

Tuition fee increase has had little effect on students' mental health

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New research led by the University of Southampton and Solent NHS Trust has found no evidence of a long term impact on students' mental health as a result of the rise in tuition fees, introduced in 2011.

The study did find students paying the higher fees were less likely to experience an improvement in their state of mind during their first year of university, but that the increase had no longer term impact on their mental wellbeing.

"Previous studies have found a relationship between financial difficulties, levels of debt and [poor mental health](#) in British students," says Dr Thomas Richardson, a Clinical Psychologist who led the research.

"This study suggests it may be the ability to pay the bills, rather than the size of the student loan itself, that is important to wellbeing while at university."

In an unexpected outcome of the study, which has been published online today in the *Journal of Public Health*, those paying lower fees showed greater symptoms of alcohol dependence. The authors speculate that this could be due to a higher level of disposable income to spend on alcohol.

Nearly 400 undergraduate students from universities across the United Kingdom completed surveys to assess levels of stress, depression, anxiety and other [mental health issues](#) during their first two years of

study.

Three different groups of students took part in the study: those paying £3,000 to £4,000 per year, before the introduction of higher fees; those studying in Scotland, where Scottish students pay no fees; and those paying up to £9,000, studying from 2011 onwards.

Surveys were completed online on four occasions, three to four months apart, and spanning students' first and second academic year at university.

The first survey showed no significant differences between the various groups. Differences became apparent at the second time of study, with those charged lower fees showing an improvement in anxiety, depression, stress and general mental health over time, while those charged more showed no improvement.

However by the third and fourth tests, the trend of worse mental health for those charged £8,000 to £9,000 had reversed, so there were no longer any differences between the groups based on fees.

Many students charged fees of £9,000 will be graduating later this year. Dr Richardson says: "At present the [tuition fees](#) increase does not appear to have had a major impact on the mental health of undergraduates. However differences between those charged higher fees may not become apparent for many years and so ongoing monitoring of the prevalence of [mental health](#) problems in [students](#) and their relationship with debt is needed."

More information: "The Impact of Tuition Fees Amount on Mental Health over Time in British Students." *J Public Health*, first published online February 10, 2015 [DOI: 10.1093/pubmed/fdv003](https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdv003)

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