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'A completely different ballgame': female A-level students' experiences of academic demands, stress and coping

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ABSTRACT

The elongation in the amount of time that adolescents remain in education in England has coincided with mounting concerns about increasing adolescent mental health problems. In light of research suggesting that A-level students in post-16 education may face a particularly high degree of academic pressure, this study aimed to deepen our understanding of how this stage of education is experienced. Sixteen female students in English sixth forms participated in task-based, semi-structured interviews aimed at generating a better understanding of their experiences of studying A-levels. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to systematically analyse the transcripts. The themes highlight that because students both aspire intensely to perform well and find studying A-levels challenging, particularly in comparison to GCSEs, it is an inescapably stress-inducing and sometimes overwhelming experience. This is especially true for students who have not cultivated a rich repertoire of time-management strategies or feel unable to seek support from adults. Our analysis suggests that studying A-levels is a uniquely difficult stage of education and that further research is needed to understand how best to support A-level students.

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A-levels; academic pressure; stress; coping; qualitative research methods

Introduction

The elongation in the amount of time that adolescents remain in education is among the most notable social changes of the past half-century (Hagell et al., 2012). In England, the percentage of 16–17-year-olds in full-time education increased from 66% to 85% between 1995 and 2020 (Department for Education, 2022), and in 2015 it became obligatory to remain in at least part-time education or training until the age of 18-years-old (Education and Skills Act 2008). This trend has been enabled and legitimised by politicians in the belief that it will lead to greater economic

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productivity and social mobility (James Relly, 2021). It has also coincided with an increase in adolescent mental health problems (Vizard et al., 2018), as well as mounting concern about the amount of academic pressure that students experience (D. W. Putwain, 2020). In light of this, a need to provide greater context-specific support to students during each of education has been identified (Gunnell et al., 2018).

In England, approximately half of 16-year-olds enter a college or school-based sixth form, where most study A-levels (Department for Education, 2022). A-level students typically study three subjects over a two-year period which culminates in terminal examinations. A-levels are more challenging than GCSEs, which students study during their final year of secondary school (Year 11) and often find stress-inducing (Denscombe, 2000). There is some evidence to suggest that many students experience the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels as a 'big jump' (Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011). Experiencing difficulties during the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels could have short- and long-term implications for students' development. Indeed, it has been found that students who experience adjustment difficulties during the transition from primary to secondary school experience poorer mental health- and academic performance-related outcomes at ages 15- and 18-years-old (West et al., 2010).

There is evidence to suggest that many students find studying A-levels stressful. Indeed, in a study conducted in the North of England, in which 1,335 A-level students were asked to describe their experience of sixth form using three words or phrases, the most commonly used term was 'stressful' (Nash et al., 2021). Additionally, in a study conducted at two grammar school sixth forms in Northern Ireland, several A-level students reported that the amount of academic pressure that they experienced led them to feel '*overloaded*' and '*worthless*'; some experienced stress-induced physical health problems, such as headaches and nausea (Finch et al., 2010). It is unclear how transferable these findings are, however, given that students in Northern Irish grammar schools experience greater academic pressure than their counterparts (Cairns & Lloyd, 2005). Nevertheless, in a study conducted in the South of England, it was found that A-level students experienced disturbed sleep, fatigue and a deterioration in their personal relationships, as well as feelings of '*inescapable guilt*' and being '*overwhelmed*', due to examination-related anxieties (Chamberlain et al., 2011). It is unclear whether this is experienced outside of the period immediately preceding examinations, however, when anxieties are likely to be heightened (Wuthrich et al., 2021). Nevertheless, these findings suggest that students may benefit from greater context-specific support aimed at helping them to minimise or manage experiences of stress that arise from studying A-levels.

It has been found that students in the USA studying for qualifications that are broadly equivalent to A-levels (i.e. International Baccalaureate) experience greater stress and poorer mental health-related outcomes than those on less demanding courses (Suldo et al., 2008). It is important to take students'

experiences of stress seriously because, although a time-limited and manageable amount of stress is normal and can be beneficial, experiencing a prolonged or overwhelming amount can aggravate or contribute towards the development of mental ill-health (Seery et al., 2010). Given that nationally representative research has found that a substantial minority of 17-year-olds in the UK are experiencing high psychological distress (Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2021), there is clearly a need to offer adolescents of this age – many of whom study A-levels – greater support with what concerns them most.

It is well-established that adolescents tend to cite academic pressure and uncertainty about their future prospects among their main sources of stress (Anniko et al., 2019; De Anda et al., 2000; Gallaher & Millar, 1996). It has also been found that experiencing a high degree of academic pressure is associated with poorer mental health-related outcomes (Högberg, 2021), and that stress-related hospital emergency admissions are higher during term time (Blackburn et al., 2021). Additionally, it is common for academic pressure, such as a perceived failure to meet one's own or others' expectations, to be identified by coroners as an antecedent of adolescent suicide (Rodway et al., 2016), especially among girls (Rodway et al., 2020). This suggests that when intense academic pressure is experienced alongside or after other adversities, it can harm students' mental health. Focusing on older students, specifically, it is notable that education-related problems are consistently among the most frequent reasons for 16–18-year-olds contacting the support line Childline, ahead of concerns about their friendships, body image and being bullied (Stubbs, 2022). Continuing to develop a better understanding of what can be done to ensure that the amount of stress that students experience during each stage of education is commensurate with their ability to cope is, therefore, critical to supporting adolescent mental health more broadly.

Coping can be defined as 'constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person' (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Put simply, coping strategies can be divided between problem- and emotion focused techniques, whereby the former relate to attempting to address the source of stress and the latter relate to lessening the unpleasant emotional symptoms that arise from it. In general, problem-focused coping strategies, such as time-management and seeking support from teachers, are preferable to emotion-focused alternatives because, if successful, they can minimise or eliminate the problem at hand. Indeed, students who use problem-focused coping strategies experience better mental health- and academic performance-related outcomes (MacCann et al., 2012). Nevertheless, whether coping strategies should be dichotomised has been questioned because of how complex and context-dependent the relationship between stress and coping is (Compas et al., 2001). Furthermore, recent research has highlighted the unique value of using qualitative research methods to investigate adolescent coping

because of its capacity to explore it within specific, situated contexts (e.g. Wilhsson et al., 2017).

It has been suggested that the amount of academic pressure that students in England are experiencing has increased since the introduction of linear assessments from 2014 onwards (D. W. Putwain, 2020), which have resulted in GCSE and A-level students sitting predominantly terminal rather than modular examinations. Supporting the suggestion that this has increased the amount of pressure that students experience, the percentage of 15-year-olds in England who reported feeling pressured by their schoolwork 'a lot' increased from 25% to 40% between the 2014 and 2018 iterations of the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children surveys, while calls to Childline by 16–18-year-olds regarding education-related problems doubled during this period (Stubbs, 2022). Furthermore, in an online poll of 300 teachers by the National Education Union (NEU) in 2019, 55% reported that they thought that the introduction of linear A-level assessments had caused a worsening of student mental health (National Education Union, 2019). Even before the transition to linear assessments, however, there was widespread concern among teachers about the amount of academic pressure that students experience (Hutchings, 2015). There is, therefore, a need to continue updating our understanding of students' experiences of academic demands, stress and coping, and what can be done to support them.

In light of the need for a better understanding of how best to provide greater context-specific support to distinct sub-groups of adolescents (Gunnell et al., 2018), the purpose of this study is to deepen our understanding of students' experiences of studying A-levels and what challenges it presents. Using task-based, semi-structured interviews with A-level students from two sixth forms in England, the aim of this study is to address the following research questions:

- How do students experience studying A-levels, especially in comparison to GCSEs?
- What causes A-level students to experience stress?
- How do students cope with stress that emanates from studying A-levels?

Methodology

Recruitment strategy

All participants ($N = 16$) opted to take part in this research after being offered a chance to do so by a senior member of staff at their sixth forms; male students declined this opportunity. To enhance the possibility of capturing a range of perspectives, no exclusion criteria applied. In other words, staff offered all students within their sixth forms an opportunity to participate in this research. Data collection ended once sufficient information had been gathered to answer

the research questions and it was no longer practical to continue participant recruitment.

Sample

Participants' demographic characteristics are depicted on [Table 1](#). All participants were female; aged 16–18; attended non-selective or grammar school sixth forms in a metropolitan English city; and studied three or four A-level subjects. Two thirds of the subjects belonged to the sciences (67%); the remainder belonged to the arts and humanities (12%) or social sciences (22%). Three quarters of participants had studied GCSEs at the schools in which their sixth forms were based. On the Generalised Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2006), two thirds of participants exceeded the cut-off for experiencing a mild severity of generalised anxiety; none exceeded the cut-off for experiencing a severe amount. Following the most recent inspections preceding this study, both sixth forms were considered to be 'Outstanding' by the Office for Standards in Education.

Interview site

Interviews took place in a private, quiet room at the participants' sixth forms. Participants at the non-selective school participated in interviews at the end of Year 12 in June 2019, whereas participants at the grammar school participated in interviews at the beginning of Year 13 in September 2019. All participants had completed their end-of-year mock examinations and could be thought to have nearly or entirely completed Year 12. The timing of interviews did not appear to influence the data co-creation process, in which the same interview guide was used and all participants primarily reflected on their experience of the transition from Year 11 to 12 and the demands of studying A-levels.

Table 1. Participants' demographic characteristics.

Pseudonym	Sixth form	Age	A-level subjects	Generalised anxiety
Piper	Non-selective	17	3	Moderate
Bethany	Non-selective	16	3	Moderate
Samantha	Non-selective	18	3	Mild
Julia	Non-selective	17	3	Mild
Joanne	Non-selective	16	3	Minimal
Harriet	Non-selective	17	3	Minimal
Rachel	Non-selective	16	3	Mild
Laura	Non-selective	17	3	Moderate
Gabriel	Non-selective	17	3	Mild
Emma	Non-selective	17	3	Minimal
Katherine	Grammar	17	3	Mild
Zoe	Grammar	17	4	Minimal
Charlotte	Grammar	17	3	Mild
Susan	Grammar	18	3	Moderate
Jessica	Grammar	18	4	Minimal
Felicity	Grammar	17	4	Mild

Interview technique

Task-based activities can make interviews more interesting and less intimidating for interviewees (Punch, 2002). Prior to beginning the interviews, participants were therefore asked to complete a short questionnaire which required them to describe their experience of Year 12, as well as their experience of Year 11 in comparison to Year 12, using three words or phrases. Participants were told that their responses would be used during the interview, but that the ordering of the terms was unimportant. Participants then completed individual semi-structured interviews with the first author, which lasted approximately half an hour (see supplementary material for interview guide).

During interviews, participants were asked why they had decided to study A-levels and to explain why they had chosen the terminology that they had selected to describe their experiences of Years 11 and 12. Participants were also asked whether they had experienced stress or anxiety during sixth form, and if so, how they coped with it. Stress was defined to participants as 'the feeling of pressure that people experience when they are trying to get things done'; anxiety was defined as 'the feeling of fear that people experience when they're worried about something' (Mind, 2018a, 2018b). These definitions were provided to optimise clarity because stress and anxiety are closely related and easily confused states (Putwain, 2007). Interviews ended with an opportunity for the participants to ask questions and make additional comments. Thus, interviews began with 'warm up' questions aimed at easing participants in and positioning them in the leading role in the interviewer-interviewee relationship, before more focused topics were sensitively discussed and later departed from during a 'cooling down' period. Throughout the interviews, active listening, tactful questions and careful attempts to summarise what participants had said were used in an effort to elicit additional information.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the authors' departmental ethics committee. Informed consent was obtained from headteachers, parents and participants. Participants were offered an informed consent form to read, consider and sign several weeks in advance of participating in this research and were verbally reminded of the purpose of the interview before it began. Participants were also reassured that they could skip questions or end the interview at any moment without needing to provide a reason for doing so and were signposted to reputable organisations to refer to if they wished to learn more about stress or anxiety. Pseudonyms have been used to anonymise and humanise participants.

Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The analysis was conducted from an experiential orientation and a critical realist perspective, meaning that it aimed to generate a better understanding of A-level students' experiences and perceptions (experiential orientation) and assumed that an active interpretation of data, rather than passive reporting, is needed to achieve this (critical realist perspective; Willig, 2013). In the initial phase, the first author transcribed the audio-recorded interviews before repeatedly reading them to facilitate data familiarisation. In the second phase, the first author inductively coded the most relevant segments of data using short, evocative names. The process of re-reading the transcripts and refining the codes was conducted recursively to enable the first author to deepen their interpretation of the data. In the third phase, the first author reflected on the codes in an effort to actively interpret recurring, coherent and meaningful across-case patterns that could be unified by core ideas. This process initially generated three prototype themes, which were iteratively revised until five themes had been constructed, defined and named. In the final phase, the data were re-read in full to confirm that the themes offered a plausible and compelling story about the data before being reported. Prior to presenting the themes, we reflect briefly on the terms participants used to describe their experiences of Years 11 and 12.

Analysis

It is notable that, although most participants used at least one unambiguously positive term to describe their experience of Year 12 (e.g. *'exciting'*), the most frequently used term was *'stressful'*. Additionally, it is notable that when asked to describe their experience of Year 11 in comparison to Year 12, three quarters described the former as easier or less stressful, with Susan using the phrase *'easy compared to A-levels'*; Harriet using the term *'less stressful'*; and Felicity using the phrases *'less busy'*, *'less difficult'* and *'less pressure'*. These patterns suggest that studying A-levels is a multidimensional and challenging experience. We now present the themes that were constructed from the transcripts.

Theme 1: 'I didn't really see another path': the road most travelled

This theme captures the idea that, for most participants, studying A-levels was an aspect of their educational trajectories that was taken for granted (*'I just thought I had to'*; Piper). While several participants commented on their legal obligation to remain in at least part-time education or training until the age of 18 (*'post-16 education is compulsory'*; Rachel), for the majority of participants, their decision to study A-levels was framed by an optimistic and predominantly

unquestioned perception that it would help them to secure a 'good' or 'stable' job ('*it's good for my future*'; Bethany), primarily by acting as a 'stepping stone' to higher education and the benefits that it can confer ('*a stepping stone for other things*'; Zoe). Furthermore, the widespread perception that studying A-levels is the most 'common', 'easiest' or 'main' route to higher education foreclosed the consideration of alternative post-16 educational routes:

Jessica: I definitely wanted to go to university. And so, A-levels was kind of the easiest way, or the most common way, to get there. And, well, that's just generally the route that people take. So I thought, after GCSEs: 'I'll definitely do A-levels.' There wasn't a question of not

Several participants knew what careers they wanted to pursue prior to entering post-16 education and therefore chose A-level subjects that would facilitate access to these ('*I was thinking about what I wanted to do as my future career*'; Charlotte). For such participants, studying A-levels was perceived to be essential, and therefore obligatory and unquestionable, because the higher education courses that they were targeting required specific A-level qualifications ('*there's not really other paths to get into them*'; Julia).

It was common for participants to refer to explicit parental expectations of them to enter higher education ('*my parents always expected me to*'; Julia), as well as 'implicit' and undiscussed expectations of them to do so ('*it was always just known, I guess*'; Jessica). In being described as '*a bit definite*', '*a given*' and '*always just known*', the decision to study A-levels (in order to access higher education) was framed as a common sense choice rather than one of several post-16 routes that needed to be carefully considered ('*it's kind of expected*'; Susan). Indeed, in framing studying A-levels as the most '*natural*' post-16 educational route, alternative routes were implicitly framed as less desirable or for students for whom studying A-levels is not a feasible option ('*there's more opportunities*'; Harriet).

Several participants referred to how, because their parents had not had the '*chance*' to enter higher education, they wanted their daughters to do so in order to '*take the next step*' and '*do better*', thereby reflecting a dominant and often unquestioned societal assumption that entering higher education is more advantageous than – and inherently superior to (James Reilly, 2021) – alternative educational routes ('*at the end of the day, it's a degree*'; Zoe). Relatedly, Bethany felt pressured to study A-levels because she thought that her parents would feel ashamed or her or inferior to other parents if she did not enter higher education ('*if all of my parents' friends' daughters and sons go to university and I don't, you know? Then it doesn't look good on my parents*'; Bethany). For Bethany, studying A-levels (in order to access higher education) was therefore both expected of her and perceived to be the only socially acceptable educational route ('*I don't think it's on what I want to do*'; Bethany).

In being perceived by the participants as an '*expected*', '*natural*' and unquestioned '*stepping stone*' towards accessing higher education and later securing

a desirable job, studying A-levels was framed as a necessity rather than a choice and was implicitly set up as a 'fateful moment' (Denscombe, 2000), in which there is a lot to be gained or lost according to their performance. Moreover, it seems that the absence of considering alternative post-16 educational routes may have enhanced participants sense that it is important to perform well by precluding the perception that there could be 'another path' to a desirable job.

Theme 2: 'a completely different ballgame': another level

This theme captures that idea that studying A-levels is substantially more difficult than GCSEs ('it's just a completely different ball game'; Gabriel). Participants experienced the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels as 'a big jump' which represented a far greater increase in difficulty than that which they had expected or previously experienced ('it's much harder than I expected'; Harriet). Several participants, for example, commented on how the increased quantity of content made studying A-levels much more demanding:

Bethany: I didn't know it would be this stressful. I didn't know, I didn't know it would be this hard ... it's so different from GCSE. I thought GCSE was stressful and stuff but when I came to A-levels, I was like: 'Woah!' You know? Like, there's so much content to go through ... Whereas in GCSE the books were, like, this thin, in A-levels they're, like, this fat

In addition to covering a larger quantity of content, participants also commented on how the increased complexity of the content is more difficult to understand ('it's much, much more difficult'; Gabriel). For several participants, studying A-levels constituted their first encounter with struggling to grasp what they were being taught:

Zoe: it's kind of like a hit that you have to properly work hard and think through things to succeed ... at times it made me feel a little bit thick. 'Cause before when you get things straight away in lesson, but now you have to go home and go over the lesson to understand things. I think it can make me feel, like, different to how I did before 'cause things don't click

In light of this increase in difficulty, participants depicted studying A-levels as an unfamiliar experience which required a considerable amount of effort to acclimatise to ('a very hard transition'; Rachel), even for those who had previously felt able to 'get things straight away in lesson' and rely on their 'natural ability' to perform well ('it's just really, really hard ... I usually would just go off my notes and it would stick and I would get it, but I can't really do that'; Laura). Furthermore, with their experience of studying GCSEs being retrospectively described as 'really easy', 'more of a fact recall' and 'very structured', as well as compared to being 'spoon fed', participants also reflected on the increased difficulty of answering examination questions that cannot be addressed in an easily predictable manner ('it's just ten times more work'; Jessica).

On top of academic challenges, participants also had to assume greater responsibility for managing their workload (*‘teachers don’t support you as much’*; Charlotte), which could be challenging in itself (*‘it gets really, really hard’*; Gabriel). Furthermore, all participants had to allocate time to other interests or obligations, such as applying for summer schools; gaining and performing work experience; maintaining friendships (with friends who no longer shared the same classes); a part-time job; and their higher education applications (*‘a lot of things to do’*; Felicity). The specific combination varied between participants (*‘a lot to do’*; Piper), but all experienced additional demands on their time (*‘a lot going on’*; Julia). These additional demands facilitated a contraction in the amount of time that participants had to be academically productive (*‘it does get quite stressful’*; Jessica). Yet such demands also constitute a largely unavoidable aspect of being an adolescent and A-level student (*‘it’s not just the grades anymore’*; Laura), and therefore contribute towards the conditions that make studying A-levels uniquely challenging (*‘it can get a bit overwhelmed in that way, definitely’*; Zoe). For some participants, the demands of studying A-levels sometimes felt overwhelming:

Charlotte: I got so overwhelmed. Like, I wasn’t even able to process my own emotions. It was my mum who was like: ‘Oh, are you giving up?’ Like: ‘What’s going on here?’ So, I just sat down in front of the laptop in the dark. I just sat there and didn’t do anything... I just felt so overwhelmed by the demands of what I had to do. Like, I’m not a very emotional person but I just cried ‘cause I just couldn’t handle it

As we will highlight in the next theme, participants felt obliged to persevere even when they felt stressed or overwhelmed because they were intensely concerned about the implications that their performance would have for what and who they could envision themselves becoming as adults (*‘worrying about how this will affect your future’*; Emma).

Theme 3: ‘determines your future’: all to play for

This theme captures the idea that participants experienced a lot of pressure to perform well (*‘that’s how I see myself, like, going up in the world’*; Katherine). Indeed, pressure to perform well, which was experienced by all participants, primarily stemmed from an awareness of the implications that their performance has for their post-18 educational and occupational prospects:

Charlotte: when predicted grades came out, that was when I was particularly stressed, because I was like: ‘This is something that determines your future.’

Samantha: I, like, become anxious long-term. Not, like, in the short-term, like: ‘Oh, I’m gonna get a bad grade. That’s it.’ I think of it, how it will affect my future... No-one else has pressured me to do well. It’s just that I want to do well for myself, and that’s kind of, like, what makes me anxious

In particular, participants referred to their desire to strengthen their position in the competition for places on competitive higher education courses and were conscious that if they failed to attain the '*right predicted grades*', they would be forced to abandon or adjust their plans:

Emma: I've been quite on edge because I really want to do well . . . if I don't get the grades, then I can't get into a good uni, I can't do psychology then, and there's nothing else I wanna do

Laura: it's just the idea that I need to do well to get the grade that I need, which is the main source of my stress . . . it's causing all this general worrying. I'm uneasy all the time, which is not great . . . it's a lot of pressure

It is because participants were conscious of, and concerned about, the implications that their academic performance would have for their post-18 educational and occupational trajectories that when they encountered challenges, they did not simply shrug them off or avoid them ('*gonna study as much as I can*'; Julia), but instead felt obliged to persevere in spite of them:

Harriet: I really want to get a good job because I do care about my future. I've always cared about my future and my job. I've always performed well, like, throughout secondary and GCSE and so on . . . I want to do well, and in school it was really my thing, but it hasn't been here. So for me, it's just pushing myself harder and harder to try to get those grades

The pressure that participants experienced also contrasted sharply with their experience of studying GCSEs, when they rarely received dissatisfactory grades and expected to progress to post-16 education without difficulty ('[at A-level,] *you have to think further ahead*'; Julia). Several participants also felt pressured to appease their parents:

Susan: that is literally my parents: 'All we want you to do is try your best.' But we all know that they know that my best is good, so do you know what I mean? Like, you know that they're, they know that you have the potential, but then they say: 'Just do your best.' But then if you come out with a D, it's like: 'Honey, why weren't you doing your best?' I'm like: 'Yeah I was!'

Here, it is clear that because Susan was conscious that trying her best was code for attaining a particular set of grades, she felt pressured to perform well to satisfy her parents, even when her parents used tactful language to encourage (the process of) trying hard rather than fixate on (the outcome of) attaining a specific grade. Compounding this, when participants did not perform to a high or satisfactory standard, some of their parents expressed anger or disappointment. Rachel even lied to her parents about how well she was performing because she felt fearful of her parents' chastisement ('*a lot of pressure comes from family*'; Rachel), which made her feel guilty and amplified her desire to improve her performance in an effort to meet their '*conditions of acceptance*' (Putwain, 2009).

Performing well in mock examinations was especially important to participants because they were conscious of how their results would be used to inform their predicted grades (*'anxiety about performing well and hoping that you do well enough'*; Felicity). Several participants experienced pressure during the approach to their mock examinations to the extent that they were unable to sleep, stop worrying or relax (*'properly panicked'*; Piper). Bethany and Harriet, who had both struggled to negotiate the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels became so fixated on compensating for this during their mock examinations that they remained awake throughout the night to revise, albeit to the detriment of their health and performance:

Bethany: I thought my head was going to explode. I used to stay up all night trying to revise, and I didn't have any sleep at all. Like, in the exam, I felt like a zombie, I felt like I was going to fall asleep ... I felt very weak

Harriet: I've definitely experienced stress, I'm not gonna lie ... during the mocks I used to, like, not get sleep. I'd be awake until one, two, three. And then, I also used to wake up at four to make sure that I review the content before I go to school. And then I used to be really tired, but I couldn't go home and relax. And that, I think that's why I didn't do well on my mocks because I just didn't care so much about myself. I just cared about, like: 'OK, I'm gonna work hard. I'm gonna get the grades.' I didn't think about if this is gonna affect my grades as well, if I don't slow down and actually take care of myself

Here, it is clear that these participants' initially problem-focused attempts to cope became counterproductive, generating more rather than less stress (*'just all-nighter and mental breakdowns'*; Harriet). Other participants also felt panicked or overwhelmed and experienced disturbed sleep or feelings of exhaustion while studying A-levels. To cope with experiences of stress, participants used a variety of coping strategies, such as listening to music, exercising and avoiding sources of stress. However, two coping strategies, which will be the primary focus of the final two themes, seemed to be especially effective: time-management and seeking support from peers.

Theme 4: 'having plans makes things better': an anchor in strong currents

This theme captures the idea that time-management strategies helped participants to minimise or manage experiences of stress. Time-management is particularly important when studying A-levels because students have free periods and are therefore far more responsible for organising their time effectively. Indeed, A-level students must engage in independent, self-directed learning and revisit content without being directed to do so by their teachers. In light of these demands, participants were conscious of the need to remain organised on an ongoing rather than interspersed basis (*'if you don't, you're in trouble'*; Samantha). Furthermore, participants recognised the importance of learning

how to *'deal with the stress'* that is inseparable from studying A-levels and framed time-management as key to this:

Zoe: that's just A-levels. It's kind of expected that you're gonna be stressed out, so it's more about finding coping mechanisms for that, rather than trying to focus on not having stress ... lists definitely help

Importantly, participants reported that their teachers emphasised the criticality of managing their time, but felt that advice on how to do so was lacking:

Rachel: they just tell you to manage your time. They don't actually tell you how you can do that. Or strategies. I think at the start of the year, we did start a booklet. And we had to write how, what we were doing and how we were handling all our subjects. But then it just got pushed to the side. We never looked at it again. So yeah, not how, only that you need to do it

It is notable that Charlotte commented on how one of her teachers *'once said something useful'* when they encouraged her to assign a particular task to each free period, before concluding *'that's the extent of useful advice, really'*. This indicates that simple but insightful advice of this kind is valued but perceived to be in short supply.

Despite receiving limited advice from their teachers on how to manage time, several participants had nonetheless developed a valuable repertoire of time-management strategies that had helped them to prevent their workload from *'piling up'* to an overwhelming extent (*'if you deal with it appropriately, you're fine'*; Julia). Several participants planned how to spend their time using planners and were accustomed to making and revising to-do lists in light of changing priorities (*'having plans makes things better'*; Jessica). Others planned when to study based on times when they thought that they would be free from distractions and therefore most productive (*'so long as there are no distractions'*; Samantha).

Time-management strategies also helped participants to ensure that they had a *'boundary and a limit'* which facilitated frequent but time-limited and purposeful opportunities to rest before returning to challenges feeling refreshed (*'eliminating myself from the situation for a bit and then approaching it with a clear head, that helps me'*; Julia). Time-management strategies also helped participants to ensure that they had a clear mental representation of what needed to be done and when (*'so that they're not in my head and they're somewhere'*; Zoe), helping them to differentiate between when it is desirable to *'take time out to relax'* versus *'hack away at'* or *'address the problem'*:

Katherine: I definitely have a boundary and a limit. Like, for example, I wouldn't work past 9pm in the evenings. Just stuff like that, so I can relax. That definitely helps

It is notable that, although participants who proactively managed their time reported that they still *'feel stressed'* and refrained from confirming that they felt *'on top of things'*, it was clear that they had not reached the point of feeling

overwhelmed to the same extent that other participants had (*'there are periods when I feel stressed, but I think I cope with them quite well'*; Julia). Asked how they had learnt how to manage their time, such participants reflected on how they had *'discovered'* it for themselves, framing it as obvious or common sense (*'it's not something too difficult to realise to do'*; Felicity). However, not all participants had learnt how to do this, meaning that it is not inevitable that A-level students will *'pick up the habits'*, even when confronted with demands that require them to be more organised (*'it's very dependent on the person'*; Katherine).

Theme 5: 'I don't think they'd get it': you had to be there

This theme captures the idea that, from some participants' perspectives, only those who are studying – or have recently studied – A-levels can appreciate how stressful it can be. While most participants described their parents or teachers as supportive, several explicitly stated that they did not feel comfortable speaking to adults about their experiences of stress (*'I don't really feel comfortable talking to them'*; Piper). This was primarily because they thought that adults would not be able to comprehend how they were feeling to an extent that would allow them to understand their experiences from their perspective (*'I don't think they'd get it'*; Bethany).

These participants felt that adults would not be able to appreciate how they were feeling because they were older, not *'going through the same thing'* and therefore inhabiting distant worlds (*'like, they're adults'*; Bethany). Indeed, such participants considered the distance that existed between their worlds and the adult worlds of their parents and teachers to be too wide to be navigated or traversed, making it difficult for adults to clearly appreciate their experiences from their vantage point (*'just 'cause of the age gap'*; Laura). Consequently, this raised a communicative barrier between some participants and their parents and teachers, which made turning to them for guidance on how to negotiate the stressful aspects of studying A-levels – to quote Rachel – *'just no help'* (*'I stopped talking to them about the problems'*; Rachel).

Several participants who had attempted to speak to teachers about their experiences of stress referred to feeling ignored, patronised or cajoled, which heightened their sense that adults are – or can be – oblivious to their experiences of stress (*'people make false assumptions about the amount of stress that you have because you're not necessarily crying all the time out loud'*; Charlotte). Charlotte, for example, commented on how she had been *'completely stripped down'* by a teacher when she had attempted to explain to them that she was feeling overwhelmed by her workload and was told that she was simply *'bringing a negative atmosphere'*. In describing herself as feeling this way, it seems that Charlotte felt as though her vulnerability was exacerbated by the exact person from whom she was seeking support; the term *'stripped down'* also implies feeling publicly exposed and humiliated. Reflecting on this experience as

'terrible' and resulting in 'a lot of stress', Charlotte concluded that it is not useful to speak to teachers about her experiences of stress ('I don't feel like you can really talk to teachers'; Charlotte). Other participants felt ignored by their teachers at times when they had openly expressed that they had been experiencing stress ('she doesn't do anything'; Harriet). These experiences raised and embedded the aforementioned communicative barrier and therefore foreclosed opportunities for these participants to seek support or signposting ('I don't think there's any point going to them to talk'; Rachel).

In contrast to adults, participants felt as though their friends or older siblings – who were studying or had recently studied A-levels – could relate to them because of their shared experiences ('going through the same kind of things'; Laura). Indeed, participants felt better able to turn to their friends or older siblings for emotional support because they thought that they would be listened to and validated by them rather than judged:

Rachel: if I tell them something, instead of judging me, or instead of reacting negatively, they hear me out and, you know, it's not like they give great advice, it's just that they can comfort you better than anyone else can, because they're in the same situation as you

Here, friends are depicted as fellow travellers on a humbling and difficult voyage rather than as distant, judgmental commentators ('they'll know how to relate to me'; Bethany). Relatedly, several participants reflected on how, because their friends invariably experience stress, it meant they could seek support from them without feeling ashamed or unusual ('everyone's kind of on the same page about feeling stressed and anxious'; Zoe). Turning to friends for emotional support was therefore a crucial, emotion-focused coping strategy for many participants.

Conclusion

This research has generated a better understanding of A-level students experiences of post-16 education, what causes them to experience stress and how they cope with it. Despite only including female students, this research offers a valuable insight into this under-studied stage of education and highlights the need for greater research on how best to support A-level students. Indeed, our analysis suggests that, although studying A-levels can be enriching (Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011), it is also uniquely challenging and can be both stress-inducing and overwhelming. In light of this, it is critical to acknowledge that the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels is not necessarily a seamless or straightforward one, and that it can require an enormous amount of effort for students to acclimatise to; it is therefore a transition in which 'vulnerabilities can be amplified' (Hagell et al., 2012, p. 94).

This research highlights that studying A-levels requires proactive time-management because the introduction of free periods, when combined with the notably increased academic demands, mean that students are far more

responsible for partitioning their resources effectively. In light of this, time-management strategies appear to help students manage their workload; keep their work in perspective; and facilitate frequent but time-limited and purposeful opportunities to rest and return to work feeling re-energised. Yet it cannot be taken for granted that students will learn how to use such strategies, even if they are provided with planners and told that it is important to use them (as all participants had been). Resource permitting, greater opportunities for students to learn how to manage their time effectively could help them to minimise or manage the experiences of stress that arise from the demands of studying A-levels. Indeed, it is now well-established that using time-management strategies is associated with better mental health- and academic performance-related outcomes (Aeon et al., 2021). Therefore, with appropriate support in place, studying A-levels could act as a resilience-building experience, providing students with an opportunity to learn how to overcome challenges and cope with stress-inducing demands in a way that facilitates rather than frustrates their development (Seery et al., 2010). For this to happen, however, sixth form staff require adequate training and support.

Importantly, this research indicates that some students feel as though adults cannot appreciate how stressful studying A-levels can be because they are considered to be too far removed from their experiences. This perception appears to orientate students away from adults and towards their peers for emotional support and validation of their feelings. It is imperative, therefore, to ensure that students feel listened to rather than ignored or belittled by adults, because opportunities for support or signposting are otherwise diminished. Furthermore, this finding underscores the importance of inviting students to actively contribute towards developing policies and practices that are aimed at supporting their mental health (e.g. Atkinson et al., 2019). Opt-in opportunities for exercise, relaxation or mindfulness could help A-level students to prevent or alleviate symptoms of stress, especially if they are built into their routines rather than turned to as a last resort. As prior research has suggested that male students are more likely to exercise and less likely to seek social support in an effort to cope (e.g. Wilhsson et al., 2017), further research on gender-based differences in how students cope with academic demands, and what type of support they consider preferable, could shed valuable light on how best to support A-level students.

From a systemic perspective, it seems important to ensure that future generations do not feel as though their prospects depend entirely on their academic performance. This could be achieved by reducing social and economic inequalities (Högberg, 2021), as well as by ensuring that high-quality vocational education and apprenticeships are both available and perceived to be worthwhile. Critical reflection on the implications that an increasingly competitive, performance-based education system that is predicted on terminal, 'all or nothing' examinations has for adolescent development is also needed.

Indeed, several participants' experiences illustrate the distress that can result from struggling to cope with intense academic pressure. If unaddressed, such distress could have harmful implications for students' learning and mental health, especially if it amplifies, precipitates or contribute towards the development of potentially self-sustaining symptoms of mental ill-health, such as persistent worrying, difficulty sleeping, fatigue and feelings of hopelessness or shame.

Reflections on participant recruitment

This research relied entirely on teachers facilitating participant recruitment. In future research, tailored emails, in-person presentations and bespoke posters could be used by researchers to recruit a greater diversity of participants, and to appeal to male students who may otherwise feel more self-conscious or less inclined to participate in mental health-related research. Additionally, researchers should consider gathering more demographic information from participants, about their ethnicity and parentaleducation, for example, because this would allow future analyses to be better situated, contextualised and enriched.

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