

Navigating entry into higher education: the transition to independent learning and living

Miles Thompson, Chris Pawson & Bethan Evans

To cite this article: Miles Thompson, Chris Pawson & Bethan Evans (2021) Navigating entry into higher education: the transition to independent learning and living, Journal of Further and Higher Education, 45:10, 1398-1410, DOI: [10.1080/0309877X.2021.1933400](https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1933400)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1933400>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 17 Jun 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 5637



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

Navigating entry into higher education: the transition to independent learning and living

Miles Thompson ^a, Chris Pawson ^a and Bethan Evans^b

^aPsychological Sciences Research Group (PSRG), Department of Social Sciences, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK; ^bDepartment of Social Sciences, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK

ABSTRACT

Student transition into higher education can set the foundation for success at university. However, some students, perhaps in increasing numbers, find this transition difficult. This study explores contemporary students' experiences when transitioning into Higher Education (HE) to gain an up to date picture of the multiple, potential sources of distress. Focus groups and interviews were held with a total of 10 participants. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. The data suggests that students find a number of things difficult about their transition into HE. Overall, our findings suggest that some find challenges adapting to living independently, while some are also unprepared for independent study at university. These challenges and feelings of lack of preparedness can be experienced as particularly distressing for students who can feel that even their early academic performances are directly tied to their future opportunities for both success at university and later life. One of the main sources of support students seem to have are their new social networks. However, even establishing these networks can become an additional challenge. In the discussion, we explore how the existing literature generally supports these findings. The discussion also considers both if and why the challenges of learning and living independently – a consistent and longstanding part of university life – appears to be causing more problems now than previously. We provisionally introduce a new concept and focus for work in this area SAILL (Struggles Around Independent Learning and Living) and consider whether such a focus might help us conceptualise future work in this area.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 June 2020
Accepted 18 May 2021

KEYWORDS

Student mental health; transition; preparedness; higher education

Introduction

Background

Concerns over student mental health have received increasing attention from within and beyond the Higher Education (HE) sector in recent years (OfS 2019; OnS 2018); and have led to a range of cross-sector policy developments (Universities UK 2020) and a University Mental Health Charter in the United Kingdom (Hughes and Spanner 2019). Although the transition to University has long been studied (Fisher and Hood 1987) and widely recognised as influential in student success and wellbeing, there is an increasing body of contemporary literature explicitly pointing to the potential centrality of transitions in addressing the current mental health concerns in the academy (Young et al. 2020). Indeed, the HE sector has recognised a need for the development of strategic partnerships with schools, colleges and Mental Health Services to better understand this transition and support students (Cage et al. 2021;

CONTACT Miles Thompson  miles@mvdct.co.uk  University of the West of England (UWE), Room 3A028, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QY, UK

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

Universities UK 2020). The current research seeks to explore student experiences of HE transition, such that it might shed new light on the increasing mental health concerns, and increasing demand for University well-being and counselling services across the sector (Williams et al. 2015).

The emerging literature from across a range of national and international contexts makes it increasingly clear that a student's transition to HE is a complex, nonlinear developmental experience (Gravett and Winstone 2019; Jindal-Snape and Rienties 2016; Taylor and Harris-Evans 2018). It is evident that this presents a diverse range of potential challenges for all students, which disproportionately impacts some student groups (Coertjens et al. 2017; Gale and Parker 2012). However, the literature on the transition from secondary education to HE can sometimes relegate or entirely omit the social and developmental psychology of transition (Le and Wilkinson 2018), instead focusing on the gaps between the organisational and cultural demands of HE relative to school or college. Such research can propagate ideas of the applicant needing to assimilate into the existing structures while failing to acknowledge or explore the individual and more nuanced developmental experiences of students' transitions (O'Donnell, Kean, and Stevens 2016). This includes the potential significance of prior educational and personal experiences (Brownlee et al. 2009; Gale and Parker 2012; Money, Nixon, and Graham 2020).

The transition from school to University is widely recognised as a significant leap to more independence, and personal and academic autonomy for the majority of students (Kyndt et al. 2017; Murtagh 2012). This transition is a crucial period in terms of studenthood, as it can set the foundation for successful study and future achievement (Hultberg et al. 2008; Krause and Coates 2008). However, for many young people entering HE, this transition represents a momentous developmental step in their journey into adulthood that requires significant social and emotional adjustment (Young et al. 2020). Transferring from the controlled environment offered in school and the family home to accepting personal responsibility for academic, financial and social aspects of life is challenging (Belfield et al. 2017; Lowe and Cook 2003; Parker et al. 2004). The complex and demanding experience of this transition has the potential to affect mental health and wellbeing (Ran et al. 2016; Thorley 2017).

While the above makes clear that there is an established literature in this area, it seems important to continue to update our understanding of our students' experiences. With this in mind, the current qualitative study aims to explore students' experiences of transitioning into HE. This research hopes to gain a contemporary picture of the potential sources of distress they experience during this time with a particular aim to see if we can gain insights into why mental health problems seem to be on the increase in this population at this time. In short, is our current understanding, and our insights from the existing literature enough – or are their further details we need to add to our formulation in order to better explain and tackle the rises in student distress we are seeing at this time. More specifically, we aim to understand more about the difficulties that students are facing now, with a long-term view to inform both strengths-based and student-led strategies to help facilitate a better transition into HE. We hope this will serve students better throughout their course of study and prepare them more successfully for graduate life.

Method

Overview

This research is deliberately underpinned by a qualitative design, because we are seeking to check, update and expand our knowledge by learning directly from the experiences of our participants (Berkwits and Inui 1998; Hammarberg, Kirkman, and de Lacey 2016). Our data collection methods involve both a focus group and one-to-one interviews. The data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Participants

First- and second-year psychology students within a post-1992 university in the South West of England were invited to take part in the study via an invitation and information sheet presented within their virtual learning environment (VLE). The authors were interested in the experiences of both first-year students who were currently experiencing the transition into HE, but also the perspectives of second-year students who may be more able to reflect back and provide an account of their first 12 months in HE. We deliberately chose not to recruit final year students as their experience may have been more clouded by the pressures and demands associated with the end of their degree programmes.

The opportunity to participate was advertised to all first- and second-year psychology students. Students were informed that the study was interested in transitions to HE. Students wishing to participate could opt to either join a focus group or a one-to-one interview. Participants received a course credit for participation as part of an internal research participation scheme within the subject area, no financial compensation was given.

Three first-year participants (one male, two females) and a second-year female student participated in the focus group. Six more (two males, four females) participated in one-to-one interviews. The age of the participants in the focus group ranged from 19 to 28, with a mean age of 22.1 years of age. The age of the participants in the interviews ranged from 19 to 22 years, with a mean age of 19.8.

Data collection

The interviews and focus groups were conducted in quiet, private rooms on university grounds. This setting was familiar to participants. All participants were presented with the same 11 open-ended questions, in the same order. The interviews were semi-structured, giving the interviewer freedom to explore additional questions in response to potentially significant responses. After introductions, the core starter questions were as follows: What are you enjoying most, and what is your least favourite thing about university?; In what ways is University different to what you were expecting?; Why do you think some people might struggle when they get to University?; Have you had any problems coping with the independence required at University?; What strategies do you have for coping with the demands of University? A Dictaphone was used to record the interviews, and recordings were transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyse the data. Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-step guide to conducting TA was followed. This involved transcribing the dataset, familiarising oneself with the dataset; initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, and reporting the analysis. In addition to the above, themes were checked and modified through consultation between the authors with the refining continuing up to and included the writing up process. Different varieties of thematic analysis exist, this research used an inductive and descriptive approach, where the themes are identified in a data driven, bottom-up way – led by and rooted in the participants account (Braun and Clarke 2013). At the same time, acknowledging that any results produced will always be shaped to some extent by the researchers positions and histories.

Ethical considerations

This research was carried out under the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (British Psychological Society 2010) and ethical approval was granted by the university research and ethics committee. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the

study at any point. All identifiable information was held securely and removed upon transcription to protect participant's anonymity.

Results

While many of the participants made reference to the transition into HE as a period of new experiences and acclimatisation to independence, aspects of it were frequently experienced as challenging and stressful. The challenges and anxieties of the transition to HE found in the data are organised into three overarching themes below:

- (1) Challenges of independent living
- (2) Challenges of independent learning
- (3) Social support and pressure.

Each theme, and its sub-themes are discussed in turn below.

Theme 1: challenges of independent living

Some students referred to the shock and demands of adjusting to new domestic independence. A sense of being unprepared seemed to underpin discussion about the everyday tasks of managing self:

"Most students who come to uni at 18 and they've always lived at their parents house, and so you come to university and all of a sudden you're kind of on your own and you've got to fend for yourself" (Participant 6).

"So independence living away from home, at first I was a bit like ahh this is kind of pretty hard, trying to get your food, your washing, getting to uni, having clothes" (Participant 3).

It seems participants had not anticipated how many day-to-day tasks they would have to take responsibility for, and how time-consuming basic self-care would be. This suggests students were not adequately prepared for domestic independence. Participants suggested that time and money management were necessary skills to develop to successfully cope with domestic responsibilities. However, the steepness of the learning curve required to develop the skill of money management made this adjustment difficult for some:

"You come out of school and you're suddenly thrust into this world where you have to pay bills, pay to watch TV, pay for your own food, there's no real financial umm, you don't really learn the sort of financial things of school" (Focus Group)

Students spoke of the feeling that they should be able to cope and that there was pressure to meet these demands and expectations – despite the demands often being under-articulated. A key related source of distress for students was the feeling that if adjustments to university were experienced as challenging, then this somehow indicated they were unable to cope and inept.

"You know you start paying for your own food and stuff and that's scary. So I couldn't pay for my rent, I couldn't pay for my food, and that's quite stressful you know, feeling as though you're constantly having to grovel to your parents makes you feel like a bit of a failure and that's stressful" (Participant 4).

Of course, not all participants found this aspect of independence stressful and participants who had previously experienced domestic independence reported coping well in this domain.

Theme 2: challenges of independent learning

Students also reported the need to adapt to managing their own academic studies, a new level of independence that HE learning required of them. As well as this general theme, sub themes around:

new ways of communicating, uncertain standards, performance as integral to future success also seem important and related.

First, the general theme. Like independent living, a sense of participants feeling as though they had little time to adapt emerged:

“The sort of whole new world where you get thrust into learning new stuff, hit with exams . . . and coursework straight away and it’s a very different set up to school where you get like sort of force fed information and just regurgitate it and at this point at university you have to start making your mind up, that’s sort of a whole gumbo of factors that makes uni quite a stressful place to be” (Participant 4).

Again, ‘whole new world’ suggests how large the differences might be for some students. HE seems to involve a different study style to that in school/college. Participants specifically referred to the expectations around proactive engagement and responsibility in relation to their learning. However, as with the challenge of independent living, participants reported a sense that they had not been adequately prepared for these expectations and requirements of HE. If students are unprepared for these demands, they are likely to feel stressed by having to complete assessments soon after starting university.

“Everything is so passive in school. It’s like you get told this, you learn it, you try not to fail your exams, and then people go to uni . . . People were like oh university will be different but they never say how it will be different and then they come here and think that they can just operate as they did in sixth form but it doesn’t work” (Participant 2).

This adjustment may be made more difficult if there is limited opportunity for one-to-one help. And, it seems students did not predict that they might receive less support in university. Expectations around guidance may not be met as they arrive in HE:

“You have to do it all so independently and like whereas at school you get a lot more help I think uni is really independent and you have to do everything yourself. So like trying to organize everything like deadlines and stuff is quite difficult” (Participant 5).

“I didn’t feel like I got that much guidance in the lectures and the seminars . . . so I did struggle a little bit yeah” (Participant 6).

New ways of communicating

In addition to the general changes, the style in which students are expected to communicate their knowledge also seemed new to them – potentially making the completion of assessments more challenging. It seems students need to be able to communicate differently to do well in university:

“You know what you want to say you just don’t know how to communicate it” (Participant 3).

Adopting a new style of writing is likely to be a difficult and potentially stressful task for transitioning students. As noted, they may be required to complete assessments soon after beginning university, and they may have less guidance from lecturers than expected. As Participant 1 explains:

“I can imagine if people didn’t get that writing style straight away you’re going to struggle for every bit of coursework” (Participant 1)

Uncertain standards

Participants also made reference to the novel marking/grading style in university. It seems that the different grading style (e.g. 1st, 2:1, etc.) confuses some students, with them unaware of what marks are considered good. This can make it difficult for students to assess how they are progressing – which in turn could contribute to uncertainty. Once again, students did not seem to anticipate the change, and were unprepared for it:

“It’s not a fail, it’s just that I’m thinking the wrong way” (Participant 3).

"I think it's not really emphasised enough that the grading style is a lot different and people freak out" (Participant 3).

This suggests that if students do not understand, or re-calibrate to HE grading, it can be stressful. A new student receiving a grade of 70% (a first) may perceive this to be a poor grade, if they were used to getting higher marks at earlier levels of education.

Students may also be uncertain about how well they are doing in comparison with other students. Some participants reported previous learning performance being benchmarked by comparison with others:

"You spend your whole life being compared to everyone else in your class, you were told where you were in your class" (Focus Group)

It seems that students have been trained at school to understand how well they are doing by comparing themselves to a different grading system and to their peers. However, in university they may not be made aware of how others are performing. Potentially further contributing to student uncertainty.

Performance as integral to future success

Students also reported feeling under pressure to perform well in their degree because of the implications the degree has for their future success. It seems that: good grades are vital, there is no room for mistakes, and you are already competing with others. For some, grades seem to have become connected to imagined future success and wellbeing:

"You need to get that grade to get this job and if you don't get this job . . . you're going to die horribly (Focus Group)

With students placing importance on gaining high grades, then it is perhaps unsurprising that they feel there is no room for mistakes:

"I have a goal of where I want to be and any grade I get that isn't going to get me to that goal just makes me feel worse and adds more pressure" (Focus Group)

It seems that although having a goal can be a positive, it can also be an added pressure. It also seems that students' tendency to compare themselves with others (as mentioned in the previous sub-theme), can make them more fearful of making mistakes as they are already in competition with others:

"If you have somewhere you want to go . . . in my mind I'm already competing with other people who want to do that, so if I make a mistake I'm already behind them" (Focus Group)

This feeling of one mistake putting a student behind relative to another with whom they are already competing is likely to add to stress.

Theme 3. social support and pressure

Although meeting new people and forming friendships was generally reported as a positive experience, some students can experience issues in terms of successfully integrating socially. This theme can be expressed in three sub-themes: Importance of new support system, Living with fellow students and Drinking/clubbing culture.

Importance of new support system

When discussing dealing with difficulties, participants consistently referred to the importance of sharing problems with friends at university:

"There are people on your course on the exact same page as you, so I think it's good to get friends early and just get to know people really early on rather than just secluding yourself, so you haven't got a support system there." (Participant 3)

Although students are likely to have a support system outside of university, participants thought it important to establish good friendships with students at their university. This seems to be largely because it is easier to share problems with likeminded people. Notice that participant 3 also claims it is important to form friendships sooner rather than later. Again suggesting that some students feel they have a short amount of time to adjust to HE.

Living with fellow students

Despite residential students having to adjust to domestic independence, the data gathered here generally suggests they have a better experience when students move away from home. Several participants had lived at home for their first year and moved out for their second year, meaning they could comment on which they felt was more enjoyable. Consistently, these participants discuss how moving out allowed them to develop and strengthen friendships with other students:

"I definitely say I'm more social now I live here . . . I have more friends now that I live up here and I like, I enjoy it more" (Participant 2)

It seems that living with other students local to university makes it easier for them to strengthen friendships as it is more convenient to spend time with each other.

"I live with four people, students, so you just get to know them and their friends" (Participant 3)

It seems that moving away for university provides advantages with regards to social integration.

Drinking/clubbing culture

It seems there is still a norm within student populations to consume alcohol when socialising. As such, there is the potential for students to become marginalised if they do not engage in these typical student activities.

"As students do, like to go out clubbing and drink a lot and all of that and that wasn't what I was, I don't enjoy that, so I felt umm, kind of a bit left out" (Participant 6)

Although many student social events involve consuming alcohol not all students will enjoy this. These students may then have less opportunity to socialise, may feel left out and be less socially integrated. This may further hinder chances of forming friendships:

"I've had a few comments from people in my seminars like oh you don't go out enough . . . it's them people that make me anxious" (Participant 2)

This suggests that as it is generally accepted that students go out, it can be viewed as strange if a student does not. It seems some students may even feel judged by others based on what they spend their spare time doing or not doing.

Discussion

This study aimed to provide an updated qualitative exploration of student's experiences of transitioning into HE, with a view to understanding the sources of potential distress, especially in light of recent reports of increases in student distress across the HE sector (OfS 2019; Williams et al. 2015). Analysis of the data echoes previous research suggesting that the transition is a period of multiple uncertainties (Gravett and Winstone 2019). But more specifically, our study found that students find themselves in a new environment, with demanding new domestic responsibilities. They need to engage in academic tasks that are experienced as different and can feel closely tied to future success. Friends can provide buffers to these challenges, but social life also be an additional source of stress. Data from the current study suggests some students face challenges in adapting to these multiple changes simultaneously, especially as some of these challenges appear to be unanticipated.

When relating these findings back to the literature, what is immediately apparent, is how strongly they are supported by existing literature, including findings highlighted in the introduction. For example, the pressure to adapt to aspects of the HE environment was generally experienced by some students as stressful. This is consistent with past findings which found that transferring from the controlled environment of school/college and the family home to accepting new responsibilities can lead to anxiety and distress (Lowe and Cook 2003). Student's failing to fully anticipate their new responsibilities is also consistent with previous findings that students struggle to envisage university life and accurately predict their experience (Briggs, Clark, and Hall 2012).

Differences between the university learning environment and previous learning environments also emerged as something that students experience as different. This is consistent with established and recent evidence. For example, Lowe and Cook (2003) noting that A levels may be too narrow a preparation for the demands of HE (see also Scanlon, Rowling, and Weber 2007). Moreover, more recent research, from a teacher's perspective, noted that the gap between further and higher education is too large for us to assume that the student alone can navigate it (Money, Nixon, and Graham 2020, 554). The confirmation of these findings are in slight contrast to Hughes and Smail (2015), who were perhaps surprised that academic concerns were not a major pre-occupation in their sample. Although it is noteworthy that their data were collected from first years during the first 6 weeks of term only. It seems that a wider time frame of transition allows for more academic work to be experienced and thus for concerns to arise. All this considered, as the change of learning environment and academic demands is already noted in the literature the question remains: what, if anything, has changed such that student distress appears to be on the increase.

It does seem noteworthy that the pressure of 'the future' was mentioned a number of times in the results section. Financial difficulties have previously been outlined as a stressor which can increase levels of student anxiety and depression (Andrews and Wilding 2004). This may be on the increase considering the rise in tuition fees (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills 2010). As a result of the Browne Review in 2010 and the subsequent changes to student fees in 2012, the financial pressure on students in England has grown. This is likely to be felt twice. Both as pressure in the here and now; and as a pressure in terms of the amount of debt students know they will carry forward into their graduate futures. Literature prior to the fee change had already traced links to difficulties associated with finance and made connections to poorer student mental health (e.g. Cooke et al. 2004; Roberts et al. 2000). The added pressure since the 2010/12 fee changes may have contributed to the additional sense of pressure and competition noted in the student comments. But, could this change alone be responsible for the broader changes reported in terms of demands for student support services? It seems unlikely, and perhaps invites us to think more broadly on what is being seen, and why these rises might be happening.

Finally, in terms of our results, in order to better deal with all the challenges faced, students voiced the need to integrate socially in order to be supported by peers during their transitions. This aligns with past findings that students find the transition easier if they have a support network (Leese 2010). It seems that the students who are most concerned with establishing new friendships are those who move away for university. This may be, as Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) suggest, because social networks at university become the main source of emotional support when student's prior support networks, such as friends and family at home, are less accessible. In our data, participant's accounts of their experiences living in student accommodation were consistently positive, providing a counterpoint to Christie, Munro, and Rettig (2002) who found that student accommodation can be claustrophobic. Our data tend to further support both Stallman (2010) and Eisenberg et al. (2009) who suggest that moving away for university can be a positive experience for many students.

It is perhaps also noteworthy that in our data, the only participant who had not moved away for university did not seem to deem it as important to make friends in university, as their prior support network was easily accessible. This data is in some contrast to Buote et al. (2007) who found that students not living in student accommodation are more likely to feel marginalised from their peers.

Of course, there is a difference between not living in student accommodation, and still living among an existing and established peer group.

Overall, our findings suggest that students find challenges adapting to living independently and learning independently. The existing literature supports each of these findings. One of the main sources of support and buffer they have from these challenges are their new social networks – but establishing these can also be a challenge. As already noted, our findings seem to be generally well-supported by the existing literature in the introduction and above. Although, of course, there are places where understandable nuance and divergence from previous findings can also be found. Moreover, it seems of note that much of this existing literature is relatively long-standing and well established. As such this seems to leave an important issue unresolved. Living independently, learning independently, and establishing new social networks are challenges – but they are not new ones. Seemingly these challenges have faced students transitioning into university for a very long time. And yet, at the same time, the data suggests that that mental health problems in HE are on the rise (e.g. Thorley 2017; Williams et al. 2015). So what has changed? The data collected in this paper has not provided new themes from students that suggest radical departures from the existing literature. There is the interesting suggestion of the pressure of future success (graduation and beyond) impacting on the now, and this may both be linked to issues of fees and debt and seems worthy of future investigation. But this aside, perhaps one of the most interesting findings is, generally speaking, how supportive our findings are of the existing literature.

With the above in mind, some wider reflections may be useful. Alongside the data presented in this paper, staff in our well-being service and our psychology department are collecting regular supportive anecdotal data suggesting that among the increasing numbers of students presenting to mental health and well-being services are a larger than expected number of students who are struggling with the kind of issues seen in the results. Issues that we are starting to describe using the acronym SAILL: 'Struggles Around Independent Learning and Living'. It seems that some students are labelling experiences as being highly distressing, as affecting their mental health, and as needing external therapeutic assistance. And yet, when explored, these experiences seem to involve relatively normal activities associated with navigating independent learning and living. In other words, the kind of tasks described in our data set. These are the same or similar tasks that students transitioning into HE have faced for generations (Andrews and Wilding 2004; Fisher and Hood 1987), and yet, today they seem to be causing greater levels of distress. It seems possible that in previous decades more students would have somehow been more able to deal with these SAILL issues by themselves. But, for whatever reason, some are now less able to do so. In short, it seems possible that many of the issues discussed in the results section of this paper and established in the literature as relatively normal tasks of transition are now such that some students are seeking additional well-being support in order to tackle them.

If the above is borne out through future data collection it seems possible that some of the increases in referrals to university well-being services might be a result of SAILL events now becoming well-being issues for students. It is too early to speculate what needs to be done to address this issue. First, data needs to be collected about whether SAILL issues are representing both a part or even an increasing part of well-being services workload. However, if data are supportive it may be both possible or even important for schools, colleges and universities to provide more information and skills to equip future students in terms of day-to-day responsibilities in HE. This may help students to be more able to more quickly adapt to domestic and academic independence. Perhaps it is that simple. However, much more understanding is required before we can conclude that the problem is simply a knowledge and skills gap that can be filled with information.

Indeed, it is very early days in exploring SAILL issues, but data like that contained in this paper does *not* seem to suggest that transition now contains new and unexpected issues. In this way, results like ours which are generally already supported by previous literature might help outline the possible scope and boundaries of SAILL issues. Naturally, we need to understand more about SAILL issues and if they may be related to increasing levels of distress in HE students at this time. This increase in knowledge may, in time, enable us to better understand and measure SAILL difficulties,

better signpost students to more appropriate services and better design universities and their curricula to help students gain the relevant skills to cope with such difficulties themselves. Importantly, more data collection and wider research are needed.

Limitations

Of course, like much qualitative research, this study is based on a limited amount of data, from a small number of students, within a single subject area, at a single institution. Different sampling strategies may give rise to different results and different researchers with different standpoints may have produced different themes.

It is noteworthy that the sample included a small number of mature students, who may have had a different experience to those who were younger and going straight through to HE from A-level study. It might be important for future research to assess whether the rise in student distress is unique in terms of HE, or whether we are simply documenting wider changes in the experience of adolescent transitions in general. Naturally, much of the literature exploring the transition to university uses those close to adolescence as participants. This stage of life is transitional in general: university or not (Mental Health Foundation 2016). Furthermore, data suggest most mental health problems start in childhood and adolescence (Kessler et al. 2005). In short, we may need to understand the degree to which we are dealing with HE issues in isolation as opposed to wider changes in adolescent transitions more generally.

It is also important to note that although above we start to consider whether SAILL issues may play a part in the increase in referrals to student well-being services, none of this ignores the fact that many referrals will still be made up of more 'traditional' mental health difficulties that would be recognised by mental health clinicians and lay people alike, including struggles with anxiety and depression. Moreover, nothing in this paper should undermine existing research which suggests improvements to current student support services (e.g. Batchelor et al. 2020).

Conclusion

Research over many years has examined student transitions into HE and the difficulties some students experience both within that transition and more broadly as part of their HE experience. And, at the same time, difficulties experienced by students in HE appear to be on the rise. As such we wanted to revisit student accounts of their HE transition, to get a sense of what, if anything had changed. We found that students transitioning into HE can experience multiple challenges around independent learning, living and navigating new social environments. In addition, some students view even early HE performance as integral to future success and so may place additional pressure on themselves. Both in isolation and combination, these responsibilities can be experienced as significant stressors by students with some appearing to be unprepared for the demands of independent learning and living. Much of the data in this paper is supported by the existing literature, although perhaps the sense of early pressure and competition around the future suggests something new. The discussion highlights the possible increase in a cluster of difficulties we are starting to label as SAILL issues (Struggles Around Independent Learning and Living) and calls for more research in this area.

Acknowledgement

We are very grateful to Simon Phillips, Deputy Director of Student and Academic Services at UWE Bristol for his valued experience and insights that helped shape parts of the discussion of this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Dr Miles Thompson is a clinical psychologist, senior lecturer in psychology and co-lead of the Psychological Sciences Research Group (PSRG) at UWE Bristol.

Dr Chris Pawson is an Associate Head of Department (AHOd) at UWE Bristol, and the head of the psychology subject area.

Bethan Evans completed both her undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in psychology and health psychology at UWE Bristol and now works as an assistant psychologist.

ORCID

Miles Thompson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1358-1962>

Chris Pawson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3554-4086>

References

- Andrews, B., and J. M. Wilding. 2004. "The Relation of Depression and Anxiety to Life-stress and Achievement in Students." *British Journal of Psychology* 95 (4): 509–521. doi:10.1348/0007126042369802.
- Batchelor, R., E. Pitman, A. Sharpington, M. Stock, and E. Cage. 2020. "Student Perspectives on Mental Health Support and Services in the UK." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 44 (4): 483–497. doi:10.1080/0309877X.2019.1579896.
- Belfield, C., J. Britton, L. Dearden, and L. van der Erve. 2017. *Higher Education Funding in England: Past, Present and Options for the Future*. Institute for Fiscal Studies. <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/9334/doi:10.1920/bn.ifs.2017.bn0211>
- Berkwits, M., and T. S. Inui. 1998. "Making Use of Qualitative Research Techniques." *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 13 (3): 195–199. doi:10.1046/j.1525-1497.1998.00054.x.
- Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp0630a.
- Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2013. *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*. London: Sage Publications.
- Briggs, A. R. J., J. Clark, and I. Hall. 2012. "Building Bridges: Understanding Student Transition to University." *Quality in Higher Education* 18 (1): 3–21. doi:10.1080/13538322.2011.614468.
- British Psychological Society. 2010. "Code of Human Research Ethics." http://www.bps.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/code_of_human_research_ethics.pdf
- Brownlee, J., S. Walker, S. Lennox, B. Exley, and S. Pearce. 2009. "The First Year University Experience: Using Personal Epistemology to Understand Effective Learning and Teaching in Higher Education." *Higher Education* 58 (5): 599–618. doi:10.1007/s10734-009-9212-2.
- Buote, V. M., S. M. Pancer, M. W. Pratt, G. Adams, S. B. Lefcovitch, J. Polivy, . . . M. G. Wintre. 2007. "The Importance of Friends: Friendship and Adjustment among 1st Year University Students." *Journal of Adolescent Research* 22 (6): 665–689. doi:10.1177/0743558407306344.
- Cage, E., E. Jones, G. Ryan, G. Hughes, and L. Spanner. 2021. "Student Mental Health and Transitions Into, through and Out of University: Student and Staff Perspectives." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 1–14. doi:10.1080/0309877X.2021.1875203.
- Christie, H., M. Munro, and H. Rettig. 2002. "Accommodating Students." *Journal of Youth Studies* 5 (2): 209–235. doi:10.1080/13676260220134458.
- Coertjens, L., T. Brahm, C. Trautwein, and S. Lindblom-Ylänne. 2017. "Students' Transition into Higher Education from an International Perspective." *Higher Education* 73 (3): 357–369. doi:10.1007/s10734-016-0092-y.
- Cooke, R., M. Barkham, K. Audin, M. Bradley, and J. Davy. 2004. "Student Debt and Its Relation to Student Mental Health." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 28 (1): 53–66. doi:10.1080/0309877032000161814.
- Department for Business, Innovation & Skills. 2010. "Changes to Tuition Fees and Higher Education." <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/changes-to-tuition-fees-and-higher-education>
- Eisenberg, D., M. Downs, E. Golberstein, and K. Zivin. 2009. "Stigma and Help Seeking for Mental Health among College Students." *Medical Care Research and Review* 66 (5): 522–541. doi:10.1177/1077558709335173.
- Fisher, S., and B. Hood. 1987. "The Stress of the Transition to University: A Longitudinal Study of Psychological Disturbance, Absent-mindedness and Vulnerability to Homesickness." *British Journal of Psychology* 78 (4): 425–441. doi:10.1111/j.2044-8295.1987.tb02260.x.
- Gale, T., and S. Parker. 2012. "Navigating Change: A Typology of Student Transition in Higher Education." *Studies in Higher Education* 39 (3): 734–753. doi:10.1080/03075079.2012.721351.

- Gravett, K., and N. E. Winstone. 2019. "Storying Students' Becomings into and through Higher Education." *Studies in Higher Education* 1–12. doi:10.1080/03075079.2019.1695112.
- Hammarberg, K., M. Kirkman, and S. de Lacey. 2016. "Qualitative Research Methods: When to Use Them and How to Judge Them." *Human Reproduction* 31 (3): 498–501. doi:10.1093/humrep/dev334.
- Hughes, G., and O. Smail. 2015. "Which Aspects of University Life are Most and Least Helpful in the Transition to HE? A Qualitative Snapshot of Student Perceptions." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 39 (4): 466–480. doi:10.1080/0309877X.2014.971109.
- Hughes, G., and L. Spanner. 2019. *The University Mental Health Charter*. Leeds: Student Minds.
- Hultberg, J., K. Plos, G. D. Hendry, and J. I. Kjellgren. 2008. "Scaffolding Students' Transition into Higher Education: Parallel Introductory Courses for Students and Teachers." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 32 (1): 47–57. doi:10.1080/03098770701781440.
- Jindal-Snape, D., and B. Rienties, eds. 2016. *Multi-dimensional Transitions of International Students to Higher Education*. New York: Routledge.
- Kessler, R. C., P. Berglund, O. Demler, R. Jin, K. R. Merikangas, and E. E. Walters. 2005. "Lifetime Prevalence and Age-of-onset Distributions of DSM-IV Disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication." *Archives of General Psychiatry* 62 (6): 593–602. doi:10.1001/archpsyc.62.6.593.
- Krause, K., and H. Coates. 2008. "Students' Engagement in First-year University." *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 33 (5): 495–505. doi:10.1080/02602930701698892.
- Kyndt, E., V. Donche, K. Trigwell, and S. Lindblom-Ylänne. 2017. *Higher Education Transitions: Theory and Research*. London: Routledge.
- Le, D. T. H., and R. Wilkinson. 2018. "Students' Mental Health during University Transition across the Cultures: An Attachment Perspective." In *Conference Presentation at CASP-I 6th International Conference on School Psychology*, Hanoi, Vietnam.
- Leese, M. 2010. "Bridging the Gap: Supporting Student Transitions into Higher Education." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 34 (3): 239–251. doi:10.1080/03098771003695494.
- Lowe, H., and A. Cook. 2003. "Mind the Gap: Are Students Prepared for Higher Education?" *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 27 (1): 53–73. doi:10.1080/03098770305629.
- Mental Health Foundation. 2016. "Fundamental Facts about Mental Health." <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/fundamental-facts-about-mental-health-2016.pdf>
- Money, J., S. Nixon, and L. Graham. 2020. "Do Educational Experiences in School Prepare Students for University? A Teachers' Perspective." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 44 (4): 554–567. doi:10.1080/0309877X.2019.1595547.
- Murtagh, L. 2012. "Enhancing Preparation for Higher Education." *Practitioner Research in Higher Education* 6 (1): 31–39.
- O'Donnell, V. L., M. Kean, and G. Stevens. 2016. *Student Transitions in Higher Education: Concepts, Theories and Practices*. Higher Education Academy. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/downloads/student_transition_in_higher_education.pdf
- Office for National Statistics (ONS). 2018. "Estimating Suicide among Higher Education Students, England and Wales: Experimental Statistics." <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/estimating-suicide-among-higher-education-students-england-and-wales-experimental-statistics/2018-06-25>
- Office for Students (OfS). 2019. "Mental Health: Are All Students Being Properly Supported?" <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/mental-health-are-all-students-being-properly-supported/>
- Parker, J. D. A., L. J. Summerfeldt, M. J. Hogan, and S. A. Majeski. 2004. "Emotional Intelligence and Academic Success: Examining the Transition from High School to University." *Personality and Individual Differences* 36 (1): 163–172. doi:10.1016/S0191-8869(03)00076-X.
- Ran, M., A. J. Mendez, L. Leng, B. Bansil, N. Reyes, G. Cordeo, . . . M. Tang. 2016. "Predictors of Mental Health among College Students in Guam: Implications for Counselling." *Journal of Counselling and Development* 94 (3): 344–355. doi:10.1002/jcad.12091.
- Roberts, R., J. Golding, T. Towell, S. Reid, S. Woodford, A. Vetere, and I. Weinreb. 2000. "Mental and Physical Health in Students: The Role of Economic Circumstances." *British Journal of Health Psychology* 5 (3): 289–297. doi:10.1348/135910700168928.
- Scanlon, L., L. Rowling, and Z. Weber. 2007. "'You Don't Have like an Identity . . . You are Just Lost in a Crowd': Forming a Student Identity in the First-year Transition to University." *Journal of Youth Studies* 10 (2): 223–241. doi:10.1080/13676260600983684.
- Stallman, H. M. 2010. "Psychological Distress in University Students: A Comparison with General Population Data." *Australian Psychologist* 45 (4): 249–257. doi:10.1080/00050067.2010.482109.
- Taylor, C. A., and J. Harris-Evans. 2018. "Reconceptualising Transition to Higher Education with Deleuze and Guattari." *Studies in Higher Education* 43 (7): 1254–1267. doi:10.1080/03075079.2016.1242567.
- Thorley, C. 2017. "Not by Degrees: Improving Student Mental Health in the UK's Universities, IPPR." <http://www.ippr.org/research/publications/not-by-degrees>
- Universities UK. 2020. "Stepchange: Mentally Healthy Universities." <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2020/uuk-stepchange-mhu.pdf>

- Wilcox, P., S. Winn, and M. Fyvie-Gauld. 2005. "It Was Nothing to Do with the University, It Was Just the People': The Role of Social Support in the First-year Experience of Higher Education." *Studies in Higher Education* 30 (6): 707–722. doi:10.1080/03075070500340036.
- Williams, M., P. Coare, R. Marvell, E. Pollard, A.-M. Houghton, and J. Anderson. 2015. *Understanding Provision for Students with Mental Health Problems and Intensive Support Needs*. Report to HEFCE by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) and Researching Equity, Access and Partnership (REAP). <https://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/id/eprint/80492/>
- Young, E., R. Thompson, J. Sharp, and D. Bosmans. 2020. "Emotional Transitions? Exploring the Student Experience of Entering Higher Education in a Widening Participation HE-in-FE Setting." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 44 (10): 1349–1363. doi:10.1080/0309877X.2019.1688264.