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Predictors of help-seeking behaviour in UK university students during the COVID-19 pandemic

Abstract

Studying at university and obtaining a degree is not only an appealing prospect, but now considered a necessity in the current economic climate in the UK. Concurrent financial, social, and academic challenges can converge and present a threat to student wellbeing. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges whilst adding novel stressors to the Higher Education context. Despite a growing prevalence of poor psychological outcomes in students, not all students reach out for help. Understanding factors that predict actual help-seeking behaviour during a period of intense upheaval could provide insight into which groups would benefit from additional attention and resource. The aim of this study was to explore predictors of help-seeking behaviour in a large sample of UK university students during the COVID-19 pandemic. 1261 participants completed a 40-item bespoke health-related questionnaire whilst under social restrictions. Hierarchical binary logistic regression revealed that students who had sought help for an emotional difficulty were more likely to be female and studying at a postgraduate level. Participants seeking help were also more likely to have recently changed accommodation, reported higher stress levels and higher Fear of COVID-19 scores. These results contribute towards the understanding of help-seeking behaviours during times of unprecedented stress and social isolation. Institutions could consider these findings should further outbreaks of COVID-19 occur, or in the eventuality of another pandemic. Outreach work may be beneficial for those most susceptible to social isolation should infection control measures be reintroduced in the future.

Introduction

General Background

Enrolment on degree courses in the UK has risen steadily over the past decade (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2021). This upward trend reflects the predominant societal view that continuous formal educational training facilitates personal, social, and economic advancement, and the associated belief that Higher Education (HE) is the primary pathway to realizing vocational aspirations (Clegg, 2017). Accordingly, from the perspective of students, university attendance is a necessary extension to formal schooling. In this context, transition from secondary/tertiary education to undergraduate study and degree completion represent, essential but challenging developmental milestones.

In the case of first year students, the ability to manage the transition from schools/colleges to university can prove particularly difficult because secondary/tertiary education has failed to adequately prepare students for the demands of HE (Lowe and Cook, 2010). Furthermore, progression through a university programme of study presents a series of challenges that produce concomitant pressures. These include, but are not restricted to, financial concerns, difficulties adapting to new routines and environments, distance from family and friends, and ability-related anxieties (Boddy, 2020; Deasy et al., 2016; Wilcox et al., 2005; Wingate, 2007). Collectively these pressures can produce stress and have detrimental effects on mental health outcomes (Kessler et al., 2005). Indeed, Thorley (2017) noted that there was an increase in access to counselling services at UK institutions (Thorley, 2017). Countering factors that undermine student mental wellbeing is important since mental health outcomes are associated with greater intent to dropout and academic dissatisfaction (Lipson and Eisenberg, 2018).

Pertinent to general student wellbeing is the effective framing and management of academic requirements. Specifically, the need to ensure that students have a keen appreciation of the demands of their course/learning environment and possess an awareness of available support mechanisms. In this context, ownership of a coherent learner identity is crucial. This refers to the extent to which students successfully connect with their university. To achieve and maintain a coherent learner identity over time, universities need to appropriately support academic, social, and personal needs. That is, one that facilitates the fulfilment of personal social, educational and welfare needs, and enhances the development of employer valued skills (Gedye et al., 2004). This is especially important in HE since the interaction between learning, progression, outcome, and career place pressures on undergraduates to succeed.

Help Seeking Behavior

The growth of student services has offered students an array of support mechanisms, however, provision and utilization are not interdependent. Key to student engage with these services is help seeking behavior. Students need to be both aware of and able to engage with available resources. This can prove difficult due to the centralization of university facilities. Although, consolidation ensures greater equality of experience, centralization can create psychological distance between learners, courses, and academics. Concurrently, pragmatic constraints such as increasing student numbers and costs have restricted the degree to which academic staff personally engage with individual learners (Heads of University Counselling Services, 1999; Sander, 2005). Subsequently, to access university services students more and more need to autonomously engage in help seeking behavior (i.e., search and contact appropriate support services).

Help-seeking has previously been characterized by the active behavior of searching for information, advice, treatment, and support in response to problems or distressing experiences (Rickwood et al., 2005). Commensurate with this definition, help-seeking represents a coping

mechanism. Despite the prevalence of mental health difficulties in this population, not all students seek advice or support. Furthermore, barriers to help-seeking, such as self-stigma, educational impact, and pre-existing symptoms hinder engagement. Illustratively, Gage et al. (2020) reported that those experiencing higher levels of depressive symptoms were less like to seek help for their condition. In this context, 33% of students transitioning into the HE environment stated that they would not know where to go to, once at university, to access mental health support (All Party Parliamentary Group on Students, 2015).

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing stressors and added novel problems to an already stressful life event. Empirical evidence surrounding the psychosocial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has emerged in a globally (Ahmadi et al., 2020). The prevalence of depression was high in both Greek (12.4%) (Patsali et al., 2020) and Chinese (9%) student samples (Tang et al., 2020). In the Tang et al (2020) study, work, fear was the most significant predictor of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression. These findings are corroborated by outcomes in other cultures. Students who had recently initiated university study were at an increased risk of severe distress and depression during confinement (Wathelet et al., 2020), whilst those who had not relocated during the pandemic were significantly more likely to experience both self-reported anxiety and stress than students who had (Husky et al., 2020). Considering that those who experience mental health issues whilst engaged in distance learning are less likely to complete and pass modules (Richardson, 2015), ensuring that students are supported during sustained remote learning is critical to degree success. Possessing sufficient coping techniques is also integral to student success.

Having the skills and resources to effectively evaluate and deal with stressors is critical to maintaining optimal mental wellbeing. Coping has previously been defined as behavioral and cognitive efforts to manage demands that are perceived to be stressful and that require

efforts that tax or exceed one's resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). If stressors begin to outweigh individual coping resources, the likelihood of low mood and negative affect increases. Coping with stress is an ongoing dynamic process whereby an ever-changing environment or stressor can subsequently influence an individual's coping approach (Roth and Cohen, 1986; Compas et al., 2001). The hierarchical model of coping depicts engagement and disengagement as overarching domains of how individuals cope with stressors more generally with tertiary level variables named problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (Tobin et al., 1989).

Problem-focused coping involves the individual seeking to resolve the discordance between the self and the environment through their own volition. Emotion-focused coping entails a reframing of the relationship to mitigate the impact of a stressor, although actual circumstances may or may not have changed (Lazarus, 1993). Engagement coping, specifically problem engagement, has previously been found to be more adaptive and is associated with improved outcomes (Shermeyer et al., 2019; Ke and Barlas, 2020). In the case of the hierarchical model, social support is proposed as emotion engagement coping, drawing close links to the notion of help-seeking. As university students are embedded within a wider community of others containing academic peers and infrastructures, students are typically not left without an abundant range of help sources.

Seeking information or resources for mental health difficulties can occur in a variety of ways. Students may opt to engage with formal services such as those provided by the National Health Service (NHS) or with informal methods of support such as reaching out to friends and family. Attitudes toward formal sources of support can be negative in nature, often due to previous negative experiences. Perceived systemic issues can also deter help-seeking, where students have reported issues such as waiting times, access to services and a reported lack of person-centred care (Batchelor et al., 2020). To better understand the mechanisms of low

intentions to help-seeking and an apprehension toward engaging with useful resources, predictors of help-seeking behaviours can indicate which groups require greater encouragement. This would potentially facilitate the design of bespoke interventions to foster greater help-seeking behaviour in the most at-risk groups.

A range of evidence regarding the most pertinent predictors of help-seeking behaviours in university students is accruing. Counterintuitively, students who had previously accessed mental health services were more likely to report significantly more barriers to treatment (Vidourek et al., 2014). These findings suggest that previous poor experiences could inform future intentions for help-seeking, such as prolonged waiting times when engaging with university-led services (Woof et al., 2019). However, psychological distress, current stressors and anxious attachment have been significantly associated with help-seeking, with no association with perceived self-stigma found (Wadman et al., 2017). Psychological distress has also been positively correlated with help-seeking intentions (Vogel and Wei, 2005), Goryczynski and colleagues (2017) explored predictors in more detail, finding that no gender differences exist in terms of help-seeking scores, whilst mental health literacy was strongly correlated with the act. The importance of help-seeking was also illustrated as a significant positive correlation was observed between mental wellbeing and help-seeking behaviours. (Gorczynski et al., 2020).

The Present Study

The current blended learning landscape has combined with social isolation to devastating effect for the university student population (Burns et al., 2020). Understanding which variables predict and relate to help-seeking behaviours in a large sample of university students during prolonged isolation would inevitably help to inform policy and interventions to improve mental health outcomes for groups who are least likely to seek emotional help during global times of hardship.

Accordingly, this paper explores potential predictors of help-seeking behaviours in university students during a period of high stress, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. A range of factors has previously been associated with help-seeking. Initial research has started to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student mental health outcomes. This study hopes to expand upon preliminary findings, exploring which variables are predictive of help-seeking behaviours. Understanding key predictors of actual help-seeking behaviour would elucidate which sections of the student population should be the focus of targeted intervention. It will also indicate whether periods of great stress, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have altered behaviour when compared to previous research studies. To understand this phenomenon, a cross-sectional survey will be deployed with the student population to canvas the prevalence of this behaviour across subgroups of the student body.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 1261 participants ($M_{age} = 24.41$, $SD = 8.48$, range of 18-82), comprising 301 males (24%, $M_{age} = 24.79$, $SD = 8.55$, range of 18-82) and 960 females (76%, $M_{age} = 24.29$, $SD = 8.46$, range of 18-65). In terms of ethnicity the following identified as: White/Caucasian, 818 (64.9%); Asian, 224 (17.8%); Black, 58 (4.6%); Mixed, 105 (8.3%); and Other Ethnicity, 55 (4.4%). Further demographic information is available in Table 1.

Instrument

SuSy Health Surveillance System

Core items were selected from the SuSy question bank, which is a health surveillance system that assesses the prevalence of a range of health behaviours and related outcomes (i.e., physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, and stress levels) (Tobisch et al., 2015). SuSy was developed iteratively via work at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) and Hamburg University (Department of Applied Sciences) (HUAS). Within MMU, SuSy is deployed at regular

intervals (i.e., periodically and annually) to the student population. Additionally, adaption for use with international populations has enabled cross-cultural comparisons (Reintjes et al., 2019). Through repeated use, SuSy has become an established research tool.

SuSy COVID 2020

SuSy COVID 2020 comprised 40-items assessing the student experience since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent closure of the university campus. Accordingly, The Fear of COVID-19 Scale was included as a measure of coronavirus-specific anxiety.

Additionally, demographic data were collected (e.g., preferred gender, ethnic group, and primary residence). Given the nature of lockdown measures, participants were asked whether their primary residence had changed due to COVID-19 implications and invited to specify why this change had occurred, such as the participant wishing to self-isolate with another family member/friend. Further items explored certain health behaviour routines, if they had changed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the nature of the change. Health behaviours explored included: diet, exercise, physical activity, and sleep. If the participant indicated that one of their health behaviour routines had changed, they were prompted to outline the nature of the change, e.g., frequency of exercise, quality of sleep. Essential worker status was also captured through a yes/no response, with the option to specify the sector of work if the participant considered themselves an essential worker. An essential worker was classified by the UK government as having a critical role in infrastructure, such as National Health Service (NHS) workers, who were unable to perform their role from home.

Participants rated their mental and physical wellbeing since campus closure on two separate 10-point Likert-type scales, ranging from 1 (“Not great at all”) to 10 (“Fantastic”). In addition to rating mental wellbeing, participants were asked whether they had sought advice for an emotional or mental health difficulty since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were asked how stressed they had been since campus closure, where stress was

reported on a similar 10-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (“Not at all”) to 10 (“Extremely stressed”). The use of single-item measures ensured brevity and increased response likelihood. Single-item measures are an adequate index of highly schematized subjective experiences (Robins et al., 2001; Gogol et al., 2014).

Fear of COVID

The Fear of COVID Scale (Ahorsu et al., 2020) comprises seven items measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (“Strongly disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly agree”). The sum score of all seven items equates to a total Fear of COVID-19 score, ranging from 7-35 where higher scores indicate greater fear of the COVID-19 virus. This measure has demonstrated acceptable internal reliability ($\alpha = .82$) and test-retest validity ($ICC = .72$). It has since been tested and validated across a number of international samples (Haktanir et al., 2020; Sakib et al., 2020; Soraci et al., 2020).

Procedure

The survey was hosted on Online Surveys (formerly Bristol Online Surveys), an encrypted online platform. The research project was promoted through various channels, including emails direct to students’ university email inboxes from the Internal Communications Team. All students studying at the university were eligible to participate. Students were invited to share their personal experiences since campus closure and were provided with a direct link to the questionnaire. The questionnaire was open for completion for a period of 30 consecutive days across June-July 2020. An introduction to the items prefaced the beginning of the survey, outlining completion time and the purpose of the work. Once the participant had responded to all relevant questions, their participation in the study was complete. Ethical approval (#5941) was obtained prior to data collection from the MMUs Faculty Ethics Committee, UK.

Analysis

In this study, analysis (via SPSS26) included an inspection of descriptive statistics to examine sample frequencies and whether predictor variables associated significantly with seeking mental health support. Next, given the outcome variable of seeking mental health support is binary, a logistic regression examined associations between key predictors (identified from the descriptive analyses) and seeking mental health support. Analysis used a hierarchical format to test relevant person-specific variables (e.g., gender), followed by education-specific variables, and lastly mental health variables.

Results

Prior to analysis, scrutiny of assumptions for logistic regression occurred (i.e., multicollinearity, outliers and linearity between the predictors and the logit). Separate regressions revealed VIF values below five indicating no issues with collinearity (Rogerson, 2001). Similarly, inspection of casewise diagnostics reported no cases above 3.3 (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2001). Satisfying the linearity assumption, the Box-Tidwell test revealed all p -values for interaction terms between continuous predictors and their logarithms were $> .01$.

Descriptive statistics and bivariate associations

Table 1 Categorical characteristics of the sample

[Insert Table 1]

Chi-square tests of association and t-tests examined how categorical (Table 2) and continuous variables (Table 3) aligned with the decision to seek mental health support during COVID-19. Results indicated a significant association between seeking mental health support, gender, study level, and accommodation change. Specifically, 18.9% of females sought mental health support compared with 3.2% of males. In addition, 16.6% of undergraduates sought

support vs. 5.5% of postgraduates, and 7.1% of students who changed accommodation opted to seek support vs. 15% of those who did not change.

A greater proportion of postgraduate students sought support (27.1% yes vs. 72.9% no) compared with undergraduates (20.8% yes vs. 79.2% no). Furthermore, more students who changed accommodation appeared to seek support (28.7% yes vs. 71.3% no) than students who stayed at their accommodation (19.9% yes vs. 80.1% no).

Table 2 Associations between categorical variables and seeking mental health support

[Insert Table 2]

T-test results revealed that students seeking mental health support reported significantly higher mean levels of stress, Fear of COVID-19, and lower mean levels of physical and mental wellbeing. Based on these findings, variables displaying significant relationships with seeking mental health support (i.e., gender, accommodation change, study level, stress, physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, and Fear of COVID-19) were taken forward to the next analytic stage.

Table 3 Associations between continuous variables and seeking mental health support

[Insert Table 3]

Logistic regression analyses

A hierarchical binary logistic regression evaluated predictors of seeking mental health support, with 'yes' as the outcome reference category (Table 4). Model 1 with gender only demonstrated statistical significance, $\chi^2 (1, N = 1261) = 19.17, p < .001$, alongside a Nagelkerke R^2 of .02. Model 2 (with the addition of study level and accommodation change) indicated significance, $\chi^2 (3, N = 1261) = 34.39, p < .001$, and an improved Nagelkerke R^2 of .04. Lastly, Model 3

(including stress, physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, and Fear of COVID-19) revealed significance, $\chi^2(7, N = 1261) = 179.54, p < .001$, and a greater Nagelkerke R^2 of .20.

The Wald statistic (Table 4) suggested that students who sought mental health support during COVID-19 were significantly more likely to be female (OR = 1.61), studying at postgraduate level (OR = 1.56), and had changed their accommodation (OR = 1.51). In addition, students reporting greater levels of stress (OR = 1.11) and Fear of COVID-19 (OR = 1.03) were significantly more likely to have pursued mental health support. The opposite trend occurred for students with higher mental wellbeing (OR = .74).

Table 4 Hierarchical binary logistic regression of students seeking mental health support

[Insert Table 4]

Discussion

University study is associated with a range of stressors and challenges (REF). During the COVID-19 pandemic these increased as a function of supplementary challenges such as social isolation, online learning navigation and reduced academic contact hours (REF). Noting that help-seeking is an adaptive coping strategy that alleviates stress and promotes positive psychological wellbeing (REF), the present study investigated which factors predicted student help-seeking during the pandemic.

Analysis revealed that gender, study level, accommodation change, self-reported stress, self-reported physical and mental wellbeing, and Fear of COVID-19 were prognosticators of student help-seeking behaviour. More specifically, students seeking advice for a mental health issue during the pandemic were more likely to be female, studying at postgraduate level, had recently changed accommodation, and had higher levels of self-reported stress and Fear of COVID-19. Moreover, students seeking mental health advice (vs. those who did not) reported higher mean levels of stress, Fear of COVID-19, and lower levels of self-reported physical and mental wellbeing.

Previous studies of UK university students had not identified gender as an important predictor of help-seeking intentions or behaviour (Gorczynski et al., 2017, 2020). Here

FROM THIS POINT FORWARD

Females tend to hold more positive attitudes toward help-seeking than their male counterparts, aligning with the results of the current study (Nam et al., 2010; Zochil and Thorsteinsson, 2018). Social support has positive direct effects on mental health outcomes for women irrespective of stress and feelings of mastery (Verger et al., 2009). Considering this, females may derive greater benefit from help-seeking than males. Targeting male students for future initiatives to encourage help-seeking should take precedence. Males perpetuate stigma in their own personal stigma beliefs leading to decreased help-seeking behaviours and

subsequent negative impacts on mental health outcomes (Pedersen and Paves, 2014). Working to change attitudes toward male help-seeking in the university student population is an important step in fostering a supportive environment during periods of intense stress and isolation. However, it should be considered that the majority of respondents to the SuSy survey were female (76%) reflecting a well-known male aversion to participating in health research (Ryan et al., 2019).

Level of study also predicted the likelihood that a student would engage in help-seeking behaviour, where postgraduate students were more likely to seek help than undergraduate students. Conversely, previous research has illustrated that undergraduate students are more likely to disclose mental health difficulties than their postgraduate counterparts (Thorley, 2017). Evidence from a global perspective indicates a mental health crisis in the postgraduate student population. Postgraduate students are more than six times as likely to experience depression and anxiety than the general population (Evans et al., 2018). As postgraduate study is typically delineated by long periods of independent study leading to feelings of isolation (Janta et al., 2014), COVID-19 restrictions will have intensified feelings of loneliness. With loneliness being significantly related to feelings of depression (Richardson et al., 2017), it could be suggested that postgraduate students may feel more psychologically distressed thus reaching out for support. The postgraduate student population in the UK differs from the undergraduate population and should be treated as such. Demographically diverse (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2020), postgraduate students may have encountered a variety of problems that undergraduate students have not in recent times. Targeted interventions, with specific postgraduate issues in mind, would combat this.

Many students have chosen to relocate because of social restrictions. Approximately a quarter of students in the sample (24.6%) had changed their primary accommodation since the beginning of the pandemic. Those who had recently changed their accommodation were more

likely to engage in help-seeking behaviours than those who had not relocated. Research undertaken during pandemic restrictions demonstrated that students who had not relocated were more likely to experience self-reported stress and anxiety than those who had (Husky et al., 2020). Should this be a similar concern in the current sample of students, their lack of engagement with help-seeking behaviours could lead to feelings of isolation increasing.

Those relocating could have potentially moved in with others to prevent complete isolation during lockdown restrictions. The close proximity to others would undoubtedly contribute toward help-seeking behaviours given increased interactions with cohabitants and confinement to the home address. Relocating at any time is inherently stress-inducing, involving time, finance and effort (Groot et al., 2011). Taking into account that external factors have likely influenced the decision to move for those participating in this study, the probability of increased stress is high. Again, students have been confronted with a major discord between their expectations of university life and the stark reality of HE study during a public health emergency. Accommodation can impact upon a student's propensity to study effectively (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013), giving rise to problems associated with academic attainment. One of the focal goals education is academic attainment (Rothman and McMillan, 2003). Barriers to academic attainment, therefore, would be interpreted as highly stressful. These circumstances will have contributed toward elevated stress levels, another predictor of actual help-seeking behaviour.

Stress across the life course, and at university, is ubiquitous. In some circumstances, stress is integral to performing under pressure. However, when stress demands outweigh coping resources, the ability to function normally can be substantially impaired (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). The inability to cope with sources of stress is particularly debilitating for the student population who are under great pressure to not only attain, but thrive in both an academic and social sense (Markoulakis and Kirsh, 2013). Adopting healthy coping

mechanisms is therefore of high importance for those undertaking HE study. Students who reported higher levels of stress were more likely to have engaged in help-seeking behaviours. Stress is inevitable during university study due to the plethora of transitional points students must navigate. The onset of a global pandemic will have only reinforced pre-existing stressful situations, translating into students engaging with coping mechanisms such as help-seeking.

Experiencing high levels of stress has previously been associated with greater intent to seek help (Zochil and Thorsteinsson, 2018). Evidence suggests that cognitive, behavioural and mindfulness-focussed interventions targeting stress reduction can alleviate symptoms of anxiety (Regehr et al., 2013). Accessibility to these initiatives is of utmost importance. Reducing stress levels would undoubtedly reduce the likelihood that help-seeking is necessary for coping. However, in absence of suitable stress management initiatives, attempts should be made to identify students predisposed to experiencing higher levels of stress and ensure appropriate sources of help are made readily available. For example, pinpointing students experiencing typical university stressors concerning financial or academic challenges (Deasy et al., 2016) that have been aggravated by the pandemic.

Wellbeing can be described as a population-level term referring to positive emotions and the capacity to cope with daily life and the challenges of academic study (Barkham et al., 2019). Students who scored higher for mental wellbeing were less likely to have engaged in a help-seeking behaviour during the pandemic. It could be concluded that these students are less likely to require help given their elevated wellbeing score. The opposite trend was found in other student samples (Wadman et al., 2017; Gorczynski et al., 2020). Students who are experiencing higher mental wellbeing may feel more confident in their ability to reach out should it be necessary. The need to engage in help-seeking for those higher in wellbeing would be low due to reduced negative affect. Indeed, those experiencing greater levels of psychological distress are more likely to hold stronger help-seeking intentions (Vogel and Wei,

2005). It could also relate to the notion that students possessing higher levels of wellbeing are, according to Barkham and colleagues (2019) definition, better equipped to cope with the rigours of the academic journey. An increase in the frequency of life events in recent times would certainly require ample coping mechanisms to continue to thrive in exceedingly tough conditions.

The emergence of a novel communicable virus has provoked levels of fear amongst the population. Worries regarding mortality, morbidity, transmission rate and mode of spread can all contribute toward psychosocial problems (Ahorsu et al., 2020). The saturation of news and information has led to distinct feelings of fear, anxiety and low mood for many individuals (Dubey et al., 2020). This is in addition to stress provoked by COVID-19 restrictions. Elevated fear has the propensity to alter behaviour within a population in either a protective or a maladaptive fashion. The current study revealed that those who were more fearful of COVID-19 were more likely to engage in help-seeking behaviour, consistent with work conducted in other cultures during the COVID-19 pandemic (Liang et al., 2020). However, work conducted during previous communicable disease outbreaks, such as the Ebola outbreak, suggested that fear-related behaviour can impact upon an individual's propensity to seek treatment (Shultz et al., 2016). Those experiencing higher levels of COVID-19 related fear may have sought information and help to mitigate intense feelings of fear. Accessing help, at present, has never been more accessible owing to the range of digital solutions available. The paradox is that those who seek more information regarding COVID-19 could be inadvertently provoking greater feelings of fear and anxiety dependent on the credibility of information that they are engaging with.

Students are increasingly expecting value-for-money from their time in HE as a consumer of education. Sufficient contact hours, structural investment and a personalised approach to their learning figured highly in student expectations (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013).

Adding to this, students anticipate that universities should provide ample guidance and advice in relation to their future once their studies have concluded. Whilst this viewpoint ultimately denotes a power shift to the student as the consumer, perceiving university study as a commodity is not expressly conducive to academic performance (Bunce et al., 2016). The current learning landscape is markedly different from the quintessential university experience. Given the discrepancy between expectations and reality, elevated levels of negative psychological outcomes is expected. Increased negative affect has evidently provoked increased engagement in help-seeking behaviour during an incredibly uncertain period of time. Reframing student expectations during worldwide emergencies should take precedence for institutions to avoid disappointing prospective and returning students alike.

Most research to date has investigated general attitudes and intentions toward help-seeking as opposed to the physical behaviour of reaching out for support. The intention-behaviour gap is well-documented in the health behaviour domain (Faries, 2016). The gap denotes the separation between an individual's intention to engage in a behaviour and their subsequent actions, where intention does not consistently translate into behaviour. According to the Theory of Planned Behaviour, an individual's intention toward a targeted behaviour is made up of attitudes, perceived behavioural control and subjective norms (Ajzen, 1991). Whilst intention has mostly been posited as a weak predictor of whether a behaviour occurs, it has been postulated that actual behavioural control can moderate the translation of intention into behaviour (Ajzen, 2020). Most individuals will have experienced a drastic loss of control over their own behaviours since the beginning of COVID-19 restrictions. A prime example of this is the need to move accommodation to avoid loneliness or total isolation. Measuring intention rather than behaviour at any point during the pandemic would not necessarily be a useful proxy for behaviour owing to the turbulent landscape that has influenced student lifestyles. For this reason, the results presented from this study give a robust indication of actual help-seeking

behaviour as opposed to the mere measurement of intentions to seek help in the university student population.

Whilst this study has uncovered a range of useful findings, there are limitations with this piece. The survey was mobilised in June 2020. Completing the survey in the summer of 2020, as opposed to March 2020, may not have captured student's experiences at their most intense point of restrictions. Participants may have also been required to rely upon their recall for a number of items in the survey. Lockdown restrictions, at the time of survey dissemination, were substantially less restrictive than in March 2020 when lockdown measures were initially introduced. However, the authors believe that this study presents novel findings concerning the fundamentally different learning experience that students are now expected to navigate. As blended learning and social isolation may persist for a considerable period of time, the results of this study are pertinent to consider for the next academic year and beyond.

It is still unclear how infection control measures will be utilised moving forward as the UK begins to tentatively emerge from a third national lockdown despite soaring case numbers. Future research should implement bespoke interventions designed specifically for sections of the student population identified in this study to encourage greater engagement with help-seeking behaviour during unprecedented times of great stress. Results from studies such as these provide valuable learning for potential further outbreaks of COVID-19 or other novel pathogens. Longitudinal approaches to investigating the overall impact of help-seeking behaviour within the student population would also be a welcome addition to the literature, specifically focussing on whether informal or formal sources of support are more beneficial to student's mental health outcomes.

To conclude, specific groups within the university population appear to be more likely to engage in help-seeking behaviour than others, such as female, postgraduate students and those experiencing negative psychological outcomes. Critical to encouraging students to seek

help is to ensure that all relevant resources provided by the university and local community are highlighted appropriately and shaped for specific groups of the student population. Even then, promotion may not be enough. Outreach work should take precedence, especially for those particularly isolated because of infection control measures. Accessibility for diverse student populations is also key to encourage engagement. The groups that are most vulnerable to becoming isolated should be the subject of more intense provision, encouraging students to engage with a range of resources available to them.

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