



Improving university mental health:

an overview of the current cultural implications of finance in higher education, and its effects on the wellbeing and mental health struggles of university staff and students.

Jane Morris

The take home message....

1. What are the main sources of financial stress at universities and colleges?
2. Who is most affected and what are the consequences of financial stress?
3. What is the interaction between finance and mental health and how does it work?
4. Can we offer any improvements to finance, either in the current situation or in the future?
5. What would these involve?



A brief diversion – the 3 'f's

- Finance
- Forensic
- Family & friends



What are the main sources of financial stress at universities and colleges?

Where you live and/or study	Maximum Maintenance Loan
Living with your parents/carers	£8,400
Living away from home, studying outside London	£9,978
Living away from home, studying in London	£13,022
Living and studying abroad	£11,427

- ‘Commodification of higher education’ financial imagery - ‘investment’, ‘human capital’, ‘value for money’, ‘entitlement’ and ‘market’ Students and parents as clients who purchase academic products rather than scholars or apprentice academics. ‘more American’? A profound change in UK attitudes, rather than simply the ways things have always been.
- Students ‘living the lovely life’ vs those who rely on loans and part time jobs ‘hard working but anxious, demanding and resentful.’ - Counsellor
- Financial hardship and anxiety resulting from lower pay and more temporary contracts for academic, teaching and support staff – a pervasive climate of financial anxiety.
- A group of staff and students suggested to me that just as students are currently invited to declare health conditions on acceptance of a university place, they might also be invited to declare financial vulnerability and have the right to financial mentoring. Applicants could be supported to complete a financial balance sheet to assess whether they would benefit from such mentoring.

Financial changes for UK students over 40 years

- Early 80s - still a minimum grant for all, but extra depended on declared parental income, no legal obligation on parents to make up the sum.
- 1990 Student Loan Company (SLC) founded to provide low interest loans to students to help make up living costs.
- 1998 Teaching Higher Education Act introduced student contribution £1,000 a year towards tuition. Maintenance grants replaced by repayable student loans, student contribution to tuition fees has gradually increased.
- Since 2016 postgraduate students also entitled to student loans.
- Scotland and Wales pay for student tuition, but maintenance grants replaced by loans across the UK.
- Private loans - sometimes a University acts as a financial intermediary. Others are 'direct to consumer' - these involve an 'origination fee' and high, variable interest rates rather than government loan fixed rates. Where student or family has excellent credit rating, repayment terms significantly better than where credit is poor.
- Students from poor backgrounds suffer disproportionately from the common delays in accessing government loans, poorer universities less able to draw on their own wealth to provide bursaries and scholarships.

Marketing.....

The UCAS website

'Marketing is a crucial part of recruitment for both universities and colleges, while an increasing number of businesses are keen to reach the lucrative student demographic.'

'That's where we can help. Through our subsidiary UCAS Media, we're able to offer our members and commercial partners a suite of marketing and creative services designed to reach every student audience – via social media, email marketing, print media, online advertising and much more.'

What are the risks and benefits for students of being characterised as a *'lucrative demographic'* ?

Edward Lucas, essay for The Times (2019)

'western cultural institutions are encouraged to be entrepreneurial – competing for customers, sponsors and partners – at home and overseas. Little stops them doing deals with authoritarian states.' China, Saudi, Russia, Iran, Turkey are examples of states donating money as a means to influence course content and research, as well as *'spying on troublesome students'*.



Family attitudes

- Financial confidence or anxiety reflects financial situation and attitudes of families and school.
- Being the first in a family to attend university, and having to take up paid work while studying both identified as risk factors for poor mental health among students (Student Minds, 2019).
- Some cultures teach attitudes to money and ‘usury’ that make a loan system very uncomfortable.
- ‘First generation’ students and those from BAME backgrounds often meet beliefs that ‘investing’ a large amount of money in higher education is not safe. They and their family may be unfamiliar with how UK student financing works.
- Could be helpful to set up meetings with university finance staff, parents and school staff . Reassure the adults around the normality of incurring managed debt. Parents unable to financially support their children still contribute by helping them manage and understand their finances.



Finance and imposter syndrome

‘I was sold a dream of upward mobility. But from cash to culture, it’s clear my working-class background still counts against me.....my first year has exposed the significant wealth disparities between me and other students. ...My privileged counterparts will be able to explore opportunities in the form of unpaid internships; I need a career path that provides monetary stability...One [friend] told me how she dreamed of pursuing a career in acting, but soon realised that the financial insecurity of that industry means that it won’t be an option...I’ve learned that our class shapes our economic, cultural and social capital, and much of our potential, from birth. This is something a Cambridge degree cannot erase.’

Daniella Adeluwoye

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/sep/23/cambridge-university-upward-mobility-working-class-background>

Veejay



Veejay was the oldest son in a large, loving and ambitious Asian family. Everyone worked long hours in the family business to ensure he could attend a prestigious university, but it was understood that he would study repay the family investment by financing the fees and living costs of his younger siblings. He joked that his youngest sister should pay him back by financing his early retirement. In practice both knew that she was expected to 'pay' by caring for their parents in old age.

The family mobilised all possible resource, even including re-mortgaging the family home. They expected him to match their sacrifice by taking on work as a nursing assistant.

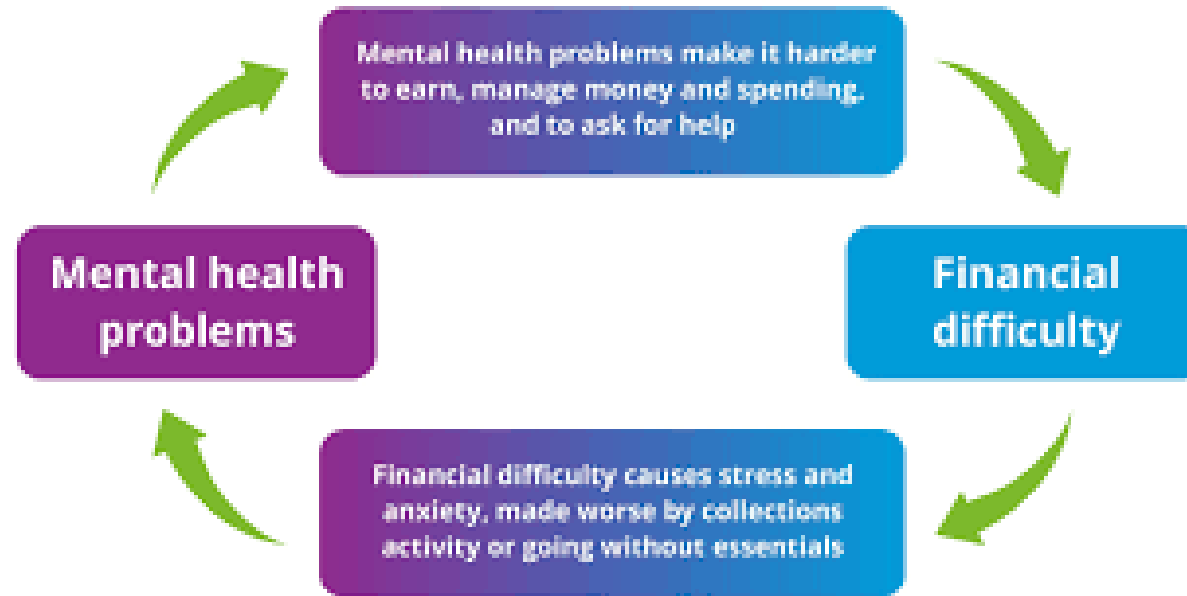
This work was exhausting and he did not maintain his position as an academic high flyer, but found the skills he gained contributed to clinical confidence later in the course. Weekend shifts limited the amount of expensive socialising he could do.

Who is affected by financial stress? What are the consequences?



- Just under two thirds of students worry about their finances all the time or very often, (NUS, 2016)
- Sources of income to ease the financial pressure include night work, medical trials and sex work.
- 34 % students reported selling their personal belongings
- 8% said that they would consider gambling

What is the interaction between finance and mental health? Vicious circles -



Students with high credit card debts not only more likely to feel stressed but also to engage in more physical altercations, binge drinking, substance misuse and being overweight 'Stress proliferation' occurs, with each stressor increasing the development of others. (Nelson et al, 2008)

Debt Stress



- 41.7% students with a mental health disorder reported being in debt, compared with only 17.5% without. (UK meta-analysis Richardson, 2013)
- Looking at it the other way round, 15.5% of students who had debts had a mental health disorder – almost double the 8.9% of those not in debt.
- Statistically significant relationship between debt and depression, suicide completion or attempt, problem drinking, drug dependence, neurotic disorders and psychotic disorders
- Richardson (2015b) showed that financial difficulties in students increased the risk of an eating disorder.
- Relationship between finances and mental health may be attributed to ***amount of stress about debt*** rather than actual debt (Richardson, 2017).
- Aberdeen medical students' healthy functioning is related to their perceptions of their own levels of debt rather than level of debt per se Ross (2006)

Longitudinal studies using validated measures



'Greater financial difficulties predicted greater depression and stress cross-sectionally, and also predicted poorer anxiety, global mental health and alcohol dependence over time.'

Depression worsened over time for those who had considered abandoning studies or not coming to university for financial reasons, and there were effects for how students viewed their student loan.

Anxiety and alcohol dependence also predicted worsening financial situation suggesting a bi-directional relationship.'

(Richardson 2017)

Financial worries – and lack of ‘belonging’ - result in poorer grades.

- Reid et al (2020) attempted to tease out exactly how financial worries result in poorer grades, controlling for background variables
- Financial concern was mediated by changes in ‘stress’ and ‘sense of belonging’ .
- Crucial role of healthy ‘attachments’ in learning well-known in schools but not always explicit in adult education.
- Sense of belonging has long driven lucrative alumni loyalties to old schools and universities.
- For many students and staff, this sense of belonging is not important not only a route to high grades and financial donations, but is the most rewarding aspect of university life.





Financial situation of staff and effects on university mental health

- Media and research focus on relationships between pay and ‘satisfaction’, rather than mental health
- University staff taking industrial action over pay now lower in real terms, pay offers below inflation.
- Healthy sign of anger rather than mental ill health?
- Pay alone does not tell us the whole story. No evidence yet on effects of industrial action on the mental health of either staff or wider University well-being. Disruption to student teaching/exams, and public conflict between staff and management unlikely to be benign.

Conditions that make people – students and staff - particularly vulnerable to financial problems

- **Bipolar affective disorder** – in the manic or hypomanic phase disinhibited spending and rash financial projects may occur
- **ADHD** – difficulty organising and remaining organised. Often given help for studying, remember finance too.
- **‘Obsessive parsimoniousness’** – found in autistic spectrum conditions, OCD, anorexia nervosa and other anxiety disorders. The person obsessively fears lack of financial security, has trouble spending, may open many bank accounts and store money.
- **Depressive disorders** – sufferer may be unable to find the energy to budget or organise
- **Substance misuse** problems – including alcohol. Eating disorders involving bingeing may also be costly
- **Gaming and gambling** problems



Ben

Ben was the only pupil from his school to attend university. He was thrilled to meet people who shared his interests but embarrassed to find how much more money the others had. He avoided socialising for fear of having to get in expensive 'rounds'.

One of his hall mates offered to sell him all the course set books second hand, but he had no idea whether she was taking advantage of his gullibility. He decided to do without books altogether and study in the library.

His extreme parsimony blighted much of his time in University, until a girlfriend he met in his final year, who came from a similar background, helped him put his concerns into perspective and to seek help for an obsessional condition.

Meeting the extra costs of a mental disorder at university: DSA



- Government funded allowance to ensure UK students with longer term health condition or 'disability' not disadvantaged in studies. May be accessed when student discloses mental health disability to the University, or student may apply later on.
- Not a loan and not financially means tested. Amount received depends on individual need.
- Formal specific psychiatric diagnosis not required, but student must provide evidence of health condition, such as GP's or Psychiatrist's letter. Dual or multiple diagnosis taken into account in deciding the level of allowance needed.
- Graduate students as well as undergraduates are eligible, if course is longer than 12 months. Distance learning courses are included.
- International Students may not be formally eligible, but some Universities can help them to access equivalent funding.
- Often DSA funds 1:1 support from a specialist Mental Health Mentor. Specialist mental health mentoring provides regular, flexible long term input from a qualified mental health professional, usually from the same individual over the course.

Maladaptive financial coping strategies

- Some students fall victim to damaging strategies that may appear at first to provide solutions, but end up compounding the financial situation and bringing devastating troubles on top.
- Some students become sex workers. Often portrayed in media as choice of glamorous young women to exploit youth and beauty for luxurious life with rich men. Reality often very different. Vulnerable students can be sexually exploited by powerful individuals who take most of their earnings and intimidate them.
- Students working as drug dealers also vulnerable to disease and exploitation by criminal networks. Sex and drug industries often linked.
- These practices impact on mental health of the individuals obtaining income this way. Also affect reputation and mental health climate of the universities in which they operate.

Finance and forensic considerations

Students *'who had considered abandoning study for financial reasons had poorer mental health, social functioning, vitality and physical health and were also heavier smokers'*. Among students who were parents of young children 79% reported difficulty paying family bills. (Roberts, 2000)

These authors were among the first to demonstrate that financial stress can bring UK students into contact with a criminal world -

'being in debt was associated with knowing people involved in prostitution, crime or drug dealing to help support themselves financially.'

Gambling & gaming

Gambling and gaming may constitute an addictive mental disorder in themselves, but also affect mental health through financial consequences.

Pathological gambling associated with increased risk of having a criminal record, generally to obtain funds to continue gambling (Blascynski et al 1996).

Treatment rarely sought until a major crisis occurs - either financial, personal, criminal conviction or work failure.

90% of those affected started excessive gambling in their teens, so students with gambling problems likely to already be established in the habit.

For many students, gaming, rather than explicit gambling seems like an attractive way to make money, also acts as a way to get a 'high' like a drug.

in the 'desperation phase' of pathological gambling there is intense mental disorder and social alienation. Other addictive behaviours often accompany this self-destructive picture. Young gamblers have significantly raised levels and drug misuse. Lynch (2004)

YGAM survey : 47% of students gambled over last 12 months to improve finances. Of these:

- 16% are moderate risk or problem gamblers.
- 59% said they were always worrying about their financial situation
- 16% had gambled more than they could afford.
- students' academic prowess and mental health as well as finance were adversely affected.

Financial savvy - an underestimated aspect of mental resilience

- American Pharmacy students' stress levels associated with 'fear of debt' rather than actual debt levels. Students with higher levels of 'contemplation and knowledge' about financial matters enjoyed lower stress and experienced greater confidence that they would manage to keep debt low and pay it off rapidly. Such students tended to keep debts lower, contributing to a 'virtuous cycle' of high competence, high confidence and lower stress.

Chisholm-Burnal (2017), similar to the findings of Ross in the UK

- Increased financial knowledge is associated with lower student debt.

Novilitis (2006)

Another 'f' - futures

Finance after graduation

Many graduates describe loan repayment problems.

It is not the SLC but the tax man who calculates and collects repayments.

When overpayment has occurred, the money should be returned with interest, but bureaucratic delays are reported.

The system is complex, with terms repeatedly changing depending on when the loan was taken out, and for some individuals the complications of having to repay several different loans.

US study analysed 13-years of data from nearly 9,000 adults, and found student loan debt correlated with lower levels of psychological wellbeing for 25- to 31-year-olds, even after controlling for other factors . *'People seem to be putting off marriage or home ownership, choosing jobs in high-paying instead of meaningful careers.'* Financial obstacles to child-bearing might be particularly daunting for women graduates facing the significant decline in fertility over the period of repaying debts.

Walsemann et al (2015)

Can we offer any improvements?

- Be mindful of the resource model for our universities and other valued institutions
- Pay the workers, and provide them with fair contracts and conditions
- Build in financing structures for study that are fair and reliable, and don't rely too much on family fortunes
- Teach financial confidence explicitly to both students and families while still at school
- Repeat this teaching around the times of transition
- Publicise financial resources and supports, normalise these
- Consider finance when assessing mental health
- Consider mental health when supporting finance



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The take home message –

do you have clearer ideas, or wider perspectives, as a result of our thinking together?