

Pandemic took a major, prolonged toll on university students' mental health, finds study

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Undergraduates at UK universities experienced prolonged and high levels of psychological distress and anxiety during the pandemic, according to a new study, tracking well-being over the course of 2020 to

2021.

They also reported significantly lower levels of well-being, happiness and life satisfaction compared to pre-pandemic levels.

Published in the [*British Journal of Educational Studies*](#), the University of Bolton research highlights how the stringent lockdown measures—including closing universities, forcing isolated study and no in-person lectures or communion with peers—had a particularly striking impact on students, who faced major disruptions to their education and future career prospects.

"Often in small student accommodation rooms, undergraduates were cut off from friends and close family, and unable to rely on their usual routes for seeking physical or [emotional support](#)," explains co-author Dr. Chathurika Kannangara, an Associate Teaching Professor in the Department of Psychology, at Bolton.

"In addition, common entertainment and socialization facilities such as restaurants, bars and clubs were closed for long periods—completely stripping away the normal social aspect of university life."

To uncover the exacting detail, experts tracked 554 undergraduates at UK universities over a one-year period between May 2020 and May 2021.

Students were asked about their [mental health](#) and well-being at four key points in the pandemic; May 2020, when the UK was in the 7th week of lockdown; June and July 2020, when lockdown measures were beginning to ease; six months later in November and December, when stricter lockdown restrictions were introduced in the lead up to Christmas; and finally one year later in May 2021, when the UK was at Step 3 of the roadmap to come out of lockdown restrictions.

The results showed that students suffered an increase in [psychological distress](#) over 12 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Periods in which COVID-19 cases were peaking and during periods of lockdown and intense confinement were also associated with poorer mental well-being.

The [data suggests](#) that students' psychological distress scores (between 13.8 and 15.6), were slightly worse than scores of a generalized group across the UK.

Perhaps surprisingly, the new findings also show students' psychological distress scores to be [consistently higher](#), and more severe, levels of psychological distress than [health care professionals](#) in the UK during the pandemic.

"Even in May 2020, at the first phase of data collection, psychological distress scores were already considerably above pre-pandemic levels," adds lead author Rosie Allen, a Research Assistant at Bolton.

"This could be due to the fact that on April 16th 2020, lockdown restrictions were extended for a further three weeks and on the 5th May 2020, the UK had the second highest daily death toll in the world."

Conversely, periods of the pandemic that saw the relaxing of rules and restrictions saw a slight improvement. For instance, there was a significant decrease in anxiety in June and July 2020 when [lockdown](#) measures were beginning to relax and social distancing rules were easing after a long period of strict isolation.

There were also signs that by the end of the study, levels of psychological distress were beginning to reduce, although the reduction was not statistically significant. This could be because students completed the final survey when the UK was following the government's roadmap plan to slowly and indefinitely return to 'normal'.

The study also looked at students' well-being and happiness, and found that both declined significantly between May 2020 and May 2021.

According to co-author Professor Jerome Carson, from the School of Education & Psychology at Bolton, there could be many reasons why university students in the UK were unable to 'flourish' during this time.

"University students, along with the rest of the population, experienced fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and health concerns produced by the pandemic," he says.

"However, in addition to this, the very ingredients that contribute towards flourishing and happiness were stripped away. For example, students experienced heightened loneliness and social isolation, which we know are linked to lower levels of flourishing. Likewise, building and maintaining healthy and effective relationships, a fundamental part of flourishing mental health, was obstructed due to social distancing measures."

The authors suggest that, considering the lasting and wide-spread changes to higher education since the COVID-19 pandemic, more needs to be done to support students physically, mentally and academically.

"There is clear evidence that the mental health needs of university students in the UK have increased since the outbreak of COVID-19," they conclude.

The team recommends the introduction of new mental health services accessible via [social media platforms](#) or mobile phone applications which "could combat the stigma associated with seeking professional help, and would alleviate the strain on overwhelmed mental health services".

More information: Long-term Mental Health Impacts of the Covid-19

Pandemic on University Students in the UK: A longitudinal Analysis Over 12 Months, *British Journal of Educational Studies* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/00071005.2023.2215857](https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2023.2215857)

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