

## Mental distress during adolescence and participation in higher education

**Background/context.** Recent evidence indicates that adolescents experiencing mental distress might be more likely to go on to attend university than those with no symptoms of distress (Lewis et al., 2021). One explanation for this is that future university students might experience greater academic pressures than their peers, which results in heightened mental distress (Lewis et al., 2021; Luthar et al., 2020). However, the mechanisms behind such pressures are unclear.

**The initiative/practice.** In this study, we anticipated that mental distress (consisting of anxiety/depressive symptoms, social dysfunction, and loss of confidence) experienced by future university students might be specifically due to the high-stakes qualifications needed for university admission. Drawing on social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), we theorised that future university students might make upward social comparisons with peers who they anticipate will perform better than them, and that this causes mental distress.

**Methods of evaluative data collection and analysis.** We conducted logistic regression analyses of longitudinal panel survey data from a population-representative cohort of approximately 8000 young people.

**Evidence of outcomes and effectiveness.** Our analyses confirmed that high-stakes qualifications appeared to be the underlying mechanism causing mental distress. Adolescents with greater mental distress were more likely to attend university in general, as well as attend a more academically selective university. Mental distress symptoms were also greater for those who planned to apply for university, but did not actually attend. By age 25, symptoms were, on the most part, no longer elevated for those who attended, or had planned to attend, university. We argue for a need to target interventions at times when adolescents undertake high-stakes qualifications at school and university.

### References.

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