

UK study finds increased risk of depression and anxiety when in higher education

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Young people who are in higher education in England face a small increased risk of depression and anxiety, compared to their peers who are not attending higher education, finds a new study led by UCL

researchers.

The research paper, published in *The Lancet Public Health*, is the first to find evidence of higher levels of depression and [anxiety](#) among higher [education](#) students compared with their peers.

The authors found that by age 25, the difference had disappeared between graduates and non-graduates.

Lead author Dr. Gemma Lewis (UCL Psychiatry) said, "In recent years in the UK we have seen an increase in [mental health problems](#) among [young people](#), so there has been an increased focus on how to support students. Here we have found concerning evidence that students may have a higher risk of depression and anxiety than their peers of the same age who are not in higher education.

"The first couple of years of higher education are a crucial time for development, so if we could improve the mental health of young people during this time it could have long term benefits for their health and well-being, as well as for their educational achievement and longer-term success."

The researchers used data from the Longitudinal Studies of Young People in England (LSYPE1 and LSYPE2). The first study included 4,832 young people born in 1989-90, who were aged 18-19 in the years 2007-9. The second study included 6,128 participants born in 1998-99, who were aged 18-19 in the years 2016-18 (i.e., prior to the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic). In both studies, just over half attended higher education.

Participants in the studies have completed surveys about their general mental health, to investigate symptoms of depression, anxiety, and social dysfunction, at multiple time points over the years.

The researchers found a small difference in symptoms of depression and anxiety at age 18-19 between students (including those at university and other higher education institutions) and non-students.

This association persisted after adjustment for potentially confounding factors including—among others—[socioeconomic status](#), parents' education, and alcohol use.

The analysis suggests that if the potential mental health risks of attending higher education were eliminated, the incidence of depression and anxiety could potentially be reduced by 6% among people aged 18-19.

First author Dr. Tayla McCloud (UCL Psychiatry) said, "Based on our findings, we cannot say why students might be more at risk of depression and anxiety than their peers, but it could be related to academic or financial pressure. This increased risk among students has not been found in studies in the past, so if the association has only recently emerged, it may be related to increased financial pressures and worries about achieving high results in the wider economic and social context.

"We would have expected [higher education](#) students to have better mental health than their non-[student](#) peers as they tend to be from more privileged backgrounds on average, so these results are particularly concerning. More research is needed to clarify the mental health risks facing students. Improving our understanding of modifiable risk factors for [depression](#) and anxiety is a global health priority, and it is clear that supporting the mental health of our young people is vitally important."

More information: The association between higher education attendance and common mental health problems among young people in England: evidence from two population-based cohorts, *The Lancet Public Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/S2468-2667\(23\)00188-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(23)00188-3)

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