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Project Summary: Perfectionism and Burnout in University Students



**student
health
association**
representing specialists in student healthcare





Contents.

Background	04
Aims of the Project	05
Methodology	06
Findings	06
Discussion of Findings	08
Concluding Remarks	10
References	11

Background.

The mental health of university students is a growing concern for universities.

The most recent data from the Office for Students shows that over the last decade there has been a seven-fold increase in the number of university students diagnosed with a mental health condition [1].

There is also evidence that this prevalence is likely to be an underestimate with many students reluctant to disclose mental health conditions to their university, and self-reported mental health and wellbeing issues much higher in other independent surveys [e.g., 2].

The burden on wellbeing services at universities is substantial with more students accessing support than ever before [3].

In addition, we also know that university students who report mental health conditions are disadvantaged in regard to academic outcomes. These students are less likely to continue after their first year (3.5% difference); less likely to achieve a first or 2.1 classification for their degree (1.4% difference); and less likely to secure “higher level employment” or postgraduate study (4.1% difference) [4].

Economic downturn, the impact of increasing academic and social pressures, and changes in lifestyle (e.g., social media use), are some of the explanations that have been offered for the observed trends in mental health and wellbeing issues in young people [5, 6, 7].

Consistent with these trends, accounts from students that describe feeling burned out are now common.

Burnout develops when students are unable to cope with the demands placed on them and lose a sense of confidence and commitment to their studies [8].



In students, burnout is measured by assessing the degree to which they feel exhausted by their studies, cynical towards their studies, and ineffective or unconfident in their abilities as a student.

Burnout has been studied extensively in a range of domains, including education, and has been shown to be associated with motivation, performance and wellbeing problems for students [9, 10].

University students experiencing burnout might stay at university and underperform or quit university so to get some relief from the stress they are experiencing [11].

In the current project we were interested in whether the degree to which perfectionism – the degree to which students internalised an irrational need to be perfect – might be related to burnout in students.

Perfectionism is a personality trait exhibited by everyone to some degree. It has a number of different features. The degree of perfectionism and the interplay between its features determines its consequences.

We were particularly interested in the degree to which students believed that they should be perfect (self-oriented perfectionism) and the degree to which they believed that other people expected them to be perfect (socially prescribed perfectionism) [12].

Perfectionism is often considered to be a common characteristic among talented, high achieving students. However, its performance benefits are modest in comparison to its substantial risks for student mental health and wellbeing.

Previous research has found, for example, that perfectionism is associated with increased eating disorders, anxiety disorders, depression, and suicidality [13].

Like general mental health and wellbeing issues, levels of perfectionism are increasing among students [14], and previous research has found evidence of a link between perfectionism and student burnout. However, in the last attempt to review and summarise research of this kind there were very few studies [15].

Burnout develops when students are unable to cope with the demands placed on them and lose a sense of confidence and commitment to their studies [8].



Aims of the Project.

The aim of the current project was to examine the relationship between perfectionism – self-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism – and university student burnout.

In doing so, we sought to provide the best available estimate of this relationship by recruiting multiple universities and the largest sample examining this relationship so far.

5

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Methodology.

A cross-sectional, survey-based, design was used.

Thirteen universities took part in the study forming a convenience-based sample.

The study was advertised to undergraduate students at these universities. Advertisement was via online course websites and lectures.

The survey included (1) demographic information, (2) course information, (3) use of student services, (4) measures of perfectionism (Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, [16]) burnout (Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey for Students, [17]), and (4) self-report measures of grades, attendance, and likelihood of quitting.

6 Measures of perfectionism are scored on an agreement scale (1 “Not at all agree” to 7 “Totally Agree”) and measures of burnout are scored on a frequency scale (0 “Never” to 6 “Everyday”).

Students were also offered an incentive to take part (participation in a prize draw for three £50 vouchers).

The survey was open for a 12-week period (March, April, and May 2024). The final sample for each university was the result of the response rate during this period.

The study was ethically approved at York St John University and preregistered on PsychArchives.



Findings.

The total number of undergraduate students that completed the survey was 1115.

The sample included 309 male and 796 female students (9 intersex, prefer not to say, or missing) of which 955 were white (-British, -Irish, -other).

Students came from a range of undergraduate programmes and were in the foundation year (15), first year (518), second year (357), third year (161), and fourth year (63) of their programmes.

The majority were full-time (1082) and domestic students (1010).

Key findings (Part 1):

1. Approximately 28% of students reported using wellbeing services at the university (308 students in total of 1115).
2. Use of the service ranged from once to 20 times. Most of the students who used the service had done so once (123). The average number of times wellbeing services were used was 2.41 times (SD = 2.38).

Hedges' g shows the size of the difference between groups in units of standard deviation. The larger Hedges' g, the bigger the difference. The values in the brackets “[,]” are the range of the effect given the precision of the estimate.

Key findings (Part 2):

3. Students typically reported experiencing exhaustion “a few times a month” ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.57$), cynicism “once a month or less” ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.53$), and feeling ineffective “a few times a month” ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.06$).
4. Approximately 21% of the students reported experiencing exhaustion “at least twice a week” (the second highest amount possible on the response scale).
5. Approximately 8% of the students reported experiencing cynicism “at least twice a week”.
6. Approximately 1% of students reported feeling like an ineffective student “at least twice a week”.

Key findings (Part 3):

7. Female students reported significantly higher levels of exhaustion ($M = 2.96$ versus 4.00 , $t [521] = 9.96$, $p < .001$, Hedges' $g = 0.69 [0.56, 0.83]$) and cynicism than male students (2.51 versus 2.89 , $t [1103] = 3.70$, $p < .001$, Hedges' $g = 0.25 [0.12, 0.38]$).
8. Full-time students also reported significantly higher levels of exhaustion than part-time students ($M = 2.93$ versus 3.74 , $t [1113] = 2.93$, $p < .01$, Hedges' $g = 0.52 [0.17, 0.86]$).
9. Domestic students reported significantly higher exhaustion than international students ($M = 3.37$ versus 3.74 , $t [1111] = 2.32$, $p < .05$, Hedges' $g = 0.24 [0.04, .044]$).

Key findings (Part 4):

10. The more students reported that they expected perfection of themselves (self-oriented perfectionism), the higher their exhaustion ($r+ = .24$, $[.20, .28]$) and cynicism, ($r+ = .08$ $[.03, .14]$) scores, and the lower their ineffectiveness score ($r+ = -.15$, $[-.22, -.02]$).
11. The more students reported that they believed others expected them to be perfect (socially prescribed perfectionism), the higher their exhaustion ($r+ = .43$, $[.38, .48]$) and cynicism ($r+ = .35$ $[.30, .41]$) scores, and the lower their ineffectiveness scores ($r+ = -.18$, $[-.28, -.08]$).

We provide $r+$ (correlation across samples) and r (correlation in individual samples) to show the size and direction of a relationship. The larger $r+$ and r , the stronger the relationship. It ranges from -1.00 to $+1.00$. The values in the brackets “[,]” are the range of the effect given the precision of the estimate.

Key findings (Part 5):

12. We found evidence of these relationships regardless of student sex (male versus female), year of study (year of study), domicile (international versus domestic), or mode of study (part-time versus full-time) of the students.



Key findings (Part 6):

13. The more students reported that they expected perfection of themselves (self-oriented perfectionism), the higher their attendance ($r = .11$, $[.05, .16]$) and typical grades ($r = .18$, $[.12, .24]$).
14. The more students reported that others expected perfection of them (socially prescribed perfectionism), the lower their attendance ($r = -.10$, $[-.16, -.04]$) and the higher the likelihood of quitting their course ($r = .20$, $[.14, .26]$).
15. The more students reported exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness, the lower their typical attendance ($r = -.27$ $[-.25, -.36]$ and $-.33$ $[-.38, -.27]$ and $-.33$ $[-.28, -.39]$), lower their typical grades ($r = -.14$ $[-.20, -.08]$ and $-.15$ $[-.21, -.10]$ and $-.33$ $[-.28, -.38]$), and the higher the likelihood of quitting their course ($r = .31$ $[.25, .36]$ and $.42$ $[.37, .47]$ and $.31$ $[.26, .37]$).

Discussion of Findings.

Mental health issues among students are increasing and, along with this trend, demand on university support services has also risen.

Almost 1 in 3 students surveyed in the current project reported that they had accessed student wellbeing services at least once at their university. Students also typically accessed these services more than once. As indicators of the use of these types of services among the wider population of over 2 million undergraduate students, this is a worryingly high number of students.



There are currently no reliable estimates of the prevalence of burnout among students because there are no accepted cut-off values to identify those who are burned out. Studies of burnout tend to adopt different statistical approaches.

The findings of the current survey showed that, generally, the undergraduate students were reporting moderate levels of burnout based on the response format of the self-report instrument we used (low being 0 to 2, moderate 2 to 4, and high 5 to 6).

Notably, the highest aspect of burnout being reported were feelings of exhaustion. Over 1 in 5 students reported experiencing exhaustion “at least twice a week” (the second highest possible).

Burnout was also higher among female students, full-time students, and domestic students signalling that these students are at greater risk and would benefit from especial consideration and support.

The finding regarding female students is consistent with other studies examining burnout in students [18] and burnout generally [19]. On this basis, accessible and effective wellbeing support for female undergraduate students should be a priority for universities.

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... perfectionism was associated with lower reported typical attendance and greater likelihood of quitting the programme.

As expected, unrealistic expectations in the form of perfectionistic pressure placed on themselves or when believed to come from others was related to higher burnout in students. This was particularly the case when they believed it was others who expected them to be perfect and reflects wider findings that shows this is a particularly harmful aspect of being perfectionistic [13].

In considering overall pattern of findings, perfectionistic students generally appeared to believe they were effective students but also found studying more exhausting and were more cynical towards their studies.

The stress of living up to exceptionally high standards may explain why perfectionism is associated with higher burnout. So, too, might difficulties in revealing their worries, fears, and anxieties to others which has emerged as part of other research findings [20].

In regards to reported attendance, grades, and likelihood of quitting programmes, we found mixed effects for the two aspects of perfectionism. However, the overall effect, taking both elements of perfectionism into account, was that perfectionism was associated with lower reported typical attendance and greater likelihood of quitting the programme.



These findings are especially notable and signal the motivational costs of perfectionism and its wider impact on students and universities.

The relationship between reported grades, attendance, and likelihood of quitting were stronger and unequivocal for aspects of burnout. All three aspects of burnout were related to worse outcomes for each one of these important issues. The findings are also consistent with previous work on burnout and academic achievement [11].

On the basis of these findings, we encourage consideration of work showing the effectiveness of different types of intervention for burnout [21] and perfectionism [22]. Rigorous tests of larger scale interventions, targeting classes, programmes, and cohorts of students, are currently unavailable. However, existing research suggests that the issues can be reduced on an individual basis by different types of structured support that are deliverable within a university context.

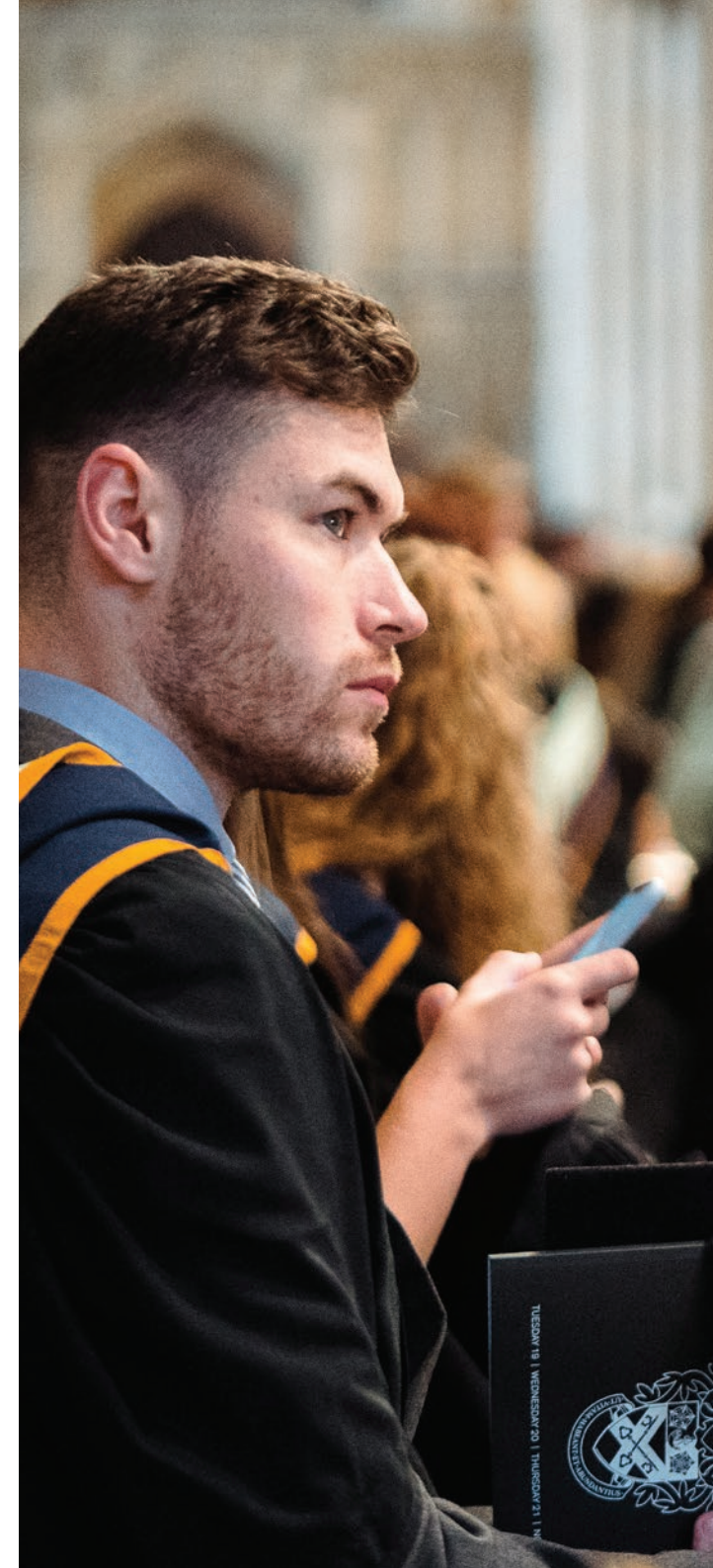
... perfectionistic students generally appeared to believe they were effective students but also found studying more exhausting and were more cynical towards their studies.

Concluding Remarks.

The current project provides the largest survey of perfectionism and burnout in undergraduate students undertaken so far.

It revealed that higher perfectionism and higher levels of burnout provide the basis for performance and motivation problems for undergraduate students. Perceived expectations of others and feelings of exhaustion, in particular, appear to be especially problematic with issues of burnout also most evident in female students, full-time students, and domestic students.

Addressing both perfectionism and burnout should be a priority for universities. Doing so in a preventative manner will support student wellbeing, motivation, and performance, while also reducing demand on student wellbeing services.



10

AUTHOR NOTE

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