Students' experiences of studying A-levels prior to, and during, the Covid-19 pandemic: implications for enhancing context-specific support

Joshua Stubbs

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University of York

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Abstract

In light of widespread concerns about adolescent mental health in England, a need for a long-term

framework aimed at providing context-specific support to students during each stage of education

has been identified. It has been suggested that A-level students (typically aged 16-19-years-old), in

particular, may be experiencing a high degree of stress. Stress is normal and can be beneficial, but

when it is prolonged or particularly intense, it can aggravate or contribute towards the development

of mental ill-health. Given that existing literature on students' experiences of studying A-levels is

scarce and occasionally conflicting, this thesis aimed to generate a better understanding of A-level

students' experiences and how they were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Using data collected

via task-based, semi-structured interviews and surveys prior to and during the pandemic, this thesis

explores A-level students' experiences of post-16 education, mental health and coping strategies.

The findings indicate that, although studying A-levels can be an enriching experience, it is also

uniquely challenging and can be both stressful and overwhelming. Moreover, the findings indicate

that the Covid-19 pandemic detrimentally affected some A-level students' mental health and

capacity to learn. Further research aimed at understanding what could be done to help students to

minimise or manage experiences of stress that arise from the demands of studying A-levels is

needed, as is research aimed at determining what proportion and type of students find studying A-

levels particularly challenging.

Graphical abstract

Author's Declaration: I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Dusana Dorjee, Dr Lucy Foulkes, Dr Poppy Nash and everyone else who has provided me with patience, support and thoughtful feedback on this thesis. I would also like to thank the teachers who helped me to recruit participants, as well as the A-level students who took part in this research; without your help, this research would not have been possible.

Dedications

I wish to dedicate this thesis to my grandmother, Bethany, who turned 100-years-old on the day on which this thesis was first submitted for examination. I also wish to dedicate this thesis to Ally, who was my girlfriend when this research began and my wife when it finished. May you stay forever young.

Common abbreviations

A-levels	General Certificate of Education Advanced Levels
AS-levels	General Certificate of Education Advanced Subsidiary Levels
BERA	British Educational Research Association
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
CADS	Coping with Academic Demands Scale
DASS-21	Shortened Version of the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scales
DfE	Department for Education
DHSC	Department of Health and Social Care
EPQ	Extended Project Qualification
GAD-7	Generalised Anxiety Disorder Assessment
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
ONS	Office for National Statistics
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
Oqual	Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation
WHO	World Health Organisation

Personal reflection

Prior to beginning, I would like to share few words about why I was drawn to researching this topic. I had special educational needs in primary school, but in secondary school performed relatively well and attained the coveted Cs in most subjects, as well as a B in English Literature. Once I started studying A-levels in sixth form, however, I began to struggle; I do not recall finding the initial transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels challenging, but I do remember feeling bewildered and confused when, at 16-years-old, I began receiving dissatisfactory grades and feeling as though my work had silently piled up and become unmanageable. During this period, I began to feel increasingly worried my performance and insecure in the presence of my peers, who appeared to me to be managing the demands of studying A-levels without difficulty. These feelings were exacerbated when one of my teachers tore an essay that I had written to several pieces, strip by strip, before instructing me to walk to the front of the class to pick up the pieces and put them in the bin. In an attempt to cope with the feelings of shame that I associated with not performing well, especially in comparison to my friends, I began pretending not to care about my performance in an effort to protect my sense of self-worth: 'not bothered' became a common refrain. I now recognise that this was a form of avoidance or withdrawal coping. I also began to feel increasingly hopeless about the future, a problem for which I sought medical help and will not elaborate upon here. In Year 13, I applied to train to become a mental health nurse, in part because – at the time – only GCSE qualifications were required to do so. I qualified at the age of 20-years-old and worked on both an adult psychiatric intensive care unit and a child and adolescent mental health

ward, where I was struck by how often it seemed to me that young people worried intensely about their academic performance, be it at school, sixth form or university. Later, after deciding that I would like to teach, I studied Education at the University of York from September 2014, where I met Dr Poppy Nash on my first day. During my second year as an undergraduate, I expressed agreement with the idea that A-level students need greater or better tailored support during a module led by Poppy, who kindly invited me to contribute, with a friend of mine, to a study that she and Dr Amanda Naylor were conducting about A-level students' experience of sixth form. During the summer break, I travelled for a total of seven hours from my home in Birmingham to York and back in a day to learn more about the project: it was an honour to have been invited by a Senior Lecturer to contribute towards work that seemed so meaningful and important. On the train, I clearly remember feeling thrilled and excited – I was travelling with a sense of purpose. The preliminary findings from this research were presented at the British Educational Research Association's annual Conference in Leeds in September 2016, where it was reported that in a survey of 514 students, three quarters of the participants used predominantly negative terms to describe their experience of sixth form. I was reminded of this study in December 2017 when a relative of mine began to find the demands of A-levels particularly stressful; something which they, like me, had not experienced when studying GCSEs. In light of this, I contacted Poppy to ask whether she would be happy to supervise me conducting a PhD aimed at building explicitly her on and Amanda's work. She and Dr Lucy Foulkes kindly agreed to do so and thus, in 2018 – a world ago – I began attempting to develop a better understanding of how A-level students experience post-16 education and what implications this may have for their mental health.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

In a recent editorial for the *British Medical Journal*, subtitled 'We need to understand causes to inform prevention', it was argued that there is an 'urgent' need for research aimed at better understanding the causes of increasing adolescent mental health difficulties, especially among older teenage girls (Gunnell et al., 2018). It was suggested that such research should go beyond identifying 'well-recognised risk factors', such as abuse, poverty and trauma, in an attempt to understand problems that have arisen specifically in recent decades. Furthermore, although the UK Government had committed to investing an additional £1.4 billion in supporting child and adolescent mental health from 2015-16 to 2019-20 (Department of Health and Social Care [DHSC] & Department for Education [DfE], 2018), it was posited that what is needed to prevent the onset of adolescent mental ill-health is a 'long-term framework' aimed at supporting adolescents "throughout life's stages and transitions" (Gunnell et al., 2018, p. 1). To establish such a framework, it was suggested that a better understanding of what can be done to provide context-specific support to different sub-groups of adolescents is required.

Amid research that has suggested that General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (A-level) students in post-16 education, in particular, may be experiencing an especially high degree of stress – to the extent that it may be harming their mental health – (Finch et al., 2010; Nash et al., 2021), the aim of this thesis will be to develop a better understanding of A-level students' experiences of post-16 education and what could be done to offer tailored support to this group of adolescents. In other words, the purpose of this research is to contribute towards our

understanding of what could be done to provide A-level students with context-specific support during post-16 education. Before discussing prior research that has explored A-level students' experiences of post-16 education in Chapter 2, however, I will first argue that students' experiences of education, stress and coping are topics that are both timely and worthy of investigation.

1.1 Participation in post-16 education

In England, the proportion of 16-17-year-olds in full-time, post-16 education – which is sometimes referred to as 'post-secondary' education – increased from 65% to 85% between 2000 and 2020 (DfE, 2021a). This trend has been consolidated by the fact that in 2015 it became obligatory for adolescents in England to remain in at least part-time education or training until the age of 18-years-old (Education and Skills Act 2008). Furthermore, the tendency for adolescents in to remain in education for longer has been enabled and legitimised by politicians and educational policymakers in the belief that it will lead to greater economic productivity and social mobility (Ball, 2021; James Relly, 2021).

Figure 1: 16-17-year-olds in education, training and employment in England from 1995 and 2020.
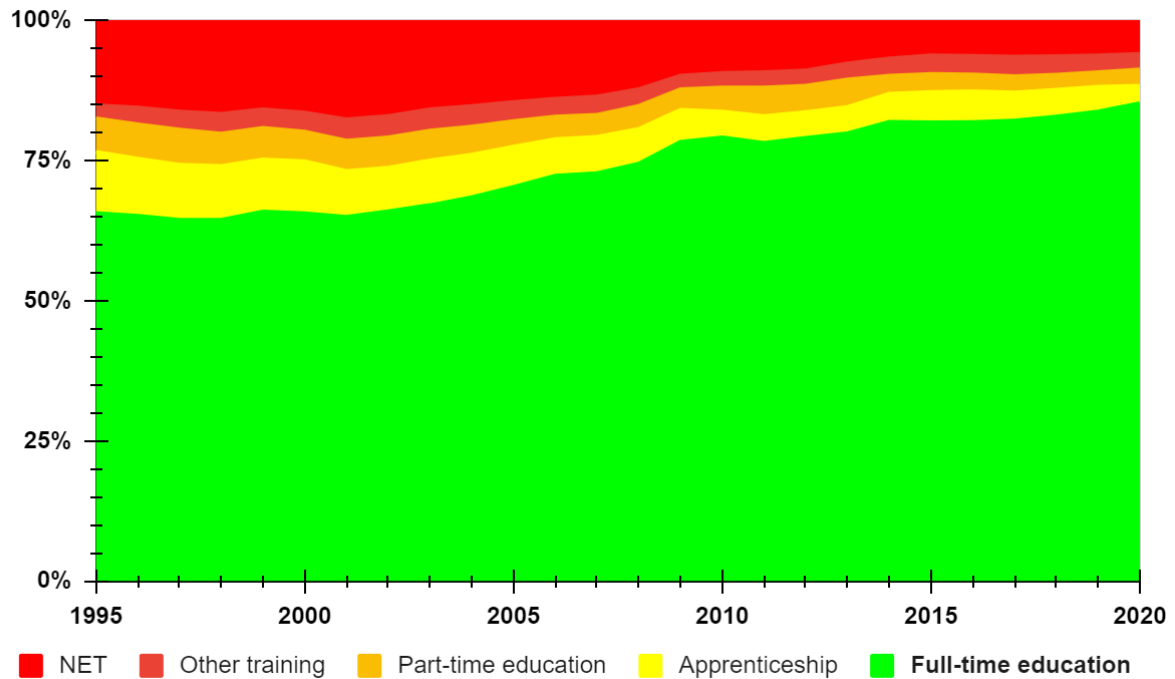
Source: DfE (2021a)

Notes: NET = Not in education or training. This data does not include 16-year-olds who are in their final year of secondary school (Year 11).

In 2020, approximately half (52%) of 16-17-years-olds in England entered a school-[1] (44%) or college (8%) sixth form for post-16 education (DfE, 2021a). Of the 16-17-years-olds in full-time education in 2020, approximately half (47%) studied A-levels (DfE, 2021a). This means that two fifths (40%) of 16-17-years-olds study A-levels, making A-level students a sizeable sub-group of adolescents. Given that A-level qualifications have been thought of as the 'gold standard' for

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[1] 38% of 16-17-year-olds studied in state-funded school sixth forms; 6% studied in independent school sixth forms (DfE, 2021a).

accessing higher education in England since their inception in inception in 1951 (Stoten, 2014), it

is unlikely that the proportion of 16-17-year-olds studying A-levels is going to decline (James Relly,

2021). Furthermore, given that the number of 16-year-olds in the UK is projected to increase

between 2020 and 2030 (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2022), the number of A-level

students is likely to remain stable or increase over the next decade even if there is a decline in the

proportion of 16-year-olds who chose to study A-levels.

Importantly, despite the proportion of 16-17-year-olds studying A-Levels more than

doubling from one in six (18%) to two in five (40%) between 1970 and 2020 (Pring et al., 2009;

DfE, 2021a), A-level students' experiences of post-16 education, and the implications that these

may have for their mental health, have rarely been researched (Hagell et al., 2012). It will, therefore,

be the aim of thesis to investigate A-level students' experience of post-16 education in greater

depth, with a particular focus on their experiences of academic pressure and coping.

Figure 2: Estimated and projected number of 16-year-olds in the UK population from 2020 to 2030.
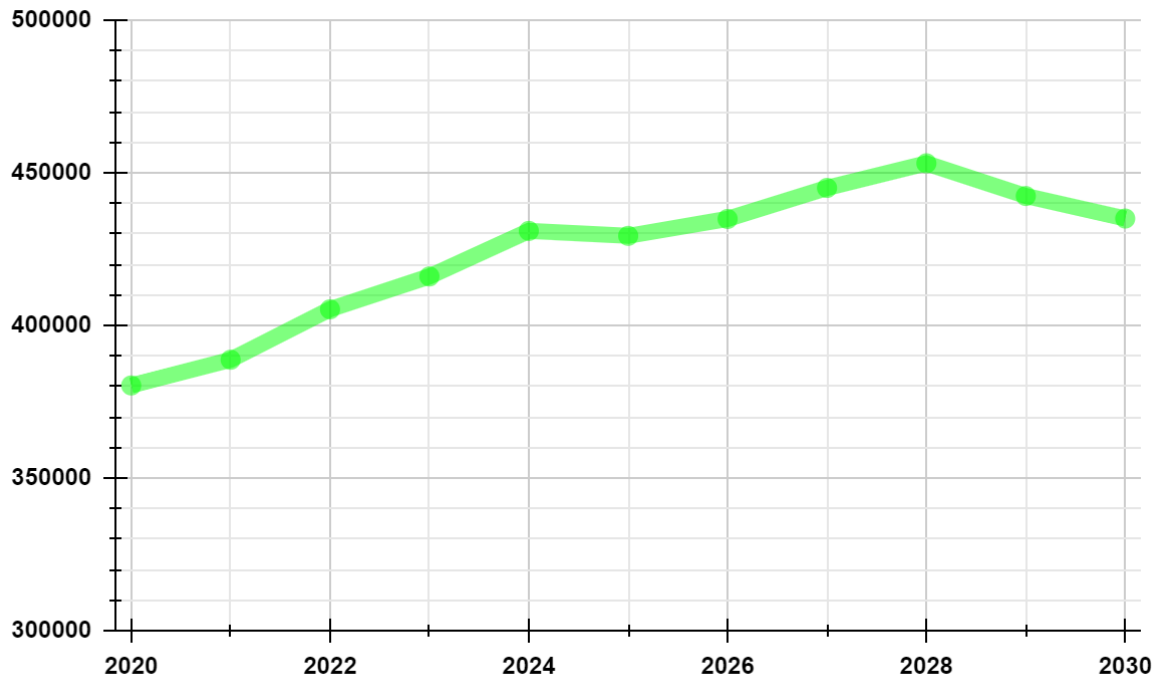
Source: ONS (2022)

1.2 A-levels: an overview

Typically, A-level students study three subjects during post-16 education (Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation [Ofqual], 2019). This is fewer than during secondary school, when students usually study nine or ten General Certificate of Secondary Educations (GCSEs) subjects in their final two years of secondary school (Years 10 and 11). It is also important to note that A-levels students choose their subjects, whereas GCSE students are obliged to study a handful of core subjects. A-level students also experience less face-to-face teaching – or 'lesson time' – and have free periods, which are sometimes referred to as 'study periods'. This means that A-level students are expected to accept greater responsibility for managing their time, remaining organised

and engaging in independent, self-directed learning. A-level curricula and assessment is also more advanced than GCSE curricula. However, it is unclear how much more difficult students find studying A-levels in comparison to GCSEs, as well as whether the transition from Year 11 to Year 12 should be thought of as a so-called 'proper transition' – like the transition from primary to secondary school – or a mere 'continuation of school', especially for those who remain in the same school. I encountered both of these perspectives among academics and teachers during the initial stages of planning this research and was conscious that, without greater research on students' experiences of studying A-levels, this debate will continue to depend on anecdotal evidence. Developing a better understanding of how students experience the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels could, therefore, help us to understand whether it is experienced as particularly challenging, and if so, for whom and why. It will also help us to understand whether A-level students' experiences of post-16 education are, in itself, worthy of further investigation.

1.3 A-levels: linear assessments

Between 1999 and 2015, A-level students' attainment was based on a combination of modular end-of-year examinations in Years 12 and 13. Furthermore, during this period, A-level students were able to retake examinations that they had taken in Year 12 if they were dissatisfied with their performance. Since 2015, however, A-level assessments have become linear, meaning that – most of the time – A-level students' attainment is based entirely on their performance in end-of-year examinations at the end of Year 13. It is possible that this has increased the amount of pressure that students experience during the approach to these examinations.

Given that only a handful of studies have focused on A-level students' experiences of post-16 education since the transition to linear assessments (Brown, 2021; Powell, 2017; Nash et al., 2021), it is unclear what effect it has had. There are, however, anecdotal reports that reforms to the GCSE and A-level curriculums have amplified students' experiences of academic pressure and examination-related stress since 2015 (Putwain, 2020). Additionally, there is tentative evidence to support this idea. Calls to the support line Childline regarding examination results increased by 51% between 2014-5 and 2018-9, for example (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children [NSPCC], 2019a); it has also been reported that some teachers have raised concerns about the harmful impacts that linear assessments are having on the mental health of students (Baird et al., 2019). Furthermore, the proportion of 15-year-olds in England who reported that they feel 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 (HBSC) repeated cross-sectional studies, while the proportion who reported that they like school 'a lot' decreased from 18% to 10% during this time period[2] (Brookes et al., 2015, 2020). There was also a decline in how happy 11-15-year-old students in England reported feeling with both school and their schoolwork between 2014-5 and 2017-8 (Children's Society, 2020). While it is not possible to determine

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[2] In the 2014 iteration of the HBSC study, 19% of 816 15-year-old boys and 41% of 15-year-old 792 girls reported that they feel pressured by their schoolwork 'a lot' (Brooks et al., 2015); in the 2018 iteration, 30% of 431 15-year-old boys and 50% of 427 15-year-old girls reported this (Brooks et al., 2020). Furthermore, in the 2014 iteration of the HBSC study, 21% of 816 15-year-old boys and 15% of 15-year-old 792 girls reported that they like school 'a lot' (Brooks et al., 2015); in the 2018 iteration, 12% of 431 15-year-old boys and 9% of 15-year-old 427 girls reported this (Brooks et al., 2020).

whether these trends would have continued in the absence of the disruption and discomfort caused by the Covid-19 pandemic at this point in time, they do suggest that the reforms to educational curricula and assessment in England may have led to an increase in the proportion of students experiencing a high degree of academic pressure or stress since 2015. Nevertheless, caution is needed when interpreting these trends because they are not based solely on the experiences of A-level students, but secondary school students in general. However, in an online poll of 300 teachers by the National Union of Teachers (NEU) in 2019, 55% reported that they thought that changes to A-level curricula and assessments had caused a worsening of student mental health (NEU, 2019).

In contrast to the idea that the introduction of linear assessments has led to an increase in the amount of academic pressure that A-level students experience, I encountered several teachers during the initial stages of this research who suggested that because A-level students 'only' sit mock examinations in Year 12, they 'don't have much to worry about' and now experience less stress as a result. Developing a better understanding of A-level students' contemporary experiences will, therefore, be the focus of this research. Before turning to prior research on A-level students' experiences of post-16 education – and specifying the research questions that this thesis will address – in Chapter 2, however, I will briefly discuss adolescent mental health, stress and coping.

1.4 Mental health

For the purpose of this thesis, mental health will be defined as:

a state of well-being in which [people can realise their] potential, can cope

with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and

[are able to contribute to their] community (World Health Organisation

[WHO], 2018, p. 7)

This definition priorities a dimensional conceptualisation of mental health in which it is assumed

that symptoms of mental ill-health exist on a continuum or spectrum, and only become a problem

when they so become disabling, distressing or disruptive that they prevent people from functioning

or flourishing.

1.5 Adolescence

Put simply, adolescence is a developmental period of life that begins with the onset of puberty and

ends with the adoption of adult social roles and independent behaviour (Coleman, 2012). In this

sense, adolescence can be thought to begin with physiological change and end with social and

behavioural change. It has long been suggested that adolescence spans the ages of 10-19-years-old

(WHO, 2021), although with puberty beginning earlier and many major social milestones, such as

completing education, securing employment and getting married, happening later in most middle-

and high-income countries, it has been argued that adolescence typically is changing in shape and

length – and should be considered to last until 24-years-old (Sawyer et al., 2018). Regardless of

which timeframe is chosen, however, 16-19-year-old A-level students – who are the focus of this

thesis – can be thought of as adolescents. In being a period of life that is charactered by

physiological, social and behavioural change, adolescence presents a plethora of challenges and

opportunities. Thus, it is critical to listen to, and support, adolescents, because their experiences have major implications for their development and health, both during adolescence and later life (Sawyer et al., 2012). Furthermore, it is important to continue updating our understanding of how adolescence is experienced because it will differ, to some extent, between generations, depending on a range of cultural, social and economic factors.

1.6 Adolescent mental health

There is strong evidence to suggest that most mental health difficulties begin during adolescence and young adulthood (Solmi et al., 2021; also see, Kessler et al., 2005; Kim-Cohen et al., 2003). For instance, in a nationally representative longitudinal study involving 980 participants in New Zealand, it was found that approximately three quarters (75% - 77%) of the participants who met the criteria for being diagnosed with a depression- or anxiety-related disorder by the age of 26-years-old had first done so by the age of 18-years-old (Kim-Cohen et al., 2003). Additionally, a recent meta-analysis of 192 nationally representative studies involving a combined total of 708,561 participants found that, worldwide, half (48%) of mental disorders begin before the age of 18-years-old; two thirds (63%) begin before the age of 25-years-old; and that the median age of onset for depression- and anxiety-related disorders is 30- and 17-years-old, respectively (Solmi et al., 2021). While caution is needed when extrapolating from these findings, because social and cultural factors influence mental health-related outcomes (for example, Campbell et al., 2021), they nevertheless underscore the criticality of promoting good mental health during adolescence and periods of transition.

There is evidence to suggest that, in the UK, there has been an increase the proportion of adolescents experiencing mental ill-health in recent decades (Vizard et al., 2018; also see, Collishaw et al., 2010; Fink et al., 2015; Lessof et al., 2016; Patalay & Gage, 2019; Pitchforth et al., 2019; Sweeting et al., 2009; Wright et al., 2020). While there is debate to whether this increase represents a 'crisis' (Foulkes, 2021), it is clear that this trend is in the wrong direction. It is also clear that teenage girls are more likely to experience mental ill-health than teenage boys (Vizard et al., 2018; also see, Campbell et al., 2021; Collishaw et al., 2010; Deighton et al., 2019; Fink et al., 2015; Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2021; Sweeting et al., 2009; Wright et al., 2020). For instance, in a study that was conducted in the north of England in 2018, in which 6,328 12-16-year-olds were asked to complete the 25-item Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997), it was found that a third (32%) of the female participants exceeded the cut-off for experiencing high emotional difficulties in contrast to a tenth (11%) of their male counterparts (Wright et al., 2020). In addition, in a nationally representative survey that was conducted in England in 2017, in which information about 7,654 5-19-year-olds was gathered via interviews, it was found that a fifth (22%) of the 17-19-year-old female participants had an emotional disorder – related to depression or anxiety, for example – in contrast to a tenth (8%) the male participants of the same age (Vizard et al., 2018).

Figure 3: Percentage of 5-19-year-olds with an emotional disorder in England in 2017 by age and gender.
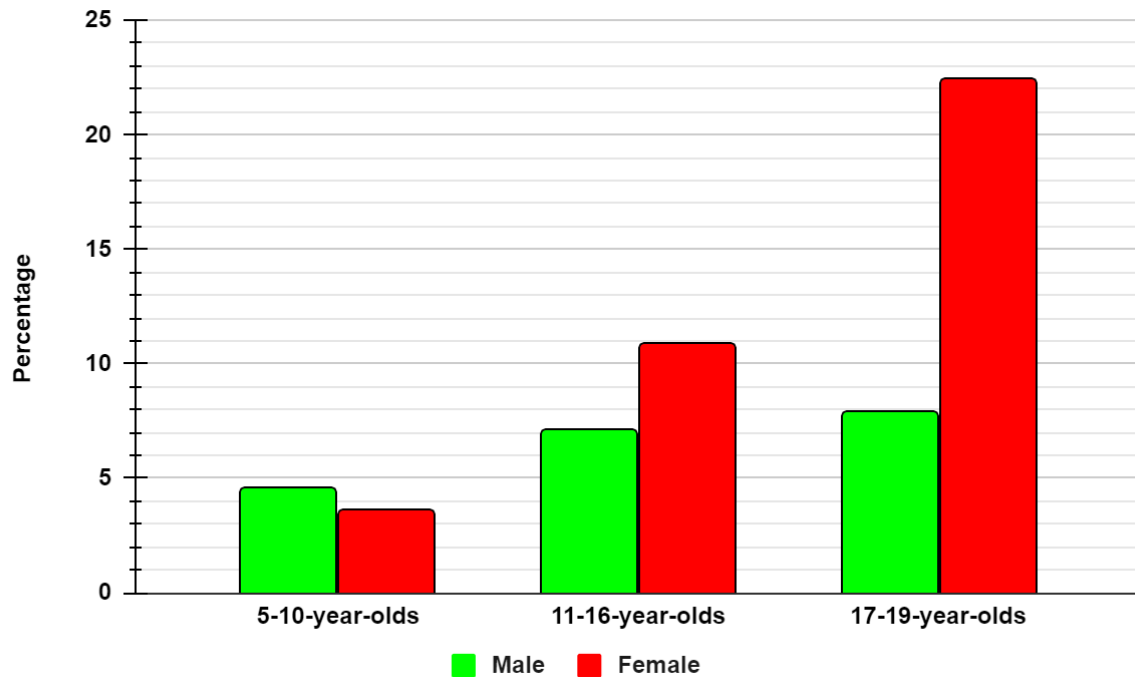
Source: Vizard et al., (2018)

Notes: 5-10-year-olds *n* = 3,597; 11-16-year-olds *n* = 3,121; 17-19-year-olds *n* = 936. Caution is need when comparing the age groups because of the different data collection methods that were used (Vizard et al., 2018).

Consistent with the finding that teenage girls are more likely to experience mental ill-health than boys, in a nationally representative survey that was conducted in the UK in 2018-19, in which 10,103 17-year-old adolescents were asked to complete the six-item K6 (Kessler et al., 2010), it was found that a fifth (22%) of the female participants exceeded the cut-off for experiencing high psychological distress in contrast to a tenth (10%) of their male counterparts (Patalay & Fitzsimon, 2021). The researchers also found that a quarter (28%) of the female participants had self-harmed – by burning, pinching or stabling themselves, for example – and that a tenth (11%) had attempted to commit suicide. In comparison, a fifth (20%) and a twentieth (4%) of male participants had self-

harm or attempted to commit suicide, respectively. The researchers argue that these findings underscore the 'urgent' need for greater mental health-related support this generation, many of whom will study A-levels (DfE, 2021a).

Interestingly, the increase the proportion of adolescents experiencing mental ill-health has been accompanied by a decrease in the proportion engaging in ant-social or risky health-related behaviours, such as drinking alcohol or smoking cannabis (Patalay & Gage, 2019; Hagell, 2021). This begs the question of what is causing an increase in the proportion of adolescents experiencing mental ill-health, because these behaviours have previously been thought of as key contributors towards its onset or intensification. It has been argued that a potential, partial explanation for the increase in the proportion of adolescents experiencing mental ill-health could be that, because students in rich, increasingly knowledge-based economics, are becoming more conscious of how dependent their occupational prospects are on their educational performance, this causes them to experience greater academic pressure and, as a result, stress-induced symptoms of mental ill-health (West & Sweeting, 2003). There is evidence to support this argument (Högberg, 2021; Sweeting et al., 2010), suggesting that offering greater or better tailored support to students during later stages of education, aimed at helping them to minimise or manage experiences of stress that arise from encountering academic pressure, could aid their mental health. Furthermore, it has been suggested that female students, in particular, may find such support especially beneficial because they are more vulnerable to experiencing stress, academic pressure and mental ill-health than their male counterparts (Högberg et al., 2020; also see, Anniko et al., 2019; Cosma et al., 2020). It has been

suggested that girls may be more vulnerable to experiencing education-related stress because of gender-based societal expectations of them to perform well academically (Wilhsson et al., 2017). It has also been suggested that girls may be more vulnerable to experiencing education-related stress because of how acutely conscious they are of the potential for their educational qualifications to act as an important buffer against gender inequalities in the labour market, which make performing well academically the more important for their occupational prospects (Högberg et al., 2020). Regardless of what explanation is accepted, it seems that female students may benefit from greater support, especially during later stages of education (Anniko et al., 2019; also see, Cosma et al., 2020; Sweeting et al., 2010).

Supporting the suggestion that female students, in particular, may benefit from greater support during later stages of education, in a repeated cross-sectional study involving a random sample of 1,128 adolescents and young adults aged 16-24-years-old in England, it was found that the proportion of female students experiencing a common mental disorder – related to depression or anxiety, for example – increased from a fifth (18%) in 2007 to two thirds (36%) in 2014, but that this was not the case for their non-student or male counterparts (McManus & Gunnel, 2020). Caution is needed when interpreting this finding because just 103 and 122 students took part in this research in 2007 and 2014, respectively. Furthermore, the researchers did not distinguish between students according to what stage of education they were in, meaning that it is not possible to discern between those in post-16 versus higher education. Understanding when mental health problems are first experienced is important, however, so that support can be directed towards

those who need it most and preventive interventions can be targeted efficaciously. Indeed, in a cross-national survey of 4,880 18-22-year-old students, it was found that four fifths (80%) of those who had experienced a mental disorder during higher education had first begun doing so prior to entering it (Auerbach et al., 2016). This highlights the importance of promoting good mental health among students before they enter, as well as during, higher education. Prior to discussing literature on students' experiences of education-related stress in greater depth, I will briefly discuss student mental health in higher education and explain why it is that providing better support to A-level students before they enter higher education may benefit their long-term mental health.

1.6 Student mental health in higher education

Even before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, there was widespread concern about the mental health of students in higher education (for example, Ansari et al., 2011; Macaskill, 2012; Stewart-Brown et al., 2000), while the proportion of UK-domiciled students who have disclosed that they are experiencing a mental health problem increased from 1% to 4% between 2010-11 and 2018-19 in England (Hubble & Bolton, 2020). Furthermore, in a survey of 37,654 primarily 18-22-year-old students in higher education in 2018, it was found that a tenth of the self-selecting participants had been diagnosed with depression- (8%) or anxiety-related (10%) disorder; two fifths (43%) often felt anxious or worried; half (50%) had thought about self-harming; and that, although a third (34%) of the participants reported that they had experienced a psychological difficulties for which they felt that they needed professional help, only a fifth (21%) had sought mental health-related support (Pereira et al., 2019). Consistent with prior research (for example, Vizard et al.,

2018), female participants were significantly more likely than their male counterparts to report that they experienced mental ill-health. It is important to note, however, that female students are significantly less likely to commit suicide than their male students (ONS, 2018; Rodway et al., 2016, 2020), suggesting that they may be more likely to disclose, as well as seek support for, experiences of psychological distress.

There are several reasons why students in higher education may experience mental ill-health. Students in higher education often live independently for the first time and face new social and financial pressures, for example (Duffy et al., 2019). It has also been suggested, however, that the experiences of stress that can arise from the academic demands of higher education may also contribute towards the development of mental ill-health, especially among students who struggle to engage in independent, self-directed learning (for example, Pollard et al., 2021). Supporting the suggestion that the academic demands of higher education may act as a significant source of stress for some students, during an in-depth interview-based study involving 23 undergraduates in the north of England, the participants reported that they often experienced anxieties about their academic performance (Macaskill, 2018). Furthermore, in a survey of 1,650 primarily 18-21-year-old students in further and higher education that was conducted by National Union of Students in 2013, two thirds (65%) of the participants reported that managing their workload caused them to experience at least some symptoms of distress (McGuire et al., 2013). Moreover, in a survey of 627 18-24-year-old students in higher education in 2016, four fifths (77%) of the participants cited academic demands among their main sources of stress; this was also the most widely cited source

of stress, ahead of concerns about their labour market prospects, family and friends, which were cited by two fifths (41%), a third (35%) and a quarter (27%) of the participants, respectively (YouGov, 2016). It is also notable that one third (33%) of the participants reported that they sometimes experience stress to such an extent that it prevents them from being able to function normally and that a fifth (20%) considered fear to be a very prevalent aspect of their life. However, it is not possible to determine what these participants, in particular, cited as their most frequent or intense sources of stress because of how the data was collected and is presented. Nevertheless, these findings suggest that experiencing academic pressure during higher education may aggravate or contribute towards the development of mental ill-health.

1.7 'Prevention is better than cure'

Evidence that academic demands are a common source of stress for students in higher education indicates that, in addition to there being a need for greater or more innovate mental health-related support for students during higher education, there is also a need to provide better tailored support to students during earlier stages of education as well. This could help to ensure that the academic demands that are made of students during higher education remain commensurate with their ability to cope. This is particularly important given that there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that many students find the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels more difficult than the transition from studying A-levels to higher education (for example, BBC, 2021). In addition, in a longitudinal study involving 4,832 students in England in 2007-8, it was found that the participants' scores for psychological distress were significantly higher among the 16-17-year-olds who would later enter

higher education in comparison to their counterparts (Lewis et al., 2021). The researchers suggest that this could be because 16-17-year-olds who aspire to enter higher education may experience a greater amount of academic pressure. In light of this, the researchers argue that there is a need to provide students with additional support at the earlier stages of education in an effort to prevent the onset or intensification of mental ill-health. Supporting this argument, it has long been recognised that students who are unprepared for, and struggle to negotiate, the transition from post-16 to higher education are at a greater risk of experiencing stress than their counterparts (Robotham & Julian, 2006).

In light of the above, it is possible that if A-level students – many of whom enter higher education – received better tailored, context-specific support, especially in relation to coping with academic demands, their risk of experiencing a notable amount of stress during post-16 or higher education could be attenuated. This, in turn, could help to reduce their risk of experiencing symptoms of mental ill-health (Nash et al., 2021). If such support is to be provided, however, a better understanding of how A-level students' experience post-16 education, and what implication this might have for their development, is needed.

1.8 Stress

Put simply, stress can be defined as a "relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). Importantly, what determines whether a potential

source of stress is considered to be endangering to those encountering it is the extent to which it is perceived to threaten their beliefs, values or commitments (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In other words, if a potential source of stress it perceived to be a threat someone's belief that they are safe, on the one hand, or their commitment to goals or values that are important to them, on the other hand, then it will be cause them to feel endangered. However, people's perception of how able they are to cope with the source(s) of stress confronting them moderates how stress-inducing they find them. Thus, being incrementally exposed to a limited amount of stress, and benefiting from the opportunity to learn how to cope with it successfully, can help children and adolescents to become more resilient; that is, able to preserve in the face of, and bounce back from, adversity (Rutter, 1985; also see, Seery et al., 2010). However, while experiencing a manageable, time-limited amount of stress can be beneficial, experiencing a prolonged or intense amount of stress can aggravate or contribute towards the development of ill-health (Compas et al., 1993; also see, Blackburn et al., 2021; Thapar et al., 2012). Indeed, organisations such as the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK and both the American Psychological Association (APA) and the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) in the USA state that stress can lead to, or exacerbate, symptoms of depression and anxiety (APA, 2019; NHS, 2020; NIMH, 2020). It is therefore critical to ensure that the specific sources of stress that students are exposed to, and when, are both understood and commensurate with their ability to cope. Developing a better understanding of what causes A-level students to experience stress, and what could be done to help them cope with it, may, therefore, benefit both their short- and long-term mental health.

1.9 Coping

In short, 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). Coping strategies can be broadly divided between problem- and emotion-focused strategies, whereby the former relates to directly addressing sources of stress and the latter relates to lessening the emotional response that arises from experiencing stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In education, these are sometimes referred to as direct-action and palliative techniques, respectively (Kyriacou, 2003).

In general, problem-focused coping strategies are considered to be preferable to emotion-focused strategies techniques because, if they are successful, they can minimise or eliminate the problem at hand (Compas et al., 2001). In a study involving 354 13-15-year-old students in the USA, for example, it was found that the participants who used problem-focused coping strategies more often experienced higher life satisfaction, better academic performance and more positive feelings about school (MacCann et al., 2012), while in a study involving 927 15-18-year-old students in China, it was found that the participants who used of problem-focused coping strategies more often experienced better mental health-related outcomes (Zhang et al., 2011). It is also well-established that proactively using time management strategies is associated with better mental health and performance-related outcomes (Aeon et al., 2021). In contrast, while adopting time-limited and purposeful emotion-focused coping strategies, such as exercising or relaxing, may attenuate the emotional response that arises from experiencing stress, exclusively or primarily using

these coping strategies can lead to the experience of stress being prolonged or intensified because the stressor(s) continue to exist (Kyriacou, 2003). Furthermore, it is well-established that children and adolescents who attempt to cope by avoiding or withdrawing from sources of stress tend experience poorer mental health-related outcomes (Sieffge-Krenke & Klessinger, 2000; also see Cicognani, 2011; Eppelmann et al., 2016).

Currently, it is unclear how students cope with experiences of stress that arise from studying A-levels and what implications these have for their mental health. Indeed, adolescent coping is an under-researched topic in the UK (Stapley et al., 2020). Furthermore, given that coping strategies rarely fit discreetly into broad categories because they are complex, multi-dimensional and context-dependent (Compas et al., 2001), continuing to update our understanding of how adolescents cope with demands that are specific to particular situations or stages of education is critical (Stapley et al., 2020; Suldo et al., 2008, 2015). Thus, developing a better insight into how students cope with the demands of studying A-levels, and what implications this has for their mental health, will help to paint a clearer picture of how A-level students currently experience post-16 education and what could be done to better support them. Indeed, such an insight could provide in an insight into what coping strategies ought to be encouraged and discouraged, as well as what coping strategies pastoral care teams or senior mental health leads ought to be alert to when attempting to identify students who may be experiencing mental ill-health or a high degree of stress.

1.10 Academic pressure: a 'serious potential risk'

Education-related stress is both widely experienced by students and can be motivating (Kyriacou, 2003), but for some students, it can be overwhelming and detrimental to their health and performance (Denscombe, 2000; also see, Chamberlain et al., 2011; Finch et al., 2010). Concerningly, 'Problems with school or education' was the eighth most common reason for contacting the support line Childline in 2018-19 (NSPCC, 2019b). For 16-18-year-olds, it was seventh most common reason for contacting them, ahead of concerns about friendships, body image and bullying. This highlights that, for some students, education-related stress can be particularly distressing.

Pointing towards the potential for academic pressure to aggravate or contribute towards the development of mental ill-health, in a study conducted in England, it was found that over a sixteen-month period between January 2014 and April 2015, approximately half (51%) of the 69 students aged 11-19-years-old who had committed suicide had been recorded as experiencing academic pressure at some point in their life (Rodway et al., 2016). It was also found that approximately two fifths (36%) had been recorded as experiencing academic pressure specifically during the three months before their death. Examples of academic pressure included: experiencing difficulties with academic work; facing current or impending examinations or examination results; and a "(perceived) failure to meet own, teacher, or parental expectations" (Rodway et al., 2016, p. 754). Additionally, of those who had been facing impending examinations or examination results, approximately half (55%) had been recorded as experiencing examination-related stress at the time

of their death; a fifth (20%) had committed suicide on the day of an examination or the following day.

The researchers point out that a complicated pattern of adversities occurred before the students committed suicide. Other adversities included, for example, being abused or bullied, experiencing a bereavement and having a long-standing physical health problem, such as acne and asthma. While none of the adversities – including academic pressure – were considered to have caused the students to have committed suicide, they were all considered by coroners or in official investigations to have been relevant to their deaths. Consequently, the findings highlight the circumstances that commonly precede adolescent suicide, as well as the 'serious potential risk' that experiencing academic pressure can pose to adolescent mental health when it is experienced alongside – or after – other adversities (Rodway et al., 2016, p. 758). In turn, while suicide is rare, these findings highlight the importance of viewing academic pressure as a potential risk factor in the development of mental ill-health. Indeed, if experiencing academic pressure can contribute towards the likelihood of students committing suicide, it must also be able to aggravate or contribute towards the development of mental health difficulties in general. Thus, developing a better understanding of how to provide context-specific support to A-level students could feed into a broader attempt to create a long-term framework that is aimed at supporting adolescent development and preventing the onset of mental ill-health.

1.11 Education: a widespread source of stress

The UK Government has identified schools as being ideally positioned to identify and support students experiencing mental ill-health (DoH & DfE, 2017; DHSC & DfE, 2018); has recently published guidance on how to promote good mental health in schools and colleges (Public Health England & DfE, 2021); and has invested in an additional £9.5 million in training senior mental health leads, with a view to offering such training to all schools by 2025 (DfE, 2021b). While this is welcome, it has also been suggested that the emphasis that the UK Government places on students' performance in examinations may itself be harming adolescent mental health (Hutchings, 2015; also see, Gunnell et al., 2018; Rodway et al., 2020).

Studies conducted in the UK have long found that adolescents tend to cite concerns about their schoolwork or examinations among their main sources of concern (Gallagher & Millar, 1998; also see, Cairns & Lloyd, 2005; Denscombe, 2000). In a cross-sectional study conducted in the mid-nineteen-nineties in Northern Ireland, for example, when 3,812 13-18-year-old adolescents were asked to complete the 138-item Things I Worry About Scale (Millar et al., 1993), it was found that 'Academic schoolwork' was rated highest by both male and female participants across the entire age range (Gallagher & Millar, 1998). It is notable that the study also found that female participants worried significantly more than their male counterparts about 'Academic schoolwork', as well as 'Choosing a job / college course', 'Obtaining a job / course' and 'Starting a job / course'. This is consistent with research that indicates that girls are generally more prone than boys to

worrying about their schoolwork and long-term educational and occupational prospects (West & Sweeting, 2003; also see, Denscombe, 2000; Frydenberg & Lewis, 1996).

In another cross-sectional study conducted in Northern Ireland approximately a decade later, when 824 16-year-olds were asked the open-ended question: 'What makes you stressed?', 'School work and examinations' was the most frequently referred to first-named stressor and was cited as by most (69%) of the participants (Cairns & Lloyd, 2005). Furthermore, when the participants were asked to rate on a five-point scale from 'Never' to 'Very often' how often they felt pressured by their schoolwork, three quarters (75%) of the participants reported that they feel pressured by their schoolwork at least 'Sometimes'; approximately a quarter (26%) reported that they feel pressured by their schoolwork 'Often' (21%) or 'Very often' (5%). Female participants studying at academically selective grammar schools were also notably more likely than male participants, as well as their female counterparts studying at non-selective comprehensive schools, to report that they felt pressured by their schoolwork 'Often' or 'Very often'. Importantly, the researchers also found that both male and female participants who reported that they felt pressured by their schoolwork 'Often' or 'Very often' had higher scores for psychological distress, although no results are presented to depict the strength or significance of the difference(s) between their scores. Nevertheless, these findings support the suggestion that students who feel pressured by their schoolwork are more likely to experience mental ill-health.

The tendency for adolescents to cite concerns about their academic performance among their main sources of stress has also been found in studies conducted outside the UK (Anniko et

al., 2019; also see, Byrne et al., 2007; de Anda et al., 2000; Ertanir et al., 2021; Hui, 2000; Lin & Yusoff, 2013; Sotari & Watson, 2019). In a cross-national study conducted in Greece, Germany and Switzerland, for example, when 1,071 12-15-year-olds were asked to indicate how stressful a range of potential stressors had been for them over the previous six months on the 27-item Shortened Version of the Adolescent Stress Questionnaire (ASQ-S; Anniko et al., 2018), 'Stress of school performance' obtained the highest mean score for Greek and German participants, and the second highest mean score for Swiss participants (behind 'Stress of future uncertainty'; Ertanir et al., 2021). Indeed, 'Stress of school pressure' was considered to be more stressful than social pressures such as 'Stress of home life', 'Stress of peer pressure' and 'Stress of romantic relationships'. It is also worth noting that, in a study conducted in New Zealand involving 1,601 13-19-year-old adolescents, 'Stress of school performance', 'Stress of future uncertainty' and 'Stress of school-life conflict' obtained the highest mean scores (Sotari & Watson, 2019). Furthermore, in a longitudinal study conducted in Sweden, when 1,137 12-years-olds were asked to complete the ASQ-S annually for three years (i.e. until the age of 15-years-old), 'Stress of school performance' obtained the highest mean score for both male and female participants at all three timepoints (Anniko et al., 2019). It was also found that experiences of stress emanating from school-related pressures increased from early- to mid-adolescence, especially for girls. Crucially, what these findings suggest is that context-specific support aimed at helping students to minimise or manage experiences of stress that arise from academic demands or pressure is particularly important for older teenagers and could help to prevent the onset of stress-induced or -related mental ill-health. These findings also indicate that helping students to improve their performance

may lead to a reduction in the amount of stress that they experience. Supporting this line of argument, research conducted with GCSE students in England has found that those who do not feel confident about their ability to perform well in examinations are the more likely to experience them as stress-inducing (Putwain, 2009, 2011).

In response to a questionnaire circulated by the Children's Commissioner for England at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, when approximately 2,000 8-17-year-olds were asked what made the most stressed, two thirds (66%) stated homework or examinations (Gombert-Waldron, 2020). Caution is needed when interpreting this finding because few details about the data collection and analysis processes are provided. Nevertheless, there has long been evidence that, in England, students find their schoolwork and examinations stress-inducing. For example, in a study conducted in England in the late nineteen-nineties, when 1,648 15-16-year-old students were asked to rate on a five-point scale from 'Not likely' to 'Very Likely' how likely they considered it to be the case that their health would be affected by twelve potential hazards, such as 'Alcohol', 'Cancer' and 'Pollution', 'Mental stress' was rated highest by girls and fourth highest by boys (Denscombe, 2000). Importantly, the participants identified their GCSE examinations as their main source of stress during subsequent focus group discussions and paired interviews – which involved sub-samples of 123 and 20 students, respectively – because of the pivotal implications that their results were perceived to have for their post-16 educational and occupational prospects, as well as their sense 'personal worth' in relation to their peers. Indeed, it was found the participants considered their GCSE examination results to provide, in the language

of the researcher, an 'objective', 'standardised' and 'universal' measure of both their intelligence and adults prospects, which they expected to be used as a public point of comparison with other students. In light of the participants' perceptions that their GCSE examinations represented "a *crucial juncture* or turning point that would significantly influence their future" (Denscombe, 2000, p. 370, emphasis added), they experienced a lot of pressure to perform well and experienced stress as a result. Accentuating their experiences of stress, the participants also referred to their teachers "cajoling and pushing, reminding and pressuring them" (Denscombe, 2000, p. 364), and therefore acting as 'stress amplifiers'. Importantly, however, the participants considered the degree of pressure from their teachers imposed on them to be 'largely unnecessary' because of how intensely they already wanted to perform well. Thus, the researcher concluded that stress is experienced by all GCSE students and that it should be taken seriously by adults rather than ignored, dismissed or trivialised.

Subsequent research has demonstrated that students can vary dramatically in how stress or anxiety-inducing they find examinations. Indeed, factors such as how confident students feel about their ability to perform to a personally satisfactory standard, as well as whether they are worried about how important others will judge their performance, influence this (Putwain, 2009, 2011; also see Banks & Smyth, 2015; Låftman et al., 2013). It is therefore critical to acknowledge that while academic pressure and education-related stress may be experienced by all students, it is not experienced equally, and that it is important to take into consideration differences in how students appraise, and cope with, academic demands.

1.12 Education-related stress in high-performing students

Supporting the suggestion that context-specific for distinct sub-groups of adolescents is needed (Gunnel et al., 2018), several studies have found that even high performing students can experience a lot of education-related stress (Suldo et al., 2008; also see, Chamberlain et al., 2011; Banks & Smyth, 2015; Finch et al., 2010; Låftman et al., 2013). In a study conducted in the USA involving 307 14-19-year-old students, for example, it was found that the participants who studied for an International Baccalaureate – a challenging qualification that is broadly equivalent to A-levels – experienced a greater amount of stress than, and poorer mental health-related outcomes to, their counterparts on less demanding courses (Suldo et al., 2008). This suggests that, as I will discuss in greater depth in Chapter 2, A-level students may be particularly prone to experiencing stress, even when they are performing to a high standard.

1.13 Covid-19 pandemic

The second half of this thesis was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, when – for much of the time – A-level students were learning online and from home. While the focus of this thesis remained on A-level students experiences of post-16 education in general, their experiences were clearly influenced the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, this thesis will offer an additional contribution to our understanding how this period was experienced by students, as well as what type(s) of support ought to be prioritised for students during future pandemics.

Importantly, it has been found that there was an increase the proportion of adolescents experiencing mental ill-health during the first sixth months of the Covid-19 pandemic (Vizard et

al., 2020). It has also been found that students in Years 12 and 13, many of whom will have been studying A-levels (DfE, 2021a), experienced lower life satisfaction and poorer well-being than their younger counterparts during the first lockdown, and that they were also more likely to report that it had a negatively impacted their happiness (Mansfield et al., 2020). On top of this, it has been found that teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic was particularly challenging for teachers (Kim et al., 2021), and that while some students welcomed the relief from the normal pressures of life during the first lockdown, at least initially, many experienced stress, frustration and loneliness, and missed both their friends and face-to-face teaching, especially as time progressed (Ashworth et al., 2021; Demkowicz et al., 2020). This thesis will, therefore, provide an additional insight into how students experiences were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic in both summer 2020 and February 2021.

1.14 Summary

In summary, this research is being conducted within a particular, situated context; namely, at a time when there are mounting concerns about adolescent mental health, especially among older teenage girls (Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2021; Vizard et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2020), and calls for a long-term framework aimed at providing context-specific support to students during each stage of education (Gunnel et al., 2018). Additionally, this research is also being conducted at a time when 1 in 2 (49%) 16-17-year-olds enter a college- (11%) or school-based (38%) sixth form (DfE, 2019), and two in five (40%) 16-17-year-olds study A-levels (DfE, 2021a). Furthermore, this research is also being conducted at a time when A-level students are required to undergo terminal, rather than

modular, assessments, and there are widespread concerns about the amount of education-related stress that students are experiencing (Hutchings, 2015). This research is also being conducted from a particular position, in the sense that it is being conducted in the belief that it is important to support students during each stage of education and that gaps in our understanding of how best to this ought to be addressed.

Generating a better understanding of students' experiences of studying A-levels will contribute towards our understanding of how to establish a long-term framework aimed at providing students with context-specific support during each stage of education. In the next chapter (Chapter 2), I will critically discuss prior research that has focused on A-level students' experiences of post-16 education, before stipulating the research questions that I constructed – and addressed – in light of the scarce and sometimes conflicting literature on this topic. In Chapter 3, I will provide an overview of the qualitative and quantitative research methods that I used to answer the research questions that I developed; I will also discuss how these methods were adapted in light of the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. In the subsequent chapters (Chapters 4, 5 and 6), I will present and critically reflect on the findings, before considering their implications for educational practice, policy and research at greater length in the final chapter (Chapter 7).

Chapter 2 – Narrative Review

Importantly, although several researchers have described A-level students' experiences of post-16 education in the UK as 'under-researched' (Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011, p. 120; Nash et al., 2021, p. 153), few have critically engaged with prior research on this topic. This means that a 'full picture' of what is and is not known about how A-level students typically experience post-16 education in the UK has not been captured (Hagell et al., 2012). In light of this oversight, the purpose of this chapter will be to present an appreciative but critical review of the literature A-level students' experiences of post-16 education in the UK[3]. On the basis of this review, I will argue that although prior research on this topic is scarce and conflicting, it indicates that studying A-levels can be both enjoyable and rewarding, on the one hand, as well as particularly challenging and stressful, on the other. I will argue that A-level students' experiences of post-16 education in the UK are, therefore, worthy of greater research. I will conclude this chapter by stipulating the research questions that the remainder of this thesis will be dedicated to answering in an effort to clarify and enhance our understanding of how this stage of education is experienced – and what could be done to provide A-level students in the UK with greater context-specific support.

2.1 Students' experiences of studying A-level: a potential source of stress

In the UK, studying A-levels was first identified as a potentially stressful experience approximately half a century ago (Dobson, 1980). Dobson (1980) conducted a questionnaire in the north of

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[3] I stopped searching for literature on this topic 1st December 2021.

England which asked 223 A-level students to rate on a four-point scale (1 = 'No stress at all'; 4 = 'Extreme stress') how stressful 50 potential sources of sixth form-related stress (i.e. stressors) had caused them (over what time period, it is unclear). To determine an overall score for the participants' experience of self-reported 'student stress', the participants were also asked to rate on the same four-point scale: 'To what extent, both inside and outside of school, do you feel that there is a certain amount of stress attached to being a student following a course leading to a public examination?'; it was communicated to the participants that stress should be thought of in this context as 'negative effects'. In response to this question, Dobson (1980) found that approximately two thirds (66%) of the participants reported experiencing either 'A lot of stress' (53%) or 'Extreme stress' (13%); in contrast, approximately a twentieth (4%) reported experiencing 'No stress at all'.

In terms of the 50 sixth form-related stressors, it was found that the sources of sixth form-related stress that obtained the highest mean scores included 'Examination pressures', 'Difficulties understanding academic work', 'Lack of concentration at home when studying', 'Difficulties keeping up with academic work' and 'Examination syllabuses are too demanding in some subjects'. Furthermore, it was found that there was a significant, moderate positive correlation between participants' scores for these items and their scores for self-reported student stress. In addition, it was found that there was a significant, moderate positive correlation between participants' scores for 'Examination pressure' and their scores for approximately half (52%) of the other sources of sixth form-related stress. These included, for example: 'Consequences of letting parents down';

'Worry about ultimate future career'; 'Difficulties keeping up with academic work'; 'Examination syllabuses are too demanding in some subjects'; 'When friends repeatedly get higher marks for written exercises'; and 'Too much homework to do each evening'. At the time of publication, these findings suggested that a majority of A-level students in England may have been experiencing a high degree of stress, and that, as a consequence, A-level students constitute a specific sub-group of adolescents deserving of greater attention and context-specific support. Indeed, the findings suggest that – even half a century ago – studying A-levels may have been a particularly challenging experience, and that the more challenging students found studying them, the more likely they were to experience stress during the approach to examinations. Yet since the publication of these findings, little research focused specifically on A-level students' experiences of post-16 education in the UK has been published; that is, with the exception of a handful of recent studies conducted in England (Brown, 2021; Chamberlain et al., 2011; Dueker, 2014; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Nash et al., 2021; Powell, 2017), and one in Northern Ireland (Finch et al., 2010). I will now turn to these studies and critically discuss what they do (and do not) reveal about A-level students' experience of post-16 education.

2.2 Negotiating the transition from studying GCSEs to A-Levels: a challenge

It has long been recognised that transitions from one stage of education can be challenging experience for some students; indeed, they can be regarded as 'flash points' which "represent times when cracks in the [educational] system might be particularly obvious, and when vulnerabilities can be amplified" (Hagell et al., 2012, p. 94). While a lot of research has focused on the transition

from primary to secondary education, as well as the transition from post-16 to higher education, little research has focused on the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels (Hagell et al., 2012). In 2014, an anonymous A-level student posted on the Childline website:

> *I knew A Levels were going to be a lot harder than GCSES and i knew that i would have to put a lot more effort in if i wanted to succeed. Even after only a month of being at sixth form i feel completely overwhelmed with the workload and ive completely lost interest in it all. I havent done any independent studying like they go on at us to do and i barely make any effort with the ridiculous amount of homework they give us, and this is only the start of the year! Everytime i look at all the work ive gotta do i just sit and cry about it, i dont have the motivation to do it all even though i know i should. I feel like im the only one that feels this way since everyone else in my classes seem to manage, and this always makes me think that if i can't handle this how am i supposed to handle anything else later on in life? i feel completely unsuitable for life and like im one huge failure and it frustrates me because im aware that im not even trying to succeed, Im trapped in this nightmare since i have to stay in full time education, i have no idea what else i want to do, nothing else interests me and i have no talents to speak of. I know im purposely making it worse for myself but i just can't get out of the mindset that i cant do it and for some stupid reason i dont even want to do it and a part of me doesnt want help or to be told how to handle sixth form or that i have to get through sixth form..... i dont understand whats going on with me? all i know is that im all over the place* (Childline, 2014)

Here, it is clear that this A-level student has found the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels particularly difficult and is confused and overwhelmed. It has also been reported that, when

reflecting on their experiences of studying A-levels, recent A-level students commented that they had expected that, because had found studying GCSEs 'quite easy', they expected studying A-levels to be 'just as easy' and, as a consequence, were surprised by how difficult studying it is (BBC, 2021). Several recent studies have also found evidence that students find studying A-levels particularly challenging in comparison to GCSEs (Brown, 2021; Dueker, 2014; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Powell, 2017; Nash et al., 2021); I will now discuss two of these, before turning to the other studies at later stages of this chapter.

First, in a semi-structured interview-based study conducted in the West Midlands of England involving six Year 12 A-level students, Powell (2017) found that although the participants had expected studying A-levels to be easier and less demanding than studying GCSEs because it involves studying fewer subjects, they found studying A-levels substantially more difficult. One participant, for example, described their initial experience of studying A-levels as 'a massive step up' and 'just so intense', while another described it as 'overwhelming' and 'a massive change' (Powell, 2017, p. 84). Specifically, the participants reflected on how they had been surprised by the increased scale of their workload and the fast(er) pace at which they were expected to learn; they reported that this had made it notably more difficult for them to remain organised. Illustrating this, one participant compared studying A-levels to 'having to run onto the treadmill when it's already running', while another likened it to 'being on a hamster wheel' (Powell, 2017, p. 85). This language suggests that studying A-levels can feel like an arduous or relentless experience, at least at times. In an attempt to better position themselves to cope with the demands of studying A-levels, two of the participants decided to stop studying ('drop') one of their subjects within their

first term in order to focus more of their time and energy on studying their other, more important subjects. Unfortunately, however, one of the participants also reported that dropping a subject made them feel 'a little bad', 'a bit stupid' and 'not as normal as everyone else' (Powell, 2017, p. 86). This is particularly important to consider in light of research that has demonstrated that adolescents are acutely conscious of - and anxious about - social comparisons with their peers (Foulkes & Blakemore, 2016; Denscombe, 2000), because it could mean that dropping subjects in an effort to cope could itself become a source of shame and embarrassment – rather than a 'quick fix' – for A-level students.

Compounding the difficulties experienced by the participants during their transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels were high expectations from their teachers, parents and themselves; the latter being partly due to comparisons that the participants made between their performance and that of their peers and siblings. This made them feel pressured to perform well despite the challenges that they were experiencing, and therefore acted as a "source of stress" (Powell, 2017, p. 111). Furthermore, the participants reported that they felt as though they were simultaneously provided with less direction and expected to already understand how to adapt to the demands of studying A-levels. Yet during the initial stages of studying A-levels, the participants often felt unsure of, and anxious about, what was expected of them; one participant commented on how this made them feel self-conscious and 'stupid', while another commented that it made them feel 'a bit lost' (Powell, 2017, p. 87). Moreover, the participants who had performed well in their GCSEs, in particular, considered their teachers' expectations to be disproportionate to their

abilities and commented that it made them feel 'quite horrible' or 'sort of guilty' when they struggled to meet them (Powell, 2017, p. 87-88).

In addition to acclimatising to the increased quantity of content and the fast(er) pace at which they were expected to learn, as well as feeling simultaneously pressured to perform well and unsure of how to adapt to the demands of studying A-levels, the participants also reported that they found the need to accept much more personal responsibility for managing their time and remaining organised both surprising and challenging. One participant commented, for example, that 'a lot more time management's needed, even though I'm taking less subjects', while another commented that 'you sort of always have to check over your work, which I think is why at sixth form you feel so pressured because it's not like you have a set schedule' (Powell, 2017, p. 92). For the participants, the large(r) amount of effort that they had to direct towards managing their time and remaining organised was *surprising* because they expected studying A-levels to be easier and less demanding than GCSEs on the basis that it involves studying fewer subjects, as well as because they had expected their teachers to provide greater structure and direction. In addition, the participants found the amount of effort that they had to direct towards managing their time and remaining organised *challenging* because the need for greater self-directed learning and revision was unfamiliar to them and required a substantial amount of effort. Therefore, rather than simply representing an opportunity to relax and socialise, free periods challenged the participants to become more autonomous, organised and self-disciplined. One participant commented, for example, that free periods felt 'weird' because they were used to adhering to - as opposed to

planning and structuring their own - routine, while another participant commented on how they 'hate not having that structure' because they found it difficult to remain organised (Powell, 2017, p. 92). In addition to needing to direct a greater amount of effort towards managing their time during free periods, the participants also described needing to take on greater responsibility for revisiting, reviewing and revising previously learnt content on an ongoing basis because of how much (more) content studying A-levels involves covering in comparison to GCSEs, and because they could no longer depend as heavily on their teachers to tell them what to revisit and when.

These findings suggest that the negotiating the change from studying GCSEs to A-levels may be a particularly challenging experience for at least some students. However, because the sample is particularly small and all of the participants attended a single sixth form, it is difficult to determine on the basis of this research alone how transferable the findings are; that is, it is unclear whether the findings can be applied to A-level students in other sixth forms as well. Turning to other research that has produced similar findings, however: in a larger-scale, focus group-based study conducted in the South of England involving 27 A-level students and three teachers, Deuker (2014) also found that, although the participants had both performed well in their GCSEs and felt confident in their academic abilities, they also reported feeling surprised by how demanding studying A-levels is in comparison to GCSEs. Deuker (2014) aimed to explore what challenges and difficulties A-level students experience, particularly when transitioning from studying GCSEs to A-levels, as well as what expectations A-level students and their teachers have of each other in their respective roles. The study was conducted because the researcher had observed as an A-level

teacher that the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels "is fraught with difficulties" (Deuker, 2014, p. 64), in part because of the tension that arises for teachers between the need to promote independent learning, on the one hand, and the need to provide students with enough direction to ensure that they perform well in their examinations and, therefore, reflect positively on the sixth form, on the other.

It is reported that the audio-recorded data was transcribed and "coded using thematic analysis" (Deuker, 2014, p. 67), but no additional details on the data analysis process are provided and no themes are presented. Instead, the researcher summarises and discusses what the participants said, which is considered to be a sign of an 'anecdotal' and unsystematic approach to conducting thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). This is because thematic analyses are predicated on the identification and interpretation of recurring, coherent and meaningful patterns across the dataset; coding is an important aspect of conducting thematic analyses, but it can be conducted in different ways and is not synonymous with theme development (as discussed in Chapter 3; Braun & Clarke, 2012; Salanda, 2021). Nevertheless, it was found that, on reflection, most of the participants considered studying GCSEs to have been 'relatively easy' in the sense that so long as they had completed their homework and attended their lessons, "good results could be achieved with minimal effort" (Deuker, 2014, p. 68). Indeed, one participant likened studying GCSEs to 'spoon-feeding', while another likened their GCSE examinations to 'just regurgitating information' (Deuker, 2014, p. 68). In contrast, and to their (often unwelcome) surprise, the participants – like those in other studies (Brown, 2021; Powell, 2017; Hernandez-Martinez et al.,

2011; Nash et al., 2021) – found studying A-levels particularly difficult during the initial stages of post-16 education.

Importantly, all of the participants reported that studying GCSEs did not prepare them to cope with how demanding studying A-Levels would be. Using language similar to that used by the participants in other studies (Brown, 2021; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Powell, 2017; Nash et al., 2021), one participant commented on how the 'jump' from studying GCSEs to studying A-levels was 'massive', while another commented on how the 'leap' from studying GCSEs to studying A-levels was 'so much harder' than expected (Deuker, 2014, p. 68). In addition, the participants also reported that their experience of studying GCSEs had led them to feel excessively confident in their academic abilities and, as a consequence, to assume that studying A-levels would involve an incremental increase in difficulty. In other words, the participant did not expect studying A-levels to be substantially more challenging than GCSEs. Yet their confidence diminished rapidly once they began studying A-levels and discovered that they had not yet developed the repertoire of 'study skills' that are needed to continue to perform well at this stage of education. What is meant by the term 'study skills' within the context of studying A-levels is not clearly explained by Deuker (2014), but the discussion and quotations presented indicate that it relates to an ability to: participate in self-directed learning; critically engage with the content being covered; manage time and remain organised.

Crucially, the participants commented on how the abilities that are needed to study A-levels had not been necessary to perform well in their GCSEs, meaning that they had not had a

prior reason to develop them. Commenting on the study skills that are needed to study A-Levels, for example, one participant suggested that they had 'never needed them before' (Deuker, 2014, p. 69), while a teacher commented that, in contrast to studying A-levels, studying GCSEs does not require what they refer to 'higher order thinking skills' (Deuker, 2014, p. 68; although what is meant by this term is also not elaborated upon). Furthermore, the participants also reported that despite attending A-level 'taster sessions', they felt poorly informed about, as well as unprepared for, how demanding studying A-levels would be. Indeed, both the students and teachers agreed that the main focus of the taster sessions was on 'selling' the subjects rather than preparing students for how (much more) demanding studying A-Levels would be. This is particularly concerning because prior research has suggested that realistic expectations help to facilitate transition periods (Gray et al., 2011), as well better subsequent academic performance (as research conducted with undergraduates has found; Nicholson et al., 2013).

In a similar manner to participants in other studies (Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Powell, 2017), the participants also expected a far greater degree of direction from their teachers when studying A-levels. Consequently, the participants initially found the (new) experience of feeling unsure about what was expected of them unsettling. In addition, the participants reported that they felt as though their teachers expected them to already possess the abilities that are needed to study A-levels successfully, meaning that the initial demands that were made of them felt disproportionate to their capacity to cope and, therefore, unreasonable in the absence of greater support. In other words, the participants felt as though what was initially asked of them by their

teachers felt inappropriate and unfair because they had not been taught how to engage in independent learning. Indeed, several participants spoke of needing a 'transitional period' to help them to develop the academic capabilities that are needed to enable them to cope with the demands of studying A-levels more fruitfully and complained of a lack of initial support. One participant commented, for example, that 'even though I know you're supposed to be independent in A-level, that doesn't mean you should be given no support whatsoever', while another commented that teachers 'just expect you to find your way' (Deuker, 2014, p. 70). Interestingly, the teachers recognised that incoming A-level students had a 'limited' and 'rudimentary' repertoire of study skills in their first term and, as a consequence, adapted their initial lessons to accommodate for this by making them less demanding (Deuker, 2014, p. 74). In light of this, it is particularly notable that the participants felt as though the 'jump' from studying GCSEs to A-levels had been 'massive' (Deuker, 2014, p. 68), and that they had felt insufficiently supported. Developing a clearer understanding of what type of academic abilities (or 'study skills') A-level students need help cultivating during the initial stage of post-16 education, and how this could be achieved, is crucial to understanding how best to provide them with context-specific support.

The small-scale nature of the studies discussed so far - and the fact that Deuker (2014) does not explain how the thematic analysis was conducted in sufficient detail to allow for its quality to be evaluated (Braun & Clarke, 2021b; Nowell et al., 2017; Tracy, 2010) - mean that it is difficult to determine whether the findings are likely to represent the experiences of A-level students more broadly. Still, what the findings form these studies highlight is that the initial transition from

studying GCSEs to A-levels can be particularly challenging, even for students who feel confident about the prospect of studying A-levels on the basis that they have consistently performed well in the past. These findings therefore point towards the importance of ensuring that A-level students are provided with the type of support that is needed to help them develop the abilities that are required to study A-levels successfully, as the absence of such support could increase the likelihood of students initially struggling and, as a consequence, being on the 'back foot' and feeling stressed and ashamed (Deuker, 2014; Powell, 2017). These findings also point to a potential underappreciation on the behalf of incoming A-level students, as well as A-level teachers, of how much more difficult studying A-levels can be in comparison to GCSEs, and sheds light on the importance of developing a better understanding of what can be done to help students negotiate the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels. Indeed, such an understanding could inform a long-term framework aimed at supporting students as they transition between different stages of education.

2.3 Negotiating the transition from studying GCSEs to A-Levels: an opportunity

In this section, I will discuss two studies that have found that, although the increase in difficulty from studying GCSEs to A-levels can be challenging, for those who manage this transition successfully, it can be a positive experience.

Whether making initial A-level lessons less difficult or 'more like school' in an attempt to ease the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels is effective or desirable is questionable given that even when this has been done by teachers, students have still complained that the 'jump'

between the two stages of education is still difficult to negotiate and have expressed a desire to be explicitly taught how to develop the abilities that are needed to adjust to the demands of studying A-levels (Deuker, 2014). Furthermore, several studies have suggested that despite initially finding studying A-levels particularly difficult in comparison to studying GCSEs, A-level students later reflect on the increased difficulty as a challenge (to be) overcome, and therefore frame it as a positive opportunity for growth, development and an affirmation of their ability to manage increased independence (Brown, 2021; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011). In a semi-structured interview-based study conducted in the South of England involving 20 A-level students, for example, it was found that the participants spoke positively about their experience of adjusting to demands of studying A-levels (Brown, 2021). Indeed, it was found that while the participants found studying A-levels substantially more difficult than GCSEs, they persevered when they experienced challenges because they understood that performing well in their A-levels would both help them to pursue educational and occupational goals that were of value to them and enhance their sense of self-worth because, as one participant commented, 'it feels good when you do well' (Brown, 2021, p. 56). Consequently, facing and - importantly - *overcoming* the challenges that the participants experienced aided their development in the sense that it facilitated what the researcher refers to as "positive personal change" (Brown, 2021, p. 57).

Positive personal change related to the participants becoming more ambitious; confident; diligent; independent; and organised. One participant commented, for example, that studying A-levels had 'probably changed the way that I see myself as a lot more, like, confident', while another

commented that studying A-levels had made them 'want to study hard and become a better person, get a good job, be able to become independent' (Brown, 2021, p. 57). Indeed, several participants commented on how their experience of successfully overcoming the challenges that they experienced when studying A-levels had been beneficial to them in the sense that it had helped them to become more confident in general, as well as more dedicated to their studies. One participant commented, for example, that studying A-levels is 'so challenging that you don't think you can do it but then you actually do it and you think: 'Oh, I can overcome any challenge'', while another commented that because studying A-Levels is 'really, really hard, you have to be dedicated and I think that's helped me a lot' (Brown, 2021, p. 58). It is therefore clear that at least some of the challenging aspects of studying A-levels, when successfully overcome, can be beneficial to students' development as independent learners, and help them to become more ambitious, dedicated and confident.

As the participants who took part in this study were recruited by teachers, it is important to note that it is possible that the teachers may have recruited students who were both performing well and held particularly positive perspectives on their experience of studying A-levels (as acknowledged by the researcher, Brown, 2021). Indeed, it has been found that for some students, the challenges that studying A-levels pose are considered to be stressful and unpleasant (as discussed below; Chamberlain et al., 2011; Finch et al., 2010; Nash et al., 2021). Consequently, it is important to recognise the possibility for potentially overly optimistic conclusions to be reached

on the basis of speaking only to those who have successfully overcome, rather than have been overwhelmed by, the challenges that studying A-levels presents.

In another study conducted in England, in which 47 A-level students were interviewed at the beginning and then again at the end of Year 12 about their anticipations and experiences of post-16 education, it was also found that although the increased difficulty of studying A-levels was initially experienced a 'shock' that exceeded their expectations of how much harder it would be, studying A-levels had nonetheless, on reflection, been a positive experience for most of the participants (Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011). Successfully overcoming the challenges that they experienced when studying A-levels helped the participants to engage more critically with their subjects, as well as become more ambitious, autonomous and independent. Consequently, adapting to the 'big' difference or 'step' between studying GCSEs and A-levels had helped the participants to feel as though they were 'moving on' and 'growing up' (Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011, p. 126). It is argued that because studying A-levels demands commitment, as well as autonomous, responsible and independent 'adult behaviour' that studying GCSEs does not, the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels can facilitate and affirm the construction of what the researchers refer to as 'more adult-like' identities (Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011, p. 128). In light of these findings, the researchers conclude that the participants' experiences of encountering difficulties during the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels "were largely balanced by a more positive discourse of challenge, growth and achievement" (Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011, p. 119). The researchers also argue that the academic literature on educational transitions should

be reframed and presented in a more positive light in which a greater emphasis is placed on the opportunities that students' encounter to grow, develop and (re)construct their identities because of, rather than in spite of, the challenges that they experience as a result of progressing from one stage of education to another. Indeed, the researchers argue that, from this perspective, progressing from one stage of education to another, and overcoming the challenges that are associated with this, can represent a "*life-affirming*… opportunity to become someone new" (Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011, p. 128, emphasis added).

In this study, some of the participants had struggled to handle the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels to such an extent that they had dropped out or had to resit their examinations or Year 12 (the study was conducted before the transition to linear assessments). Yet the researchers comment that it "*could* even [be suggested that] the more severe the troubles, the more life-affirming the transition is as a record of successful growing up" (Hernandez -Martinez et al., 2011, p. 127-128, emphasis added). It is highlighted that those who had dropped out or had to resit (modular examinations or the whole of Year 12; it is unclear which) had still adapted to these challenges, even if this meant changing their educational or occupational plans to align with what they now perceived to be realistically achievable. This particular line of argument needed to be unpacked, however, and it is not illustrated or supported by extracts of transcript data, perhaps because it is made in the conclusion rather than the results. Earlier in the article, the researchers briefly describe one participant who had retaken Year 12 and felt positively about it, but this is anecdotal evidence based on a single example rather than evidence that is based on common,

recurring and meaningful patterns across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). The use of the term 'could even' also highlights a level of ambiguity or lack of confidence in the statement that undermines the credibility of the argument and does not cultivate trust on behalf of the reader because it highlights a potential mismatch or lack of 'fit' between the participants' experiences and perspectives and the researcher's interpretation or representation of them (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). Furthermore, a detailed description of how the interviews were conducted, and what efforts were made to ease power imbalances and establish a sense of rapport between the interviewers and participants, is needed, because if the participants did not feel sufficiently at ease with - or trusting of - the interviewers, it is possible that they may have presented a superficially positive depiction of their experiences rather than admit to how disconcerting, distressing and humiliating their experience of struggling or failing had been (Hoffman, 2007). Whether A-level students who experience the most severe difficulties or 'troubles' would ordinarily be expected to view their experience of studying A-levels most positively is, therefore, questionable.

Notwithstanding the limitations to this study, which also includes the absence of distinct themes, it is concluded that in light of the 'strong theme' of the participants reflecting on "their troubles as troubles overcome in their *right of passage*" (Hernandez-Martinez et al.,, 2011, p. 128, emphasis added), it is important to:

> challenge the validity of transitional practices that tend to make 'college
>
> more like school'… because these only take institutional perspectives on
>
> transition, leaving out the voices of those for whom transition means not

only a change in curriculum, for instance, but a 'step-up', a challenge that,

when supported by the institution, offers them a sense of development, the

possibility of 'growing up', of becoming more active participants in

society, which in the end is what education is about (Hernandez-Martinez

et al.,, 2011, p. 128, emphasis added)

What such support should look like is unclear. What is clear, though, is that although the transition

from studying GCSEs to A-levels is generally experienced as a 'big jump' (Brown, 2021; Powell,

2017; Deuker, 2014; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Nash et al., 2021), it is important to frame

it as both an opportunity *and* a challenge because it requires students to become more autonomous,

determined and independent, and can therefore lead to 'positive personal change' (Brown, 2021),

as well as the 'growth and development' (Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011). For this to happen,

though, it is important to ensure that support is in place to help students acclimatise to the change

in demands that are made of them when transitioning from studying GCSEs to A-levels (Powell,

2017; Deuker, 2014; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Nash et al., 2021).

Interestingly, of the studies that have been discussed so far (Brown, 2021; Powell, 2017;

Deuker, 2014; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011), none have specifically explored A-Level students'

experiences of preparing for, or sitting, what could be considered to be the biggest challenge that

they will encounter: examinations.

2.4 A-Level students' experience of examination-related anxiety pre-2015

In this section, I will discuss one study that focused on A-level students' experience of examination-related anxiety prior to the transition to linear assessments. In a focus group-based study conducted in the South of England involving 19 Year 12 A-level students, Chamberlain et al., (2011) found that participants reported experiencing disturbed sleep, tiredness and a deterioration in their personal relationships, as well as feelings of 'inescapable guilt', 'pressure' and being 'overwhelmed', due to anxieties about their first year, AS-level examinations and the implications that their results would have for their post-sixth form educational and occupational prospects. The aim of the study was to explore A-level students' experiences of examination-related anxiety, as well as their perceptions of the possible usefulness of potential intervention strategies aimed at helping students to minimise or manage it. The study was conducted prior to the change to linear A-level examinations, meaning that the participants' attainment had been based on their performance in a combination of examinations at the end of Years 12 and 13. Examination-related anxiety refers to students' perceptions of examinations as highly threatening (Putwain, 2008). Importantly, while examination-related anxiety had been experienced by all of the participants, the researchers identified two different types of examination-related anxiety during the data analysis process: 'pre-examination-' and 'examination-day-related' anxiety.

Pre-examination-related anxiety was experienced during the approach to, rather than on the day of sitting, examinations. The researchers identified three main triggers of pre-examination-related anxiety. These included: (i) the demanding scale of their revision workloads; (ii) their

teachers' tendency to frequently remind them of the importance of performing well in their examinations; and (iii) the unwelcome surprise at attaining (unexpectedly) dissatisfactory mock examination results. Yet all three of the triggers of pre-examination-related anxiety could be thought of as causes of stress that emanate from largely unavoidable aspects of studying A-levels throughout the academic year, especially in light of research that found that studying A-levels can be a particularly challenging experience in which students need to adapt to new and more intense demands (Brown, 2021; Finch et al., 2010; Powell, 2017; Deuker, 2014; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Nash et al., 2021). In other words, it is possible that the experience of feeling under pressure and unable to easily perform to an expected academic standard may not only be experienced during the days or weeks immediately prior to examinations taking place, but to a greater or lesser extent throughout the academic year. These experiences could, therefore, be thought to be characteristic of studying A-levels in general. Yet the temporal demarcation of when pre-examination anxiety begins is not specified by the researchers, presumably because they were unable to identify it on the basis of the data that they had gathered. Indeed, because the main focus of the study was situated specifically on exploring examination-related anxiety, it may be that researchers did not ask the participants about their (past) experience of the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels or their (ongoing) experience of studying A-levels throughout the academic year and what implications this had for their (recent) experience of examination-related anxiety. Yet it is important to recognise that A-level examinations – like GCSE examinations – do not take place in a vacuum, but follow a period of (often challenging) study which is likely to contribute to how anxious students feel about them (Putwain, 2009, 2011).

Specifically, the participants reported that revision could be burdensome, especially when they were attempting to combine learning new content with preparation for upcoming mock or actual examinations. Yet revisiting, reviewing and revising previously learnt content alongside learning new content is a task that A-level students need to do throughout the academic year (Dobson, 1980; Powell, 2017), albeit to a greater extent during the more immediate approach to examinations. Furthermore, the participants complained that the effort that they directed towards preparing for their examinations led them to experience disturbed sleep, tiredness and irritability, as well as feelings of 'inescapable guilt' (when they were not revising) and the sensation of being 'overwhelmed' (by the amount of content that they needed to learn). One participant commented, for example, that during the approach to A-level examinations, revision is 'constantly at the back of your mind', while another commented that, amid competing demands on their time, 'it's hard to find the right balance for what to revise for' (Chamberlain et al., 2011, p. 197).

Exacerbating the difficulties that the participants experienced when attempting to balance their revision alongside other demands on their time was a lack of appreciation on the behalf of their parents regarding how much effort they were directing towards their studies. Several participants commented, for example, that even when were trying hard, their parents either complained that they were not trying hard enough or continued to expect them to contribute towards (tiresome and distracting) housework. It is again possible that these experiences may occur for A-level students throughout the academic year rather than only during the days or weeks approaching their examinations, as other studies have also found that A-level students often report

that they find it difficult to manage their larger, more diverse and self-directed workload (Brown, 2021; Powell, 2017; Deuker, 2014; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Nash et al., 2021).

The participants also reported that their teachers highlighted the importance of performing well in their examinations early in the academic year before continuing to emphasise it at an increased frequency and with greater intensity as their examinations approached. Pressure that is predicated on using fear to motivate students is referred to as using 'fear appeals'. For some students, these can be upsetting (Putwain & Roberts, 2009), as well as detrimental to their performance (Putwain & Remedios, 2014). One participant commented that their teachers 'start talking about exams as soon as you walk through the door in September and then it's non-stop', while another commented that 'every time we get to a lesson, [the teacher] says 'It's this many days now - are you panicking yet?' Why would you do that? I am panicking, yes!' (Chamberlain et al., 2011, 198). In a similar manner to students preparing for examinations in other studies (Banks & Smyth, 2015; Denscombe, 2000; Putwain & Roberts, 2009), the participants considered it to be both unhelpful unnecessary in light of the fact that they had already formed clear educational and occupational goals that depended on them performing well.

The participants also reported that unexpectedly poor mock examination results acted as an additional source of pre-examination-related anxiety, especially for those who had been predicted high grades and had a prior record of performing well in their GCSE examinations. The researchers suggest that their performance may be due to the difficulties that the participants experienced multitasking (learning new content alongside revisiting, reviewing and revising

previously learnt content, for example), but it is possible that the participants had simply not been prepared for how much more difficult studying A-levels is. Indeed, it has been found that students who have performed well in their GCSE examinations often find studying A-levels surprisingly demanding (Deuker, 2014; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Nash et al., 2021; Powell, 2017), which can lead to them feeling ashamed or stressed for not being able to meet the expectations of their teachers (Finch et al., 2010; Powell, 2017).

The participants were also asked whether they would like their teachers, parents or examinations boards to provide interventions aimed at helping them to minimise or manage examination-related anxiety, but the majority of participants expressed no support for this idea. Instead, most of the participants framed examination-related anxiety as a useful aid to their performance. It is important to note, however, that the usefulness of examination-related anxiety was time-limited in the sense that, although the participants found it helpful during their examinations, they did not find it beneficial during the pre-examination period preceding them. Yet when the participants discussed the idea of receiving interventions aimed at helping them to minimise or manage examination-related anxiety, the participants only considered it in relation to examination-day-related anxiety, *not* pre-examination-related anxiety. Indeed, as the approach to examinations was associated with tiredness; difficulty sleeping; irritability; and feelings of 'inescapable guilt' about not revising enough, on the one hand, and feelings of being 'overwhelmed' by the amount of content that they needed to learn and revise, on the other, the researchers suggest that interventions during pre-examination period could be beneficial.

While most of the participants did not express a desire for interventions aimed at helping them to minimise or manage examination(-day)-related anxiety, three of the participants did point out that their experiences of examination-related anxiety had detrimentally affected their performance by making them feel less confident and unable to concentrate; one participant reported that they had developed a stress-related illness that they partially attributed to examination-related anxiety. It is, therefore, important to bear in mind that examination-related anxiety, be it on the day of an examination or in the period preceding it, is experienced on a spectrum and is detrimental when it becomes debilitating or disabling (Putwain, 2008). What proportion of A-Level students typically experience a debilitating or disabling degree of anxiety is unclear. However, it is thought that approximately a sixth (16%) of 13-18 year olds experience it (Putwain & Daley, 2014). The main limitation of the study lies in pre-examination-related anxiety, as distinct from examination-day-related anxiety, being identified during data analysis (and therefore *after* data collection), meaning that the researchers could not intentionally explore it in greater depth during the focus groups. It is, therefore, important to turn to studies that have explored students' experiences of studying A-levels throughout the academic year in order to determine whether this stage of education can be considered to be stressful in general rather than purely during the initial transition from studying GCSEs and immediately before examinations.

2.5 A-level students' experiences of stress across the academic year

In this section, I will discuss a study that focused on female A-level students' experiences of post-16 education at an academically selective sixth form throughout the academic year, with a particular

focus on their experiences of stress. In a longitudinal study conducted in Northern Ireland involving 410 female A-level students, Finch et al., (2010) found that the vast majority of the participants had experienced what they refer to as the 'effects of school-related stress' at each time point, and that several participants reported feeling 'overloaded', 'pressurised', 'cracking up' or 'out of control' due to the pressure that they faced to perform well. Furthermore, the researchers also found that the proportion of participants experiencing what they refer to as 'scholastic stress' increased at each time point as the academic year progressed. The aim of the study was to identify the extent to which female A-level students at two single-sex, academically selective and 'scholastic' grammar school sixth forms in Northern Ireland were experiencing the 'effects of school-related stress' at three different time points (the questionnaire was distributed at the start of the academic year in September, prior to internal examinations in January and shortly before the external examinations in April). The questionnaire was complemented by focus groups involving 15 self-selecting participants aimed at exploring their experiences of sixth form-related stress in greater depth. Of central concern to the researchers was the notion that "academically able girls could be perceived as being capable of coping with the demands of schooling" (Finch et al., 2010, p. 312), meaning that their academic and emotional needs may be overlooked on the basis that they appear to be managing well.

The researchers found that the physical and psychological 'effects of school-related stress' were experienced by the vast majority of the participants at each timepoint. In addition, the researchers found that the proportion of participants who experienced 'scholastic stress' – which

is not clearly defined but appears to relate to academic pressure – increased between each timepoint. Furthermore, at each timepoint, the majority of the participants reported experiencing at least one stress-induced physical health problem, such as: irritable bowel syndrome, nausea and dysmenorrhoea, as well as tiredness, headaches and sleeping problems. Several participants also reported feeling 'worthless', 'incapable', 'stupid', 'overloaded', 'pressurised', 'cracking up' or 'out of control' due to stress. One participant commented, for example, that it 'can often upset me and sometimes I feel like I'm on the edge of a nervous breakdown', while another commented that studying A-levels made them feel as though 'I can't cope, like I'm a failure, as if it dominates my life' (Finch et al., 2010, p. 321). The researchers also highlight that three participants reported that experiencing education-related stress had led them to experience suicidal ideations or a desire to self-harm.

In a similar manner to GCSE and A-level students in other studies (Chamberlain et al., 2011; Denscombe, 2000; Putwain, 2009), the participants also reported that the pressure that their parents and teachers placed on them to perform well caused or exacerbated their experiences of 'school-related' or 'scholastic stress'. In addition, as the academic year progressed, some of the participants reported abandoning activities such as sport and drama, despite evidence that exercise and stable, supportive social networks that accompany participation in group activities can help to ameliorate symptoms of stress (for example, Mikkelsen et al., 2017). Furthermore, the participants reported that their personal relationships had been weakened by their experiences of sixth form-related stress due to a protracted decline in meaningful interactions with their friends and families

as they spent more time working. Importantly, several participants also reported feeling pressured to present themselves as capable, dedicated and responsible students, and therefore concealed their experiences of stress in an effort to avoid being perceived as an 'imposter' who is not genuinely deserving of their place in a 'scholastic' grammar school sixth form. The researchers highlight that the students' concealment of their experiences of stress resulted in the supportive role of staff being diminished. In turn, this undermined the mechanisms for pastoral care that the sixth forms had in place – if pastoral care teams are not conscious of students' concerns or experiences of stress, it is difficult for them to offer tailored support.

Several of the findings represent a cause for concern because they highlight that while studying A-levels may, for some students, lead to 'positive personal change' (Brown, 2021), if A-level students experience too much pressure, studying A-levels can also be a particularly stress-inducing experience. Furthermore, the findings also highlight that students who experience the most severe difficulties do not necessarily find studying A-levels 'more life-affirming' than their peers, as other researchers have argued (Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011, p. 127). It also highlights that A-level students appear to experience stress throughout the academic year rather than purely during the approach to examinations. Yet there are several important limitations to this study. First, because the research was conducted at two single-sex, academically selective and 'scholastic' grammar school sixth forms, it is possible that the perceived pressure to perform well is higher than in non-academically selective comprehensive school or college sixth forms. The researchers highlight, for example, that "by restricting comparison to members of the same academically-

selected group, unrealistic magnification of expectation may occur" (Finch et al., 2010, p. 319). In other words, being in an academically selective sixth form could exacerbate the extent to which students experience pressure to perform well academically and, as a result, increase the likelihood of them experiencing stress. It is therefore important to determine whether A-level students in non-academically selective school and college sixth forms share similar experiences to the participants in this study. This is especially important because prior research has found that female students in grammar schools in Northern Ireland are significantly more likely to feel pressured by their academic work 'Often' or 'Very often' (Cairns & Lloyd, 2005).

In addition, while it is argued that "considerable and sustained school-related pressure exists that exceeds the coping abilities of some pupils" (Finch et al., 2010, p. 314), it is unclear what proportion of the sample this statement can be applied to. Furthermore, the finding that the vast majority of the participants had experienced the 'effects of school-related stress' at each time point is not surprising given that all students will experience a degree of stress at some stage. Indeed, it is important to differentiate between time-limited and manageable experiences of stress, on the one hand, and prolonged or intense experiences of stress, on the other (Kyriacou, 2003; Putwain, 2007). It is, therefore, important to determine how severely A-level students are experiencing symptoms of stress, as well as stress-related mental health difficulties such as depression and anxiety, using validated and replicable rather than opaque measurements.

In addition to these limitations, researcher expectancy bias could also have influenced the students participating in the focus groups. This is because, in placing a specific focus on the

participants' experiences of school-related stress, it is possible that the participants focused excessively on negative aspects of their experiences of studying A-levels due to the impression, be it conscious or not, that the interviewer wanted to find out that it *is* experienced as stressful. This potential threat to their findings is particularly relevant because the students who participated in the focus groups were a self-selecting group who volunteered to do so after completing a questionnaire that invited them "to identify ways in which they experience school-related stress" (Finch et al., 2010, p. 314). Consequently, it is difficult to gauge whether the perspectives shared during the focus groups can be considered to be representative of those held by the remainder (94%) of the sample, let alone A-level students in general. Furthermore, in what is a potential limitation to focus groups in general, it has been found that during focus group interactions, alternative, individual-level perspectives may not be expressed once a dominant, group-level perspective has been established, and that as focus group participants begin to adhere to – and share – a particular perspective, they can also begin to think less critically about it (Smithson, 2000).

Therefore, while the findings are concerning, how applicable they can be considered to be to the experience A-level students in general is unclear. Studies aimed at understanding how larger and more diverse samples of A-level students experience post-16 education are, therefore, needed. It seems right, though, to point out that "a system that enforces demands without providing appropriate support may, for [some A-level students], prove deleterious [to their performance and

health]" (Finch et al., 2010, p. 326), especially because other studies involving GCSE and A-level have suggested the same (Chamberlain et al., 2011).

2.6 A-Level students' overall experiences of sixth form in England post-2015

In this section, the research that inspired me to conduct this thesis[4] will be presented and critically discussed: this research was aimed at developing a better of understanding A-level students' overall experiences of post-16 education (Nash et al., 2021). The purpose of the research was to generate a better understanding of students' experience of education immediately prior to entering higher education and consists of two studies, which I will discuss. The research was conducted in the hope of developing a better understanding of what could be done to support students prior to entering higher education so that the possibility of them developing mental ill-health during post-16 or higher education could be reduced.

2.6.1 Study 1

In a questionnaire-based study conducted in the North of England following the transition to linear assessments, when 514 Year 12 A-level students were asked to describe their experience of sixth form using three words or phrases, approximately three quarters (73%) of the participants

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[4] The preliminary findings from Study 1 were first presented at the British Educational Research Association Conference in 2016 (Nash et al., 2016), when I was an undergraduate at the University of York. I contacted the lead author, Dr Poppy Nash, about the prospect of building explicitly on this research for my thesis in winter 2017 and received an offer to do so in spring 2018.

used two (32%) or three (41%) words or phrases that the researchers considered to be 'negative' (the researchers do not provide a definition of 'negative' for Study 1; Nash et al., 2016, 2021). In contrast, less than a twentieth (4%) of the participants provided three words or phrases that were considered to be 'positive'. In addition, when the participants were asked to describe their experience of Year 11 in comparison to their experience of Year 12, approximately two thirds (64%) of the 509 participants who responded to this question were considered by the researchers to have described the former as 'better', despite it being well-established that Year 11 is often experienced as a stress-inducing stage of education for students (Denscombe, 2000; Putwain, 2009, 2011). It is reported that Year 11 was "generally perceived easier and less demanding than Year 12" (Nash et al., 2021, p. 158), and that the participants referred to it as 'not as intense' and 'more relaxed' (Nash et al., 2021, p. 158).

It is notable that female participants were significantly more likely than their male counterparts to use words or phrases to describe their experience of sixth form that were considered by the researchers to be negative, despite generally being predicted higher grades. Approximately four fifths (80%) of the female participants, for example, used two (36%) or three (44%) words or phrases that were considered to be negative to describe their experience of sixth form in comparison to approximately two thirds (64%) of the male participants. What this suggests is that, despite generally performing to a higher standard, female A-level students may be less likely than their male counterparts to experience sixth form as enjoyable. Indeed, it may be that the academic and emotional needs of female A-level students who are performing to a high standard

are being overlooked by teachers and pastoral care teams on the basis that such students appear

to be coping well with the demands that are being made of them, especially if they do not express

a desire for greater support (Chamberlain et al., 2010; Finch et al., 2010).

Figure 4: Percentage of Year 12 A-level students who used zero, one, two or three 'negative' terms to describe their experience of sixth form in 2016.
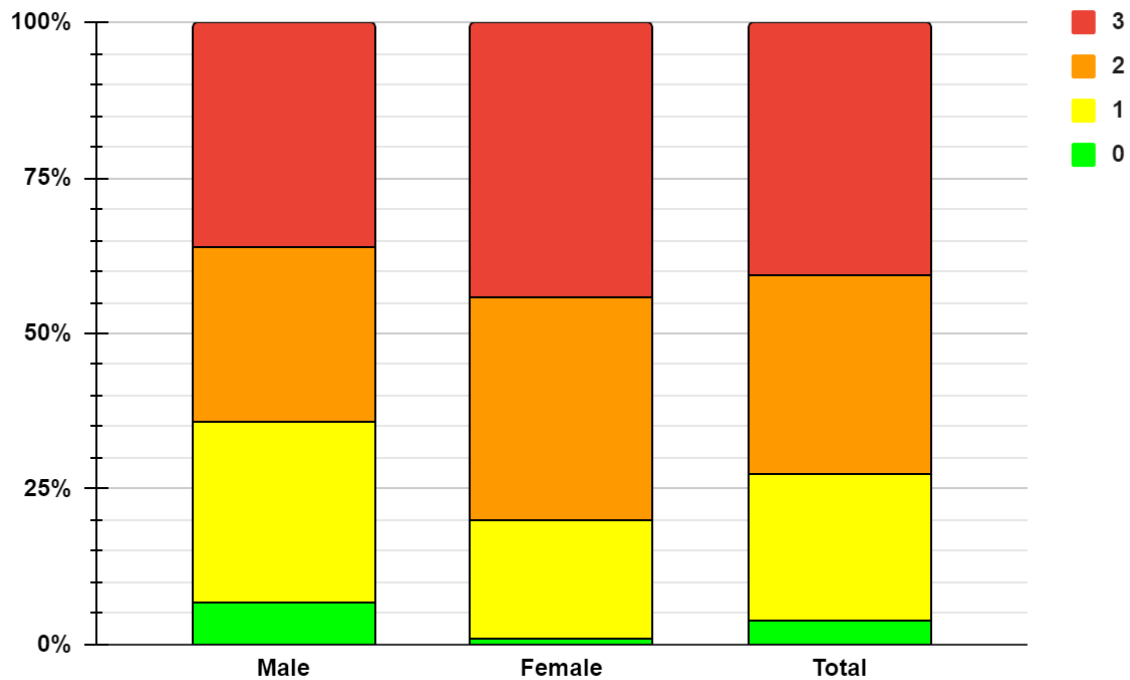
Source: Nash et al., 2016, 2021

2.6.2 Study 2

In a subsequent questionnaire-based study (Study 2) conducted by the same researchers in the North of England, when a different group of 1335 Year 12 A-level students were again asked to describe their experience of sixth form using three words or phrases, approximately three fifths (61%) of the words or phrases that were provided by them were considered by the researchers to be negative. In comparison, approximately a quarter (24%) of the words or phrases that were provided by the participants were considered by the researchers to be positive and approximately a sixth (15%) were considered to be neutral. The proportion of words and phrases that were considered to be positive, neutral or negative are presented in Figure 5, below. It is explained by

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the researchers that in Study 2, the words and phrases that were considered to be negative "depicted [a] lack of enjoyment, negative emotion or a sense of purposelessness in studying" (Nash et al., 2021, p. 160), while the words and phrases that were considered to be positive conveyed the opposite: "enjoyment, positive emotion or a sense of purposefulness in studying" (Nash et al., 2021, p. 160). In addition, the researchers considered the words and phrases to be neutral "if they described neither positive nor negative perceptions" (Nash et al., 2021, p. 161).

Figure 5: Percentage of 'negative', 'neutral' and 'positive' of terms that Year 12 A-level students used to describe their experience of sixth form in 2017.
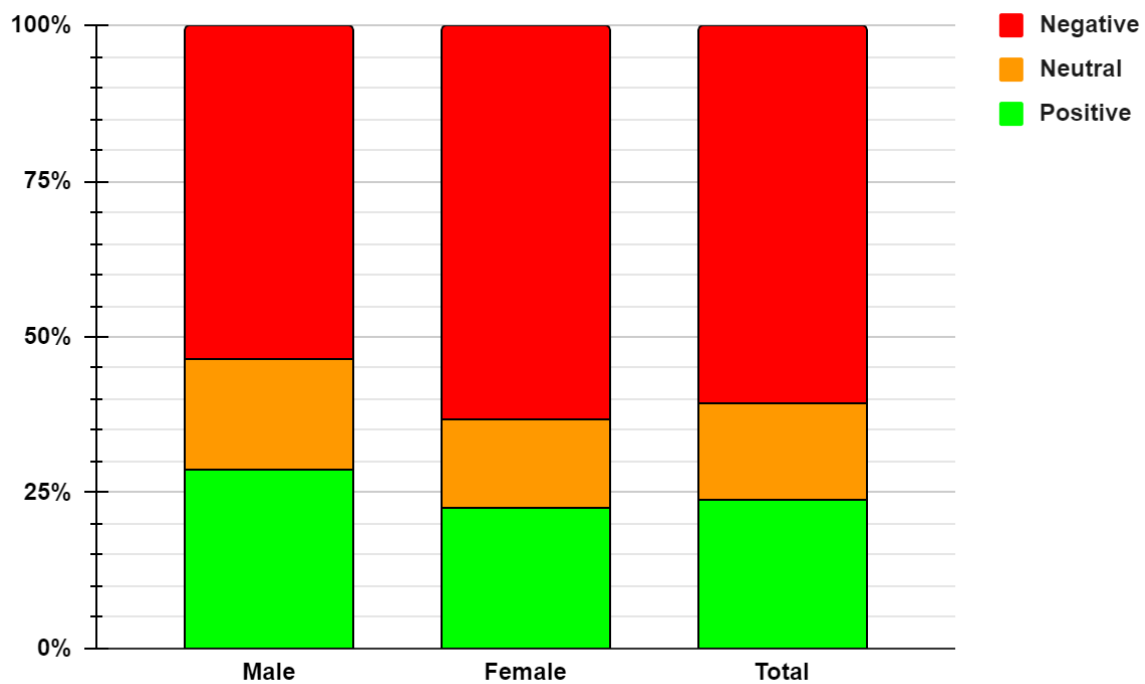
Source: Nash et al., 2021; Study 2

The combination of negative versus positive or neutral words or phrases that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form is not reported, meaning that it is not clear what proportion of the participants used two or three words or phrases that were considered by the

researchers to be positive or negative, for example. Gender-based differences in the type of language that participants used to describe their experience of sixth form were again evident: approximately two thirds (63%) of the words or phrases that were used by female participants to describe their experience of sixth form were considered to be negative in contrast to approximately half (53%) of the words or phrases that were used by their male counterparts. Unlike in Study 1, however, the researchers did not attempt to determine whether the gender-based difference was statistically significant. (It is unclear why the researchers took a different approach to presenting the data analysis in Study 1 and Study 2 when both are possible.)

The researchers do not differentiate between 'descriptors', 'codes', 'categories', 'labels' or 'themes', or explain what type of thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, which is problematic because thematic analysis is not a single, "homogenous entity, with one set of - widely agreed on - procedures" (Braun & Clarke, 2021b, p. 345). Indeed, thematic analysis is an 'umbrella' term which encompasses a variety of different approaches to qualitative data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021b; 2022). Nevertheless, of the words or phrases that were considered to be negative, the two 'categories of adjectives' that occurred most frequently were named *other negatives* and *stress*. When combined, the words and phrases that were coded to these sub-categories accounted for approximately three fifths (57%) of the terms that were considered to be negative and approximately a third (34%) of all of the terms that were provided by the participants overall. Examples of the words that were coded as *other negatives* included: 'anxiety', 'crying', 'depressing', 'disaster', 'failure', 'frustrating', 'grim', 'lonely', 'panic', 'pointless', 'pressing', 'scary' and 'terrifying'

(Nash et al., 2021, p. 162-3). Examples of the phrases that were coded as *stress* included: 'intolerably stressful', 'maximum stress overload' and 'unnecessarily stressful' (Nash et al., 2021, p. 162). The participants' use of these words and phrases to describe their experience of sixth form is concerning because such terminology depicts their experience of post-16 education as unpleasant and stress-inducing, to an extent that it may contribute towards them experiencing symptoms of mental ill-health, such as persistent feelings of apprehension or hopelessness.

It is important to note, however, that while it may seem reasonable to consider many of the words or phrases coded to the sub-categories *other negatives* and *stress* to be negative because they clearly point towards experiences which may undermine A-level students' performance and health, the researchers also considered words and phrases that were assigned to the sub-categories *challenging*, *difficult*, *hard*, *workload* and *time usage* to be negative as well. This is problematic because many of the examples of the words and phrases that were coded to these categories do not appear to fit the definition of a negative experience or perception that is provided by the researchers. Challenging experiences, for example, are a normal aspect of life and can be both desirable and sought after: those who aspire to become better at something that is of value to them often pursue and embrace challenges: athletes, for example, often seek to compete in increasingly challenging competitions. Tellingly, educational institutions often describe their courses as 'challenging' (rather than 'stressful'), which highlights the appealing, positive connotations that are often associated with this term. Furthermore, it has been found that some A-level students associate challenging experiences with growth, development and 'positive personal change'

(Brown, 2021; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011). It is, therefore, questionable as to whether the word 'challenging' should be considered to reflect a lack of enjoyment, negative emotional symptoms or a sense of purposelessness without greater context.

It is also important to note that the phrases 'hard work' and 'harder than expected' are notably different to the phrases 'hard as hell', 'hard as nails' and 'unexpectedly unnecessarily hard' in the sense that while the former phrases merely highlight that studying A-Levels can be difficult, the latter phrases suggest that it can be hard to a potentially distressing extent. Yet all of the phrases were coded as *hard* and were, therefore, considered to reflect negative experiences or perceptions despite the important differences in the meaning that they convey. In addition, the phrases 'not enough time' and 'time-consuming' were both coded as *workload* and were, therefore, considered to reflect negative experiences as well, even though the latter phrase is not necessarily negative: many, if not most, enjoyable, rewarding and worthwhile pursuits are time-consuming. The word 'difficult' was also coded as *negative*, but without understanding the context in which this word is being used, it is again not possible to conclude that it is definitely being used to express a negative perception for the same reasons that apply to words and phrases such as 'challenging', 'harder than expected' and 'time consuming'. It is also important to note that the words 'effort' and 'tiring' were labelled as *other negatives* and were, therefore, considered to reflect negative experiences as well. However, it seems unreasonable to assume that experiences that require effort and are tiring are negative unless a contextualised justification for believing this to be the case is provided. Indeed, experiences that are challenging, difficult, time consuming and require effort could meet the

definition of a positive experience that is provided by the researchers in the sense that they could be used to convey a sense of purposefulness. Crucially, however, no justification for considering *all* of the words and phrases that are coded to the categories *challenging*, *difficult*, *hard*, *workload* and *time usage* to be *negative* is provided, despite the researchers stating that "rigorous attention was paid to adopting a consistent and clear understanding of these… categories" (Nash et al., 2021, p. 160).

Inconsistently, the words 'complex', 'exams', 'fast', 'jump', 'persistence' and 'revision' were considered to be neutral words (Nash et al., 2021, p. 162-3), even though these words are closely related to several of the words and phrases that were assigned to categories *challenging*, *difficult*, *hard* and *workload*, which were considered to reflect negative experiences. It is unclear, for example, why the words 'complex', 'fast' and 'persistence' were considered to be neutral when the words 'challenging', 'difficult' and 'hard' were considered to be negative, or why the word 'jump' is considered to be neutral when the phrase 'harder than expected' is considered to be negative. Furthermore, no attempt was made by the researchers to differentiate, where possible, between participants' reference to social versus academic aspects of their experience of sixth form: the words 'enjoyable', 'exciting', 'freedom', 'fun', 'interesting', 'liberating', 'motivation', 'relaxed', 'rewarding' and 'social' are all simply coded *positive* (Nash et al., 2021, p. 162-3), despite the fact that these words point to different aspects of the participants' experiences of sixth form. Indeed, the terms 'interesting' and 'rewarding' could be considered to be related to the participants' academic experiences; the terms 'freedom' and 'liberating' could be considered to be related to the participants' appreciation of the independence that studying A-levels entails; and the words

'relaxed' and 'social' could be considered to be related to the participants' social experiences. Disaggregating these words into separate sub-categories would have provided a more detailed insight into what aspects of sixth form the participants valued most.

Unfortunately, as the researchers do not explain what type of thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, or clearly delineate between 'descriptors', 'codes', 'categories', 'labels' or 'themes', it is unclear whether their researchers attempted to use a systematic approach to the data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021b, 2022). What is clear, however, is that many of the assumptions that the researchers have made have not been explained or justified, particularly in relation to considering words and phrases such as 'challenging', 'demanding', 'difficult', 'effort needed', 'harder than expected' and 'time consuming' to reflect negative experiences.

Another important point about the Study 2 dataset it that, despite the participants being asked to provide three words or phrases to describe their experience of sixth form, just 2601 words and phrases were provided altogether, meaning that each participant provided fewer than two words or phrases each, on average (M = 1.95), and approximately one third (35%) of the data is missing. Yet the potential reason(s) for the large amount of missing data is not addressed by the researchers; nor are the implications that it has for the conclusions that can be made on the basis of the analysis. The first author confirmed via email that 1136 rather than 1335 participants provided at least one word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form (Nash, personal communication, 2021), but even when the adjusted sample size is taken into consideration, this still means that of the participants who responded to the request to describe their experience of

sixth form using three words or phrases, they provided approximately two rather than three words or phrases each, on average (M = 2.29).

Despite the inconsistent approach to data analysis and the large amount of missing data, it remains concerning that in Study 2 less than a quarter of the words or phrases that were used by the participants to describe their experience of sixth form were considered to be unambiguously positive, and that words and phrases such as 'anxiety', 'crying', 'depressing', 'disaster', 'failure', 'grim', 'intolerably stressful', 'lonely', 'panic', 'pointless', 'pressure', 'scary' and 'terrifying' appeared more frequently than words such as 'exciting', 'interesting', 'liberating', 'rewarding' and 'social' (624 terms were coded as *positive*, whereas 918 were coded as *stress*, *pressure* or *other negatives*; Nash et al., 2021, p. 161). Figure 6, below, displays the proportion of terms that were used by the participants when the 'categories of adjectives' are grouped on the basis of meaning that is shared by their titles.

Figure 6: Terms that Year 12 A-level students used to describe their experience of sixth form in 2017.
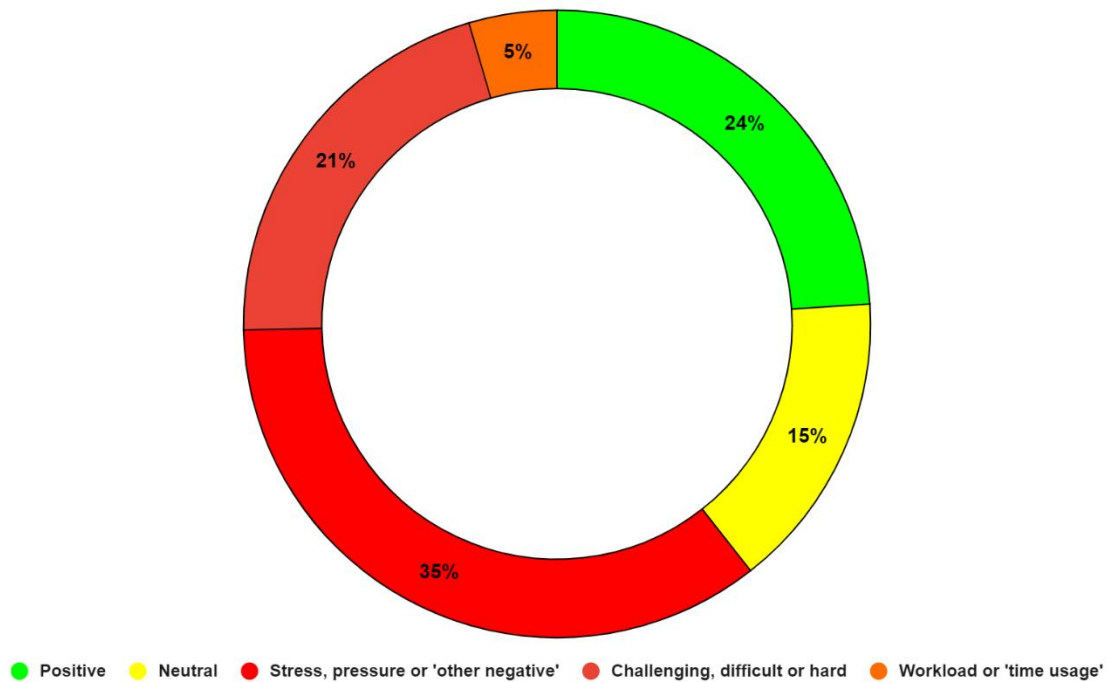
Source: Nash et al., (2021)

Notes: Sub-categories of adjectives have been merged on the basis of meaning that is shared by the titles.

The relative prevalence of such terminology indicates that for some students, studying A-levels may be an arduous and potentially distressing experience, and therefore not necessarily conducive of the 'positive personal change' or 'growth and development' that other researchers have found it that can be (Brown, 2021; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011). Indeed, the findings from the two studies offer an important insight into A-level students' experiences of post-16 education and support the idea that it may be a particularly challenging stage of education in which greater context-specific support is needed. Nevertheless, the studies also beg several questions that need to be answered before conclusions can be made about how A-level students experience post-16 education.

First, in light of the large amount of missing data in the Study 2, it is important to determine whether the findings can be reproduced. In particular, it is important to confirm whether the finding that A-level students use a small proportion of unambiguously positive terms to describe their experience of sixth form can be found again. If so, it would suggest that studying A-levels may be an unenjoyable and potentially distressing experience for a notable proportion of students. It would, therefore, foreground the need for greater reflection and further research on the impact that contemporary educational policy and practice is having on A-level students' experiences. It is also important to determine whether this finding can be reproduced because it could be that if it was not for the large amount of missing data (using the adjusted sample size [$N = 1136$], approximately a quarter [24%] of the words and phrases are missing), more unambiguously positive words may have been used by the participants to describe their experience of sixth form. It is also important to determine whether this finding can be reproduced because, as well as being concerning, it is surprising that so few positive terms were used by participants to describe their experience of sixth form in light of research that has found that A-level students sometimes frame their experience of facing challenges within post-16 education in a primarily positive light (Brown, 2021; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011). Finally, it important to determine whether this finding can be reproduced because the participants were asked to describe their experience of sixth form closely before or after examinations, meaning that while they were asked to describe their *overall* experience of sixth form, their perceptions may have been skewed by experiences of examination-related stress or anxiety (Chamberlain et al., 2011). In other words, it may be that A-level students

describe their overall experience of sixth form differently if they are asked to do so midway through the academic year.

Second, it is important to question whether it is appropriate to trichotomise the words and phrases that A-level students use to describe their experience of sixth form into particularly broad 'categories of adjectives', as doing so obscures nuanced meaning(s) between similar but distinct words and phrases (Elo et al., 2014). In particular, it is important to question whether phrases such as 'harder than expected' and 'hard as hell' or 'sometimes stressful' and 'intolerably stressful' should be coded to the same categories given that they express notably different intensities of meaning. Furthermore, it is crucial to question whether words and phrases such as 'challenging', 'demanding', 'difficult', 'a lot of effort needed', 'harder than expected' and 'time consuming' should be considered to reflect a "*lack of enjoyment*, negative emotion or a *sense of purposelessness* in studying" (Nash et al., 2021, p. 160, emphasis added), especially in the absence of understanding why the participants chose the words or phrases that they did to describe their experience of sixth form. Indeed, although such terminology *could* be used to describe negative experiences, it could also – and, importantly, *easily* – be used to describe desirable experiences. Certainly, given that research has found that A-level students sometimes experience challenges as opportunities for growth, development and 'positive personal change' (Brown, 2021; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011), and no justification is provided for assuming that terminology such as 'challenging', 'difficult' and 'harder than expected' are likely to be indicative of negative experiences, indiscriminately considering a wide range of words or phrases to reflect a lack of enjoyment or a sense of

purposelessness is questionable. Activities such as baking a cake, running a marathon and knitting a jumper require effort and can be challenging, difficult, time-consuming and harder than expected, but are not necessarily negative experiences (even though, in some circumstances, they can be).

It is also important to note that, in light of the *quantitative* approach to presenting the proportion of positive versus negative words or phrases that the participants use to describe their experience of sixth form, a participant who describes their experience of sixth form using the words or phrases 'amazing', 'challenging' and 'difficult', or as 'exciting', 'harder than expected' and 'time-consuming', would be considered to have used predominantly negative terminology, even though it is entirely possible that studying A-levels may have constituted a positive and worthwhile experience for them, especially if they found the challenging, difficult and hard aspects of studying A-levels enriching, enjoyable and rewarding. Indeed, it has been argued that "counting responses *misses the point* of qualitative [data analysis]" (Pyett, 2003, p. 1174, emphasis added), because it obscures the situated and contextualised meaning that language can convey.

A clearer approach to analysing the words and phrases that A-level students use to describe their experience of sixth form, which used an established, systematic and transparent approach to qualitative data analysis, is therefore needed in order to generate a more detailed understanding of how A-level students' experience post-16 education. It is also important to ascertain whether the type of language that A-level students use to describe their experience of sixth form is associated with their scores for depression and anxiety on validated measures because it is suggested that the dominance of *negative* – or, alternatively, the absence of unambiguously *positive* – terminology in

these studies may be an indication that A-level students' academic performance may be coming at

"at a cost to their mental health" (Nash et al., 2021, p. 164), and that experiences of depression

and anxiety "are common" (Nash et al., 2021, p. 162).

Third, as it is not entirely clear what criteria the researchers used to decide whether students

considered Year 11 to be better or worse than Year 12, it is important to determine in greater detail

how studying A-levels differs from GCSEs. Indeed, it seems that the researchers have considered

references to Year 11 being easier or less demanding than Year 12 to be synonymous with

considering the former to be preferable, but have not provided a justification for assuming this to

be the case. It could be that students value the increased difficulty and independence that is

associated with studying A-levels, especially if it is managed successfully and therefore enhances

their sense of competency (Brown, 2021; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011). Nevertheless, if

context-specific support is to be provided to A-level students, then a clearer and more detailed

understanding of how students experience the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels, and

what could be done to support this, is needed (Deuker, 2014; Powell, 2017).

Finally, it is important to explore what (other) factors may influence how A-level students

experience post-16 education. Indeed, while attention has been directed towards gender-based

differences in how A-level students describe their experience of sixth form, and it is well-

established that older teenage girls are more likely to experience mental ill-health than their male

counterparts (Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2021; Wright et al., 2020; Vizard et al., 2018), it is also

important to consider how different motivations (for studying A-levels) and coping strategies (in

response to the demands of studying A-levels) influence students' experiences of post-16 education, as these are potentially important but largely unexplored variables.

2.6 Summary of research on A-level students' experiences of post-16 education

In summary, research has consistently found that the change from studying GCSEs to A-levels is often experienced as a challenging 'jump', especially for students who have performed well in their GCSEs and, in light of this, expect the transition to represent a seamless or incremental increase in difficulty (Brown, 2021; Dueker, 2014; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Nash et al., 2021; Powell, 2017). Research has also consistently found that studying GCSEs does not adequately prepare students for the demands of studying A-levels because the former does not require them to engage in self-directed learning; critical thinking; and time management and organisation to the same extent as the latter does (Brown, 2021; Dueker, 2014; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Powell, 2017). Subsequently, some students express a desire to be explicitly taught how to cultivate the abilities that are required to study A-levels rather than be expected to develop them via a process of trial and error (Dueker, 2014). In addition, some students report feeling ashamed, stressed and overwhelmed during the initial transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels because of their inability to meet their own or others' expectations (Powell, 2017).

The is some evidence to suggest that for some students, the change from studying GCSEs to A-levels, and the challenges and difficulties that accompany the latter, offer an opportunity for students to become more autonomous, responsible and independent (Brown, 2021; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011). Studying A-levels can, therefore, facilitate 'positive personal change' (Brown,

2021), as well as the construction of 'more adult'-like identities (Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011).

Furthermore, several studies indicate that, in time, most students acclimatise to the demands of studying A-levels, despite finding them initially difficult (Brown, 2021; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Powell, 2017).

For some students, though, studying A-levels may also be particularly stressful experience, meaning that if they are un(der)supported or unable to cope, it may have deleterious consequences for both their performance and health (Dobson, 1980; Chamberlain et al., 2011; Finch et al., 2010; Nash et al., 2021). Girls studying A-levels at academically selective sixth forms, in particular, may be at an elevated risk of experiencing a particularly intense amount of stress due to the heightened (actual or perceived) pressure that they may experience to (i) perform well in comparison to their high-attaining peers; (ii) meet the high expectations of their teachers and parents; and (iii) maintain a 'scholastic' image, especially if their academic and emotional needs are overlooked on the basis that is assumed that because they are performing well and do not seek help, they are coping sufficiently well with the demands that are being made of them (Finch et al., 2010; Nash et al., 2021). Consistent with prior research on GCSE students' experiences (for example, Denscombe, 2000), several studies have also suggested that A-level students are most likely to experience stress during the approach to their examinations because of how conscious they are about the implications that their results will have for their reputations, relationships (with their parents, for example), and post-18 educational and occupational opportunities and prospects (Chamberlain et al., 2011; Finch et al., 2010). Yet it is also important to recognise that examinations do not take

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place in a vacuum and that students' overall experiences of studying A-levels are likely to influence how worried they feel about their capacity to perform in them to a satisfactory standard (for example, Putwain, 2009, 2011). Students who: (i) struggle to negotiate the transition from studying GCSEs to studying A-levels; (ii) feel pressured by their teachers or parents; or (iii) struggle to manage their time and remain organised, may be notably more likely to experience a high degree of stress during the approach to, or when sitting, examinations. Furthermore, in light of studies that have found that A-level students use words and phrases such as 'anxious', 'depressing', 'intolerably stressful', 'scary' and 'terrifying' to describe their *overall* experience of sixth form, rather than just their experience of preparing for, or sitting, examinations, a clearer understanding of how studying A-levels is experienced throughout the academic year, as well as how this differs according to gender (given that girls are less likely to use unambiguously positive language to describe their experience of sixth form; Nash et al., 2021), is needed. Indeed, it may be that there is a need to offer greater support to A-level students earlier than during the approach to examinations in an effort to help them minimise or manage experiences of stress.

None of the studies that have focused on A-level students' experienced have explored what type of coping strategies they use most frequently in response to academic demands, or what type of coping strategies are associated with less severe experiences of academic pressure, stress or mental ill-health. Furthermore, none of the studies have used validated measures of depression, anxiety or stress, despite several specifically attempting to investigate students' experiences of stress or mental ill-health (Finch et al., 2010; Nash et al., 2021). In addition, with exception for a

study published in the nineteen-eighties (Dobson, 1980), none of the studies that have focused on students' experiences of studying A-levels have used replicable scales to gauge how often or intensely students feel stressed (in general) or pressured by their academic work, despite the potential that such scales have to capture and compare how this changes at different stages of the academic year, as well as how this may have changed over time and differ among different groups of students (male versus female, for example). Furthermore, none of the studies that have focused on students' experiences of studying A-levels have explored what they worry about most often, and whether their academic workload and performance features prominently among their main sources of concern – although this seems probable (Chamberlain et al., 2011; Dueker, 2014; Finch et al., 2010; Nash et al., 2021; Powell, 2017), especially in light of prior research on what concerns adolescents' most (for example, de Anda et al., 2000; Denscombe, 2000; Anniko et al., 2019), evidence is needed to ascertain this. In addition, of the studies that have used qualitative data to explore A-level students' experiences, just one has used an established and systematic data analysis technique (namely, Powell, 2017); this weakens the overall evidence-base for this topic (Smith, 2018). This thesis will, therefore, aim to address these gaps in the literature in an effort to establish a better understanding of how students experience studying A-levels and what could be done to provide context-specific support to this sub-group of adolescents.

This thesis will also aim to explore what motivates students to study A-levels and how this influences their subsequent experiences of post-16 education, as well as whether studying A-levels is perceived to be a predominantly positive or negative experience in light of diverging accounts

on this point within the (limited) academic literature on this stage of education (Brown, 2021; Finch et al., 2010; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Nash et al., 2021). Given that recent large-scale studies – that have been conducted since the transition to linear assessments – have found that A-level students infrequently use unambiguously positive words or phrases to describe their experience of sixth form (Nash et al., 2021), this thesis will also aim to replicate and extend this work, albeit using a more coherent, systematic and transparent approach to data analysis. This thesis will also attempt to determine whether the type of language that A-level students use to describe their experience of post-16 education is associated with their scores on validated measures of depression, anxiety and stress. If so, the finding(s) would lend retrospective evidence to support the suggestion that students' infrequent use of unambiguously positive words or phrases to describe their experience of sixth form is an indication that the pressure to perform well when studying A-levels is detrimentally affecting their mental health (Nash et al., 2021). Furthermore, this thesis will provide a first major account of how the transition to linear assessments may have influenced students' experiences of studying A-levels and explore whether mock examinations taken in Year 12 are experienced as though they are of high importance (and are therefore stress-inducing), or, instead, are taken less seriously.

In light of the disruption caused to students' experiences of studying A-levels during the Covid-19 pandemic (Mansfield et al., 2020), particularly in relation to studying from home and learning that examinations will be cancelled (I discuss this at greater length in Chapters 3, 5 and 6), this thesis will also contribute to an understanding of: how A-level students experienced this

challenging period and what kind of support they would have liked to have received. Such an understanding may help to inform educational policies and practices aimed at supporting A-level students during future pandemics. This is particularly important because, in a study conducted in the South of England during the Covid-19 pandemic, when 19,039 students aged 13-18 were asked to complete the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scales (WEMWS), it was found that students Years 12 and 13 had the lowest scores for well-being and life satisfaction (Mansfield et al., 2020).

2.7 Research questions

Research questions should specify the focus of the research; who is being studied; and when and where the research is being conducted (White, 2017). With this in mind, it is important to note that the aim of this thesis is to explore A-level students' experiences of post-16 education, before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, with a specific focus on their experiences of academic pressure, stress and coping. It is also important to note that this research was conducted within the context of mass participation in post-16 education; terminal examinations; and widespread concerns about increasing academic pressure (Hutchings, 2015), as well as adolescent mental health difficulties among older teenagers (Vizard et al., 2018; Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2021). The research questions have been separated into main and sub-contributory research questions, with the latter being used to help answer the former (Denscombe, 2010). Prior to the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic, this thesis aimed to address the following main research questions:

- How do A-level students experience post-16 education?[5]

- What causes A-level students to experience stress or anxiety?

- How often do A-level students feel pressured by their academic work?

- What coping strategies do A-level students use in response to academic demands?

- What proportion of A-level students experience a moderate severity of depression, anxiety or stress?

Prior to the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic, this thesis also aimed to address the following contributory research questions:

- What motivates students to study A-levels?

- What do A-level students worry about most frequently?

- What support is available to A-level students during post-16 education?

- How do students experience the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels?

- Is the type of language that A-level students use to describe their experience of sixth form associated with the severity of their experiences of depression, anxiety or stress?

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[5] This is an intentionally broad research question, which reflects the aim of developing a broad but detailed picture of how A-level students' experience post-16 education.

Following the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic at the mid-point of this research, this thesis also aimed address the following research questions:

- What have A-level students found most supportive during the pandemic?

- What affect has the pandemic had on A-level students' experiences of post-16 education?

This thesis also aimed to address the follow ancillary research question, which can only be answered once the main research questions have (White, 2017):

- Is further research into students' experiences of A-levels justified or warranted?

In the next chapter, the research methods that were adopted for the purpose of this thesis will be explained and critically discussed.

Chapter 3 – Research Methods

In this chapter, the research methods that were used and adapted for the purpose of this thesis will be introduced. This chapter will begin with a brief overview of Studies 1, 2 and 3, and what research questions they aimed to answer. Then, the specific qualitative and quantitative research methods that this thesis adopted will be discussed in greater depth. Throughout this chapter, how the tension between the need to collect the type of data that were needed to answer the research questions, on the one hand, and the need to negotiate the practical and ethical considerations which constrained the data collection processes, on the other, will be explained. In this vein, how the research methods changed in light of the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic at the midpoint of this thesis will also be highlighted.

3.1 Questions-led research

The aim of this thesis was to answer the research questions that concluded Chapter 2, above. In order to answer these questions, a research questions- rather than method-led approach to data collection and analysis was adopted (White, 2013). This is because different types of data and research methods are needed to answer different types of research questions (de Vaus, 2001; Putwain, 2007). For example, qualitative data and analysis methods are best suited generating in-depth, detailed and contextualised accounts of peoples' experiences and perceptions, whereas quantitative data and analysis methods are best suited to measuring – identifying the relationship(s) between different – variables (Muijs, 2011). The research methods that this thesis used were initially planned in 2019, before being adapted in light of the disruption caused, and ethical

dilemmas raised by, the commencement of Covid-19 pandemic (discussed below). Thus, a methodologically plural, pragmatic approach to data collection and analysis has been adopted in an effort to develop a more detailed and insightful account of how students' experience studying A-levels (Morgan, 2007).

3.2 Purpose of research

Research can be conducted for different purposes, which generally include criticising or evaluating; describing; developing good practice; empowering; explaining causes or consequences; forecasting an outcome or making predictions (Denscombe, 2010); and comparing (Gorrard, 2003). In light of this, the main aim of this thesis was to develop a broad but detailed description of how students experience studying A-levels throughout the academic year, rather than purely during the initial transition from secondary school or during the immediate approach to examinations, as several other studies have done (Chamberlain et al., 2010; Deuker, 2014; Powell, 2017). The purpose of this was to generate foundational knowledge about A-level students' experiences, upon which further research aimed at understanding how best to support A-level students and, therefore, develop good practice, could be established. This thesis also aimed to investigate the mental health of A-level students; understand what causes A-level students to experience stress and anxiety; critically evaluate prior studies that have focused on students' experiences of studying A-levels (Chapter 2, above); empower the voices of A-level students by positioning them at the forefront of understanding their experiences and perceptions; and capture how students' experiences of studying A-levels were influenced by the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. This thesis

also sought to establish whether the kind of language that students use to describe their experience of sixth form can be used to meaningfully differentiate between those with better versus worse mental health, as other researchers have suggested that is the case (Nash et al., 2016, 2021).

3.3 Qualitative and quantitative research methods

In short, qualitative research methods were used to generate detailed accounts of how A-level students' experience post-16 education and to establish an insight into what A-level students worry about most often. Quantitative research methods, on the other hand, were used to be investigate the severity of A-level students' experiences of depression, anxiety and stress; how often A-level students feel stressed (in general) or pressured by their academic work (specifically); what strategies A-level students use to cope with academic demands; and how these variables interact with one another. Quantitative research methods were also used to evaluate two sets of claims. The first set of claims were based on the notion that the type of words and phrases that A-level students use to describe their experience of sixth form can offer a meaningful insight into the quality of their mental health (Nash et al., 2016, 2021). The second set were about how students experience studying A-levels, especially in comparison to studying GCSEs, and were generated from (qualitative) findings from Study 1 (discussed below), as well as prior qualitative research (discussed in Chapter 2; Deuker, 2014; Hernandez-Martinez et al. 2011; Powell, 2017). Later in this chapter, the different overarching qualitative and quantitative research methods that this thesis adopted will be introduced and explained. First, however, a brief overview of the aims of Studies 1, 2 and 3, and what research questions they aimed to answer, will be presented.

3.4. Studies

3.4.1 Study 1

Study 1 involved task-based, semi-structed interviews with sixteen female A-level students that were conducted in 2019. Study 1 was conducted prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and aimed to explore Year 12 students' experiences of studying A-levels, with a particular focus on their experiences of stress, anxiety and coping. Specifically, Study 1 aimed to investigate why secondary school leavers chose to study A-levels; how A-level students experience post-16 education; what causes A-level students to experience stress or anxiety; and how students cope with experiences of stress and anxiety that arise from the demands of studying A-levels. In light of this, the purpose of Study 1 was to address the following main research questions:

- How do A-level students experience post-16 education?

- What causes A-level students to experience stress or anxiety?

- What coping strategies do A-level students use in response to academic demands?

Study 1 also aimed to address the following sub-contributory research questions:

- What motivates students to study A-levels?

- What support is available to A-level students during post-16 education?

- How do students experience the transition from studying GCSEs to studying A-levels?

Semi-structured interviews were considered to be appropriate for Study 1 because they facilitate opportunities for people to discuss their experiences and perceptions in both depth and privacy, the latter being particularly important when discussing sensitive topics (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Edwards & Holland, 2013; Willig, 2013). Semi-structured interviews were also considered to be appropriate because they both ensure that key focal points are discussed during each interview and permit for particular topics to be explored in greater depth if it seems beneficial or important to do so (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Edwards & Holland, 2013; Willig, 2013). Task-based activities were incorporated into the interviews in an effort to make them more interesting and less intimidating for the participants, and to therefore ease the asymmetries of power in the interviewer-interviewee relationship (Punch, 2002).

The participants who took part in the interviews opted to participate in this research after being given the opportunity to do so by a senior member of staff[6] at their sixth form; male students declined the opportunity to participate in this research. All of the participants studied A-levels at one of two sixth forms in the West Midlands of England. In order to enhance the possibility of capturing a wide(r) range of perspectives, no exclusion criteria were applied. In other words, staff were asked to offer all of the A-level students within their sixth forms, rather than just those who were known to be experiencing a notable amount of academic pressure, stress or anxiety, an

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[6] The staff at the grammar school sixth form who offered A-level students an opportunity to participate in this research had been met at an academic conference regarding pastoral care in education. I was put in contact with the staff at the non-selective school sixth form by someone that I knew personally.

opportunity to participate in this research. Data collection ended once: i) enough data had been gathered to answer the research questions (to a satisfactory standard) and "tell a rich story" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 53); and ii) time constraints made the continuation of participant recruitment no longer practical. Both of my supervisors[7] also strongly advised me not to conduct more interviews in order to avoid be becoming overwhelmed by the amount of data that I would need to analyse.

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data because it is a qualitative data analysis method that is suitable for both novice qualitative researchers and doctoral-level research, and is based on the interpretation of recurring, coherent and meaningful patterns across datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012, 2013). Thus, reflexive thematic analysis was considered to be an appropriate qualitative data analysis method for Study 1 because, at the outset of this thesis, I was both a novice qualitative researcher and interested in developing a better understanding of how students typically experience studying A-levels; the emphasis on across-case patterns of meaning that is central to reflexive thematic analysis was, therefore, appealing (as discussed below). The precise data collection and analysis techniques that were used for Study 1 will be explained in greater depth in Chapter 4, below. I had hoped that Study 1 would be both enlightening in itself and able to inform subsequent research.

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[7] Dr Lucy Foulkes and Dr Poppy Nash were my supervisors at this time (September 2019).

3.4.2 Study 2

Study 2 involved an online (Qualtrics) cross-sectional questionnaire which was completed by 136 A-level students in summer 2020. Study 2 was planned prior to, but conducted during, the Covid-19 pandemic, and had several aims. First, it aimed to expand on Study 1 by exploring a wider range of students' experiences and perceptions of studying A-levels. Second, it aimed to determine what proportion of A-level students experience at least a moderate severity of depression, anxiety or stress (as discussed below). Third, it aimed to determine how often A-level students feel stressed (in general) or pressured by their academic work (specifically). Fourth, it aimed to determine how A-level students cope with academic demands. Fifth, it aimed to determine what implications, if any, the factors mentioned so far have for A-level students' mental health, and how they differ between genders. Sixth, it aimed to generate an insight into what A-level students worry about most frequently in an attempt to develop a better understanding of what might cause or contribute towards them feeling stressed. Seventh, it aimed to find out what kind of terminology students use to describe their experience of sixth form when they are asked to do so midway through the academic year (rather than immediately before or after end-of-year examinations; Nash et al., 2016, 2021). Eighth, it aimed to determine how strongly, if at all, the language that A-level students use to describe their experience of sixth form is associated with their experiences of depression, anxiety or stress, because – as highlighted above – it has been suggested that the kind of language that students use to describe their experience of sixth form can be used to meaningfully differentiate between those with better versus worse mental health (Nash et al., 2016, 2021). Ninth, it aimed to

establish an understanding of how A-level students' experiences of post-16 education had been affected by the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and what kind of support they would have liked to have received ahead of the next academic year. Study 2 aimed, therefore, to address the following main research questions:

- How do A-level students experience post-16 education?

- How often do A-level students feel pressured by their academic work?

- What coping strategies do A-level students use in response to academic demands?

- What proportion of A-level students experience at least a moderate severity of depression, anxiety or stress?

Prior to the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic, this thesis also aimed to address the following contributory research questions:

- What do A-level students worry about most frequently?

- How do students experience the transition from studying GCSEs to studying A-levels?

- Is the type of language that A-level students use to describe their experience of sixth form associated with the severity of their experiences of depression, anxiety or stress?

Following the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic, Study 2 also aimed address the following research questions:

- What affect has the pandemic had on A-level students' experiences of post-16 education?

- What support would A-Level students like to have received during the pandemic?

Prior to the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic, it had been anticipated that a sample of 400-500 A-level students would be obtained, with an expectation that more girls would complete the questionnaire than boys. This expectation was based on the sample size that had been obtained in prior questionnaire-based research involving A-level students (Nash et al., 2016). The circulation of the questionnaire was planned for mid-March 2020. Following the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic, which caused widespread anxieties, panic buying and food shortages at this time, and resulted in a national lockdown on the 23rd March 2020, however, the circulation of the questionnaire was postponed due to ethical and practical concerns (as discussed below). The national lockdown led to most[8] in-person teaching in schools, sixth forms and colleges being ceased, and most students being expected to learn online and from home. The Covid-19 pandemic also led to A-level examinations being cancelled on the 18th March (DfE, 2020); A-level students were later informed that their grades would be based on a complicated series of measures, such as the their predicted grades, predicted performance relative to their classmates and the average performance of students at their sixth form in recent years, via an algorithm[9] (Ofqual, 2020).

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[8] Children of critical workers who were considered to be providing essential goods and services could continue to receive face-to-face teaching (DfE, 2020).

[9] The algorithm-assigned grades were later replaced with centre assessment grades shortly after the former had been released because they caused widespread discontent among the general public (Paulden, 2020).

The circulation of the questionnaire was paused while the possibility of it prompting participants to experience distress at a time of heightened worldwide anxieties was considered. After careful consideration of the scales included in the questionnaire (which will be discussed in greater detail in the final part of this chapter, below), several changes and the addition of open-ended questions aimed at understanding how A-level students felt about the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (which will also be discussed in greater detail in the final part of this chapter, below), the questionnaire was submitted to the University of York's Department of Education for ethical approval. Once ethical approval had been granted, invitations to circulate the questionnaire were emailed to headteachers of school- and college-based sixth forms between May-June 2020.

Invitations to circulate the questionnaire were emailed exclusively to headteachers of sixth forms, rather than shared via social media platforms, in the hope that this would enhance the participants' sense that it was trustworthy and secure. The online information sheet asked potential participants not to complete the questionnaire if answering questions about 'low mood, stress or anxiety' are 'likely' to upset them. It was also made clear on the information sheet that completion of the questionnaire was entirely voluntary and that participants could stop completing it at any moment by simply 'exiting the window'. Signposting to reputable websites offering mental health-related information and support (Mind, Young Minds and the National Health Service) was provided in the information sheet, as well as at the end of the questionnaire. The precise scales

and open-ended questions included in the questionnaire will be explained in greater depth in the final part of this chapter and then again in Chapter 5, below.

As discussed in greater detail Chapters 5 and 6, the self-selecting, small and skewed sample (far more girls [$n = 108$] than boys [$n = 27$] completed the questionnaire), and the unusual period in which the questionnaire was completed (i.e. during the Covid-19 pandemic), mean that the light shed by quantitative findings in Studies 2 and 3 need to be treated as tentative and provisional glimmers of potential trends rather than clear and unobstructed insights into A-level students' typical experiences. The cross-sectional questionnaire also included an option for participants in Year 12 to agree to participate in a follow-up questionnaire when they were in Year 13 (Study 3).

3.4.3 Study 3

Study 3 involved another online (Qualtrics) longitudinal questionnaire which was completed by 42 A-level students (who had participated in Study 2) in February 2021. Study 3 was planned prior to, but conducted during, the third national lockdown that commenced on the 6th January 2021 and led the cancellation of A-level examinations and most students being taught online rather than face-to-face until 8th March 2021. Study 3 investigated how A-level students' experiences changed between summer 2020 and February 2021 and attempted to understand what kind of support they would have found helpful during the Covid-19 pandemic. Study 3 therefore repeated all of the scales and open-ended questions that had been used in Study 2 but did not ask the participants to share demographic information. Study 3 also aimed to investigate what motivates students to study A-levels and to determine what proportion of A-level students consider studying A-levels to be

more demanding than GCSEs by asking the participants to rate how strongly they agreed with a series of statements that had been generated from Studies 1 and 2, as well as prior qualitative research (Deuker, 2014; Hernandez-Martinez et al. 2011; Powell, 2017). Study 3 attempted, therefore, to address most of the research questions that Study 2 did, albeit with a focus on changes in A-level students experiences between summer 2020 and February 2021. The precise scales and open-ended questions included in the questionnaire will be explained in greater depth in the final part of this chapter and in Chapter 6, below.

3.5 Qualitative research methods

With the overarching aims of Studies 1, 2 and 3 and what research questions they aimed to answer outlined above, I will now discuss the qualitative data collection and analysis methods that were used for the purpose of this thesis.

3.5.1 Qualitative research methods: data collection methods

Qualitative data is non-numerical, meaning that it includes data such as spoken words and written text, and can be used to generate in-depth, detailed, and contextualised accounts of peoples' experiences and perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2022; Willig, 2013). Qualitative data was collected via task-based, semi-structured interviews with sixteen female A-level students in Year 12 prior to the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic (Study 1); as well as via a cross-sectional survey of 136 A-level students during the Covid-19 pandemic (in summer 2020; Study 2); and a

follow-up longitudinal survey of 42 of the participants who had completed the cross-sectional survey (in February 2021; Study 3).

Qualitative data was collected via semi-structed interviews because they allow for sensitive topics to be discussed in private; ensure that the same focal points are discussed with each participant; and permit for certain topics to be explored in greater depth if it seems beneficial to do so (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Edwards & Holland, 2013; Willig, 2013). During interviews, data is co-constructed during a 'professional conversation' in which focused interactions between the interviewer (i.e. the researcher) and the interviewee (i.e. the researched) take place (Kvale, 1996). Importantly, however, while the interviewer frames the topic, asks questions and prompts the interviewee to clarify or elaborate on specific points, these efforts are of minimal or limited value without the co-operation of the interviewee. Thus, interviews can be compared to a 'dance' (Hoffman, 2007; Luker, 2008), in which it is important for researchers to build rapport with, and attain the trust of, the participants; ask tactful questions; and position the interviewees as "knowing and approving experts" (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 78). Semi-structured interviews should also incorporate 'warm up' and 'cool down' phases (Kvale, 1996). These should be incorporated in an effort to ease into, and then decompress from, the most probing, sensitive and 'emotionally threatening' questions, before "setting the stage for a friendly departure" (Luker, 2008, p. 171). The interview technique, as well as ordering and wording of the questions that the participants who took part in Study 1 were asked to answer, will be elaborated upon in Chapter 4; the interview guide can be found in Appendix 1.

Qualitative data was collected via questionnaires because they offer a 'wide-angle lens', meaning that a broad(er) variety of perspectives can be accessed; they are easier for people to take part in than interviews and focus groups; and allow people to share their thoughts about sensitive topics in an enhanced state of '*felt* anonymity' (Braun et al., 2021, p. 645, authors' emphasis). Qualitative data was also collected via questionnaires because a key aim of this thesis was to determine what kind of words or phrases A-level students use to describe their experience of sixth form when they are asked to do so at the mid-point of the academic year, rather than immediately before or after end-of-year examinations (Nash et al., 2021); this thesis also aimed to determine whether the type of words or phrases that students use to describe their experience of sixth form are associated with their scores for depression, anxiety or stress (as discussed below). The precise questions that the participants who took in Studies 2 and 3 were asked to answer will be elaborated upon in Chapters 5 and 6, although what characterised all of them was that I attempted to ensure they were open, focused and easy to interpret (Braun et al., 2021).

The specific approaches to qualitative data collection and analysis will be returned to and explained in greater detail in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. Below, the two overarching and adaptable qualitative research methods that were used to analyse qualitative data in this thesis will introduced and briefly reflected upon.

3.5.2 Qualitative research methods: data analysis

Two qualitative data analysis methods were used to investigate A-level students' experiences: reflexive thematic analysis and a variation of content analysis that I will refer to as 'quantitative

content analysis'[10]. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to generate in-depth, detailed and contextualised descriptions of A-level students' experiences in Studies 1, 2 and 3. It was chosen for several reasons: first, because it is flexible (meaning that it can be used to analyse different types of data and can be adapted to suit a range of different aims, research questions and theoretical positions); second, because it is both suitable for novice qualitative researchers and can be used to conduct high quality, doctoral-level research; and third, because it facilitates particularly deep interpretive engagement with qualitative data; and fourth, because it focus on across-case patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2013, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021).

Reflexive thematic analysis involves interpreting recurring, coherent and meaningful patterns across the dataset, and is used to actively generate rich (and often unexpected) insights into the topic being investigated; it also values the reflexive (i.e. self-conscious and -critical; Tracy, 2010) interpretation of the researcher and the inherently partial and perspectival story that they wish to tell about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2013, 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Despite being predicated on subjective interpretation, reflexive thematic analysis

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[10] This name has been adopted within this thesis in order to explicitly distinguish the variation of content analysis that I adopted from other approaches to content analysis, such as conventional, directed and summative content analysis (Hseigh & Shannon, 2005). The approach to content analysis that I have used is based on the clear but flexible (i.e. adaptable) procedures that are described by Elo & Kyngäs (2008) and Stemler (2001), in particular. The name 'quantitative content analysis' has been chosen to describe the variation of content analysis that I have used in Studies 2 and 3 because it is a term that has been used to depict approaches to analysing qualitative data that are predicated on systematically assigning coded segments of data to categories and then describing the number of coded extracts of data that each category contains using statistics (Mayring, 2000; Morgan, 1993; Rouke & Anderson, 2004).

– when it is conducted properly – is rigorous in the sense that it is based on thorough coding; engagement with across-case or dataset-wide patterns; personal and epistemological reflexivity[11]; the construction of logical and coherent arguments; and the thoughtful use of excepts data to ground, support and situate analytic claims (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2013, 2021b, 2022; Nowell et al., 2017; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). When conducting this thesis, reflexive thematic analysis has been adopted whenever possible, albeit in different ways. In other words, reflexive thematic analysis has been used to conduct all of the qualitative data analyses, other than when A-level students had been asked to describe their experiences or perceptions using three words or phrases; it was not used on these occasions because the data that these questions generated was not sufficiently rich enough to permit for reflexive thematic analysis to be conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2013, 2021a, 2022; Braun et al., 2020; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). (In as far as I am aware, no form of thematic analysis is appropriate for such data).

On the four occasions that reflexive thematic analysis has been used, I have attempted to explain the variations of it that I have used in enough detail to enable the reader to evaluate its quality (Elliot et al., 1999; Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2013, 2021a, 2021b, 2022; Nowell et al., 2017; Tracy, 2010; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). What has united all of the reflexive thematic analyses, however, is that they have been conducted from an experiential orientation and a critical realist

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[11] Put simply, personal reflexivity refers to critically reflecting on, and acknowledging, how the researcher's experiences, beliefs, values and social identities influence the development of research questions, data collection and analyses processes (i.e. the research process), whereas epistemological reflexivity refers to this in relation to assumptions knowledge (Willig, 2013).

position. In other words, the purpose of the reflexive thematic analyses has been to use the participants' spoken or written language to access, and develop a better understanding of, students' experiences of studying A-levels (experiential orientation; Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2021a, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). I have also assumed that while a material reality exists independently of our ideas about it, I have accepted that representations of this reality have been mediated by the data collection methods; my values, experiences and perceptions (i.e. subjectivity); the participants' language; and underlying cultural, social and economic structures or mechanisms (critical realist position; Willig, 2012, 2013). Consequently, when conducting reflexive thematic analysis, I have sought to interpret – and 'make sense' of – what the participants have said or written in an effort to understand their experiences rather than accepting it at 'face value' as a 'mirror' of reality (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2022; Willig, 2012, 2013).

Quantitative content analysis was used in Studies 2 and 3 for two purposes: first, in order to categorise the words and phrases that A-level students use to describe their experience of sixth form (so that they could be compared to those used by participants in previous research; Nash et al., 2016, 2021); and second, to categorise the words and phrases that A-level students use to describe what they worry about most frequently. Quantitative content analysis was used for these purposes because it is a transparent, systematic and replicable method of 'compressing', 'distilling' or 'sifting' large amounts of (small segments of) qualitative data (Stemler, 2001), such as 'words and phrases' (Cavanagh, 1997), and can be used to generate a 'broad description' of the topic being studied (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Furthermore, quantitative content analysis can be used to make

inferences from qualitative data when alternative data collection methods are not ethical or practical (Stemler, 2001). In this sense, quantitative content analysis can be used as a 'last resort', offering insights into topics that would otherwise remain untouched due to ethical or practical concerns (as discussed in greater depth at the end of this chapter). What has united all of the quantitative content analyses is that they have been conducted from an experiential orientation and a direct – or naïve – realist position, meaning that I have attempted to use the participants' language to directly access their experiences and perceptions (Madill et al., 2000; Willig, 2012, 2013).

3.5.3 Qualitative research: Big Q and little q qualitative research

Qualitative research can be grounded to varying extents in qualitative or quantitative paradigms and can, therefore, be distinguished between Big Q and little q qualitative research, respectively (Kidder & Fine, 1987[12], cited in Willig, 2013). Paradigms within the social sciences exist on a spectrum and can be defined as the framework of beliefs, values and practices – or 'worldviews' – that inform research (Morgan, 2007). Qualitative paradigms value meaning and generally position knowledge as being both constructed by researchers and situated within specific contexts; qualitative paradigms also value researcher subjectivity and what it can 'bring to the table' as an asset (Willig, 2013). Quantitative paradigms, on the other hand, value numerical measurements and typically position knowledge as being discovered; quantitative paradigms also seek to control,

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[12] The University of York does not provide access to this publication, but I have read about in several others (for example, Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2021a, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021; Willig, 2013).

distance or subdue researcher subjectivity, which is often thought of as introducing contamination, bias or distortion to the process of knowledge production (Muijs, 2011). Thus, in quantitative paradigms, the researcher is "(ideally) detached, neutral and unbiased – more of an instrument that a person" (Willig, 2013, p. 25). In this sense, knowledge generation within a qualitative paradigm could be compared to building, painting or sculpting, whereas knowledge acquisition within a quantitative paradigm could be compared to excavating, digging or treasure hunting (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Willig, 2013).

Reflexive thematic analysis is a Big Q form of qualitative research because it is grounded in a qualitative paradigm which values researcher subjectivity, frames knowledge as situated and attempts to explore meaningful patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2021a, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021), whereas quantitative content analysis is as a particularly little q form qualitative research because it compromises qualitative paradigmatic values by seeking to quell researcher subjectivity as far as reasonably possible; code in an objective and replicable manner; and describe findings using statistics (Stemler, 2001). Indeed, whether quantitative content analysis should be considered a qualitative method at all is debated because of its emphasis on the quantification of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Hseih & Shannon, 2005; Morgan, 1993; Willig, 2013), but it will be discussed within this section due to its shared use of qualitative data and procedures such as data familiarisation and coding (discussed below). As data familiarisation and coding are foundational to both reflexive thematic analysis and quantitative content analysis (and were, therefore, used in Studies 1, 2 and 3), they will be discussed in next in the next section, before the different

approaches to constructing themes and categories in reflexive thematic analysis and quantitative content analysis are turned to, respectively.

3.5.4 Qualitative research methods: data familiarisation

Both reflexive thematic analysis and quantitative content analysis involve data familiarisation, whereby the researcher immerses themselves in, and critically engage with, the data in an effort to enhance their capacity to navigate, understand and interpret it (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2013, 2021a, 2021c, 2022; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Generally, data familiarisation is achieved by attentively and repeatedly reading and reflecting on the data being studied and recording provisional notes about it. The purpose of data familiarisation is, therefore, to both foster familiarity and cultivate critical engagement: it helps the researcher to develop better understanding of the context(s) in which statements are made, the potential meaning(s) of statements and how frequently they occur – or are patterned – across the dataset (Elliot, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2013, 2021a, 2021c, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). To a limited extent, data familiarisation could be compared to a reconnaissance, in which an athlete repeatedly traverses a particular course in an effort to aid their appreciation of its terrain: the aim being to identify unexpected corners where slipping may occur, or to prepare for elongated inclines or sharp descents where a higher degree of attention and sustained effort may be needed. This analogy is limited, however, because data familiarisation is not conducted 'once and for all'. Rather, it is a process of 'zooming in' and 'zooming out', which requires patience, concentration and a willingness to be returned to at later stages in the analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2021a,

2021c, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Data familiarisation could, therefore, be better compared to repeatedly reading a novel in preparation to write an essay about it: the aim is not just to understand what happens, but to begin the process of observing, and thinking carefully about, potentially important patterns.

3.5.5 Qualitative research methods: coding

Following data familiarisation, both reflexive thematic analysis and quantitative content analysis also involve coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008), which is sometimes referred to as 'indexing', 'labelling' or 'tagging' (Elliot, 2018). Coding involves designating labels to segments of data using 'essence-capturing', 'evocative' and 'salient' words or brief phrases which succinctly summarise the meaning that the researcher is attributing to them (Saldaña, 2013). The purpose of coding is to aid researchers' attempts to organise, understand and interpret data that is otherwise too dense, disparate and unmanageable to "make sense of" (Creswell, 2015, p. 152). In so far as it requires researchers to critically reflect on and "spend time with [the data]" (Elliot, 2018, p. 2851), coding can also be thought of as a continuation of the data familiarisation process. In this sense, coding helps researchers to determine what is and is not important in the dataset and can, therefore, be thought of – to at least some extent – as a process of "reducing the data" (Elliot, 2018, p. 2854). Indeed, coding has been likened to the process of 'condensation' (Miles et al., 2014), as well as the process of 'winnowing', whereby unwanted chaff is removed from the desired grain (Creswell, 2015). Coding can, therefore, be thought of as a 'resource' or 'tool' for isolating – and organising – the most meaningful elements of the data in relation to the research question

being addressed (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2013; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Thus, coding could be loosely compared to reduction cooking, whereby liquid (data) is simmered (coded) until a desirable or satisfactory concentration (understanding of what aspects of the data appear to be most important) has been reached; what is considered to be a desirable or satisfactory concentration will be dependent, to varying extents, on the perspective of the cook (researcher), as well as the requirements of the meal (the aims and researcher question[s] being addressed).

In both reflexive thematic analysis and quantitative content analysis, coding is considered to be a context-dependent decision-making process which involves researchers recording aspects of the data that they perceive to be relevant to their research question (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2021; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). In reflexive thematic analysis, however, the aim is not to code in an 'accurate' or 'replicable' manner, because subjective interpretations of data cannot be inaccurate, only more or less nuanced or complex (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). In contrast, in quantitative content analysis, coding should be valid and reliable (Stemler, 2001); in content analysis (in general), coding schemes are often created to ensure that the analysis can be easily revised or replicated (Elo et al., 2014). Replication is not considered to be a useful concept in reflexive thematic analysis, however, because subjective interpretations differ from person to person, depending on their theoretical orientation(s) and position in relation to the data (as discussed in greater detail below; Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). This means that Nash et al.,'s (2021) coding of the words 'challenging', 'difficult' and 'hard' as *negative*, for example, could be considered to be unconvincing (but not 'wrong') from

the perspective of reflexive thematic analysis, and inaccurate from the perspective of quantitative content analysis, as the evaluative criteria for the two approaches are predicated on different paradigmatic values. In either case, the coding could be considered to lack plausibility, because it does not necessarily reflect what has been expressed by the participants.

Coding can also be thought of as providing the foundations or building blocks for subsequent, more insightful pattern-based qualitative data analysis[13] (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Willig, 2013). "theme is an outcome of coding, categorization, or analytic reflection, not something that is, in itself, coded" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 14). Indeed, coding is a purposeful, pragmatic and problem-focused means to an end and "never an end in itself" (Richards, 2015, p. 105). The outcome of interest (i.e. 'end') is generally the development of categories or themes, and the problem is that, in the absence of coding, it is not possible for qualitative data analysis to be conducted in a complex, rigorous and systematic manner because the data remains too disorderly for researchers to "get to grips with" (Elliot, 2018, p. 2851). Indeed, coding opens up opportunities for 'headspace', reflection and inspiration (Gough & Lyons, 2016). Thus, in both reflexive thematic analysis and quantitative content analysis, coding is conceptualised as an adaptable technique which is used by researchers to assist their attempts to condense, arrange and contextualise data in an effort to render it manageable enough for them to begin identifying and interpreting aspects of the

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[13] Pattern-based qualitative data analysis methods include reflexive thematic analysis, grounded theory and interpretive phenomenological analysis, among other methods (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

data that are - or at least appear to be - pertinent to their research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006,

2012, 2013, 2021a, 2022; Cavanagh, 1997; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Terry & Hayfield, 2021).

In general, codes can be distinguished between 'data-derived' or 'semantic' codes, which

succinctly summarise the explicit meaning *in* the data, on the one hand, and 'researcher-derived'

or 'latent' codes, which express the researcher's interpretation of the 'hidden' or implicit meaning

within the data, on the other (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Willig, 2013). Both semantic and latent codes

are usually used by researchers, although semantic codes are more common among novice

qualitative researchers, as well as when researchers are attempting to answer exploratory research

questions or describe the participants' situated experiences and perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2013,

2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021; Willig, 2013). In light of this, semantic coding was primarily used

during this (self-consciously) applied, exploratory and descriptive thesis. Codes can also be

inductive or deductive; a combination of both have been used in this thesis and will elaborated

upon in chapters 4, 5 and 6.

Crucially, coding is an iterative and recursive process in the sense that it is common for

codes to be discarded, refined or merged following a period of reflection and the development of

a deeper understanding of data (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2013, 2021a, 2022; Creswell, 2015; Elliot,

2018; Saldaña, 2013; Willig, 2013). Indeed, as the researcher's interpretation of the data develops,

most initial codes, which can often be thought of as 'first level', descriptive codes, are replaced or

accompanied by 'second level', inferential codes which integrate first level codes that share a

pattern of meaning (Punch, 2013, cited in Elliot, 2018). It is also important to note that, when

conducting reflexive thematic analysis, the same segments of data can be coded more than once if multiple (semantic or latent) meanings are apparent to the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2013, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). In turn, this means that sub-codes can be created to reflect subtle differences that exist within larger segments or 'lumps' of coded data (Saldaña, 2013). It also means that, while second level codes can be constructed from several first level codes, the distinctions between first level codes can be retained, especially when using computer assisted qualitative data analysis software programmes which "make it easier to develop complex stratified sets of codes" (Elliot, 2018, p. 2857). In contrast, when conducting quantitative content analysis, similarly sized segments of data, which are referred to as 'units of analysis', must be coded to internally consistent, mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories once – and once-only – in order to ensure that the prevalence of codes, sub- or main categories can be analysed quantitively (Stemler, 2001).

3.5.6 Qualitative research methods: Computer assisted qualitative data analysis software

Coding can be conducted by hand (by annotating and highlighting an interview transcript or questionnaire response, for example) or using computer assisted qualitative data analysis software. The latter can make it easier to: retrieve segments of data that have been assignment to codes; arrange, count and merge codes; and determine how widespread codes are across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Elliot, 2018). Computer assisted qualitative data analysis software can also make it easier to assign multiple codes to the same segments of data, as doing so by hand can be impractical, confusing and counterproductive if it leads to the data becoming more rather than less difficult to interpret (Elliot, 2018). For these reasons, NVivo 12 – a form of computer assisted

qualitative data analysis software – was used as a platform on which to code the data in Studies 1, 2 and 3. Crucially, however, NVivo 12 is not a qualitative research method; it is akin to a 'useful toolset' which still requires the craftsman or women to apply their skills (Saldaña, 2013). Indeed, in reflexive thematic analysis, "researcher subjectivity is the primary 'tool' for [data analysis]" (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, p. 15).

3.5.7 Reflexive thematic analysis: theme construction and development

In Studies 1, 2 and 3, I constructed themes in an effort to understand and interpret the coded data. Put simply, themes can be defined as "patterns of meaning anchored by a shared idea or concept" (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, p. 16). In reflexive thematic analysis, themes are actively constructed by the researcher (as discussed above) and are based on the interpretation of common and recurring patterns across the dataset[14] that are pertinent to the research question and can be underpinned by a 'central organising concept'; that is, "an idea or concept that captures and summarises the core point of a coherent and meaningful pattern in the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 328). Crucially, reflexive thematic analysis is predicated on the assumption that well-developed themes capture multifaceted, salient and insightful aspects of the data which, when combined, offer an insightful answer to the research question that is being addressed (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2021; Terry & Hayfield, 2021).

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[14] The term 'across the dataset' refers to observations that apparent in the accounts of several of the participants, but not necessarily all of them.

Importantly, in the reflexive thematic analysis, as well as many other qualitative research methods, themes are not 'discovered' and neither do they 'appear', 'arise' or 'emerge' from the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012, 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021; Saldaña, 2013; Vapio et al., 2017; Willig, 2013). Instead, themes are actively generated by the researcher during an organic process that is aimed at telling an "*interpretive… story about the data*" (Braun & Clarke, 2021b, p. 366, author's emphasis). Indeed, claiming that themes are discovered or found fails to acknowledge the complex interaction that takes place between the researcher and the data, as well as the high degree of creativity that researchers must proactively direct towards interpreting and organising common, coherent and meaningful across-case patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012, 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021; Vapio et al., 2017; Willig, 2013). Thus, "if themes 'reside' anywhere, they reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them" (Ely et al., 1997, p. 205-6, cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80).

Coding, as highlighted above, can be "understood as part of a resource to assist the construction of themes" (Terry & Hayfield, 2021, p. 41). This is because codes and the segments of data that are captured by them help researchers to create 'candidate' or 'prototype' themes, which are developed and iteratively revised until a sufficient number of multifaceted and distinct themes have been crafted to answer the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2019, 2021a, 2021c, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Indeed, codes are either clustered on the basis of shared patterns of meaning or 'promoted' to themes if they are sufficiently complex and insightful (Braun

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& Clarke, 2012, 2019, 2021a, 2021c, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Themes are, however, more

than a combination of codes because the codes need to be organised and interpreted by researcher;

in this sense, themes are analytic 'outputs' rather than 'inputs' (as discussed below; Braun & Clarke,

2012, 2013, 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Themes cannot – as mentioned –

be 'right' or 'wrong', but they can be strong or weak[15]: strong analyses are plausible, coherent,

thoughtful, insightful and useful, whereas weak analyses are unconvincing, underdeveloped,

superficial, 'thin' or unhelpful (Braun & Clarke, 2021a).

Importantly multiple themes or sub-themes are required to capture "something important

about the data in relation to the research question" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 82), as well as "tell

a rich story" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 56), and need to be presented in a logical and integrated

order (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2013, 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021; Tracy,

2010). Thus, when judging the quality of a reflexive thematic analysis, 'the proof is in the pudding';

it cannot be evaluated exclusively on the basis of how well the coding has been conducted, for

example. Rather, reflexive thematic analyses need to be considered 'as a whole' and can, therefore,

be compared to a patchwork quilt which is comprised of:

> …separately patterned squares. Each of the patterned squares can be
>
> understood as akin to a theme… (the pieces of fabric which create those
>
> patterns are akin to codes). Each of the… squares need to be organised,

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[15] The strength of reflexive thematic analyses exists on a spectrum; there is no 'cut-off' point between strong and weak
analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2021b, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021).

coherent and distinct; and combined together, they need to work to create

an *overall* patchwork pattern for the quilt. The patterning requires

organisation to give it meaning. The partwork only works if lots of

different pieces of fabric (codes) contribute towards creating organised

and coherent patterns (themes), which are distinct from other patterns,

and which work together to make an overall pattern (the analysis) (Braun

& Clarke, 2013, p. 231, authors' emphasis)

While reflective thematic analysis is based on six procedural phases[16] (data familiarisation; coding;

candidate theme construction; theme development; defining and naming themes; and reporting

themes; Braun & Clarke, 2012; Terry & Hayfield, 2021), it is important to recognise that this model

is rarely linear, simple or straightforward and "should never be rushed" (Braun et al., 2016, p. 198).

Indeed, it has been suggested that while the phases provide structure and make reflexive thematic

analysis accessible to novice qualitative researchers, they risk representing reflexive thematic

analysis as "akin to walking… up a flight of steps, where your progress from start to finish is clear

and direct" (Braun et al., 2016, p. 198). In contrast, the progression from one phase to another is

– as I have experienced – often slow, difficult and iterative:

[Reflexive thematic analysis is] like following a hose through long grass,

where you cannot clearly see the way ahead, and the path is not direct:

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[16] These phases are different from those presented by Braun & Clarke (2006), reflecting advances in the development
of this method (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2019, 2021b).

sometimes you move forwards; other times you coil back on yourself.

Doing [reflexive thematic analysis] (well) usually involves a recursive,

reflexive process of moving forwards (and sometimes backwards)... these

steps must not be followed in robotic repetition (Braun et al., 2016, p.

198)

When using reflexive thematic analysis in Studies 1, 2 and 3, I have sought to avoid "slavish or

unthinking adherence to procedures" (Braun & Clarke, 2021c, p. 343). Indeed, I have to used,

adapted and modified the procedural phases in light of what I considered to be best suited to the

analysis at hand (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2021b, 2022; Chamberlain, 2000; White, 2013). I have

explained and justified the specific approaches that I took to conducting reflexive thematic analysis

in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

When learning how to conduct reflexive thematic analysis, I made several initial mistakes,

partly because I read several peer-reviewed journal articles that had claimed to have used reflexive

thematic analysis, but had not, and therefore acted as misleading examples (for example, Tunney

et al., 2017). The analysis presented in Chapter 3, for example, was conducted twice from the

beginning prior to being revised a third time before it was considered to be 'good enough'[17] to

answer the research question (Vapio et al., 2017). Indeed, the first iteration of the analysis resulted

in three excessively broad, bloated and unwieldy themes, which captured the most obvious

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[17] I use the term 'good enough' in an attempt to acknowledge that none of the analyses are 'perfect', not to display
complacency.

patterns in the dataset; this, I later learnt, is a common mistake, especially for novice qualitative researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2022; Connelly & Peltzer, 2016; Terry & Hayfield, 2021; Willig, 2013). Nevertheless, it was not a 'wasted effort', because "no effort expended on the data is ever wasted" (Terry & Hayfield, p. 45). Indeed, after realising in spring 2021 that the analysis had been foreclosed prematurely in summer 2020 (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016), it was started again from the beginning (i.e. starting with data familiarisation), with coding being conducted in light of a better understanding of: (i) how to code; and (ii) what the purpose of coding is within the context of reflexive thematic analysis (namely, to aid the researcher's subjective interpretation of the data rather than to code 'accurately' and in a frightened and paranoid manner about 'what someone else might think'). The second attempt to conduct the reflexive thematic analysis resulted in the construction of eight, tightly focused themes, which were later revised to create the five multifaceted and distinct themes that are presented in Chapter 4. I also revised the analysis presented in Chapter 5 after realising that I had confused codes and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). During this time, I occasionally felt alone and lost in the wilderness as I was without an experienced qualitative researcher to provide feedback on the quality of my analysis. Despite this, my understanding of how to conduct reflexive thematic analysis developed dramatically during this period, as I read widely and attentively, and held myself to the highest standard I knew how to (hence revising the analyses presented in Chapters 4 and 5 on several occasions). Since then, I have reflected frequently on the following observation:

> Becoming a qualitative researcher occurs both through intentional,
> directed effort and via informal, implicit learning… In reading the works
> of others, we learn how to conduct research and how to communicate
> within our academic environment… As we develop our researcher
> identities through reading others' research manuscripts, and receiving
> feedback on our own writing, we gradually absorb the practices of that
> community (Vapio et al., 2017, p. 47).

I found reflecting on this observation useful because it helped me to understand where I had gone wrong: I had placed too much faith in the assumption that peer-reviewed journal articles that claim to have used reflexive thematic analyses can be looked on as 'exemplars'; this is not the case (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2021b; Terry & Hayfield, 2021; Trainer & Bundon, 2021). Furthermore, I agree that "for qualitative research to flourish…, students and early career researchers require more sophisticated, in-depth instruction than is currently offered (Gough & Lyons, 2016, p. 234).

Throughout this thesis, the themes and sub-themes have been named using a combination of the participants' language and short, playful names that offer an insight into the core idea or central organising concept that they capture (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Segments of coded data have also been presented frequently during the reporting of the themes in an effort to simultaneously provide evidence for the analytic claims being made and to add depth, coherence and multivocality to the analyses (Tracy, 2010). In doing so, an attempt has been made

to position the voices of the participants in Studies 1, 2 and 3 at the forefront of the analyses (Creswell, 2015).

I concluded the analyses when I thought that I had constructed a sufficiently "compelling, coherent and useful story in relation to the research question" (Braun & Clarke, 2021c, p. 207); the concept of saturation was not considered to be useful within the context of this research because it is always possible for additional or more nuanced insights or interpretations to be constructed (Braun & Clarke, 2021b; Vapio et al., 2017). Once the themes had been reported, I asked myself the following questions in an attempt to evaluate whether I had conducted reflexive thematic analysis well enough for the purpose of this research:

- Are the themes rich and multifaceted?

- Are the themes internally consistent and distinct?

- Are the themes 'artistically interpretive', analytic outputs?

- Are the themes named using 'creative', engaging and catchy titles?

- Are the themes underpinned by a core idea or central organising concept?

- Are the themes based on recurring, coherent and meaningful across-case patterns?

- Are the themes anchored by, and grounded in, the participants' accounts of their realities?

- Are the themes telling convincing, insightful and useful stories in relation to the research question being addressed, as well as an overall story?

These questions were based my interpretation of the assumptions, criteria and critical questions for evaluating the quality reflexive thematic analyses that have been proposed (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2021b, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021), in addition to the criteria for evaluating the quality of qualitative analyses more generally (Elliot et al., 1999; Tracy, 2010).

3.5.8 Quantitative content analysis: category creation and refinement

Given that content analysis is an 'umbrella' term that captures a wide variety of data analysis techniques that are aimed at "compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding" (Stemler, 2001, p .8), I will provide a brief overview the variation of it that I used in Studies 2 and 3 in this section before describing it in greater detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

In quantitative content analysis, following data familiarisation, the researcher must decide on what 'unit of analysis' (i.e. size segment of data) is to be coded (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Stemler, 2001). Thus, because I only used quantitative content analysis on occasions when participants had been asked to describe their experiences using three words or phrases, the words and phrases were treated as units of analysis (i.e. phrases were not 'dissected', but coded 'as a whole'). Each unit of analysis was coded once – and once-only – and I developed and refined coding schemes to ensure that the data were coded as coherently, transparently and systematically as reasonably possible (Stemler, 2001; Elo et al., 2014).

Once the data has been coded, similar or closely related codes that I considered to share the same or similar meaning and, therefore, belong together, were merged (Cavanagh, 1997). This process was repeated until a sufficiently exhaustive list of internally consistent and mutually exclusive categories has been created (Stemler, 2001). In other words, all of the words and phrases were assigned to categories that they could be considered to belong; none one the words or phrases 'fell between' categories (Cavanagh, 1997; Stemler, 2001). A miscellaneous category was created for words and phrases that did not fit into the other categories and were used by fewer than 5% of the participants. Once enough categories had been created to adequately capture the meanings that I considered the words and phrases to express, the categories were grouped in order to create 'higher order' categories (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). For the analysis of the words and phrases that participants used to describe their experience of sixth form, I differentiated between sub- and main categories, with the latter being used to contain all of the words and phrases that had been assigned to the former.

What constitutes an appropriate number of categories within the context of quantitative content analysis is situation-dependent and important the researcher to decide, explain and justify: "there is no simple, 'right' way of doing it" (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 113). In light of this, the decisions that I have made when analysing the words and phrases that the participants provided to describe their experiences of sixth form and what they worry about most frequently in Studies 2 and 3 have been described in detail in Chapters 5 and 6. Generally, however, I followed five procedural phases, which I derived from the procedures described by Elo & Kyngäs (2008) and

Stemler (2001), in particular: data familiarisation; semantic coding; coding scheme development and refinement; category formation; and reporting. The second, third and fourth phases (i.e. semantic coding; coding scheme development and refinement; and category formation) were the most interconnected, iterative and recursive. The coding schemes that I created can be found in Appendices 7 and 8.

In quantitative content analysis, it is up to the researcher to present the findings in whatever way they consider best or most useful. In this thesis, I have reported how many participants in Studies 2 and 3 used at least one word or phrase to describe their experiences in a particular way; the number and proportion of words or phrases that were assigned to specific sub- and main categories; and the types of words and phrases that the participants used first. The words or phrases that the participants used first were reported on the grounds that it could be assumed to be the case that the first term is the one that best represents the participants' experiences and, therefore, immediately 'springs to mind'. The participants were not, however, asked to provide the terms in a particular order.

All of the sub- and main categories were named using a combination of 'content-characteristic' words or phrases and multiple examples of the words and phrases that were assigned to each category have been presented (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). While content analysis does "not proceed in a linear fashion" (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 113), it was – in this thesis – far simpler and more straightforward than conducting reflexive thematic analysis because it relied on coding and categorising particularly small segments of data (i.e. words and phrases) which did not require a

deep interpretive engagement. Nevertheless, it still required time for me to learn how to conduct quantitative content analysis 'well enough', and the analyses were revised after periods of critical reflection.

3.5.9 Qualitative research methods: final reflections

In Chapters 4, 5 and 6, below, I have attempted to describe the qualitative data collection and analysis processes in enough detail to enable readers to clearly understand and evaluate how they were conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2021b, 2022; Elliot et al., 1999; Elo et al., 2014; Nowell et al., 2017; Terry & Hayfield, 2021; Tracy, 2010). I have also attempted to enable readers to determine the extent the which the findings can be transferred to the experiences of other A-level students or different situations by writing clearly; using quotations to illustrate the analytic claims; and describing the samples and data collection processes and contexts in detail (Smith, 2018). In addition, the themes that were constructed from Studies 1 and 2 have been discussed informally with a small number of recent A-level students within my social network in an attempt to gain in insight into whether they resonate, reverberate or 'ring true' with their experiences (Smith, 2018), which they did. Furthermore, the data for Studies 2 and 3 will be deposited in an anonymous format on Research Data York in February 2022, meaning that other researchers will be able to access and analyse it in line with open science practices. In the next section, I will introduce the quantitative research methods that this thesis used.

3.6 Quantitative research methods

Quantitative data is either numerical or derived from measures that can be converted to numbers; it is used to investigate relationships between different variables (i.e. measurements that can vary; Muijs, 2011). In this section, I will introduce the quantitative data collection and analysis methods that were used in Studies 2 and 3. I will also briefly describe the demographic information that was gathered for participants in Study 1.

Quantitative data was mainly collected via a cross-sectional survey of 136 A-level students during the Covid-19 pandemic (in summer 2020; Study 2; Chapter 5); and a follow-up longitudinal survey of 42 of the participants who had completed the cross-sectional survey (in February 2021; Study 3; Chapter 6). In Study 2, a cross-sectional survey was adopted in an effort to capture a broad but detailed 'snapshot' of A-level students' experiences of post-16 education (de Vaus, 2001). In Study 3, a longitudinal survey – of the participants who had completed the cross-sectional survey and been in Year 12 at the time – was adopted in the hope that second timepoint (February 2021) would offer a better insight into how A-level students experience ordinarily experience sixth form; it had not been anticipated that A-level students would again be learning in online format at that time. Thus, as discussed below, Study 3 offers an insight into how students' experiences of studying A-levels were influenced by the ongoing disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in the cancellation of examinations in January 2021.

3.6.1 Quantitative research methods: overarching aims

In short, quantitative research methods were primarily used to investigate the severity of A-level students' experiences of depression, anxiety and stress / tension; how often A-level students feel stressed (in general) or pressured by their academic work (specifically); what strategies A-level students use to cope with academic demands; and how these variables a) interact with one another and b) differ between genders (male and female) and timepoints (summer 2020 and February 2021).

Better understanding the above was considered to be important for several reasons. First, because prior qualitative research has suggested that A-level students may be experiencing a lot of pressure to perform well, to the extent that it may be harming their mental health (Finch et al., 2010; Nash et al., 2016, 2021; Study 1). Thus, A-level students' experiences of stress (in general), academic pressure (specifically) and scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension were measured so that a) they could be gauged more clearly; and b) so that associations between these variables could be investigated. I considered doing this to be important because it cannot be assumed that students who report experiencing a greater amount of academic pressure or stress experience a high degree of negative emotional symptoms because how education-related stressors are interpreted and responded to by students mediates their affect (Compas et al., 2001; Putwain, 2007). In this vein, generating a better understanding of how A-level students cope with academic demands was also considered to be important because adolescent coping is an 'under-researched'

topic in the UK (Stapley et al., 2020[18]). Thus, I thought that capturing what strategies A-level students use to cope with academic demands – and what implications these have for their mental health – could provide an insight into: i) what type of coping strategies A-level students are currently using; ii) what type of coping strategies A-level students should be encouraged to use or discouraged from using; and iii) what type of coping strategies pastoral care teams or senior mental health leads should look out for when attempting to identify students who may be experiencing psychological distress. This was considered to be particularly important because prior (qualitative) research has found that A-level students complain of not being taught how to cope with the academic demand that are made of them (Deuker, 2014; Powell, 2017; Study 1), and that even students who experience a lot of stress express reluctance to seek support from adults (Chamberlain et al., 2010; Finch et al., 2011; Study 1).

It is also important to note that because it is well-established that older teenage girls are more likely than their male counterparts to experience mental ill-health (for example, Vizard et al., 2018; Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2021; Wright et al., 2020), and are also significantly less likely to use unambiguously positive language to describe their experience of sixth form (Nash et al., 2016, 2021), differentiating between male and female participants' scores was considered to be

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[18] This statement was made in a peer-reviewed journal article that had been co-authored by Professor Miranda Wolpert (Director of Mental Health at the Wellcome Trust) and Professor Jessica Deighton (Director of the Evidence Based Practice Unit at the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families). I point this out because I am conscious that claiming that a topic 'under-researched' is a subjective, value-laden statement. The article had been published online in 2019.

worthwhile. In addition, A-level students experiences in summer 2020 and February 2021 were compared in an effort to contribute to our understanding of how the Covid-19 pandemic influenced A-level students' experiences of post-16 education.

3.6.2 Quantitative research methods: evaluating claims

Quantitative research methods were also used to evaluate two sets of claims. The first set of claims were based on the notion that the type of words and phrases that A-level students use to describe their experience of sixth form can offer insight into the quality of their mental health (Nash et al., 2016, 2021). In order to do this, the findings from quantitative content analysis formed the basis for differentiating between participants according to whether they had used: i) two or more unambiguously positive words or phrases to describe their experience of sixth form; ii) at least one word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form as *stressful, intense or overwhelming*[19]; iii) and whether the first word that they used to describe their experience of sixth form was categorised as such. The second set of claims were about how students experience studying A-levels, especially in comparison to GCSEs, and were generated from (qualitative) findings from Study 1, as well as prior qualitative research (Brown, 2021; Deuker, 2014; Hernandez-Martinez et al. 2011; Powell, 2017). Thus, I adopted a mixed-methods, abductive approach to data analysis, in which I used qualitative analyses to generate theories that I later evaluated using quantitative analyses (Morgan, 2007).

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[19] This is one of the main categories that will be presented in Chapters 5 and 6.

In order to measure depression, anxiety, stress / tension and the coping strategies that A-level students use in response to academic demands, validated scales were used. Validated scales are measurements that have been developed, evaluated and revised to ensure that they provide a valid and reliable insight into the phenomena that they meant capture. In other words, validated scales are trusted to measure phenomena accurately (validity) and can be relied upon to do so consistently (reliability; Muijs, 2011). Prior to introducing the scales that were used, and the demographic information that was collected, I will identify the cut-offs that I used to determine the strength of statistical findings throughout this thesis.

3.6.3 Quantitative data analysis: cut-offs for statistical tests

In order to be clear and consistent in Studies 2 and 3, the same cut-offs for determining the strength of the findings were used; these were based on the widely accepted 'rules of thumb' that are recommended by Muijs (2011). In null hypothesis tests, for example, an alpha level of .05 was used to determine whether differences observed between separate groups of participants' scores were significant. In other words, whenever a p value was lower than .05, this meant that the chance of observing a disparity between the scores of that size or bigger with another sample from the same population is less than 1 in 20. The same cut-off was used for determining whether correlation analyses (which are discussed below) were significant or likely to be the result of sampling error or random variation.

To determine the magnitude of the differences between the scores of separate groups (for example, male versus female participants' scores for depression), the following cut-offs – which

are recommended by Muijs (2011) – were used to differentiate between the strength of different effect sizes:

0.00 – 0.20 = weak

0.21 – 0.50 = modest

0.51 – 0.99 = moderate

> 1.00 = strong

When conducting correlation analyses, which are used to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between two variables, the following cut-offs were adapted[20] from those suggested by Muijs (2011) to evaluate their strength:

+/- 0.00 – 0.04 = negligible

+/- 0.05 – 0.09 = weak

+/- 0.10 – 0.29 = modest

+/- 0.30 – 0.49 = moderate

+/- 0.50 – 0.79 = strong

+/- 0.80 – 1.00 = very strong

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[20] Muijs (2011) does not explicitly recommend differentiating between negligible and weak correlations, so I incorporated a cut-off of my own.

Finally, when using linear regression, which is an extension of correlation analyses that is used to estimate how much a dependent variable will vary as the independent variable does, the following cut-offs – which are again recommended by Muijs (2011) – were used to determine the strength of the model:

0.00 – 0.09 = poor

0.10 – 0.29 = modest

0.30 – 0.49 = moderate

> 0.50 = strong

In the next section, I will describe the quantitative data collection methods that were used in Studies 2 and 3. First, however, I will briefly mention the quantitative data that was collected in Studies 1 and 2 for the purpose of being able to describe the samples clearly.

3.6.4 Study 1: demographic information

For the semi-structured interview-based study (Study 1), it was considered important to describe the sample in enough detail to enable the reader to understand who took part and, therefore, situate and enhance the transferability of the findings (Smith, 2018; Tracy, 2010), albeit without over-burdening the participants or making them feel as though they were being examined, judged, or tested (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Thus, the participants were asked to complete a short form prior to beginning the audio-recorded interview, in which they asked to state their age; gender identity; year of study; the subjects that they were studying; and whether they were completing an

Extended Research Project (EPQ). (On reflection, it would have been beneficial to have asked the participants to share their ethnicity and their parents', carers' or guardians' occupations, as well as whether their parents, carers or guardians had been to university.)

In order to measure the participants' generalised anxiety, they were asked to complete the seven-item Generalised Anxiety Disorder Assessment (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2006). The GAD-7 is a brief, validated and relatively unintrusive scale which requires participants to rate on a four-point scale (0 = 'Not at all'; 3 = 'Nearly every day') how often they have been 'bothered' by problems such as: 'Becoming easily annoyed or irritable', 'Trouble relaxing' and 'Worrying too much about different things' over the past fortnight. Scores of 5, 10 and 15 are used as cut-offs for mild, moderate and severe generalised anxiety disorder, respectively. The GAD-7 was used purely in order to describe the sample clearly and, therefore, better understand who the findings can and cannot be transferred to.

3.6.5 Studies 2 and 3: demographic information

For the cross-sectional and longitudinal surveys (Studies 2 and 3), it was again considered to be important to describe the sample in enough detail to enable the reader to understand who took part and, therefore, situate and enhance the generalisability of the findings (Muijs, 2011). Thus, the participants were asked to provide a relatively extensive list of demographic information at the beginning of the questionnaire. This included: their age; gender; ethnicity; sexuality; year of sixth form; whether they attended a college or school sixth form; whether they attended a non-selective, private or grammar school-based sixth form (*if* they attended a school sixth form); what subjects

they were studying; and whether they were completing an EPQ. I provided the participants with options to all of the above.

The participants were also asked to rate how well of they considered their families to be on a five-point scale (1 = 'Not at all well off'; 3 = 'Average'; 5 = 'Very well off'). I provided this option because I thought that it would be quicker and easier for both myself[21] and the participants interpret than asking what their parents', carers' or guardians' occupations are. The measure has also been used in the 2005-2019 iterations of the Young Life and Times Survey (Access Research Knowledge [ARK], 2021). I also thought this would allow the participants to determine for themselves whether they thought that they were well off or not in comparison to their peers and, therefore, prioritise their perspective over my own. For example, I hoped that if a participant was conscious of not having access to the same resources as their peers (for example, a good quality laptop or 'brand name' clothes), this would be reflected in their response. I also thought that asking this question would feel less intrusive and, therefore, enhance their sense of "*felt* anonymity" (Braun et al., 2021, p. 645, authors' emphasis) – a consideration that was important from both a practical and ethical perspective. Finally, the participants were also asked the following question:

> All young people experience problems at some time or another, and sometimes
>
> they may seek help. In the past year, have you experienced a serious personal,
>
> emotional, behavioural or mental health problem for which you felt that you

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[21] In previous experience, I have found it difficult to understand how to interpret the answers that people provide for their occupation, especially when they have been particularly vague (naming an organisation, for example).

needed professional help (for example, from a general practitioner, social

worker, psychologist, psychiatrist or telephone helpline)?

The response options included: 1) Yes, and I asked for professional help; 2) Yes, but I did not

seek professional help; and 3) No, I have had few or no problems. This question has also been

used in the Young Life and Times Surveys, and was used in order to both describe the sample and

investigate professional support-seeking behaviours. While most of the demographic information

was collected the purpose of describing the sample, I was also conscious that poorer mental health-

related outcomes are more common among girls (Vizard et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2020); sexual

minorities (Amos et al., 2020; Irish et al., 2019); and those from poorer households (Deighton et

al., 2019; Reiss et al., 2019). Given that I had been hoping to attain a substantially larger sample

than that which I did, I thought that it would be important to take this characteristics into

consideration during statistical analyses. I will now turn to the scales that the A-levels students

who participated in Studies 2 and 3 were asked to complete.

3.6.6 Quantitative measurements: depression, anxiety and stress / tension

For a number of reasons (as described above), it was important to gauge the severity of A-level

students' experiences of what often referred to as 'common mental health difficulties' (Hagell et

al., 2012), such as depression and anxiety, in Studies 2 and 3. Thus, in order to measure the

participants' experiences of depression, anxiety and stress / tension, the participants were asked

to complete the shortened, 21-item[22] version of the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scales (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995a). These are a set of three seven-item scales that have been designed to measure the negative emotional states of depression, anxiety and stress / tension (how these constructs are conceptualised is described below). These scales require participants to rate (i.e. self-report) on a four-point scale (0 = 'Did not apply to me at all'; 3 = 'Applied to me very much or most of the time') how often they have experienced negative emotional symptoms, such as self-deprecation (depression), autonomic arousal (anxiety) and irritability (stress / tension), over the past week. The participants' scores for each item are added and doubled to create total scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension, respectively. The participants' scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension can also be averaged to produce a "composite measure for negative emotional symptoms" (Lovidbond, 2018, p. 37), which was considered to be useful within the context of this research because it permits for simpler, less convoluted analyses to be conducted.

The items included on the DASS-21 scale for depression (and what each item assesses), include:

- I felt down-hearted and blue (dysphoria)

- I felt that life was meaningless (devaluation of life)

- I felt that I had nothing to look forward to (hopelessness)

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[22] The shortened version of the DASS was chosen because it is half the length of the full-length version and is, therefore, less likely to fatigue participants; the shortened version has also been explicitly recommended as most suitable for research purposes (Lovibond, 2018).

- I felt that I wasn't worth much as a person (self-deprecation)

- I found it difficult to work up the initiative to do things (inertia)

- I couldn't seem to experience any positive feeling at all (anhedonia)

- I was unable to become enthusiastic about anything (lack of interest / involvement)

The items included on the DASS-21 scale for anxiety (and what each item assesses), include:

- I experienced breathing difficulty (autonomic arousal)

- I was aware of dryness of my mouth (autonomic arousal)

- I felt that I was close to panic (subjective experience of anxious affect)

- I was worried about situations in which I might panic (situational anxiety)

- I felt scared without any good reason (subjective experience of anxious affect)

- I experienced trembling (for example, in the hands; skeletal musculature effects)

- I was aware of the action of my heart in the absence of physical exertion (for example, sense of heart rate increase or heart missing a beat; autonomic arousal)

The items included on the DASS-21 scale for stress / tension (and what each item assesses), include:

- I found it difficult to relax (difficulty relaxing)

- I found it hard to wind down (difficulty relaxing)

- I found myself getting agitated (easily upset or agitated)

- I felt that I was rather touchy (irritable or over-reactive)

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- I tended to over-react to situations (irritable or over-reactive)

- I felt that I was using a lot of nervous energy (nervous arousal)

- I was intolerant of anything that kept me from getting on with what I was doing (impatient)

The items are presented to participants in a mixed, pre-determined order (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995a).

Importantly, in focusing on symptoms that have been experienced over the past week, the scales are designed to measure negative emotional states rather than traits (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995a), meaning that they are suited to investigating how A-level students' contemporaneous experiences of post-16 education may be affecting them emotionally. Furthermore, the scales are based on dimensional rather than categorical conceptualisions of depression, anxiety and stress / tension. In this sense, the scales are predicated on the assumption that the differences that exist between the experiences of depression, anxiety and stress / tension that are experienced by clinical and non-clinical samples belong on the same continuum, but cease to be 'normal' when they become excessively disruptive, disabling or maladaptive. Supporting this suggestion, the factor structure of the DASS-21 in clinical and non-clinical adult samples has been found to be essentially the same (Anthony et al., 1998). This conceptualisation of mental health also aligns with the definition of mental health that has been adopted for this thesis (see Chapter 1; WHO, 2018).

The DASS-21, which – as mentioned – was used in Studies 2 and 3, has been found to be a valid and reliable measures of depression, anxiety and stress / tension in non-clinical samples of adults (Anthony et al., 1998; Henry & Crawford, 2005; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995b; Sinclair et

al., 2012); adolescents aged 12-19-years-old (Le et al., 2017; Mellor et al., 2015); and undergraduates (aged ~18-22-years-old; Osman et al., 2012), and has been used in longitudinal research involving students in their final year of secondary school in Australia (aged ~17-18-years-old; Einstein et al., 2000), as well as in quasi-experimental research involving A-level students in the UK (aged 16-18-years-old; Bennet & Dorjee, 2016). Normative scores for older adolescents or young adults (aged 18-24-years-olds) on the DASS-21 are also available (Crawford et al., 2011). These factors were considered to be important within the context of this research because it meant that the participants' scores could be compared to those of students or adolescents of a similar age in prior research.

Specifically, depression is conceptualised as a multi-dimensional state which is primarily characterised by a loss of self-esteem and incentive, and is associated with a perception that one is highly unlikely to attain personal life goals; anxiety is conceptualised as multi-dimensional state which is primarily characterised by psychological fear that is derived from a sustained anticipation of harm to oneself; and stress is conceptualised as multi-dimensional state which is primarily characterised by a state of over-arousal that results from sustained difficulties to meet the demands that are being made of oneself (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995a). High scorers for depression on the DASS-21 commonly feel dispirited, self-disparaging and pessimistic about the future; high scorers for anxiety commonly feel apprehensive and worried about their performance or the prospect of losing control; and high scorers for stress / tension commonly feel easily upset, tense and unable to relax (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995a). Thus, given that researchers have previously argued that symptoms such as these can be precipitated or amplified by the demands of studying A-levels

(Chamberlain et al., 2011; Finch et al., 2010; Nash et al., 2021; Study 1), I considered these measures to be suitable within the context of this research.

The DASS-21 scales do not provide clinical thresholds, although cut-off points for normal, mild, moderate, severe and extremely severe experiences of depression, anxiety and stress / tension have been developed. It is thought that approximately 78% of adults experience a normal severity of depression, anxiety or stress / tension; 9% experience a mild amount; 8% experience a moderate amount; 3% experience a severe amount; and 2% experience an extremely severe amount (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995a). (It has previously been found, however, that more than 20% of final year secondary school students in Australia experience at least a severe amount of depression, anxiety and stress / tension in the weeks preceding their end-of-school examinations [Einstein et al., 2000].) While these cut-offs need to be thought of as tentative approximations and treated with caution (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995a), they were deemed to be useful within the context of this exploratory and descriptive research due their capacity to enable an insight into roughly what proportion of A-level students experience at least moderate severity of depression, anxiety or stress / tension. Indeed, the research question 'What proportion of A-level students experience at least a moderate severity of depression, anxiety or stress?' was developing in light of, rather than before, discovering that the DASS-21 provides these cut-offs, and that other researchers have made use of them within the context of research involving students of a similar age (Bennet & Dorjee, 2016; Einstein et al., 2000). As discussed at greater length in Chapter 5, this question was retained in the interest of open science practices, despite it not being possible to answer it confidently due to the

self-selecting, skewed and small(er than anticipated) sample, and the unusual time at which Studies 2 and 3 were conducted (i.e. during the Covid-19 pandemic).

The participants' scores for depression, anxiety, stress and negative emotional symptoms were treated as scale variables, whereas the severity of participants' symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress, which were determined using prespecified cut-off points, were treated as ordinal variables. Due to the greater degree of variability in scores – and therefore insight – that the scores provide in contrast to the categories, they have been prioritised in Studies 2 and 3 and used to conduct statistical tests. Using the DASS-21 was also shorter than using a combination of the 13-item Short Moods and Feelings Questionnaire (to measure depression; Arnold et al., 1995); the 7-item GAD-7 to measure anxiety; and 10-item Perceived Stress Scale (to measure stress; Cohen et al., 1983).

3.6.7 Quantitative measurements: stress and academic pressure

Using questions adapted from the 2004 iteration of the Young Life and Times Survey in Northern Ireland (Cairns & Lloyd, 2005), the participants were asked to rate on a five-point scale (1 = 'Never'; 3 = 'Sometimes'; 5 = 'Very often') how frequently they experience a notable amount of stress in general ('How often do you get stressed?') and how often they feel pressured by their academic work ('How often do you feel pressured by your academic work?') These scales were chosen because they are particularly brief and, therefore, reduce the risk of over-burdening or fatiguing the participants in comparison to if a longer scale had been used in combination with other scales (described immediately above and below). These scales were also chosen because of

their capacity to allow for comparisons to be made with findings from prior research involving 16-year-olds who had not yet entered post-16 education (Cairns & Lloyd, 2005), and in order to determine whether the frequency with which A-level students feel pressured by their academic work is associated with their scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension.

3.6.8 Quantitative measurement: coping with academic demands

In order to generate a comprehensive depiction of how students experience studying A-levels and what could be done to provide them with greater context-specific support, it was important to: a) capture how A-level students cope with the heightened academic demands that are made of them (for example, Study 1); and b) understand what implications this has for their mental health (as measured using the DASS-21). I considered it to be particularly important to use a scale that focuses specifically on how students cope with academic demands because it is thought that adolescents may vary in how they cope with different stressors and that coping scales should, therefore, focus on responses to specific sources of stress (Frydenberg, 2008). Thus, in order to capture what coping strategies students use in response to the demands of studying A-levels, the participants in Studies 2 and 3 were asked to complete the 58-item Coping with Academic Demands Scale (CADS; Suldo et al., 2015).

The CADS was recently developed in the USA and is aimed at understanding how students (aged 15-18-years-old) pursuing 'advanced high school curricula', such as the International Baccalaureate (IB; an internationally recognised alternative to A-levels), cope with academic demands. The CADS features sixteen (3-6 item) groups of coping strategies and, therefore, has

the potential to provide a particularly useful insight into what coping strategies students use most frequently in response to academic demands, as well as how these relate to their mental health.

The CADS requires participants to rate on a five-point scale (1 = 'Never'; 3 = 'Sometimes'; 5 = 'Almost always') how frequently they use coping strategies such as 'Prioritise the order in which you complete your work' (*time and task management*), 'Think about the bigger picture (your goals and values) to put things in perspective' (*cognitive reappraisal*), 'Ask teacher(s) questions about assignments or coursework' (*seek academic support*), 'Spend time with family' (*turn to family*), 'Keep problems to yourself' (*attempt to handle problems alone*) and 'Keep thinking about work to be done' (*deterioration*) in response to 'sixth form[23]-related challenges or stress'; mean scores are then calculated for the groups of coping strategies, which are treated as scale variables. I changed Americanised language to English ('prioritize' was changed to 'prioritise' and 'school program' was changed to 'A-level course', for example). The coping strategies included in the CADS (and an example of an item included within each group of strategies) include:

- *time and task management* (six items; 'Break work into manageable pieces')

- *cognitive reappraisal* (four items; 'Adopt an optimistic or positive attitude')

- *seek academic support* (three items; 'Ask teacher[s] about assignments or coursework')

- *turn to family* (three items; 'Spend time with family')

- *talk with classmates and friends* (four items; 'Talk to friends about what's bothering you')

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[23] The original scale used the term 'school', but I changed this to 'sixth form' for the specific focus on this research; this is also reflected in the items.

- *skip sixth form* (three items; 'Skip sixth form to avoid tests or assignments')

- *social diversions* (three items; 'Hang out with friends')

- *athletic diversions* (three items; 'Exercise [run, go to the gym or swim, for example]')

- *creative diversions* (three items; 'Write about problems and feelings')

- *technology diversion*s (three items; 'Surf the internet')

- *substance use* (three items; 'Smoke cigarettes or use other tobacco products')

- *reduce effort on schoolwork* (three items; 'Stop caring about academic work')

- *attempt to handle problems alone* (four items; 'Try to handle things on your own')

- *deterioration* (six items; 'Panic or 'freak out' about the problem without trying to fix it')

- *sleep* (three items; 'Take naps')

- and *spirituality* (three items; 'Rely on your faith to help you deal with the problem')

The CADS was chosen to measure how A-level students cope with academic demands for several reasons. First, because it reflected the heterogeneity of coping strategies that the participants who had taken part in Study 1 expressed using[24]; second, because of its specific focus on coping with academic demands rather than life more generally (Compas et al., 2001); third, because it has been designed for older teenagers (aged 15-18-year-old) studying challenging subjects (i.e. 'advanced

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[24] At the time of deciding what scale to use to measure A-level students' coping strategies, one of the prototype themes in Study 1 was called *studying A-levels requires a well-developed repertoire of coping strategies*; I had noted that the participants in Study 1 had referred to a wide variety of different approaches to coping with the academic demands of studying A-levels. This theme was, however, later de- and reconstructed. See appendix 2 for data familiarisation notes.

curricula'), which are broadly comparable to A-levels; and fourth, because the CADS has been found to shown promising signs of being a valid and reliable measure (Suldo et a., 2015). For example, the CADS has acceptable internal consistency in all but two three-item coping strategies (*seek academic support* and *technology diversions*); strong test re-rest reliability; and support for content, construct, and criterion validity (Suldo et al., 2015).

Focusing on criterion validity, for example, in research involving 727 students (aged 15-18-years-old) from six state-funded schools in the USA, greater use of *time and task management* and *cognitive reappraisal* was found to be associated with higher life satisfaction[25] and academic performance; greater use of *attempt to handle problems alone* and *deterioration* (i.e. aggression and rumination) was found to be associated with lower life satisfaction; and *skip school* and *reduce effort on schoolwork* was found to be associated with poorer academic performance (Suldo et al., 2015). Furthermore, greater use of *time and task management*, *cognitive reappraisal* and *seek academic support* was found to be associated with task-orientated coping; greater use of *turn to family*, *talk with classmates and friends* and *spirituality* was found to be associated with emotion-orientated coping; and greater use of *skip school*, *social diversions* and *reduce effort on schoolwork* was found to be associated with avoidance-orientated coping[26] (Suldo et al., 2015).

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[25] Life satisfaction was measured using the Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner, 1991).

[26] Task-, emotion- and avoidance-orientated coping was measured using the 25-item Coping with School-Related Stress Questionnaire (CWSS; Wrzesniewski & Chylinksa, 2007).

In light of the above, I hoped that using the CADS would allow me to generate a detailed and trustworthy insight into how A-level students cope with academic demands, and what coping strategies are associated with better versus poorer mental health outcomes (as measured via the DASS-21). I hoped that this, in turn, could be used to informed context-specific support for A-level students, and provide those working within the context of pastoral care in education with useful information about what kind of coping strategies those most in need of support tend to exhibit. I also chose the CADS because it is substantially shorter than the widely used 80-item Adolescent Coping Scale[27] (ASC; Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993b).

3.6.9 Study 3

As discussed above, Study 3 followed up on A-levels students who had taken part in Study 2 and were in Year 12 at the time. Thus, the same scales that had been used in Study 2 were retained in Study 3, albeit without a repeat of the demographic questions. One nine-item scale was added, in addition to an opportunity for the participants to rate their agreement with eight brief statements that had been generated from findings from Study 1, as well as prior qualitative research (Deuker, 2014; Hernandez-Martinez et al. 2011; Powell, 2017).

3.6.9.1 Motivations for studying A-levels

In order to measure motivations for studying A-levels, the participants were asked to complete a brief, nine-item scale that is aimed at measuring students' self-oriented, interest-driven; extrinsic;

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[27] I also considered the ACS to be prohibitively expensive.

and pro-social, self-transcendent (purpose for learning) motivations that has been developed in the USA (Yeager et al., 2014). This requires participants to rate on a five-point scale (1 = 'Not at all true'; 3 = 'Somewhat true'; 5 = 'Completely true'), 'How rue for you personally are each of the following reasons for going to sixth form[28]?' The items for measuring self-oriented, interest-driven motivation include:

- I want to learn more about my interests

- I want to become an independent thinker

- I want to expand my knowledge of the world

The items for measuring extrinsic motivation[29] include:

- I want to get a good job

- I want to earn more money

- I want to have fun and make new friends

The items for measuring pro-social, self-transcendent (purpose for learning) motivation include:

- I want to gain skills that I can use in a job that help others

- I want to become an educated citizen that can contribute to society

- I want to learn things that will help me make a positive impact on the world

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[28] I replaced 'college' with 'studying A-levels'.

[29] I did not include the item 'I want to leave my parents' house' because most A-level students live with their parents.

This scale was used for several reasons: first, in order to generate a more comprehensive answer to the research question 'What motivates students to study A-levels?'; second, because I thought that students who are motivated to study A-levels by primarily self-oriented, interest-driven or pro-social, self-transcendent (purpose for learning) reasons may be less likely to experience mental ill-health because that had been the impression that I had gained from Study 1 (see Appendix 2 for data familiarisation notes); and third, because prior research involving adolescents in the USA has suggested that students who study for primarily self-oriented, interest-driven or pro-social, self-transcendent (purpose for learning) reasons are more likely to persevere with difficult tasks (Yeager et al., 2014). I hoped, therefore, to extend this research by investigating whether such motivations are associated with better versus worse mental health.

3.6.9.2 Quantitative measurements: experience of studying A-levels

In order to gain an insight into how A-level students experience the transition from studying GCSEs to studying A-levels, the participants were also asked to rate on a five-point scale (1 = 'Strongly disagree'; 3 = 'Neither agree nor disagree'; 5 = 'Strongly agree') to what extent they agreed with the following statements related to the demands of studying A-Levels in comparison to GCSEs:

- There is more content to learn when studying A-levels

- The content is more difficult to understand when studying A-levels

- It is harder to remain organised and 'keep on top of things' when studying A-levels

- There is more pressure to perform well when studying A-levels

In order to gain an insight into how A-level students experience the initial stages of studying A-levels, the participants were asked to reflect on their experience of transitioning from studying GCSEs to A-levels, and to rate, on the same five-point scale (1 = 'Strongly disagree'; 5 = 'Strongly agree') to what extent they agreed with the following statements about their initial experiences of studying A-levels:

- I was surprised by how difficult studying A-levels is

- I was unprepared for how difficult studying A-levels is

- When I first began studying A-Levels, I felt well-supported by my teachers

- It took several months for me to get used to the demands of studying A-Levels

I asked the participants to rate their agreement with these statements in an effort to quantify how widespread these perceptions are, as the findings from Studies 1 and 2 – and prior research (Deuker, 2014; Hernandez-Martinez et al. 2011; Powell, 2017) – had suggested *most* students find studying A-levels particularly demanding, especially during the initial transition from Year 11 to Year 12. Furthermore, I wanted to find out whether students who struggle to negotiate this transition, and therefore take several months 'to get used to the demands of studying A-Levels', experience poorer mental health at later stages of their A-level courses. I considered this to be important because longitudinal research conducted in Scotland has found that adjustment difficulties during the transition from primary to secondary education predict higher scores for depression and lower attainment several year later at ages 15- and 18-years-old (West et al., 2010). Thus, I thought that if it is the case that the students who find the transition from studying GCSEs

to A-levels difficult experience a greater severity of mental ill-health over a year later, then this would further highlight the need to offer greater support at this stage of education.

I will now turn to the ethical considerations that were important in Studies 1, 2 and 3, before presenting the findings in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, respectively.

3.7 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for Studies 1, 2 and 3 was obtained from the Department of Education Ethics Committee before participant recruitment or data collection began. I also consulted several ethical guidelines when planning and conducting all three studies (namely, British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018; British Psychological Society [BPS], 2021; Social Policy Association [SPA], 2009),

3.7.1 Study 1: ethical considerations

I considered it to be critical to: gain informed consent from the participants before conducting the interviews; to ask the participants questions about sensitive topics in a respectful and tactful manner during the interviews in an effort to minimise the possibility of them experiencing distress; and to signpost the participants to reputable organisations that provide mental health-related information and support after the interviews had finished. I also considered it to be critical to maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants and their sixth forms. I will elaborate on how I addressed each of these considerations below.

3.7.1.1 Informed consent

I obtained informed consent from the headteachers of the sixth forms; the participants' parents; and the participants before conducting the interviews. Furthermore, I offered the participants an opportunity to read, consider and sign an informed consent form several weeks before taking part in an interview and then verbally reminded them of the purpose, focus and scope of the interview before it began. Prior to beginning the interviews, I also offered the participants an additional opportunity to ask questions; checked that the informed consent form had been signed; and reminded the participants that I would not share information that they disclose during the interviews with anyone unless they were to lead me to believe that they or someone else is going to be harmed. I also reassured the participants that they could skip questions or end the interview at any moment without needing to provide a reason for doing so, although none of the participants asked to do either.

3.7.1.2 Interview technique: building rapport and minimising potential distress

The one-to-one interviews took place in a private room in the participants' sixth forms, in which the participants were sat closest to the door. This was arranged by the teachers who had agreed to help me recruit participants. Throughout the interviews, I paid careful attention to the participants' reactions in an attempt to ensure that they were not becoming distressed by the topics that were being discussed. I also attempted to cultivate rapport with the participants and built 'warm up' and 'cool down' phases into the interview guide in an effort to ease into, and then decompress from, the most probing, sensitive and 'emotionally threatening' questions, before "setting the stage for a

friendly departure" (Luker, 2008, p. 171). Throughout the interviews, I attempted to make it clear to the participants that I was listening to, rather than testing, them, and used active listening and tactful questions or probes to sensitively explore their experiences and perceptions in greater depth. One participant referred to self-harming; two to being diagnosed with emotional disorders. I did not, however, seek more information on these topics or specify who had revealed such information in the findings in an attempt to protect the participants' identities. I did, however, allow the participants to elaborate on these topics if it seemed important to them to do so, before choosing an appropriate moment to sensitivity shift to another aspect of the interview guide.

3.1.7.3 Debriefing and signposting

Once the interviews had ended, I offered the participants another opportunity to ask questions about the purpose of the research and provided them with a list of reputable websites to refer to if they wished to learn more about stress or anxiety. These included:

- Mind (www.mind.org.uk)

- Young Minds (www.youngminds.org.uk)

- Mental Health Foundation (www.mentalhealth.org.uk)

The participants were also offered an opportunity to read, or comment on, their transcript after the interview had taken place, although none requested to do so. Several participants wished to engage in relaxed, informal conversation about higher education or psychology once the interview had finished, which I was happy to take part in.

3.1.7.4 Symbol of gratitude

As an expression of gratitude for their time and willingness to share personal information, I gifted the participants a £10 Amazon voucher to thank them for contributing to this research, which I considered to reasonable and "commensurate with good sense" (BERA, 2018, p. 19). I obtained ethical approval and a grant from the Department of Education to do this and did not explicitly advertise the vouchers as an incentive, although it is possible that – in being mentioned in the information sheet – they may have performed this function. I also confirmed with the headteachers of the sixth forms and the participants' parents via informed consent forms that they were happy for me to give the participants these vouchers. During the interviews, I gained the impression that the participants were genuinely interested in discussing their experiences of sixth form rather than taking part in the this research purely for the purpose of gaining a voucher.

3.1.7.5 Privacy and data storage

I used pseudonyms to both anonymise and humanise the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Furthermore, the data has been stored securely and remained anonymous and confidential (BERA, 2018; BPS, 2021; SPA, 2009). I also refer to the sixth forms as non-selective or grammar school sixth forms in the Midlands in order to maintain their anonymity. The informed consent forms were stored were stored in a locked filing cabinet in a room that was only accessible to staff and PhD students in the Department of Education at the University of York until the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic, when I was requested to store at home; since then, I have kept them in a locked safe.

3.7.2 Study 2: ethical considerations

Prior to the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic, the circulation of the questionnaire was planned for mid-March 2020. However, following the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic, which caused widespread anxieties, panic buying and food shortages, and resulted in a national lockdown on the 23rd March 2020, the circulation of the questionnaire was postponed due to ethical concerns. I will highlight these concerns and explained how I addressed them below.

3.7.2.1 Minimising potential harm

The circulation of the questionnaire was paused while I considered the possibility of it over-burdening teachers (by adding to their workload) and prompting participants to experience distress at a time of heightened anxieties. I discussed these concerns with my supervisors[30] and confirmed that neither the DASS-21 nor the CADS mentioned self-harm or suicidal ideations. I also removed a ten-item scale about students' motivations for studying A-levels in order to shorten the length of the questionnaire. I also decided to ask the participants' what they worry about most often frequently using three words or phrases rather than what makes them 'get stressed' because, while I wanted to understand what causes A-level students to experience stress, I did not want them dwell on this. Thus, I thought that in asking the participants to describe what they worry about most frequently using three terms, this would produce insightful but 'clipped' responses, allowing the participants to describe what they worry about most often without needing to elaborate on or

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[30] Dr Dusana Dorjee and Dr Poppy Nash were my supervisors at this time.

think about this extensively. It is also for this reason that I did not ask the participants to explain why they had chosen the terms that they had done to describe what they worry about most often.

3.7.2.2 Amplifying students' voices

I added two open-ended questions to the end of the question in an attempt to understand how A-level students felt about the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and what type of support they would ahead of the next academic year. I included these questions in the hope that I would be able to use the participants' answers to amplify their voices.

3.7.2.3 Informed consent and signposting

The informed consent form asked potential participants not to complete the questionnaire if answering questions about 'low mood, stress or anxiety' is 'likely' to upset them. It was also made clear that completion of the questionnaire was entirely voluntary and that participants could stop completing it at any moment by 'exiting the window'. The participants were told who to contact if they had questions or concerns and that they could request the deletion of their data by emailing me[31]. The participants were also told that completing the questionnaire would take approximately half an hour and that it would involve sharing information about:

- what their experiences of sixth form had been like;

- what they worry about most frequently;

- whether they have experienced low mood, anxiety or stress over the past week;

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[31] One participant requested this.

- how they cope with academic challenges;

- how they feel about the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic;

- and what kind of support they would find most helpful over the coming months.

The participants were told that the information that they share may be used in anonymous publications and will be stored in an anonymous format indefinitely; they were also provided with GDPR-related information that is provided by the University of York's Department of Education. Once the participants had read the informed consent form, they were asked to confirm that they had 'read the information' and were 'happy to participate' in this research. I also signposted potential participants to reputable organisations that provide mental health-related information and support in both the information sheet and at the end of the questionnaire. These organisations included:

- Mind (www.mind.org.uk);

- Young Minds (www.youngminds.org.uk);

- and the National Health Service (www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters).

3.7.2.4 Recruitment

Once the informed consent form and questionnaire had been submitted to, and received approval from, the University of York's Department of Education, I began contacting headteachers of school- and college-based sixth forms about the prospect of inviting A-level students at their institutions to complete it. Invitations to complete the questionnaire were circulated exclusively by

sixth form staff, rather than shared via social media platforms, in the hope that this would enhance the participants' sense that it was trustworthy and secure. If the headteachers expressed an interest in circulating the questionnaire, I sent them a link to it so that they could read it to confirm that they were happy for their students to complete it if they wished to. I used Qualtrics to conduct the survey because it has a clean, 'professional' look, meaning that it may also help to ensure that participants feel as though the information that they were sharing is secure.

3.7.3 Study 3: ethical considerations

For Study 3, I emailed participants who had taken part in Study 2, provided their email addresses and agreed to be contacted about the prospect of taking part in a follow-up questionnaire in the autumn or winter. I had initially planned to circulate the questionnaire in January 2021, but due to the unexpected national lockdown that was implemented at this time[32], I circulated invitations to complete the questionnaire in February 2021 instead. I did this in an effort to ensure that students had had an opportunity to 'settle in' to learning online and from again before being asked to reflect on their experiences. I ensured that the invitations to complete the follow-up questionnaire did not make the participants feel pressured to complete it. I did this by wording them politely; prioritising clarity and conciseness; and explicitly explaining again that the recipients were under no obligation to complete the questionnaire. I emailed the participants in the first, second and third week of February. However, because the participants had provided their email addresses when completing the follow-up questionnaire, I removed those who had already completed it from

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[32] A national lockdown began on 4th January 2021.

the follow-up invitations during the second and third week of February in an effort to prevent them from feeling pestered. In the final week of February, I emailed the participants who had completed the questionnaire to thank them for their time and offered those who had not completed it a final opportunity to do so before the end of the month. All of the emails used the blind carbon copy function in order to protect the anonymity of the recipients. Otherwise, all of the same ethical considerations that had informed Study 2 remained. Indeed, I discussed the questionnaire items with my supervisors and thesis advisory panel member and provided the participants with: an informed consent form to read, reflect on and sign before completing the questionnaire; and a list of reputable organisations that provide mental health-related information and support at both the beginning and the end of the questionnaire. Furthermore, I also ensured that the information the participants shared remained anonymous and confidential, and reminded the participants of how to request the deletion of their data.

Chapter 4 – Study 1

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the findings from the task-based, semi-structed interviews with sixteen female A-level students that were conducted in 2019 (Study 1) will be presented. Study 1 was conducted prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and aimed to explore Year 12 students' experiences of studying A-levels in their own words. Specifically, Study 1 aimed to investigate why secondary school leavers study A-levels; how A-level students experience post-16 education; what causes A-level students to experience stress or anxiety; and how students cope with experiences of stress and anxiety that arise from studying A-levels. In light of this, the purpose of Study 1 was to address the following main research questions:

- How do A-level students experience post-16 education?

- What causes A-level students to experience stress or anxiety?

- What coping strategies do A-level students use in response to academic demands?

Study 1 also aimed to address the following sub-contributory research questions:

- What motivates students to study A-levels?

- What support is available to A-level students during post-16 education?

- How do students experience the transition from studying GCSEs to studying A-levels?

4.1.1 Rational

At the time of designing Study 1, I had discovered few studies about A-level students' experience of post-16 education, especially since the transition to linear assessments. Thus, Study 1 was conducted with relatively few preconceptions, other than an expectation that the participants would have found certain aspects of studying A-levels stress-inducing (Chamberlain et al., 2011; Finch et al., 2010; Nash et a., 2016). It had been suggested to me, however, that Year 12 A-level students experience minimal stress because they 'only' sit mock examinations; I had also encountered mixed perceptions about how much more difficult studying A-levels is in comparison to GCSEs. I hoped, therefore, that Study 1 would extent recent research on Year 12 students' experiences of studying A-levels across the academic year (Nash et al., 2016), be enlightening in itself and, consequently, inform subsequent research (Morgan, 2007).

4.2 Methodology

4.2.1 Participant recruitment

All of the participants opted to take part in this research after being offered a chance to do so by a senior member of sixth form staff[33] at their respective sixth forms; male students declined the

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[33] The staff at the grammar school had been met at a teacher-orientated academic conference regarding pastoral care in education in 2019 and had agreed to offer students within their sixth form an opportunity to participate in this research.

opportunity to participate in this research. In order to enhance the possibility of capturing a range of perspectives, no exclusion criteria applied during the participant recruitment process. In other words, sixth form staff were asked to offer all of the students, rather than just those who were known to be experiencing a high degree of academic pressure, stress or anxiety an opportunity to participate in this research. Data collection ended once: i) a sufficient amount of data had been gathered to answer the research questions and "tell a rich story" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 53), and ii) time constraints made the continuation of participant recruitment no longer practical. Both of my supervisors[34] also strongly advised me not to conduct more interviews in order to avoid being overwhelmed by the amount of data that I would need to analyse.

4.2.2 Sample

Participants' demographic characteristics are depicted on Table 1, below. All of the participants were female; aged 16-18; attended non-selective ($n = 10$) or grammar ($n = 6$) school-based sixth forms in the West Midlands of England; and studied three ($n = 13$) or four ($n = 3$) A-level subjects. Two thirds of the subjects belonged to the sciences (67%); the remainder belonged to the arts and humanities (12%) or the social sciences (22%). It was also compulsory for students at the grammar school-based sixth form to be working towards an Extended Project Qualification (EPQ), which involves writing a 5000-word assignment or creating an 'artefact', such as a musical composition, accompanied by a shorter essay (UCAS, 2019).

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[34] Dr Lucy Foulkes and Dr Poppy Nash were my supervisors at this time (September 2019).

Three quarters ($n = 12$) of the participants had studied GCSEs at the schools in which their sixth forms were based. One third ($n = 5$) of the participants were experiencing a minimal degree of anxiety, whereas the remainder were experiencing either a mild ($n = 7$) or moderate ($n = 4$) amount; no participants met the threshold for severe anxiety. Two participants disclosed during the interviews that they had been diagnosed with emotional disorders; these will not be elaborated upon in order to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Following the most recent inspections preceding the study, both of the sixth forms were considered to be 'Outstanding' by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted; England's educational institution inspectorate). The staff at the grammar school-based sixth form who offered A-level students an opportunity to participate in this research had been met at an academic conference regarding pastoral care in education, indicating that this sixth form had an established and proactive pastoral care team in place. I was put in contact with the staff at the non-selective school-based sixth form by someone that I knew personally.

Table 1: Participants' demographic characteristics.

Pseudonym	School-based 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 (Selective)	17	3	Mild
Zoe	Grammar (Selective)	17	4	Minimal
Charlotte	Grammar (Selective)	17	3	Mild
Susan	Grammar (Selective)	18	3	Moderate
Jessica	Grammar (Selective)	18	4	Minimal
Felicity	Grammar (Selective)	17	4	Mild

Notes: All of the participants were self-selecting, 16-18-years-old, female and studying three or four A-levels in the West Midlands of England. All of the participants at the grammar school-based sixth form were also studying for an EPQ. Anxiety was measured using the Generalised Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2006).

4.2.3 Interview site

The interviews took place in a private, quiet room[35] at the participants' sixth forms and lasted approximately half an hour each. The participants at the non-selective school-based sixth form participated in interviews at the end of Year 12 in June 2019, whereas the participants at the grammar school-based sixth form participated in interviews at the beginning of Year 13 in September 2019. All of the participants had completed their end-of-year mock examinations and could be thought to have nearly or entirely completed Year 12.

4.2.4 Task-based, semi-structured interview technique

A semi-structured interview technique was adopted in order to gain an in-depth and contextualised understanding of the participants' experiences of studying A-levels. Semi-structured interviews have the benefit of ensuring that specific topics are discussed during each interview, while also facilitating flexibility in how and when questions are asked, responded to and explored (the interview guide can be found in the Appendix 1). Semi-structured interviews are, therefore, suited to the exploration of sensitive topics; can elicit detailed, situated and focused information; and allow participants to discuss their experiences in their own words and on their own terms (Edwards & Holland, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Luker, 2008; Willig, 2013). These features were considered to be particularly valuable within the context of this research given that it aimed to generate a rich

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[35] This was arranged by the same members of staff who had offered students an opportunity to participate in this research.

understanding of A-level students' experiences, as well as explore sensitive topics, such as their experiences of stress, which may be uncomfortable to speak about in the presence of peers or teachers. In light of these considerations, both the ordering and the wording of the questions was thought about carefully in order to ensure that they were clear, coherent and tactful and could, therefore, aid the development of rapport, trust and confidence. This is important from an ethical perspective, as well as from the perspective of facilitating the co-production of knowledge within interviewer-interviewee interactions (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Edwards & Holland, 2013; Luker, 2008; Willig, 2013). The participants were repeatedly reminded that the interview was not a test, and that it was their perspectives, *expressed in their own words*, that mattered.

Task-based activities can make interviews more interesting and less intimidating for interviewees (Punch, 2002). Therefore, prior to beginning the audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews, the participants were asked to complete a brief questionnaire which asked them to describe their experience of Year 12 using three words or phrases, as well as their experience of Year 11 in comparison to Year 12, again using three words or phrases (this questionnaire can be found in Appendix 1). The participants were told that their responses would be used during the interview, but that the ordering of the words and phrases was not important. These tasks were derived from questions that previous researchers had asked A-level students (Nash et al., 2016, 2021), and were considered to be appropriate because it was thought that they would allow the participants to reflect on their experiences of sixth form, and describe it in their own words, prior to beginning of the interview. Thus, it was hoped that these tasks would allow the participants to

both 'set the scene' and act as an alternative source of foci during the potentially intimidating act of participating in an individual, semi-structured interview with an unknown and inquiring other (Luker, 2008; Punch, 2002).

During the interviews, the participants were asked to explain why they had chosen the words or phrases that they had done to describe their experience of Year 12, as well as their experience of Year 11 in comparison to Year 12. It was hoped that these questions would help to elucidate what, if anything, is distinctive about studying A-levels. The purpose of these tasks was, therefore, to prompt subsequent conversation about the participants' experiences of sixth form, and to position them as "knowing and approving expert[s]" (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 78), whose perceptions were valued and considered to be important. With this in mind, after the participants had explained why they had chosen the words or phrases that they had done to describe their experience of Year 12, as well as their experience of Year 11 in comparison to Year 12, they were also asked to respond to two imaginary situations involving fictional A-level students who had either: i) been told by their parents that it was important to them that they perform well; ii) or had decided to continue playing sport during the approach to their examinations. These tasks were again used for the purpose of prompting subsequent conversation about students' experiences of studying A-levels, and to ease the participants into discussing sensitive topics such as their own experiences of stress, anxiety and coping.

Once the participants had explained why they had chosen the words or phrases that they had done to describe their experience of Year 12, as well as their experience of Year 11 in

comparison to Year 12, and had discussed the fictional A-level students, they were asked to explain, in their own words, what they understood by the terms 'stress' and 'anxiety'. Once the participants had shared their understanding of the terms, which typically involved citing common symptoms of each, they were provided with basic definitions of these constructs. Stress was defined to the participants as 'the feeling of *pressure* that people experience when they are trying to get things done', whereas anxiety was defined as 'the feeling of *fear* that people experience when they're worried about something' (Mental Health Foundation, 2018a; 2018b; Mind, 2018a; 2018b). These definitions were provided in order to enhance clarity and consistency because stress and anxiety are closely related and easily confused concepts which are often referred to interchangeably (Putwain, 2007), meaning that it was deemed to be important to establish a shared, if simple, understanding of them before discussing students' experiences of either greater depth. These definitions, in particular, were used because they are based on those provided by two of the UK's leading mental health charities (namely, the Mental Health Foundation and Mind), meaning that, if the participants searched for a more information about stress or anxiety after the interview had taken place, there would not be a discrepancy between what they had been told during the interview and the information provided to them online. These definitions were also used because they were deemed to be both accurate enough for the purpose of this research and relatively easy for the participants understand. These definitions were purposely *not* provided at the beginning of the interviews in order to allow the participants to explain why they may have chosen words such as 'pressure', 'stressful' or 'scary' to describe their experience of Year 12 without feeling as though

their definition of these terms were being evaluated or tested in light of the definitions provided to them.

Once definitions of stress and anxiety had been provided to the participants at the midpoint of the interview, the participants were asked to share whether they had experienced either during sixth form, and if so, what caused it and how they coped with it. The participants were reminded that they were under no obligation to share information that they felt uncomfortable disclosing. Nevertheless, all of the participants shared thoughts on these topics; none asked to skip questions.

The interviews ended with an opportunity for the participants to ask questions or make additional comments. Thus, the interviews began with 'warm up' questions aimed at easing the participants into the interview and positioning them in the 'leading role' in the interviewer-interviewee relationship (Hoffman, 2007), before sensitive topics were discussed and, later, departed from during a 'cooling down' period (Kvale, 1996; Luker, 2008). Throughout the interviews, active listening, tactful probing and careful attempts to summarise what the participants had said were used in an attempt to encourage them to share more, or more specific, information about their experiences and perceptions (Bernard, 2000; Edwards & Holland, 2013). At the same time, close attention to the participants' emotional responses was paid in order to ensure that they did not become distressed by the topics being discussed.

4.2.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Department of Education Ethics Committee before participant recruitment or data collection began. Informed consent was obtained from headteachers, parents and the participants. The participants were offered an information sheet and consent to read, consider and sign several weeks in advance of agreeing to participate in this research and were verbally reminded of the purpose and scope of the interview before it commenced. The participants were also repeatedly reassured that they could skip questions or end the interview at any moment without needing to provide a reason for doing so and were provided with a list reputable websites (www.mentalhealth.org.uk [Mental Health Foundation]), www.mind.org.uk [Mind] and www.youngminds.org.uk [Young Minds]) to refer to if they wished to learn more stress or anxiety once the interview had been concluded. Careful attention was directed towards to ensuring that the participants did not become distressed by the topics being discussed their interviews (as highlighted above and discussed in Chapter 3). The participants were also offered an opportunity to comment on their transcript (none requested to do so), ask questions and given a £10 Amazon voucher to thank them for contributing to this research. Pseudonyms have been used to anonymise and humanise the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013), and the data that they shared has been stored securely and remained confidential.

4.2.6 Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted in six iterative and recursive phases: data familiarisation; coding; initial theme generation; developing, refining and reviewing

themes; defining and naming themes; and reporting the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2013, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). The main, overarching research question that informed the analysis was: how do A-level students experience post-16 education? The analysis was conducted from an experiential orientation and a critical realist position (Willig, 2012). Stress was conceptualised as the participants' subjective interpretation of their experiences as both threatening and taxing or exceeding their ability to cope (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In contrast, anxiety was conceptualised as the participants' subjective experiences of fear and apprehension (Putwain, 2007). During the presentation of the themes, I will focus on stress because this is what the participants' referred to most often during the interviews.

Once the audio-recorded interviews had been transcribed, the transcriptions were checked for accuracy before being imported into NVivo 12 and read several times in order to facilitate data familiarisation (see Appendix 2 for my initial data familiarisation notes). In the second phase, the most salient segments of data in relation to the research question were coded inductively and semantically using short names. Following this, the initial codes were iteratively refined, with closely related codes being merged and excessively broad codes being disaggregated. For example, when considering the participants' experience of studying A-levels, when a phrase included the use of the word 'content', such as in the phrases '*content wise*', '*there's so much content*' or '*it was just the content*', it was initially assigned to the code 'Content or revision', but was later recoded as 'Complexity of content' or 'Quantity of content', depending on the context in which it was being used. (The decision to treat the words 'content' and 'revision' as synonymous was made because

the participants tended to refer to revision within the context of reviewing content.) Thus, the data were recoded until it was considered to be condensed and organised well enough for recurring, coherent and meaningful patterns across the dataset to be identified and interpreted.

In the third phase, the codes and the segments of data that had been captured by them were used to construct three initial themes: 1) *studying A-levels is expected*; 2) *studying A-levels substantially harder than GCSEs*; and 3) *studying A-levels requires a rich repertoire of proactive coping strategies*. However, after realising in spring 2021 that the latter two initial themes were too broad, bloated and 'unwieldy' (Braun & Clarke, 2021b), data familiarisation and coding was conducted again and the initial themes were de- and reconstructed to create eight, more focused candidate themes: 1) *studying A-levels is expected*; 2) *engaging*; 3) *enjoyable*; 4) *taxing*; 5) *pressured*; 6) *threatening*; 7) *manageable*; and 8) *unrelatable*. In the fourth phase, these themes were iteratively refined until five multifaceted and distinct themes, which were based on recurring, coherent and meaningful across-case patterns that could be unified by a core idea (i.e. 'central organising concept'; Braun & Clarke, 2013), had been constructed:

1. *'I didn't really see another path': an expected and unquestioned route*

2. *'a good environment to learn': an enriching opportunity*

3. *'a completely different ballgame': a league of its own*

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

5. *'I don't think they'd get it': you have to be there to understand*

Theme 3 is comprised of two sub-themes: 3.1) *'there is a big difference': a big jump* and; 3.2) *'this determines your future': all or nothing*. See Appendix 3 for a thematic table which displays the codes that were clustered to construct the themes (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). In the fifth phase, the themes were named using a combination of the participants' language and short, 'creative' titles which embodied the main idea that they captured (Braun & Clarke, 2013). See Appendix 4 for theme definitions that succinctly capture the focus, scope and boundaries of each theme in a short paragraph (Braun et al., 2016). Once the themes had been named and defined, the transcripts were re-read in full to confirm that they provided an "compelling, coherent and useful story in relation to the research question" (Braun & Clarke, 2021b, p. 207). In the final phase, the themes were reported in an integrated and logical order, with reference to prior research on GCSE and A-level students' experiencing being incorporated into the analysis and extracts of coded data being used illustratively to: i) provide evidence for the analytic claims being made; and ii) to position the voices of the participants at the forefront of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Creswell, 2015; Tracy, 2010).

4.2.7 Reflexivity

During the analysis, I was frequently reminded of my own experience of studying A-levels. I was reminded, for example, of the joy of spending time with my friends and of studying subjects that I was genuinely interested in. I was also reminded, however, of the feeling of excitement about my future giving way to the feeling of being simultaneously overwhelmed by my workload and reticent to seek support from adults, whose judgement I feared. Additionally, I was reminded of feeling

alone, ashamed and as though my future was almost entirely dependent on my performance in A-level examinations, without considering the possibility that there may be alternative routes to securing a desirable job that do not involve first accessing higher education. Furthermore, while conducting the analysis from the beginning during my third year, I felt increasingly close to some of the participants' accounts of their experiences of (di)stress because I began to experience a high degree of stress myself – to the point that I felt that it was harming my health for the first time in over half a decade. Consequently, these experiences influenced how I engaged with the data. In particular, these experiences influenced how I thought about the potential for stress to contribute towards the development of ill-health; the importance of being able to seek support; and the need for students to develop – and be in a position to draw on – a repertoire of coping strategies in an effort to manage academic demands. These experiences, and my belief that young people ought to be listened to, taken seriously and supported, therefore informed the construction of the themes and my sense that I was capturing meaningful, important and useful insights into the experiences of A-level students. I was also conscious of attempting to avoid projecting my experiences onto those of the participants and ensuring that, while I felt close to the data, I was also distanced from – and not going beyond – it. I achieved this by actively checking that the extracts of data that I had coded supported the analytic claims that I was making (Braun & Clarke, 2021b), as well as by informally discussing the themes with recent A-level students in an attempt to establish whether they 'rang true' or reverberated with their experiences (Smith, 2018). Thus, I engaged in a range of self-reflexive attempts to enhance the credibility, sincerity and resonance of the analysis (Tracy, 2010). I will now turn to the analysis itself.

4.3 Analysis

4.3.1 Overview of the terms used to describe Years 11 and 12

The purpose of asking the participants 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 was to prompt, and facilitate, focused and meaningful conversation about their experiences of studying A-levels. In other words, the words and phrases were not intended to act as a primary source of data analysis. Nevertheless, there are three patterns in the terms that the participants used that stand out; I will mention them briefly before presenting the themes that were constructed from the interview transcript data.

First, when asked to describe their experience of Year 12, all but one ($n = 15$) of the participants used at least one unambiguously positive term to do so, such as '*enjoyable*', '*exciting*', '*fun*', '*informative*', '*interesting*', '*insightful*', '*inspiring*', '*rewarding*', '*social*' or '*thoughtful*'. Furthermore, unambiguously positive terms accounted for half (50%) of the terms that were used by the participants to describe their experience of Year 12 altogether. This contrasts sharply with research that has found that approximately a quarter of the terms that A-level students use to describe their experience of sixth form are unambiguously positive (Nash et al., 2021), and immediately suggests that studying A-levels can be an enriching and worthwhile experience. It also suggests that students may describe their experience of sixth form differently when they are not asked to do so immediately before or after examinations.

Second, when asked to describe their experience of Year 12, most (n = 11) of the participants used the word '*stressful*', which was the most commonly used term and, when combined with the term '*anxiety-inducing*', accounted for a quarter (25%) of the terms that were used by the participants to describe their experience of Year 12 altogether. This immediately suggests that studying A-levels may typically be experienced as particularly stress-inducing. It is also notable that a majority of the participants at both sixth forms used the term '*stressful*' to describe their experience of sixth form because this suggests that studying A-levels is not only stressful for those in academically selective institutions (where there may be more pressure to perform well; Cairns & Lloyd, 2005; Finch et al., 2010). In addition, a majority of the participants experiencing a minimal or mild amount of anxiety used the word '*stressful*' to describe their experience of Year 12, indicating that it is not a word that is exclusively used by those who would customarily be expected to be experiencing a moderate or severe degree of anxiety regardless of the specific circumstances that they are facing.

Third, when asked to describe their experience of Year 11 in comparison to Year 12, three quarters (n = 12) of the participants effectively described the former as easier, less pressured or less stressful, with Susan using the phrase '*easy compared to A-levels*', Katherine using the phrase '*comparatively easy*' and Felicity using the phrases '*less busy*', '*less difficult*' and '*less pressure*'. Interestingly, Bethany and Laura described their experience of Year 11 in comparison to Year 12 as both '*stressful*' and '*easier*', which tentatively suggests that, although studying GCSEs can be stressful (Denscombe, 2000; Putwain, 2009, 2011), studying A-levels may be more stressful. This immediately lends

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provisional support the suggestion that the change from studying GCSEs to A-levels may not represent a mere 'continuation of school', but a notable increase in difficultly (Deuker, 2014; Powell, 2017; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Nash et al., 2021). In the next section, I will present the themes that were constructed from the transcript data.

4.3.2 Themes

Five themes were constructed from the transcript data:

1. '*I didn't really see another path*': *an expected and unquestioned route*;

2. '*a good environment to learn*': *an enriching opportunity*;

3. '*a completely different ballgame*': *a league of its own*;

4. '*having plans makes things better*': *an anchor in strong currents*;

5. and '*I don't think they'd get it*': *you have to be there to understand*.

The themes highlight that A-level students often perceive studying A-levels to be an '*expected*' and unquestioned '*prerequisite*' to higher education and a desirable job, and that studying A-levels can be a socially and academically enriching experience. The themes also highlight, however, that because students both aspire to perform well (in order to enhance their post-18 educational and occupational prospects) and find studying A-levels challenging, particularly in comparison to studying GCSEs, it is an inescapably stress-inducing and sometimes overwhelming experience. This is especially the case for students who have not cultivated a well-developed repertoire of time management and organisation strategies or feel unable to seek support from adults on the basis that they are not '*going through the same thing*'.

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This theme captures the idea that, for most of the participants, remaining in education to study 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 until the age of 18 ('*post-16 education is compulsory*'; Rachel), for the majority of the 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*', specific 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 pursuing alternative post-16 educational routes:

> Laura: *I do wanna go to uni, so I wanna get a degree, so I therefore need my A-levels*
>
> *for that. So, that's me, that's the main reason… I thought it would be best to go to uni*
>
> *and get a degree*

> Joanne: *I think for university, I've looked at most, like, courses or things, they need*
>
> *A-levels. You can't really use any other, some of them, BTEC[36], you can, but most of*
>
> *them use A-levels. They use them, that's why*

---

[36] BTEC = British and Technology Education Council

Felicity: *I want to go to university and A-levels are usually required. So, that, kind of. It was just a natural option to be honest... I think it's kind of a given that I'd just go to sixth dorm, go to university. And I, I would want to follow that path anyway but, it's kind of expected I guess*

Jessica: *I knew 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... I feel like that's kind of the main route*

Several participants knew what careers they wanted to pursue prior to entering post-16 education and therefore chose to study A-level subjects that would facilitate their access to these ('*I was thinking about what I wanted to do as my future career*'; Charlotte). For these 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). Consequently, studying A-levels was perceived by these participants to be a necessity rather than a choice, because in order to pursue the careers that they aspired to - in dentistry, pharmacy or optometry, for example - they needed to complete higher education courses which require specific A-level qualifications ('*they do require A-levels*'; Gabriel).

Other participants knew what they wanted to study in higher education prior to entering post-16 education, even if they were unsure of what career they wanted to pursue ('*that kind of inspired the choices*'; Susan). These participants therefore chose to study A-level subjects that would

facilitate their access to courses that they felt enthusiastic or passionate about, such as criminology, history or psychology ('*I chose my A-levels around that*'; Emma). For these participants, studying A-levels was also perceived to be a necessity rather than a choice because, as highlighted above, studying A-levels was seen as either required or simply '*the route that people generally take*' to access higher education ('*most courses or things, they need A-levels*'; Joanne). Indeed, one participant described studying A-levels as part of a '*rubber stamping*' approach to realising a future that she had envisaged for herself, which involved studying history in higher education ('*very necessary process in what I was hoping to achieve*'; Katherine).

It was common for the 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*', studying A-levels (in order to access higher education) was framed as a 'common sense', obvious or - as another participant put it - '*natural*' progression, rather than one of several post-16 educational or occupational routes that need to be carefully considered before being pursued ('*it's kind of expected*'; Susan). Indeed, in framing studying A-levels as the most '*natural*' post-16 educational route ('*it's often quite a given that you go on to do A-levels*'; Zoe), alternative routes were implicitly framed as strange and abnormal, and therefore as less desirable or for 'other', less capable students for whom studying A-levels is not a feasible option ('*I feel like there's more opportunities*'; Harriet).

Several participants also 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 - alternative educational or occupational routes ('*at the end of the day, it's a degree*'; Zoe; Wolf, 2002). In another case, 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, highlighting that it can sometimes be seen as the only socially acceptable educational route ('*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 enter higher education) was therefore both expected of her and perceived to be 'not up for debate' ('*I don't think it's on what I want to do*'; Bethany), as socially sanctioned alternatives did not exist and could not therefore be considered.

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, as well as a 'fateful moment' in which there is a lot to be gained or lost according to their performance (Denscombe, 2000). Moreover, the absence of considering alternative post-16 educational routes enhanced the importance of performing well because it precluded the perception that there could be '*another path*' to a desirable job, and therefore positioned studying A-levels as a 'one shot' chance to secure a '*good future*'.

Theme 2: 'a good environment to learn in': an enriching opportunity

This theme captures the idea that studying A-levels was a socially and academically enjoyable experience which supported the participants' development and, therefore, offered them an opportunity for growth, development and 'positive personal change' (Brown, 2021; Hernandez-Martines et al., 2011). Indeed, it is notable that – as highlight above – when asked to describe their experience of Year 12 using three words or phrases prior to the interview, almost all (*n* = 15) of the participants used at least one unambiguously positive form of terminology, such as '*enjoyable*', '*inspiring*' or '*rewarding*'.

From a social perspective, all of the participants enjoyed spending time with their friends ('*I have good friendships*'; Felicity). Several participants described the atmospheres within their respective sixth forms as sociable and welcoming ('*everyone gets along very well*'; Gabriel). In addition, sixth form as facilitated opportunities to establish new friendships ('*I've made some new friends*'; Julia), as well as more opportunities to socialise ('*sixth form is more social*'; Jessica). Of particular importance to several participants was the opportunity to cultivate more '*authentic*', '*genuine*' or '*real*' friendships ('*I like it where we share interests*'; Charlotte), reflecting an adult-like approach to establishing and maintaining friendships on the basis of mutual interests rather than mere convenience ('*I made friends and I just hope it's a lifetime friends* 'cause *it's people who do the same stuff*'; Harriet). Furthermore, several participants also described their teachers as encouraging, passionate or supportive ('*most of my teachers are really passionate, so it kind of rubs off*'; Piper), which contributed towards making sixth form conducive of learning ('*a good environment to learn in*'; Emma).

From an academic perspective, the majority of the participants enjoyed studying their chosen subjects, even if they found them challenging (*'they're obviously a lot harder than they used to be, but I do enjoy them'*; Felicity). In particular, the participants commented on enjoying studying their chosen subjects in greater depth, which compensated – to varying extents – for the experiences of stress that arose from studying A-levels:

> Harriet: *I do enjoy studying them. It can be stressful sometimes, but yeah, I do enjoy*
>
> *them in general, 'cause it's more in depth compared to before*

> Emma: *I really enjoy all the subjects. Like, we'll start a new unit and I'm really*
>
> *looking forward to it. Like, I don't hate coming to sixth form, which, it sounds quite*
>
> *weird to say, considering the amount of stress there is*

Studying A-levels can, therefore, be a meaningful and worthwhile experience in which students can '*grow*' or 'move on' (*'I really liked, like, sort of taking the next level'*; Charlotte; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011, p. 128), especially for those who chose subjects that they are genuinely interested in (*'that was probably my main aim, was just to enjoy revising, enjoy studying'*; Katherine). Indeed, the participants particularly valued studying subjects that would help them to pursue an educational or occupational route that was of interest to them (*'I know that they're going to help me in the future'*; Samantha). Several participants also reflected on how satisfying it felt to overcome difficulties and challenges:

Jessica: *you're putting all of that stress in, but then, to get things like the predicted grades that you want, or to do well in a test. Or, to, like, I don't know, just get feedback from your teacher and then think: 'Yeah, you're doing well in the content.' Then, that can be quite rewarding. It's not like you're stressing out for nothing. You are putting the work in and getting the results back*

Gabriel: *maths is just incredibly difficult in the sense that, I wasn't really good at it, urm, but I think I've grown to love it now. Urm, I still have issues of, like, whenever I have homework I just sit there just staring at the page, because I just don't wanna do it or attempt it at all. And then, sometimes I just sit there doing hours of maths just because I remember why I love it so much and why I took it in the first place*

Studying A-levels can, thus, constitute an enriching experience in which students can spend time with friends within a supportive educational environment and study subjects that are of genuine interest to them. It can, therefore, promote "a sense of purposefulness" (Nash et al., 2021, p. 160).

Theme 3: 'a completely different ballgame': a league of its own

This theme captures the idea that studying A-levels was experienced as a uniquely challenging stage of education because the combination of demands and pressure that it presented far exceeded those which the participants had encountered when studying GCSEs ('*it's a big transition, so that was hard to overcome*'; Rachel). It also captures the idea that, when the externally imposed demands that studying A-levels presented were combined with the internally imposed pressure(s) that the

participants experienced to perform well, studying A-levels became an inescapably stress-inducing experience ('*if you haven't, you're not doing it right*'; Emma). This was especially true during the approach to mock examinations ('*that's when it's most stressful*'; Julia), as well as when the participants felt as though their work was becoming unmanageable ('*it's just a bit too much*'; Laura).

Sub-theme 3.1: 'there is a big difference': a big jump

This sub-theme captures that idea that studying A-levels was experienced as substantially more difficult than studying GCSEs ('*sometimes I struggle cause it's just a completely different ball game*'; Gabriel), and therefore required a lot more effort ('*it's just really, really hard*'; Laura). Indeed, the participants experienced the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels as a surprisingly '*big jump*' which represented a far greater increase in difficulty than that which they had previously experienced during the transition from one academic year to another during secondary school ('*it's much harder than I expected*'; Harriet).

It is notable that – as highlighted above – when the participants were asked to choose three words or phrases to describe Year 11 in comparison to Year 12 prior to the interview, three quarters ($n = 12$) of them described the former as easier, less pressured or less stressful, with Susan using the phrase '*easy compared to A-levels*' and Felicity using the phrases '*less busy*', '*less difficult*' and '*less pressure*'. During the interviews, all of the participants explicitly commented on how much more demanding studying A-levels is in comparison to GCSEs and highlighted the notable increase in effort that it requires ('*that was a big jump*'; Charlotte). Several participants, for example, commented on how the increased quantity of content made studying A-levels more demanding than GCSEs:

Laura: *it was just the content, the big jump between A-level and GCSE. There's just so much content that you have to get through in just one subject… it was really hard because it was such a big jump*

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. Like, 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, like, GCSE the books were, like, this thin, in A-levels they're, like, this fat*

In addition to covering a large(r) quantity of content, the participants also commented on how the (increased) complexity of the content made it (notably more) difficult for them to understand (*'I kind of struggle'*; Harriet). Several participants commented, for example, that studying A-levels constituted their first encounter with struggling to grasp what they were being taught – an experience that challenged their otherwise confident academic self-concepts (Brown, 2021; Deuker, 2014; Powell, 2017):

Gabriel: *it's hard, especially from GCSEs to A-levels. It's much, much more difficult 'cause GCSEs it's more of a fact recall… sometimes you just get frustrated that you can't grasp it as quickly as you want, as quickly as you used to*

Zoe: *it's kind of like a hit that you have to, like, properly work hard and think through things to succeed… at times it made me feel a little bit thick. Like, '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 describing studying A-levels as '*a big transition*' and '*a completely different ball game*', the participants depicted sixth form as an unfamiliar experience which required a considerable amount of effort to acclimatise to ('*I find it difficult, like, at GCSE it was a bit, it was a bit too easy*'; Susan), 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 the opposite of what sixth form is, basically*'; Jessica). Indeed, 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 that of being '*spoon fed*' (perhaps due to a degree of retrospective distortion; *there's a lot of content and topics that you have to do, at a quicker pace than you would do in secondary school*'; Joanne), the participants also reflected on the increased difficulty of answering examination questions that cannot be answered in an easily predictable, '*formulaic*' or straightforward manner:

> Susan: *it's so different… it was quite a big jump …with GCSEs, like, you could*
>
> *revise and you know that you're going to do well. With A-levels you could revise, and*
>
> *then, the questions could be so, like, different*

> Jessica: *it's just ten times more work, I feel like. From Year 11, I never really did*
>
> *much work to be honest. Like, the content that we were learning, I thought: 'Oh, that*
>
> *makes sense.' So once you understand it, applying it is easy. But for A-levels,*

> *understanding the content is one thing, and then you also have to put the effort in to*
>
> *apply that content as well. So it's kind of like double the workload*

On top of the academic challenges that the participants experienced, the participants also had to take independent responsibility for managing their workload (*'they don't support you as much'*; Charlotte), which could be challenging in itself:

> Gabriel: *to manage time is even more stressful because, it's, you have to cram a lot of*
>
> *things in and it gets really, really hard*

> Samantha: *I thought that only doing five subjects would be easy. But turns out it's*
>
> *harder than doing ten GCSE subjects. And even though we've got free lessons, you*
>
> *can't really enjoy them. You need to do revision, because sixth form is, I think, in*
>
> *regards to secondary school, it's more so independent study than the teachers being at*
>
> *your head all the time… I can't enjoy the free lessons in the way that I expected*

Furthermore, all of the participants also had to allocate time to other commitments, interests and obligations, such as applying for summer schools; conducting their EPQs; gaining and performing work experience; maintaining friendships (with friends who no longer shared the same classes or attended the same sixth form); a part-time job; and their higher education applications (*'there's just a lot of things to do'*; Felicity). The specific combination of commitments varied between participants (*'there's a lot to do'*; Piper), but all experienced additional demands on their time (*'there's a lot going on'*; Julia; Powell, 2017). Each of these additional demands led to a contraction in the amount of time

that the 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; Foulkes, 2021), and therefore contribute towards the conditions that make studying A-levels uniquely challenging:

> Charlotte: *it's quite stressful trying to juggle all of these things… I don't have a way to, like, reduce my stress because I don't have time for it 'cause I'm so stressed about doing things*

> Zoe: *it's really stressful with A-levels… I feel like you can get a bit overwhelmed in that way, definitely. I think I've got that throughout sixth form at different points… throughout the year, when there's different things. Like, different trains of thought going on all the time*

Thus, studying A-levels is uniquely challenging in part because it is notable more demanding than studying GCSEs, and therefore taxing of students' physical and cognitive resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Studying A-levels is more demanding because of the increase in the complexity, quantity, and pace of the content, which has to be adjusted to and handled within a context of assuming greater responsibility for managing time and remaining organised ('*I thought it was going to be easier, but not really*'; Charlotte).

Sub-theme 3.2: 'determines your future': all or nothing

This sub-theme captures the idea that the participants experienced a lot of pressure to perform well ('*I do really care about the grades*'; Harriet). Indeed, pressure to perform well, which was experienced by all of the participants, primarily stemmed from their desire to access higher education, secure a desirable job, and go '*up in the world*':

> Katherine: *because I've given myself that aim of a good university then I, I'm kind of putting pressure on myself to get those grades needed… So, in that sense it's quite challenging because I've continued that aim of aiming high… but that's very much what I've made it to be. I didn't have to do that but I kind of want to do that because that's how I see myself, like, going up in the world or whatever… progressing*

> Samantha: *I've got the mindset of: 'I want three As and nothing less.' So that makes me stressed. What makes me anxious is if I don't do well on an exam. I'm like: 'I'm not gonna get the grade, which might affect my future.' So 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*

Here, it is clear that the participants' awareness of the major implications that their performance will have for their (immediate) educational and (eventual) occupational prospects prevented performing poorly from being a conceivable option ('*I was particularly stressed, because I was like: "This is something that determines your future."*'; Charlotte; Banks & Smyth, 2015; Denscombe, 2000; Chamberlain, 2011). In particular, the participants referred to their desire to strengthen their

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position in the competition for places on competitive higher education courses ('*that's put things into real life*'; Gabriel), and were conscious that if they failed to attain the '*right predicted grades*', they would be forced to abandon, adjust or postpone 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: *I want to do better than I'm doing now… 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 pressure*

It is because the 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 ('*that's just A-levels*'; Jessica), 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:

> Rachel: *there's a lot of emphasis on grades, obviously. If I want to, you know, get into the best university and do the course I want. So, it's been really stressful to get the right grades and if I don't get the good grades and then, yeah*

> 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*

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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 intensity of pressure to perform well also contrasted sharply with the participants' experience of studying GCSEs, when they rarely received dissatisfactory grades and, therefore, expected to progress to post-16 education without difficulty (*'it was a very hard transition from GCSEs to A-levels because you'd never get bad grades'*; Rachel). For the participants, studying A-levels therefore presented their first experience of not knowing whether they would 'make it to the next level', as transitions from one academic year to another during secondary school were mandatory and they *'just knew'* - and could therefore take it for granted - that they would perform well enough in their GCSEs to access sixth form (*'you have to think further ahead'*; Julia).

Several participants also felt pressured to appease their teachers (*'I was more stressed about the fact that it was kind of like they don't think I'm trying'*; Charlotte; this will be discussed at greater length in Theme 5), as well as their parents:

Bethany: *parents and expectations. They're like: "I believe that you'll do good in this*

and that." Like: "You've got the potential to do good." They tell me to revise a lot and

to stop, you know, 'cause I used to read a lot of books, but now they want me to read

educational books instead

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, like, 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 the participants were conscious that trying their best was 'code' for attaining a particular set of grades that they felt pressured to perform well in order to satisfy their parents, even when their parents used tactful language that sought to encourage (the process of) trying hard rather than fixate on (the outcome of) attaining a specific grade. Compounding this, when the participants did not perform to a high or satisfactory standard, some of their parents' expressed disappointment or anger ('*kinda disappointed*'; Charlotte). 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, personally, rather than the school*'; Rachel), which consequently made her feel guilty and amplified her sense of obligation to improve her performance in the hope of meeting what she perceived to be her parents' 'conditions of acceptance' (Putwain, 2009):

Rachel: *I expected to do well just from, like, as soon as I start. But I wasn't doing well until, like, this year, a few months ago, three or two months ago. Urm, and you know, every time I go home and my parents ask: 'Oh, how are you doing?' I don't know, sometimes I lied, sometimes. And when you lie to your parents, you feel really guilty about it. So I think there is a lot of stress from that side. Yeah, the grades mostly*

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In a similar manner to participants in prior studies (Chamberlain et al., 2011; Denscombe, 2000; Finch et al., 2010; Putwain, 2009), during the approach to mock examinations (*'the build up to exams is stressful'*; Gabriel), as well as at times when the participants felt as though their work was becoming unmanageable, the participants felt threatened (*'just the thought of not doing well'*; Harriet). This was perceived by the participants to be experienced by most students within their sixth forms (*''cause everyone does their mocks at the same time, it's just the whole kind of sixth form is a bit, like, on edge'*; Julia).

Performing well in mock examinations was particularly important to the participants because they were concerned about how their results would be used to inform their predicted grades (*'it's just anxiety about performing well and hoping that you do well enough to most likely get into the universities'*; Felicity), which are used on higher education applications and, therefore, contribute towards determining the likelihood of them being accepted by universities (*'everyone says that they're gonna be sent to universities and stuff, and then that just scared me'*; Piper). Indeed, mock examinations were experienced as though they were *'the real thing'* because of their capacity to strengthen or weaken the participants' likelihood of pursuing a post-18 educational route that was interest to them (*'it's very scary, especially for university, because of the predicted grades'*; Bethany).

Experiencing stress was framed by some of the participants as occasionally motivational and, therefore, sometimes beneficial (*'if I don't stress about doing well in the exams, then I won't even try'*; Samantha; Yerkes & Dodson, 1908). Stress was, however, sometimes experienced to an extent that it undermined the participants' performance in class (*'there's been periods where if I'm feeling a bit too anxious or a bit too stressed, I'm in lessons and I just can't focus'*; Jessica), as well as in examinations (*'because*

I've been overthinking so much sometimes, my mind can go a bit blank'; Joanne). This suggests that, as

Chamberlain et al., (2011) argued, supporting students to manage experiences of stress – especially

during approach to examinations – could help to enhance their performance ('*if you miss out that*

detail on the exam, then it can, like, jeopodise your whole grade'; Gabriel).

Several participants spoke of experiencing stress during the period leading up to their mock

examinations to the extent that they were unable to sleep, stop worrying or relax ('*properly panicked*';

Piper). Two participants, who had both struggled to negotiate the increase in difficulty between

studying GCSEs and A-levels (as discussed in Sub-theme 3.1) became so fixated on compensating

for their perceived shortcomings and performing well in their mock examinations that they

resorted to remaining awake throughout the night to revise ('*all nighter*'; Harriet), albeit to the

detriment of both 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*

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about if this is gonna affect my grades as well, if I don't slow down and actually take

care of myself

Other participants felt overwhelmed to the extent that they felt exhausted and cried when their work was perceived to be unmanageable or struggled to stop worrying or sleep ahead of mock examination:

> 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*

> Joanne: *I couldn't go to sleep. I think it was the day before, two days before, I couldn't*
>
> *get to sleep. I was just thinking about the test and if I'm gonna do well or not or: 'What*
>
> *I've learnt, is it enough?' Or: 'Have I focused on something that might not be as*
>
> *important, but I thought might be important?' Or, I was stressed about it. I couldn't*
>
> *get to sleep, and then when I did, I woke up in the middle of the night and I couldn't*
>
> *get to sleep again. Yeah, and then, and then I felt like I was shaking a bit because I*
>
> *was just really anxious*

These experiences illustrate the negative emotional states that can be associated with feeling pressured and struggling to cope with the demands of studying A-levels. If unaddressed, such

experiences could have deleterious implications for students' short- and long-term performance and health, especially if they amplify or precipitate a potentially 'self-sustaining network' of symptoms of mental ill-health such as persistent worrying, difficulty sleeping, fatigue and feelings of hopelessness or shame (Borsboom, 2017). Indeed, Rachel, who had struggled to negotiate the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels; felt pressured to perform well by her parents (as highlighted above); and worried about the implications that her performance would have for her post-18 educational and occupation prospects, experienced panic attacks when her workload felt overwhelming ('*when you start to overthink, overthink, overthink, that's when I get my panic attacks*'; Rachel).

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

This theme captures the idea that while studying A-levels is uniquely challenging and inherently stress-inducing, using time management and organisation strategies can help to prevent it from being inescapably overwhelming, in part because it helped them to stop their work from 'piling up' ('*I make sure that I have plenty of time to do it all*'; Julia), and in part because it helped them to keep their work in perspective ('*you can't spend every single hour working*'; Jessica)

In order for the participants to minimise or manage the demands of studying A-levels, it was important for them to be able to draw on a repertoire of time management and organisation strategies ('*if I leave it to the last minute it won't do me no good*'; Samantha). This is particularly important when studying A-levels because, for the first time, students have free periods and are (far) more responsible for managing their (finite amounts of) time and energy effectively; engaging in self-directed learning; and revisiting previously covered content without being directed to do so by their

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teachers ('*you have to make sure that you're on top of everything*'; Joanne). Indeed, the participants

highlighted that they could no longer rely on being instructed what to revisit and when by their

teachers when studying A-levels and, therefore, had to work harder in an effort to '*keep up*' rather

than relying on their '*natural ability*' or being '*spoon fed*' to succeed ('*you're much more self-sufficient*';

Gabriel). In light of these demands, the participants were conscious of the need to remain organised

on an ongoing rather than an interspersed basis ('*you have to remain organised and if you don't, you're in*

trouble'; Samamtha). Furthermore, the participants recognised the importance of learn how to '*deal*

with the stress' that is inseparable from studying A-levels (as discussed in Theme 3):

> Zoe: *I feel like 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*

It is notable that all of the participants reported that their teachers emphasised the criticality of

time management and organisation ('*they say just do revision, like, in time before exams*'; Piper), but some

of the participants commented that they rarely provided advice on how to do either:

> Emma: *the teachers would be, like, like at the start of the year they'd be like: 'Start*
>
> *your notes now.' But it wasn't really something that was consistent. Urm, maybe a*
>
> *month before mocks they might suggest: 'Revise this, revise that', but nothing rigid*

> 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… they always say: "Do it, do it, do it", instead of how to

do it

It is notable that one participant 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 '*that's the extent of useful advice, really*' (Charlotte). This indicates that simple but insightful advice of this kind is valued and considered to be helpful but is (sometimes) perceived to be in short supply ('*it's not talked about enough, to be honest*'; Harriet).

Despite receiving limited advice from their teachers on how to manage their time and remain organised, several participants had nonetheless developed a valuable repertoire of time management and organisation strategies that had helped them to '*deal with the stress*' and 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 ('*having plans makes things better*'; Jessica), as well as to-do lists ('*lists definitely help get things out of my head*'; Zoe), and were accustomed to revising to-do lists in light of changing priorities and the knowledge that 'best laid plans' are often disrupted ('*sometimes it's just a lot of things, so I'll just do the things that I can*'; Felicity). Several participants also selectively planned when to study based on times that they thought that they would be free from distractions and, therefore, most productive, such as during free periods or when it was quiet at home ('*so long as there are no distractions*'; Samantha).

Using time management and organisation strategies helped the participants to both handle their work and ensure that they had a '*boundary and a limit*' which facilitated frequent but time-limited and purposeful opportunities to rest ('*it takes your mind off everything*'; Felicity), as well as return to challenges feeling refreshed ('*eliminating myself from the situation for a bit and then approaching it with a clear head, that helps me*'; Julia). In addition, using time management and organisation strategies also facilitated fruitful periods of problem-focused work ('*I tick those off when I do them*'; Felicity), in part because they helped to ensure that the participants had a clear 'mental map' of what needed to be done and when ('*just so that they're not in my head and they're somewhere*'; Zoe). This, in turn, helped the participants to identify when it was desirable to '*take time out to relax*' versus '*hack away at*' or '*address the problem*' (Julia). In this sense, proactive time management and organisation strategies acted as an anchor in strong currents:

> 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*

> Jessica: *I'm in bed by, like, ten o'clock. That's, like, my sleep time. I'm not working after that. And then, when I get home, I probably give myself about an hour to have some food, watch some TV or something, and then I get what I need to get done, done. Sometimes if there's a test or something the next day, then I will stay up a little bit later, 'cause I know that that's gonna be, like, an immediate pay off. But then I'll also know that if I'm cramming all night, then I'm not gonna do as well*

While the participants who proactively managed their time and remained organised reported that they still '*feel stressed*' and refrained from confirming that they felt '*on top of things*' (Zoe), it was clear that they had not reached the point of feeling overwhelmed to the same extent that other participants had done ('*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, several such participants reflected on how they had '*discovered*' it for themselves, framing it as obvious or 'common sense' ('*I think it's discovered for myself, but it's not something too difficult to realise to do*'; Felicity). Yet not all of the participants had learnt how to manage their time effectively, meaning that it is not inevitable that students will develop these abilities (i.e. '*pick up the habits*'; Jessica), even when they are confronted with demands that require them to be (more) organised ('*it's very dependent on the person*'; Katherine).

Several participants referred to exercise as an important coping strategy ('*I found that good and I would go to the gym 'cause that takes your mind off of it*'; Joanne). For those who had built exercise into their regular, weekly routines, rather than turn to it only when they were feeling overwhelmed ('*to let off steam*'; Rachel), it offered a regular opportunity to decompress and '*let out the energy from the adrenaline and anxiety*' (Piper):

> Jessica: *I go swimming on the weekends, I go with my sister so that's a good, like, stress relief. And I know that that's always gonna happen*
>
> Felicity: *starting up netball again… it's nice to take a break out, so I'm not at home thinking I should doing this or that. It kind of takes your mind of everything because you're doing that one thing. You can't think about anything else*

Highlighting the difference that proactive time management and organisation strategies can make, Rachel – who had struggled to negotiate the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels and had experienced a lot of stress, as well as panic attacks, as a result – reflected on how once she had '*finally understood how to balance*' her workload, her attainment had begun to improve. Joanne also reflected on how explicit advice provided to her by a teacher on how to use a revision timetable had made it '*easier*' for her to use her time effectively:

> Joanne: *I wasn't that good at managing because of that step from Year 11 to Year 12. I wasn't that good at managing. But, now, my teacher told me, she showed us this timetable, revision timetable. So I've made one revision table and it's easier to manage my work, and then I change it depending on the tests that I have close… it's been a bit easier to manage my subjects, but before, at the beginning of the year, I wasn't. Like, I would do some things not at the right time. But now I know what to do at the right time better, so I've been using my time better*

This suggests that time management and organisation strategies can be taught, learnt and make a difference to 'how on top of things' students feel. It can also act as an important, potentially lifelong lesson that it is important to maintain a work-life balance ('*there's more just to learning, which I think is really important throughout your whole academic career*'; Katherine).

> *Theme 5: 'I don't think they'd get it': you have to be there to understand*

This theme captures the idea that, from some of the participants' perspectives, only those who are studying (or have recently studied) A-levels can appreciate how stressful it can be ('*she's been through the same stuff*'; Rachel), and can therefore be turned to for non-judgemental, emotional support. While most of the participants described their parents or teachers as supportive ('y*ou can just come up to them and they'll sit down with you and just have a chat with you and explain that you can't control things, and that sometimes you just have to let them feelings go*'; Gabriel), and said that they would feel comfortable turning to them ('*I would feel, like, comfortable*'; Joanne), 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 'see things' from the 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 '*age gap*' that existed between their worlds and the adult worlds of their parents and teachers to be too wide to be bridged, navigated or traversed ('*I think just 'cause of the age gap*'; Laura), making it impossible for adults to clearly apprehend the stressful aspects of studying A-levels from their vantage point ('*I don't think they would understand*'; Charlotte). Consequently, the perceived distance of adults from the experience of studying A-levels raised a communicative barrier between some of the participants and their parents and teachers, which made turning to adults for guidance on how to negotiate the stressful

aspects of studying A-levels unappealing or - in the words of Rachel - '*just no help*' ('*I stopped talking to them about the problems*'; Rachel).

Several participants who had attempted to speak to their parents or teachers about their experiences of stress referred to feeling ignored, patronised or cajoled, which heightened their sense that adults are – or can be – unable to appreciate how stress-inducing studying A-levels can be ('*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 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; she had been told that she was simply '*bringing a negative atmosphere to the group*' (Charlotte). In describing herself as feeling '*completely stripped down*' by her teacher, 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 possible to speak to teachers about her experiences of sixth form-related stress ('*I don't feel like you can really talk to teachers*'; Charlotte). At the same time, she also felt unable to speak to her parents about her experiences after – as highlighted above – they had expressed disappointment in her performance ('*obviously my parents don't necessarily understand*'; Charlotte).

Other participants felt ignored by their teachers at times when they had openly expressed that they had been feeling particularly stressed and unsure of how to handle the situation ('*I've been like: 'Oh my God, I'm so stressed. I don't know what to do.' And then the teacher walks in and then, I don't know,*

she doesn't do anything'; Harriet), or as though their teachers were uninterested in them '*on a more personal level*' ('*some teachers would see you in the corridors and just pass you*'; Rachel). In both cases, these experiences raised and embedded the aforementioned communicative barrier and, therefore, foreclosed the possibility of the participants turning to their teachers for support ('*I don't think there's any point going to them to talk*'; Rachel). In thinking of teachers as only caring '*about the grades*', or as not being interested in their students '*on a more personal level*', these participants did not perceive teachers to be a source of potential support or signposting. In turn, this meant that opportunities for the teachers to offer support or signposting to the participants were diminished ('*I don't tell my parents or teachers, no*'; Bethany; Finch et al., 2010; Atkinson et al., 2019).

In contrast to adults, the participants felt as though their friends or older siblings – who were studying or had studied A-levels – could relate to them because of their shared experiences ('*'cause they go through the same thing, they kind of know what I'm talking about*'; Rachel). In being '*on the same page*' and sharing experiences ('*going through the same kind of things*'; Laura), the participants felt better able to turn to their friends or older siblings for emotional support ('*for me, it's more about going to a friend*'; Harriet), regardless of whether they provided worthwhile advice ('*they'll know how to relate to me and stuff*'; Bethany). This is 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*

> Gabriel: *they're my stress reliever... I think having friends in place makes life so much easier because you're all going through the same experience. You're all going through whatever stress you are going through. And so to have that kind of, you know, friendship group where everyone's just listening to you, it's just, it's nice to have. Like, even if they don't offer good advice or don't offer advice at all, it's nice to just get it out*

Here, friends are depicted as fellow travellers on a humbling and difficult voyage rather than as distant, '*disappointed*' or '*judging*' commentators ('*I could literally speak to any one of the students*'; Emma). Indeed, several participants reflected on how, because their friends invariably experienced stress as well, it means that they could relate to one another and, therefore, seek support without feeling ashamed or unusual ('*I think everyone's kind of on the same page about feeling stressed and anxious*'; Zoe). Turning to friends for emotional support was, therefore, a crucial palliative coping technique for most of the participants ('*there's always gonna be weeks where people are, like, a lot of people are more down than others, so then, yeah. I can definitely speak to people*'; Jessica). Friends and older siblings could also offer support with work-related challenges and difficulties and could, therefore, facilitate problem-focused coping:

> Joanne: *I prefer it* [in the study room] *because my friend, she has her free period then too, so then we can study together. If I need help, I ask her. If she needs help, she asks me*

> Samantha: *they try to find distractions for me. Or motivate me to do well. If I'm stressed about a certain topic, they might get me some help from outside. Or they might help me with a subject that they're better at, so that I can do well*

Despite both experiencing stress and perceiving stress to be an expected and normal aspects of studying A-levels (as highlighted in Theme 3), it was also common for the participants to feel as though adults could not appreciate how they were feeling because they were considered to be too far removed from the experience of what it is like to study A-levels; an experience which they shared with their friends and older siblings (who were studying or had studied A-levels). This often orientated the participants away from adults and towards their peers for emotional support and validation of how they were feeling.

4.4 Conclusion

Study 1 was conducted prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and aimed to explore Year 12 students' experiences of studying A-levels in their own words. Specifically, Study 1 aimed to investigate why secondary school leavers study A-levels; how A-level students experience post-16 education; what causes A-level students to experience stress or anxiety; and how students cope with experiences of stress and anxiety that arise from studying A-levels. In light of this, the purpose of Study 1 was to address the following main research questions:

- How do A-level students experience post-16 education?

- What causes A-level students to experience stress or anxiety?

- What coping strategies do A-level students use in response to academic demands?

Study 1 also aimed to address the following sub-contributory research questions:

- What motivates students to study A-levels?

- What support is available to A-level students during post-16 education?

- How do students experience the transition from studying GCSEs to studying A-levels?

Study 1 was designed and conducted with relatively few preconceptions, other than an expectation that students would report finding aspects of studying A-levels stress-inducing (Chamberlain et al., 2011; Finch et al., 2010; Nash et a., 2016). I will now briefly discuss the findings, before doing so again in greater depth in Chapter 7.

The findings demonstrate that, although studying A-levels can be enriching, it is also uniquely challenging, inherently stress-inducing and can, for some students, be overwhelming. It appears that – as other studies have found (Brown, 2021; Deuker, 2014; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Powell, 2017) – the change from studying GCSEs to A-levels is rarely experiences as a seamless or straightforward transition. Instead, it can require a high degree of effort to acclimatise to, even for students with confident academic self-concepts and a track record of depending on their 'natural ability' to perform well. In this sense, the transition could, therefore, be loosely compared to a team (students) being promoted to a superior sports league (stage of education), in which the increased demands and pressure come as a surprise to athletes (students) who have been used to performing well without needing to invest as much, or a lot of, effort. In light of this, the

findings highlight the importance of developing a better understanding of how best to support students during this transition period, which is under-studied in comparison to the transition from primary to secondary school (Hagell et al., 2012). This seems particularly important because several of the participants who appeared to have struggled most to adjust to the increased demands of studying A-levels reported experiencing a greater amount of stress at later stages of the academic year – in some cases, to the extent that it made them feel overwhelmed or induced panic attacks. For some of these participants, their experiences of stress peaked during the approach to mock examinations because they felt as though they were on the 'back foot' and were, therefore, especially worried about the implications that their performance will have for their post-18 educational and occupational prospects.

It is notable that mock examinations were experienced as stress-inducing because it had been suggested to me that because Year 12 students 'only' sit mock examinations, they experience minimal stress. This finding highlights the importance of recognising that examination-related stress *is* experienced during mock examinations. It may even have intensified since the transition to linear assessments because it means that students no longer have an opportunity to retake their first year (formerly AS-level) examinations. Concomitantly, this finding also highlights the importance of helping A-level students to cope with stress, both throughout the academic year and during the approach to examinations. Indeed, the findings demonstrate that experiencing challenges, stress and anxiety does not always act as a 'life-affirming' experience (Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011). Indeed, when these were experienced to too great an extent, it led some of

the participant to cry, panic and stay awake throughout the night in attempt to continue revising; others felt so ashamed of their performance that they lied to their parents about it (which then made them feel guilty and, therefore, under greater pressure to improve their performance).

The findings also highlight that – as other studies have found – studying A-levels requires a high degree of independence, time management and organisation (Deuker, 2014; Powell, 2017). This is because the introduction of free periods and greater self-directed learning, when combined with the increased quantity and complexity of the content, mean that students are far more responsible for partitioning their (finite amounts of) time and energy effectively. This is especially important because attending sixth form coincides with a range of other commitments and obligations that place additional constrains on students. Thus, using proactive time management and organisation strategies can help students to manage their workload; keep their work in perspective; and facilitate frequent but time-limited and purposeful opportunities to rest, decompress and, later, return to work feeling re-energised. In this sense, time management and organisation strategies can be thought of as an anchor in strong currents: a buffer against the demands of studying A-levels.

Importantly, it cannot be taken for granted that A-level students will cultivate a rich repertoire of time management and organisation strategies, even if they are provided with planners and repeatedly told that it is important to use them (as all of the participants had been). Crucially, however, the promotion of time management and organisation strategies ought to be framed by a recognition that time and energy are finite: students should not be misled into believing that time

management and organisation strategies can be used for the sake of unremitting productivity (Aeon et al., 2021). In this vein, students should be encouraged to plan time for rest and rejuvenation just as athletes do in an effort to enhance their performance and avoid counterproductive overtraining.

Resource permitting, greater opportunities for students to learn how to manage their time, remain organised and keep their work in perspective could help them to minimise or manage experiences of stress that arise from the demands of studying A-levels. In this sense, it is important to teach rather than preach proactive time management and organisation strategies, which are also important during higher education and adulthood more broadly (Aeon et al., 2021; Walker, 2005). Indeed, with appropriate support in place, studying A-levels could act as a 'steeling experience' (Rutter, 1985), providing students with an opportunity to learn how to overcome challenges and cope with stress in a way that facilitates rather than frustrates their development (Brown, 2021; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011). Opt-in opportunities for exercise, relaxation or mindfulness could help A-level students to prevent or alleviate feelings of stress or anxiety, especially if they are built into their routines rather than turned to as a 'last resort'. For this to happen, however, sixth form staff require adequate training, resources and support, which should be acknowledged by politicians and policymakers (Gunnel et al., 2018; Hutchings, 2015; Putwain, 2020).

Importantly, the findings also indicate 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 the experience of what it is like to study A-levels; an experience which students

share with their friends and older siblings. This perception orientates students away from adults and towards their peers for emotional support and validation of their feelings. It is imperative, therefore, to ensure that A-level students feel as though their concerns are listened to rather than ignored, dismissed or trivialised (Denscombe, 2000; also see, Chamberlain et al., 2011; Finch et al., 2010). This does not mean that teachers need to become therapists or counsellors, but it does mean being open and alert to students' feelings and the enormous impact that teachers can have on them (Kyriacou, 2003; also see, Banks & Smyth, 2015; Chamberlain et al., 2011). The finding that A-level students feel more confident and at ease turning to one another rather than adults for support also suggests that they should also be actively involved in the development and delivery of policies and practices aimed at supporting their mental health (for example, Atkinson et al., 2019).

From a systemic perspective, it is important to consider ways of helping to ensure that students do not feel as though their future depends entirely on how well they perform in their A-levels. This could be achieved by reducing social and economic inequalities because it could lead students to perceive there to be 'less at stake' in their academic performance (Wilkinson & Picket, 2018). This could also be achieved by ensuring that more high-quality post-16 vocational education courses and apprenticeships are both available and perceived to be worthwhile rather than 'second best', as this could take some of the pressure out of the post-16 education system by allowing students to see that there are other, legitimate routes to securing desirable jobs. In light of the ongoing emphasis on increasing access to higher education as a means of facilitating social

mobility, however, this is unlikely to happen soon (James Relly, 2021). Critical reflection on the implications that an increasingly performance-based education system – that is predicted on terminal exams – has for adolescent development is also needed, as the findings suggest that the high degree of pressure such systems ingrain into the experience of education can have deleterious consequences for students' performance and health, respectfully.

4.5 Limitations

A major limitation of this study is that it did not include male A-level students or students in independent school sixth forms, meaning that the transferability of the findings may be limited to female A-level students in state-funded school sixth forms. Another major limitation is that this study was conducted exclusively in the West Midlands of England, meaning that the transferability of the findings may also be limited in geographical scope. On reflection, data collection for this study ended prematurely. Had the richness of the data been foreseen, I would have been extended participant recruitment in an effort to include a larger and more diverse range of students; the premature foreclosure of data collection can be attributed to my lack of experience as a qualitative researcher. Future research focused on A-level students' experience of post-16 education should, therefore, seek to incorporate broader range of students in an effort to understand how, if at all, their experiences align with, or differ from, those of the participants who took part in this study. Nevertheless, the findings are in several respects consistent with prior research on this topic (Chamberlain, 2011; Deuker, 2014; Finch et al., 2010; Hernandez-Martinez et a., 2011; Powell, 2017; Nash et al., 2016, 2021), suggesting that they may be broadly representative of A-level

students' experiences of post-16 education. Furthermore, when I described the themes to recent A-level students within my personal social network, they 'made sense' and 'range true' – an observation that points towards some degree of naturalistic generalisability (Smith, 2018).

It is possible that recall bias or retrospective distortion may have influenced how some of the participants thought about their experience of studying A-levels in comparison to GCSEs. This seems possible because, although several other studies have also have found that A-level students retrospectively liken their experience of studying GCSEs to being 'spoon fed' (Deuker, 2014; Powell, 2017), it is well-established that GCSE examinations, in particular, can be stress-inducing (Denscombe, 2000; Putwain, 2009, 2011; Roome & Soan, 2019). It is also possible that all of the participants *had* been provided with advice how to manage their time and remain organised, but that they had not understood or been receptive to it. This seems possible because several participants claimed that they had been told to do this during assembles or their induction to sixth form.

While, on basis of this research, it seems that A-levels students often experience academic pressure and experience stress, it is not possible to quantify how frequently or what implications this has for their mental health. In addition, it is not possible to determine precisely what difference coping strategies such as time management, 'keeping things in perspective', exercise and talking to friends, makes to the severity of A-level students' experiences of stress. Indeed, it is only possible to conclude that these strategies appear to have helped the participants and may have prevented some of them from feeling reaching the point of feeling overwhelmed. Quantitative research aimed

at investigating the relationship between A-level students' use of coping strategies and mental health will, therefore, be turned to in the next chapter.

One of the limitations to the emphasis that reflexive thematic analysis places on *across*-case patterns and telling coherent stories is that it can make it difficult to engage with divergent but isolated perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Contrary to most of the participants, for example, Joanne did not feel comfortable speaking to her friends about her experiences of stress on the grounds that she feared the prospect of being judged:

> Joanne: *I don't really talk to my friends about it because, I just prefer not to. Because maybe they will be, like: 'Oh, you just overthink or are stressed about it.' I don't want them to think like that. Because some people can think like that. So I don't really talk to them, I'm more comfortable with my family*

This observation was hard to 'fit' into the presentation of the findings without being 'jarring', however. Furthermore, Bethany and Charlotte appeared to find studying A-levels particularly challenging because they had chosen subjects that they did not enjoy, but it was not possible to construct a 'fully-realised' theme out this. In light of this, a methodology such as interpretive phenomenal analysis may have been better suited to exploring these *within*-case intricacies (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Willig, 2013).

The focus on exploring stressful aspects of studying A-levels added a particular inflection to interviews and, therefore, the data that was co-produced. This meant that, although I was

interested in exploring A-level students' overall experiences of post-16 education, the participants'

positive experiences were not explored in as much depth as they could have been. This is reflected

in the nuance and length of Theme 2, which is not as well-developed as Themes 1, 3, 4 and 5.

There are several reasons for not exploring the participants' positive experience of post-16

education in more depth. First, I had been particularly focused on, and interested in, what aspects

of studying A-levels led the participants to experience stress or anxiety because – at the time of

planning and conducting this research – it had been reported that the majority of terms that A-

level students use predominantly negative language to describe their experience of sixth form

(Nash et al., 2016). Second, like many researchers, I had been focused on the 'problem' (i.e. stress

and anxiety) rather than what a positive experience looks like and what it is that can be learnt from

this. Third, I had not discovered Hernandez-Martinez et al.'s (2011) research at the time of

designing and conducting Study 1, and Brown's (2021) research had not been published. In

Chapter 5, I present the findings from a cross-sectional survey of 136 A-level students that was

conducted in 2020.

Chapter 5 - Study 2

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings from a cross-sectional questionnaire which was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic in late spring and early summer 2020 (Study 2). Study 2 was planned prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and had aimed to expand on Study 1 by exploring a wider range of students' experiences of studying A-levels, as well as their mental health and how they cope with academic demands. A cross-sectional questionnaire was adopted in an attempt to capture a broad but detailed 'snapshot' of A-level students' mental health and experiences of post-16 education (de Vaus, 2001). Study 2 aimed, therefore, to address the following main research questions:

- How do A-level students experience post-16 education?

- How often do A-level students feel pressured by their academic work?

- What coping strategies do A-level students use in response to academic demands?

- What proportion of A-level students experience at least moderate severity of depression, anxiety or stress?

Prior to the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic, this thesis also aimed to address the following contributory research questions:

- What do A-level students worry about most frequently?

- How do students experience the transition from studying GCSEs to studying A-levels?

- Is the type of language that A-level students use to describe their experience of sixth form associated with the severity of their experiences of depression, anxiety or stress?

Following the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic, the following research questions were added:

- How has the pandemic affected A-level students' experiences of post-16 education?

- What support would A-level students like to have received during the pandemic?

5.1.1 Recruitment strategy

Prior to the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic, it had been anticipated that a sample size of 400-500 A-level would be obtained, with an expectation that more girls would complete the questionnaire than boys. These expectations were based on samples obtained in prior research involving A-level students (Nash et al., 2016, 2021). The circulation of the questionnaire was originally planned for mid-March 2020. Following the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in the cancellation of examinations on 18th March and a national lockdown beginning on the 23rd March, however, the circulation of the questionnaire was postponed while it was considered in light of ethical and practical concerns (as discussed in Chapter 3).

After careful consideration of the scales and questions (as discussed in Chapter 3), and the addition of open-ended questions aimed at understanding how A-level students felt about the

disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, school sixth forms were invited to begin circulating

the questionnaire in May. The questionnaire also included an option for participants in Year 12 to

agree to take part in a follow-up questionnaire when they were in Year 13. These changes received

ethical approval from the Department of Education (as highlighted in Chapter 3).

In order to circulate the questionnaire, approximately 200 headteachers at school sixth

forms in the Midlands, North and South of England were contacted via email; this included

headteachers at private as well as state-funded schools. However, few headteachers responded to

these emails or agreed to circulate the questionnaire on the grounds that they had either: i) been

approached by other researchers who were conducting similar research; or ii) because they did not

wish to over-burden their students. In light of these recruitment difficulties, I later approached

college sixth forms in the hope of obtaining a larger sample size. This was done even though, prior

to then, the aim of this thesis had been to focus specifically on the experiences of A-level students

in school sixth forms. Several college sixth forms agreed to circulate the questionnaire, which

resulted in the sample size being more than doubled. Data collection ended on 30th June 2020,

meaning that it lasted approximately two months and resulted in a smaller sample than anticipated;

the diversity of the sample will be discussed below. Once the data had been collected, it was

imported into R, which was used to conduct statistical analyses.

5.1.2 Ethical considerations

As discussed in Chapter 3, data collection was initially postponed for several weeks because the

commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic coincided with when the questionnaire was supposed

to be circulated. Thus, the circulation of the questionnaire was paused while the possibility of it over-burdening teachers (by adding to their workload) and prompting participants to experience distress at a time of heightened worldwide anxieties was considered. I discussed these concerns with my supervisors[37] and confirmed that none of the scales mentioned self-harm or suicidal ideations. I also removed a ten-item scale about students' motivations for studying A-levels in order to shorten the length of the questionnaire. I also added two open-ended questions aimed at understanding how A-level students felt about the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and what type of support they would like to receive ahead of the next academic year. These questions were asked at the end of the questionnaire and were included in the hope that I would be able to use the participants' answers to amplify their voices. I also decided to ask the participants' what they worry about most often frequently using three words or phrases because, while I wanted to understand what causes A-level students to experience stress, I did not want them dwell on this. Thus, I thought that in asking the participants to describe what they worry about most often frequently using three terms, this would produce insightful but 'clipped' responses, allowing the participants to describe what they worry about most often without needing to elaborate on or think about this extensively.

The informed consent form asked potential participants not to complete the questionnaire if answering questions about 'low mood, stress or anxiety' are 'likely' to upset them. It was also made clear that completion of the questionnaire was entirely voluntary and that participants could

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[37] Dr Dusana Dorjee and Dr Poppy Nash were my supervisors at this time.

stop completing it at any moment by 'exiting the window'. I also signposted potential participants to reputable organisations that provide mental health-related information and support in both the information sheet and at the end of the questionnaire. The participants were told that they could request the deletion of their data by emailing me (one participant requested this) and who to contact if they had questions or concerns. The participants were also told that completing the questionnaire would take approximately half an hour and that it would involve sharing information about:

- what their experiences of sixth form had been like;

- what they worry about most frequently;

- whether they have experienced low mood, anxiety or stress over the past week;

- how they cope with academic challenges;

- how they feel about the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic;

- and what kind of support they would find most helpful over the coming months.

Once the information sheet, consent form and questionnaire had been submitted to, and received ethical approval from, the Department of Education Ethics Committee, I contacted headteachers of school- and college-based sixth forms in May and June 2020 about the prospect of inviting A-level students at their institutions to complete the questionnaire. Invitations to complete the questionnaire were circulated exclusively by sixth form staff, rather than shared via social media platforms, in the hope that this would enhance the participants' sense that it was trustworthy and secure. If the headteachers expressed an interest in circulating the questionnaire, I sent them a link

to it so that they could read through it before confirming that they were happy for their students to complete it if they wished to. The participants were told that the information that they share may be used in anonymous publications and will be stored in an anonymous format indefinitely; they were also provided with General Data Protection Regulation information that is provided by the University of York. Once the participants had read the informed consent form, they were asked to confirm that they had 'read the information' and were 'happy to participate' in this research.

5.1.3 Scales and questions

As highlighted in Chapter 3, the participants were asked to provide demographic information and to complete the short-version of the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scales (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995a); the Coping with Academic Demands Scale (CADS; Suldo et al., 2015); and to rate on a five-point scale (1 = 'Never'; 5 = 'Very often') how often they 'get stressed' or feel pressured by their academic work. The participants were also asked to describe their experiences of sixth form using three words or phrases (Nash et al., 2016, 2021); and to describe what most they worry about most often, again using three words or phrases. At the end of the questionnaire, the participants were also asked to describe how they felt about the academic year being disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic and what kind of support they would like to receive ahead of the next academic year.

5.1.4 Sample

The participants' demographic characteristics are displayed in Table 2, below. All the participants were from the Midlands or the north of England and were predominantly female; 17-years-old; White British; heterosexual; in Year 12; studying at least three (n = 106; 78%) or four (n = 22; 16%) A-level subjects; and considered their families to be in an average or above average financial position. Approximately a third (n = 47; 35%) were studying for an Extended Project Qualification. Half considered themselves to have experienced a 'personal, emotional, behavioural or mental health-related problem' in the last year for which they felt that they needed professional help, although most had not sought it. The proportion of participants attending a college sixth form slightly exceeded the proportion attending a school sixth form (a handful of the participants were attending a grammar school sixth form [n = 5; 4%]; none were attending a private school sixth form).

Table 2: Participants' demographic characteristics

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Age						
16	7	26	9	8	16	12
17	16	59	71	66	87	64
18	4	15	25	23	30	22
19	0	0	3	3	3	2
Year of sixth form						
12	22	81	82	76	104	76
13	5	19	26	24	32	24
Type of sixth form						
School	15	56	45	42	61	45
College	12	44	63	58	75	55
Region						
Midlands	0	0	19	18	20	15
North of England	27	100	89	82	116	85
Ethnicity						
White British	24	89	70	65	95	70
Ethnic minority	3	11	38	35	41	30
Sexuality						
Heterosexual	20	74	78	72	98	72
Sexual minority	7	26	22	20	30	22
Prefer not to say	0	0	8	7	8	6
Financial status						
Very well off	0	0	1	1	1	1
Well off	8	30	26	24	34	25
Average	15	56	65	60	81	60
Not very well off	2	7	13	12	15	11
Not at all well off	2	7	3	3	5	4
Prior mental health difficulties						
Yes - sought support	1	4	24	22	25	18
Yes - did not seek support	7	26	34	31	42	31
No	19	70	50	46	69	51

Notes: male participants *n* = 27; female participants *n* = 108; undisclosed gender *n* = 1. Four participants attended a grammar school sixth form; none attended an independent sixth form. Sexual minorities included those who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual or 'other'. Ethnic minorities included those who identified as White Irish (*n* = 3) or other White background (*n* = 5); Mixed (White and Asian [*n* = 2]; White and Black Caribbean [*n* = 1]; Other mixed or multiple ethnic background [*n* = 2]); Asian (Bangladeshi [*n* = 2]; Chinese [*n* = 3]; Indian [*n* = 7]; Pakistani [*n* = 12]; other Asian background [*n* = 2]); or Arab (*n* = 2).

5.1.5 Limitations

Given that the questionnaire was circulated and completed during the first six months of the Covid-19 pandemic, a high degree of caution needs to be taken when interpreting the quantitative findings. This is because it is likely that the participants' experiences of depression, anxiety and stress were heightened (Vizard et al., 2020; also see, Mansfield et al., 2020). Furthermore, because the sample is relatively small and self-selecting, it means that the findings are likely to reflect the experiences of A-levels who are either most conscientious or experiencing a greater severity of mental ill-health and were, therefore, attracted to the idea of completing a questionnaire about their 'experiences of low mood, anxiety and stress'. In addition, because the sample is primarily comprised of girls, who are known to experience a greater severity of mental ill-health at this age (Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2021; Vizard et al., 2018, 2020; Wright et al., 2020), the participants' scores on the DASS-21 cannot be thought of as representative. Furthermore, because the questionnaire was circulated exclusively in Midlands and north of England, the findings cannot be considered to be generalisable to other geographical locations within England or the UK more broadly. Indeed, prior research has highlighted regional differences in adolescent mental health in England (Vizard et al., 2018).

In light of the above, the findings must be thought of as providing a tentative and provisional insight into A-level students' mental health and experiences of post-16 education. In this sense, this research sheds a glimmer rather than an unwavering light on this topic. This means that, although a glimmer is better than total darkness, just as an old or partial map must be

interpreted with caution rather than looked upon as an accurate representation of reality, the same gaze must be cast upon the findings that I will now turn to and critically discuss.

In order to enhance the coherence and focus of this chapter, and to reduce the length of this thesis, I will focus primarily on gender differences because these have been highlighted as important in prior research focused on adolescent mental health in England (Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2017, 2021; Vizard et al., 2018, 2020; Wright et al., 2020); as well as in research focused specifically on A-level students' experiences of sixth form (Nash et al., 2021). However, given that the number of male participants ($n = 27$) is substantially smaller than the number of female participants ($n = 108$), and falls just below the conventional threshold (i.e. 30) for null hypothesis tests (Muijs, 2011), caution is needed when comparing these groups.

5.2 Participants' scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension

Participants' scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms are depicted in Table 3, below; the severity of participants' experiences of depression, anxiety and stress / tension are depicted in Tables 4, 5 and 6, also below. Strikingly, approximately half of the participants exceeded the cut-off for experiencing a moderate severity of depression ($n = 75$; 56%) or anxiety ($n = 74$; 55%); approximately a third ($n = 49$; 36%) exceeded the cut-off for experiencing a moderate severity of stress / tension. Typically, it is expected that approximately 13% of adults exceed these cut-offs (as depicted in Figure 7, below; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995a). Furthermore, approximately half ($n = 67$; 49%) of the participants exceeded the cut-off for experiencing a severe amount of at least one of the negative emotional states of depression, anxiety or stress / tension.

The participants' scores for the negative emotional states of depression, anxiety or stress / tension seem particularly high given that nationally representative research conducted in England prior to the Covid-19 pandemic indicated that approximately a sixth (16%) of 17-year-olds were experiencing high psychological distress (Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2021); approximately a seventh (15%) of 17-19-year-olds were experiencing an emotional disorder (Vizard et al., 2018); and that approximately a quarter (28%) of 15-16-year-old students in the north of England were experiencing high emotional difficulties (Wright et al., 2020). Furthermore, the participants' scores for the negative emotional states of depression, anxiety and stress / tension are higher than those observed in most prior research which has involved adolescents or young adults completing the DASS-21 (for example, Crawford et al., 2011; Bennet & Dorjee, 2015; Mellor et al., 2015; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995b), although 17-year-old students preparing for their end-of-year examinations in Australia have been found to have higher scores for stress / tension (Eistein et al., 2000). It is critical to note, however, that these scores are likely to be elevated due to the questionnaire being circulated during the first six months of the Covid-19 pandemic (Mansfield et al., 2020; Vizard et al., 2020), as well as because the sample was self-selecting and predominantly female (as discussed in section **5.1.5**, above; also see, Chapter 1). Nevertheless, these findings lend provisional evidence to support the suggestion that relatively severe symptoms of depression and anxiety may be particularly 'common' among A-level students (Nash et al., 2021).

Even though the participants' scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension cannot – and must not – be considered to be representative of A-level students' typical experiences, they

can still be used to investigate what variables are associated with better versus poor mental health, which much of the remainder of this chapter will be dedicated to exploring.

Table 3: Participants' scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms by gender

	M	*Mdn*	*SD*
Depression			
Male	13.85	8.00	10.93
Female	16.33	16.00	9.38
Total	15.90	14.00	9.70
Anxiety			
Male	7.70	6.00	6.60
Female	13.61	12.00	8.94
Total	12.54	11.00	8.89
Stress / Tension			
Male	12.15	12.00	7.82
Female	17.87	16.00	8.87
Total	16.79	16.00	8.95
Negative emotional symptoms			
Male	11.23	10.67	7.57
Female	15.94	16.00	7.76
Total	15.08	14.35	7.95

Notes: male participants *n* = 27; female participants *n* = 108; undisclosed gender *n* = 1. Cut-offs for depression range from: 0-9 = normal; 10-13 = mild; 14-20 = moderate; 21-27 = severe; >28 = extremely severe. Cut-offs for anxiety range from: 0-7 = normal; 8-9 = mild; 10-14 = moderate; 15-19 = severe; >20 = extremely severe. Cut-offs for stress / tension range from: 0-14 = normal; 15-18 = mild; 19-25 = moderate; 26-33 = severe; >34 = extremely severe. Scores for negative emotional symptoms are calculated by averaging participants' scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension (Lovibond, 2018).

Table 4. Severity of participants' experiences of depression

	Depression					
	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Normal	14	52	25	23	39	29
Mild	0	0	22	20	22	16
Moderate	5	19	29	27	34	25
Severe	6	22	17	16	24	18
Extremely severe	2	7	15	14	17	13

Notes: male participants *n* = 27; female participants *n* = 108; undisclosed gender *n* = 1.

Table 5. Severity of participants' experiences of anxiety

	Anxiety					
	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Normal	14	52	33	31	47	35
Mild	6	22	9	8	15	11
Moderate	3	11	23	21	26	19
Severe	3	11	12	11	15	11
Extremely severe	1	4	31	29	33	24

Notes: male participants *n* = 27; female participants *n* = 108; undisclosed gender *n* = 1.

Table 6. Severity of participants' experiences of stress / tension

	Stress / Tension					
	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Normal	22	81	43	40	65	48
Mild	0	0	22	20	22	16
Moderate	4	15	21	19	25	18
Severe	0	0	16	15	17	13
Extremely severe	1	4	6	6	7	5

Notes: male participants *n* = 27; female participants *n* = 108; undisclosed gender *n* = 1.

Figure 7: Severity of participants' experiences of depression, anxiety and stress / tension
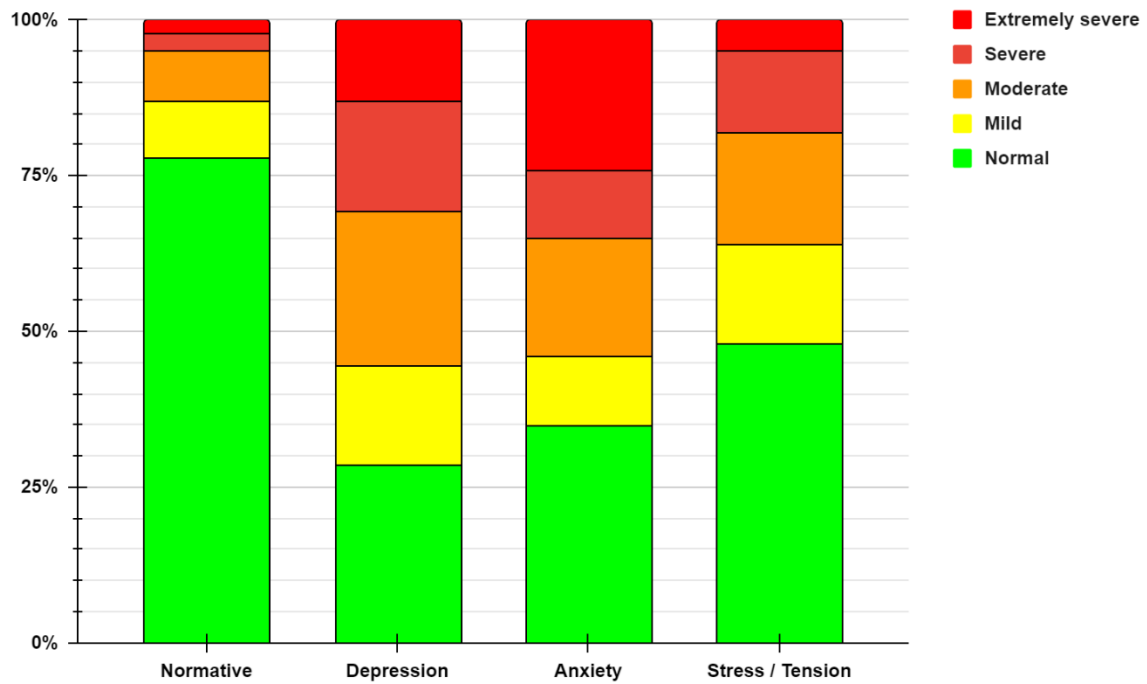
Notes: the proportion of people who would generally be expected to be experiencing normal, mild, moderate, severe and extremely severe depression, anxiety or stress / tension, respectively, are displayed in the far-left column and are based on the scores of 2,914 17-69-year-olds in Australia (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995a). The proportion of participants that exceeded the cut-offs for experiencing a mild, moderate, severe and extremely severe amount of depression, anxiety or stress / tension is depicted in the three columns on the right.

5.2.1 Co-occurrences of negative emotional states

The relationship between participants scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension are depicted in Table 7 and Figure 8, below. Results from Pearson correlations indicated that there was a significant, strong positive correlation between the participants' scores for depression and anxiety, $r(134) = .57$, $p < .001$; depression and stress / tension, $r(134) = .63$, $p < .001$; and anxiety and stress / tension, $r(134) = .67$, $p < .001$. It is notable that the direction and strength of these correlations are the same as those found in previous research (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995b). It is also notable that approximately a quarter ($n = 32$; 24%) of the participants exceeded the cut-offs for experiencing a severe amount of two or more of the negative emotional states of depression, anxiety or stress / tension. While it is not possible to determine the direction of the relationship(s) between these negative emotional states on the basis of these findings alone, these findings nonetheless highlight that the co-occurrence of negative emotional states is common. Crucially, these findings provide additional evidence to highlight that experiencing frequent symptoms of stress / tension is associated with experiencing frequent symptoms of depression and anxiety as well, meaning that students' experiences of stress should not be belittled, dismissed or trivialised (Denscombe, 2000). Indeed, of those who exceeded the cut-off for experiencing a severe amount of stress / tension ($n = 24$), the majority ($n = 22$; 91%) also exceeded the cut-off for experiencing a severe amount of depression ($n = 16$; 66%) or anxiety ($n = 20$; 83%).

Table 7: Pearson correlation coefficients between participants' scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension

	Male		Female		Total	
	Depression	Anxiety	Depression	Anxiety	Depression	Anxiety
Anxiety	.71		.54		.57	
Stress	.64	.78	.63	.62	.63	.67

Notes: male participants $n = 27$; female participants $n = 108$; undisclosed gender $n = 1$.

Figure 8: Relationship between the participants' scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension

Notes: male participants $n = 27$; female participants $n = 108$; undisclosed gender $n = 1$. Cut-offs for depression range from: $0 - 9$ = normal; $10 - 13$ = mild; $14-20$ = moderate; $21 - 27$ = severe; > 28 = extremely severe. Cut-offs for anxiety range from: $0 - 7$ = normal; $8 - 9$ = mild; $10 - 14$ = moderate; $15 - 19$ = severe; > 20 = extremely severe. Cut-offs for stress / tension range from: $0 - 14$ = normal; $15 - 18$ = mild; $19 - 25$ = moderate; $26 - 33$ = severe; > 34 = extremely severe.

5.2.2 Participants' financial status and experiences of negative emotional states

The relationship between the participants' perceived economic status and their scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms is depicted in Table 8, below. Results from Spearman correlations indicated that there was a non-significant, negative correlation between the participants' perceived economic status and their scores for depression $r_s(134) = -.09, p = .276$; anxiety $r_s(134) = -.11, p = .218$; stress / tension $r_s(134) = -.06, p = .471$; and negative emotional symptoms $r_s(134) = -.09, p = .256$. In other words, participants who considered their families to be economically above average had marginally lower scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension. However, the participants perceived economic status will not be taken into consideration during subsequent analyses because it is not strongly associated with their scores for the negative emotional states of depression, anxiety and stress / tension, even though a slight but consistent social gradient – which has been observed more strongly in other studies (Deighton et al., 2019; also see, Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2021; Reiss et al., 2019; Vizard et al., 2018) – is perceptible.

Table 8: Pearson correlation coefficient between how financially well off the participants considered their families to be and their scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms

	How well off do you think your family is financially?		
	Male	Female	Total
Depression	-.04	-.13	-.09
Anxiety	-.09	-.11	-.11
Stress / Tension	.09	-.07	-.06
Negative emotional symptoms	-.02	-.12	-.09

Notes: male participants $n = 27$; female participants $n = 108$; undisclosed gender $n = 1$.

5.2.3 Support seeking

Concerningly, of those who reported that they had experienced a serious psychological problem in the past year, but had *not* sought professional support ($n = 42$), approximately half exceeded the cut-off for experiencing a severe amount of depression ($n = 19$; 45%) or anxiety ($n = 24$; 57%); approximately a third exceeded the cut-off for experiencing a severe amount of stress / tension ($n = 13$; 31%). This highlights that even A-level students who recognise that they are experiencing severe symptoms of mental ill-health may not seek support and could, therefore, benefit from greater encouragement and assistance to do so (Finch et al., 2010). This also suggests that a tendency to avoid seeking support for mental health-related difficulties or problems, which has long been observed among students in higher education (for example, Macaskill, 2013), may begin at earlier stages of education.

Table 9: Severity of participants' experiences of depression, anxiety and stress / tension among those who reported that they had experienced a serious psychological problem in the past year, but had not sought professional support

	Depression		Anxiety		Stress / Tension	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Normal	6	14	6	14	10	24
Mild	5	12	4	10	10	24
Moderate	12	29	8	19	9	21
Severe	10	24	6	14	8	19
Extremely severe	9	21	18	43	5	12

Notes: participants who reported that they had experienced a serious psychological problem in the past year, but had not sought professional support *n* = 42.

5.2.4 Negative emotional states by sexuality

It is also concerning that, of those who belonged to sexual minorities (*n* = 30), half exceeded the cut-off for experiencing a severe amount of depression (*n* = 15; 50%), anxiety (*n* = 17; 57%) or stress / tension (*n* =14; 47%), respectively. Furthermore, those who belonged to sexual minorities had significantly higher scores than those who identified as heterosexual[38] for depression (*t*(126) = 4.26, *p* < .001, *d* = 0.89); anxiety (*t*(126) = 4.29, *p* < .001, *d* = 0.90); stress / tension (*t*(126) = 5.77, *p* < .001, *d* = 1.21); and negative emotional symptoms (*t*(126) = 5.65, *p* < .001, *d* = 1.18), with moderate to large effect sizes between these groups being observed. These findings are consistent with prior research that has found that adolescents who belong to sexual minorities are more likely to experience mental ill-health than their counterparts (Amos et al., 2020; also see, Irish et al., 2019; Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2021), and lends additional evidence to underscore the need for society-wide efforts to provide targeted and appropriate support to this group. This should include

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[38] The participants who did not disclose their sexuality (*n* = 8) were excluded from this analysis.

raising awareness among parents and teachers, as well as health professionals, about the heightened

risk of experiencing mental ill-health that those belonging to sexual minorities face.

Table 10: Participants' scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms by sexual orientation

	M	*Mdn*	*SD*
	Depression		
Heterosexual	13.87	12.00	8.36
Sexual minority	21.80	21.00	10.82
	Anxiety		
Heterosexual	10.53	8.00	8.32
Sexual minority	18.00	18.00	8.40
	Stress		
Heterosexual	14.43	14.00	7.80
Sexual minority	23.93	24.00	8.20
	Negative emotional symptoms		
Heterosexual	12.93	12.00	6.74
Sexual minority	21.24	21.00	7.99

Notes: heterosexual *n* = 98; sexual minority *n* = 30. Participants who did not disclose their sexuality (*n* = 8) were excluded from this analysis.

5.2.5 Negative emotional states by ethnicity

Participants' scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms by ethnicity are displayed in Table 11, below. Broadly consistent with prior research (Lessof et al., 2016; Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2021; Vizard et al., 2018), those identified as White British had slightly poorer mental health than those who belonged to ethnic minorities. However, given that there does not appear to be a notable difference between the participants' scores for depression, anxiety or stress / tension according to their ethnicity, and it is not possible to disaggregate the participants who belonged to ethnic minorities into more meaningful and discrete ethnic groups because of how small these groups would be (see notes below Table 2, above), no attempt was made to determine whether the differences between these scores were significant.

Table 11: Participants' scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms by ethnicity

	M	Mdn	SD
	Depression		
White British	16.00	16.00	9.58
Ethnic minority	15.66	14.00	10.11
	Anxiety		
White British	12.82	10.00	8.89
Ethnic minority	11.90	12.00	8.95
	Stress		
White British	17.43	16.00	8.99
Ethnic minority	15.31	16.00	8.78
	Negative emotional symptoms		
White British	15.41	14.67	7.86
Ethnic minority	14.29	14.00	8.19

Notes: White British $n = 95$; ethnic minority $n = 41$. Ethnic minorities included those who identified as White Irish ($n = 3$) or other White background ($n = 5$); Mixed (White and Asian [$n = 2$]; White and Black Caribbean [$n = 1$]; Other mixed or multiple ethnic background [$n = 2$]); Asian (Bangladeshi [$n = 2$]; Chinese [$n = 3$]; Indian [$n = 7$]; Pakistani [$n = 12$]; other Asian background [$n = 2$]); or Arab ($n = 2$).

Figure 9: Participants scores negative emotional symptoms by ethnicity
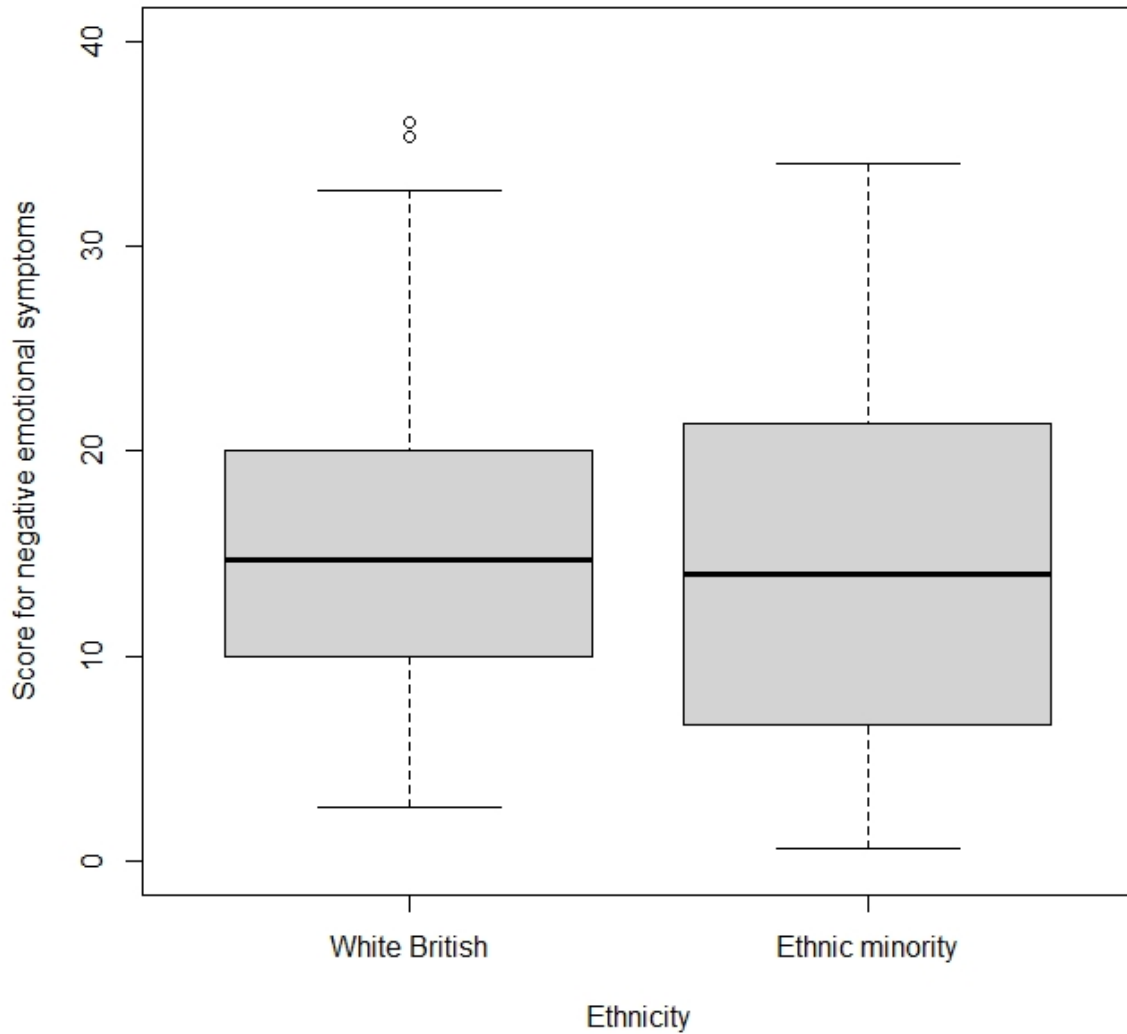
Notes: White British $n = 95$; ethnic minority $n = 41$. Ethnic minorities included those who identified as White Irish ($n = 3$) or other White background ($n = 5$); Mixed (White and Asian [$n = 2$]; White and Black Caribbean [$n = 1$]; Other mixed or multiple ethnic background [$n = 2$]); Asian (Bangladeshi [$n = 2$]; Chinese [$n = 3$]; Indian [$n = 7$]; Pakistani [$n = 12$]; other Asian background [$n = 2$]); or Arab ($n = 2$).

5.2.6 Negative emotional states by gender

Participants' scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms by gender are displayed in Table 3, above. Female participants had higher scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension than their male counterparts; approximately three quarters (n = 83; 77%) of female participants, for example, were experiencing at least a mild severity of depression in contrast to approximately half (n = 13; 48%) of male participants. On the more extreme end of the spectrum, two fifths (n = 43; 40%) of female participants were experiencing at least a severe amount of anxiety in contrast to approximately a sixth (n = 4; 15%) of male participants; and a fifth (n = 22; 20%) of female participants were experiencing at least a severe amount of stress / tension in contrast to just one (n = 1; 4%) male participant.

Results from an independent samples t-test indicated that there was not a significant difference between female participants scores for depression and that of their male counterparts, although a modest effect size was observed, $t(133)$ = 1.19, p = .236, d = 0.26. However, results from independent samples t-tests also indicated that female participants had significantly higher scores than their male counterparts for anxiety, $t(133)$ = 3.85, p < .001, d = 0.69; stress / tension, $t(133)$ = 3.06, p = .002, d = 0.66; and negative emotional symptoms, $t(133)$ = 2.83, p = .005, d = .61. Importantly, moderate effect sizes were observed in the differences between female and male participants' scores for anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms, indicating that female participants were experiencing these notably more intensely than male participants. While caution is needed when interpreting these findings due to the small(er) number of male participants

(Muijs, 2011), it is also important to note that these findings are consistent with large-scale studies that have found that older teenage girls (age 17 and over) are more likely than their male counterparts to be experiencing an emotional disorder or high psychological distress (Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2021; Vizard et al., 2018). Thus, these findings support the argument that female A-level students, in particular, need greater attention and support (Nash et al., 2021).

5.3 How often do A-level students feel stressed?

In order to gain an insight into how often A-level students experience a notable amount of stress, the participants were asked to rate on a five-point scale from 'Never' to 'Very often': 'How often do you get stressed?' The frequency with which the participants reported feeling stressed is depicted on Table 12, below. Strikingly, approximately three quarters ($n = 101$; 74%) of the participants reported feeling stressed 'Often' ($n = 50$; 37%) or 'Very often' ($n = 50$; 37%), while the vast majority ($n = 125$; 92%) reported feeling stressed at least 'Sometimes'.

Table 12: Participants' responses to the question: 'How often do you get stressed?'

	How often do you get stressed?					
	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Never	1	4	1	1	2	1
Rarely	8	30	1	1	9	7
Sometimes	5	19	20	19	25	18
Often	8	30	41	38	50	37
Very often	5	19	45	42	50	37

Notes: male participants $n = 27$; female participants $n = 108$; undisclosed gender $n = 1$.

To put these findings in perspective, research conducted in Northern Ireland in 2004 found that approximately a third (30%) of 16-year-olds report feeling stressed 'Often' (20%) or 'Very often' (10%; Cairns & Lloyd, 2005). It is important to exercise caution when interpreting this difference because it is possible that the Covid-19 pandemic may have exacerbated the frequency with which the participants felt stressed (as discussed above; Mansfield et al., 2021), as well as because the point of comparison is almost two decades old and in a different geographical region of the UK. Nevertheless, it is also possible that studying A-levels is a particularly stressful experience for a larger proportion of students than studying GCSEs is (Nash et al., 2021), or that studying A-levels coincides with a stage of adolescence in which students feel more stressed in general and are therefore in greater need of support (Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2021; Vizard et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2018).

5.3.1 Gender differences in the frequency with participants felt stressed

Consistent with prior research that has found that girls tend to experience stress more often than boys (Anniko et al., 2019; also see, Cairns & Lloyd, 2005; Sweeting et al., 2010), female participants were more likely than their male counterparts to report that they frequently feel stressed. Indeed, four fifths (n = 86; 80%) of female participants reported that they feel stressed 'Often' (n = 41; 38%) or 'Very often' (n = 45; 42%) in comparison to approximately half (n = 13; 49%) of their male counterparts. Results from a Mann-Whitney U test indicated that female participants were significantly more likely to frequently feel stressed (*Mdn* = 4 ['Often']) than male participants (*Mdn* = 3 ['Sometimes']), U = 840, p < .001, r = .10. While this finding should again be interpreted with

caution, because of the small(er) number of male participants (Muijs, 2011), it nonetheless lends provisional and tentative evidence to support the idea that female A-level students are more likely than their male counterparts to be experiencing a high degree of stress (Nash et al., 2021).

5.3.2 Stress frequency and negative emotional states

The relationship between participants' scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension and the frequency with which they reported feeling stressed is depicted in Table 11, below. Results from Spearman correlations indicated that there was a significant, moderate positive correlation between the frequency with which participants reported feeling stressed and their scores for depression $r_s(134) = .44$, $p < .001$; and that there was a significant, strong correlation between the frequency with which participants reported feeling stressed and their scores for anxiety $r_s(134) = .49$, $p < .001$; stress / tension $r_s(134) = .57$, $p < .001$; and negative emotional symptoms $r_s(134) = .57$, $p < .001$.

Importantly, it is not possible to determine the direction of the relationship between the frequency with which participants feel stressed and their scores for depression, anxiety and stress on the basis of these findings. Nevertheless, these findings highlight again that A-level students' self-reported experiences of stress should not be belittled, dismissed or trivialised because the more often students report feeling stressed, the more likely they are to be experiencing frequent symptoms of depression, anxiety or stress / tension.

Table 13: Spearman correlation between the frequency with which participants reported feeling stressed and their scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms

	How often do you get stressed?		
	Male	Female	Total
Depression	.55	.38	.44
Anxiety	.54	.44	.49
Stress / Tension	.46	.52	.57
Negative emotional symptoms	.56	.52	.57

Notes: male participants $n = 27$; female participants $n = 108$; undisclosed gender $n = 1$.

5.4 What do students worry about most frequently?

In order to gain an insight into what may act as a prominent source of concern and, therefore, potentially contribute towards A-level students experiencing negative emotional symptoms, the participants were asked to describe what worries them most frequently using three words or phrases (in no particular order). Almost all ($n = 134$; 99%) of the participants adhered to this request, although a handful provided fewer or more than three words or phrases. In total, 396 words or phrases were coded, meaning that the participants can be thought to have provided an average of three ($M = 2.91$) words or phrases each.

5.4.1 Data analysis

Quantitative content analysis was used to assign the words and phrases that the participants used to describe what they worry about most frequently into distinct categories (Stemler, 2001). The analysis was conducted in five, iterative phases: data familiarisation; semantic coding; coding scheme development and refinement; category formation; and reporting.

In the first phase, the words and phrases that the participants had used to describe what they worry about most frequently were imported into NVivo 12, before being read repeatedly in order to facilitate data familiarisation. In the second phase, all of the words and phrases were coded *once* and once-only. Once an initial list of codes had been created, similar or closely related codes were combined to create seven internally consistent, mutually exclusive and exhaustive (enough) categories (Stemler, 2001). The words and phrases that were assigned to the codes *homework*, *deadlines*, *examinations, failure, grades*, and *getting into university*, for example, were later assigned to a single category called *academic work, examinations or grades* on the basis that they all related to the participants' academic performance. During this process, a coding scheme, explaining what type of words or phrases should be assigned to which categories, was developed in order to enhance the coherence and transparency of the analysis (see Appendix 5). The process of combining the initial codes in order to create a smaller number of more meaningful and distinct categories was continued until it was no longer 'reasonable' to continue doing so (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008), and none of the words or phrases 'fell between' different categories (Stemler, 2001).

A major limitation to this analysis was that, because the participants had not been asked to explain why they worry about whatever sources of concern that they cite (for ethical reasons that are discussed in Chapter 3, above), it was sometimes difficult to know precisely what it was that caused them to worry. For example, the words '*buses*', '*friends*', '*family*', '*future*', and '*time*' reveal little about precisely what it is about these phenomena that the participants worry about. It is not clear, for example, whether the participants worried about their friends, whether they worried about the

quality (or quantity) of their friendships, or whether they worried about what their friends thought of them. As a result, the categories are typically broader than usually anticipated; this is a self-imposed limitation.

5.4.2 Results

The proportion of participants who used at least one word or phrase to describe a particular source of concern as one of the things that worry them most often is depicted in Table 14, below. It is notable that most (n = 118; 87%) of the participants cited *academic work, examinations or grades* as one of the three things that they worry about most frequently, and that approximately a third cited their *career or future* (n = 42; 31%). This is consistent with prior research that has found that adolescents tend cite their academic work future and uncertainty about the future among their main sources of stress (Anniko et al., 2019; also see, de Anda et al., 2000; Bryne et al., 2007). In contrast to these concerns, few of the participants mentioned *Covid-19* (n = 4; 3%), their *health* (n = 17; 12%) or *politics* (n = 7; 5%); none mentioned social media or cyberbullying. However, a sixth (n = 21; 15%) of the participants cited concerns about what other people think of them by using terms such as '*disappointing my parents*', '*if people like me*' and '*how people see me*', which suggests that A-level students – like most adolescents – are sensitive to others' approval (Sawyer et al., 2012).

Table 14: Number and percentage of participants who cited a particular source of worry at least once

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Academic work, examinations or grades	22	81	96	89	118	87
Career or future	9	33	33	31	42	31
Family or friends	8	30	16	15	25	18
Finances	3	11	8	7	12	9
Health or well-being	4	15	13	12	17	13
'What others think about me'	1	4	20	19	21	15
Miscellaneous	8	29	18	17	26	19

Notes: male participants *n* = 27; female participants *n* = 108; undisclosed gender *n* = 1.

The proportion of terms that were used to describe each source of worry is depicted in Table 15, below. Strikingly, approximately two thirds (70%) of the terms that the participants provided were used to describe concerns about their *academic work, examinations or grades* (57%) or *career or future* (13%). This suggests that the implications that A-level students' performance will have for their post-18 educational and occupational prospects are a prominent source of concern for them. Terms that were assigned to the *academic work, examinations or grades* category included: '*assignments*', '*workload*', '*deadlines*', '*grades*', '*being able to learn the content*', '*falling behind in my subjects*', '*getting behind on work*', '*doing enough revision*', '*how I perform in tests and exams*', '*getting the grades I want*', '*entry requirements*', '*meeting uni grades*' and '*if I will get into uni or not*'.

Table 15: Number and percentage of terms that the participants used to cite a particular source of worry

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Academic work, examinations or grades	34	46	191	60	225	57
Career or future	12	16	39	12	51	13
Family or friends	10	15	18	6	30	8
Finances	3	4	8	3	12	3
Health or well-being	4	5	14	4	18	5
What others think of me'	1	1	27	8	28	7
Miscellaneous	10	12	22	7	32	8

Notes: male participants *n* = 27; female participants *n* = 108; undisclosed gender *n* = 1.

The terms that the participants used to describe what they worry about most frequently first are displayed in Table 16, below. These have been presented because it could be reasonable to assume that, although the participants were not asked to provide the terms in a particular order, the first source of concern may be the one that they worries them most frequently and was therefore at the forefront of their mind. It is notable that for three quarters (*n* = 102; 75%) of the participants, the first word or phrase that they used to describe what they worry about most frequently depicted their *academic work, examinations or grades*. This is consistent with prior research conducted in Northern Ireland in 2004 that found that, when asked to describe what causes them to feel stressed, approximately two thirds (69%) of 16-year-olds named examinations or schoolwork first (Cairns & Lloyd, 2005).

Table 16: Number and percentage of terms that the participants used to describe what they worry about most often first

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Academic work, examinations or grades	12	44	90	83	102	75
Career or future	4	15	5	5	9	7
Family or friends	4	15	3	3	8	6
Finances	1	4	0	0	0	0
Health or well-being	0	0	1	1	1	1
What others think of me'	1	4	5	5	6	4
Miscellaneous	3	11	4	4	7	5

Notes: male participants *n* = 27; female participants *n* = 108; undisclosed gender *n* = 1.

5.4.2.1 Worries of those experiencing severe depression, anxiety or stress / tension

Of those who exceeded the cut-off for experiencing a severe amount of depression, anxiety or stress / tension (*n* = 67), the majority (*n* = 54; 81%) cited their *academic work, examinations or grades* as one of the things that worry them most often; approximately three quarters (*n* = 49; 73%) listed it first by using terms such as '*exams*', '*grades*', '*failure*', '*keeping on top of my work*' and '*if I'm going to get the grades I need to get into the university I want*'. These findings do not mean that the participants workload, or the implications that their academic performance has for their post-18 educational and occupational prospects, is what concerned or distressed them most, but it does highlight that it is among the things that they worry about most often.

5.4.3 Reflections

What these findings suggest is that A-level students' performance, and the implications that it has for their post-18 educational and occupational prospects, is a frequent source of concern for them. While it cannot be concluded on the basis of these findings that the participants' performance is

what causes them to experience stress / tension, because frequency is not equal to intensity, the findings suggest that it may contribute towards them doing so. Thus, the findings support the idea that supporting A-level students to cope with their academic work may help to reduce the amount of stress and stress-related ill-health that they experience (Finch et al., 2010; Nash et al., 2021).

5.5 How often do A-level students feel pressured by their academic work?

In order to gain an insight into how often A-level students feel pressured by their academic work, the participants were asked to rate on a five-point scale from 'Never' to 'Very often': 'How often do you feel pressured by your academic work?' The frequency with which participants felt pressured by their academic work is depicted on Table 17, below. It is notable that approximately three quarters ($n = 105$; 77%) of the participant reported that they felt pressured by their academic work 'Often' ($n = 70$; 51%) or 'Very often' ($n = 36$; 26%), while the vast majority ($n = 126$; 93%) reported that this happened at least 'Sometimes'.

Table 17: Participants' responses to the question: 'How often do you feel pressured by your academic work?'

| | How often do you feel pressured by your academic work? | | | | | |
| | Male | | Female | | Total | |
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Never	1	4	1	1	2	1
Rarely	6	22	2	2	8	6
Sometimes	5	19	16	15	21	15
Often	12	44	57	53	70	51
Very often	3	11	32	30	35	26

Notes: male participants *n* = 27; female participants *n* = 108; undisclosed gender *n* = 1.

Importantly, the high frequency with which the participants reported feeling pressured by their academic work lends tentative support the suggestion that studying A-levels may be a particularly

challenging – and potentially stressful – experience for a notable proportion of students (Finch et al., 2010; Nash et al., 2021). Furthermore, the finding that approximately a quarter ($n = 35$; 26%) of the participants reported feeling pressured by their academic work 'Very often' suggests that studying A-levels may be an especially difficult or strenuous experience for a notable minority of students. To put this finding in perspective, prior research conducted in Northern Ireland in 2004 found that a twentieth (5%) of 16-year-olds[39] report feeling pressured by their schoolwork 'Very 'Often' (Cairns & Lloyd, 2005). Furthermore, research conducted in England in 2018 found that two fifths (40%) of 15-year-olds, most of whom will be studying GCSEs, reported feeling pressured by their schoolwork 'a lot' (Brooks et al., 2020), which could be considered to be broadly equivalent to 'Often'. Thus, these finding lend additional, provisional evidence to support the suggestion that studying A-levels is substantially more demanding than GCSEs (Nash et al., 2021; Study 1).

It is again important to remain conscious that these findings could be due to - or exaggerated by - the questionnaire being completed during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as

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[39] It is important to note that the 16-year-olds who took part in this research had *not* entered post-16 education at the time of doing so. It is also important to note that these findings are based on the 2004 iteration of the self-selecting Young Life and Times Survey, meaning that the findings may not accurately reflect the contemporary experiences or perceptions of this group. Furthermore, the 2004 iteration of the Young Life and Times Survey was conducted in August, which outside of term time, meaning that the participants' experiences of pressure may be lower than expected midway through the academic year.

because the participants were self-selecting and primarily female (as discussed above). Indeed, it could be that the A-level students who felt most pressured by their academic work were more likely than their counterparts to be attracted towards, and willing to complete, a questionnaire aimed at understanding their experience of 'low mood, stress and anxiety' and they 'cope with academic challenges'. As a result, the findings may not reflect most students' experiences of studying A-levels. Furthermore, it is important to exercise caution when comparing the participants' responses to that of the 16-year-olds who participated in the 2004 iteration of the self-selecting Young Life and Times survey because the latter: i) has a much larger sample; ii) was conducted in Northern Ireland; and iii) and was conducted more than a decade ago, meaning the responses may no longer accurately reflect the contemporary experiences or perceptions of this group or 16-year-olds more broadly. Consequently, further research is needed before conclusions about precisely how often A-level students feel pressured by their academic work can be made.

5.5.1 Gender differences in frequency of academic pressure

Once again, gender differences emerged: approximately four fifths ($n = 89$; 82%) of the female participants reported that they felt pressured by academic work at least 'Often' in contrast to approximately half ($n = 15$; 55%) of the male participants. Interestingly, approximately a quarter ($n = 7$; 26%) of the male participants reported that they 'Never' ($n = 1$; 4%) or 'Rarely' ($n = 6$; 22%) felt pressured by their academic work in contrast to approximately a twentieth ($n = 3$; 3%) of their female counterparts. A Mann-Whitney test indicated that female participants were significantly more likely to feel frequently pressured by their academic work ($Mdn = 4$ ['Often'])

than male participants (*Mdn* = 4 ['Often']), U = 913, p = .001, r = .08. While this finding should again be interpreted with caution, primarily because of the small(er) number of male participants (Muijs, 2011), it is consistent with prior research (Anniko et al., 2019; also see, Cosma et al., 2020; West & Sweeting, 2003), and lends additional evidence to support the idea that female A-level students are notably more likely than their male counterparts to frequently feel pressured by their academic work (Nash et al., 2021), and are therefore in need of greater attention and context-specific support.

5.5.2 Academic pressure and negative emotional states

Results from a Spearman correlation indicated that there was a significant, strong positive correlation between the frequency with which participants reported feeling pressured by academic work and the frequency with which they reported feeling stressed r_s(134) = .68, p < .001. While it is not possible to determine the direction of this relationship on the basis of these findings, it is possible that the former may cause, or contribute towards, the latter (Chamberlain et al., 2011; Finch et al., 2010; Nash et al., 2021).

The relationship between the participants' scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms and the frequency with which participants felt pressured by their academic work is depicted on Table 18, below. Results from Spearman correlations indicated that there was a significant, moderate positive correlation between the frequency with which participants reported feeling pressured by their academic work and their scores for depression

$r_s(134) = .45, p < .001$; anxiety $r_s(134) = .38, p < .001$; stress / tension $r_s(134) = .42, p < .001$; and

negative emotional symptoms $r_s(134) = .48, p < .001$.

Table 18: Spearman correlation coefficient between the frequency with which participants reported feeling pressured by their academic work and their scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms

	How often do you feel pressured by your academic work?		
	Male	Female	Total
Depression	.46	.43	.45
Anxiety	.47	.31	.38
Stress / Tension	.32	.37	.42
Negative emotional symptoms	.47	.42	.49

Notes: male participants $n = 27$; female participants $n = 108$; undisclosed gender $n = 1$.

Participants scores for negative emotional symptoms according to whether they reported feeling

pressured by their academic work infrequently (i.e. 'Rarely' or 'Sometimes'; $n = 29$; 21%); 'Often'

($n = 70$; 51%); or 'Very often' ($n = 35$; 26%) are depicted in Figure 10, below. Results from a one-

way between subjects analysis of variance indicated that when the participants mean scores for

negative emotional symptoms were compared according to how often they reported feeling

pressured by their academic work, there was a significant difference between their scores $F(2, 133)$

$= 18.53, p < .001, \eta^2 = .22$. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey's honest significant difference

(Tukey's HSD) test indicated that participants who reported that they feel pressured by their

academic work 'Rarely' or 'Sometimes' had significantly lower scores for negative emotional

symptoms ($N = 29$; $M = 9.71$; $SD = 5.33$) than participants who reported that they feel pressured

by their academic work 'Often' ($N = 70$; $M = 14.78$ $SD = 7.32$), $p = .004, d = 0.59$. In addition,

the participants who reported that they feel pressured by their academic work 'Often' had

significantly lower scores for negative emotional symptoms than participants who reported that they feel pressured by their academic work 'Very often' (N = 35; M = 20.44; SD = 7.76), p = < .001, d = 0.75. In addition, moderate effect sizes were observed between each of these groups. Therefore, these results indicate that A-level students who feel pressured by their academic work most often are substantially more likely than their counterparts to be experiencing frequent negative emotional symptoms. Consequently, these findings lend support to the suggestion that experiencing a high degree of academic pressure could have deleterious consequences for – or be closely associated with – deteriorations in A-levels' students health (Finch et al., 2010; Nash et al., 2021).

Figure 10: Participants' scores for negative emotional symptoms according to the frequency with which they feel pressured by their academic work
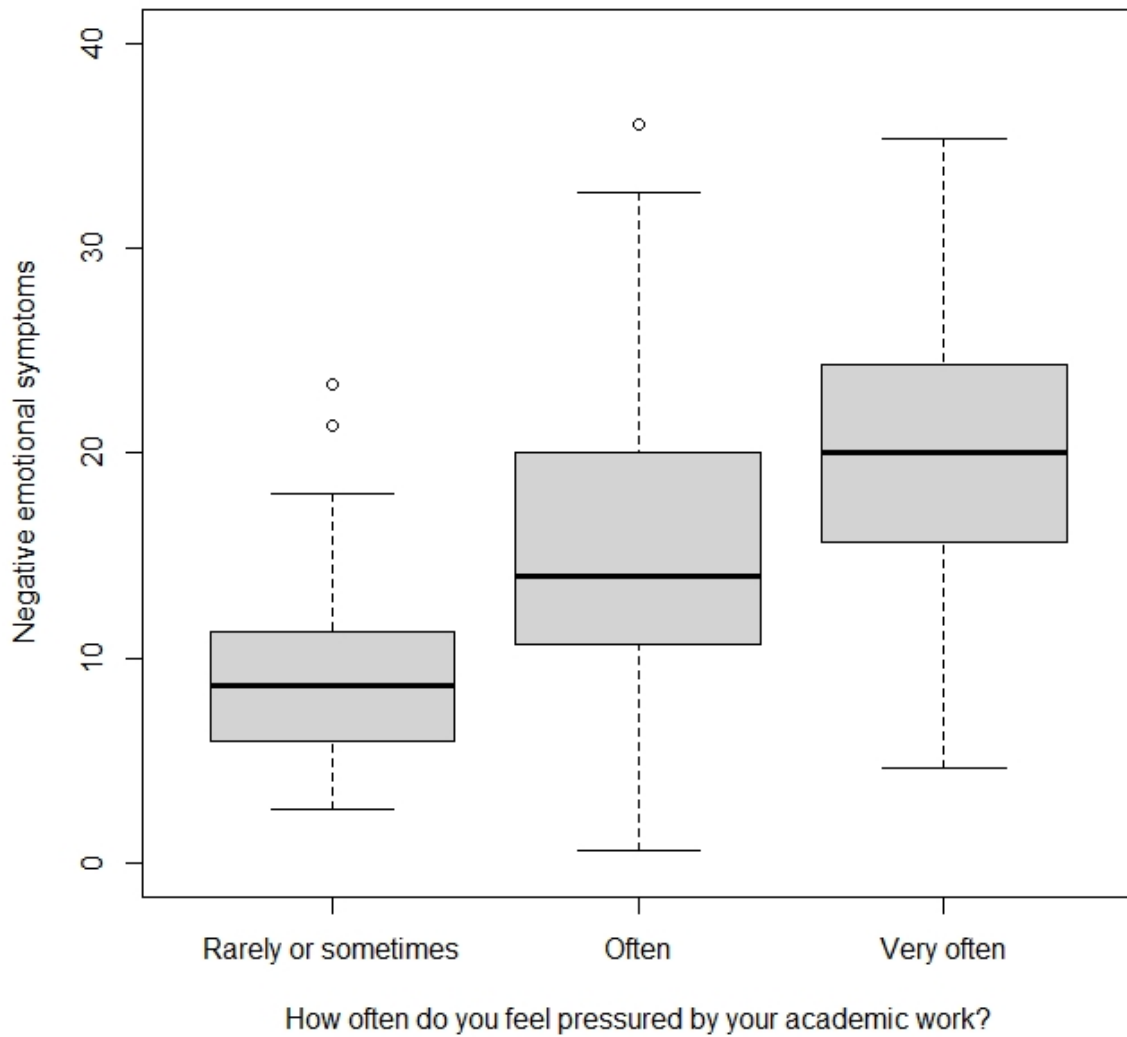
Notes: male participants $n = 26$; female participants $n = 107$; undisclosed gender $n = 1$. Participants who felt pressured by their academic work 'Rarely' or 'Sometimes' $n = 29$; participants who felt pressured by their academic work 'Often' $n = 70$; participants who felt pressured by their academic work 'Very often' $n = 35$. Participants who reported that they never felt pressured by their academic work ($n = 2$; 1%) were excluded from this analysis.

5.6 How do students cope with academic demands?

The average[40] frequency with which participants reported using specific coping strategies in response to 'sixth form-related challenges and stress' is depicted in Table 19, below. The coping strategies that were used most frequently included: *attempt to handle problems alone* ($M = 3.63$; $SD = 0.79$); *technology diversions* ($M = 3.49$; $SD = 0.87$); *time and task management* ($M = 3.45$; $SD = 0.79$); and *cognitive reappraisal* ($M = 3.38$; $SD = 0.82$). These findings are similar to those in previous research in the USA which found that *time and task management*, *cognitive reappraisal* and *attempt to handle problems alone* were the three coping strategies were used most often by 727 15-18-year-olds studying for A-level-equivalent qualifications (Suldo et al., 2015). Similar coping strategies have been reported to be popular in response to daily stressors among 9-13-year-olds in the UK as well (Stapley et al., 2020).

It is notable that *attempt to handle problems alone* was the most popular coping strategy because, while it may reflect the self-directed approach to learning that studying A-levels requires, it also suggests that some A-level students may be reluctant to seek help when they are experiencing challenges, difficulties or stress and may, therefore, benefit from greater encouragement or support to do so. Indeed, results from Pearson correlations indicated that there was a significant, negative moderate correlation between the frequency with which the participants' attempted to *attempt to handle problems alone* and the frequency with which they attempted to *seek academic support*, $r(134) = -.31$, $p < .001$; *turn to family*, $r(134) = -.37$, $p < .001$; and *talk with classmates and friends* $r(134) = -.34$, p

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[40] Average = arithmetic mean

< .001. Nevertheless, it is reassuring that *time and task management* and *cognitive reappraisal* are among most popular coping strategies, as they can both be considered to be adaptive or productive coping strategies (Frydenberg, 2008; Kyriacou, 2003), and have previously been associated with higher life satisfaction and academic performance (Suldo et al., 2015). Interestingly, results from a Pearson correlation indicated that there was a significant, moderate positive correlation between the frequency with which the participants used *time and task management* and *cognitive reappraisal* to cope with the demands of studying A-levels, $r(134) = .45$, $p < .001$. This aligns with the finding from Study 1 that the participants who appeared to be proactively managing their time also appeared to be better positioned to self-regulate and keep their work in perspective. It is unsurprising that turning to *technology diversions* was among the most common coping strategies given that access to modern technology is widely available in the UK, notwithstanding the 'digital divide' (ONS, 2019), and was relied on during the Covid-19 pandemic for education, entertainment and socialising. Even outside the Covid-19 pandemic, however, going online to 'switch off' and relax is likely to have been a popular behaviour among adolescents.

The coping strategies that were used least frequently included: *skip sixth form* ($M = 1.43$; $SD = 0.77$); *substance use* ($M = 1.46$; $SD = 0.65$); *spirituality* ($M = 1.51$; $SD = 0.97$); and *reduce effort on academic work* ($M = 2.13$; $SD = 0.89$). It is notable that *skip sixth form* and *reduce effort on academic work* were among the four coping strategies that were used least frequently because it suggests that A-level students generally care a lot about performing well. Alternatively, this finding could be an indication that the most conscientious A-level students were more likely than their peers to

complete this questionnaire, especially because *substance use* and *skip sixth form* were also among the

least frequently used coping strategies.

Table 19: Participants' use of coping strategies

	Male			Female			Total		
	M	*Mdn*	*SD*	*M*	*Mdn*	*SD*	*M*	*Mdn*	*SD*
Time and task management	3.23	3.33	0.80	3.51	3.50	0.78	3.45	3.50	0.79
Cognitive reappraisal	3.27	3.25	0.89	3.40	3.50	0.80	3.38	3.50	0.82
Seek academic support	2.38	2.33	0.74	2.65	2.67	0.80	2.60	2.67	0.79
Turn to family	2.36	2.33	0.80	3.00	3.00	1.16	2.87	2.67	1.12
Talk with friends and classmates	2.38	2.50	0.77	2.79	2.75	0.92	2.70	2.75	0.91
Skip sixth form	1.28	1.00	0.66	1.47	1.00	0.79	1.43	1.00	0.77
Social diversions	2.89	3.00	0.82	2.99	2.67	0.86	2.96	3.00	0.85
Athletic diversions	2.86	2.67	1.20	2.48	2.33	0.96	2.55	2.33	1.02
Creative diversions	1.91	2.00	0.70	2.26	2.00	0.90	2.19	2.00	0.88
Technology diversions	4.00	4.00	0.81	3.35	3.33	0.83	3.49	3.33	0.87
Substance use	1.42	1.33	0.64	1.47	1.33	0.66	1.46	1.33	0.65
Reduce effort on academic work	1.98	1.75	0.83	2.17	2.00	0.91	2.13	2.00	0.89
Attempt to handle problems alone	3.62	3.50	0.72	3.64	3.50	0.81	3.63	3.50	0.79
Deterioration	2.40	2.17	0.78	2.99	3.00	0.77	2.87	2.83	0.80
Sleep	1.88	1.67	0.76	2.34	2.17	1.09	2.27	2.00	1.07
Spirituality	1.17	1.00	0.44	1.61	1.00	1.05	1.52	1.00	0.97

Notes: male participants $n = 27$; female participants $n = 108$; undisclosed gender $n = 1$. Scores range from: 1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Frequently; 5 = Almost always.

Table 20: Pearson correlation coefficients between the participants' use of coping strategies

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Time and task management[1]															
Cognitive reappraisal[2]	.45														
Seek academic support[3]	.31	.36													
Turn to family[4]	.19	.21	.39												
Talk with friends and classmates[5]	.07	.11	.32	.48											
Skip sixth form[6]	-.19	-.20	-.14	-.08	.00										
Social diversions[7]	.12	.19	.32	.21	.44	-.13									
Athletic diversions[8]	.09	.17	.21	-.02	-.05	-.28	.30								
Creative diversions[9]	.04	.17	.14	-.01	.12	-.02	.12	.07							
Technology diversions[10]	-.23	-.02	-.09	-.09	.02	.13	.19	-.10	.28						
Substance use[11]	-.13	-.09	-.01	.00	.22	.18	.35	.14	-.05	-.01					
Reduce effort on academic work[12]	-.40	-.38	-.17	-.13	.13	.47	.10	-.14	.05	.28	.29				
Attempt to handle problems alone[13]	-.06	-.17	-.30	-.37	-.34	.24	-.18	-.12	.04	.09	.04	.29			
Deterioration[14]	-.04	-.23	-.05	.10	.10	.16	-.03	-.17	.14	.03	.10	.44	.26		
Sleep[15]	-.16	-.07	.13	.08	.13	.29	.21	-.10	.17	.36	.19	.47	.07	.27	
Spirituality[16]	.05	.20	.30	.14	.06	.01	-.04	-.08	.07	-.03	-.13	-.08	-.07	-.7	.09

5.6.1 Gender differences in coping with academic demands

As anticipated on the basis of prior studies that have found that girls are more likely than boys to turn to others for support in an effort to cope (for example, Eschenbeck et al., 2007; Frydenberg & Lewis, 1991, 1993; Stapley et al., 2020), results from independent samples t-tests indicated that female participants were significantly more likely than their male counterparts to *turn to family t*(133) = 3.37, p = .001, d = 0.64, as well as *talk with friends and classmates t*(133) = 2.18, p = .031, d = 0.48. Results from an independent samples t-tests also indicated that female participants were significantly more likely than their male counterparts to become aggressive or ruminate (*deterioration*), t(133) = 3.61, p < .001, d = 0.76. This is consistent with prior research that has found that girls are more likely to worry about their concerns than boys (Anniko et al., 2019; Frydenburg & Lewis, 1993, 1996). Contrary to expectations based on prior studies that have suggested that girls may be less likely than boys to exercise in an effort to cope (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1991, 1993; Wilhsson et al., 2017), results from an independent samples t-test indicated that there was not a significant difference in how often female and male participants used *athletic diversions*, t(133) = 1.74, p = .083, d = 0.37. It is again important to be cautious when comparing female and male participants' scores, however, due to the small(er) sample of the latter (Muijs, 2011).

5.6.2 Coping strategies and negative emotional states

The correlations associated with using particular coping strategies and participants' scores for negative emotional symptoms are depicted on Table 21, below. Results from Pearson correlations indicated that there was a non-significant, modest negative correlation between participants' scores

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for negative emotional symptoms and *time and task management* $r(134) = -.11$, $p = .20$; *seek academic support*, $r(134) = -.09$, $p = .29$; and *social diversions*, $r(134) = -.12$, $p = .17$. Results from a Pearson correlation also indicated that there was a significant, modest negative correlation between participants' scores for negative emotional symptoms and *cognitive reappraisal*, $r(134) = -.20$, $p = .02$, as well as *athletic diversions*, $r(134) = -.24$, $p = .005$. These findings point towards to the complexity of the relationship between coping strategies and experiences of negative emotional symptoms and highlight that there is no 'quick fix'. Nevertheless, these findings do highlight the general importance of being organised (*time and task management*); able 'step back' from work (*social diversions*, *athletic diversions* and *cognitive reappraisal*); and focusing on long-term, self-endorsed goals (*cognitive reappraisal*). Such behaviours should, therefore, be encouraged as part of a repertoire of useful coping strategies, even if they cannot be looked upon as 'silver bullets'.

Results from Pearson correlations also indicated that there was a significant, moderate positive correlation between participants' scores for negative emotional symptoms and *skip sixth form* $r(134) = .32$, $p < .001$; *reduce effort on academic work* $r(134) = .42$, $p < .001$; and *attempt to handle problems alone* $r(134) = .48$, $p < .001$, as well as a significant, strong positive correlation between participants' scores for negative emotional symptoms and *deterioration* (i.e. aggression or rumination), $r(134) = .61$, $p = < .001$. Given that experiencing a symptom of anxiety is apprehension and symptoms of stress / tension include agitation, impatience, irritability and difficulty relaxing (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995a), it is possible that the relationship between experiencing negative emotional symptoms and using both *attempt to handle problems alone* and

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deterioration may be, for some students, both bidirectional and mutually reinforcing – worsening rather than resolving difficulties (as discussed below). These findings highlight coping strategies that should be discouraged, as well as behaviours (in the form of coping strategies) that pastoral care teams or mental health leads could remain alert to or search for when attempting to identify students who need greater support. Indeed, if students appear to be more irritable or are fixated on their work than usual (*deterioration*), it may be because they are experiencing negative emotional symptoms and may benefit from being sensitively encouraged to seek or accept help. Additionally, if students appear to be experiencing difficulties or challenges but are not seeking support (*attempt to handle problems alone*), they may benefit from being reminded that, although it is important to work independently, it is also important to seek help or assistance when help it is needed. It is well-established that students who appear to be avoiding or withdrawing from sources of stress (*reduce effort on academic work* or *skip sixth form*) may be experiencing poor or deteriorating mental health (Seifgge & Kessinger, 2000; also see, Cicognani, 2011; Eppleman et al., 2016).

Table 21: Pearson correlation coefficients between the participants' use of coping strategies and their scores negative emotional symptoms

	Negative emotional symptoms		
	Male	Female	Total
Time and task management	-.24	-.13	-.11
Cognitive reappraisal	-.42	-.19	-.20
Seek academic support	-.49	-.06	-.09
Turn to family	-.38	-.01	-.01
Talk with friends and classmates	.11	-.06	-.01
Skip sixth form	.41	.28	.32
Social diversions	.07	-.17	-.12
Athletic diversions	-.41	-.14	-.24
Creative diversions	.11	.07	.12
Technology diversions	.36	.13	.10
Substance use	.09	.15	.14
Reduce effort on academic work	.64	.38	.42
Attempt to handle problems alone	.70	.46	.49
Deterioration	.80	.53	.61
Sleep	.56	.10	.22
Spirituality	-.25	-.10	-.07

Notes: male participants $n = 27$; female participants $n = 108$; undisclosed gender $n = 1$.

5.7 Predicting negative emotional symptoms

In order to explore the influence of several variables on participants' scores for negative emotional symptoms, a multiple linear regression was conducted in two sequential steps.

Model 1: frequently experiencing academic pressure

First, a simple linear regression was conducted to investigate whether the frequency with which participants felt pressured by their academic work could significantly predict their scores for negative emotional symptoms. This variable was included because, when approximated as a scale variable, results from a Pearson correlation indicated that there was a significant, moderate positive correlation between the frequency with which participants reported feeling pressured by their academic work and their scores for negative emotional symptoms $r(134) = .46$, $p < .001$, as well as because it has been suggested that students who frequently feel pressured by their academic work are more likely to experience frequent symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress (Finch et al., 2010; Nash et al., 2021). As the frequency with which participants felt pressured by their academic work is an ordinal variable, it is important to exercise caution when interpreting the findings because it is not possible to identify the exact difference between the scale points (Muijs, 2011). Nevertheless, the results indicated that the frequency with which participants felt pressured by their academic work explained 21.5% of the variance in their scores for negative emotional symptoms and that the model was a significant, albeit modest, predictor of this variable, $F(1,134)$ $= 36.59$, $p < .001$. The participants' gender and financial status was not included in the analysis because the former is significantly associated with the frequency with which they feel pressured by

their academic work[41] and a linear relationship between the latter and their scores for negative emotional symptoms has not been observed (Strand et al., 2012).

Model 2: 'stressing out' about academic demands

Second, a multiple linear regression was conducted to add the coping strategies *attempt to handle problems alone* and *deterioration* (i.e. aggression and rumination) to the model in a second sequential step. These coping strategies were initially considered because results from a Pearson correlation indicated that there was a significant, strong positive correlation between the participants' scores for negative emotional symptoms and the frequency with which they used *attempt to handle problems alone* $r(134) = .48$, $p < .001$; and *deterioration*, $r(134) = .61$, $p = < .001$. Furthermore, tests to determine whether the variables met the assumption of collinearity indicated that multicollinearity was not a concern, meaning that variables did not strongly explain one another and could be used to independently predict the participants' scores for negative emotional symptoms (frequency of academic pressure, Tolerance = .87; *attempt to handle problems alone*, Tolerance = .89; *deterioration*, Tolerance = .88). Moreover, Figures 11 and 13, below, display the frequency distributions of participants' scores for *attempt to handle problems alone* and *deterioration*, which demonstrate that they clearly meet the assumption of variance in explanatory variables (Strand et al., 2012).

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[41] Results from a simple linear regression also indicated that the participants' gender (female or non-female) was a highly significant predictor of the frequency with which they felt pressured by their academic work $F(1,134) = 14.96$, $p < .001$.

Figure 11: Frequency distribution of participants' scores for *attempt to handle problems alone*
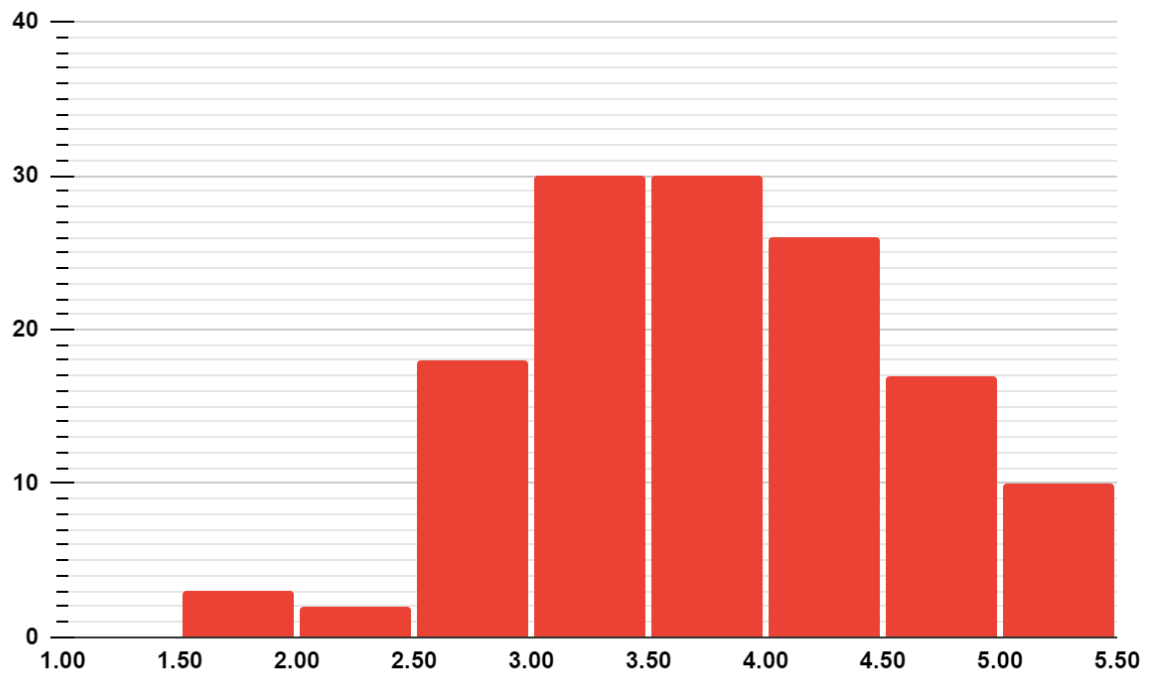
Figure 12: Relationship between the participants' use of *attempt to handle problems alone* and their scores for negative emotional symptoms
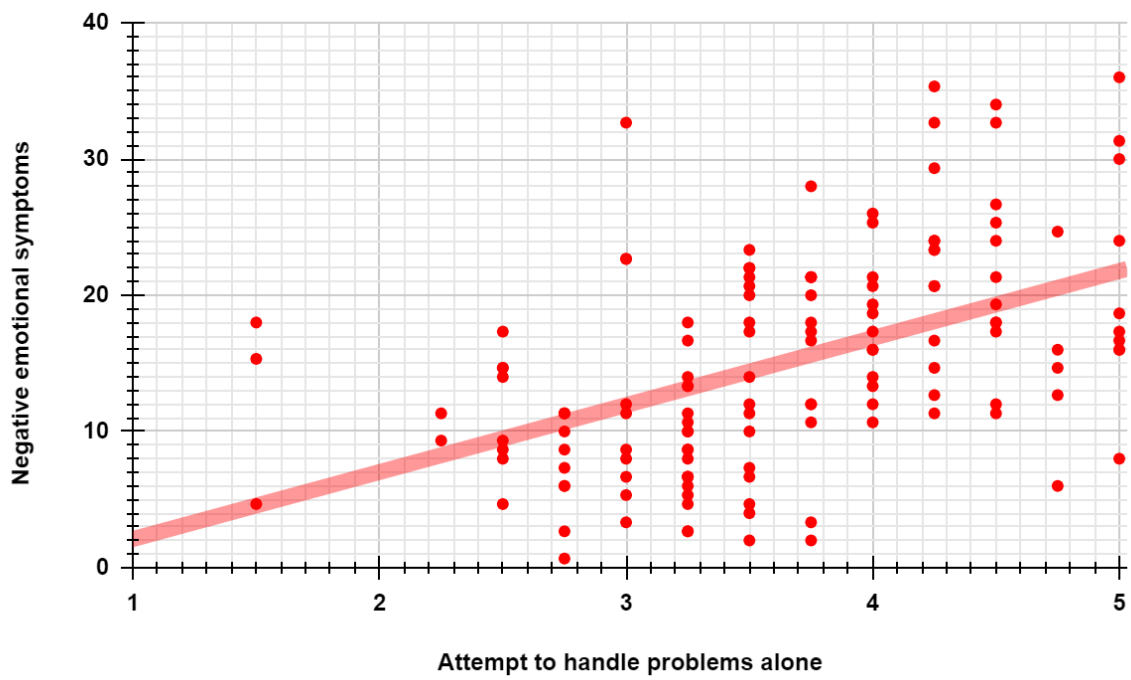
Figure 13: Frequency distribution of participants' scores for *deterioration*
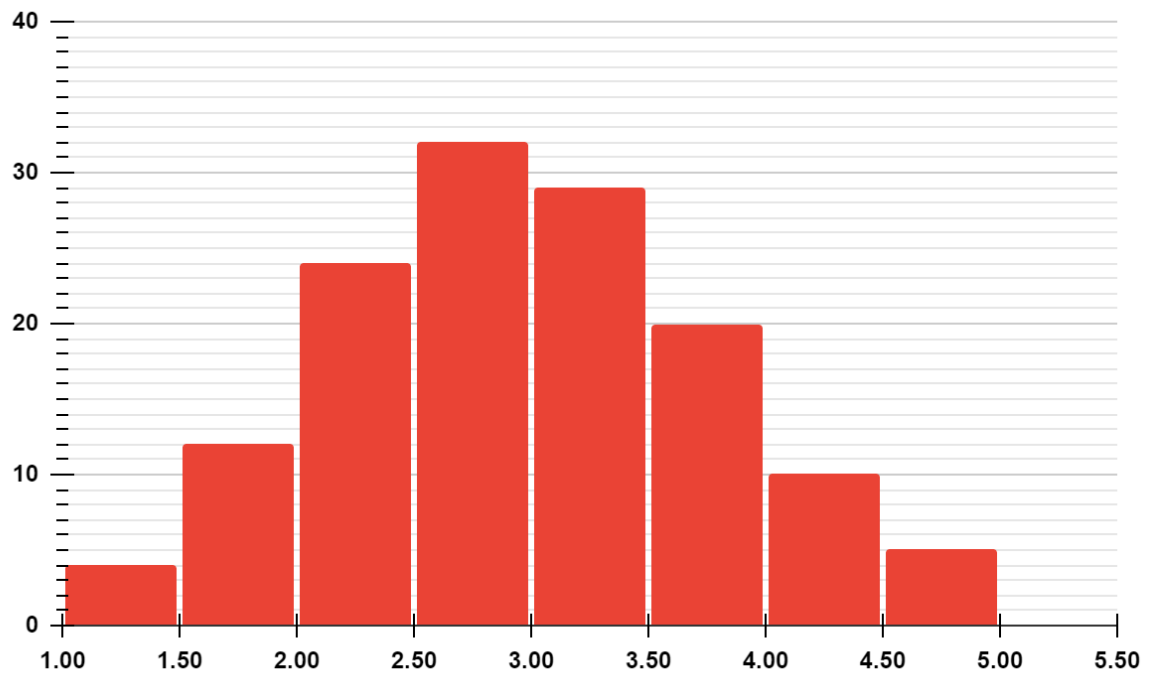
Figure 14: Relationship between the participants' use of *deterioration* and their scores for negative emotional symptoms
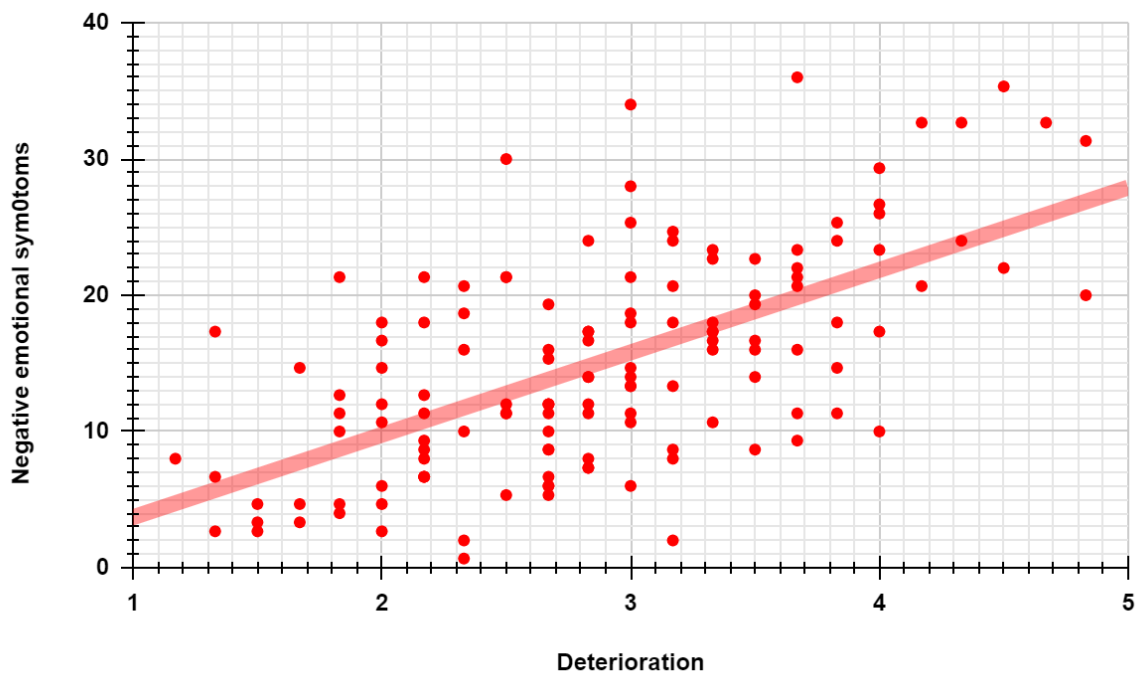
These coping strategies were also included in the model because both could be thought to represent a dysfunctional or counterproductive approach to coping with academic demands which involves: denial and social withdrawal ('try to ignore feeling of stress' and 'become quiet [talk less or not all to others]'; *attempt to handle problems alone*); not seeking support ('keep problems to yourself' and 'try to handle things on your own'; *attempt to handle problems alone*); fixating on challenges or difficulties ('continue to think about problem[s] even when doing other activities' and 'keep thinking about work to be done [obsess about workload]'; *deterioration*); and panicking ('yell, scream or swear' and 'panic or 'freak out' about the problem without trying to fix it'; *deterioration*). Furthermore, these coping strategies had been used by several of the participants in Study 1 who had found the demands of studying A-levels particularly stressful, especially – but not exclusively – during the approach to examinations (as discussed in Chapter 4). In addition, these coping strategies align with those that are considered to be non-productive (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993), and could be considered to constitute an unhelpful or maladaptive approach to coping which involves 'stressing out', "worrying and allowing the situation to get worse" (Kyriacou, 2003, p. 87), without seeking assistance or support.

Including these coping strategies significantly improved the variance in the participants' scores for negative emotional symptoms that the model explained from 21.5% to 53.5%, and increased the strength of the model from a modest to a strong predictor of this variable, $F(3,132) = 52.68, p < .001$. All of the variables contributed significantly to the final predictive model: negative emotional symptoms = -17.94 + (2.22*frequency of academic pressure [$p < .001$]) +

(3.06**attempt to handle problems alone* [$p < .001$]) + (4.46*deterioration [$p < .001$]). The assumption of homoscedasticity was met, and the residuals were approximately normally distributed (Strand et al., 2012).

5.7.1 Reflections

These findings lend additional support to the suggestion that experiencing a high degree of academic pressure could have deleterious consequences for A-levels students' mental health (Finch et al., 2010; Nash et al., 2021), but also highlight that how students cope with challenges also has important implications in this respect. Indeed, the findings suggest that A-level students should be encouraged and supported to seek help when they are experiencing sixth form-related difficulties, challenges or stress, and – resource permitting – be offered opportunities to develop better coping strategies (Anniko et al., 2019; Frydenberg & Lewis, 1999, 2000). Furthermore, the findings highlight that senior mental health leads or those responsible for pastoral care within sixth forms should attempt to identify and offer support to A-level students who appear to be irritable or fixating on their problems, because this may be a sign that they are experiencing a lot of stress or mental ill-health (see also, Kyriacou, 2003). The findings also point to the need, at an educational policy-level, to critically reflect on the amount of academic pressure that adolescents face, on the one hand, and to provide schools, sixth forms and colleges with the resources, training and support that is needed to help students cultivate helpful coping strategies, on the other hand – I will return to and elaborate upon this idea in Chapter 7.

5.8 How do A-level students experience sixth form?

In order to gain a more detailed insight into how A-level students experience sixth form, the participants were asked to describe their experience of sixth form using three words or phrases (in no particular order). All of the participants adhered to this request, although a handful provided fewer or more than three words or phrases. In total, 405 words or phrases were coded, meaning that the participants can be thought to have provided an average of three (M = 2.98) words or phrases each.

In order to compare the words and phrases that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form to the words and phrases that have been provided by A-level students in prior studies (Nash et al., 2021), albeit in a more transparent, replicable and systematic manner, the words and phrases that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form were analysed using quantitative content analysis (as described in Chapter 3). Quantitative content analysis rather than reflexive thematic analysis was adopted because the words and phrases that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form were not detailed enough to "tell a rich story" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 53), and could not, therefore, be used to construct themes. Based on explicit and replicable protocols or "*rules* of coding" (Stemler, 2001, emphasis added), quantitative content analysis can be used to facilitate the compression and distillation of large numbers of words and phrases into a smaller number of categories that share meaning (Cavanagh, 1997). These categories can then be used to develop a 'broad' but relatively insightful 'description of the phenomena' at hand (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Below, the findings from the quantitative

content analysis are presented, before the relationship(s) between the type of words and phrases that the participants' used to describe their experience of sixth form and their scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension are investigated.

On the basis of the quantitative content analysis, it is argued that while most students find studying A-levels simultaneously challenging and enjoyable, a notable minority of students appear to find it particularly stressful. For such students, studying A-levels may therefore aggravate or contribute towards the development of mental ill-health, meaning that these students could benefit from greater support aimed at helping them to minimise or manage experiences of stress that arise from academic demands. Indeed, subsequent statistical tests indicate that participants whose first choice of word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form was categorised as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* had significantly higher scores for depression, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms than their counterparts, as well as high scores for anxiety.

5.8.1 Data analysis

An inductive approach to conducting quantitative content analysis was adopted in part because it is recommended when claims about a particular phenomenon are conflicting; when a topic is under-researched; or "when knowledge [about a topic] is fragmented" (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 113), as the literature on how A-level students experience post-16 education is (as discussed in Chapter 2; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Nash et al., 2021). It was also adopted because prior approaches to categorising the words and phrases that students use to describe their experience of

sixth form have not been internally consistent, mutually exclusive or exhaustive (as discussed in Chapter 2; Nash et al., 2021). Thus, a more coherent approach was needed.

The quantitative content analysis was conducted in five phases: data familiarisation; semantic coding; coding scheme development and refinement; category formation; and reporting. In the first phase, the words and phrases that the participants had used to describe their experience of sixth form were imported into NVivo 12, before being read repeatedly in order to facilitate data familiarisation. In order to be able to compare the words and phrases that the participants had used to describe their experience of sixth form with those provided in prior studies (Nash et al., 2021), the words and phrases were treated as the 'units of analysis'. Put another way, all of the words and phrases were coded once and once-only (Stemler, 2001).

In the second phase, the words and phrases were coded, or 'indexed' (Richards & Richards, 1994); the codes were named using 'content-characteristic' labels that were based on the explicit language that had been used by the participants (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Later, after an initial list of codes had been constructed, the words and phrases were read again and reflected upon before similar or closely related codes were combined to create twelve internally consistent, mutually exclusive and exhaustive (enough) categories (Stemler, 2001); the categories were named using an 'essence-capturing' combination of the names of the initial codes (Saldaña, 2013). The words and phrases that were assigned to the initial codes *friendly, inclusive, inviting, sociable* and *welcoming,* for example, were later assigned to a single category called *friendly, inclusive or welcoming* on the basis that they all related to positive social aspects of the participants' experiences of sixth form. In another

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example, the words and phrases that were assigned to the initial codes *demanding*, *fast-paced*, *hard* and *tiring* were later assigned to a single category called *demanding, difficult or hard* on the basis that: i) they all related to the idea that studying A-levels can be academically challenging; but ii) did not explicitly depict it as exhausting, stressful or overwhelming. Thus, I made a subjective decision to separate words and phrases according to the level of intensity that they appeared to convey.

During this process, a coding scheme, explaining what type of words or phrases should be assigned to which categories (see appendix 6), was developed and revised in order to aid the coherence and transparency of the analysis (Elo et al., 2014). The process of combining the initial codes in order to create a small number of more meaningful and distinct categories was – as highlighted above – continued until an exhaustive (enough) number of categories had been created (Stemler, 2001). In other words, the categories were de- and reconstructed until I no longer deemed it 'reasonable' to continue doing so (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

Once the categories had been created, categories that were considered to share meaning were grouped together and assigned as sub-categories to one of two 'higher order' main categories (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008), or a *miscellaneous* category. The two main categories that were constructed to capture the overarching ways in which the participants described their experience of sixth form were called *challenging* and *positive*; a *miscellaneous* category was used to group the sub-categories that captured the words or phrases that were used infrequently by the participants and were not considered to contribute towards the first two main categories. Importantly, the *positive* main category contains words and phrases that are considered to be unarguably or unambiguously

positive, whereas the *challenging* main category contains some words and phrases, such as '*difficult*', '*hard*' and '*stretching*' that could reflect desirable or undesirable experience of sixth form, depending on the context in which it is being used (as discussed below). Crucially, the main categories contain all of the words and phrases that were coded to the sub-categories that they contain, but none of the words or phrases were coded directly to a main category.

In the final phase, the number and proportion of participants who used at least one word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form in a particular manner was reported, as was the proportion of words and phrases that had been assigned to each main and sub-category. In addition, the proportion of participants who used zero, one, two or three unambiguously *positive* words or phrases to describe their experience of sixth form was reported (in an attempt to replicate a prior analysis; Nash et al., 2016, 2021), as was the type of words or phrases that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form *first*. Importance was attributed to what type of words or phrases the participants used first because I considered it to be reasonable to assume that, although the participants had not been asked to provide the words or phrases in a particular order, the first word or phrase that was provided by them may have immediately 'sprang to mind' precisely because it best represented their experiences.

5.8.2 Results

5.8.2.1 Overarching categories

The number and proportion of participants who described their experience of sixth form in a particular way is depicted on Table 22, below, where the main categories are highlighted in bold and the sub-categories that they are comprised of are listed in alphabetical order below them. Two main categories, consisting of several sub-categories, were constructed from the data: *challenging* and *positive*. The main categories highlight that while there are multiple aspects of being in sixth form that most students appreciate and find engaging, enjoyable and exciting, students also find studying A-levels demanding, challenging and stress-inducing, sometimes to an exhausting or overwhelming extent. Studying A-levels can, therefore, be thought of as a multi-faceted experience. It is also notable that just two participants [*n* = 2; 1%] referred to the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, as this suggests that most of the participants may have used words or phrases to reflect their experience of sixth form prior to its commencement. Given that notable gender-based differences are not apparent, unlike in prior research (Nash et al., 2016, 2021), they will not be discussed in this section.

Table 22: Number and percentage of participants who used at least one word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form in a particular way

	Language used to describe sixth form (cases)					
	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Challenging	19	70	87	81	107	79
Busy	0	0	10	9	10	7
Demanding, difficult or hard	14	52	53	49	68	50
Intense, overwhelming or stressful	10	37	47	44	58	43
Positive	26	96	95	88	121	89
Autonomy, freedom or independence	9	33	27	25	36	26
Encouraging, helpful or supportive	3	11	19	18	22	16
Engaging, interesting or stimulating	12	44	28	26	40	29
Enjoyable, exciting or fun	15	56	56	52	71	52
Friendly, inclusive or welcoming	4	15	26	24	31	23
Miscellaneous	3	11	10	9	13	10
Boring, disappointing or monotonous	1	4	2	2	3	2
Disrupted by Covid-19	1	4	1	1	2	1
Lonely	2	7	4	4	6	4
Neutral	0	0	6	6	6	4

Notes: male participants *n* = 27; female participants *n* = 108; undisclosed gender *n* = 1.

Category 1: Positive experiences of sixth form

Reassuringly, and in contrast to prior research findings (Finch et al., 2010; Nash et al., 2021), almost all (n = 121; 89%) of the participants used at least one unambiguously *positive* word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form. This indicates that most of the participants appreciated at least one aspect of sixth form. Indeed, approximately half (n = 71; 52%) of the participants used at least one word or phrase to describe their overall experience of sixth form as *enjoyable, exciting or fun* by using words or phrases such as '*a great experience*', '*enjoyable*', '*exciting*', '*fun*', '*happy*', '*joyful*', '*loved it*' and '*positive*', although it is not clear what aspect(s) of sixth form these participants valued most solely on the basis of these terms.

From a social perspective, approximately a quarter (n = 31; 23%) of the participants used at least one word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form as *friendly, inclusive or welcoming* by using words or phrases such as '*create great friendships*', '*friendly*', '*helped me be more social*', '*inclusive*', '*inviting*', '*good to meet people from all different backgrounds*' and '*welcoming*'. This suggests that sixth form was often experienced as a place where friendships can flourish and the participants felt included among their peers. Indeed, less than a twentieth (n = 6; 4%) of the participants described their experience of sixth form as *lonely* (a sub-category that was assigned to the *miscellaneous* category), with one participant stating that sixth form was '*lonely at first*' before she had made '*a couple* [of] *new friends*'.

From an academic perspective, approximately a sixth (n = 22; 16%) of the participants used at least one word or phrase to describe their peers or teachers as *encouraging, helpful or supportive*

by using words or phrases such as '*encouraging*', '*driven*', '*helpful*', '*motivating*', '*support network*', '*supportive*', and '*very supportive*'. In addition, approximately a third (*n* = 40; 29%) of the participants used at least one word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form as academically *engaging, interesting or stimulating* by using words or phrases such as '*academically stimulating*', '*educational*', '*engaging*', '*intellectually stimulating*', '*interesting*', '*rewarding*' and '*stimulating*'. This suggests that the participants found studying A-levels academically enriching. (Interestingly, few [*n* = 3; 2%] participants described their experience of sixth form as *boring, disappointing or monotonous* [another sub-category that was assigned to the *miscellaneous* category]).

It is also notable that approximately a quarter (*n* = 36; 26%) of the participants used at least one word or phrase to depict sixth form as facilitating greater *autonomy, freedom or independence* in a positive light by using words or phrases such as '*a lot more free*', '*easier to get on with what I want to do*', '*freedom*', '*independent*', '*less restricted*', '*liberating*', '*suited to my independent learning style*' and '*treated more like equals*'. This suggests that the additional independence that studying A-levels affords students was often utilised productively and valued by the participants, contrary to what has been suggested by other researchers (Stoten, 2014).

Category 2: Challenging experiences of sixth form

Pointing to a multidimensional experience, four fifths (*n* = 107; 79%) of the participants used at least one word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form as *challenging*, indicating that as well as being socially and academically enjoyable, engaging and enriching, studying A-levels can also constitute a difficult stage of education (Brown, 2021; Chamberlain et al., 2011; Dueker, 2014;

Finch et al., 2010; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Nash et al., 2021; Powell, 2017; Study 1).

Indeed, half ($n = 68$; 50%) of the participants used at least one word or phrase to describe their

experience of sixth form as *demanding, difficult or hard* by using words or phrases such as '*out of my*

comfort zone', '*academically stretching*', '*challenging*', '*demanding*', '*difficult*', '*fast-paced*', '*hard*', '*tiring*', '*tough*'

and '*ups and downs*'. In addition, approximately a fifth ($n = 10$; 7%) of the participants also described

their experience of sixth form as '*busy*' or '*jam packed*'. Importantly, while the use of words and

phrases such as these depict studying A-levels as requiring a substantial amount of effort and

challenging the participants' abilities, the widespread use of these words and phrases does not

necessarily indicate that studying A-levels is a primarily unpleasant experience, as previously

suggested by other researchers (Finch et al., 2010; Nash et al., 2021). Indeed, educational

experiences that are '*stretching*' can lead to growth and development precisely because they are

'*challenging*', '*demanding*' and encourage A-level students to '*expand*' their '*comfort zone*', especially if

students value what they are studying (Brown, 2021; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011). However,

as this is not guaranteed to be the case, because '*tough*' experiences can also be both emotionally

distressing and harmful to students' learning (Chamberlain, 2011; Finch et al., 2010), these words

and phrases were not considered to be unarguably or unambiguously *positive*.

On the more extreme end of the spectrum, approximately a third ($n = 44$; 32%) of the

participants specifically used the word '*stressful*' (the most commonly used term) to depict their

experience of sixth form, indicating that studying A-level was, for a notable proportion of the

participants, stress-inducing rather than merely difficult or challenging. Indeed, approximately two

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fifths (*n* = 58; 43%) of the participants used at least one word or phrase to describe their overall experience of sixth form as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* by using words or phrases such as: '*a toll on my mental health*', '*almost unbearable*', '*emotionally draining*', '*exhausting*', '*intense*', '*overwhelming*', '*scary*', '*straining*', '*stressful*' or '*taxing*'. Importantly, the use of words and phrases such as these indicates that, for a notable proportion of the participants, studying A-levels constituted an '*exhausting*', '*straining*' and '*overwhelming*' experience which may not have been conducive of 'positive personal change' or thought of as 'life-affirming' (Brown, 2021; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011).

5.8.2.2 Prevalence of main and sub-categories

The number and proportion of words or phrases that were assigned to each main and sub-category is depicted in Table 24, below, where the main categories are again highlighted in bold and the sub-categories that they are comprised of are listed in alphabetical order below them. Positively, and again in contrast to prior research findings (Nash et al., 2021), the number of words and phrases that were used by the participants to describe their experience of sixth form as unambiguously *positive* (57%) trebled the number that depicted it as *boring, disappointing or monotonous* (1%) or *intense, overwhelming or stressful* (18%). Furthermore, approximately two thirds (*n* = 88; 65%) of the participants used two (*n* = 65; 48%) or three (*n* = 23; 17%) unambiguously *positive* words or phrases to describe their experience of sixth form. In addition, approximately four fifths (*n* = 48; 83%) of the participants who used at least one word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* also described it using at least one unambiguously *positive* word or phrase as well.

What these findings suggest is that, outside of the approach to – or immediate aftermath of – examinations, A-level students may be much more likely to use language that is unambiguously *positive* to depict their experience of sixth form. In turn, this suggests that students' overall experience of studying A-levels may not be as relentlessly arduous or unenjoyable as previously suggested by other researchers who had asked A-level students to describe their experience of sixth form within close proximity of their examinations taking place (Nash et al., 2021).

Table 23: Number of participants who used zero, one, two or three unambiguously *positive* words or phrases to describe their experience of sixth form

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
3	6	22	17	16	23	17
2	13	48	52	48	65	48
1	7	26	26	24	33	24
0	1	4	13	12	15	11

Notes: male participants *n* = 27; female participants *n* = 108; undisclosed gender *n* = 1.

Figure 15: Number of unambiguously positive terms A-level students used to describe their experience of sixth form in 2016 and 2020
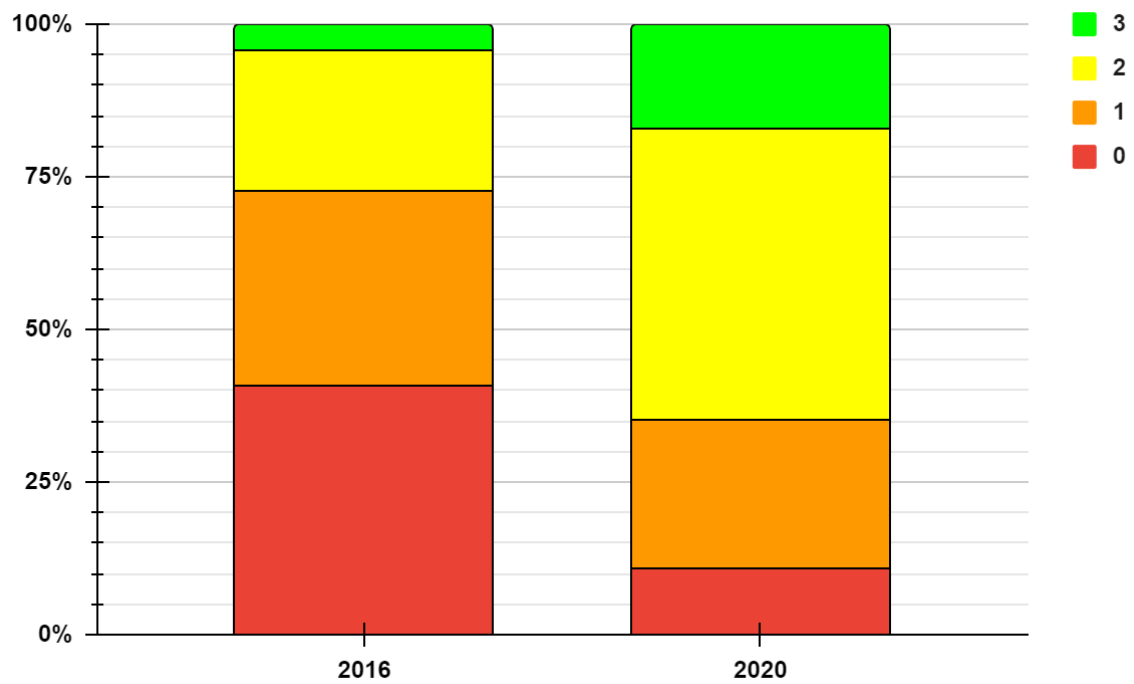
Notes: 2016 data is from Nash et al., (2016, 2021) and only includes Year 12 students.

Table 24: Number and percentage of terms that the participants' used to describe their experience of sixth form

| | Language used to describe sixth form (codes) | | | | | |
| | Male | | Female | | Total | |
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Challenging	24	30	128	40	155	38
Busy	0	0	11	3	11	3
Demanding, difficult or hard	14	18	58	18	73	18
Intense, overwhelming or stressful	10	13	59	18	71	18
Positive	51	64	178	55	229	57
Autonomy, freedom or independence	11	14	29	9	40	10
Encouraging, helpful or supportive	2	3	22	7	27	7
Engaging, interesting or stimulating	12	15	31	10	43	11
Enjoyable, exciting or fun	18	23	69	21	87	21
Friendly, inclusive or welcoming	5	6	27	8	32	8
Miscellaneous	5	6	6	5	21	5
Boring, disappointing or monotonous	2	3	2	1	4	1
Disrupted by Covid-19	1	1	1	1	2	1
Lonely	2	3	5	2	7	2
Neutral	0	0	8	2	8	2

Notes: male participants *n* = 27; female participants *n* = 108; undisclosed gender *n* = 1.

5.8.2.3 First words or phrases used to describe sixth form

In order to gain a sense of what kind of language may have best represented the participants' experiences of sixth form, an analysis of the first words or phrases that the participants used first to describe their experience of sixth form was conducted. This analysis was conducted because it could be argued that, although the participants were not asked to provide the words or phrases in a particular order, the first words or phrases that were provided by the participants may have been the most meaningful one; or, to put it differently, the one which best represented their experiences of sixth form. The number and proportion of words or phrases that the participants used first to describe their experience of sixth is depicted in Table 25, below, where the main categories are again highlighted in bold and the sub-categories that they are comprised of are listed in alphabetical order below them. Reassuringly, approximately half ($n = 74$; 54%) of the participants chose an unambiguously *positive* word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form first in contrast to approximately a fifth ($n = 30$; 22%) who opted for a word or phrase to depict it as *demanding, difficult or hard*. It is also important to note, however, that approximately a sixth ($n = 23$; 17%) of the participants chose a word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* first. Furthermore, most of the participants whose first choice of word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form was categorised as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* listed their *academic work, examinations or grades* as one of the things that they worry about most often first ($n = 18$; 78%); all of them reported that they feel pressured by their academic work 'Often' ($n = 15$; 65%) or 'Very often' ($n = 8$; 35%). These findings suggest that these participants may have

found studying A-levels particularly demanding. Indeed, these findings indicate again that while studying A-levels may have been experienced as academically and socially enjoyable, engaging and enriching by most of the participants, it may also have been particularly stressful or overwhelming for a notable minority.

Table 25: First terms used by the participants to describe their experience of sixth form

	First words and phrases used to describe sixth form					
	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Challenging	7	26	49	45	57	42
Busy	0	0	4	4	4	3
Demanding, difficult or hard	5	19	25	23	30	22
Intense, overwhelming or stressful	2	7	20	19	23	17
Positive	19	70	55	51	74	54
Autonomy, freedom or independence	6	22	13	12	19	14
Encouraging, helpful or supportive	1	4	2	2	3	2
Engaging, interesting or stimulating	3	11	8	7	11	8
Enjoyable, exciting or fun	7	26	22	20	29	21
Friendly, inclusive or welcoming	2	7	10	9	12	9
Miscellaneous	1	4	4	4	5	4
Boring, disappointing or monotonous	0	0	0	0	0	0
Disrupted by Covid-19	1	4	0	0	0	0
Lonely	0	0	2	2	2	1
Neutral	0	0	2	2	2	1

Notes: male participants *n* = 27; female participants *n* = 108; undisclosed gender *n* = 1. All of the participants provided at least one word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form.

5.8.3 Reflections

In summary, these findings present a different picture of how A-level students' experience post-16 education to that which had been presented previously (Nash et al., 2016, 2021), potentially because the participants had been asked to describe their experience of sixth form midway through the academic year rather than immediately before or after sitting mock or actual examinations. Indeed, examinations had been cancelled for the participants who took part in this research. Due to the self-selecting sample in this research, it is also possible the terms provided primarily reflect the experiences of the most conscientious, stressed or anxious A-level students (as discussed above). Interestingly, few of participants referred to the Covid-19 pandemic. This indicates that the words and phrases that the participants provided may better reflect their experience of sixth form prior to, rather than during, this period. The benefit of this is that it permits for a better insight into how A-levels students typically experience sixth form; a limitation is that the words and phrases may be skewed by recall bias or retrospective distortion. Nonetheless, the findings highlight that sixth form is a multidimensional experience that can be both enriching and stress-inducing. These findings also suggest that, for a potentially large minority of students, studying A-levels may be an exhausting or overwhelming experience – it is not possible to determine how large this minority might be on the basis of these findings, however. A major shortcoming of this approach to data collection is that it produces data that is too constrained to permit for a rich, contextualised and detailed analysis of the participants' experiences and perceptions from being conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

In the next section, I will investigate whether the terms that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form are associated with their scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension, before concluding this chapter by turning to the participants' justifications for describing their experience of sixth form in the way that they did for a better insight into their experiences' of post-16 education.

5.9 Use of words or phrases and negative emotional states

In light of other researchers' attempts to make inferences about A-level students' mental health on the basis of the type of words or phrases that they use to describe their experience of sixth form (Finch et al., 2010; Nash et al., 2016, 2021), several statistical analyses were conducted to determine whether there was an association between the type of words or phrases that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form and their scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension.

First, given that other researchers have suggested that when A-level students' use of few unambiguously *positive* words or phrases to describe their experience of sixth form, it may be an indication that their academic performance is coming "at a cost to their mental health" (Nash et al., 2021, p. 164), a Pearson correlation was conducted to determine whether there was a relationship between the number of unambiguously *positive* words or phrases that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form and their scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension. The relationship between the number of unambiguously *positive* words or phrases that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form and their scores for depression,

anxiety and stress / tension is depicted in Table 26, below. Results from a Pearson correlation indicated that there was a significant, modest negative correlation between the number of unambiguously *positive* words or phrases that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form and their scores for depression $r(134) = -.19$, $p = .030$; as well as a non-significant, modest negative correlation between the number of unambiguously *positive* words or phrases that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form and their scores for anxiety $r(134) = -.12$, $p = .179$; stress / tension $r(134) = -.09$, $p = .255$; and negative emotional symptoms $r(134) = -.16$, $p = .070$.

Table 26: Pearson correlation coefficients between the participants' scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms and the number of unambiguously positive words or phrases that they used to describe their experience of sixth form

	Unambiguously positive words or phrases		
	Male	Female	Total
Depression	-.25	-.15	-.19
Anxiety	-.28	-.04	-.12
Stress / Tension	-.01	-.07	-.09
Negative emotional symptoms	-.21	-.10	-.16

Notes: male participants $n = 27$; female participants $n = 108$; undisclosed gender $n = 1$.

These findings highlight that the more frequently the participants were experiencing symptoms of depression, the less likely they were to use unambiguously *positive* words or phrases to describe their experience of sixth form, although the direction of this relationship is unclear. It is possible, however, that experiencing few positive aspects of sixth form may cause students to experience symptoms of depression more frequently (Finch et al., 2010; Nash et al., 2021). In light of this, a simple linear regression was conducted to determine whether the number of unambiguously *positive*

words or phrases that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form could significantly predict their scores for depression. The results indicated that while the number of unambiguously *positive* words or phrases that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form was a significant predictor of their scores for depression, it explained just 2.7% of the variance and was therefore a poor explanatory variable, $F(1,134) = 4.80$, $p = .030$. No attempt was made to determine whether the number of unambiguously *positive* words or phrases that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form could significantly predict their scores for anxiety or stress / tension because a significant, linear correlation between these variables had not been observed (Muijs, 2011). Thus, these findings do not lend strong evidence to support the notion that the number of unambiguously *positive* words or phrases that A-level students use to can be used to make confident inferences about their mental health.

In light of the emphasis that other researchers have also placed on the dichotomy between whether A-level students use one or zero in comparison two or more unambiguously *positive* words or phrases to describe their experience of sixth form (Nash et al., 2016, 2021), the difference between the participants' scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension according to how many unambiguously *positive* words or phrases to describe their experiences of sixth form was investigated. Participants' scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension according to how many unambiguously *positive* words or phrases to describe their experiences of sixth form are depicted in Table 27, below. Results from independent samples t-tests indicated that participants who used one or zero unambiguously *positive* words or phrases to describe their experience of sixth

form did not have significantly different scores to their counterparts for depression, $t(134) = 1.50$, $p = .135$, $d = 0.27$; anxiety, $t(134) = 0.93$, $p = .357$, $d = 0.17$; stress / tension, $t(134) = 0.92$, $p = .359$, $d = .16$; or negative emotional symptoms, $t(134) = 1.30$, $p = .195$, $d = 0.23$. These findings do not, therefore, lend strong evidence to support the notion that it is useful to dichotomise A-level students according to how many unambiguously *positive* words or phrases they use to describe their experience of sixth form in an attempt to make inferences about the quality of their mental health. Furthermore, the findings lend evidence to support the proposition that at least some A-level students who describe experience of sixth form as 'challenging', 'difficult' or 'hard' may find aspects of it valuable or rewarding.

Table 27: Participants' scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms according to whether they used one or zero in contrast to two or three unambiguously positive words or phrases to describe their experience of sixth form

Number of *positive* terms	M	Mdn	SD
	Depression		
One or zero (*n* = 48)	17.58	16.00	9.38
Two or three (*n* = 88)	14.97	13.00	9.81
	Anxiety		
One or zero (*n* = 48)	13.50	12.00	8.85
Two or three (*n* = 88)	12.02	10.00	8.92
	Stress / Tension		
One or zero (*n* = 48)	17.75	17.00	9.73
Two or three (*n* = 88)	16.27	16.00	8.51
	Negative emotional symptoms		
One or zero (*n* = 48)	16.28	14.67	8.06
Two or three (*n* = 88)	14.42	13.67	7.85

Notes: male participants *n* = 27; female participants *n* = 108; undisclosed gender *n* = 1. One or no positive words or phrases used to describe sixth form *n* = 48; two or more positive words or phrases used to describe sixth form *n* = 88.

In another attempt to investigate whether the type of words or phrases that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form was associated with their scores for negative emotional states, and in light of other researchers' reasonable suggestion that A-level students who describe their experience of sixth form using words such as 'scary', 'stressful' or 'terrifying' may be more likely than their counterparts to experience mental ill-health (Finch et al., 2010; Nash et al., 2021), the difference between the participants' scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension according to whether they used at least one word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* was investigated. Participants' scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension according to whether they used at least one word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* are depicted in Table 28, below. Results from independent samples t-tests indicated that participants who used at least one word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* did not have significantly different scores to their counterparts for depression, $t(134) = 1.43$, $p = .153$, $d = 0.25$; anxiety, $t(134) = 1.46$, $p = .147$, $d = 0.25$; stress / tension, $t(134) = 1.60$, $p = .113$, $d = 0.28$; or negative emotional symptoms, $t(134) = 1.73$, $p = .085$, $d = 0.30$, although modest effect sizes were consistently observed. Consequently, whether the participants used at least one word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* was a better, albeit still limited, indicator of their scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension than whether they used one or zero in contrast to two or more unambiguously *positive* words or phrases.

Table 28: Participants' scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms according to whether they used at least one word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form as *intense, stressful or overwhelming*

Overwhelming or stressful?	M	Mdn	SD
		Depression	
a (*n* = 58)	17.28	14.00	10.38
b (*n* = 78)	14.87	15.00	9.10
		Anxiety	
a (*n* = 58)	13.83	12.00	8.92
b (*n* = 78)	11.58	8.00	8.81
		Stress / Tension	
a (*n* = 58)	18.21	17.00	9.26
b (*n* = 78)	15.74	15.00	8.55
		Negative emotional symptoms	
a (*n* = 58)	16.44	15.00	8.26
b (*n* = 78)	14.07	14.00	7.60

Notes: a = used at least one word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form *as intense, overwhelming or stressful* (*n* = 58); b = did not use at least one word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* (*n* = 78).

In a final attempt to investigate whether the type of words or phrases that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form was associated with their scores for negative emotional states, the difference between the participants scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension according to whether their first choice of word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form was categorised as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* was investigated. Participants' scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension according to whether their first choice of word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form was categorised as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* are depicted in Table 29, below. Results from independent samples t-tests indicated that participants whose first choice of word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form was categorised as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* had significantly higher scores for depression, $t(134) = 2.06$, $p = .041$,

d = 0.47; stress / tension, *t*(134) = 2.33, *p* = .021, *d* = 0.53; and negative emotional symptoms *t*(134) = 2.20, *p* = .030, *d* = 0.50, although not anxiety, *t*(134) = 1.28, *p* = .204, *d* = 0.29. It is worth noting, however, that approximately half (*n* = 12; 52%) of the participants whose first choice of word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form was categorised as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* were experiencing a severe (*n* = 3; 13%) or extremely severe (*n* = 9; 39%) amount of anxiety. Furthermore, most (*n* = 22; 91%) of these participants reported that they feel stressed 'Often' (*n* = 6; 26%) or 'Very often' (*n* = 15; 65%). These findings need to be interpreted with a high degree of caution, as the proportion of participants whose first choice of word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form was categorised as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* (*n* = 23) is below the conventional threshold (i.e. 30) for null hypothesis significance tests (Muijs, 2011). Nevertheless, these findings lend tentative evidence to support the idea that, for a notable minority of students, studying A-levels may be a particularly stress-inducing experience. Alternatively, these findings may reflect the number of students with pre-existing vulnerabilities, for whom studying A-levels is, as a result, experienced as stressful. In either case, these findings highlight that there may be a notable minority of A-level students in need of greater attention and context-specific support.

Table 29: Participants' scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms according to whether the first word or phrase that they used to describe their experience of sixth form was categorised as *intense, overwhelming or stressful*

	M	Mdn	SD
	Depression		
a (*n* = 23)	19.65	20.00	9.10
b (*n* = 113)	15.13	14.00	09.68
	Anxiety		
a (*n* = 23)	14.70	16.00	9.41
b (*n* = 113)	12.11	10.00	8.76
	Stress / Tension		
a (*n* = 23)	20.70	20.00	8.52
b (*n* = 113)	16.00	14.00	8.86
	Negative emotional symptoms		
a (*n* = 23)	18.35	18.67	7.59
b (*n* = 113)	14.41	13.33	7.88

Notes: a = first word or phrase that that they used to describe their experience of sixth form was categorised as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* (*n* = 23); b = first word or phrase that that they used to describe their experience of sixth form was not categorised as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* (*n* = 113).

5.9.1 Summary

In summary, these findings indicate that while there is a consistent association between the type of words or phrases that A-level students use to describe their experiences of sixth form, on the one hand, and their mental health, on the other, the relationship is generally modest. Indeed, while participants who used one or zero unambiguously *positive* words or phrases to describe their experience of sixth form, or at least one word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form as *intense, overwhelming or stressful*, had higher scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms in comparison to their counterparts, no significant differences or moderate effect sizes between the groups were observed. However, the relatively small number (*n* = 23; 17%) of participants whose first choice of word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form was categorised as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* had significantly higher scores for depression, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms than their counterparts, and borderline moderate effect sizes were observed. These findings tentatively suggests that for students who find studying A-levels particularly stress-inducing, and therefore immediately depict it as such when asked to describe their experience of sixth form, it has the potential to have deleterious consequences for their mental health. Regardless of the direction of causality, this finding lends tentative evidence to suggest that a notable proportion of A-level students may benefit from greater support. In the next section, I will turn to the justifications that the participants provided for choosing the words and phrases that they did to describe their experience

of sixth form in an attempt to develop a better contextualised and more detailed insight into their experiences of post-16 education.

5.10 How do A-level students experience sixth form (revisited)?

In order to gain a more detailed understanding of the participants' experience of post-16 education, reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the justifications that the participants provided for choosing the terminology that they did to describe their experience of sixth form (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2013, 2019, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021).

5.10.1 Theoretical lens

Following inductive and semantic coding of the data, self-determination theory was used to inform the clustering of the codes and the subsequent refinement of the themes. Self-determination theory posits that for optimal health and performance to be sustained, people's basic psychological needs for autonomy (the need for self-endorsed, -directed and volitional behaviour), competence (the need for a sense of mastery) and relatedness (the need for meaningful relationships) need to be satisfied (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Additionally, self-determination theory posits that when these basic psychological needs are satisfied, intrinsic motivation is enhanced, thereby leading people to pursue, and engage in, goal-orientated pursuits that are of interest them with an agentic sense of volition; that is, without the presence of external rewards or threats (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Put simply, within the context of education, these basic psychological needs are met when students feel able to decide what and how to learn (autonomy); when students feel able to understand the content that is being taught, as well as able to manage their workload (competence); and when

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students are able to establish meaningful relationships with their with peers and teachers (relatedness), for example (Niemec & Ryan, 2009). Self-determination theory was used as a theoretical lens through which to interpret the data following reflection on the findings from Study 1 and the main and sub-categories constructed from the quantitative content analysis, above. This is because both pointed towards aspects of studying A-levels that can meet or deplete students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness and, therefore, support or thwart their health and performance. Self-determination theory was also chosen because there is a substantial amount of evidence to suggest that barriers and obstacles to the satisfaction of these basic psychological needs can act as health- and performance-depleting or threatening sources of stress (Weinstein & Ryan, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2017). In this sense, the decision to use self-determination theory to aid the interpretation of the data resulted from a reflexive, organic process rather than a prespecified data analysis plan.

5.10.2 Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted in six iterative and recursive phases: data familiarisation; coding; initial theme generation; developing, refining and reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and reporting the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2013, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). The main, overarching research question that informed the analysis was the same as that which was used inform the analysis in Study 1: how do A-level students experience post-16 education? The analysis was again conducted from an experiential orientation and a critical realist position (Willig, 2012), and stress was conceptualised as the participants' subjective

interpretation of their experiences as both threatening and taxing or exceeding their ability to cope (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). During the presentation of the themes, I will again focus on stress because this is what the participants' referred to most often during their responses.

In the first phase, the justifications that the participants provided for choosing the language that they did to describe their experience of sixth form were imported into NVivo 12 before being read repeatedly in order to facilitate data familiarisation. In the second phase, the semantic meaning in the data was coded inductively. In other words, the latent (implicit or 'hidden') meaning within the data was not actively interpreted at this stage. In the third phase, the codes and the extracts of data that had been captured by them were critically reflected upon and used to constructed seven candidate themes based on coherent, recurring and meaningful across-case patterns. It was at this stage that self-determination theory was incorporated into the analysis as a 'lens' through which to interpret the data more deeply. In the fourth phase, the candidate themes were refined and assigned brief definitions and names, before being grouped as sub-themes to one of two main themes that were predicated on aspects of sixth form that appeared to facilitate or frustrate the participants' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competency and relatedness. In the final phase, the main and sub-themes were reported in an integrated and logical order, with frequent references made to self-determination theory. To compensate for the (often short) length of the participants' justifications, a larger number of quotations was used to support the analytic claims being made than is customary in interview- or focus group-based research (Braun et al., 2021). Grammatical

errors were also corrected to make the quotations easier to read (for example, 'i' was changed to 'I', 'gcses' was changed to 'GCSEs' and 'A Level' was changed to 'A-level').

5.10.3 Analysis

Two themes were constructed from the data: 1) *hold on tight*; and 2) *the days of our lives*. The themes highlight that while studying A-levels is uniquely challenging, and can be exhausting, stressful or overwhelming, it also affords students opportunities to become more independent; critically engaged with subjects that are of interest to them; and able to cultivate meaningful, supportive and valued relationships with both their peers and teachers. In other words, studying A-levels has the potential to both support and undermine students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, and can, therefore, enhance or dampen their capacities for growth and development.

Theme 1: 'A-levels are just stressful': hold on tight

This theme captures the idea that studying A-levels is an inherently and uniquely challenging experience that can cause students to experience tiredness, exhaustion or stress. Specifically, this theme highlights that students find studying A-levels challenging because it is particularly difficult (especially in comparison to GCSEs; Sub-theme 1.1); demanding (on their time; Sub-theme 1.2); and pressured (meaning that 'quitting is not an option' and that relationships can become strained; Sub-theme 1.3). In combination, these aspects of studying A-levels can frustrate students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, and can, therefore, cause them to

experience stress. For some participants, experiences of stress worsened during the Covid-19 pandemic (sub-theme 1.4).

Sub-theme 1.1: 'a massive step up': on another level

This sub-theme captures the idea that studying A-levels is particularly difficult, especially in comparison to GCSEs. Studying A-levels therefore requires a high degree of effort from students, sometimes to an extent that seriously depletes their capacities to cope with the demands that are being made of them. Indeed, some participants experienced this to the point that they felt '*exhausted*', '*stressed*' or '*overwhelmed*'.

Reflecting on their experience of studying A-levels in comparison to GCSEs in a similar manner to participants in other studies (Brown, 2021; Dueker, 2014; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Nash et al., 2021; Powell, 2017), as well as the participants in Study 1, the participants repeatedly highlighted the magnitude of the '*big jump*' or '*massive step up*' that had been required of them to bridge the '*gap*' or '*big step*' between these stages of education:

> *work is a massive step up from GCSE*

> *stressful as it's a big jump from GCSE*

> *the workload is a massive step up from GCSE*

> *the gap between GCSEs and A-levels has been challenging*

In particular, the participants commented on how the quantity of their workload had increased '*a lot*' and was '*challenging*', '*tough*' and '*harder*' to manage:

a lot more work than GCSE

workload is tough compared to GCSE

the workload is more than GCSE level

there is more work and harder work than at GCSE

In addition, the participants also commented on how the complexity of the content became '*much harder*' and therefore required '*extra effort*' or '*extreme hard work*' to understand:

harder in terms of learning the content

I have found the content much harder than at GCSE

we have to put extra effort into our work as it is a lot harder

the work is very challenging in comparison to GCSEs which didn't require full focus

to achieve well if you have the intelligence whereas [studying A-levels] *is exempt from*

these conditions and does require extreme hard work and focus

Here, the final quoted participant – like several of the participants in Study 1 – highlights that studying A-levels requires a substantial amount of effort, even for students who are used to relying on their '*intelligence*' or '*natural ability*' to perform well. For another participant, the '*big step*' between

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studying GCSEs and studying A-levels, and the initial experience of receiving '*bad grades*', was

described as both '*the norm*' and an unwelcome surprise ('*I went into sixth form having no idea that bad

grades were the norm at the beginning, and that workload was at a large scale*'). These excerpts suggest that

most students find the transition from studying GCSEs to studying A-levels challenging, as well

as a potential threat to their sense of competence or academic self-concept. This suggests that, as

other researchers have argued, studying GCSEs does not adequately prepare students for the

demands of studying A-levels (Deuker, 2014; Study 1).

Importantly, even participants who did not make explicit references to the difficulty of

studying A-levels in comparison to studying GCSEs described the former as '*challenging*', '*very hard*'

and '*tough*', highlighting that – as one participant put it – studying A-levels '*is itself difficult*':

> *it's been tough and very hard work*

> *a lot of hard work as A-levels have been challenging*

> *there can be a lot of work to get through and* [it's] *very hard*

> *pressured to learn a lot of content in such a small amount of time*

It is also notable that just two participants (*n* = 2; 1%) explicitly stated that studying A-levels had

not been particularly difficult ('*step up from GCSEs but nothing impossible*'; '*not easy but not ridiculously

difficult either*'), as this suggests that this was not a widely shared perspective ('*everyone is struggling just

as much as you are*'; '*very stressful with all the information you need to memorise*'). Indeed, many of the

participants commented on how they felt as though they were expected to work at a '*fast pace*', and described their experience of studying A-levels as feeling '*non-stop*', '*strenuous*' and '*stressful at times*' as a result:

> *the work is hard and non-stop*

> *strenuous at times due to the large workload*

> *it can be stressful at times due to how hard the work is*

> *one downside is obviously the workload, it can be very stressful at times*

For some of the participants, the difficulties that they experienced with managing their workloads accumulated to the extent that it made studying A-levels feel energy depleting ('*it takes a lot out of you*'), isolating ('*no one is going to help too much*'), stressful or overwhelming:

> *it's hard to deal with the workload and often feels really overwhelming*

> *I'm stressed, it takes a lot out of you every day and you're kind of in it by yourself*

> *the workload… is significantly higher than* [when studying GCSEs] *and requires way more thought and effort so at times it made me feel a bit overwhelmed and stressed*

> *the work becomes harder and even though we do less lessons and subjects than in high school, it was more tiring and the work easily piles up.* [UCAS] *applications on top of*

work is stressful, it seems to just consume your life sometimes as you often have to

continue working when you go home and at the weekend

Here, the notion of cumulative demands is emphasised. Thus, studying A-levels is challenging, both in itself and in comparison to GCSEs, because it requires students to direct (far more) effort towards performing well and maintaining their (threatened) sense of – and basic psychological need for – competence.

Sub-theme 1.2: 'a lot going on': pulled in different directions

This sub-theme captures the idea that there is more to sixth form than studying A-levels in the sense that additional, time-consuming but important commitments, interests or obligations constrain the amount of time and energy that students have available to them to direct towards managing their workloads (as highlighted in Study 1). Subsequently, studying A-levels can feel '*hectic*', '*fast-paced*' and '*full on*', and therefore frustrate students' basic psychological need for autonomy because it diminishes their capacity to feel self-determinedly in control of their behaviour.

Reflecting on their experience of sixth form, several participants commented on how there '*is always a lot to do*', indicating that, despite studying fewer subjects and having free periods, A-level students rarely experience extended opportunities to 'take it easy' or rest and recuperate:

there's always lots to do

there is always a lot to do

there are always things to do

you are never without something to do

Reflecting on how '*always* [having] *things to do*' made them feel, several participants described their overall experience of sixth form as being '*always busy*', '*hectic at times*' and '*quite stressful*', indicating that studying A-levels can be a particularly tiring experience:

it can become a bit hectic at times

it's been really full on and I'm always busy

you can finish one thing and then there's 100 other [things] *to do*

it is quite stressful because there are always deadlines that are looming

Here, in describing their experience of sixth form as one in which there are '*always deadlines looming*' and there are constantly '*things to do*', the participants highlight that the multiplicity of demands that are made of them challenges their basic need for autonomy. Indeed, it is possible that keeping on top of the demands '*is quite stressful*' because it diminishes their agentic sense of control or capacity for self-endorsed behaviour. Two participants also commented on the need to manage their '*challenging*' workloads alongside making '*daunting*' or '*important*' decisions about their post-18 educational and occupational trajectories:

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> *it's fast paced and feels like you're having to make a lot of really important decisions*
>
> *in a short space of time*

> *it is sometimes daunting in the sense that you have to make so many decisions and*
>
> *plans for post-18 about things that I currently have no idea about and that's so many*
>
> *options to research*

For A-level students who do not have clear ideas about what to do after post-16 education, this decision making-process is likely to present and additional burden on their time. Furthermore, as well as needing to balance their academic workload alongside making important decisions about their post-18 educational and occupational trajectories, the participants – like the participants in Study 1 – referred to the need to take greater responsibility for '*juggling*' time-consuming but important commitments, interests or obligations such as extra-curricular activities, their EPQs or part-time work, which could be '*exhausting*', '*stressful*' or '*overwhelming*':

> *I often found it stressful as I always had a lot going on*

> *exhausting as I feel I was spread a little too thin between extra-curricular and school*
>
> *obligations*

> *the amount of work and independent learning expected plus extra-curricular activities*
>
> *can be overwhelming*

It was stressful and busy because I was juggling trying to maintain A/A* in my

subjects, applying to [university] *(interviews and an* [entrance] *exam), a part-time*

job, sport and a social life

Here, it is clear that even high achievers – who might be expected to be 'in control' and 'on top of things' – can feel stressed (Chamberlain et al., 2011; Finch et al., 2010; Study 1). In combination, the increased difficulty of studying A-levels in comparison to GCSEs (Sub-theme 1.1) and the need to manage other commitments, interests and obligations can challenge students' basic psychological needs for autonomy and competence, especially for those who struggle to manage the competing demands on their time.

Sub-theme 1.3: 'worry of not doing well': under pressure

This sub-theme captures the idea that, as well as finding studying A-levels particularly difficult (especially in comparison to GCSEs; Sub-theme 1.1) and demanding (on their time; Sub-theme 1.2), A-level students feel pressured to perform well in order to enhance their post-18 educational and occupational prospects and, in some cases, appease their own expectations or the expectations of their teachers. It is also important to view this theme in light of the finding that most A-level students cited examinations, grades or accessing higher education as one of the things that worries them most frequently (as highlighted above).

Reflecting on their experience of studying A-levels in a similar manner to the participants in Chapter 4, the participants often referred to experiencing pressure to '*keep up*', '*do well*' and secure

'*good grades*', which was '*stressful*' because it necessitated '*extreme hard work and focus*' (as discussed in

Sub-themes 1.1 and 1.2):

> *pressure because of post-18 plans*

> *I feel an enormous amount of pressure*

> *trying to keep up with my work and get good grades*

> *A-levels are just stressful: the workload, the worry of not doing well*

Here, in referring to their experience of studying A-levels as '*just stressful*', the final quoted

participant implies that experiencing stress is an inevitable or unavoidable aspect of studying A-

levels because, even when students encounter challenges that frustrate or threaten their basic needs

for autonomy or competency (as discussed in Sub-themes 1.1 and 1.2), they have no choice but to

'*be persistent*' in an effort to '*get good* [enough] *grades*' to realise their '*post-18 plans*'. In this sense, 'taking

part is not enough'; it is 'winning that counts', meaning that what Putwain (2009) refers to as 'fear

of failure' is baked into the experience of studying A-levels. Indeed, the participants repeatedly

expressed concerns about the implications that their performance will have for their prospect of

accessing higher education, which was the most commonly cited reason for aspiring to perform

well ('*stressful because I want to do well and attend university*'; '*stressful due to the workload and pressures of*

universities and future life'). On the line, from the participants' perspectives, was not just their grades,

but their '*future life*' itself. Implicated in studying A-levels, as other researchers have suggested, is

therefore the what and who students can envision themselves becoming (Brown, 2021; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Stubbs & Murphy, 2020).

Heightening the sense of pressure that some of the participants experienced was the short period of time in which they had to '*get everything done*' and the perception that '*anything can happen*' if they fail to persistently remain 'on the ball':

> *a lot of pressure to get everything done in two years*

> *anything can happen and as there is only two years of education before going to university*

> *there is an extra sense of tension and pressure*

Here, the uniqueness of sixth form in comparison to primary and secondary school is apparent, as it the first stage of education in which students transition into their first year and out of their second year, while attempting to achieve a lot in that short space of time (as discussed in Sub-themes 1.1 and 1.2); this is a point that has not been highlighted in prior literature. Furthermore, the sense that studying A-levels is an inherently stressful experience because students' ongoing performance – rather than just their performance in their examinations – is of high importance, is emphasised. Indeed, studying A-levels requires ongoing effort due to the importance of predicted grades, especially since the transition to linear assessments:

> *Unenjoyable* [and] *emotionally draining… but I was persistent to get through it to try*

> *and achieve the grades I needed for higher education*

stressful simply due to the workload and constant assessments that all counted towards

predicted grades which played a large part when it came to applying for higher education

Two participants also referred to placing pressure on themselves to perform as well as they '*possibly could*' rather than just to access higher education, which they cited as enhancing their experiences of stress ('*I find it stressful partly just because I feel like I am not doing the best I possibly could*'; '*I also tend to put a lot of pressure on myself and so this exacerbates the amount of stress and anxiety I feel*'). In addition, several participants referred to their teachers placing them under additional pressure, potentially by using fear appears ('*always go on about how much revision you should be doing*'; '*quite stressful as they push us hard to receive only the highest grades*'), which have been found to have the potential to enhance students' anxieties and undermine their performance (Putwain & Romedios, 2016; also see, Banks & Smyth, 2015; Chamberlain et al., 2011; Denscombe, 2000; Finch et al., 2010; Putwain & Roberts, 2009). Furthermore, such pressure can deplete or undermine the sense of relatedness between students and teachers, which can in turn "stifle the natural, volitional processes involved in high-quality learning" (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009, p. 133). Moreover, several of the participants felt – like some the participants in Study 1 – judged by their teachers if they did not perform to a satisfactory standard:

a stressful experience as I feel that [my sixth form] *has a high reputation to uphold*

and applies this extreme pressure, whether knowingly or not, to its students

it was very stressful and I had an immense amount of pressure to do well, and you

almost felt criticised if you didn't do at least well in any of the work and tasks sent -

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often, teachers label you 'lazy' if your work isn't at a good standard, or if your grades

aren't improving

For some participants, as well as being '*stressful*', such pressure diminished the '*joy of the learning process*' and had a potential '*toll*' on their mental health:

I enjoy school and learning but the pressure we receive and the frequent testing takes

away the joy of the learning process

I don't know if it was just A-levels in general that had a big toll on my mental health

but [the teacher's] *requirements definitely were quite unnecessary*

In summary, the findings suggest that studying A-levels is an inherently and uniquely challenging stage of education because the increase in difficulty between studying A-levels and studying GCSEs is experienced as '*a big jump*' or '*a massive step up*' rather than a small or 'seamless step up' (Sub-theme 1.1; Brown, 2021; Deuker, 2014; Powell, 2017; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Nash et al., 2021; Study 1), as well as because it presents a notable increase in independence (Sub-theme 1.2) and requires students to perform well on an ongoing basis (for predicted grades) rather than 'just' in examinations (Sub-theme 1.3). Subsequently, these demands can diminish students' sense of competence if they struggle to manage them. Furthermore, the need to negotiate constantly '*looming deadlines*' and additional commitments, interests and obligations can lead to a contraction in the amount of time that students have available to students and therefore constrict their sense of autonomous control over their lives. In combination, these aspects of studying A-levels

challenge students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, and make it '*exhausting*', '*stressful*' or '*overwhelming*' for some.

Sub-theme 1.4: 'less enjoyable': trapped inside

This sub-theme captures the idea that the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic made learning more challenging and '*less enjoyable*' for some students ('*during this pandemic, it has been stressful*'; '*learning from home has been less enjoyable*'). In addition to not being able to spend as much time with their peers ('*sixth form is such a sociable environment where you get to talk and make so many new friends which is great (before Covid-19)*'), some of the participants had also found it more difficult to learn and '*keep on top*' of their (already challenging; Sub-themes 1.1 and 1.2) workload when working from home ('*content is difficult to understand and learn, especially with remote learning*'; '*I found it okay to keep on top of when we were at school*').

In particular, several participants commented on finding it difficult to remain motivated during the Covid-19 pandemic ('*during the pandemic, I found it very difficult to keep motivated*'; '*motivation and all incentive to do well feels like it's difficult to obtain at times, since this pandemic seemed as if it never came to an end*'). For one participant, what made it particularly difficult to remain motivated was the challenge of working at home, a place where – unlike sixth form – they associated with resting ('*we associate being at home with being relaxed - home is home, and school is school. In this pandemic, those two worlds had mixed under changed circumstance and at times was difficult to balance out*'). Several participants found learning from home particularly stressful ('*it was essay after assignment after another with a load of emails surging at once*'; '*the second half of college was terrible, online classes were really stressful both due to balancing*

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workloads and a lack of drive or motivation'), suggesting that for some students, the challenging aspects of studying A-levels (as discussed in Sub-themes 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3) were exacerbated rather ameliorated by the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the requirement that students learn from home.

Theme 2: 'overall positive experience': the days of our lives

This theme captures the idea that, although studying A-levels is uniquely and inherently challenging and can be exhausting, overwhelming or stressful (Theme 1), it also affords students opportunities to become more independent (autonomous), organised and knowledgeable (competent), as well as embedded within a '*support network*' of students and staff (relatedness). Therefore, studying A-levels offers students opportunities for growth, development and 'positive personal change' (Brown, 2021; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Study 1), which can support their health and performance, as well as their overall transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Theme 2.1: 'a lot more independent': more grown up

This sub-theme captures the idea that because A-level students are afforded greater independence insofar as they are expected to take on additional responsibility for managing their time, remaining organised and reviewing content, among other commitments (as discussed in Theme 1), they are treated – and expected to behave – '*much more like adults*' (Brown, 2021; Deuker, 2014; Powell, 2017; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011). Consequently, studying A-levels affords students opportunities to exercise autonomy and develop a range of competencies. As a result, studying A-levels can help

to prepare students for higher education (specifically) and adulthood (more broadly) by presenting them with a degree of independence which, for at least some students, functions as more of a blessing than a burden.

Several participants likened their experience of sixth form as '*starting a new chapter*' or described it as the '*next stage of education*' and a '*new environment to grow in*', thereby framing it as an opportunity to continue developing. Indeed, from this perspective, sixth form was presented as an adventurous 'new beginning' rather than an arduous or frightening 'journey into the unknown'. In particular, the participants referred to being required to be '*a lot more independent*' in sixth form in comparison to secondary school ('*you're a lot more independent*'; '*A-levels is a lot more independent*'), and reflected on being in a more '*grown up*' environment and treated '*more like adults*' by their teachers:

> *teachers treat us much more like adults*

> *the whole experience* [is] *more grown up*

> *you're treated differently, more like an adult than* [a] *child*

> *I feel like I am treated more like an adult compared to in a school*

In referring to being treated '*much more like adults*', it is implied that students are not only afforded, but also required to accept, greater autonomy in sixth form in comparison to secondary school ('*you have to be more independent*'; '*more responsibility on me since I have come to the next stage of life*'). In particular, the participants highlighted that studying A-levels had required them to engage in

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greater self-directed learning ('*unlike school you have a lot more self-study*'); time management ('*make sure that you get all the work done on time*'); and organisation ('*we have more control over our learning*'). In addition, the participants highlighted that studying A-levels had also required them to meaningfully contribute towards class discussions ('*classes are more involved and we have more discussions with the teachers*'), as well as accept greater personal responsibility for the quality of their performance ('*your performance in sixth form is very much down to yourself*'). It is notable that these abilities are also important during higher education (Walker, 2005), which several of the participants considered their experience of studying A-levels to be preparation for:

> *get ready for study in university*

> *feel more like students and less like pupils*

> *a really great step between high school and university*

> *a transition period between school and being totally independent at uni*

Importantly, many of the participants framed the additional independence as enjoyable, beneficial or '*liberating*', the latter word being a particularly positive term which – unlike the terms 'abandoned', 'isolated' or 'stranded' – is associated with autonomy, freedom and opportunities for continued growth and development:

> *I've also enjoyed the increased independence*

> *liberating, it led to an increase in my independence*

> *I enjoyed sixth form more because I had more freedom*

> *I enjoyed the independence and had a generally good time*

Crucially, while studying A-levels can be '*hectic*', '*exhausting*' and '*strenuous*' (as discussed in Theme 1), and can require students to spend their free periods or leisure time revisiting, reviewing or revising content ('*all my free periods are spent revising*'; '*I have to spend a lot of my free time doing my A-level work*'), the participants' willingness to do the latter could be thought of as reflecting an adult or '*grown up*' approach to accepting responsibility for oneself, predicated upon an understanding that dedication, sacrifice and the weighing of opportunity-costs are among the prices of success. In addition, the participants reflected on how studying A-levels had prompted them to cultivate, and therefore become more competent at, a range of organisational abilities:

> *it can be helpful as it helps time management*

> *taught me to motivate myself to do work in* [free periods]

> *I have gained lots of independence in organisation and learning*

> *broadening as I felt in terms of skills and independence that I've grown*

One participant even highlighted that studying A-levels had prompted them to become '*less lazy*' and more proactive ('*I've had to adapt to a less lazy approach to tasks and to be more structured*'), while another commented that it had been '*crucial in pushing*' them to become more independent ('*sixth form was crucial in pushing me into being independent while giving me support to fall back on*'). Furthermore,

studying A-levels was presented as a 'journey of discovery' in which the participants had '*many opportunities*' to '*develop skills*' and explore what strategies '*worked best*' for them, and could therefore enhanced their sense of competency ('*exciting as there is many opportunities to develop skills*'; '*I've learnt the importance of being self-motivated and learning revision strategies that worked best for me*'). Indeed, the notion of being '*encouraged… to grow*' because of, rather than in spite of, being '*faced with challenges*' that arise from studying A-levels was a recurring reflection:

> *I've grown a lot since finishing Year 11*

> *I feel like the environment has encouraged me to grow*

> *I have grown up… since I went to sixth form and are loving it*

> *I feel that I am growing as a person in sixth form as I am faced with challenges that I have to react to and also I have more time to reflect on the kind of person I am and indeed want to be*

These quotes also illustrate that growth and development can indeed be born out of the difficult experiences which result from studying A-levels (Brown 2021; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Study 1), and that challenging experiences (as discussed in Theme 1) can therefore act as a 'blessing in disguise'. Furthermore, these quotes highlight while studying A-levels is more demanding than studying GCSEs, that does not mean that it is experienced as 'worse' than studying GCSEs, as suggested by other researchers (Nash et al., 2016, 2021). Indeed, in a similar manner to participants in other studies (Brown, 2021; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011), several participants commented

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on how they appreciate or '*love*' assuming greater responsibility for their own learning, and had

found this beneficial to their progress:

> *I like the style of education where you are taught quickly and if unsure on topics you*
>
> *have more time to teach yourself*

> *you get so much more freedom which I love, how/when you study, what you wear, what*
>
> *you learn, who you talk to, it's really your* [A-level experience] *and you can almost*
>
> *do what you want which I love it* [because] *helps me study better when I can do it my*
>
> *way*

In summary, because A-levels students are afforded greater independence, they are forced to

become more responsible. While some A-level students find the additional independence

strenuous and tiresome (as discussed in Theme 1), others find it beneficial to their learning and

the development of their organisational abilities. It is, therefore, sometimes interpreted as (good)

preparation for higher education and adulthood. In this sense, sixth form can meet students' basic

psychological needs for autonomy and competence and can be thought to facilitate growth and

development.

Sub-theme 2.2: 'extremely rewarding': interesting, very interesting

This sub-theme captures the idea that, although studying A-levels is challenging (as discussed in

Theme 1), students also appreciate being able to choose their subjects and find their lessons

engaging, interesting and insightful, which can foster intrinsic motivation, perseverance and heightened performance (Niemec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Several participants commented on how they enjoy learning in general ('*it's exciting learning so much*'; '*I love sixth form probably because I like learning*'), as well as their particular A-level subjects:

I enjoy my subjects

I thoroughly enjoy my subjects

my subjects are interesting and I like to learn about them

I really enjoy the subjects I've chosen and find them really interesting

Furthermore, several participants commented on how they enjoy studying A-levels specifically because they are offered the opportunity to choose what subjects to study:

learning more about my favourite subjects is awesome

I got to [choose] *my subjects making it more direct to what I like*

finally able to specialise my classes to what [I'm] *actually interested in*

I really enjoy sixth form because I can study… subjects I really want to

For these participants, being able to choose subjects that they '*really want to*' study was a valued and appreciated aspect of studying A-levels which enhanced their sense of autonomy. Indeed, the

participants' use of the terms '*actually*' and '*finally*' to compare their experience of studying A-levels to their prior experience(s) of education suggest that studying A-levels represented – for these participants – their first opportunity to study subjects that they were genuinely interested in. Furthermore, these quotes suggest that if students decide what subjects to study on the basis of what they find inherently interesting, studying A-levels can constitute a '*thoroughly*' enjoyable or '*awesome*' experience.

In addition to appreciating being able to choose what subjects to study, several participants commented on how they found their lessons engaging ('*probably more engaging*'; '*engagement of the lessons*'), as well as fun ('*lessons are fun*'; 'a *lot of my lessons are fun*'), and reflected positively on the difference between their experience of studying GCSEs and A-levels, particularly in relation to the amount that they had learnt ('*I have learnt way more since starting sixth form than in my GCSEs*'; '*I've come into contact with lots of new ideas and desire to learn more*'). It is possible that learning '*way more*' more increased the participants' sense of competency, and therefore fed their intrinsic motivation to continue learning. In other words, it is possible that it is because the participants '*finally*' had the opportunity to study subjects that were they were '*actually interested in*', when combined with '*engaging*', '*different*' or '*fun*' lessons, they felt (intrinsically) motivated '*to learn more*' and embraced difficulties as '*exciting*', '*positive*' or '*special*' opportunities to continue developing ('*it was extremely rewarding*'; '*a new step in my life and every day is a special day*'), even when they found the demands of studying A-levels challenging:

> *work is challenging which I think is positive*

even though the work can be tough sometimes it's fun

although the subjects… were very hard, they were subjects I enjoyed

just like other students[,] *sixth form was a new challenge for me which meant everyday*

was full of different things to do and learn which I had never done before. This made

my experience exciting at sixth form

This sub-theme suggests that, in offering students an opportunity chose how and what they study, studying A-levels can lead to a virtuous of cycle of autonomy and competence enhancing one another, which – when combined with supportive relationships (as discussed in Sub-theme 2.3, below) – can support intrinsic motivation.

Sub-theme 2.3: 'great community and staff': the good place

This sub-theme captures the idea that sixth form facilities meaningful relationships which are conducive of development and act as a source of support for students during difficult, challenging or stressful experiences that arise from studying A-levels. Indeed, this theme captures the idea that sixth form is a place where students can spend time with, and make, friends, as well as receive encouragement and support from their teachers. Consequently, because sixth form enables students to feel part of a '*community*' or '*network*' in which they feel able to be '*more open and social*', as well as encouraged, understood and supported, students enjoy spending time in sixth form and are better positioned to persevere in the face of adversity.

Several participants highlighted that being able to spend time with their friends was among the aspects of sixth form that they appreciated most:

I have a good group of friends

I have a great network of friends

I have a really close group of friends

I was able to be around my closest friends

Furthermore, several participants commented on how sixth form had afforded them opportunities to establish new friends, some of whom they had formed particularly strong bonds with:

I have made friends for life

I met lots of amazing people

I have met some of my closest friends here

you get to talk and make so many new friends which is great

Beyond their personal friendship groups, the participants also reflected on being part of a wider community of '*students and teachers*' within sixth form, which made it a welcoming ('*all of my teachers were welcoming*'; '*the college atmosphere is very pleasant and welcoming*'), inclusive and pleasurable place to be:

I enjoy being part of the school community

lovely place with great community and staff

we all get along well and help each other, which is really nice

I also enjoy the social dynamic… with both students and teachers

In addition to describing their sixth form as welcoming and inclusive, several participants reflected on how being in sixth form had enhanced their sense of confidence and connectedness by allowing them to become less '*isolated*', '*more social and open*' and able to '*make friends with a wide variety of people*':

it's helped me be a more open and social person

I felt I'd come out my of shell a lot socially due to the new environment

I have found new friends through my subjects, which has improved my experience at the college because I don't feel isolated without people to have conversations with

there was finally an opportunity to make friends with a wide variety of people, and to find a group that I felt comfortable with. I also began exploring my identity and the diversity of the college student body made me feel more comfortable doing so

It is possible that because sixth form is a more '*grown up*' environment (Sub-theme 2.2), students feel less at the whim of 'laddish' school cultures (Jackson, 2003), as well as able to make friends with people with whom they share interests or identities rather than just classes (Study 1).

From an academic perspective, the participants reflected on the amount of hard work that their teachers did *for* them, rather than made them do, and commented on how their teachers '*go the extra mile*' and encourage them '*gain the most out*' of their experience of studying A-levels:

the staff work so hard for us to do well

I would still be pushed to gain the most out of the time I had

I had very supportive teachers who were always there and willing to go the extra mile
for me and my fellow peers

my sixth form has an amazing team throughout the college including teaching staff
which provide students with support allowing them to reach their full potential

In addition to feeling encouraged by their teachers, several participants also commented on feeling both supported and able to turn to their teachers for the help:

we receive support if we struggle with the work

teachers and other students are supportive and have helped me

if I ever need help with anything there is always a teacher to ask

the teachers were helpful and you got [the] *support* [that] *you needed*

As trust is borne out active enquiry rather than passive acceptance (O'Neill, 2002), *actively experiencing* help from their teachers may have enhanced the participants' trust in them and overall

sense of security ('*support to fall back on*'; '*you have to trust your teachers if you don't understand something, and… they will be able to help you*'). Indeed, it is possible that it is because these participants had experience of being encouraged, understood and supported by their teachers ('*I have always felt understood by my teachers*'; '*supported me immensely in every aspect*'), that they felt able to trust them to offer meaningful assistance or help during challenging, difficult or '*stressful times*' ('*supported by a positive group of teachers*'; '*get along well with my teachers, I always feel if I need anything I can go to them*'). Certainly, for some participants, teachers acted as an important source of support when their experience of studying A-levels '*got stressful*':

> *teachers were helpful with resources and keeping me going when it got stressful*

> *overall my experience wasn't terrible as my teachers were very good and offered assistance when needed*

> *the supportive staff members helped a lot during these stressful times mainly due to how easy it was to approach them when in need of help*

> *I experienced some mental health struggles throughout my time at college and the support I received from my tutor, teachers and the counselling team was amazing and I'm very grateful for them*

While teachers can increase stress, even without meaning to, by emphasising the importance of performing well in ways that are appraised as threatening (Putwain & Romedios, 2016; also see, Banks & Smyth, 2015; Chamberlain et al., 2011; Denscombe, 2000; Finch et al., 2010; Putwain &

Roberts, 2009), or by not listening to students when they feel stressed and are seeking support (Study 1), these findings highlight the immense capacity that teachers and other sixth form staff have to create a supportive and reassuring atmosphere within sixth form (also see, Banks & Smyth, 2015), and to offer students assistance and help during '*stressful times*'. Indeed, providing a friendly, inclusive and welcoming environment in which the participants felt able to establish meaningful friendships and feel supported by their teachers created a setting which met students' basic psychological need for relatedness, and therefore contributed positively towards their health and performance.

5.10.4 Reflections

This analysis clearly provides a greater and more useful insight into the participants' experiences of post-16 education than the quantitative content analysis that was conducted. It also offers additional evidence to support the idea that studying A-levels is a multi-dimensional experience which can both support and frustrate students' development, learning and health. Additionally, it highlights that focusing on supporting A-level students' basic psychological needs for competency, autonomy and relatedness may be a particularly effective way of developing context-specific support for this group. I will elaborate upon this idea in Chapter 7. In this next section, I will turn to the participants' experiences of sixth form during the Covid-19 pandemic, before concluding this chapter and returning to some of the participants' experiences of sixth form during the third national lockdown in Chapter 6.

5.11 How did A-level students feel about the disruption caused by the pandemic?

5.11.1 Overview

It had been anticipated that the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic would influence or feature prominently in the terms that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form, and so it was a surprise when it was explicitly referred to by less than a tenth ($n = 11$; 6%) of the participants in the justification that they provided for choosing the words or phrases that they had provided to do so. Nevertheless, in order to gain a clearer insight into how the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic had influenced the participants' experiences of studying A-levels, the participants were asked to explain how they felt about it, as well as what type of support they would find helpful ahead of the next academic year. The participants' answers to these questions were combined (Braun et al., 2021), before being analysed using an abbreviated approach to reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2013, 2019). The answers to these questions were combined because what kind of support students desire can be thought to reveal a lot about how they feel about the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

5.11.2 Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis of the participants' responses was conducted in six phases: data familiarisation; coding; candidate theme generation; theme development, refinement and reviewing; theme definition and naming; and reporting the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2013, 2021). The research question that anchored the analysis was:

- How did A-level students experience the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic?

In the first phase, the participants' responses to the questions asking them to describe how they felt about their experience of studying A-levels being disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic and what kind of support they would find helpful ahead of the next academic year were imported into NVivo 12 before being read repeatedly in order to facilitate data familiarisation. In the second phase, the semantic (explicit or manifest) meaning in the data was coded inductively; in other words, the latent (implicit or 'hidden') meaning was not actively interpreted. In the third phase, the codes and the extracts that had been captured by them were critically reflected upon before being clustered to construct four candidate themes. In the fourth phase, the candidate themes were integrated to create two themes, which were then refined and assigned definitions and names. Two broad and relatively simple themes were constructed because the brevity of the participants' responses meant that attempts to disaggregate the themes to create more themes, or sub-themes, resulted in particularly 'thin' summaries of the codes; and, despite being relatively simple, the themes nonetheless reflect recurring, coherent and meaningful patterns across the dataset that are pertinent to the research question(s), cluster around central organising concepts and tell insightful stories that offer a useful answer to the research question being addressed (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2013, 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2022). Nevertheless, it is the brevity of the analysis that renders it 'abbreviated'[42]. In the final phase, the main themes were reported, one after another.

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[42] Here, I took inspiration from the abbreviated approach the grounded theory that Willig (2013) describes.

5.11.3 Analysis

Two main themes were constructed from the data: 1) *a weight off the shoulders*; and 2) *an unwelcome surprise*. The themes capture contradictory perceptions and highlight that A-level students experienced a mixture of feelings about the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. For some A-level students, the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic presented an opportunity to rest, recuperate and 'breathe a sigh of relief', whereas for other A-level students, it was a source of major confusion, disappointment and concern. This was particularly the case for participants in Year 12 who felt concerned about the prospect of '*falling behind*' and participants in Year 13 who felt both worried about their predicted grades, and '*robbed*' of an opportunity to portray how much they had learnt and, therefore, '*prove*' themselves as worthy winners of their grades.

Theme 1: 'happy I can take a break': a weight off the shoulders

This theme captures the idea that the requirement to work from home and the cancellation of examinations that followed the commencement of pandemic was experienced as a change that made studying A-levels easier and ameliorated the amount of stress that students were experiencing. For some of the participants in Year 12, the requirement to work from home allowed them to '*catch up*' on their sleep and work and '*take a break from stress*'. Several presumably test-anxious participants in Year 13 who had been expecting to sit examinations also reflected on feeling '*glad*' or '*relieved*' to discover that they had been cancelled. Together, these findings highlight how challenging, stressful and tiring studying A-levels, and preparing for A-level examinations in particular, can be.

Several participants considered the requirement to work from home to be necessary in light of the pandemic ('*it's necessary*'; '*necessary given the nature of the pandemic*'); expressed indifference towards working from home ('*I don't mind*'; '*I don't mind it too much*'); or framed it as part and parcel of the inevitable disruption that life involves ('*fine, life*'; '*it's the same for everyone*'). For other participants, however, the requirement to work from home was welcomed as an opportunity to '*take a break*' and, in particular, '*catch up*' on sleep:

> *happy I can catch up on my sleep*

> *a lot better as… I was able to get more sleep*

> *happy I can take a break and sleep since sixth form is exhausting*

> *happy because it feels like I have time now to sleep whenever I need to*

In addition to being able to catch up on sleep, which is often disrupted during adolescence (Brookes et al., 2020), several participants commented on how the requirement to work from home had allowed them to '*catch up*' on their work ('*it was good to catch up on subjects*'; '*I have managed to catch up on a lot of revision*'). This suggests that, prior to the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic, they had been struggling to keep up and remain organised. In this sense, the requirement to work from home facilitated a welcome relief from some of the demands that these participants had been facing. Furthermore, several participants commented on wanting a better organised and more manageable workload in the future ('*just not an overload of work*'; '*work set in manageable chunks*'), suggesting that, for these participants, their workload had felt unmanageable prior to the

commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic (as discussed in section **5.10.3**, above). (It is also possible, however, that these comments emanate from a sense that their workload was unmanageable *during* the Covid-19 pandemic.)

From a social perspective, two participants preferred online learning because it relieved them of needing to interact with their peers, who they either felt uncomfortable around or found distracting ('*as someone who is often nervous and an introvert I have liked online school*'; '*I have always preferred learning on my own as opposed to with other students*'). Other participants had welcomed the relief that working from home had afforded them from the imposed structure of sixth form, as it offered them greater freedom to structure their schedules to their own needs:

> *I could do work in an order that best fits around my other responsibilities*

> *I do not mind studying at home as I can create my own schedule according to my liking*

> *I was doing fairly well, I had an established routine and felt comfortable with learning*

> *I can do stuff on my own routine, like I can do work at 4pm if that's when I feel focused*

Several participants found working from home more productive and enjoyable ('*I am getting more work done*'; '*I enjoy doing work from home for this period*'), perhaps partly due to the high degree of support offered by their teachers ('*my teachers have all been extremely supportive and helpful*'; '*my sixth form have been really helpful to make sure everyone has adjusted to the new at home lifestyle*'). In combination, the relief from the usual demands of sixth form relieved several participants' feelings of stress:

> *I like it because it's a break from stress*

> *I am kind off happy as I get time to relax more*

> *I feel fine about it really as I needed the time to focus on my own health which I think*
>
> *needed more attention than my academic record*

> *short-changed on my education and worried about predicted grades, but this is massively*
>
> *outweighed by the giant stress of A-levels being relieved*

For several participants in Year 13, who had been expecting to sit their A-levels examinations and were potentially highly test-anxious (Putwain, 2009), the cancellation of their examinations was also experienced as a relief:

> *I feel very relieved as I now have no exam stress*

> *I feel so relieved that I won't have to take exams*

> *quite relieved due to not having deal with exam stress*

> *I was relieved because exam stress is something that really gets to me*

Thus, the requirement to work from home that followed the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic offered some of the participants a welcome break and a relief from the demands of studying A-levels. Indeed, it permitted some of the participants in Year 12 a chance to catch up on their sleep and work, and facilitated opportunities for them to organise their schedules around their personal preferences or needs. Furthermore, for some of the participants in Year 13, the cancellation of the examinations was a relief, as they no longer had to '*deal with*' the stress that can

emanate from preparing for, and sitting, them (for example, Chamberlain, 2011). The high degree of relief that the participants expressed highlights again how challenging studying A-levels can be for a sizeable proportion of students.

Theme 2: 'it has stressed me out a lot': an unwelcome surprise

This theme captures the idea that while the requirement to work from, and the cancellation of examinations, was experienced as a relief for some students (Theme 1), for other participants it was disappointing, frustrating and unsettling. For some of the participants in Year 12, working from home was particularly difficult. Additionally, some of the participants in Year 13 worried about whether they would receive the grades that they needed and felt as though their sense of purpose had been stripped from them. In light of these feelings, many of participants expressed a desire for greater clarity from the Government.

Several participants commented on how the requirement to work from home had made it more difficult for them to spend time with their friends, which made them feel '*sad*' and as though they were '*missing out*' on an important and expected aspect of life, which is particularly important for adolescents (Andrews et al., 2021):

> *missing out on spending time with people*

> *sad I can't spend much time with my friends*

> *I felt quite sad as it meant that I couldn't see my friends*

sad that I won't be able to go to sixth form with my friends again

Several participants also commented on how the transition to online learning was a shock which had prevented them from being able to say 'a proper goodbye' to their peers and teachers ('*we don't have closure about leaving college and saying goodbye to our friends and teachers*'; '*I wish I could've said a proper goodbye*'), while others commented on feeling frustrated by the overall situation:

I feel frustrated

not very happy about it if I'm being honest

I am very annoyed about my year ending prematurely

it's annoying as I can't see friends at school or get proper lessons

While some of the participants in Year 12 found it easier and more enjoyable to work from home, and framed it as an opportunity to '*catch up*' and organise their time according to their preferences (as highlighted in Theme 1), others expressed particular concern about the amount of effort that would be required of them to '*catch up*' as a result of working from home and lacking the degree of critical feedback, support or confirmation of their progress from their teachers that they were accustomed to and found reassuring:

worried because working at home is not the same as working at school and I'm worried

that I'll be behind

nervous [in case] *we haven't been taught everything. It's just a really confusing situation*

and the uncertainty is horrifying

I sometimes don't know if the work I'm doing at home is effective and I worry that

when we go back to sixth form, we'll have way too much catch-up work to do

shit. I feel like I've lost a third of the school year and [I'm going to] *have to catch up*

on all that learning because I haven't been able to teach myself all the content effectively

Importantly, in excess half of the participants in Year 12 expressed a particular desire to recap what they taught themselves or learnt online and from home, highlighting the feeling of fear and uncertainty that can accompany the absence of validation from a more knowledgeable other:

overview of each topic so we can individually check to make sure we all did the right

thing at home

any academic support which would help to ensure what we've had to teach ourselves has

actually worked

I'd like to know how successful I've been at teaching myself everything because it's

sometimes hard to know on your own

additional classes going over topics we had to teach ourselves in lockdown to clear up

any misunderstandings or things we've found difficult

Furthermore, several participants in Year 12 felt *'forgotten about'* and unacknowledged by the Government (*'forgotten about'*; *'nothing has been done by the* [G]*overnment to even acknowledge* [Year 12 students]*'*), and expressed a desire for greater clarity about their situation and, in particular, potential change to their A-level examinations:

> *what's happening about exams*

> *extra clarity regarding the position we're in*

> *more clarity on the changes* [to examinations in 2021]

> *just some sort of certainty from the government would be amazing*

Together, the lack of clarity and concerns about *'falling behind'* made several participants feel *'scared'*, *'stressed'* and *'worried'*:

> *worried that I will fall behind because that causes me to s t r e s s*

> *very hard, very stressful.* [I don't] *know how we're going to catch up*

> *I barely take any time for myself anymore because I am so scared of falling behind on my schoolwork*

> *it's really impacted how well I'm going to do in next year's exams, I'll be the most stressed I've ever been next year having to catch up*

As highlighted above, more than half of the participants in Year 12 wanted to review content that they had covered while working from home. Unsurprisingly, several participants in Year 12 also wanted their examinations to make them more lenient or require less knowledge, potentially because they perceived it to be unreasonable to expect them to be able to catch up in light of the disruption that they had experienced:

> *reduced exam specification*

> *some sort of change to the exam content*

> *reduced content on the [Year] 13 syllabus*

> *the amount of content we have to learn should be reduced*

While some of the participants in Year 13 felt '*glad*' or '*relieved*' to have had their upcoming A-level examinations cancelled (as highlighted in Theme 1), other participants felt worried about the implications that this would have for their predicted grades (which, at the time, were to be based on a complicated and opaque algorithm [Paulden, 2020]):

> *worried about predicted grades*

> *I'm just worried about the teacher assessments*

> *scared because I don't know if I'll be able to go to university this year*

> *apprehensive and unsettled about it because it was all up in the air about grades*

These participants also wanted the Government to provide greater clarity about the situation ('*actually knowing what is going on*'; '*questions and concerning being answered*'), while others felt as though the meaning and purpose that their upcoming examinations had afforded them had been '*taken*' from them ('*feel like my purpose has been taken from me*'; '*horrible, not able to show full potential*'), a term which implies a lack of consent. Indeed, several participants felt '*robbed*' of an opportunity to '*portray*' how much they had learnt; '*prove*' themselves worthy of their grades and attain '*sense of achievement*':

> *I feel like my efforts have gone to waste because I cannot portray how much I have learned in the past year and a half*

> *the other part of me is sad because they're based on predicted grades which is not a true reflection of our abilities when compared to the official A-level exams*

> *I'm sad that I don't have the chance to prove myself in the exams or have that sense of achievement but instead someone who doesn't know me well will predict what I could get*

> *it was so weird and sudden that I couldn't help but feel robbed somehow. One side of me didn't want to take the exams but the other wanted to prove myself that I could do it if I tried hard enough*

Here, the participants could be thought of as being like athletes who have been promised medals on the basis that their opponents are no longer able to compete or the competition has been

cancelled; gratifying though it may be to receive a medal, athletes would presumably feel themselves robbed of an opportunity to showcase their abilities - built on sustained dedication, perseverance and sacrifice.

5.12 Conclusion

In this chapter, a lot of ground has been covered and I have attempted to contextualise, discuss and critically reflect on the findings throughout. In light of this, the findings presented within this chapter will be discussed at greater length, and within the context of the findings from Studies 1 and 3, in Chapter 7. For the time being, however, it is important to emphasise again that the participants' scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension, as well as the frequency with which the participants' reported feeling stressed in general or pressured by their academic work, need to be treated with an extremely high degree of caution. Indeed, these findings cannot be thought of as representative of A-level students' typical experiences because of the self-selecting, skewed and geographically constrained sample and the particular point in time that this research was conducted (i.e. during the Covid-19 pandemic). Nevertheless, given how high the participants' scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension are, the findings support the idea that A-level students require greater attention (Hagell et al., 2012; Nash et al., 2021), especially because most of the participants reported feeling frequently pressured by their academic work (i.e. at least 'Often') and many commented on finding the demands of studying A-levels particularly difficult, tiring or stressful. Furthermore, given that the frequency with which the participants' felt pressured by their academic work was a highly significant predictor of their scores for negative emotional symptoms,

and some participants reported feeling exhausted, overwhelmed and 'stressed out' by the demands of studying A-levels, additional research aimed at understanding how best to help students cope with the demands of studying A-levels seems warranted. Moreover, given that the frequency with which the participants attempted to manage their difficulties alone in an attempt to cope with the demands of studying A-levels was also a highly significant predictor of their scores for negative emotional symptoms, such research seems particularly pertinent. This finding also points towards the need to encourage A-level students to seek support when they are experiencing challenges, especially because *attempt to handle problems alone* was the most frequently used coping strategy.

The qualitative findings within this chapter, in particular, shed greater light on A-level students' experiences of post-16 education and support the idea that it can represent both a challenge and an opportunity (as found in Study 1). Indeed, viewed through the lens of self-determination theory, it seems that there are aspects of studying A-levels that can both thwart and support students' basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness, and can, therefore, both frustrate and facilitate opportunities for healthy adolescent development. Thus, self-determination theory could be used as a framework for identifying how to provide context-specific support to A-level students. For example, students could be taught how to remain organised in an effort to enhance their competency, autonomy and relatedness, because students who feel more 'on top' of their workload are more likely to feel more competent, in control of their time (i.e. autonomous) and able to justify spending time to relax with their friends or families; I will discuss this idea at greater length in Chapter 7.

The findings also highlight that the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on A-level students' experiences of post-16 education has been met with mixed and contradictory responses: some welcomed the change of routine and the cancellation of examinations with a sigh of relief, while others interpreted it as an unwelcome and disorientating burden. What these perceptions have in common is that they highlight how heavily invested in their studies most A-level students appear to be – if they were not, greater feelings of indifference may have been expected. How the Covid-19 pandemic continued to influence A-level students' experiences of post-16 education will be the primary topic of the next chapter, in which I will discuss the experiences of 42 of the participants who took part in this questionnaire again, albeit within the context of England's third national lockdown in February 2021.

Chapter 6 - Study 3

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will be present longitudinal findings based on 42 A-level students' responses to a follow-up questionnaire that was circulated in February 2021. Study 3 was planned prior to, but conducted during, the third national lockdown that commenced on in January 2021 and led the cancellation of A-level examinations and most students being taught online and from home rather than face-to-face until March 2021.

Study 3 investigated how A-level students' experiences changed between summer 2020 and February 2021 and attempted to understand what kind of support they would have found helpful during the Covid-19 pandemic. Study 3 therefore repeated all of the scales and open-ended questions that had been used in Study 2 but did not ask the participants to share demographic information again. Study 3 also aimed to investigate what motivates students to study A-levels and to determine what proportion of A-level students consider studying A-levels to be more demanding than GCSEs by asking the participants to rate how strongly they agreed with a series of statements that had been generated from Studies 1 and 2, as well as prior qualitative research (Deuker, 2014; Hernandez-Martinez et al. 2011; Powell, 2017). Study 3 attempted, therefore, to address most of the research questions that Study 2 did, albeit with a focus on changes in A-level students experiences between summer 2020 and February 2021. Specifically, the research questions that Study 3 attempted to address included:

- How do A-level students experience post-16 education?

- What affect has the pandemic had on A-level students' experiences of post-16 education?

- What support would A-level students like to have received during the pandemic?

- What do A-level students worry about most frequently?

- How often do A-level students feel pressured by their academic work?

- What coping strategies do A-level students use in response to academic demands?

- How do students experience the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels?

6.1.1 Ethical considerations

The same ethical considerations that had informed Study 2 informed Study 3 as well (see section **5.1.2**, above). However, following the unexpected national lockdown that was implemented in January 2021, when I had planned to circulate invitations to complete the follow-up questionnaire via email, I decided to circulate the invitations in February 2021 instead. I did this in an effort to ensure that the participants had had an opportunity to 'settle in' to learning online and from again before being asked to reflect on their experiences. I ensured that the invitations to participate in the follow-up questionnaire did not make the participants feel pressured to complete it. I did this by wording them politely; prioritising clarity and conciseness; and explicitly explaining again that the recipients were under no obligation to complete the questionnaire. I emailed the participants in the first, second and third week of February. However, because the participants had provided

their email addresses, I removed those who had already completed the questionnaire from the follow-up invitations during the second and third week of February in an effort to prevent them from feeling pestered. In the final week of February, I emailed the participants who had completed the questionnaire to thank them for their time and offered those who had not completed it a final opportunity to do so before the end of the month. All of the emails used the blind carbon copy function in order to protect the anonymity of the participants. I will now describe the demographic characteristics of those who completed the follow-up questionnaire before presenting, and critically discussing, the findings.

6.1.2 Sample

In response to the cross-sectional questionnaire conducted in summer 2020, approximately three quarters (*n* = 80; 76%) of the participants who had been in Year 12 provided their email address and agreed to be contacted again about the prospect of completing a follow-up questionnaire in the winter. Approximately half (*n* = 42; 53%) of those who had provided their email address responded to follow-up questionnaire when it was circulated in February 2021.

The majority of those who responded to the follow-up questionnaire were female (*n* = 37; 88%); White British (*n* = 31; 74%); from the north of England (*n* = 37; 88%); and studying three (*n* = 37; 88%) or four (*n* = 5; 12%) A-level subjects. In addition, three fifths of the participants attended a college sixth form (*n* = 25; 60%); none considered their families to be financially 'very' or 'not at all well off'. The small and relatively homogeneous sample means that it is not possible

to investigate between-group differences. Instead, I will focus on comparing the participants' scores and responses in summer 2020 and February 2021.

6.2 Negative emotional states in summer 2020 and February 2021

Participants' scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms in summer 2020 and February 2021 are depicted in Table 30, below. The severity of participants' experiences of depression, anxiety and stress / tension are depicted in Tables 31, 33 and 33, as well as in Figure 16, also below. Concerningly, in February 2021, the majority of participants were experiencing at least a moderate severity of depression (n = 35; 83%), anxiety (n = 31; 73%) or stress / tension (n = 30; 71%). Furthermore, in February 2021, the proportion of participants who were experiencing an extremely severe amount of depression (n = 18; 43%), anxiety (n = 20; 48%) or stress / tension (n = 10; 24%) had substantially increased since summer 2020.

Paired samples t-tests indicated that the participants' had significantly higher scores in February 2021 for depression, $t(41)$ = -3.02, p = .004 , d = 0.35; anxiety, $t(41)$ = -2.07, p = .044, d = 0.25; stress / tension, $t(41)$ = -4.24, p < .001, d = .54; and negative emotional symptoms, $t(41)$ = -3.87, p < .001, d = 0.43. It is possible that these increases result from an in stress that A-level students experience as they transition from Year 12 to 13. It is important to exercise caution when interpreting these findings, however, because in February 2021 England was in a national lockdown and it was winter, meaning that these factors could have contributed to the increase in the scores.

Table 30: Participants' scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms in summer 2020 and February 2021

	M	*Mdn*	*SD*
	Depression		
Summer 2020	20.19	19.00	10.65
February 2021	23.95	25.00	10.78
	Anxiety		
Summer 2020	15.48	14.00	9.15
February 2021	18.00	18.00	10.97
	Stress / Tension		
Summer 2020	19.09	18.00	9.11
February 2021	24.09	24.00	9.36
	Negative emotional symptoms		
Summer 2020	18.25	18.00	8.05
February 2021	22.06	22.00	9.12

Notes: male participants *n* = 4; female participants *n* = 37; undisclosed gender *n* = 1. Cut-offs for depression range from: 0 – 9 = normal; 10 – 13 = mild; 14 – 20 = moderate; 21 – 27 = severe; > 28 = extremely severe. Cut-offs for anxiety range from: 0 – 7 = normal; 8 – 9 = mild; 10 – 14 = moderate; 15 – 19 = severe; > 20 = extremely severe. Cut-offs for stress / tension range from: 0 – 14 = normal; 15 – 18 = mild; 19 – 25 = moderate; 26 – 33 = severe; > 34 = extremely severe. Scores for negative emotional symptoms are calculated by averaging participants' scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension (Lovibond, 2018).

Table 31: Severity of participants' experiences of depression in summer 2020 and February 2021

	Depression					
	Summer 2020		February 2021		Change	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Normal	6	14	4	10	-2	-4
Mild	5	12	3	7	-2	-5
Moderate	11	26	11	26	0	0
Severe	11	26	6	14	-5	-12
Extremely severe	9	21	18	43	9	22

Notes: male participants *n* = 4; female participants *n* = 37; undisclosed gender *n* = 1. Percentage point changes are displayed in the final column.

Table 32: Severity of participants' experiences of anxiety in summer 2020 and February 2021

	Anxiety					
	Summer 2020		February 2021		Change	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Normal	9	21	7	17	-2	-4
Mild	3	7	4	10	1	3
Moderate	10	24	7	17	-3	-7
Severe	5	12	4	10	-1	-2
Extremely severe	15	36	20	48	5	12

Notes: male participants *n* = 4; female participants *n* = 37; undisclosed gender *n* = 1. Percentage point changes are displayed in the final column.

Table 33: Severity of participants' experiences of stress / tension in summer 2020 and February 2021

	Stress / Tension					
	Summer 2020		February 2021		Change	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Normal	13	31	7	17	-6	-14
Mild	10	24	5	12	-5	-12
Moderate	7	17	12	29	5	12
Severe	8	19	8	19	0	0
Extremely severe	4	10	10	24	5	14

Notes: male participants *n* = 4; female participants *n* = 37; undisclosed gender *n* = 1. Percentage point changes are displayed in the final column.

Figure 16: Percentage point changes in the severity of participants' experiences of depression, anxiety and stress / tension
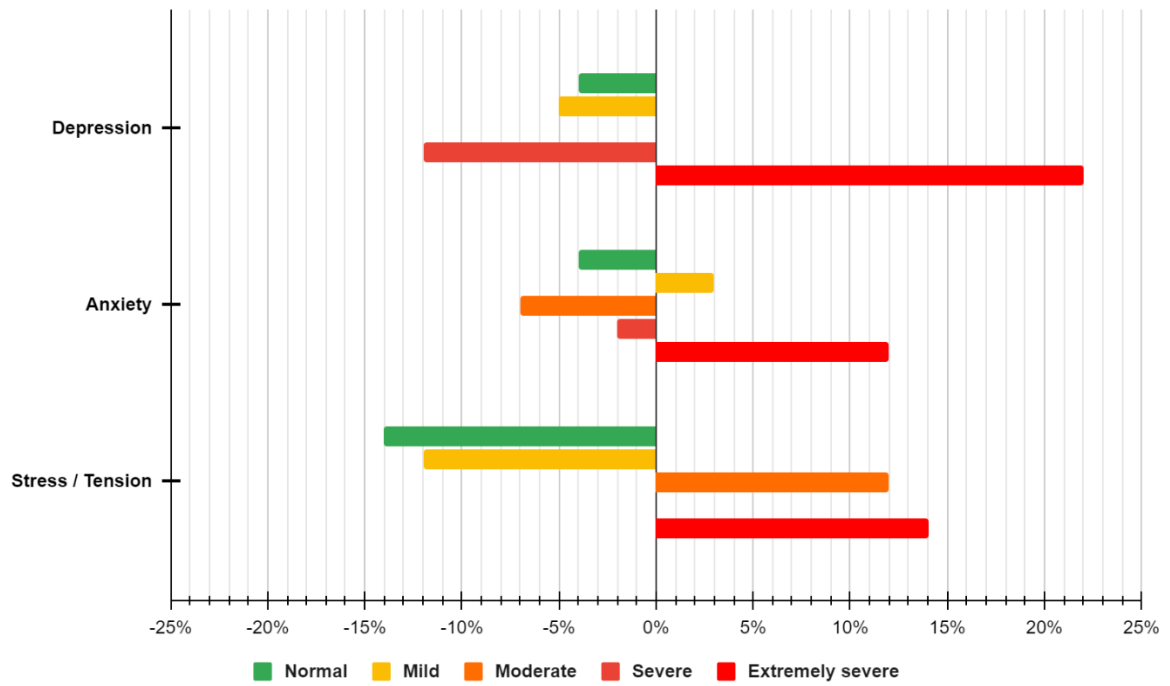
Notes: male participants *n* = 4; female participants *n* = 37; undisclosed gender *n* = 1.

The relationship between participants' scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms in summer 2020 and February 2021 are depicted on Table 34, below. Results from Pearson correlations indicated that there was a significant, strong positive correlation between the participants' scores in summer 2020 and February 2021 for depression, $r(40) = .72$, $p < .001$; anxiety, $r(40) = .71$, $p < .001$; stress / tension, $r(40) = .66$, $p < .001$; and negative emotional symptoms, $r(40) = .74$, $p < .001$. The association between the participants' scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension in summer 2020 and February 2021 suggest that it is particularly important to support students in Year 12, because it is the same students who are experiencing high(er) negative emotional symptoms then are the most likely to experience them in Year 13, when their terminal examinations take place and students are likely to feel under greater pressure. In this sense, offering greater support to A-level students during Year 12 could help to alleviate the build-up of stress and, in so doing, contribute towards preventing the onset of stress-related mental ill-health.

Table 34: Pearson correlation coefficients between participants' scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms in summer 2020 and February 2021

	Depression (2021)	Anxiety (2021)	Stress / Tension (2021)	Negative emotions (2021)
Depression (2020)	.72			
Anxiety (2020)		.71		
Stress / Tension (2020)			.66	
Negative emotions (2020)				.74

Notes: male participants *n* = 4; female participants *n* = 37; undisclosed gender *n* = 1.

Figure 17: Participants' scores for negative emotional symptoms in summer 2020 and February 2021
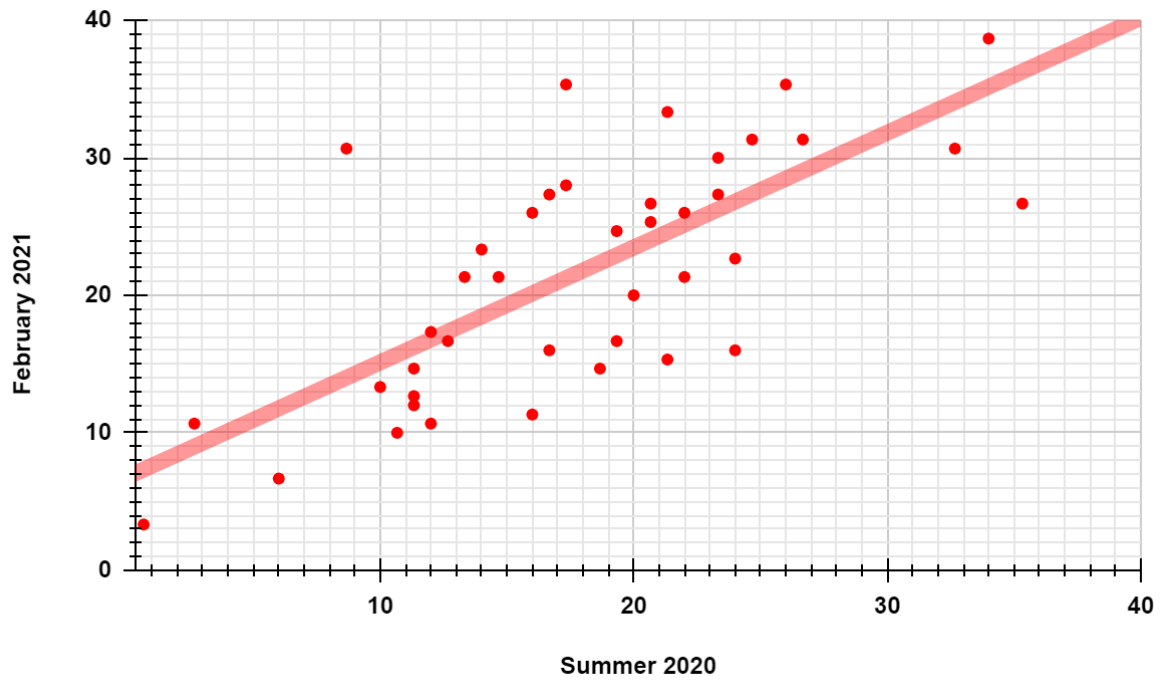
Notes: Participants scores for negative emotional symptoms in summer 2020 are displayed on the horizontal axis; participants scores for negative emotional symptoms in February 2021 are displayed on the vertical axis.

6.2.1 Co-occurrence of negative emotional symptoms

The relationship between participants' scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension in summer 2020 and February 2021 are depicted in Table 35, below. As anticipated in light of the finding that the participants had higher scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension in February 2021, between summer 2020 and February 2021, the participants experienced an intensification in the co-occurrence of negative emotional symptoms that they were experiencing. Results from a Pearson correlation indicated that in February 2021 there was a significant, strong positive correlation between participants' scores for depression and anxiety, $r(40) = .56, p < .001$; depression and stress / tension, $r(40) = .71, p < .001$; and anxiety and stress / tension, $r(40) = .72$, $p < .001$.

Once again, these findings highlight the importance of supporting A-level students during Year 12 in an effort to help them minimise or manage the increase in stress and related negative emotional states that many will inevitably experience as they progress through their respective courses and draw nearer to their important, terminal examinations.

Table 35: Pearson correlation coefficients between the participants' scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension in summer 2020 and February 2021

	Summer 2020		February 2021	
	Depression	Anxiety	Depression	Anxiety
Anxiety	.45		.56	
Stress / Tension	.62	.57	.71	.72

Notes: male participants $n = 4$; female participants $n = 37$; undisclosed gender $n = 1$.

6.3 What motivates secondary school leavers to study A-levels?

The participants' scores for self-orientated, extrinsic and self-transcendent (purpose for learning) motivations for studying A-levels are depicted in Table 36, below. It appears that the participants agreed strongly with all of the items, as the scores are almost indistinguishable from one another. This finding suggests that students study A-levels for a variety of reasons. In light of this, this finding lends provisional evidence to support the idea that many students study A-levels in an attempt to both focus on subjects that are of interest to them, as well as to secure purposeful and well-paid employment as adults (as suggested in Study 1). It could be concluded, therefore, that students pin a host of 'hopes and dreams' to the prospect of studying A-levels, and that there is consequently a lot to be gained or lost in the balance of their performance.

Table 36: Participants' motivations for studying A-levels

	M	Mdn	SD
Self-orientated	4.23	4.16	0.65
Extrinsic	4.22	4.33	0.75
Self-transcendent	4.15	4.00	0.75

Notes: male participants $n = 4$; female participants $n = 37$; undisclosed gender $n = 1$. Scores range from: 1 = Not at all true; 2 = Slightly true; 3 = Somewhat true; 4 = Very true; 5 = Completely true.

The relationships between the participants' motivations for studying A-levels and their scores for negative emotional symptoms are depicted on Table 37, below. It had been anticipated that the participants' motivations for studying A-levels would be associated with their scores for negative emotional symptoms. Specifically, it had been anticipated that participants who expressed stronger self-orientated and self-transcendent (purpose for learning) motivations would have lower scores for negative emotional symptoms. However, results from Pearson correlations indicated that there

was a non-significant, negligible correlation between participants' self-orientated motivations for studying A-levels and their scores for negative emotional symptoms in summer 2020 ($r(40) = .03$, $p = .866$) and February 2021 ($r(40) = .04$, $p = .778$), and non-significant, mild positive correlations between the participants' self-transcendent motivations and their scores for negative emotional symptoms in summer 2020 ($r(40) = .13$, $p = .389$); and February 2021 ($r(40) = .15$, $p = .333$).

Table 37: Pearson correlation coefficients between the participants' motivations for studying A-levels and their scores for negative emotional symptoms in summer 2020 and February 2021

	Summer 2020	February 2021
Self-orientated	.03	.04
Extrinsic	.12	-.08
Self-transcendent purpose	.13	.15

Notes: male participants $n = 4$; female participants $n = 37$; undisclosed gender $n = 1$.

These findings could be interpreted as offering minimal insight into the extent to which students' motivations for studying A-levels are associated with their experiences of mental ill-health. Indeed, it is possible that the non-significant correlations are a result of most of the participants agreeing strongly with all of the items, meaning that it is difficult to discern differences (Chen & Popovich, 2000). Caution should also be exercised when interpreting the findings because the participants' recollections of what motivated them to studying A-levels may have been distorted by recall bias. Nevertheless, an alternative interpretation of these findings could be that students' motivations for studying A-levels are of little relevance to their experiences of mental ill-health, potentially because of how important it is to all students that they perform well.

6.4 How often did A-level students feel stressed in February 2021?

The frequency with which participants reported feeling stressed in summer 2020 and February 2021 is depicted on Table 38, below. In summer 2020, the vast majority of participants reported that they feel stressed at least 'Sometimes' ($n = 41$; 98%); approximately four fifths ($n = 33$; 79%) reported that they feel stressed 'Often' ($n = 14$; 34%) or 'Very often' ($n = 19$; 45%). In February 2021, all of the participants reported that they feel stressed at least 'Sometimes' and the proportion who reported that they feel stressed 'Very often' ($n = 24$; 57%) had increased by approximately a fifth (21%). Results from a Wilcoxon signed-rank test indicated, however, that participants were not significantly more likely to frequently feel stressed in February 2021 (*Mdn* = 5 ['Very often']) in contrast to summer 2020 (*Mdn* = 4 ['Often']) ($p = .092$, $r = .26$). Nonetheless, there appears to be a clear trend towards a larger proportion of participants reporting that they feel stressed 'Very often' at the second timepoint, as well as a smaller proportion reporting that they 'Rarely' or 'Sometimes' feel stressed. Indeed, it is possible that because most ($n = 33$; 78%) of the participants reported that they feel stressed at least 'Often' in summer 2020, a 'ceiling effect' had been reached, meaning that there was insufficient capacity within the response options for significant increases to be identified (Howitt & Cramer, 2011).

	How often do you get stressed?					
	Summer 2020		February 2021		Change	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Never	0	0	0	0	0	0
Rarely	1	2	0	0	-1	-2
Sometimes	8	19	7	17	-1	-2
Often	14	33	11	26	-3	-7
Very often	19	45	24	57	5	12

Notes: male participants *n* = 4; female participants *n* = 37; undisclosed gender *n* = 1. Percentage point changes are displayed in the final column.

6.5 What did A-level students worry about most frequently in February 2021?

Participants were again asked to describe what they worry about most frequently using three words or phrases in February 2021 (the ordering of the terms was again not communicated as being of importance). All of the participants adhered to this request, although at both timepoints a small proportion of the participants provided fewer than three words or phrases. Nevertheless, in summer 2020, 117 terms were provided, meaning that the participants can be thought to have provided three terms (*M* = 2.78; *Mdn* = 3) each, while in February 2021, 119 terms were provided, meaning that the participants can again be thought to have provided three terms each (*M* = 2.83; *Mdn* = 3).

6.5.1 Data analysis

Quantitative content analysis was again used to assign the words and phrases that the participants used to describe what they worry about most frequently into distinct categories (Stemler, 2001), although this time in three phases: data familiarisation; deductive coding; and reporting.

In the first phase, the words and phrases that the participants had used to describe what they worry about most frequently were imported into NVivo 12, before being read repeatedly in order to facilitate data familiarisation. In the second phase, all the words and phrases were assigned to one of the categories in the coding scheme that had been developed during Study 2; I did not consider new categories to be necessary.

6.5.2 Results

The number and proportion of participants who used at least one word or phrases to describe a particular source of concern as one of the things that worry them most often in summer 2020 and February 2021 is depicted in Table 39, below. The proportion of participants who cited their *academic work, examinations or grades* as one of the things that they worry about most frequently remained high, marginally increasing from approximately four fifths ($n = 36$; 86%) in summer 2020 to almost all ($n = 40$; 95%) of the participants February 2021. Terms that the participants used to describe *academic work, examinations or grades* as one of the things that they worry about most frequently in February 2021 included, for example: '*assignments*', '*deadlines*', '*keeping on top of things*', '*getting behind on work*', '*understanding concepts enough*', '*exams*', '*grades*' and '*getting into a course I want to study at university*'.

Table 39: The number of participants who cited a particular source of worry at least once

	Summer 2020		February 2021		Change	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Academic work, examinations or grades	36	86	40	95	4	10
Career or future	9	21	9	21	0	0
Family or friends	6	14	1	2	-5	-12
Finances	4	10	2	5	-2	-5
Health or well-being	6	14	6	14	0	0
What others think of me'	8	19	5	12	-3	-7
Miscellaneous	10	24	5	12	-5	-12

Notes: male participants *n* = 4; female participants *n* = 37; undisclosed gender *n* = 1. Cases displayed. Percentage point changes displayed in the final column.

The number and proportion of terms that the participants used to describe a particular source of concern as one of the things that worry them most often in summer 2020 and February 2021 is depicted in Table 40, below. In summer 2020, approximately three fifths (59%) of the terms that the participants had used to describe what worries them most frequently had been used to describe *academic work, grades or accessing higher education*; in February 2021, however, the proportion of words or phrases that depicted *academic work, grades or accessing higher education* or as one of the things that worried the participants most frequently had increased to approximately three quarters (72%).

The proportion of participants whose first word or phrase depicted *academic work, grades or accessing higher education* as one of the thing that worried them most often remained both high and stable between summer 2020 (*n* = 33; 79%) and February 2021 (*n* = 33; 79%; see Table 41, below).

Table 40: Number and percentage of terms that the participants used to describe what they worry about most often

	Summer 2020		February 2021		Change	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Academic work, examinations or grades	68	59	86	72	18	14
Career or future	9	8	11	9	2	1
Family or friends	8	7	1	1	-7	-6
Finances	4	3	2	2	-2	-2
Health or well-being	6	5	7	6	1	1
What others think of me'	9	8	6	5	-3	-3
Miscellaneous	13	11	6	5	-7	-6

Notes: male participants *n* = 4; female participants *n* = 37; undisclosed gender *n* = 1. Codes displayed. Percentage point changes displayed in the final column.

Table 41: Number and percentage and terms that the participants used to describe what they worry about most often first

	Summer 2020		February 2021		Change	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Academic work, examinations or grades	33	79	33	79	0	0
Career or future	2	2	1	1	-1	-1
Family or friends	1	1	0	0	-1	-1
Finances	0	0	1	1	1	1
Health or well-being	0	0	2	2	2	2
What others think of me'	3	3	3	3	0	0
Miscellaneous	2	2	2	2	0	0

Notes: male participants *n* = 4; female participants *n* = 37; undisclosed gender *n* = 1. Cases displayed. Percentage point changes displayed in the final column.

6.5.3 Reflections

These findings suggest that the participants' academic performance and the implications that it has for their post-18 educational and occupational prospects remained concerning to them, although to a potentially greater extent. This trend is unsurprising given that the participants' were closer to receiving their grades than they had been in summer 2020. Thus, these findings are again consistent with research that has found that older teenagers often feel concerned about their academic performance and future prospects (for example, Anniko et al., 2019; de Anda et al., 2000).

6.6 How often do A-level students feel pressured by their academic work?

The frequency with which participants reported feeling pressured by their academic work in summer 2020 and February 2021 is depicted on Table 42, below. In summer 2020, the vast majority of the participants reported that they feel pressured by their academic work at least 'Sometimes' (n = 40; 95%); approximately four fifths (n = 35; 83%) reported that they feel pressured by their academic work 'Often' (n = 18; 43%) or 'Very often' (n = 17; 40%). In February 2021, none of the participants reported that they 'Never' feel pressured by their academic work, and the proportion who reported that they feel pressured by their academic work 'Very often' (n = 24; 57%) had increased by approximately a third (29%). Results from a Wilcoxon signed-rank test indicated, however, that the participants were not significantly more likely to frequently feel pressured by their academic work in February 2021 (*Mdn* = 5 ['Very often']) in contrast to summer 2020 (*Mdn* = 4 ['Often']) (p = .097, r = .26). Nevertheless, there again appears to be a clear trend towards a

larger proportion of participants reporting that they feel pressured by their academic work 'Very

often' at the second timepoint.

Table 42: Participants' answer to the question: 'How often do you get stressed?' in summer 2020 and February 2021

	How often do you feel pressured by academic work?					
	Summer 2020		February 2021		Change	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Never	1	2	0	0	-1	-2
Rarely	1	2	2	5	1	3
Sometimes	5	12	4	10	-1	-2
Often	18	43	12	29	-6	-14
Very often	17	40	24	57	7	17

Notes: male participants *n* = 4; female participants *n* = 37; undisclosed gender *n* = 1. Percentage point changes displayed in the final column.

6.6.1 Academic pressure and negative emotional states

Results from a Spearman correlation indicated that in February 2021 there was a moderate positive

correlation between the frequency with which participants reported feeling pressured by their

academic work the frequency with which they reported feeling stressed ($r_s(40) = .62, p = < .001$),

as there had been in summer 2020 ($r_s(40) = .57, p = < .001$).

The relationship between participants' scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension and

negative emotional symptoms, and the frequency with which participants felt pressured by their

academic work in summer 2020 and February 2021 is depicted on Table 43, below. Results from

Spearman correlations indicated that there was a non-significant, modest positive correlation

between the frequency with which participants reported feeling pressured by their academic work

in February 2021 and their scores for depression, $r_s(40) = .21, p = .189$) and anxiety, $r_s(40) = .28, p$

= .072); but that there was a significant, moderate positive correlation between the frequency with which participants reported feeling pressured by their academic work and their scores for stress / tension, $r_s(40) = .46$, $p = .002$; and negative emotional symptoms $r_s(40) = .36$, $p = .021$.

Table 43: Spearman correlation coefficients between the frequency with which participants reported feeling pressured by their academic work and their scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms in summer 2020 and February 2021

	Summer 2020	February 2021
Depression	.43	.21
Anxiety	.34	.28
Stress / Tension	.45	.46
Negative emotional symptoms	.51	.36

Notes: male participants $n = 4$; female participants $n = 37$; undisclosed gender $n = 1$.

The weaker positive correlations between the frequency with which the participants felt pressured by their academic work and their scores for depression and anxiety in February 2021 in comparison to summer 2020 can be explained by participants' higher scores for these negative emotional states, as well as the increased likelihood of them frequently feeling pressured by academic work at the second timepoint. Indeed, this is because the clustering of the scores reduces the variance needed for covariance to be detected due to the 'restriction of range' that it produces (Chen & Popovich, 2000). Therefore, while the correlations between the frequency with which the participants felt pressured by their academic work and their scores for depression, anxiety and negative emotional symptoms were weaker in February 2021 in comparison to summer 2020, it is nonetheless possible to conclude that there appears to be a clear association between these variables because all of them had increased in at the second timepoint.

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6.7 Coping with academic demands

The average[43] frequency with which participants reported using specific coping strategies in response to 'sixth form-related challenges and stress' in summer 2020 and February 2021 is depicted on Table 44, below.

Concerningly, in light of the findings presented in Study 2, the coping strategies that were used most frequently in February 2021 included *attempt to handle problems alone* ($M = 3.72$; $SD = 0.83$) and *deterioration* ($M = 3.34$; $SD = 0.66$), although *technology diversions* ($M = 4.36$; $SD = 0.79$) was the most frequently used. Positively two unambiguously adaptive coping strategies, *time and task management* ($M = 3.33$; $SD = 0.83$) and *cognitive reappraisal* ($M = 3.25$; $SD = 0.85$), were also among the most frequently used in February 2021. It is unsurprising that *technology diversions* was the most frequently used coping strategy given that England was in both winter and a national lockdown, the latter meaning that face-to-face activities were restricted.

The coping strategies that were used least frequently in February 2021 included *spirituality* ($M = 1.48$; $SD = 0.88$), *substance use* ($M = 1.55$; $SD = 0.69$) and *skip sixth form* ($M = 1.71$; $SD = 1.03$). While it is reassuring that *substance use* and *skip sixth form* were among the least frequently used coping strategies, it is concerning to that *seek academic support* ($M = 2.27$; $SD = 0.77$) was also among those that were used least often, as this suggests that the participants' felt reluctant to seek assistance, especially because *attempt to handle problems alone* and *deterioration* (i.e. aggression and rimination) were among the most used coping strategies (as highlighted above)

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[43] Average = arithmetic mean

Paired samples t-tests indicate that between summer 2020 and February 2021, participants became significantly more likely to frequently *skip sixth form,* $t(41) = -3.02, p = .004, d = 0.47$ and *reduce effort on academic work* ($t(41) = -2.51, p = .016, d = 0.28$) in an effort to cope, as well as significantly less likely to frequently use *social diversions* ($t(41) = 3.29, p = .002, d = 0.47$), *athletic diversions* ($t(41) = 2.84, p = .007, d = 0.26$) and to *seek academic support* ($t(41) = 2.57, p = .018, d = 0.41$). The decline in the use of diversions such as *social diversions* and *athletic diversions* may be due to the national lockdown that was in place at the time of data collection . This is because social contact was limited during the lockdown, as well as because during cold(er) winter months it can more difficult to take part in these activities.

While it is important to note the increase in the frequency with which participants chose to skip classes (*skip sixth form*), it is also important to note that, as mentioned, it was among the least frequently used coping strategies. Nevertheless, the increase in the frequency with which participants chose to *skip sixth form* could be indicative of students feeling increasingly overwhelmed by their academic workloads, especially as *reduce effort on academic work* was also among the coping strategies being used more frequently at the second timepoint and *deterioration* was the third most frequently used coping strategy. In other words, it may be that more students were feeling inclined to give up in the face of adversity in February 2021.

Table 44: Participants' use of coping strategies in summer 2020 and February 2021

	Summer 2020		February 2021		Change	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Time and task management	3.51	0.80	3.33	0.83	-0.18	0.03
Cognitive reappraisal	3.38	0.90	3.25	0.80	-0.13	-0.10
Seek academic support	2.61	0.90	2.27	0.77	-0.34	-0.13
Turn to family	2.63	1.09	2.62	1.01	-0.01	-0.08
Talk with friends and classmates	2.65	0.91	2.83	0.96	0.17	0.05
Skip sixth form	1.29	0.51	1.71	1.03	0.42	0.52
Social diversions	2.94	0.96	2.48	0.93	-0.45	-0.03
Athletic diversions	2.58	1.09	2.30	1.01	-0.28	-0.08
Creative diversions	2.28	0.81	2.07	0.60	-0.21	-0.21
Technology diversions	3.47	0.85	3.46	0.79	-0.01	-0.06
Substance use	1.51	0.76	1.55	0.69	0.04	-0.07
Reduce effort on academic work	2.26	0.92	2.52	0.99	0.26	0.06
Attempt to handle problems alone	3.90	0.71	3.72	0.83	-0.18	0.12
Deterioration	3.25	0.66	3.34	0.66	0.09	0.00
Sleep	2.36	1.18	2.37	1.15	0.02	-0.03
Spirituality	1.50	0.88	1.48	0.88	-0.02	0.00

Notes: male participants *n* = 4; female participants *n* = 37; undisclosed gender *n* = 1. Scores range from: 1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Frequently; 5 = Almost always.

6.7.1 Coping strategies and negative emotional symptoms

The relationship between using particular coping strategies and participants' scores for negative emotional symptoms are depicted on Table 45, below. It is notable that there was a modest negative correlation between participants' scores for negative emotional symptoms at both timepoints and the following coping strategies: *time and task management*, *cognitive reappraisal*, *social diversions* and *athletic diversions*. The consistent association between these coping strategies and lower scores for negative emotional symptoms suggest that they may help to reduce the risk of students becoming overwhelmed by: helping them to remain organised (*time and task management*); taking breaks (*social diversions* and *athletic diversions*); and keeping their academic work in perspective (*cognitive reappraisal*).

Conversely, results from Pearson correlations indicated that there was a moderate positive correlation between participants' use of both *skip sixth form* and *reduce effort on academic work* and their scores for negative emotional symptoms in both summer 2020 and February 2021, as well as a strong positive correlation between participants' use of *deterioration* and their scores for negative emotional symptoms at both timepoints. The consistent association between these coping strategies and higher scores for negative emotional symptoms again suggests that students who appear to be giving up, on the one hand, or fixating on their academic work, on the other, are more likely than their peers to be experiencing mental ill-health. While the direction of the relationships between these variables is likely to be complex and bidirectional, it seems clear that attention and support ought be targeted towards students who exhibit these behaviours.

Interestingly, while there was a moderate positive correlation between the participants' use of *attempt to handle problems alone* and participants' scores for negative emotional symptoms in summer 2020, a weak correlation between these variables was observed in February 2021. It is unclear what the reason for this is.

Table 45: Pearson correlation coefficients between the participants' use of coping strategies and their scores negative emotional symptoms in summer 2020 and February 2021

	Summer 2020	February 2021
Time and task management	-.27	-.22
Cognitive reappraisal	-.20	-.21
Seek academic support	-.16	.09
Turn to family	.08	.15
Talk with friends and classmates	-.01	.22
Skip sixth form	.35	.28
Social diversions	-.10	-.14
Athletic diversions	-.33	-.15
Creative diversions	.20	.18
Technology diversions	.24	-.10
Substance use	.08	-.02
Reduce effort on academic work	.49	.40
Attempt to handle problems alone	.49	.08
Deterioration	.52	.65
Sleep	.20	.20
Spirituality	-.08	-.11

Notes: male participants $n = 4$; female participants $n = 37$; undisclosed gender $n = 1$.

6.8 How do students experience sixth form?

6.8.1 Overview

The participants were again asked to describe their experience of sixth form using three words or phrases in February 2021 (again, in no particular order). All of the participants adhered to this request, although a small proportion of the participants provided fewer or more than three words or phrases at both timepoints. In summer 2020, 124 terms were provided, meaning that the participants can be thought to have provided three terms ($M = 2.95$) each, while in February 2021, 126 terms were provided, meaning that the participants can again be thought to have provided three terms each, on average ($M = 3.00$).

6.8.2 Data analysis

Quantitative content analysis in three phases: data familiarisation; deductive coding; and reporting categories. During the data familiarisation phase, it was noted that all of the terms could be coded using the coding scheme that had been created for Study 2 (see Appendix 6). Thus, this coding scheme was used to deductively code and categorise the words and phrases that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form in February 2021.

6.8.3 Results

6.8.3.1 Main categories

The number and proportion of participants who described their experience of sixth form in a particular way in summer 2020 and February 2021 is depicted in Table 46, below, where the main

categories are highlighted in bold and the sub-categories that they are comprised of are listed in alphabetical order below them.

The proportion of participants who used at least one word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form as *demanding, difficult or hard* by using terms such as '*challenging*' '*complicated*', '*confusing*', '*demanding*', '*difficult*', '*hard*', '*high workload*' and '*work heavy*' marginally increased from approximately half in summer 2020 ($n = 22$; 52%) to approximately three fifths in February 2021 ($n = 24$; 57%). In addition, the proportion of participants who used at least one word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* by using terms such as '*alarming*', '*anxiety*' '*anxiety-inducing*', '*intense*', '*overwhelming*', '*strenuous*' and '*stressful*' also marginally increased from just under half ($n = 20$; 48%) in summer 2020 to just over half ($n = 22$; 52%) in February 2021. It is also notable that several ($n = 6$; %) of the participants explicitly referred to the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in February 2021, whereas none had done in summer 2020.

In contrast to the increase in the proportion of participants who used at least one word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form as *demanding, difficult or hard* or *intense, overwhelming or stressful* between summer 2020 and February 2021, the proportion of participants who used at least one unambiguously *positive* word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form declined by approximately two fifths (42%) between summer 2020 ($n = 37$; 88%) and February 2021 ($n = 26$; 62%).

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6.8.3.2 Prevalence of terms used to describe sixth form in February 2021

The number and proportion of words and phrases that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form in in a particular way in summer 2020 and February 2021 is depicted in Table 46, below, where the main categories are highlighted in bold and the sub-categories that they are comprised of are again listed in alphabetical order below them.

In summer 2020, more than half of the terms that the participants had used to describe their experience of sixth form had been considered to be unambiguously *positive* ($n = 67$; 54%); in February 2021, however, the proportion of unambiguously *positive* terms that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form had declined by a quarter to approximately two fifths ($n = 49$; 39%). Furthermore, paired samples t-tests indicated that there was a significant difference between the number of unambiguously *positive* words or phrases that the participants used describe their experience of sixth form in summer 2020 ($M = 1.59$; $Mdn = 2.00$; $SD = 0.91$) and February 2021 ($M = 1.17$; $Mdn = 1.00$; $SD = 1.13$), $t(41) = 2.41$, $p = .020$, $d = 0.41$.

6.8.3.3 First term used to describe sixth form in February 2021

In order to gain a sense of what kind of language may have best represented the participants' experiences of sixth form, an analysis of the first words or phrases that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form in summer 2020 and February 2021 was conducted. This analysis was conducted because – as highlighted in Chaters 3 and 4 – it could be argued that, although the participants were not asked to provide the words or phrases in a particular order, the first word or phrase that was provided by the participants may have been the most meaningful

one. The number and proportion of words or phrases that the participants used first to describe their experience of sixth is depicted in Table 48, below, where the main categories are again highlighted in bold and the sub-categories that they are comprised of are listed in alphabetical order below them. It is notable that the proportion of participants who chose a word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* first increased from approximately a fifth ($n = 8$; 19%) in summer 2020 to more than two fifths ($n = 18$; 43%) in February 2021. In contrast, the proportion of participants who chose an unambiguously *positive* word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form first in declined from approximately than two fifths ($n = 18$; 43%) in summer 2020 to approximately a quarter ($n = 12$; 29%) in February 2021.

Table 46: Number and percentage of participants who used at least one word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form in a particular way in 2020 and February 2021

	Summer 2020		February 2021		Change	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Challenging	34	81	32	76	-2	-5
Busy	4	10	1	2	-3	-8
Demanding, difficult or hard	22	52	24	57	2	5
Intense, overwhelming or stressful	20	48	22	52	2	4
Positive	37	88	26	62	-11	-26
Autonomy, freedom or independence	9	21	8	19	-1	-2
Encouraging, helpful or supportive	4	10	0	0	-4	-10
Engaging, interesting or stimulating	12	29	14	33	2	4
Enjoyable, exciting or fun	21	50	16	38	-5	-12
Friendly, inclusive or welcoming	10	24	03	7	-7	-17
Miscellaneous	2	5	10	24	8	19
Boring, disappointing or monotonous	0	0	3	7	3	7
Disrupted by Covid-19	0	0	6	14	6	14
Lonely	2	5	1	2	-1	-3
Neutral	0	0	1	2	1	2

Notes: male participants *n* = 4; female participants *n* = 37; undisclosed gender *n* = 1. Words and phrases provided in summer 2020 *n* = 124; words and phrases provided in February 2021 *n* = 124. Percentage point changes are displayed in the final column.

Table 47: Number and percentage of terms that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form

	Summer 2020		February 2021		Change	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Challenging	55	44	64	51	9	6
Busy	4	3	1	1	-3	-2
Demanding, difficult or hard	26	21	32	25	6	4
Intense, overwhelming or stressful	25	20	31	25	6	4
Positive	67	54	49	39	-18	-15
Autonomy, freedom or independence	12	10	10	8	-2	-2
Encouraging, helpful or supportive	4	3	0	0	-4	-3
Engaging, interesting or stimulating	13	10	17	13	4	3
Enjoyable, exciting or fun	27	22	19	15	-8	-7
Friendly, inclusive or welcoming	11	9	3	2	-8	-6
Miscellaneous	2	0	13	10	11	10
Boring, disappointing or monotonous	0	0	4	3	4	3
Disrupted by Covid-19	0	0	7	6	7	6
Lonely	2	2	1	1	-1	-1
Neutral	0	0	1	1	1	1

Notes: male participants *n* = 4; female participants *n* = 37; undisclosed gender *n* = 1. Terms provided in summer 2020 *n* = 124; terms provided in February 2021 *n* = 124. Percentage point changes are displayed in the final column.

Table 48: Terms that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form first

	Summer 2020		February 2021		Change	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Challenging	24	57	26	62	-2	-5
Busy	1	2	0	0	-1	-2
Demanding, difficult or hard	15	36	8	19	-7	-17
Intense, overwhelming or stressful	8	19	18	43	10	-24
Positive	18	43	12	29	-6	-14
Autonomy, freedom or independence	5	12	2	5	-3	-7
Encouraging, helpful or supportive	0	0	0	0	0	0
Engaging, interesting or stimulating	4	10	2	5	-2	-5
Enjoyable, exciting or fun	7	17	6	14	-1	-2
Friendly, inclusive or welcoming	2	5	1	2	-1	-2
Miscellaneous	0	0	4	0	4	10
Boring, disappointing or monotonous	0	0	0	0	0	0
Disrupted by Covid-19	0	0	3	7	3	7
Lonely	0	0	0	0	0	0
Neutral	0	0	1	2	1	2

Notes: male participants *n* = 4; female participants *n* = 37; undisclosed gender *n* = 1. All of the participants provided at least one word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form. Percentage point changes are displayed in the final column.

6.9 How do A-level students experience sixth form (continued)?

In order to develop a more detailed understanding the participants' experiences of sixth form, before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, a simplified, abbreviated variation of reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the justifications that the participants provided for choosing for the terms that they did to describe their experience of it. In order to enhance the richness of the dataset and, therefore, allow for a more insightful analysis to be conducted, the participants' answers to the following questions were also incorporated into the dataset:

- Has the Covid-19 pandemic changed your plans for the future?

- What have you learnt about yourself during the Covid-19 pandemic?

- What have you found most supportive during the Covid-19 pandemic?

- What kind of support would you like to have received during the Covid-19 pandemic?

6.9.1 Data analysis

In the first phase, the participants' responses to the questions stimulated above, which often consisted of a short phrase, were transferred to a spreadsheet, where they were read repeatedly in order to facilitate data familiarisation. In the second phase, the data were coded deductively, with evidence of the themes that had been constructed in Study 2 being identified. In the final four phases, three, brief themes were constructed, refined, defined, named and reported. The analysis was conducted from an experiential orientation and critical realist position, meaning that I attempted to make sense of the data – and what it can be thought to reveal about the participants'

experiences of studying A-levels before and during the Covid-19 pandemic – rather than accept it at 'face value' (Willig, 2012). This was particularly important within the context of this analysis because of how short and fragmented the participants' responses often were.

6.9.2 Analysis

Three themes were constructed from the data: 1) *on and on*; 2) *let down and hanging around*; 3) and *it was good while it lasted*. The themes highlight again that the participants experienced sixth form as challenging and enriching, but that many of the most enriching aspects of studying A-levels were diminished or disrupted by the need to learn online and from home during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Theme 1: 'a difficult and stressful experience': on and on

This theme captures the idea that studying A-levels can be a particularly challenging experience which requires a lot of effort and can, therefore, tax students' resources (*'a lot to handle'*; *'a difficult and stressful experience'*), especially when they feel under a lot of pressure to perform well (*'anxiety about what will happen should I not do well'*; *'working myself harder and harder to do well'*).

Several participants commented again on studying A-levels being different to, and more difficult than, studying GCSEs (*'it wasn't what I expected and was very different from my GCSE experience'*; *'some subjects feel like a continuation of what we learned at GCSE, others feel like a massive step up'*). In particular, some of the participants commented on the scale of their workload, which they seemed to find particularly difficult to manage (*'the workload is excessive'*; *'the workload is stressful'*). Some of the participants also commented again on the complexity of the content (*'the content is much harder'*; *'the*

content is very difficult to understand'), as well as the '*fast pace*' at which it needs to be learnt, which could

be difficult to keep abreast with ('*so much faster paced*'; '*difficult with the fast pace of going through content*').

The participants' reflected on how, in combination, these aspects of studying A-levels make it a

time and effort-consuming experience ('*lots of content to understand and digest*'; '*difficult as the workload

can be a lot and it takes a lot of practice to get used to*'). For some of the participants, the demands of

studying A-levels could feel relentless ('*the work seems to be never ending*'; '*you can be working constantly to

keep on top of the workload*'), as well as tiring ('*you get a lot of work and sometimes it's a lot to handle*'; '*insane

amounts of work, homework and studying that you're supposed to complete is constantly on your mind*'). In light

of these demands ('*non-stop working*'; '*it is stressful to try and keep on top of everything all the time and you

are always busy with work*'), several participants commented on how greater support from their sixth

forms aimed at helping them to develop the abilities that are needed to manage the demands of

studying A-levels would have been helpful ('*more academic support*'; '*time management help sessions so that

I don't work all the time*'). For some participants, studying A-levels was described as being harmful

to their mental health:

> [Sixth form was] *not enjoyable, stressful, high workload* [and I would have liked
>
> to have had] *some sort of mental health support*

> [Sixth form was] *demanding* [and] *stressful… A-levels have had a significant effect
>
> on my mental health. It's hard to be surrounded by people who are doing better than
>
> you and mixed with all the stress it starts to make you feel useless*

The participants also commented again on the pressure to perform well that they perceived to be imposed on them by others:

a lot of pressure coming from teachers

they pile more and more work on in stressful times

high expectations put on you which can get very tiring

expected to get so much done so quickly and to a really high standard

In response to such pressure, several participants commented on how they would have liked sixth form staff to have been more understanding and supportive ('*more understanding from school as I feel like they put a lot of pressure on students*'; '*there's a lack of support from the sixth form with emotional and mental wellbeing, general work[-]related stress*'). Other participants expressed a desire for greater mental health-related support during sixth form ('*some sort of mental health support*'; '*practical mental health support*'), or for someone to turn to when they were experiencing difficulties:

[Sixth form was] *difficult* [and] *tiring* [and I would have liked] *loving support*

[Sixth form was] *stressful* [and] *confusing* [and I would have liked] *counselling*

[Sixth for was] *stressful* [and] *strenuous* [I would have liked] *my family* [to be] *more supportive rather than forceful*

[Sixth form was] *difficult… I stress and worry a lot. I don't really have anyone to speak to in the family.* [It would have been helped if I had had] *someone to*

> *listen to me and tell me what to do and how to deal with things… crying has also*

> *helped*

It is notable that family and, in particular, friends were often cited as being among the most important sources of support; the latter being because they are '*going through the same thing*' and could, therefore, be turned to and trusted ('*my friend because she going through the same thing as me*'; '*my friends and boyfriend have been supportive and willing to listen to me when I was struggling with the workload and stress*'). It is again apparent, therefore, that when the '*draining*' demands of studying A-levels are combined with the pressure that students experience to perform well, sixth form can be a challenging and stress-inducing experience.

Theme 2: '*it was good for the first half*': let down and hanging around

This theme captures the idea that the participants' experience of sixth form was distorted by the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic ('*disrupted and incomplete*'; '*it's not been a 'normal' sixth form experience*'), which both shortened and limited their experience of it ('*my sixth form experience was cut short*'; '*my experience has been severely limited*').

The participants often framed their experience of studying A-levels as both disappointing and less enjoyable than it had been prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic ('*underwhelming* [because the Covid-19 pandemic] *took away all the fun parts*'; '*it was good for the first half but I don't have much to say about it after that*'). Unsurprisingly, therefore, many of the participants felt '*frustrated and upset*' about the disruption that the Covid-19 pandemic had caused, and described themselves as feeling '*annoyed*', '*devastated*', '*disappointed*', '*disheartened*', '*down*', '*rubbish*', '*sad*' and '*unhappy*' about the

impact that it had had on their experience of post-16 education (*'missed out on a lot of opportunities'*; *'it's been so long and it's getting tiring now'*). Several participants also commented on how the uncertainty that the Covid-19 pandemic had introduced had in itself acted as an unsettling source of stress:

> *it has introduced a new level of concern and stress*

> *incredibly stressed and feel like it's unfair to expect us to be able to do well*

> *stressful* [because] *there is a lot of work to complete and I haven't known what is going to happen with A-levels*

> *because of the pandemic it means we are kept in the dark about a lot of things including exams as no one knows what is going to happen so it has made it a lot more stressful*

In light of this uncertainty (*'the government has no idea what it's doing'*; *'I haven't known what is going to happen with A-levels'*), which made some of the participants feel *'worried'*, *'scared'* and *'stressed'*, it was common for participants to express a desire for greater clarity from the Government:

> [I would have liked] *more support and clarity from government for students*

> [I would have liked] *support from the Government* [and] *reassurance from those in power*

> [I would have liked] *clear plans from the government, not shitty u turns at every opportunity*

> [I would have liked] *the education board to stop messing us around and clearly tell us what's going on*

The participants also commented on how the disruption caused by the pandemic had also made it harder for them to learn ('*online learning is a mess*'; '*since lockdown it's difficult to concentrate and stay motivated*'). For some of the participants, this had the effect of making sixth form less enjoyable and more stressful:

> *increased the stress - online lessons aren't as good as in person - felt the quality of my education was declining, struggling more to understand things, harder to pay attention at home when there are others around*

> *especially now where we have had to study remotely, it's harder to keep on top of the work and stay organised. No access to printers and other services that we would usually get in school has made it really stressful for me to continue studying my subjects… each day feels repetitive and almost dull because I'm at the computer for over seven hours a day*

Thus, the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic appeared to detrimentally effect many of the participants' experiences of studying A-levels by making it harder for them to learn, socialise or experience a sense of security about the future.

> *Theme 3: 'enjoyable and exciting': it was good while it lasted*

This theme captures the idea that, before the Covid-19 pandemic, studying A-levels was often experienced as an opportunity for growth, development and 'positive personal change' (Brown,

2021; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; '*I loved going to my sixth form*'; '*before I found it really enjoyable and exciting*').

Several participants commented again on the independence that sixth form afforded them in comparison to secondary school ('*it feels more like the adult world than I envisioned*'; '*it's very different from school in terms of independence*'), which was valued by some of the participants ('*the freedom given at sixth form is amazing*'; '*we are treated as young adults, with respect but also an expectation to do enough work to keep up with our studies*'). Several participants also commented on how studying A-levels had led them to develop confidence in their abilities to learn independently ('*I can do well independently*'; '[I have learnt that] *I'm an independent learner*'). Other participants commented on learning how to organise their time ('*I am more organised than I thought*'; '*figured out the best way to split my time into an effective revision timetable so I get everything done*'). Indeed, it was relatively common for the participants to comment on how sixth form had helped them to develop:

> *I grew up and became more aware of and involved with the world around me*
>
> *sixth form has really allowed me to step into my own, through the increased independence outside of lessons*
>
> *time management is of paramount importance to achieving well in A-levels, having good time management ensures a good grade*
>
> *college has been very informative as it have prepared me for higher education and taught me skills and topics that I will use throughout the rest of my life*

It was also relatively common for the participants to express appreciation for the opportunity to study subjects that were of interest and value to them:

I did learn and what I learnt was valuable

I enjoy the subjects I chose and the learning

the content can be very interesting and fun at times

the content I have learned has really expanded my knowledge of important things and developed me as a person

Prior to, or despite, the Covid-19 pandemic, studying A-levels therefore afforded many of the participants valuable opportunities to develop.

6.9.3 Reflections

It can be concluded on the basis of this analysis that the participants' experiences of sixth form were detrimentally effects by the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is, therefore, possible that this contributed towards the significant increases in the participants' scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension. It is certainly clear that the participants felt that the most enjoyable and enriching aspects of sixth form were diminished by the requirement to learn online and from home, and that many of the participants would have appreciated greater clarity from the Government. It is also clear, however, that a notable proportion of the participants found studying A-levels particularly challenging and stress-inducing even before the onset of the Covid-19

pandemic. In the final part of this chapter, I will focus on the participants' recollections of their initial experiences of studying A-levels.

6.2 How do students experience transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels?

In order to gain a more detailed insight into how A-level students experience the transition from studying GCSEs to studying A-levels, the participants were also asked to rate on a five-point scale from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree' the extent to which they agreed with statements related to the increase in difficulty of studying A-levels in comparison to GCSEs. The participants' responses to the statements are displayed in Table 49, below. It is notable that the vast majority of the participants ($n = 35$; 84%) either agreed ($n = 5$; 12%) or strongly agreed ($n = 30$; 72%) that there is more content to learn when studying A-levels, and that a similar proportion ($n = 36$; 86%) either agreed ($n = 10$; 24%) or strongly agreed ($n = 26$; 62%) that the content is also more difficult to understand. Furthermore, approximately four fifths of the participants ($n = 33$; 78%) either agreed ($n = 11$; 26%) or strongly agreed ($n = 22$; 52%) that it is harder to remain organised and 'keep on top of things' when studying A-levels, while all but one participant ($n = 41$; 98%) agreed ($n = 10$; 24%) or strongly agreed (n = 31; 74%) that there is more pressure to perform well. These responses indicate that, on reflection, most students consider studying A-levels to be considerably more challenging than studying GCSEs, and therefore support the proposition that developing a better understanding of how to support students during the transition from studying GCSEs to studying A-levels warrants further research.

Table 49: Participants' perceptions of the difference between studying GCSEs and A-levels

	In comparison to studying GCSEs, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?									
	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neither*		Agree		Strongly agree	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
There is more content to learn	0	0	4	10	3	7	5	12	30	72
The content is more difficult to understand	0	0	3	7	3	7	10	24	26	62
It is harder to remain organised	1	2	2	5	6	15	11	26	22	52
There is more pressure to perform well	0	0	0	0	1	2	10	24	31	74

Notes: male participants *n* = 4; female participants *n* = 37; undisclosed gender *n* = 1. *Neither = 'Neither agree nor disagree'

Table 50: Participants' initial experiences of studying A-levels

	To what extent do you agree with the following statements?									
	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neither*		Agree		Strongly agree	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
I was surprised by how difficult A-levels are	0	0	8	19	12	29	15	36	7	17
I was unprepared for how difficult A-levels are	1	2	9	21	15	36	15	36	2	5
When I first began A-levels, I felt well-supported by my teachers	0	0	1	2	11	26	21	50	9	22
It took several months for me to get used to the demands of studying A-levels	2	5	5	12	8	19	15	36	12	29

Notes: male participants *n* = 4; female participants *n* = 37; undisclosed gender *n* = 1. *Neither = 'Neither agree nor disagree'

In order to gain a more detailed insight into how A-level students experienced the initial stages of studying A-levels, the participants were asked to reflect on their experience of transitioning from studying GCSEs to A-levels, and to rate, again on a five-point scale from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree', to what extent they agreed with a variety of statements about their initial experiences of studying A-levels. The participants' ratings are displayed in Table 50, above. A more uneven picture emerged in response to these statements, suggesting that while the vast majority of participants found studying A-levels notably more challenging than GCSEs, their anticipation and preparedness for the increase in difficulty was more varied. For example, while the vast majority of participants considered studying A-levels to be more challenging than studying GCSEs (as discussed), approximately half ($n = 20$; 48%) either disagreed ($n = 8$; 19%) or neither agreed nor disagreed ($n = 12$; 29%) that they were surprised by how difficult studying A-levels is. This suggests that a realistic appreciation of how much more difficult studying A-levels would be was not shared equally by the participants.

It is notable that approximately two thirds of the participants ($n = 27$; 65%) either agreed ($n = 15$; 36%) or strongly agreed ($n = 12$; 29%) that it had taken them several months for them to acclimatise to the demands of A-levels because this lends evidence to support the suggestion that it is a transition point that takes a considerable amount of time and effort for most students to adapt to (Deuker, 2014; Powell, 2017; Study 1). Importantly, results from a Spearman correlation indicated that there was a significant, moderate positive correlation between the extent to which the participants agreed that they were surprised by how difficult studying A-levels is and the extent

to which they agreed that it had taken them several months to get used to the demands of studying A-Levels ($r_s(40) = .38, p = .012$). This finding suggests that students who have realistic expectations of how much more difficult studying A-levels will be in comparison to studying GCSEs may be better prepared for, and therefore able better positioned to manage, the transition between these two stages of education.

Results from a Spearman correlation indicated that there was a significant, moderate positive correlation between the extent to which participants agreed that it had taken them several months to 'get used to the demands of studying A-levels' and the frequency with which they felt pressured by the academic work in February 2021 ($r_s(40) = .34, p = .026$). This finding suggests that students who struggled to manage the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels may have experienced pressure to catch up and compensate for 'lost learning'. Supporting this idea, results from a Spearman correlation indicated that there was a significant, moderate positive correlation between the extent to which the participants agreed that it had taken them several months to get used to the demands of A-levels and their scores in February 2021 for depression ($r_s(40) = .33, p = .032$); anxiety ($r_s(40) = .42, p = .005$); stress / tension ($r_s(40) = .31, p = .049$); and negative emotional symptoms ($r_s(40) = .43, p = .004$). These findings highlight the potentially lingering psychological consequences that may be associated with finding the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels particularly challenging. Indeed, the association between how strongly the participants felt as though it had taken them several months to acclimatise to the demands associated with studying A-levels and their scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension, as

well the frequency with which they felt pressured by their academic work, suggests that students who struggle to adapt to the demands of A-levels when they first transition from secondary school to sixth form are more likely to experience a greater degree of academic pressure and negative emotional symptoms at later stages of their courses. Supporting this suggestion, approximated as a scale variable (Strand et al., 2012), how strongly the participants felt as though it had taken them several months to adapt to the demands of studying A-levels explained 15.1% of the variance in the their scores for negative emotional symptoms in February 2021 and was a significant, modest predictor of this variable, $F(1,40) = 7.11$, $p = .011$. These findings therefore lend tentative evidence to support the suggestion that it is particularly important to help students to develop the academic and organisational abilities that are needed to engage in independent, self-directed learning during the initial stages of their transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels (Deuker, 2014; Powell, 2017), because those who struggle to cultivate these capabilities may be more vulnerable to experiencing academic pressure and mental ill-health during later stages of their programmes.

6.2.1 Retrospective distortion

Of course, it is also possible that those had poorer mental health in February 2021 reflected more pessimistically on their transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels, and that retrospective distortion therefore skewed their interpretation of how difficult this period had been. In light of this limitation, more research aimed at understanding this transition, and what short- and long-term implications it may (or may not) have for A-level students' mental health and performance, is needed.

6.11 Conclusion

In this chapter, a lot of ground has again been covered and I have attempted to contextualise, discuss and critically reflect on the findings throughout. In light of this, the findings presented within this chapter will be discussed at greater length, and within the context of the findings from Studies 1 and 2, in the following chapter. Nevertheless, turning to the main takeaways from this chapter: the findings highlight that between summer 2020 and February 2021, there was a significant increase in the participants' scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension, in addition to a significant decrease in the number of unambiguously *positive* words or phrases that they used to describe their experience of sixth form. Furthermore, between summer 2020 and February 2021, there was an increase in the frequency with which the participants reported feeling pressured by their academic work and, on top of this, the participants became more likely to cite their academic work as one of the three things that they worry about most often. In light of these findings, it is especially concerning that the participants continued to frequently try to manage their difficulties alone in an attempt to cope with the demands of studying A-levels and became significantly less likely to seek support from their teachers. Given that many of the participants commented on how their experience of studying A-levels had been hampered by the Covid-19 pandemic, it seems reasonable to conclude that it had a harmful impact on A-level students' learning and health. Taking this into account, it is difficult to determine the extent to which the changes in the participants' experiences reflect changes that would be ordinarily experienced by A-level students as they transition from Years 12 to 13.

Turning to the other focus of this chapter, it was also found that, on reflection, most of the participants found the transition from studying GCSEs to studying A-levels challenging: the majority agreed or strongly agreed, for example, that studying A-levels involves covering a larger quantity of content; that the content is more complex; that it is more difficult to remain organised and 'keep on top of things'; and that there is more pressure to perform well. It was also found that students who felt like it took several months to acclimatise to the demands of studying A-levels felt pressured by their academic work more often and had higher scores for negative emotional symptoms in February 2021. In combination, these findings suggest that some A-level students would benefit from greater academic support during the transition from studying GCSEs to studying A-levels, as it possible that adjustment difficulties could lead to poorer mental health-related outcomes at later stages. This certainly aligns with the findings from Study 1. Nevertheless, larger-scale, longitudinal research is needed before this relationship can be confidently confirmed or quantified. In the next chapter, I will discuss the findings from Studies 1, 2 and 3 together.

Chapter 7 - Discussion

7.1 Questions-led research

In the spirit of adopting a research questions-led approach to conducting research (White, 2013), in this chapter I will reflect on the answers to the research questions that I addressed in this thesis. I will also discuss the implications that these have for educational practice, policy and research. To reiterate, prior to the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic, I aimed to address the following main research questions:

- How do A-level students experience post-16 education?

- What causes A-level students to experience stress or anxiety?

- How often do A-level students feel pressured by their academic work?

- What coping strategies do A-level students use in response to academic demands?

- What proportion of A-level students experience at least a moderate amount of depression, anxiety or stress?

Prior to the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic, I also aimed to address the following sub-contributory research questions:

- What motivates students to study A-levels?

- What do A-level students worry about most frequently?

- What support is available to A-level students during post-16 education?

- How do A-level students experience the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels?

- Is the type of language that A-level students use to describe their experience of sixth form associated with the severity of their experiences of depression, anxiety or stress?

Additionally, following the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic, I also aimed address the following research questions:

- How has the pandemic affected A-level students' experiences of post-16 education?

- What have A-level students found most supportive during the pandemic?

Overall, the findings from Studies 1, 2 and 3 demonstrate that A-level students experience post-16 education as both a challenge and an opportunity, which can both frustrate and facilitate their development.

7.2 How do A-level students experience post-16 education?

Above all else, the findings – when considered against the backdrop of prior research on this topic (Brown, 2021; Chamberlain et al., 2011; Dueker, 2014; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Nash et al., 2021; Powell, 2017) – consolidate the criticality of acknowledging that the change from studying GCSEs to A-levels is rarely experienced by students as a seamless transition or straightforward 'step up' in difficulty. Instead, it often requires a substantial amount of effort and a protracted period of time for students to acclimatise to – even for those who are used to performing well or

remain in the same institution (Dueker, 2014). The findings also underscore the importance of acknowledging that A-level students often experience an enormous amount of pressure to perform well (Chamberlain et al., 2011), both throughout the academic year and during the immediate approach to mock as well as actual examinations. Indeed, there was widespread agreement among the participants in Studies 1 and 3, in particular, that there is more pressure to perform well when studying A-levels in comparison to GCSEs. Thus, the heightened demands of studying A-levels, when combined with the increased pressure to perform well, simultaneously entrench and amplify the 'conditions for stress' that have long been associated with students' experiences of preparing for GCSE examinations (Denscombe, 2000; Putwain, 2009). I will now consider the demands and pressures that A-level students experience, as well as how they cope with them, and discuss the implications that this has for educational practice, policy and research.

7.3 How do A-level students experience the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels?

Consistent with prior research, the participants in Studies 1, 2 and 3 reported that the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels represented a 'big jump' or a 'massive step up' rather than an incremental increase in difficulty (Brown, 2021; Dueker, 2014; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Nash et al., 2021; Powell, 2017). Importantly, this thesis offers an up-to-date and detailed insight to what aspects of studying A-levels students find most challenging in contrast to GCSEs[44] (discussed below). In so doing, it 'puts to bed' debates about whether the change from studying

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[44] Included in this contribution is the synthesising of what several prior qualitative studies have found (Chapter 2).

GCSEs to A-levels is 'really a transition' and provides evidence to support calls for greater attention to be paid to students during this stage of education (Hagell et al., 2012; Nash et al., 2021).

The participants in Study 1 highlighted that the greater complexity and quantity of the content, and the faster pace at which it is expected to be learnt, makes studying A-levels much more demanding than studying GCSEs. Furthermore, the same participants highlighted that A-level examination questions are less straightforward or predictable than their predecessors and cannot, as a consequence, be answered in a formulaic manner. This meant that the participants had to engage more critically with the content and learn more advanced examination techniques, because '*splurging information on the page*' and '*spoon feeding*' – as Susan and Katherine put it, respectively – could no longer be relied upon to perform well. These experiences extended to the participants who had been used to performing well with minimal effort during secondary school. This suggests that studying A-levels can challenge students' academic self-concepts (Chamberlain et al., 2011; Dueker, 2014; Powell, 2017). In combination, these factors meant that the participants had to work much harder than they had anticipated, despite studying fewer subjects and expecting a decrease in their workload.

Importantly, the large(r) sample of participants in Study 2 reiterated the perceptions that had been expressed by the participants in Study 1 when they were asked to explain why they had chosen the terminology that they had done to describe their experience of sixth form. In particular, the participant in Study 2 drew attention to the greater complexity and quantity of the content,

and the faster pace at which it is expected to be learnt, when studying A-levels. This suggests that these perceptions are widely shared and may, therefore, be representative of a sizeable proportion of A-level students' experiences. Tentatively supporting this suggestion, when the participants in Study 3 were asked to rate how strongly they agreed with a series of statements about their experience of studying A-levels in comparison to GCSEs, there was almost unanimous agreement that there is a larger quantity of content to learn when studying A-levels; that the content is more complicated; that it is more difficult to 'keep on top of things' and remain organised; and that there is more pressure to perform well. Moreover, approximately two thirds of the participants in Study 3 agreed that it had taken them several months to adapt – or 'get used' – to the demands of studying A-levels. It is also notable that there were significant, moderate positive correlations between how strongly the participants agreed that this had been the case and their scores for negative emotional symptoms, as well as the frequency with which they felt pressured by the academic work, in February 2021. These findings – when again set against the backdrop of prior research on this topic (Brown, 2021; Dueker, 2014; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Nash et al., 2021; Powell, 2017) – support the notion that the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels should be thought of as a 'proper' transition rather than a mere 'continuation of school' – even for those who remain in the same institution. Indeed, it involves intellectual, behavioural and social change, even for those for whom it does not involve a physical change in environment.

In addition to adapting to the change in the type of content that they need to learn when transitioning from studying GCSEs to A-levels, A-level students are also expected to assume

greater responsibility for managing their time and remaining organised. This is rendered all the more important because of the introduction of free periods, which A-level students are expected to take on an adult-like responsibility for utilising productively. Consistent with prior research, it was common for participants in Studies 1, 2 and 3 to highlight that managing their workload was a difficult and demanding task in itself (Dueker, 2014; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Powell, 2017). Indeed, the participants in Study 1 highlighted that because they could no longer rely on being told what to revisit, review and revise by their teachers, this meant that they had to direct additional effort towards 'keeping on top' their workload and partitioning their (finite amounts of) time and effort efficaciously. On top of managing their work, however, the participants in Study 1 also highlighted that other commitments, obligations and responsibilities, such as securing and conducting work experience or a part-time job; completing their higher education applications; and maintaining friendships with friends who no longer share the same lessons or attend the same sixth form, also constrained their time. These are rarely 'optional' for students, meaning that there is more to sixth form than studying A-levels. Indeed, like adults, A-level students have to manage and prioritise competing demands on their time. (It is possible that for many A-level students, this represents a particularly new experience.) Crucially, many of the participants in Study 2 shared this perspective and commented that '*there's always more to do*' during sixth form. This indicates that, for many A-level students, post-16 education can sometimes feel like a relentlessly demanding experience.

7.4 What support is available to A-level students during post-16 education?

In light of the additional demands that accompany studying A-levels in comparison to studying GCSEs, and amid calls for a long-term framework aimed at providing context-specific support to students during each of education (Gunnel et al., 2018), A-level students ought to be assisted to develop the abilities that are needed to negotiate this transition rather than be expected to simply 'work it out for themselves' via a process of trial and error (Deuker, 2014). Indeed, learning how to manage time and remain organised requires time and effort – or 'groundwork' – in itself, and is not easy to do (Kennerly, 2014). Thus, it cannot be taken for granted that A-level students will learn how to manage their time well, even if they are told that it is important for them to do so and issued with planners (as all of the participants in Study 1 had been). Furthermore, targeted support ought to be directed towards A-level students who appear to be experiencing adjustment difficulties, because the findings suggest that those who struggle to adapt to the change from studying GCSEs to A-levels may find themselves 'on the back foot', losing confidence and experiencing greater pressure at later stages of their courses (as highlighted above). Indeed, this was evident in Studies 1, 2 and 3, and prior research has found that adjustment difficulties during the transition from primary to secondary education are associated with poorer mental health- and performance-related outcomes at ages 15- and 18-years-old (West et al., 2010). Promoting realistic expectations of what studying A-levels is like among potential or soon to be A-level students may also help them to be better prepared for it (also see, Nicholson et al., 2014).

7.5 Resources and curriculum continuity

In order for additional or targeted support to be made available to A-level students, sixth form staff require sufficient training, resources and funding. Furthermore, curriculum continuity ought to be reviewed in an effort to ensure that the increase in difficulty from studying GCSEs to A-levels does *not* excessively exceed what most students are able to negotiate (Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011). While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to consider how this could be achieved, it is important to note that the findings suggest that the 'massive step up' from studying GCSEs to A-levels may pose particular challenges to a notable proportion of students. Greater research aimed at understanding what proportion and type of students find the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels particularly difficult to adjust to could make it easier to identify those most in need of greater support. This could be achieved via longitudinal research that tracks A-level students' experiences from the beginning of the Year 12 in an effort to investigate who encounters the most difficulties, when and why, so that support can be directed towards those who are most likely need it (Kyriacou, 2003).

7.6 Long-term framework: a positive perspective

It is important to recognise that, for some students, the challenges that studying A-levels present can offer opportunities for growth, development and 'positive personal change' (Brown, 2021; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011). Indeed, most of the participants in Study 2 used at least two unambiguously positive terms to describe their experience of sixth form; many commented that they appreciated the opportunities to become more independent, study subjects that they are

genuinely interested in and establish friendships with students with whom they share interests. These perceptions were broadly shared by the participants in Study 1 as well. Viewed through the lens of basic self-determination theory (psychological need satisfaction theory, in particular), these findings offer a hopeful sign that, with appropriate support in place, studying A-levels can be an enriching experience which can fulfil students' basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness and therefore help them to flourish – the task ahead is to extend this experience to as wide a proportion of A-level students as reasonably possible. These findings also highlight the importance of developing a better understanding of the 'active ingredients' that contribute towards creating supportive educational institutions and spaces in which students can flourish, and suggest that self-determination theory could be used as a framework for developing context-specific support for A-level students.

7.7 What coping strategies do A-level students use in response to academic demands?

7.7.1 Coping with academic demands: protective coping strategies

The findings from Study 1 indicated that students who proactively manage their time and remain organised by using their planners, revision timetables and to-do lists are better positioned to cope with the demands of studying A-levels. Furthermore, one of the participants in Study 1 had been explicitly taught how to use a revision timetable by their teacher, which made a notably perceptible difference to how organised and 'in control' of her workload she felt. However, many of the participants in Study 1 commented on how they had rarely been shown how to manage their time

or remain organised, despite being repeatedly told that it is important for them to do so – as Rachel put it: *'they just say "do it, do it, do it", not how to do it'*. Here, tentative parallels could be drawn with campaigns that emphasise the importance of exercising or eating healthily without providing sufficiently clear guidance on how to incorporate these behaviours into busy and demanding lifestyles; some may *'pick up the habits'*, to quote Zoe, but this cannot be guaranteed. In other words, preaching is not the same as teaching. This highlights a potential opportunity for sixth form staff to provide A-level students with context-specific support, dependent on sufficient training, time and resources (as highlighted above), which may help them to minimise or manage experiences of stress that arise from the demands of studying A-levels.

Supporting the suggestion that using time management and organisation strategies may help to moderate the amount of stress that A-level students experience, in Studies 2 and 3, the participants who made greater use of *time and task management* coping strategies, such as 'Break work into manageable pieces', 'Get and keep materials for sixth form organised' and 'Use a planner to keep track of activities and assignments due', had lower scores for negative emotional symptoms. This finding is consistent with prior research that has found that greater use of *time and task management* is associated with higher life satisfaction (Suldo et al., 2015). These associations were modest, however, meaning that time management and organisation strategies cannot be thought of as a 'silver bullet'. Nevertheless, prior research has found that those who use time management strategies experience higher life satisfaction and lower psychological distress (Aeon et al., 2021). This suggests that teaching time management and organisation strategies during post-16 or earlier

stages of education could have long-term benefits for students. Indeed, an ability to manage time and remain organised is especially important during higher education, when students are expected to assume even greater responsibility for their learning. Thus, teaching A-level students how to manage their time and remain organised could help to equip them for – and reduce the amount of stress that they experience during – higher education.

In Studies 2 and 3, there were also modest negative correlations between the participants' scores for negative emotional symptoms and their use of *cognitive reappraisal* strategies (for example, 'Adopt an optimistic or positive attitude'), as well as *athletic diversions* (for example, 'Exercise') and *social diversions* (for example, 'Have fun with other people to get your mind off the problem'). These findings are again consistent with prior research that has found that these coping strategies are associated with higher life satisfaction (Suldo et al., 2015). These findings are also consistent with the finding that, in Study 1, several of the participants who appeared to be coping well with the demands of studying A-levels reported: taking regular but time-limited and purposeful breaks from their work in an effort to rest, rejuvenate and keep it perspective; exercising regularly (swimming or dancing twice a week, for example); and spending time with, and seeking support from, their friends. This suggests that promoting a repertoire of coping strategies such as these may benefit A-level students' mental health by preventing or relieving the onset or intensification of negative emotional symptoms. There is certainly a lot of evidence to suggest that exercising regularly is associated with better mental health-related outcomes (for example, Mikkelsen et al., 2017). Furthermore, small-scale quasi-experimental research has found that A-level students who opt to

participate in mindfulness-based stress reduction courses – which may facilitate *cognitive reappraisal* and self-determined, volitional behaviour (Weinstein & Ryan, 2011) – experience better mental health- and performance-related outcomes than their peers (Bennet & Dorjee, 2016). However, given the modest strength of the associations observed in Studies 2 and 3, as well as in prior research involving students of a similar age in the USA (Suldo et al., 2015), further research aimed at developing a better understanding of what coping strategies are associated with mental health-related outcomes among A-level students is needed. Generating a better understanding of this is especially important because adolescent coping is an under-researched topic in the UK (Stapley et al., 2020).

It is a limitation of this research that it does not shed more light on what coping strategies are associated with better mental health. One potential explanation for why none of the coping strategies were more than modestly associated with lower scores for negative emotional symptoms could be that most of the participants were experiencing a lot of stress, regardless of how they coped. For example, even participants in Study 1 who appeared to be highly organised and able to keep their work in perspective reported regularly experiencing stress and occasionally feeling overwhelmed. This limitation may also simply reflect the complexity of the relationship between stress, mental health and coping (Compas et al., 2001). What the findings from Studies 2 and 3 do highlight clearly, however, are coping strategies that are associated with experiencing poorer mental health.

7.7.2 Coping with academic demands: warning signals

A-level students who appear to be substantially reducing the amount of effort that they direct towards their work may be experiencing poor or deteriorating mental health. Indeed, in Study 2, there was a moderate positive correlation between the use of the coping strategies *skip sixth form* (for example, 'Skip sixth form to avoid tests that you are not ready for or assignment that you have not completed') and *reduce effort on academic work* (for example, 'Work less or just don't do assignments that are less important') and the participants' scores for negative emotional symptoms. (Unsurprisingly, there was also a moderate positive correlation between these variables.) These findings are consistent with prior research that has found that these coping strategies are associated with lower life satisfaction (Suldo et al., 2015). These findings are also consistent with the well-established finding that adolescents who attempt to cope by avoiding or withdrawing from sources of stress tend to experience poorer mental health (for example, Cicognani, 2011; Epplman et al., 2016; Sieffge-Krenke & Klessinger, 2000). Thus, these findings suggest that A-level students who appear to be decreasing the amount of effort that they direct towards their academic work may be feeling stressed, anxious or hopeless and therefore require targeted, tactful support.

A-level students who appear to be fixating on their workload may also be at a heightened risk of experiencing poor or deteriorating mental health. Indeed, in Study 2, there was a strong positive correlation between the frequency with which the participants attempted to *handle problems*

alone[45] (for example, 'Keep problems to yourself', 'Try to ignore feelings of stress' and 'Try to handle things on your own') and their scores for negative emotional symptoms. This was also the case for *deterioration* (for example, 'Yell, scream, or swear', 'Panic or 'freak out' about the problem without trying to fix it' and 'Keep thinking about work to be done [obsess about workload]'). Furthermore, both of these coping strategies were highly significant predictors of the participants' scores for negative emotional symptoms. These findings are again consistent with prior research that has found that these coping strategies are associated with lower life satisfaction (Suldo et al., 2015), and clearly indicate that A-level students who appear to be irritable, withdrawn and fixated on their workload or performance may need greater support (Kyriacou, 2003). These findings also highlight the tension between the need to promote self-directed, independent learning, on the one hand, and the importance of ensuring that A-level students feel able to seek support from adults without feeling as though they are going to be belittled, judged or made to feel fearful, on the other (for example, Banks & Smyth, 2015; Chamberlain et al., 2011; Finch et al., 2010).

The criticality of attempting to ensure that A-level students feel better able to seek support from others seems particularly important in light of the finding that *attempt to handle problems alone* was the most commonly used coping strategies in Study 2 and the second most commonly used coping strategy in Study 3 (behind *technology diversions*). This indicates that, at present, many A-level students may feel reluctant to seek assistance or support from others. Given that experiencing

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[45] The correlation between the frequency with which the participants used *attempt to handle problems alone* their scores for negative emotional symptoms was on the borderline between moderate and strong.

stress is associated with social withdrawal (daSilva et al., 2021), A-level students who frequently try to manage difficulties alone may subsequently feel more isolated, unsupported and increasingly distressed. Indeed, it is notable that, as well as being a significant predictor of the participants' scores for negative emotional symptoms, there were negative moderate correlations between participants' use of *attempt to handle problems alone* in Study 2 and their use of *seek academic support*, *turn to family* and *talk with classmates and friends*, in addition to a modest negative correlation between this variable and their use of both *cognitive reappraisal* and *social diversions*. Thus, making it possible for A-level students to feel more comfortable or confident seeking support may help to prevent the escalation of difficulties or negative emotional symptoms, as well as an over-reliance on coping strategies such as *attempt to handle problems alone*, *deterioration*, *reduce effort on academic work* and *skip sixth form* – which could inadvertently worsen students' mental health and performance if they are used too often.

7.7.3 Coping with academic demands: seeking support from adults

It is possible that some A-level students may be reluctant to seek assistance or support from adults because they are fearful of being judged by them. Several participants in Study 1, for example, felt unable to speak to their parents or teachers about their experiences of stress because they considered adults to be too far removed from their experiences to be able to understand them. This is concerning because, in Study 2, there was a negative, albeit weak, correlation between the participants' use of *seek academic support* (for example, 'Ask teacher[s] questions about assignments or coursework') and their scores for negative emotional symptoms – and, as highlighted

immediately above, the frequency with which the participants used *attempt to handle problems alone* was a highly significant predictor of their scores for negative emotional symptoms. This finding is also concerning because opportunities for staff to provide support or signposting to students is made more difficult if students are unwilling to seek or accept it, even in sixth forms with well-developed pastoral care teams (Chamberlain et al., 2011; Finch et al., 2010; Powell, 2017).

Some of the participants in Study 1 had first-hand experience of feeling ignored or belittled by adults when they had sought support or clearly expressed that they had been experiencing stress. Several of the participants in Study 2 also commented on how they felt as though their teachers placed them under a lot of pressure to perform well, which may have undermined support-seeking from taking place. Furthermore, a number of participants in Study 3 commented on how they would have liked to have received greater mental health-related support and less pressure from their teachers or parents during sixth form. Thus, creating an atmosphere in which A-level students feel able to turn to adults for help without feeling ashamed or fearful is crucial if context-specific support is to be provided to this sub-group of adolescents. Given that several participants in Studies 1 and 3 reported that they felt more comfortable seeking support from their friends or siblings rather than adults, it seems important to ensure that A-level students are actively involved in informing or leading mental health-related initiatives that are aimed at supporting them (Atkinson et al., 2019; Chamberlain et al., 2011). From a broader perspective, it also seems important to ensure that young people are asked about what kind of support they would like to receive (Atkinson et al., 2019).

7.8 How often do A-level students feel pressured by their academic work?

The findings from Studies 1, 2 and 3 indicate that A-level students tend to feel frequently pressured by their academic work. For the participants in Study 1, this was especially the case during the approach to their mock examinations. For these participants, performing well in their mock examinations was particularly important because they were conscious that their results would be used to inform their predicted grades, which, in turn, determine what higher education courses that they can apply to. This is a new and important finding because, when I began my thesis, I encountered a variety of perspectives about how, if at all, stress-inducing A-level students find their mock examinations. The finding that mock examinations appear to be experienced as stress-inducing and thought of as – to quote Piper – akin to '*the real thing*', partially resolves this debate and highlights the importance of ensuring that students receive support during the approach to their mock as well as actual examinations. This finding may also help to explain why it has previously been found that, when A-level students in Year 12 have been asked to describe their overall experience of sixth form immediately before or after their mock examinations, few use unambiguously positive terms, such as 'enjoyable', 'interesting' or 'rewarding' (Nash et al., 2021). Heightening the importance to providing support to A-level students in Year 12 is the finding that there was a strong, positive correlation between the participants' scores for negative emotional symptoms in summer 2020 and February 2021, because this suggests that the A-level students in Year 13 who are most in need of support are likely to be the same as those who needed it most in

Year 12 – this presents an opportunity to intervene at earlier stages in an effort to prevent difficulties or problems from swelling (as highlighted above).

7.9 What do A-level students worry about most frequently?

Importantly, the findings from Studies 2 and 3 highlight that the vast majority of A-level students worry about their academic performance. Indeed, examinations, grades and accessing higher education were the most commonly cited sources of worry among the participants in both studies. They were cited by the vast majority of the participants and references to them accounted for over half of the words and phrases that the participants used to describe what they worry about most frequently. Furthermore, three quarters of the participants in Study 2 used a word or phrase to describe their *academic work, examinations or grades* as one the things that they worry about most frequently first, indicating that for most A-level students, their performance – and in the implications that it has for their post-18 educational and occupational prospects – may be what concerns them the most often. This finding is line with prior research that has found that, when 16-year-olds are asked to describe what causes them to experience stress, approximately two thirds cite their examinations or schoolwork first (Cairns & Lloyd, 2005). These findings also align with the well-established finding that when adolescents are presented with a list of potential sources of stress, education-related stressors are generally rated most highly (for example, Aniko et al., 2019; de Anda et al., 2000; Gallager & Miller, 1998).

7.10 What causes A-level students to experience stress or anxiety?

The vast majority of participants in Study 2 reported that they feel pressured by their academic work at least 'Sometimes', and approximately three quarters reported that this was the case 'Often' or 'Very often'. Caution is needed when interpreting this findings because the sample was self-selecting, smaller than anticipated and primarily comprised of girls, as well as because the research was conducted during the first six months of the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, this finding lends evidence to support the idea that A-level students experience a lot of pressure – a finding that was supported by students' accounts of their realities in Studies 1, 2 and 3. These findings therefore support of calls for greater attention to be paid to A-level students (Hagell et al., 2012; Nash et al., 2021). Indeed, it is particularly important to support A-level students because the frequency with which they feel stressed or pressured by their academic work is associated with the quality of their mental health. It is notable, for example, that in Study 2 there was a strong positive correlation between the frequency with which the participants' reported 'getting stressed' and their scores for anxiety and stress / tension, and a moderate positive correlation between this variable and the participants' scores for depression. It is also notable that in Study 2 there was a moderate positive correlation between the frequency with which the participants' reported feeling pressured by their academic work and their scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension, and that this was a highly significant predictor of their scores for negative emotional symptoms. These findings provide evidence to support the idea that studying A-levels can be a particularly stressful experience, which may amplify or precipitate symptoms of mental ill-health (Finch et al., 2010;

Nash et al., 2021). These finding also provide evidence to support the idea that students' experiences of education-related stress ought to be acknowledged and taken seriously by adults rather than belittled, dismissed or trivialised (Denscombe, 2000; also see, Banks & Smyth, 2015; Chamberlain et al., 2011; Finch et al., 2010; Putwain, 2009).

Several of the participants in Study 1 described feeling overwhelmed by the demands of studying A-levels to the point that they cried, experienced panic attacks or disturbed sleep. This happened both ahead of examinations and when they felt as though their workload was becoming unmanageable. Despite this, several of these participants felt deterred from seeking help from their parents or teachers because they perceived them to be too far removed from their experiences to see things from their perspectives (as highlighted above). It was also relatively common for the participants in Study 2 to report feeling 'exhausted', 'stressed' and 'overwhelmed' by the demands of studying A-levels. Indeed, approximately two fifths of the participants used the word 'stressful' to describe their experience of sixth form, which is similar to the proportion of A-level students in large(r)-scale, prior research who have used this or a similar term to describe their experience of post-16 education (see Figure 6; Nash et al., 2021). While experiencing a manageable and time-limited amount of stress is both normal and can be beneficial, when it is experienced too intensely or often, especially by those with pre-existing vulnerabilities, it can be harmful (for example, Rodway et al., 2016, 2020; Seery et al., 2010; Schneiderman et al., 2005). The amount of stress that A-levels students experience is, therefore, in need of further research: it must be commensurate

with their ability to cope in order for it to support rather than undermine their development (Rutter, 1985; Kyriacou, 2003).

7.11 A long-term perspective

Creating educational institutions that support students' development and capacities to cope with stress, just like creating equal, inclusive or democratic institutions, is not an end point that can be fully realised, but a valuable goal which it is worth striving for. It is, therefore, unambitious political leaders that shrug their shoulders and proclaim that there is nothing to be done to reduce the number of students who experience stress to an overwhelming or harmful extent, either by ameliorating the demands that are made of them or by providing them with the support that is needed to ensure that whatever demands are made of them are commensurate with their ability to cope. This highlights a tension that exists between the need to promote helpful coping strategies, on the one hand, and the importance of questioning whether the demands that are being made of students are acceptable or excessive, on the other (Malmberg & Urbas, 2019).

The pressure that the participants in Studies 2 and 3 reported receiving from their teachers raises questions about how much pressure is 'baked into' the education system, as the teachers' performance is often judged by that of their students (Ball, 2003, 2021). Indeed, in a survey of 7,466 teachers in England that was conducted by the National Union of Teachers, the vast majority agreed that their experiences of stress impacted how they interact with their students (Hutchings, 2015). At an educational policy-level, it is therefore important to question whether the performance-based, competition-orientated education system that exists in England, which may

have been intensified by the introduction of linear assessments, is causing too much pressure for students and teachers alike (Putwain, 2020). Indeed, the findings from Studies 1 and 2 suggest that introduction of linear assessments may have led A-level students to perceive there to be a need to perform well constantly in an attempt to secure high predicted grades, as well as because their examinations may be looked upon as 'all or nothing'. It is also notable that the participants in Study 1 considered their futures – and the what and who they could envision themselves becoming – to held in the balance of their performance in their A-level examinations. This appeared to be underpinned by a perception that, in order to secure an interesting and well-remunerated job, it is necessary to attend higher education – and that in order to access higher education, A-levels are needed. Thus, creating more legitimate alternatives to studying A-levels – via more or better vocational education options, for example (James Relly, 2021) – could help to reduce the amount of pressure that A-level students experience to perform well.

7.12 What proportion of A-level students experience at least a moderate amount of depression, anxiety or stress?

It is a limitation of this research that it has not been possible to determine what proportion of A-level students experience at least a moderate amount of depression, anxiety or stress / tension due to the self-selecting, smaller than expected and skewed sample obtained in Study 2, as well as because it was conducted during the first six months of the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, the participants' scores for these negative emotional states are likely to have been elevated by the Covid-19 pandemic and reflect girls' experiences more than that of boys, as well as the most

conscientious or stressed students. Consequently, the scores cannot be accepted at 'face value' and must, therefore, be treated as both tentative and provisional. Despite these limitations, it is concerning that approximately half of the participants in Study 2 were experiencing at least a moderate amount of depression and anxiety, and that approximately a third were experiencing at least a moderate amount of stress / tension. Even more concerning is that approximately a third of the participants in Study 2 were experiencing at least a severe amount of depression and two fifths were experiencing at least a severe amount of anxiety. Usually, 13% and 5% of adults would be expected to exceed these cut-offs, respectfully (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995a). It is also concerning that half of the participants in Study 2 reported that, although they had experienced a serious psychological problem in the last year for which they felt as though they needed professional help, only two fifths of this group had sought support. Furthermore, of those who had not sought support, most exceeded the cut-off for experiencing a moderate amount of depression, anxiety or stress / tension.

Unsurprisingly, in light of the above, the participants' scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension in Study 2 were higher than those that have been observed in most prior research involving non-clinical samples (for example, Bennet & Dorjee, 2016; Crawford et al., 2011; Mellor et al., 2015); the exception being that higher scores for stress / tension have been observed in Australian final year high school students shortly before their end-of-year examinations (Einstein et al., 2000). For a more reliable picture of A-level students' experiences of these negative emotional states, however, larger scale research – conducted outside of a pandemic – is needed.

7.12.1 Depression, anxiety and stress / tension by gender and sexuality

In line with prior research that has consistently found that teenage girls typically experience poorer mental health than their male counterparts (for example, Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2021; Vizard et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2020), the female participants in Study 2 had significantly higher scores for anxiety, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms. Furthermore, in line with prior research that has found that girls tend to feel stressed and pressured by their schoolwork more often than boys (Cairns & Lloyd, 2005), the female participants in Study 2 also felt stressed and pressured by their academic work significantly more often than the male participants. While caution is needed when interpreting these findings, these findings nevertheless indicate that female A-level students, in particular, may benefit from greater support (Nash et al., 2021).

It is also notable that those who belonged to sexual minorities had significantly higher scores than those who identified as heterosexual for depression, anxiety and stress / tension, with moderate to large effect sizes between these groups being observed. These findings are consistent with prior research that has found that adolescents who belong to sexual minorities are more likely to experience mental ill-health than their counterparts (Amos et al., 2020; also see, Irish et al., 2019; Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2021), and lends additional evidence to underscore the need for society-wide efforts to provide targeted and appropriate support to this group. This should include raising awareness among parents and teachers, as well as health professionals, about the heightened risk of experiencing mental ill-health that those from sexual minorities face.

7.13 Three words or phrases: what do they reveal about A-level students' mental health?

The number of unambiguously positive words or phrases that the participants in Study 2 used to describe their experience of sixth form was not strongly associated with their scores for depression, anxiety, stress / tension or negative emotional, contrary to expectations (Nash et al., 2016, 2021). It is important to note, however, that the participants in Study 2 whose first choice of word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form was categorised as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* had significantly higher scores for depression, stress / tension and negative emotional symptoms. Caution is needed when interpreting this finding because the number of participants whose first choice of word or phrase to describe their experience of sixth form was categorised as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* was relatively small and did not meet the conventional threshold for null hypothesis tests. Nevertheless, with this caution in mind, these findings offer tentative and provisional evidence to suggest that a sizeable minority of students may find studying A-levels particularly demanding, to the extent that it may exceed their ability to cope and induce symptoms of mental ill-health. Given that it is not possible to conclude this with a high degree of confidence on the basis of this research, however, further research aimed at determining what proportion and type of students find studying A-levels particularly challenging is needed. Such research would make it possible to ensure that support can be targeted towards, and tailored for, those who need it most. It would also allow us to develop a better understanding of what proportion of students find studying A-levels particularly difficult, and therefore begin addressing the question whether they are excessively demanding (as highlight above).

The finding that most A-level students use few unambiguously positive terms to describe their experience of sixth form when they are asked to do so using three words or phrases was not reproduced in Study 2 (Nash et al., 2016, 2021). Instead, the majority of the words and phrases that the participants provided to describe their experience of sixth form were considered to be unambiguously *positive*. What this discrepancy points to is how much anxieties may be heightened during the immediate approach to, or aftermath of, mock as well as actual A-level examinations (as highlighted above). This, in turn, highlights the importance of offering additional support to students during this period, even if – as I have argued in this thesis – support throughout the academic year is needed to lower their baseline level of stress at the beginning of 'exam season'.

7.13.1 Three words or phrases: what are they good for?

I have learnt that asking participants to describe their experiences or perceptions using three words or phrases is a useful tool for prompting anchored and detailed subsequent responses in interviews (Study 1) and questionnaires (Studies 2 and 3), but that it provides data of limited insight in itself. It is also a useful technique for prompting short and constrained responses, which can be useful when exploring sensitive and potentially distressing topics (such as what students worry about most frequently; Studies 2 and 3). It is not a useful for technique, in isolation, for generating in-depth and contextualised understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions. However, future research could use the words and phrases that have been provided by participants in this thesis, as well as prior research (Nash et al., 2021), to inform Q-methodology-based research

focused on identifying, and interpreting, the different perspectives – or 'points of view' – that students have on the experience of studying A-levels (Watts & Stenner, 2005).

7.14 How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected A-level students' experiences?

Students' experiences of studying A-levels were severely disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which twice led to the cancellation of examinations and the requirement for students to learn online and from home[46]. For the participants in Study 2, this was experienced as both a blessing and burden. For some of the participants, the requirement to work online and from home offered them an opportunity to rest, recuperate and 'breathe a sigh of relief', whereas for other participants, it was a source of major confusion, disappointment and concern. This was particularly the case for participants who felt worried about the prospect of 'falling behind', as well as for participants who felt both anxious about their predicted grades – because of the implications that they would have for their post-18 educational and occupational prospects – and 'robbed' of an opportunity to portray their abilities. What both of these perspectives have in common in the sense that studying A-levels is a demanding experience which students feel heavily invested in.

Between summer 2020 and February 2021, the participants' scores for depression, anxiety and stress / tension increased, as did the frequency with which the participants felt stressed or pressured by their academic work. Furthermore, between summer 2020 and February 2021, the

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[46] A-level students were required to work online and from home from March – July 2020 and January – March 2021, unless their parents or guardians were critical workers.

number of unambiguously positive words or phrases that the participants used to describe their experience of sixth form decreased; the participants commented on how the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic had hampered their ability to learn and socialise; and the participants became more likely to cite *academic work, examinations or grades* among the things that worry them most often. On top of this, the participants became significantly more likely to *skip sixth form* and *reduce effort on academic work*, and significantly less likely to engage in *athletic* or *social diversions*, although the latter may be due to it being winter – and England being in lockdown – at the second timepoint. Several participants in Study 3 commented that the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic had made them feel 'more stressed'. Taken together, these findings contribute towards a body of research that suggests that the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic harmed students' learning and well-being, partly because they found it difficult to concentrate on – and engage with – their work at home (Walters et al., 2022). It also seems that students missed spending time with their friends and wished to 'catch up' with them in addition to their work (also see, Ashworth et al., 2021; Demkowicz et al., 2020). While it is possible that some of the trends mentioned above may have been expected as the participants transitioned from Year 12 to 13 and approached their terminal examinations, it is not possible to control for this within the context of this research. What is clear, however, is that close attention should be paid to the experiences of adolescents who lived through the Covid-19 pandemic in an effort to understand how it may have affected their development and what could be done to support them.

In terms of what A-level students would have benefited from during the Covid-19 pandemic, there is one, clear finding that reverberates with other research on students' and teachers' experiences: greater communication and clarity from the UK Government (Ashworth et al., 2021; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Demkowicz et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2021b). While undoubtedly challenging, clearer communication with students, teachers and parents ought to be prioritised by the UK Government in future pandemics.

Chapter 8 – Conclusion

Given that the aim of this research was to develop a better understanding of A-level students'

experiences of post-16 education in an effort to generate knowledge that could be used to inform

a long-term framework aimed providing context-specific support to students, I will conclude this

thesis with ten key recommendations for educational practice:

1. It ought to be acknowledged that the change from studying GCSEs to A-levels is often

   experienced as a challenging transition – or 'big jump' – that requires a notable amount of

   time and effort for students to acclimatise to. During this transition, students ought to be

   taught how to work independently, manage their time, remain organised, maintain a work-

   life balance and seek help when they encounter persistent or protracted difficulties.

2. It ought to be acknowledged that A-level students typically experience a lot of pressure to

   perform well and that, in light of this, additional pressure may undermine or harm both

   their performance and mental health, as well as deter them from seeking supporting from

   adults. This is especially the case if such pressure is predicated on making students feel

   threatened or fearful.

3. Students ought to be listened to and taken seriously when they say that they feel stressed

   because experiences of stress can precipitate, amplify or aggravate symptoms of depression

   and anxiety. Resource permitting, opportunities for students to seek support or participate

   in regular exercise and stress-reduction-based activities should be made available, because

   these may help to relieve or prevent experiences of stress from escalating.

4. It ought to be acknowledged that A-level students often experience apprehension during the approach to mock, as well as actual, examinations. Thus, additional support should be made available to students during such periods. It should also be acknowledged, however, that how well students adjust to studying A-levels during the initial transition from studying GCSEs may influence how stressed or anxious they feel at later stages of their courses.

5. It ought to be acknowledged that A-level students often feel more comfortable speaking to one another rather than adults about their experiences of stress and that they should therefore be actively involved in informing or developing resources aimed at helping them to minimise or manage the experiences of stress that arise from the demands of studying A-levels (for example, Atkinson et al., 2019).

6. It ought to be acknowledged that students who appear to be reducing the amount of effort that they direct towards their work, on the one hand, or fixating on their workload and becoming irritable or aggressive ('stressing out'), on the other hand, may be experiencing poor or deteriorating mental health and therefore need – but be reluctant to seek – greater support. Pastoral care teams and trained teachers should seek to identify and offer support or signposting to such students.

7. It ought to be recognised that no coping strategies act as 'silver bullets', but that a repertoire of the following coping strategies may help to prevent A-level students from experiencing an overwhelming amount of stress:

- *time and task management;*

- *cognitive reappraisal;*

- *seek academic support;*

- *turn to family;*

- *talk with classmates and friends*;

- regular but time-limited *social* and *athletic diversions;*

- and *spirituality.*

8. Students should be encouraged to reflect on their values and long-term goals, as well as supported to make informed, self-endorsed decisions about their post-18 educational and occupational pursuits. Guidance on how to do this is needed.

9. Students ought to be made aware of reputable organisations that offer information and support related to the development of study skills, such as:

- BBC Bitesize (www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/support)

- Crash Course (www.thecrashcourse.com/topic/studyskills)

10. Students ought to be made aware of reputable organisations that offer information and support related to stress and mental health, such as:

- Childline (www.childline.org.uk//info-advice/your-feelings/anxiety-stress-panic)

- Mental Health Foundation (www.mentalhealth.org.uk/)

- Mind (www.mind.org.uk/information-support/for-children-and-young-people)

- Young Minds (www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/coping-with-life/)

As I have repeatedly argued, if A-level students are to be properly supported, adequate resources and training for sixth form staff who are tasked with supporting them is paramount, as is critical

reflection on the level of curriculum continuity between GCSEs and A-levels and the impact that linear assessments are having on the amount of pressure that students experience. As these have been discussed already, however, I will draw the line Here.

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Appendix

1. Interview questionnaire and guide (Study 1)

Please fill out as much of this questionnaire as possible. All questions are optional.

Gender:	
Age:	
Year of sixth form:	

Please list three words or phrases that describe your experience of sixth form:

1.	
2.	
3.	

Please list three words or phrases that describe your experience of Year 11 in comparison to Year 12:

1.	
2.	
3.	

Please list each of the A Level subjects that you are studying, as well as your predicted grade (if known):

Subject	**Predicted grade (if known)**

Please fill out as much of this questionnaire as possible. All questions are optional.

Over the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by the following problems?

1. Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge

Not at all **|** Several days **|** More than half of the days **|** Nearly every day

2. Not being able to stop or control worrying

Not at all **|** Several days **|** More than half of the days **|** Nearly every day

3. Worrying too much about different things

Not at all **|** Several days **|** More than half of the days **|** Nearly every day

4. Trouble relaxing

Not at all **|** Several days **|** More than half of the days **|** Nearly every day

5. Being so restless that it is hard to sit still

Not at all **|** Several days **|** More than half of the days **|** Nearly every day

6. Becoming easily annoyed or irritable

Not at all **|** Several days **|** More than half of the days **|** Nearly every day

7. Feeling afraid as though something awful might happen

Not at all **|** Several days **|** More than half of the days **|** Nearly every day

<div align="center">**Interview Guide**</div>

Choices, expectations and motivations

1. What made you decide to study A-levels in sixth form?

   - What did you expect to gain from studying A-levels in sixth form?

     Prompt: Did you expect to gain anything from an academic or social perspective?

   - Did anyone encourage you to study A-levels in sixth form?

     Prompt: How about teachers, parents or friends?

2. How did you decide what A-level subjects to study?

   - Had you studied these subjects before entering sixth form?

   - Do you enjoy studying these subjects?

Words and phrases used to describe sixth form

Earlier, I asked you to complete a brief questionnaire, on which you were asked to identify a selection of words or phrases to describe your experiences of sixth form. If it's OK with you, I'd like to ask you about those now.

3. Could you tell me why you've chosen the terms that you have done to describe your experience of sixth dorm?

4. Could you tell me why you've chosen the terms that you have done to describe your experience of Year 11 in comparison to sixth form?

Imaginary vignettes

I'm going to describe an imaginary sixth form student to you now, and would like you to think about how they may feel, think and behave in their situation.

5. Jessica is a student who is preparing for her A-level examinations. Her parents have said that they'll be really proud of her if she performs well. With her A-level examinations approaching, how do you think Jessica may feel, think or behave?

6. James is also a student who preparing for A-level examinations. He's decided to continue playing football during this period. What do you think of this decision?

Stress, anxiety, coping and support

If it's OK with you, I'd like to ask you some questions about any experiences of stress or anxiety that you may have had during sixth form.

7. In your own words, what do you understand by the terms 'stress' and 'anxiety'?

Put simply, stress can be defined as the feeling of *pressure* that people experience when they are **trying to get things done**, whereas anxiety can be defined as the feeling of *fear* that people experience when they're **worried about something**.

8. Have you ever experienced stress or anxiety during sixth form?

- What causes you to experience stress or anxiety during sixth form?

- If you feel comfortable doing so, could you describe a time when you've felt stressed or anxious during sixth form?

- How, if at all, has experiencing stress or anxiety during sixth form impacted your life?

  Prompt: Has it impacted your personal life or ability to learn?

9. When you're feeling stressed or anxious during sixth form, how do you cope?

- Who, if anyone, do you tell when you're feeling stressed or anxious during sixth form?

- Is there anything that you find particularly helpful when you're feeling stressed or anxious during sixth form?

  Prompt: Do you participate in a sport, listen to music or spend time with friends or family?

10. Are there people in sixth form who you can turn to for support?

- What kind of support do they offer?

- Do you feel comfortable turning to them for support?

  Conclusion

We're now approaching the end of the interview. Is there anything more that you'd like to share in relation to what we've been talking about?

Note to self: ease the interview to a close, offer the participant signposting and thank them for their participation in this research.

2. Initial data familiarisation notes (Study 1; 11th November 2019)

- Sixth form (SF) is enjoyable

    o Students enjoy focusing on subjects that they are genuinely interested in

    o Students enjoy exercising greater control over what they concentrate on

    o Students enjoy spending time with their friends

- SF is also substantially harder than secondary school

    o There is more content to learn; an onus on students to organise their time well; and a need to think more critically

    o It is no longer possible to 'coast', 'rely on natural intelligence' or be 'spoon fed' formulaic and predictable material

    o The above makes learning and examinations much harder than previously experienced or expected

- SF is stressful

    o Mock examinations, in particular, are cited as a course of stress, predominantly because they are used to calculate students' predicted grades and therefore pose major implications for students' post-SF opportunities

    o Fear appeals from teachers were not cited. Instead, the main sources of pressure stemmed from students' own aspirations and expectations of themselves.

    o In some cases, students' experienced pressure from their parents to perform well

- Some students cope better with SF than others

- Adjusting to the academic and organisational demands of SF, cited above, is a source of stress, especially for those who:

    - a) have chosen their A Level subjects for predominantly extrinsic reasons;

    - b) do not adjust well to the need to be organised and keep SF in perspective;

    - and c) struggle to perform at the standard at which they would like to

- Students who are coping well are well organised, able to keep SF in perspective and have chosen their subjects for predominantly intrinsic reasons

- Such students proactively plan how they are going to spend their time (including free periods), and seek to protect time in which to relax, rejuvenate and keep their SF-related challenges in perspective

- Those students who fail to do the above find their work 'piling up', struggle to keep SF in perspective and begin to feel increasingly overwhelmed

- Students prefer to turn to their friends for support rather than their teachers or parents

    - Students perceive other students to be better equipped to understand their perspective and offer emotional support, something that students consider to be more important than practical advice

    - Students do not want to be seen in a 'different light' by their teachers and are sometimes afraid that both their teachers and parents will judge them or not be able to help

- Students are told by staff to remain organised, but are not shown how to do so

3. Thematic table (Study 1)

Theme 1: *'I didn't really see another path': an expected and unquestioned route*

- 'I chose what I liked' (Intrinsic motivation)

- 'I didn't see another path' (Unquestioned post-16 educational route)

- 'I do wanna go to uni' (Facilitate progression to higher education)

- 'it was just comfortable' (Comfort, convenience and familiarity)

- 'it's expected of me' (Others' expectations)

- 'the Government doesn't allow me to leave' (Perceived legal obligation)

- 'there's more opportunities' (Enhance post-18 educational and occupational prospects)

Theme 2: *'a good environment to learn': an enriching opportunity*

- 'all sorts of events' (Fun activities)

- 'I do enjoy it' (Enjoyable)

- 'I have good friendships' (Sociable)

- 'it's not like you're stressing out for nothing' (Rewarding)

- 'taking the next level' (Moving on or forward)

- 'very supportive' (Supportive or passionate teachers)

Theme 3: *'a completely different ballgame': a league of its own*

- 'a big jump' (Harder than GCSEs)

- 'a lot of content' (Quantity of content)

- 'a lot of things to do' (Hectic)

- 'I got so overwhelmed' (Overwhelmed)

- 'I just can't focus' (Counterproductive amount of stress)

- 'a lot more independent' (Responsibility)

- 'stress from teachers' (Pressure from teachers)

- 'this determines your future' (Self-imposed pressure)

- 'parents and expectations' (Pressure from parents)

- 'my head was going to explode' (Examination-related stress)

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

- 'it's not all about grades' (Keep work in perspective)

- 'not how' (Lack of advice on how to remain organised)

- 'plans make things better' (Time management and organisation)

- 'take your mind of everything' (Time-limited breaks)

- 'try to address the problem' (Return to problems feeling refreshed)

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

- 'I don't tell parents or teachers' (Refrain from speaking to adults)

- 'I just don't want anyone acting differently' (Self-conscious)

- 'I'll talk to my friends' (Speak to friends or siblings)

- 'neither of them help' (Adults can be unhelpful)

- 'she advised me to do exercise or something' (Stress management advice)

4. Theme definitions (Study 1)

Theme 1: '*I didn't really see another path': an expected and unquestioned route*: for most of the participants, remaining in education to study A-levels was an '*expected*', unquestioned and taken for granted aspect of their educational trajectories which was justified by a perception that it would facilitate their access to higher education and, later, a desirable job. Several of the participants already knew what careers or higher education courses they wanted to pursue prior to entering post-16 education, and therefore chose to study A-levels that would facilitate their access to these. Several participants also cited (implicit and explicit) parental or societal expectations of them to enter higher education which contributed towards the foreclosure of them considering alternative post-16 educational routes largely because studying A-levels was perceived to be the '*easiest*' or most '*natural*' route to it. Studying A-levels is, therefore, perceived to be a critical turning point, in which students have a lot to gain or lose according to their academic performance: from the perspective of their future prospects, students 'have it all to play for'.

Theme 2: '*a good environment to learn': an enriching opportunity*: for most of the participants, studying A-levels was in several respects a socially and academically enriching experience. From a social

perspective, the participants enjoyed establishing and maintaining friendships, especially with students with whom they had shared interests. From an academic perspective, most of the participants enjoyed studying their chosen subjects in greater depth (even if they found them extremely difficult) and valued the opportunity to study subjects that would help them to pursue an '*exciting*' educational or occupational route that was of interest to them. Combined, these aspects of sixth form made '*a good environment to learn*', develop and grow in.

Theme 3: *'a completely different ballgame': a league of its own*: the participants found studying A-levels notably more difficult than studying GCSEs due to the substantially increased quantity and complexity of the content, and the need for far greater self-directed learning, time management and organisation. Therefore, when the externally imposed demands that studying A-levels presents were combined with the internally imposed pressure that the participants placed on themselves to perform well in an effort to enhance their educational and occupational prospects, studying A-levels became an inescapably stress-inducing and sometimes overwhelming experience. Studying A-levels was experienced as most stressful during the approach to class tests and mock examinations because of the implications that the participants' results would have for their predicted grades, as well as when participants felt as though their work was becoming unmanageable. Studying A-levels can, therefore, constitute a significant source of stress for students.

Theme 4: *'having plans makes things better': an anchor in strong currents*: in order for the participants to avoid becoming overwhelmed by the stress-inducing aspects of studying A-levels (as highlighted in Theme 3), it was important for them to be able to draw on a well-developed repertoire of proactive time management and organisation strategies. This is particularly important when studying A-levels because students have 'free' periods and are therefore far more responsible for partitioning their (finite amounts of) time and energy effectively. Participants who proactively managed their time and remained organised used planners and frequently made (and revised) to-do lists, which helped them to: '*keep up*'; afford themselves permission to relax; keep their work in perspective; and return to challenges or difficulties feeling re-energised. All of the participants expressed an appreciation of the importance of proactively managing their time and remaining organised but were not equally adept at doing so.

Theme 5: *'I don't think they'd get it': you have to be there to understand*: although most of the participants described their parents and teachers as supportive, several explicitly stated that they did not feel comfortable speaking to adults about their experiences of sixth form-related stress (as highlighted in Theme 3). This is because they thought that adults would not be able to understand how they were feeling or be in a position to relate to them because, unlike their friends or older siblings (who were studying or had studied A-levels), they were not '*on the same page*' or '*going through the same thing*'. Consequently, such participants preferred to turn to their

friends or older siblings for emotional support because they thought that they would be listened to by them rather than judged, patronised or cajoled; turning to their friends or older siblings for emotional support was therefore an important palliative coping technique. The perceived communicative barrier between the participants and adults also prevented potential opportunities for pastoral care or sign-posting to be realised.

5. Coding scheme (participants' worries; Studies 2 and 3)

Category 1: academic work, examinations or grades: reference to academic workload (for example, '*homework*' or '*deadlines*'), examinations, grades or accessing higher education.

Category 2: career or future: reference to career, future or jobs.

Category 3: family or friends: reference to family, friends or social life.

Category 4: finances: reference to money or financial concerns. This does not include securing a desirable job in the future (see Category 2).

Category 5: health or well-being: reference to mental or physical health or well-being.

Category 6: 'what others think of me': reference to other peoples' perceptions.

Category 7: miscellaneous: reference to concerns that do not fit into the categories above. For example, '*buses*', '*politics*', sport or the Covid-19 pandemic. Note: consider creating an additional category if a source of concern that does not fit into the above categories is mentioned by at least 10% of the participants.

6. Coding scheme (Participants' experience of sixth form; Studies 2 and 3)

Category 1: *challenging:*

This category contains all of the terms that are assigned the sub-categories 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3; **no** terms are assigned directly to this category.

Sub-category 1.1: *busy:*

Reference to sixth form being busy.

Sub-category 1.2: *demanding, difficult or hard:*

Reference to sixth form or studying A-levels being challenging, demanding, difficult or harder than secondary school or studying GCSEs.

Sub-category 1.3: *Intense, overwhelming or stressful:*

Reference to sixth form or studying A-levels being intense, stress-inducing, overwhelming or harmful to mental health.

Category 2: *positive:*

This category contains all of the terms that are assigned the sub-categories 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5; **no** terms are assigned directly to this category.

Sub-category 2.1: *autonomy, freedom or independence:*

Reference to sixth form facilitating greater autonomy, freedom or independence in an appreciative tone (for example, '*freeing*', '*liberating*' or '*less restricted*').

Sub-category 2.2: *encouraging, helpful or supportive:*

Reference to peers, teachers or other sixth form staff being encouraging, motivating, helpful or

supportive.

Sub-category 2.3: *engaging, interesting or stimulating:*

Reference to studying A-levels being engaging, interesting, rewarding or stimulating.

Sub-category 2.4: *enjoyable, exciting or fun:*

Reference to sixth form being enjoyable, exciting, fun or 'good' **without** specifying what aspect

of it they are referring to.

Sub-category 2.5: *friendly, inclusive or welcoming:*

Reference to sixth form being a friendly, inclusive or socially welcoming environment.

Category 3: *Miscellaneous:*

This category contains all of the terms that are assigned the sub-categories 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4;

no terms are assigned directly to this category.

Category 3.1: *boring, disappointing or monotonous:*

Reference to sixth form / studying A-levels being uninteresting or unstimulating.

Category 3.2: *disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic:*

Reference to the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Category 3.3: *lonely:*

Reference to feeling lonely in sixth form.

Category 3.3: *neutral:*

No strong feeling expressed (for example, '*fair*', '*fine*' or '*neutral*').

7. Thematic table (Study2a)

Theme 1: *'A-levels are just stressful': hold on tight*

Sub-theme 1.1: *'a massive step up': on another level*

- 'work is a massive step up' (Harder than GCSEs)

- 'a lot more work' (Scale of workload)

- 'the work is very challenging in comparison to GCSEs' (Complexity of content)

- 'the work is hard and non-stop' (Pace of workload)

- 'it's been tough and very hard work' (Difficult)

- 'it takes a lot out of you every day' (Draining)

- 'often feels really overwhelming' (Overwhelming)

Sub-theme 1.2: *'a lot going on': pulled in different directions*

- 'there's always lots to do' (Multiple demands)

- 'a lot of really important decisions in a short space of time' (Planning for the future)

- 'it can become a bit hectic at times' (Hectic)

Sub-theme 1.3: *'worry of not doing well': under pressure*

- 'anything can happen and as there is only two years' (Uncertainty)

- 'pressure because of post-18 plans' (High-stakes)

- 'emotionally draining' (Quitting is not an option)

- 'applies this extreme pressure' (Pressure from adults)

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Sub-theme 1.4: *'less enjoyable': stuck inside*

- 'during this pandemic, it has been stressful' (Stressful during the Covid-19 pandemic)

- 'before the pandemic' (Better before the Covid-19 pandemic)

Theme 2: *'overall positive experience': the days of our lives*

Theme 2.1: *'a lot more independent': more grown up*

- 'more grown up' (Greater independence)

- 'you get so much more freedom' (Autonomy)

- 'it can be helpful' (Opportunity for development)

- 'get ready for study in university' (Preparation for higher education)

Sub-theme 2.2: *'extremely rewarding': interesting, very interesting*

- 'I thoroughly enjoy my subjects' (Enjoyable)

- 'work is challenging which I think is positive' (Challenging)

Sub-theme 2.3: *'great community and staff': the good place*

- 'a great network of friends' (Friendship network)

- 'the staff work so hard for us' (Supportive teachers)

- 'I enjoy being part of the school community' (Sense of community)

- 'it's helped me be a more open and social person' (Social competence / confidence)

8. Thematic table (Study 2b)

Theme 1: *'happy I can take a break': a weight off the shoulders*

- 'a break from stress' (Respite)

- 'I feel so relieved' (Relief)

- 'catch up on my sleep' (Better quality sleep)

- 'I can create my own schedule' (Greater flexibility)

- 'I have managed to catch up on a lot of revision' (Opportunity to 'catch up')

- 'getting more work done' (Greater productivity)

- 'I have always preferred learning on my own' (Enjoy being or learning alone)

- 'my teachers have all been extremely supportive' (Supported by teachers)

Theme 2: *'it has stressed me out a lot': an unwelcome surprise*

- 'I feel frustrated' (Sad, frustrated or upset)

- 'I couldn't see my friends' (Isolated from friends)

- 'the uncertainty is horrifying' (Anxious)

- 'worried that I'll be behind' (Concerned about 'falling behind')

- 'don't know if the work I'm doing at home is effective' (Self-conscious)

- 'overview of each topic' (Review work covered during online learning)

- 'my purpose has been taken from me' (Loss of purpose)

- 'I don't have the chance to prove myself' (Robbed of an opportunity)

- 'extra clarity' (Desire for greater clarity)

- 'reduced exam specification' (Desire for evaluative adjustment)