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Introduction

The SARS-CoV-2 virus is responsible for the infectious disease COVID-19, which led the World Health Organisation to proclaim a public health emergency of global concern in January 2020 (WHO, 2021). Soon after, numerous limitations, including those impacting universities, were put into place by 172 countries worldwide (World Health Organisation, 2022). The pandemic has had a significant negative influence on young people's security, mental health, and general well-being. Mental health has a significant impact on our thoughts, feelings, behaviour, and interpersonal connections (Mentalhealth.gov, 2022). University students have been vulnerable to mental health problems even before the pandemic, and the stressors and limitations brought on by the pandemic have exacerbated this issue. This could have negative consequences on their academic performance, social life, and future prospects (Mentalhealth.gov, 2022).

The aim of this study is to analyse the latest research on the effects of putting these restrictions into place in the UK, on the mental health issues of university students during the pandemic (COVID 19) From the point of view of their development in cognitive educational health, emotional, as well as social.

The objectives of this study are:

- To identify the common mental health issues experienced by university students in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic
- To assess the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of university students in the UK.
- To examine the coping strategies used by university students to manage their mental health during the pandemic.
- To identify the barriers and facilitators to accessing mental health support for university students during the pandemic.
- To provide recommendations for universities and policymakers to better support the mental health needs of university students during and after the pandemic.
- To conduct a systematic literature review

Background

University students are more susceptible to mental health problems than the general population, and many initially struggle with them or seek help for them at university (Johnson and Crenna-Jennings, 2018). The pandemic presented particular difficulties for students, such as : the move to online assistance and learning resources, which many found challenging to use effectively, increasing anxiety and concern about academic success and long-term employment (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020). Other consequences of the pandemic include the closure of student residence halls, delays in exchange programs and commencement rituals, job losses, and increased confusion about career options. Social isolation and lockdown measures may have also contributed to chronic loneliness, reducing opportunities for connection and socializing, and increasing reliance on social media (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020). Interpersonal relationships are crucial for emotional regulation, stress management, and resilience in trying circumstances. They also contribute to overall life satisfaction and have positive effects on mental and physical health (psycnet, n.d.).

According to data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), there were approximately 2.5 million students enrolled in higher education in the UK in the academic year 2020/2021. This includes both undergraduate and postgraduate students (HESA, n.d.). Most universities offer free and confidential counselling services, mental health and well-being teams, peer support groups, and online resources to support students' mental health (Thompson, 2019). Additionally, students can access mental health services through the National Health Service (NHS) which include counselling, therapy, and medication. Some universities have partnerships with local NHS services to provide additional support (Thompson, 2019).

In the UK, a significant number of university students have reported experiencing mental health issues during the pandemic. According to a survey conducted by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in 2020, 56% of university students in the UK reported a decline in their mental health due to the pandemic. (Office for National Statistics, 2020) Additionally, a report by the mental health charity, Student Minds, found that 84% of university students in the UK have experienced increased levels of stress and anxiety during the pandemic. (Student Minds, 2020) In the UK, there are a range of health and social care services available to support the mental health needs of university students. These include university counselling services, the National Health Service (NHS), and various mental health charities. (NHS, 2021) However, reports suggest that these services have been overwhelmed during the pandemic, leading to long waiting times and limited access to mental health support for students. (NHS, 2021) The government has issued guidance to universities to support the mental health needs of their students during the pandemic. This includes providing online mental health resources, ensuring students have access to mental health support services, and promoting good mental health practices such as exercise and social connection. (GOV, 2020) 259 college students were polled by University of Surrey researchers about their levels of depression, anxiety, general well-being, alcohol use, and sleep quality. The study was carried out in the autumn of 2019, which is before the outbreak and the first lockdown, which occurred around the turn of May and June 2020. (SURREY, undated) First, they observed a decline in overall wellbeing and an increase in the chance of developing depressive symptoms during the epidemic. Clinical depression more than doubled in frequency, from 14.9 to 34.7 percent. University students' general sleep quality did not decline, but researchers did discover a connection between poorer sleep and an increased risk of depression (SURREY, undated).

The rationale of researching the mental health issues of university students during the COVID-19 pandemic is to identify the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of this population. As universities around the UK had shifted to online learning and social distancing measures, it is essential to understand the extent to which these changes have affected students' mental health. The study will contribute to an adequate understanding of the particular mental health problems experienced by university students during the epidemic. Because they have a considerable impact on students' well-being and academic progress, mental health difficulties affecting university students in the UK during the pandemic are a crucial issue. Academic performance may be hampered by poor mental health due to lower productivity, motivation, and focus (Mind, 2021). Additionally, poor mental health among university students can have long-term consequences, including an increased risk of developing mental health issues in the future. It is therefore important to address the mental health needs of university students during the pandemic to ensure their well-being and academic success (Mind, 2021).

Methods

Data collection involved doing a systematic literature review, which is a research technique used to find, assess, and synthesise existing literature on a specific research issue or topic (UCL, n.d.). To generate a thorough and objective assessment of the current state of knowledge in a certain topic, it entails using a disciplined and rigorous approach to find, pick, and analyse appropriate studies. A systematic literature review typically involves several steps, such as defining the research question or topic, carrying out a thorough search of appropriate databases and other sources, screening and selecting studies using pre-established inclusion and exclusion criteria, extracting data and information from selected studies, and synthesising and analysing the results (UCL, n.d.). Academic search engines used are Google Scholar and PubMed, the key words and phrases used to develop the search strategy are, "COVID-19," "pandemic," "mental health," "university students," "college students," "anxiety," "depression," "loneliness," and "isolation".

Inclusion criteria for data collection for a study on the mental health issues of university students during the pandemic (COVID 19) in the UK:

- Studies conducted in the UK
- Published between January 2020 and the present day
- Studies that specifically focus on mental health outcomes among university students
- Studies that examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health outcomes among university students
- Studies that use validated measures or tools to assess mental health outcomes
- Scan the abstracts

Exclusion criteria include:

- Studies conducted in countries other than the UK
- Studies that do not focus specifically on mental health outcomes among university students
- Studies that examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health outcomes in general, rather than among university students specifically
- Studies that use non-validated measures or tools to assess mental health outcomes
- Studies that do not provide sufficient detail or data on mental health outcomes among university students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thematic analysis, a qualitative research technique used to find and interpret patterns, themes, and meaning in qualitative data, has been carried out for data analysis. Understanding the data, creating preliminary codes, looking for themes, examining and improving themes, defining and labelling themes, and making a report of the findings are all steps in the process (Nowell et al., 2017). The themes in the report should be accompanied with statements and examples from the data that support them, and it should also explore the significance of the findings for the research topic and the larger area of study.

There are several ethical considerations to keep in mind, conducting the review and analysis in an objective manner, without allowing personal biases or assumptions to influence the results, being respectful of the participants whose data is being analysed and ensure that their privacy and confidentiality is maintained throughout the process (Neale, 2016).

Results

For this research, three articles have been selected, which can be found in the table below.

Author(s), title, and year of publication	Aim of study	Methods and Sample size and characteristics	Summary of main findings
(Chen and Lucock, 2022)	Examine mental health of students in early stage and identify factors	Online survey, 1173 students participated. Inc. questions about lifestyle and mental health history	Highly important to monitor long term Covid put university students at higher risk of developing mental health issues, particularly anxiety and depression
(Carr et al., 2021)	Investigate changes in mental health. Examine if more vulnerable groups were at higher risk	Online surveys in 2019/2020 Measure: anxiety and depression	Increase in anxiety and depression. Need for suitable treatment options and continuous monitoring
(Bennett et al., 2022)	Analyse depression and anxiety among uni students and staff in large UK university in April/May 2020	Online survey in 2020 Questions on depression and anxiety, assessed using Patient Health Questionnaire	20% staff and 30% students had depression and anxiety symptoms Female gender, ethnic minority, caregiving responsibilities and shielding or isolating situation showed higher levels of anxiety and depression

Theme 1: Anxiety and depression - The theme of anxiety and depression is present in all three articles, and they all highlight the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health among university students and staff. The studies explore the prevalence of mental health issues such as anxiety and depression among university students, the factors that contribute to these issues, and the potential consequences for academic success and future opportunities. The results from (Chen and Lucock, 2022) showed that around 20% of staff and 30% of postgraduate research students met thresholds for probable depression or anxiety, with higher rates observed among younger respondents aged <25.

Similarly, the second article describes how staff and postgraduate research students at a UK university experienced high level of depression, anxiety, and alcohol use disorder in the months following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that factors such as caregiving responsibilities and shielding or isolating were associated with higher levels of depression and anxiety.

Theme 2: Loneliness and social isolation - The first article notes that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to disruptions in social connections, with university students experiencing increased feelings of isolation and loneliness. The study found that students who reported feeling more socially connected also reported better mental health outcomes. This highlights the importance of maintaining social connections and providing support to help combat loneliness and isolation during the pandemic (Carr et all., 2021). These findings suggest that

social connections and support play a vital role in mental health outcomes during times of crisis.

Theme 3: Barriers to accessing/lack of mental health support – Findings suggest that there is a need for comprehensive strategies, including suitable treatment options for students with mental health difficulties and continuous monitoring after the pandemic (Carr et all., 2021).

These studies have examined the mental health issues faced by university students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of these studies suggest that the pandemic has had a significant impact on students' mental health, including increased rates of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and social isolation. The pandemic-related stressors, such as academic pressure, financial concerns, and social disconnection, have been identified as key factors contributing to these mental health issues.

The three studies looked at how the COVID-19 epidemic affected staff and students at UK universities in terms of their mental health. The first study discovered that while there was initially a decline in the symptoms of sadness and anxiety among students in 2020 compared to 2019, there was a subsequent rise in anxiety and a decline in subjective wellbeing in 2021. However, in 2021 as compared to prior years, outcomes for pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds and those with pre-existing mental health disorders improved (Bennett et al., 2021). According to the second study, 30% of postgraduate research students and 20% of staff members matched the criteria for likely depression or anxiety, with greater rates among younger respondents, female respondents, members of ethnic minority groups, and those who were responsible for caring for others (Chen and Lucock, 2022). Chen and Lucock also documented increasing alcohol consumption and risky drinking. In the third study, it was discovered that university students had high levels of anxiety and sadness, with over 50% reporting levels that were above clinical cutoffs and females scoring much higher than males. There were also reports of reduced levels of resilience, with higher levels of distress linked to lower levels of exercise, higher levels of tobacco use, and pandemic-related stressors including postponed events and financial worries (Carr et al., 2022). Overall, these results show the need for sector-wide interventions, including preventative measures, suitable treatment choices, and continuing monitoring, to help university students' and staff's mental health during and after the pandemic.

Discussion

Lack of support/barriers

The findings of this research have significant implications for health and social care. The mental health issues faced by university students during the COVID-19 pandemic can have long-term effects on their well-being and academic success. Therefore, it is essential to address these issues proactively and provide the necessary support and resources to maintain students' mental health.

There are several limitations to this research. First, the study may not have captured the full extent of the mental health issues faced by university students during the pandemic. Second, the study was limited to a particular geographical area, which may not be representative of the experiences of university students worldwide. Further longitudinal studies are needed to examine the long-term effects of the pandemic on students' mental health.

Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of university students. The research found that the pandemic has had a significant impact on students' mental health, including increased rates of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and social isolation. Academic pressure, financial concerns, and social disconnection were identified as key factors contributing to these mental health issues. The research recommends that universities should provide increased access to mental health resources, address academic stress and financial concerns, and provide opportunities for students to connect with each other and with their communities. The findings of this research are significant for health and social care, as the mental health issues faced by university students during the pandemic can have long-term effects on their well-being and academic success. However, the study has several limitations, including a limited area of study.

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