

Student Mental Health in Higher Education: Potential Influences from the Upstream Educational Journey

Abstract:

Background

The mental health of students in UK Higher Education (HE) is receiving increased attention and support services for students are under increased pressure.

Aims

Drawing on ecological systems theory (EST), this study sought to explore possible contextual influences, over time, on student distress within HE.

Method and Samples

We conducted a two stage Delphi study, first asking UK professionals (n=236) from primary, secondary, further education and HE to provide possible reasons for increases in student distress. The material was reduced to 58 representative statements across all sectors with a further 10 specific to HE. In stage two, 89 participants rated each statement in terms of whether it: i. takes place and ii. contributes to distress.

Results

The results suggest multiple contextual influences potentially contributing to student distress. They can be summarized using the words: cuts, competition and comparison. Education professionals in our sample reported that, upstream from HE, pressures on schools and colleges have led to a narrowing of curricula, with a more singular focus on assessment. Reduced teaching teams and pressurised staff unintentionally embed an assessment focus

within students who unhelpfully compare themselves with peers while also struggling with wider societal cuts, austerity and political uncertainty.

Conclusions

The discussion draws on the peer-reviewed literature and relevant reports, discussing them in the context of EST, finding considerable support for these influences. The potential importance of adopting a contextual approach and incorporating this knowledge into the way we understand and tackle student distress and preparedness for HE is discussed.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background

The mental health of students in UK Higher Education (HE) is receiving increased attention from within (Barden & Caleb, 2019) and outside (Shackle, 2019) of the sector. Data from the Institute for Public Policy Research suggests 94% of HE providers have reported an increase in demand, with some reporting that 1 in 4 students are using, or waiting to use, counselling services (Thorley, 2017). As such, addressing student mental health and distress has recently generated a sector wide response, with Universities UK publishing their #stepchange policy framework (Universities UK, 2017).

Of course, concerns about student distress and increasing demands on university support services are not new, nor limited to the UK (Auerbach et al., 2018; Dogan, 2018; Stewart-Brown et al., 2000; Watkins et al., 2012). At the individual level, established intrapersonal constructs such as self-efficacy, academic confidence, locus of control and coping abilities have all been reported to be correlates of students' stress and adjustment to university (Abouserie, 1994; Aherne, 2001; Au, 2015; Misra et al., 2000; Ross et al., 1999), and predictors of distress (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010).

Widening the lens somewhat, academic factors such as the demands of workload, examinations and deadlines have also been found to be associated with student wellbeing (Gadzella et al., 1998; Halamandaris & Power, 1999). Other necessary changes such as the transition from school and home to the independence required of university has been identified as exacerbating the impact of academic factors as students navigate new identities

and environments (Mann, 2001; Perry & Allard, 2003; Scanlon et al., 2007). For some students, even before the changes in fee regimes in England in 2012 financial independence brought difficulty managing and paying bills, long working hours and debt – all of which have been associated with poorer student mental health (Cooke et al., 2004; Roberts et al., 2000).

The established literature outlined in the preceding paragraphs, illustrates the many different factors that may already impact student distress. And yet, there is also a strong suggestion that things are getting worse. It seems possible that what has been less well studied in previous research, is the interconnections between the intrapersonal and academic factors, as well as transition struggles. Moreover, perhaps all of these factors are being heightened by broader contemporary influences on young people that are taking place either both in HE and in earlier stages of education.

For example, the experience of transition and acclimatisation varies significantly from student to student, and is increasingly recognised across international contexts to be impacted by a range of institutional factors, as well as intrapersonal social and affective competencies (Coertjens et al. 2017; Gravett, Kinchin & Winstone, 2020; HEPI, 2017). Many of these intrapersonal factors are also themselves shaped by prior personal experiences of family, peers, and the school and the education system (Brownlee et al., 2009; Gale & Parker, 2014; Money, Nixon & Graham, 2020). Previous research has suggested that secondary and further education is key to, but often falls short of, preparing students psychologically or academically for the demands of independent learning in HE (Beaumont, Moscrop & Canning, 2014, Hultberg, Plos, Hendry & Kjellgren, 2009). This is, in part, attributable to lack of dialogue between sectors, but also structural and systemic pressures on teachers who

face a ‘conflict of interest’ in their attempts to help students perform in examinations (Money et al., 2020). When student exam performance is a measure of teacher performance, it is perhaps unsurprising that narrower ‘teach to the test’ approaches will emerge, and that ultimately this may leave students psychologically and academically unprepared for HE (Christie et al., 2008; Kuh et al., 2011; Lowe & Cooke, 2003).

The possibility of changes both in and impacting on earlier stages of education seems especially relevant as data suggests there is an increase in the numbers of students arriving at UK Universities with pre-disclosed mental health needs (APPGoS, 2015; HEPI, 2017; Williams et al., 2015). Of course, such changes might also reflect broader social, cultural or even socio-political changes (Macaskill, 2013). It is because of these possibilities that the current study uses Ecological Systems Theory (EST).

EST was originally developed by developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) and went through a number of revisions during his career (Eriksson et al., 2018; Tudge, et al., 2009). In general, Bronfenbrenner's work asks us not just to see the individual in isolation, but to understand the context that has given rise to the individual. EST highlights the importance of different systems of influence around the individual (micro- face to face interactions with the individual [e.g. classroom or home]; meso- linkages between two settings both involving the individual [classroom “and” home]; exo- linkages between two settings one of which does not involve the individual [classroom and staffroom]; macro- [wider culture and belief systems influencing all settings, from Bronfenbrenner, 1994 p.39-40]). Importantly, later versions of EST also includes chrono-, changes over time. Bronfenbrenner highlights the potential importance of chrono- in two ways. First through changes in the individual over time (traditional developmental processes), but also through

influences on that individual from the way wider contexts (micro- to macro-) have and are changing as the individuals pass through them. Bronfenbrenner says: "time appears not merely as an attribute of the growing human being, but also as a property of the surrounding environment not only over the life course, but across historical time" (1994, p.40). So time both influences the individual directly, and through changes to the environments that they pass through.

EST thinking suggests that if wider contextual influences on the individual over time, are important (e.g. prior experiences rooted in prior education and / or wider socioeconomic conditions), then simply trying to influence the individual skills of an individual in isolation (once they have entered HE, for example) may be limited in its impact. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that an EST approach which acknowledges how wider contexts may interact with individual factors might be particularly valuable in understanding young peoples' experience (Duckett et al., 2008), and guiding a response to mental health problems (Eriksson et al., 2018).

Adopting this broader perspective on student distress may allow us to become more aware of other potential influences on well-being. Focusing in specifically on the chrono-, it seems possible that relatively recent changes in wider contexts (i.e. micro- to macro-) around education may be contributing to the increasing levels of student distress being witnessed in HE. For this reason, it seems important not just to explore any changes that may have taken place within HE alone, but also to look further upstream to other potential factors impacting on the individuals education journey as they move through primary, secondary and further education.

1.2 Current research

To explore the influence of possible broader contextual changes on student distress within UK HE, we conducted a two stage Delphi study (see below). As we are interested in changes broader than the individual alone, our approach deliberately calls upon EST as its theoretical reach includes both: i. levels of influence wider than the individual (i.e. meso- to macro-) and, importantly, ii. how those influences may have both changed and accrued over time. (i.e. chrono). Holding these dual ideas from EST centrally, a particular focus of this study is the desire to gain an understanding of any possible changes that have taken place upstream, in the earlier stages of contemporary students' education journeys, as well as any changes in HE itself. We are seeking potential insights into how changes in education broadly (meso to macro), including changes earlier in student's education journeys (chrono) may be influencing rising student distress levels in HE. With this in mind, despite our focus being student distress levels within HE, we will collect data from participants in primary, secondary, further as well as HE sectors (see below).

Delphi research is a consensus method. Consensus methods are used where established evidence is lacking, but participants (sometimes known as "experts") are thought to hold knowledge that might help reveal data and move towards future agreement (Thompson, 2009). There are different forms of consensus methods, for example the nominal group technique (NGT). However, the NGT tends to take place face to face, while Delphi research can embrace a geographically diverse sample. Moreover, as participants take part individually, Delphi may be less influenced by group influences which can sometimes bias group responding (Smithson, 2000; Thompson, 2009). One of the main reasons for using any consensus method, as opposed to – for example - a pre-existing questionnaire, is that at the start of the research process it is not clear what the relevant items in this questionnaire would

be. In many ways, the first stage of Delphi research generates potential questionnaire items from those individuals, other than the researchers, who are thought to hold relevant knowledge.

In this way, Delphi research involves a series of stages. In the first phase each participant independently contributes information they deem pertinent to a research question. Open questions are often used to gather wide ranging responses. The researchers collect in and then edit down responses from the first stage into a series of representative statements. These statements are then returned to the original, or other, participants in a questionnaire format to be rated. The mean scores statements receive across participants give an indication of relative consensus (e.g. higher rated items, more consensus). In some forms of Delphi the statements are sent back to participants again, this time with mean, median or other values displayed – allowing participants to modify their judgements in line with average group scores (Thompson, 2009).

In terms of our specific research question, this enquiry was informed by EST, and sought to gather information about potential factors that may be contributing to student distress from education professionals in HE and also further upstream, in FE, secondary and primary. In terms of professional groups, we recruited:

1. Teachers / lecturers in HE, FE secondary and primary education.
2. SENCOs (special educational needs coordinators), student nurses, student counsellors (or equivalent) in HE, FE, secondary and primary education.
3. Educational psychologists.

We deliberately targeted a wide range of education professionals as we sought a broad range of views about the potential influence of wider factors. We also deliberately sought “experienced” professionals, i.e. participants with more than 10 years’ experience (although, of course, this inclusion criteria may impact findings, see limitations section). Our targeted selection relates to the chrono- aspect of EST, as we wanted to increase the likelihood that participants may have witnessed and could report back on emerging factors impacting on students in their education sector over the breadth of their career. While this research has been prompted by the increase in student distress in HE, we are aware that by gathering information from upstream education stages, any findings may also be relevant to those working in these upstream sectors also.

2.0 Overall Method

This research involved two stages. In short, in stage 1, experienced professionals from different education sectors were asked to respond to a short survey asking about potential reasons for any increase in student distress in their sector (Stage 1: gathering examples), professionals were also invited to volunteer for stage 2. Before stage 2 took place, data from stage 1 was summarized into representative statements. Participants in stage 2 were asked to rate each statement according to its perceived relevance as they saw it (Stage 2: rating examples).

In stage 1, before the main question, participants were also asked to report if they felt student distress levels had: decreased, stayed about the same or increased. Participants also had an “other” option if they wished to make a free text response.

In terms of the main Delphi question, participants were asked to report on the factors they thought may have contributed to any increase or to the perception of increase in student distress levels. We asked participants to think widely, provide multiple answers, to focus on their own sector, but to allow themselves to make comments about other and / or all sectors if they felt able.

Stage 1 data collection took place towards the end of the 2017-18 academic year (June-July 2018). Stage 2 data collection took place at the end of the 2018-19 academic year (June-July 2019). Top up data collection for stage 2 took place during the 2019-20 academic year (October 2019-February 2020). The timing of the original two stages of data collection was deliberate to try and target a less busy time for education professionals, just before but outside of traditional school holidays.

The study was granted ethical approval by the faculty research and ethics committee. All data collection took place online using the website: Qualtrics. Potential participants were asked to study a brief information sheet and then indicate that they consented to take part. Participants were able to withdraw their participation and data without penalty. No questions were mandatory. Only general demographic information was collected.

Participants were recruited through several routes. Generally, education institutions were contacted and asked to either forward an invitation e-mail containing the online link to potential participants and/or to place the invitation on an internal notice board (real or virtual). Invitations to participate were also sent out on social media channels and posted to relevant online forums. In all instances, participants who took part were encouraged to pass

the survey link onto others who might be interested in taking part (snowball sampling, Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004).

3.0 Stage 1 – Gathering examples

3.1 Participants

Stage 1. Across the data collection period, 338 potential participants clicked on the link and entered at least some data. Of these, 35 entered only demographic data leaving 303 participants. A further 67 only answered the first question about whether distress rates had increased or not (below). In total, 236 participants provided full data. The demographic data in Table 1 below describes the 303 participants who answered at least the levels of student distress question. It also describes participants from stage 2.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

3.2 Methods and Results

The results section below explains the process of data analysis during stage 1, describing how the data was moved towards final statements for stage 2. First, we provide concrete results about the levels of student distress question.

Having provided demographic data, participants were asked: “during your time in the area(s) of education you are most familiar with, do you feel mental health and well-being problems in students have: decreased, stayed the same, increased, other?” Of the 303 participants who

responded, 7% (n=22) thought the problem had decreased, 13% (n=39), thought it had stayed the same, while 78% (n=237) thought it had increased. A further 2% (n=5) chose other. Four of these participants made qualitative comments. All suggested that irrespective of whether student distress had increased they had become more visible, and society had become aware of them. Overall, it seems clear that a large majority of participants reported a increase in student distress levels across the areas of education they felt most familiar with.

The main question in stage 1 asked participants to think back over their experience and comment on the factors that may be contributing to the increase or perception of the increase of student distress problems in the student population. It was noted that we were especially interested in their thoughts about their own sector(s), but participants were also able to comment more generally. They could separate out their responses into different free text boxes, labelled: all sectors, primary, secondary, FE, HE. Remembering that participants could enter data into more than one area, of the 236 participants who entered data into at least one box: 108 entered data into the all sectors box, 79 into primary, 104 into secondary, 61 into FE and 111 into HE.

We used an adapted form of thematic analysis (TA) to qualitatively analyse the data from stage 1 and move towards the list of final statements to be rated in stage 2. TA, as originally described, has flexibility in terms of approach, theory and epistemology (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). It involves “searching across a data set... to find repeated patterns of meaning” (p. 86). We used the six phases of TA, as outlined by Braun and Clarke, as guiding principles. Namely: transcribing the dataset (not needed in this instance as participants typed in their own data), familiarizing oneself with the dataset; initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, and reporting the analysis.

Compared to some more traditional qualitative studies (e.g. a small number of recorded face to face interviews), this dataset contained data from more participants (i.e. 236) who individually provided more concise data. Larger, thinner datasets like these require a small adaptation to the data analysis process. Specifically, during initial coding, relevant whole comments or smaller sections were first allocated a temporary 'holding code' (e.g. "staff"), as opposed to a more specific, focused code (e.g. "staff being under pressure" or "less staff in key roles"). In this way, the analysis begins by allocating data to a finite number of holding codes, rather than potentially swamping the researcher with an unmanageable number of fine grade codes. In short, initial grouping under a holding code first, before finer level coding later.

In terms of this data set, 25 participant responses were first examined to come up with a preliminary number of holding codes (i.e. curriculum, staff, management, the student, peers, family, the future, wider society, technology, money, other). More holding codes could have been added later, but were not needed. All participant responses were then analysed in light of these holding codes, working through the sectors one by one (i.e. all sectors, primary, secondary, FE and HE). After this process was complete, finer level coding was conducted on all of the material held under each of the holding codes. It is important to remember that the desired end point of stage 1 was not a consolidated theme structure, but multiple specific statements, capturing comments made by participants during stage 1, that could be rated by participants in stage 2.

Draft statements were first collated within sectors, then checked and combined across sectors. As the process progressed any statements with compound meanings were divided and

duplicate statements were collapsed onto each other. Some Delphi studies return every statement back to participants to be rated, others place limits on what information is returned in later rounds (Hasson et al., 2000) or focus on “common themes” alone (Thangaratinam & Redman, 2005). Limits like this may avoid participant fatigue and attrition: a potential issue in Delphi studies (Hasson et al., 2000; Hirschhorn, 2019; Thangaratinam & Redman, 2005; Thompson, 2009). In this study, statements which were mentioned by only a small number of participants (either in terms of total number of responses, or percentage of responses in that sector) were not presented back to participants in stage 2.

A final draft list of statements was prepared (MT & HP) and then checked by the authors on this paper (CP, AS, MT & HP). We also wanted feedback from individuals not associated with the study and who did not work within HE. We recruited an educational psychologist and a secondary school teacher known to the researchers to review the items and make any suggestions in terms of clarity and readability. Small edits and comments to improve sense and meaning were incorporated, paying careful attention not to move away from the original meaning of the participant data provided during stage 1.

The final questionnaire prepared for stage 2 consisted of 58 statements to be rated by education professionals in all sectors, and a further 10 statements which were only to be rated by professionals working in HE. The HE only statements seemed particularly specific to the HE context (e.g. students feel pressure to succeed because of their financial debt, students need to work to supplement their income while studying). All statements can be found in the results section below and appendix.

Finally, at the end of stage 1, participants had the opportunity to provide their e-mail address to be contacted about stage 2 (to rate the statements). Earlier, it was noted that 236 participants provided data in answer to the main question. Of these, 158 (78% of respondents) provided their e-mail address to be contacted about stage 2. Of course it was up to them, at the time of stage 2 (one year later), to decide whether they wanted to take part, or not.

4.0 Stage 2 – rating examples

4.1 Orientation to stage 2.

As noted earlier, stage 1 was about gathering relevant examples from participants and turning that data into representative statements. Stage 2 is about participants rating those statements. We describe both the initial and top up data collection periods below.

4.2 Participants

Across the initial data collection period, 52 participants completed at least half of the questionnaire. Some had experience in more than one sector and so rated the items again for a different sector. Five participants did this, resulting in 57 responses in total. However due to low numbers from FE and Primary sectors we launched an independent top-up round of recruitment targeting those FE and Primary. Top-up data collection recruited 31 extra participants, 1 of whom entered data for two sectors, making a total of 32 extra responses. The results for the original and top-up samples were compared. i.e. the analysis reported below was separately run on both samples. The results appeared very similar to each other and the correlation between the mean scores for each of the 58 items from round 2 and the top up data was .79 ($r=.79$, $p=.001$, $n=58$ [HE items were excluded as there was only 1 extra responses in the top up data]). As a result, the original and top-up samples were combined.

This resulted in 89 responses in total, 29 from HE, 21 from FE, 23 from Secondary, 16 from Primary. Stage 2 demographics are reported in table 1.

4.3 Methods and Results

The final statements from stage 1 included 58 items rated by all participants and 10 additional items rated only by HE professionals. Statement presentation was non-random and items were chunked together with other semantically linked statements (e.g. curriculum & assessment, peers, future, family, teaching staff).

Participants were asked to rate each statement twice. Once in terms of whether it takes place in their sector (“takes place”), and then again in terms of whether it contributes to students’ distress / coping less well (“contributes to distress”). Both questions were answered using a 5 point Likert (1932) scale measuring agreement from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Higher scores indicated greater levels of agreement.

Appendix one, shows the table of statements (Table 4) in their original presentation order. Below in table 2, both “takes places” and “contributes to distress” scores are combined together into a single score. This score is calculated by multiplying together the two individual scores. This forms an interaction term that takes into account both numbers as they vary. The combined scores ranges between: 1= strongly disagree (1x1) to 25 strongly agree (5x5). The numbers of participants who contributed to the combined item score are shown in table 2 (some statements had small amounts of missing data), along with mean, SD and item rank information for separate sectors and all data combined.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

In terms of mapping out the main results section below, we focus first on those statements with high mean scores across all sectors – thematically clustering and describing similar statements. We then explore any exceptions, for example, high scoring statements in one sector only. Before finally exploring possible statistical differences between statement scores across sectors.

Table 2 contains the mean scores for all 68 statements across all relevant sectors and an overall combined mean. Hasson et al. (2000) note that there is no single, consistent method of reporting results from Delphi studies (p.1013). So, in terms of summarising this data set, we have decided to focus on the highest rated items only – those with a higher levels of relative consensus. We choose to focus on the items that have a score above 18.00 in the combined mean column. This also happens to be the first 18 items. Of course, focusing on scores at 18.00 and above is relatively arbitrary – but does suggest a high degree of consensus. By way of example, two scores of 4, on the five point scales (4x4) would equal 16. Moreover, the lowest average that one of the two scores could be and still equal 18 is 3.6 (i.e. $3.6 \times 5 = 18$). As such a score of 18.00 or above suggests a relatively high degree of agreement that statements are rated highly by participants.

Of course, the focus on the combined mean column, potentially ignores the means for the different sectors. And yet, examining the sector means: all of the top 18 items for Primary score above 18 (and 24 of the 68), 17 of 18 (and 22 of 68) in Secondary score above 18; and 16 of 18 (and 23 of 68) for FE. However, interestingly, only 6 of all 68 items for HE score

above 18. In short, aside from HE (which we will return to later), the items we are choosing to focus on seem to be similarly rated across sectors.

Focusing on those top 18 items across all sectors, what are the patterns among these statements, if any? Starting with the statement with the highest mean score (54) and exploring other statements that it seems to thematically cluster with, there are four high-ranking statements which together seem to be linked to cuts in provision:

(54) There is less resource and less time to support individual student needs

(53) While rates of inclusion increase (e.g. SEN), this has not been matched by increased levels of support for those students

(52) There are less support staff and less capacity to provide pastoral care

(55) Funding cuts result in increasing class sizes and other issues which impact students

Very simply, there seem to have been cuts to provision and now there are less teachers, less support staff and less resources.

Another cluster of three statements relates to how these cuts might be impacting staff and their students:

(50) The pressure teaching staff are under can be passed on to their students

(49) Teaching staff are placed under greater pressure by managers, students and parents

(51) Teaching staff are experiencing a poorer work-life balance, a deterioration in their wellbeing, impacting their students

Staff seem under more pressure and two of these statements note that this pressure can be passed onto students.

As well as being under pressure due to having less resources, another statement suggests another potential source of pressure for staff:

(57) "Education establishments are under pressure to meet national targets and standards (e.g. Ofsted, league tables)".

By itself this statement may feel like an anomaly, but when combined with other statements the probable reason for its inclusion seems clear. These statements describe a focus on targets and achievement suggesting that education is becoming increasingly focused on assessment results:

(1) Education is increasingly focused on achievement rather than learning or self-exploration

(10) There is increased pressure for students to do well in assessments

(9) There is a strong narrative that academic achievement is the only way for students to be successful

This focusing on assessment success to the detriment of wider learning is perhaps a direct consequence of the need for institutions to perform in league tables and other metrics. This could easily result in less time for other activities traditionally associated with broader education and learning. It could also result in more pressure on staff and students.

As well as there being cuts within the school, three other statements note how cuts can influence other aspects of student lives:

(46) Families lack support from external agencies (e.g. if someone experiences long term health / mental health issues)

(30) Students are living through increased economic insecurity (poverty, austerity)

(31) Students are living through an uncertain socio-political climate (e.g. a more divided society, inequality)

Together, these statements seem to note how poverty, austerity, inequality and cuts in support may also be contributing to student distress.

Finally, another cluster of statements seem to relate to student comparison. The statements detail how:

(26) Students unhelpfully compare themselves with their peers / others and feel inadequate

(27) Students face pressure to conform to social norms

These statements speak to a general level of comparison and conformity to social norms that is impacting students. This may, in part, reflect an education context where the expectation to do well in tests and exams and the comparison with peers who do so is becoming the norm (see also items 9 and 17). But is also likely to indicate a wider level of comparison and conformity with peers.

Exception checking

As described earlier, the analysis is focusing on the top 18 statements across all sectors.

However, it also seems important to check for individual statements within specific sectors which are high scoring but do not fall in the overall top 18 (specifically, statements with means >20 and a high rank for that specific sector).

In terms of Primary, two high ranking statements repeat concerns about changes to curriculum and assessment:

(3) Delivering curriculum requires an increasingly assessment-focused approach (i.e. “teach to the test”; ranked 9th primary)

(5) Students are expected to know more at younger ages (ranked 14th primary)

These statements seem to echo the concerns described earlier around a more singular focusing of the curriculum around assessment.

One other statement that deserves mention is:

(25) Students have unhelpful access to sexually explicit content through the internet

It ranked 11th for Primary and also 9th for Secondary, but as it was considered less important for the later stages of education (FE: 37th, HE 58th), it did not feature in the overall top 18.

No others statement pass the criteria for secondary, FE or HE. However it is worth highlighting the two HE sector only statements that scored high enough to be included in the overall top 18:

1. (HE-7) Students need to work to supplement their income while studying (ranked 4th HE).

An issue for many HE students, and perhaps an issue that is well known to the sector.

2. (HE-9) Teaching staff are facing increased pressures (more teaching, admin, grants, research), meaning less time for students (ranked 6th HE).

Perhaps this represents an HE specific extension of the increased pressure on staff seen in other sectors.

Finally, as noted earlier and shown in table 3 below, average scores for items in the HE sector seem to be lower than those across other sectors generally. This suggests either slightly less concern, or less consistency of concern across the HE sector, when compared to other sectors.

[insert Table 3 about here]

Examining for statistically significant differences in the data in table 3; two one way ANOVAs were conducted for the two different variations of the same data above. Levene's test was non-significant for both variations. There was a significant effect of sector on scores for both the top 20 shared items ($F(3,77) = 4.39, p=.007, \omega=.33$) and all shared items ($F(3,70) = 5.11, p=.003, \omega=.38$). Post hoc tests (Tukey, Games-Howell) located the significant difference between HE and primary and FE scores for Top 20, and between HE and primary, secondary and FE for all shared items. In other words, HE scores are significantly lower than scores for other sectors.

5.0 Discussion

Drawing on the work of Bronfenbrenner and ecological systems theory (EST), this study sought to explore possible contextual influences on increasing levels of student distress within HE. It did this by looking upstream within education, and gathering the views of experienced professionals from primary, secondary, FE as well as HE on what had changed over time in their sectors (focusing on the chrono- within EST). We conducted a two stage Delphi study. First asking professionals to provide qualitative material on potential reasons for any increase in student distress within education. This material was then reduced down to 58 statements across all sectors and a further 10 specific to HE. Then, participants rated the statements relevant to them in terms of whether the content both: i. took place and ii. contributed to distress. The discussion section below will: i. summarise the results, ii. look for wider evidence for these findings in the wider literature, iii. relate the findings back to Bronfenbrenner and EST, before iv. focusing on the importance of these findings to HE and even other sectors of education.

In the results, we chose to focus on the highest scoring statements. Together they seemed to form six related themes or clusters of content. In summary:

- i. There are cuts to teaching numbers and other resources, putting pressure on staff.
- ii. There is additional pressure on educational establishments and staff within them to perform against other institutions (e.g. Ofsted / league tables).
- iii. Together this seems to result in an increasingly singular focus on academic achievement to the exclusion of wider aspects of education.
- iv. The pressure for assessments results is felt by teaching staff, which can in turn be experienced by students.
- v. The focus on assessment can mean students compare themselves with their peers in terms of academic results and other aspects of their life.
- vi. The influence of wider economic cuts and austerity in society also impacts on students through broader pathways (e.g. economic insecurity, political climate, lack of state support for struggling families).

To try to capture the above in two sentences: i. An education system with less resources and a focus on internal competition has become more focused on assessment leading to a narrowing of wider curricula. ii. These pressures are felt by students, who internalise the assessment focus, unhelpfully compare themselves with peers, whilst also struggling with wider societal cuts, austerity and political uncertainty.

If the above follows, then perhaps the combined results from this paper can be summarised with just three “C” words: cuts, competition and comparison. These three words stand for multiple potential factors that may be impacting upstream in the education and broader life

journey of students. Together our participants suggest these factors are contributing to student distress both in HE and other education sectors.

Before linking this knowledge gathered from experienced education professionals back to EST, it seems important to explore if wider evidence exists that supports the findings above? We will explore evidence at different levels: schools, teachers, students and wider issues. We will also deliberately focus upstream from HE, using evidence mainly from primary and secondary sectors. This is because it seems more likely that professionals in HE may be less aware of these potential upstream influences. As such, they may be less aware of the changes that are taking place earlier in students education journey and how these changes may be shaping student experiences and expectations before they arrive in HE.

Within schools, league tables were first introduced in 1992 (Leckie & Goldstein, 2009) to help increase parental choice (Adnett & Davies, 2002). But it has been argued that league tables both increased inter-school competition (Coates & Adnett, 2003, p. 207, point 3) and, under the coalition government (2010-2015), increased pressure on academic outcomes (Young Minds, 2017, p.10). As Baroutsis (2016) notes, under such pressure, schooling became more focused on maximising performance data and improving test scores, which in turn both narrowed the curricula and encouraged “teaching for [the] test” (Sahlberg, 2010, p.47). Indeed, a 2016 survey of 6,613 NUT primary members reported that 97% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that preparation for SATs had had a negative impact on children’s access to a broader curriculum (National Union of Teachers [NUT], 2016b. p.2).

Pressures on teachers to meet targets also appear to be taking a toll on teachers themselves (Young Minds, 2017). Workloads are growing and many experience considerable stress as a

result of accountability strategies (Hutchings, 2015). Worryingly yet unsurprisingly, 93% of teachers agreed that their stress levels sometimes impacted on the way they interact with pupils (Young Minds, 2017, p.11), and many reported ‘pushing’ pupils to achieve (Hutchings, 2015, p.54). At the same time, in a different NUT report of primary school teachers, amongst other statistics, 54% noted that there was greater use of unqualified staff to teach, while 57% said there were fewer resources and materials for pupils (NUT, 2016a, p.2 [n=5,247]).

In terms of students, Hutchings (2015) notes that children and young people increasingly see the main purpose of schooling as gaining qualifications, because this is what school focuses on (point 15); leading some teachers to worry that pupils’ attitude to learning has been permanently damaged (NUT, 2016b, p.1). Indeed, a finding from Young Minds (2017) suggest young people felt that their schools cared more about their grades than cared about them being happy.

Regarding wider cuts and poverty, the NUT report (2016a) of primary school members reports that 53% of members say that some children were coming to school hungry and unable to concentrate, while 39% suggest that poor housing conditions were having a negative impact on some children’s achievement. Looking more broadly, according to figures published by the Trussell Trust (2013), 2,814 three-day emergency food supplies were issued in 2005/06. In the lead up to the financial crisis in 2008/09, this figure had risen to 25,899 – a 900% increase. The most recent figures from the Trussell Trust (2019) show that 1,538,668 three-day emergency food supplies were issued in 2018/19. An increase of nearly 6000% in ten years since 2008/2009.

Some would argue that accountability measures and signs of audit culture such as league tables within education are driven by wider neoliberal ideologies (Pinto, 2015). And, to this extent students become ‘commodified’ on their ability to enhance their own and their school’s reputation (Keddie, 2016). Indeed, Keddie (2016) further details how high achieving children in the UK are aware of their academic abilities in relation to their peers and become invested in competition and comparison. This competition and comparison with peers seems to extend beyond school life. Reports suggest that the use of social media risks young people entering into “constant comparison” with the lives of others (Brown, 2016, p.15).

The corroborating evidence above, appears to strengthen the results of this paper. There seems to be wider supporting evidence for the potential role of cuts, competition and comparison and multiple potential pathways through which this may be increasing student distress. Of course, this paper does not claim to have uncovered new knowledge, but we are reassured that the consensus results above have wider support. Indeed, it feels useful to draw together in one place the multiple different factors that are taking place upstream that may be acting on students, as they move through education – and together may be contributing to increased levels of distress . Indeed, bringing this collection of upstream factors to the attention of those working with student distress in HE seems like a timely and important thing to do.

Bronfenbrenner and EST is the theoretical framework for this research. EST highlights the importance of exploring broader influences around the individual (micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-), and, importantly, examining those influences over time (chrono-; Bronfenbrenner, 1994). In this dataset, experienced education professionals within HE, but also upstream in FE, secondary and primary have consistently described multiple changes to education and

broader changes to wider society that may well now be contributing to the levels of student distress we are seeing in HE. The findings summed up in the phrase “cuts, competition and comparison” seem to include all levels of the EST from micro- (face to face interactions) all the way out to macro- (culture, belief systems). Together this appears to support the usefulness of gathering information informed by an EST approach.

While word limits and reader attention may not permit us to situate each highly rated item within the EST framework, some broader comments seem important. For example, many of the findings in the results eventually result in face to face interactions which take place in school, peer or home environments (micro-). But what is telling is the related pattern of linkages across different environments which contain the student (meso-). For example, cuts impacting on both school and home life. Or competition and comparison being something that takes place both in terms of assessments in school and also more broadly in terms of peer to peer interactions. Perhaps most striking of all though is the links out to: i. exo- and ii. macro- and how these filter down to meso- and micro- levels. “Exo-” explores linkages between systems, where one of the systems does not include the focus individual. The classic example being linkages between the home environment and the parental workplace. What is clear from our findings is how many things that involve face to face interactions in school have been influenced by changes that take place at a governmental level (i.e. cuts to budgets, promotion of leagues tables) and the knock on effect of these have had (reduction in curricula, focus on assessment). Moreover, what this data seems to point to are macro- level changes, such that our wider culture and belief system is now more influenced by austerity, by the free market and by neoliberal thinking. And perhaps, by recruiting experienced participants and asking them to reflect on changes they have witnessed over time (chrono-), we have been more able to draw these different connections to the surface.

So where do we go from here? In short, when we seek to intervene, there seems to be a risk that we target one area in isolation and see that as “the” problem. For example: the use of social media alone. And, of course, it should be noted that social media does seem problematic. But as only one, of many issues. Hopefully by bringing together the range of different relevant issues above under “cuts, competition and comparison”, those working in this area can appreciate the broad contextual factors that may be contributing to student distress, not just in HE, but in other upstream education sectors as well. Moreover, the broad nature of these findings suggest they might be relevant not just to educational psychologists in HE and other sectors, but also to mental health practitioners, teaching staff and even policy makers. What these findings suggest is that trying to tackle student distress in HE and elsewhere by increasing the capacity of well-being services alone, may hit a ceiling in terms of its impact. There is unlikely to be a single silver bullet of success, and individually focused approaches will play a role in tackling this issue. But, importantly, it seems that we must also bear in mind both: i. how the wider contributing influence from cuts, competition and comparison may be playing a role and ii. how this influence can be reduced or removed.

Educational psychologists, other applied psychologists and other well-being professions across all education sectors can be presented with problems related to student distress.

Typically, we may intervene at individual, class or even institution levels. However, it seems possible that the issues discussed in this paper reaffirm the need for a wider, broader, more contextual levels of intervention. For example, in order to help tackle levels of distress being seen in students in HE, educational psychologists and others working in earlier sectors of education may now have another reason to reaffirm their support for changes to politics, policy and pedagogy alongside the worthwhile individual work that they already do.”

As interesting comparison here comes from work around “resilience”. As part of efforts to tackle student distress there has been talk of and even toolkits for enhancing “student resilience” (e.g. AMOSSHE, 2018). In some instances, resilience may primarily refer to an individual characteristic which can be increased through individual interventions alone. However, in recent years resilience researchers including Ann Masten, the author of “Ordinary Magic: Resilience in Development” (2001, 2014), now define resilience as: “the capacity of a system to adapt successfully to significant challenges that threaten its function, viability, or development” (Masten, 2018, p.12). The use of the word ‘system’ in this definition is a deliberate adoption of ecological systems thinking. In line with this, we may need to think about how both the individual level and the broader “system” is contributing to student distress and how we may need to intervene at multiple levels. Indeed, our success in tackling this issue may, in part, come down to how broadly and deeply we consider and tackle some of the systemic and contextual factors raised in this paper.

By way of comparison, in the field of public health Marmot describes “lifestyle drift” as something that might stand in the way of nations tackling the social determinants of health. What is meant by lifestyle drift, is the tendency to focus on individual behaviours, like smoking and drinking, while ignoring the drivers of these behaviours – the so called “causes of the causes” (Marmot & Allen, 2014, p.S517). While we still need to be aware of where individual interventions may be useful, we may also need to look at our “causes of the causes” and focus attention on cuts, competition and comparison (see below for possible future directions).

While, again, it is hopefully clear that the findings from this paper have implications for those working in HE and also in other sectors, a few comments specific to HE seem pertinent. As highlighted at the end of the results, participants from HE scored the top statements significantly lower than participants from other sectors. These scores suggest that the issues in the highly rated items are less of a concern for staff in HE. This potentially makes the findings of this paper important for additional reasons. One, because staff in HE may not be aware of these upstream issues. And two, they may not be aware of the knock-on effect these issues are potentially having. For example, if issues around assessment have become established ways of being for students upstream in education, they are quite likely to still be having considerable influence on students once they reach HE. So even if HE does not put “pressure on students to do well in assessments” – if that pressure was present at earlier stages starting in primary, it may now be embedded in their behaviour. Indeed, it is even possible that not having this overt assessment focus in HE may contribute more to student distress as the rules students had been expecting and successfully following earlier no longer apply.

There is potentially another way of illustrating this point. Statement 8 stated: “students have less skills in self-discipline and autonomy, instead they seek greater support and spoon-feeding”. It was rated 41/58 for primary and 32/58 for secondary: way down the list. But it was rated 14/58 for FE and 10/68 for HE. FE/HE staff saw this as a considerable issue, but not so earlier sectors. Perhaps this makes sense. If earlier stages of education have become, more prescriptive, more assessment focused – if, they now: “teach to the test”, then why would: “self-discipline and autonomy” be important or the lack of it be a problem? But unintentionally, the very act of teaching to the test may be contributing to a lack of self-

discipline and autonomy which may help explain why some students struggle when asked to demonstrate such skills in HE.

It is also important to note that some other factors specific to HE continue to impact on student distress. For example: student finance, and students struggling to balance academic life with other aspects of their life (HE-7 and HE-4). Again, the wider literature highlights these issues (e.g. NUS, 2012; Student Minds, 2014; Thorley, 2017; YouGov, 2016), as did the introduction to this paper. It is perhaps the case that HE well-being services are already aware of these issues. Important as these issues have been and will continue to be, this paper deliberately focused on also gathering broader data and raising awareness of other possible issues from further upstream so we can start to become more aware of the influence wider contextual issues on student distress.

Limitations and future research

The Delphi literature talks about the method “establishing consensus”. It is important to note that this does not mean any objective truth has been found. Any consensus (i.e. gathering material, reducing to statements, rating statements, focusing on statements with high mean scores), is necessarily relative and tied to the participants consulted and their current context (Thompson, 2009, p.420). Different participants, asked slightly different questions at different times, may well produce different results. That said, the supporting wider literature should be noted. That notwithstanding, all these findings should be subject to critical enquiry, should open up broader research avenues, and prompt the gathering of further data.

It is worth noting that the relevance of our statements to all sectors have limits. For example, they tend to originate in the state-funded sector and may not apply as well / at all to private sectors. Equally, even within one sector, circumstances can change in different devolved parts of the UK. For example, in HE in England students pay fees but students normally living in Scotland do not.

It is worth noting that the numbers of participants in stage 2, are less than those in stage 1 (236 down to 52). A reduction in participation between stages is normal in the Delphi literature. And, in this case, there was a year gap between stage one and stage two. When breaking the data down into sectors, the numbers reduce considerably, hence gathering the top-up data.

It is also worth reflecting on our participants. We focused on professionals working in education, ideally with 10 or more years' experience. This was deliberate, in order that they were more likely to have seen and could report back on changes that may have taken place. Of course, this choice of participants may have had influences on the statements produced during stage 1 and their rating in stage 2. As noted above, different participants (i.e. students or their families), will likely have produced different results. And, at the same time, the views of experienced education professionals seem like an important perspective to gather.

Aside from replicating and extending this single study – what other future endeavours could be prompted by this research? One big question that seems to arise from this paper is what broad range of actions and interventions could fully appreciate, mitigate and even reverse some or all of the changes upstream in education which may now be impacting on students and their distress levels in HE. There is likely no one answer – but the risks of slipping into

lifestyle drift / individually focused solutions is clear. Indeed, perhaps useful future research could employ Delphi or other consensus methodologies to ask the question: if these are the broader problems that are impacting of student distress what do you consider to be possible solutions to them both individually and collectively?

The growing problems highlighted in this paper seem to suggest the need for more than individual level interventions alone to tackle the increases in student distress that are being reported. Although other literature supports the findings from this research – there have perhaps been few instances in the peer reviewed literature thus far where these different factors have been brought together with the suggestion that in combination they may be contributing, over time (chrono-), to student distress.

Of course, since the data collection for this paper concluded, the world has been rocked by the Covid-19 pandemic. The ramifications for many sectors, including both education and mental health are being witnessed and documented by professionals and researchers globally. In the UK, as life hopefully starts to return to “normal” and more specifically university students start to return to campus in greater numbers – it may be important to remember that getting back to “normal” might not be all we need to do. Even before the pandemic we were trying to understand why student mental health difficulties were increasing. This paper suggests it may be that being more aware of the possible importance of wider, contextual issues – summarised as: “cuts, competition and comparison” is hopefully a helpful contribution to the growing research base in this area. Before the pandemic, and even more so now, there remains much work to be done.

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Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants from Stage 1 and 2.

Characteristic	Stage 1		Stage 2	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Gender				
Female	232	76.8	58	70.7
Male	70	23.2	24	29.3
Normal living location				
UK	300	99.3	83	100
Europe (other than UK)	1	.3	-	-
Asia	1	.3	-	-
Ethnic group				
White	288	95.7	77	95.1
Mixed	5	1.7	3	3.7
Asian	3	1.0	-	-
Black	1	.3	-	-
Other	4	1.3	1	1.1
Highest educational level				
Undergraduate	31	10.3	12	14.5
Postgraduate	151	50.0	51	61.4
PhD / Other Doctorate	116	38.4	19	22.9
Other	4	1.3	1	1.2
Profession(s) ^a				
Teacher / Lecturer	207	68.3	65	78.3
Educational Psychologist	79	26.1	10	12.0
SENCO, student nurse, counsellor	12	4.0	4	4.8
Other	18	5.9	4	4.8
Working Sector(s) ^a				
Higher Education	142	46.9	37	41.6
Further Education	75	24.8	35	39.3
Secondary	117	38.6	27	30.3
Primary	89	29.4	19	21.3
Other	57	18.8	5	5.6

Note. Study 1 (N = 303), participants were on average 48 years old (SD = 9.61). Study 2 (N=83), participants were on average 49.8 years old (SD = 10.44).

^a As participants could tick more than one box numbers / percentages add up to more than the total number of participants.

Table 2. Statements from stage 2 showing number of participants (N) combined mean (M), standard deviation (SD) and rank (R) scores for individual sectors and all sectors, ordered by overall all sector score.

	Statement	All Sectors				Primary				Secondary				FE				HE			
		N	M	SD	R	N	M	SD	R	N	M	SD	R	N	M	SD	R	N	M	SD	R
54	There is less resource and less	87	20.30	5.96	1	16	21.31	5.69	5	22	20.41	6.36	5	21	20.86	5.50	6	28	19.21	6.26	1
57	Education establishments are	85	20.15	5.42	2	16	22.31	3.84	2	22	20.50	5.25	4	21	20.57	4.84	8	26	18.19	6.38	3
1	Education is increasingly	87	19.87	4.95	3	16	20.94	4.01	10	22	19.91	6.65	10	20	20.80	3.27	7	29	18.62	4.84	2
26	Students unhelpfully compare	88	19.57	5.21	4	16	21.63	4.73	3	22	21.91	4.26	1	21	19.24	6.33	16	29	16.90	3.99	18
53	While rates of inclusion	87	19.55	6.38	5	16	21.06	5.84	7	22	18.68	7.67	18	20	21.30	5.65	4	29	18.17	5.92	5
50	The pressure teaching staff are	87	19.43	5.99	6	16	21.38	5.14	4	22	20.68	5.78	3	21	19.67	6.08	13	28	17.14	6.09	16
49	Teaching staff are placed under	88	19.22	6.23	7	16	20.56	5.73	13	22	19.18	6.37	14	21	21.71	4.73	1	29	16.69	6.66	23
52	There are less support staff and	86	19.15	6.78	8	16	20.81	5.97	12	22	18.05	7.05	22	20	21.70	5.13	2	28	17.25	7.52	14
55	Funding cuts result in	86	19.15	6.36	9	16	19.19	6.65	20	22	19.86	6.49	11	21	21.52	4.26	3	27	16.70	6.89	21
10	There is increased pressure for	88	19.11	6.33	10	16	23.31	3.91	1	22	20.09	6.53	7	21	18.52	6.46	22	29	16.48	6.02	24
46	Families lack support from	86	18.71	5.89	11	16	21.00	4.56	9	22	20.36	5.21	6	21	18.67	6.67	19	27	16.04	5.70	28
30	Students are living through	88	18.57	6.27	12	16	20.31	5.46	15	22	19.41	6.28	12	21	17.29	7.87	28	29	17.90	5.31	7
9	There is a strong narrative that	88	18.57	6.23	13	16	19.13	7.15	22	22	17.91	6.38	23	21	21.05	5.48	5	29	16.97	5.77	17
51	Teaching staff are experiencing	88	18.55	5.79	14	16	18.50	5.87	23	22	18.68	6.06	17	21	20.19	4.95	9	29	17.28	6.08	13
27	Students face pressure to	87	18.39	6.05	15	16	21.06	4.84	6	22	20.00	5.44	9	21	19.86	5.66	11	28	14.50	5.76	38
H-7	Students need to work to	28	18.18	4.77														28	18.18	4.77	4
31	Students are living through an	88	18.13	6.93	17	16	19.81	7.62	16	22	18.91	6.44	16	21	16.76	8.64	34	29	17.59	5.46	9
H-9	Teaching staff are facing	28	18.00	6.87														28	18.00	6.87	6
H10	Universities are increasingly	28	17.75	7.23														28	17.75	7.23	8
23	There is an increase in bullying	87	17.68	6.47	20	16	19.81	5.87	17	22	21.23	4.10	2	21	18.90	7.20	18	28	12.75	4.83	47
H-4	Students worry about finances	28	17.46	4.86														28	17.46	4.86	12
17	Students feel that their grades	87	17.34	5.92	22	16	19.38	6.16	19	22	17.50	5.91	25	20	16.95	5.54	31	29	16.38	6.06	25
24	Students develop unhelpful	87	17.22	6.22	23	15	18.27	7.63	24	22	19.14	5.25	15	21	17.57	7.08	27	29	14.97	4.94	35
H-1	Students struggle with the	28	17.21	4.13														28	17.21	4.13	15
8	Students have less skills in self-	88	17.20	6.82	25	16	15.13	8.52	41	22	16.14	7.30	32	21	19.43	6.59	14	29	17.55	5.25	10
36	Students increasingly identify	87	16.85	6.86	26	15	13.33	8.45	51	22	16.41	6.84	29	21	19.86	5.88	11	29	16.83	5.95	20
12	Assessments often fall at the	87	16.64	6.86	27	16	15.38	8.10	39	22	19.23	6.44	13	20	14.75	7.51	48	29	16.69	5.59	23
2	The curriculum has narrowed	88	16.55	6.42	28	16	19.63	5.08	18	22	18.32	4.78	21	21	17.76	6.28	24	29	12.62	6.63	48
40	Poor parental mental health is	85	16.53	6.63	29	15	17.47	7.61	27	22	18.45	6.25	20	21	18.24	6.20	23	27	13.11	5.60	46
37	Normal levels of uncertainty	87	16.31	6.88	30	15	14.20	7.07	45	22	16.45	6.42	28	21	19.00	7.06	17	29	15.34	6.70	32
H-3	Students feel under pressure to	28	16.29	6.41														28	16.29	6.41	27
3	Delivering curriculum requires	88	16.26	6.84	32	16	21.00	5.92	9	22	15.45	6.07	37	21	19.24	5.92	16	29	12.10	6.01	50
32	Students feel pressure to make	87	16.17	6.59	33	15	14.80	7.74	42	22	15.14	6.33	40	21	17.24	8.24	29	29	16.90	4.65	19
25	Students have unhelpful access	85	16.05	6.92	34	15	20.87	6.17	11	22	20.00	4.59	9	21	16.05	7.09	37	27	10.15	3.99	58
38	Students face difficulties	87	15.69	6.51	35	15	14.00	6.39	47	22	13.27	6.49	46	21	16.90	7.67	32	29	17.52	5.04	11
47	Poor parenting is impacting	85	15.65	7.01	36	16	15.75	7.77	36	22	17.59	6.05	24	21	19.71	6.29	12	26	10.65	4.82	57

Statement	N	All Sectors			N	Primary			N	Secondary			N	FE			N	HE		
		M	SD	R		M	SD	R		M	SD	R		M	SD	R		M	SD	R
H-5	28	15.54	5.83														28	15.54	5.83	31
48	86	15.49	6.84	38	15	15.13	7.39	40	22	14.05	6.58	44	21	18.62	5.42	21	28	14.46	7.27	39
15	88	15.44	6.56	39	16	16.75	7.35	30	22	15.82	7.29	35	21	15.24	6.82	43	29	14.59	5.44	37
14	87	15.01	6.25	40	16	15.81	7.88	34	21	15.19	5.64	39	21	16.81	5.62	33	29	13.14	5.91	45
45	85	14.86	6.34	41	15	17.80	6.88	26	22	16.18	6.01	31	21	15.86	6.17	38	27	11.37	5.08	55
11	88	14.69	8.03	42	16	19.19	6.59	21	22	18.55	7.14	19	21	13.95	7.51	52	29	9.83	7.10	61
6	87	14.62	7.19	43	16	17.06	6.59	29	21	13.43	8.59	45	21	14.81	7.14	47	29	14.00	6.43	40
33	86	14.62	6.46	44	15	13.60	8.37	49	21	11.76	5.08	50	21	15.81	7.07	39	29	16.34	5.16	26
34	87	14.54	6.60	45	15	16.60	8.30	33	22	13.09	6.78	47	21	13.95	5.62	52	29	15.00	6.16	34
44	86	14.44	5.38	46	15	15.47	6.06	38	22	14.05	5.35	43	21	15.05	5.62	45	28	13.75	4.99	42
43	83	14.34	6.01	47	15	16.60	6.05	32	21	16.48	5.08	27	20	16.40	5.98	36	27	9.89	4.24	60
4	88	14.22	7.31	48	16	17.94	6.36	25	22	16.18	6.41	31	21	15.62	7.43	40	29	9.66	6.33	63
35	87	14.18	7.06	49	15	12.73	8.40	52	22	11.18	7.00	53	21	17.62	6.88	26	29	14.72	5.44	36
18	87	14.18	6.70	50	16	16.69	7.65	31	22	15.41	7.51	38	21	14.48	6.52	49	28	11.57	4.79	53
16	88	14.16	7.57	51	16	17.31	8.11	28	22	15.05	6.97	41	21	16.62	7.38	35	29	9.97	6.22	59
7	88	14.11	7.06	52	16	15.75	7.69	36	22	17.23	6.09	26	21	15.57	7.58	41	29	9.79	4.92	62
42	85	14.09	7.35	53	15	12.33	7.96	53	21	11.67	7.72	52	20	15.15	8.09	44	29	16.03	5.70	29
H-8	28	13.96	5.12														28	13.96	5.12	41
39	83	13.96	6.41	55	15	15.47	8.04	38	22	15.55	5.53	36	21	15.00	7.62	46	25	10.80	3.52	56
56	86	13.73	7.49	56	16	14.75	8.85	43	22	12.68	8.00	48	20	17.20	6.88	30	28	11.50	5.88	54
H-2	27	13.67	5.97														27	13.67	5.97	43
28	87	13.56	7.25	58	16	13.88	8.48	48	22	10.82	5.92	54	21	18.67	6.81	20	28	11.71	6.01	52
5	87	13.30	7.94	59	16	20.38	5.00	14	22	15.82	6.35	35	21	13.43	8.10	54	28	7.18	5.76	67
58	86	13.07	6.85	60	15	10.80	7.34	55	22	9.86	5.85	56	20	14.40	7.44	50	29	15.76	5.73	30
29	86	12.92	7.29	61	16	14.06	8.70	46	22	11.68	7.60	51	21	17.62	6.43	26	27	9.59	4.50	64
41	86	12.90	5.28	62	15	13.40	6.27	50	21	12.00	4.63	49	21	12.38	5.18	56	29	13.66	5.39	44
13	88	12.66	7.18	63	16	14.63	8.02	44	22	15.86	7.52	33	21	13.81	6.81	53	29	8.31	4.42	66
20	86	12.64	6.85	64	16	8.50	5.30	56	22	9.68	4.68	57	20	15.50	7.92	42	28	15.29	6.35	33
21	87	12.23	5.77	65	15	8.13	7.00	57	22	14.59	5.06	42	21	12.81	5.10	55	29	12.14	5.13	49
H-6	27	11.85	5.19														27	11.85	5.19	51
22	87	10.02	6.30	67	15	12.13	8.11	54	22	9.86	7.41	56	21	9.57	4.52	57	29	9.38	5.49	65
19	86	6.08	3.62	68	15	5.87	3.36	58	21	5.52	3.49	58	21	6.19	3.75	58	29	6.52	3.86	68

Note. N= number of participants; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; R = rank; FE = Further Education; HE = Higher Education. HE only statements, indicated by H in the No. column do not receive an overall rank, but are still ordered according to their overall mean. See table 2 for full statements.

Table 3. Average mean and standard deviation scores across both the top 20 items and all items by sector.

	Primary	Secondary	FE	HE
Top 20 shared items	20.76 (3.25)	19.66 (3.69)	19.99 (2.69)	17.22 (3.62)
All items	16.97 (3.67)	16.17 (2.97)	17.06 (2.67)	14.34 (2.21)

Note: To enable comparison, the HE scores only include items shared across all sectors, not items only completed within HE.

Appendix

Table 4. Statements from stage 2, ordered by statement number.

No.	Statement
1	Education is increasingly focused on achievement rather than learning or self-exploration
2	The curriculum has narrowed in ways that limit other creative or active inputs
3	Delivering curriculum requires an increasingly assessment-focused approach (i.e. “teach to the test”)
4	The curriculum is increasingly prescribed, staff have less freedom to teach to their strengths and interests
5	Students are expected to know more at younger ages
6	Students are expected to learn at the same rate, there is little room for differences across learners
7	Students are required to study subjects in which they have little interest or skill
8	Students have less skills in self-discipline and autonomy, instead they seek greater support and spoon-feeding
9	There is a strong narrative that academic achievement is the only way for students to be successful
10	There is increased pressure for students to do well in assessments
11	The number of assessments has increased
12	Assessments often fall at the same time, increasing pressure
13	Changes to the structure of assessments has negatively impacted students
14	Students experience a downward spiral if they receive poor academic results
15	Students feel that their best is not good enough and that they must meet the high standards set by others
16	Targets for students are set too early, students feel like failures if they do not meet them
17	Students feel that their grades signify their worth
18	Feedback always emphasises the need for students to improve
19	Feedback fails to highlight areas for improvement
20	Feedback is often ignored by students
21	Students are using drugs and alcohol which can have negative results
22	There is an increase in bullying from peers within the educational environment
23	There is an increase in bullying from peers through social media (e.g. cyber bullying)
24	Students develop unhelpful aspirations and expectations, often because of social media
25	Students have unhelpful access to sexually explicit content through the internet
26	Students unhelpfully compare themselves with their peers / others and feel inadequate
27	Students face pressure to conform to social norms
28	Students lack social interaction skills
29	The quality of social relationships and peer support networks has reduced
30	Students are living through increased economic insecurity (poverty, austerity)
31	Students are living through an uncertain socio-political climate (e.g. a more divided society, inequality)
32	Students feel pressure to make decisions about their future
33	Students feel under pressure to get certain kinds of jobs
34	Students have unrealistic expectations about job prospects
35	Students find a lack of jobs and find it very competitive to get any job
36	Students increasingly identify themselves with mental health labels and so seek support
37	Normal levels of uncertainty and distress are being pathologized in students
38	Students face difficulties balancing academic work (e.g. homework) with social lives / physical activity
39	Students are experiencing increasingly dysfunctional home lives

No.	Statement
40	Poor parental mental health is increasingly impacting students
41	Families are placing increasing pressure on students to do well
42	High levels of parental involvement results in students being less equipped to deal with difficulty
43	Lack of parental involvement is negatively impacting students
44	Students are increasingly taking on caring roles within the family
45	Normal family interactions within the home have been negatively impacted by technology (e.g. computers, tablets, mobiles)
46	Families lack support from external agencies (e.g. if someone experiences long term health / mental health issues)
47	Poor parenting is impacting students in education
48	There are fewer teaching staff generally
49	Teaching staff are placed under greater pressure by managers, students and parents
50	The pressure teaching staff are under can be passed on to their students
51	Teaching staff are experiencing a poorer work-life balance, a deterioration in their wellbeing, impacting their students
52	There are less support staff and less capacity to provide pastoral care
53	While rates of inclusion increase (e.g. SEN), this has not been matched by increased levels of support for those students
54	There is less resource and less time to support individual student needs
55	Funding cuts result in increasing class sizes and other issues which impact students
56	Policies to deal with poor student behaviour are inadequate
57	Education establishments are under pressure to meet national targets and standards (e.g. Ofsted, league tables)
58	Students feel that going to university is something that they must do
HE-1	Students struggle with the independence required studying at university, expecting more to be done for them
HE-2	Students pick modules based on assessment. They consciously avoid exams. Making the exams they cannot avoid more stressful
HE-3	Students feel under pressure to 'get value for money' from their degree
HE-4	Students worry about finances both during and after university
HE-5	Students feel pressure to succeed because of their financial debt
HE-6	Students feel guilty about the sacrifices their families have made so that they can attend university
HE-7	Students need to work to supplement their income while studying
HE-8	Students experience difficulties living independently at university
HE-9	Teaching staff are facing increased pressures (more teaching, admin, grants, research), meaning less time for students
HE-10	Universities are increasingly being run as businesses not as centres for learning, impacting students