Exploring the Experience of Anxiety Among Final Year Students at University: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

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Keywords

anxiety, university, transition, support, qualitative research methodology, thematic analysis

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Keywords: anxiety, university, transition, support, qualitative research methodology, thematic analysis

Introduction

Anxiety is a phenomenon which can occur often throughout one's daily life (e.g., worrying about picking the right birthday card, delivering a presentation which one feels unprepared for, etc.). Rachman (2004) defined anxiety as "the tense, unsettling anticipation of a threatening but vague event; a feeling of uneasy suspense" (p. 3). Anxiety is also considered to entail a "sense of uncontrollability focused on the possibility of future threat, danger, or other potentially negative events" (Suárez et al., 2009, p. 153). Therefore, one main source of anxiety for people is when they make a major life transition (e.g., starting a new university course).

Anxiety Among University Students

Research shows there is a high prevalence of anxiety within undergraduate student populations (e.g., Mayer et al., 2016). This may be due, in part, to the immensity of the transition associated with going to university (Hughes & Smail, 2014). For example, the transition to university typically involves navigating a significantly less familiar learning environment. Moreover, such transitions often include a change in locality, a change in social networks, a change of subject focus and depth, and demands for increased independence, personal responsibility, and autonomous learning (e.g., Holliman et al., 2020; Perry 2003). Students who are less able to adapt are more likely to experience higher distress and lower psychological wellbeing (Holliman et al., 2021). Other studies have shown the transition to university can lead to unpleasant experiences such as homesickness, isolation, sleep disturbance, distress, lower self-esteem, and may even result in more clinical discomfort, such as anxiety or depression (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013; Hughes & Smail, 2014; Thurber & Walton, 2012). It should be noted, however, that most research has focused on the transition into university, using freshman or first-year samples, and less research has focused on samples in the final year of their studies who are about to transition out of university (Gale & Parker, 2014).

Anxiety Among "Final Year" University Students

Like concerns about transition to university, students have been found to display concerns about the change and uncertainty associated with transition out of university. For example, commentators in the field (e.g., Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020; Matheson, 2018; Newman-Ford, 2018) point out that final year students are uncertain (and indecisive) about their next steps (e.g., their goals, the process of searching for a job, and whether to continue education): they must focus not only on the "here and now" but also on their future lives after university. It is argued that this "transition shock" (Newman-Ford, 2018, p. 55) can be challenging physically, intellectually, emotionally, developmentally, and socio-culturally and lead to anxiety amongst other negative outcomes. Indeed, high levels of anxiety may also lead to poor academic outcomes (Segool et al., 2013) and lower psychological wellbeing outcomes (Jenkins et al., 2020). Therefore, the final year of an undergraduate programme, can be particularly stressful, as students need to complete challenging (harder) academic assignments as well as navigate and prepare for their imminent transition towards a postgraduate career. For some students, this can become overwhelming, and support via university health and wellbeing services or alternative means may be sought and/or required. Although a developing literature has begun to explore strategies for supporting students' transition out of university (James, 2019), less research has focused on final year students who already demonstrate significant levels of anxiety.

The Present Study

This brief review has shown that anxiety is prevalent among university students, and this has often been attributed to the immensity of the transition into university using freshman, first-year samples. However, the available literature on the experiences of final year university students remains sparse (Gale & Parker, 2014). Moreover, there is limited empirical focus on those who currently receive university support for their anxiety. This is problematic, considering the importance of identifying and remediating difficulties with anxiety. Indeed, such anxiety has potential repercussions on the psychological wellbeing, academic performance, and future career prospects of students (e.g., Jenkins et al., 2020; Segool et al.,

2013). To fill the gap, the present study explores the experiences of five final year undergraduate (UG) students with anxiety, who were interviewed about the factors that give rise to their anxiety, and the consequences of this, from their perspective, for those involved.

The key question that is being asked is: What are the causes of anxiety for students in the final year of their UG degree?

Role of the Researchers

The research team consisted of five researchers from different academic institutions (Keane, Waldeck, Holliman, Goodman, and Choudhry). The principal researcher was Keane who was involved in all aspects of the study. Holliman collaborated on the design of the study. Waldeck, Holliman, and Goodman contributed to the writing of the present manuscript. However, Goodman also supported the data analysis. Waldeck, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in Psychology at Coventry University, with expertise in the domains of Applied Psychology and Research Methods. Holliman, Ph.D., is Lecturer in Psychology at UCL Institute of Education. His research interests include the psychology of education, teaching and learning in higher education, and the development of children's literacy. Goodman, Ph.D., is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at DeMontfort University, with expertise in qualitative methods and discursive psychology. Choudhry, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor at Coventry University, with expertise in qualitative methods and health psychology. Keane has a postgraduate degree in Psychology and conducted this qualitative research during her studies. This research was inspired by her work for the University College Dublin (UCD) Student Counselling Service, where it became apparent that a significant number of final-years students, many of whom had not previously attended the service at earlier education stages, were attending the service and presenting with anxiety-related symptoms that were impacting upon their studies and their psychological wellbeing.

Method

Design

We received ethical approval for this research from the Coventry University Research Ethics Committee. We chose to use a qualitative methodology as it was important to focus on "why" students felt anxious during their final year of UG study. Indeed, qualitative approaches are best suited to explore in more depth the richness of student experience as well as unpack potential explanatory mechanisms which cannot be quantified (Willig, 2013). We adopted a phenomenological approach, so we could "understand several individual's common or shared experiences of a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p. 60). In order to understand how anxious students understand and describe the causes of their anxiety during the final year of their degree, it is important to first identify any shared experiences.

Participants and Recruitment

We recruited five participants from a University in the West Midlands (UK) who agreed to participate in this study. All participants were female; three identified as White British and two identified as British-Asian. Participants were aged between 18-24 years at the time of the study and were enrolled on different courses: Psychology (x2), English, English and Midwifery, and Biology and Forensics. We recruited our participants via self-selective sampling by responding to a recruitment poster made available in the Spirituality and Faith

Centre. All students had visited this Centre because they had experienced anxiety and were in the final year of their UG degree.

Data Collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews in a quiet room at the Spirituality and Faith Centre to provide comfort and facilitate free expression (Willig, 2013). Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes and was audio-recorded for later transcription and analysis using an Olympus Digital Voice Recorder (Model: DS-30). The recording was downloaded via the main Dictaphone App for the iPhone 6. An information sheet and consent form were made available and signed prior to participation, and a full debrief was provided upon completion.

Keane transcribed the data verbatim from the audio-recorded files. For the purposes of this study, data was constituted as any descriptive verbal information (e.g., single words, phrases) expressed by participants.

The Interview

Keane designed a semi-structured interview schedule which focused on how students describe their experience of anxiety in the final year of their UG degree.[1] Keane also ensured that open questions were asked to address the participants experience (Willig, 2013). As an example, the participants were asked questions such as: "can you describe your experience of final year in university?", "how do you feel about transitioning from final year of university?", and "how has final year impacted your study and assignment submission?" Responses were probed further as necessary for clarification or further understanding. At the end of the interview students were invited to ask any questions or add any additional comments that may not have been sufficiently covered.

Thematic Analysis

We analyzed the data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic method was selected as it is not restricted to any theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Indeed, when exploring the potential causes of anxiety for students in the final year of their UG degree, there may be experiences (or causes) which were unaccounted for by the researchers; therefore, the analysis structure needs to be flexible to reflect the reality of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first step of the analysis was to transcribe the interviews verbatim. The data were then analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed very closely the six-stage process described in Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report.

Reliability of the Analysis

All the interviews and the initial analysis were conducted by Keane. Therefore, two researchers (Goodman and Choudhry) were asked to perform credibility checks on the data analysis. Indeed, such checks are in accordance with best practice guidelines for qualitative analysis to limit the influence of bias from a single researcher (Elliott et al., 1999). Specifically, Goodman was asked to check whether the original extracts chosen supported the developing themes. Moreover, Goodman also checked the structure of the original analysis. Following

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[1] The interview schedule will be available upon reasonable request by emailing the corresponding author.

these checks, Goodman identified a large overlap between some of the themes, so we collapsed from four themes to two. For example, the themes "performance pressure" and "pressure without sufficient support" largely addressed similar concerns from students, so merging allowed for greater coherence. Choudhry then checked the established themes to ensure the extracts supported them. Choudhry also added analytic commentary to the thematic analysis. All researchers agreed to the restructure and the extracts used to support the themes. This process helped to ensure that themes constructed were reliable, clear, and consistent.

Analysis and Discussion

Analytical Overview

Through following the process of thematic analysis, two overarching themes were identified (below). The themes captured the perceived pressures experienced by the students and concerns about what the future may look like post degree. Both areas were important topics of discussion for students and were areas that had a key role to play in their feelings of anxiety in the final year of their degree. The themes are discussed in further detail below:

(1) Perceived Pressure without Sufficient Support

The students discussed feeling a sense of pressure from the University about their studies in detail and felt there was a lack of support; the students discussed they had heard about the stressful nature of the final year, which was realised by all students when they started the final year of their degree.

Students were asked about their experiences of final year overall. They found it difficult to manage the demands of the third year, particularly in relation to managing the demands of the dissertation and the other modules that they needed to complete.

> I found it quite stressful because there is lots of pressure on like the dissertation which is a massive thing to do as well as like loads of other modules and stuff and you expect it by October / November to know what you are going to do afterwards, so it's quite stressful thinking about what it means, when I have done, and when I finish and also like trying to get everything else sorted as well as trying to enjoy life at the same time. (P4)

> I find it quite stressful because of a lot more work than my first years in my undergraduate so I did my dissertation and that required a lot of work… there was a lot of taught schedules, and everyone had to do everything like it felt like everything came all the deadlines came all at once in the first semester, deadlines, second semester was quite stressful, too. (P5)

Some students described a sense of pressure they felt was put on them by the university. The students described this pressure but did not provide details about exactly how this pressure was applied:

> I think, they should apply less pressure to people because I feel they put on a lot of pressure. You need to be like getting graduate jobs straight away or applying for courses right now, and I don't think they really give you the kind of time of day to get to know who you are. (P4)

The sense of perceived pressure was not only external; students also placed pressure on themselves to do well. They don't say I have to get a first, I feel like I need to get a first. (P3)

This internal pressure was also echoed by another student in relation to her dissertation supervisor. The student felt well supported by her advisor but did not want to disappoint her advisor or come across like a "bad student":

> …because I really really like my, because we have allocated advisors… I really respect her, so then if I feel like I am not doing what she thinks is the ideal students. I kind of, I am kind of avoiding her in a sense that I don't want her to think that I am a bad student. (P3)

Some students noticed the staff were stretched (large workloads, short office hours, and tight schedules), and this deterred them from approaching a staff member to seek support and guidance:

> Stretched. Too many people for the amount of people they got… I don't know because they expect you to like do a lot of stuff by yourself but having someone to talk to would be useful but then the uni is quite stretched on that kind of thing anyways. (P1)

> You need to be like getting graduate jobs straight away or applying for courses right now, and I don't think they really give you the kind of time of day to get to know who you are and what would be good for you. I think it feels like they are very outcome focussed, like they are not really looking at us as people, like just what the university needs. (P4)

Such perceptions of pressure and feeling deterred from seeking support from staff suggests some students feel universities are too "outcome focused" (P4). This suggests the target driven Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) agenda—to find out what students have gone on to do approximately six months after graduating—could potentially be actively harming students' wellbeing.

(2) Concerns About Next Steps

All students were worried about life post degree/graduation; the next steps following the end of their degrees was a clear source of anxiety for many students. This anxiety, in part could be attributed to the uncertainty that they felt after finishing their degrees:

> I think part of it is fear and part of it is the unknown. Like leaving university and that is scary knowing what I am going to do. I want to know that things are going to be okay. (P4)

> I am really nervous about moving; It's a big step, I guess. (P1)

Students discussed continuing their education to postgraduate studies and the importance of having some form of continuation by staying at the same university that they had completed their undergraduate degree at.

> I feel like it's a safety net, so I won't have to start all over again at another university. I just thought it would take off more pressure… I am terrified of veering off the path, so like I am really focused on education because the rest is too much if it doesn't go right. (P4)

Overall, the two themes capture some of the experiences that may contribute to final year students' feelings of anxiety when completing their undergraduate studies. The perceived pressure experienced by students about their studies, managing their dissertations, and their plans post-graduation may be caused by a sense of stress and anxiety for the students who took part in this project.

General Discussion

This study set out to explore what students perceive to be the causes of their anxiety in the final year of their undergraduate degree. Consistent with previous literature (e.g., Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020; Matheson, 2018; Newman-Ford, 2018), our findings suggest university students perceive the transition *out* of undergraduate study to be particularly stressful due, in part, to being uncertain about the steps that are needed. Indeed, research has shown how students who perceive themselves as not being able to adapt to situations of change is associated with lower levels of psychological wellbeing and greater levels of distress (Holliman et al., 2021). This study newly identifies how students felt unsupported from their institution because of the perceived added pressure provided to succeed and compete in the job market.

Practical Implications

The findings from this study may have important implications for the provision of welfare for students considering the lack of confidence and perceived pressure expressed. For example, sufficient resources need to be placed to signpost anxious final year students towards career counselling as well as to counselling services to manage feelings of anxiety. Moreover, to help promote the transition towards a postgraduate career, final year students might be supported to recognize and develop their personal adaptability (i.e., their ability to adjust to situations of stress, novelty, and change; Martin et al., 2015), so new situations can be recognized and managed more effectively in the future.

Limitations and Future Directions

The study adopted a qualitative design, using thematic analysis. This form of analysis enabled rich and detailed description of the data, regarding the anxiety experiences of final year students. However, in not adopting more interpretative phenomenological approaches, we may have missed some of the nuances in the data that might have been brought out by alternative analyses. Secondly, we only recruited women as participants. It is possible that participants from other genders may have differing experiences in relation to their anxiety in their final year. Alternatively, the Centre where we recruited participants may have catered more to women than men. Therefore, future researchers may consider recruiting participants from different genders. Finally, although not quite constituting a "theme" in this analysis, there were some recurrent concerns relating to the stigma around diagnosis: some students were concerned that seeing a General Practitioner (GP) about their anxiety might jeopardise attainment of a position in their future professions. Relatedly, although the present work focused on "anxiety," given its overlap with depression (Clark & Watson, 1991), we cannot rule out the possibility that the emergent themes here might also partially explain how some students may become

depressed in the final year of the UG degree. Future research might therefore adopt different qualitative approaches and pose questions that might elicit greater detail regarding the role of stigma around diagnosis and possible overlap with depression.

To conclude, this study provides an attempt to further our understanding of what final year university students perceive as the causes of their anxiety. Overall, these findings suggest that policymakers in Higher Education institutions need to consider the balance of promoting employability skills throughout the curriculum with sufficient resources to reduce pressure and promote wellbeing. For example, such institutions should ensure students have access to personal tutoring schemes and are signposted to welfare services when necessary. Moreover, institutions may seek to develop capability building initiatives. For example, employability initiatives and interventions focused on improving one's levels of adaptability (Holliman et al., 2020) may prove fruitful.

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