This is probably driven by the fact that they are time poor and balancing work, family, care, and their own health needs in unison (Bhowmik et al., 2024). One student reflected that leaving work to the last minute had affected their mental health: 'it's bad because it puts me into a really bad mental state' (Aoife, S).

3:2 Grade Pressure

Our student participants talked powerfully about how academic grades will affect their future plans for work or study, and about pressure to do well from teachers, and family. They talked about the fear of failure, and the impact on themselves and their families if they do not achieve desired

grades. Although some acknowledged that feeling pressure helped motivate them, others reported worrying if their grades are lower than needed or their peers are achieving higher grades. A student described this as:

'like a very big hole that you fall into because there's so much pressure from quite literally every single circle in my life, like if you do wrong, the entire glass is going to crack' (Kai, S).

The effects of family pressure in relation to grades has an impact on student mental health, particularly intrusive thoughts. Students talked about being compared to other family members who are also at university, for example cousins or siblings and where their achievements are openly compared. They explained that they felt pressure from wider family members such as parents, aunts and uncles and even people from within their community to achieve good grades and they found this pressure, 'playing in their heads'. They reported that this additional pressure affected their mental health.

4. Perceived Lack of Future

Academic and professional service staff felt that for young people the current climate was, 'a completely different world... It's the worst I've ever...I think anybody has ever seen' (Elizabeth, P). They sensed that some students felt they lacked a fulfilling future. They reported students worrying about securing jobs following completion of their degrees, and degrees leading to low-paid roles or jobs with long hours and high stress such as nursing, healthcare, and teaching. A participant in professional services reported that this uncertainty focused on the:

'pressures of [the] degree leading to future employment worries and commercialisation of knowledge, as this is the focus rather than learning [for its own sake]. Many students [are] stressing about getting a job at the end of their degree' (Parva, P).

Academic and professional service staff also discussed students having what might be termed existential doubts, where they questioned the purpose of their programme. They felt that COVID-19 interruptions affected young people's development of social skills and that students missed out on the rites of passage to explore, have freedom, and make mistakes during this period, which is creating pressure for their future as they are now questioning their chosen routes and assessing the cost/benefits more closely. Students reported that COVID-19 interrupted many of the commonly perceived milestones for young adults, such as passing a driving test, completing a degree, finding a career. A student explained,

‘the university forgets that students arrive having experienced individual journeys – we are students who are concerned about our future, we have emotions, we have pressures, more so for those students who have experienced education [during] COVID’ (Abebi, S).

For young people specifically who were in the education system during COVID-19, our interview data suggests that there is a perceived lack of future, especially in relation to future job prospects, and earning potential, and they are weighing up the cost/benefit more assertively than ever before (Aina et al., 2022). There is also a sense of loss for these students who have missed out on key social and emotional development points, due to the periods of enforced isolation which have reduced their skills and their aspirations, with implications on mental health and wellbeing.

5. Strong Relationships

Academic staff referred to concerns about student pressures in relation to being away from home, finding friendship groups, and loneliness within halls of residence, recognising that students need a community or personal tutor group community and that good relationships are crucial for both health and retention (Pedler et al, 2021; Tinto, 1993; 1997). Loneliness can be linked to ‘a series of adverse mental health outcomes’ (Vasileiou et al., 2019, p21), such as depression, self-harm, suicide ideation, poor mental and physical health (Bhowmik et al., 2024). Academic staff also recognised that some students are having to play ‘catch-up’ in terms of social community building because of the pandemic, although they also acknowledge that students have adapted to different ways of doing things. Students talked about having ‘secure bases’ both within university and outside of university as helping to relieve ‘pressures’. One student explicitly talked about tutor support.

‘It’s like, wow, this person believes in me more than I do, so I should believe you, so I should start believing in myself’. Having that level of support really affects you (Rose, S).

This highlights the powerful impact of relational pedagogy and strong relationships with teaching and support staff (Jones 2021; Bell, 2022; Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022; Gravett et al. 2021).

Professional service staff recognised that COVID-19 interrupted students’ ability to attend live events; whilst online events were offered, they found these were not as effective for relationship building, which is a crucial part of reducing loneliness, building coping skills, and improving mental health and wellbeing (Bhowmik et al., 2024; Vasileiou et al., 2019). Social support, friendship and relational pedagogy were found to be crucial to good mental health and wellbeing in higher education and existing academic literature also supports this finding (Bell, 2022; Gravett and Ajjawi, 2021; Gravett et. al. 2022; Robertson et. al., 2019).

Conclusion and Implications

Our findings strongly support the view that pressures on university students in the post-COVID-19 era are serious and interlinked; as one participant put it, students really are ‘being squeezed left, right and centre’ (Rhian, A). Our dataset provides robust first-hand narrative support for the view that COVID-19, mental health and wellbeing and the cost-of-living crisis are increasing students’ feelings of pressure. This aligns with numerous academic reports (Brimelow, 2023; Defeyter et al., 2021; Dougall et al., 2023; Holt-White et al., 2023; Jones & Bell, 2024; Jones & Bell, 2025). The pandemic and its impact on society and the economy have had profound and lasting effects on many students and the way they experience university. This has, for many students, had a damaging effect on their ability, sense of belonging and their engagement, on progression, attrition and academic outcomes (Ahn & Davis, 2019; 2022; 2023; Crawford et al., 2024; Gilani et al. 2024).

The current research also identifies the heightened inequalities for students with special educational needs and those from, non-traditional demographics, with implications for social mobility (Social Mobility Commission, 2023; 2024). The findings also suggest considerable scope for development, with much that might be done to alleviate these pressures, particularly for these students. If change does not happen the situation is likely to worsen, especially if the predicted 27% UK growth in student numbers occurs (HEPI, 2023). With social mobility in the UK and developing countries high on the political agenda (Social Mobility Commission, 2023; 2024), it would make sense to invest research, expertise, and funding to alleviate student pressures.

Implications

We discuss in this section some of the practical implications of our findings in terms of what might be done to alleviate the pressure on students. Like the pressures themselves, these recommendations sit across macro, meso and micro domains (Haas & Hadjar, 2020), and we must acknowledge potential difficulties in implementing change in time to benefit the students who may need it most. Large scale actions are generally outside the scope of action for individual institutions, yet we mention them because without action at this level the problems are unlikely to significantly diminish and because large scale actions are in our view essential for longer term solutions.

1. At the macro levels there are significant improvements needed for government policy and funding strategies, in areas including health services, economy, student funding, student housing reform and transport. Improvements in these domains would act directly to improve students’ mental health and wellbeing post-COVID-19 and alleviate the need to

work full time whilst balancing academic studies. This would relieve pressures not only for the most disadvantaged students but also for UK universities' student support services. Increased financial help for universities with high numbers of students from non-traditional backgrounds is also needed.

2. At an intermediate level, and within the grasp of institutions, emergency financial hardship funds could be increased to reduce students in dire hardship. Personal tutoring systems and workload allocations for staff could also be improved, to help reduce academic pressures for students and improve time for staff to develop trusting relationships with students (Jones & Bell, 2025; Jones & Nangah, 2020; Jones, 2021; Jones 2023; Yale, 2020). Better systems for identifying and acting on student mental health issues, and training in their use, could enable staff to manage increasing referrals. Training and support is also required to enable students affected by COVID-19 to improve self-regulation, self-esteem, and social and emotional development. None of these recommendations is necessarily easy to implement or likely to be a permanent long-term solution.
3. We see most hope for immediate change at the micro level, that being the students themselves, the teaching staff, and the classroom environment. Students are already finding ways to navigate and alleviate some of the pressures, for example, by not attending when they feel it is not necessary. Some practical pedagogical suggestions are:
 - Hybrid teaching and learning or course design where possible could be considered during programme review and planning. Students reported many positives of this method of teaching and learning, particularly those students with special educational needs, work or caring responsibilities.
 - 'Condensed attendance', with classes blocked as far as possible rather than spread out, would better enable students to work alongside their studies. Better understanding of student time management strategies and understanding of student workloads, work around building self-esteem.
 - Make greater efforts to build strong, trust-based relationships (staff-student and student-student) as these appear to be key to diminishing loneliness and reducing barriers to student engagement.

Of course, none of these are certain or complete fixes, and they do not remove the necessity for universities to identify complex needs and respond to them appropriately quickly.

To conclude, this study provides evidence of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected students post-pandemic in terms of the pressures they face in higher education. These pressures relate

significantly to mental health and wellbeing with associated feelings of isolation, anxiety, support and internal pressures. Cost of living pressures include employment, students having to weigh up the costs and benefits of attendance, and challenges with paying for accommodation (National Union of Students, 2022). Academic pressures relating to time, and grades were also reported, alongside students' feelings of the perceived lack of future. This research also highlights the importance and benefits of strong relationships within higher education, particularly for students from non-traditional backgrounds post-COVID-19.

Although the dataset comes from one institution, the data demonstrates, through the voice of students, academic staff, and professional services staff, how much pressure students are facing. All of our participants were very keen to talk about their experiences. It is therefore possible that by treating COVID-19 as a collective trauma, the simple act of discussing it might itself provide a useful therapeutic space which could allow some resolution to the issues discussed in the paper. These results provide key insights for HEI's internationally who share similar student demographics. We think the stakes are very high. Much has been made recently of the financial weaknesses at the heart of higher education (London Economics, 2024; HEPI, 2024; 2024a; 2024b), but we feel that this focus may take precedence over a similar crisis in the student body. This is a crisis of mental health, wellbeing and poverty that is affecting students now and is likely to affect them for many years as cohorts in the worst affected groups (Leavy et al., 2020) progress through their education. If this is not dealt with, and the trauma is ignored, this will likely lead to increasing pressures that will affect student belonging, engagement, success, and attrition rates in the future.

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