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# Students' perceptions of studying A-levels: factors facilitating and frustrating positive learning experiences

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# Students' perceptions of studying A-levels: factors facilitating and frustrating positive learning experiences

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## ABSTRACT

To generate a better understanding of students' experiences of studying A-levels, 136 A-level students in England were asked to provide three words or phrases to describe their experience of sixth form, and their reasons for choosing these terms, via an online survey. Data were analysed using content analysis and reflexive thematic analysis. The analyses highlight that, although studying A-levels is challenging and can be stressful and overwhelming, it can also help to prepare students for higher education and adulthood more broadly by presenting them with unique opportunities to exercise autonomy, study subjects of genuine interest to them and cultivate more meaningful relationships with their peers and teachers. Implications for educational practices aimed at promoting positive learning experiences and supporting basic psychological needs are discussed.

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## Introduction

In England, it is well-established that studying for General Certificate for Secondary Education qualifications (GCSEs) during the final year of secondary school can be stressful (Putwain 2009). It is possible that studying Advanced Levels (A-levels), which involves studying fewer, more challenging subjects, along with the introduction of free periods and greater self-directed learning (Stoten 2014), may be even more stressful. Given that approximately half of 16-year-olds enter a sixth form to study A-levels (Department for Education, 2022), often before entering higher education, it is important to understand what factors contribute towards promoting and diminishing positive learning experiences during this stage of education.

Initial evidence suggests that the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels may be particularly difficult for some students. In a study conducted in England, for example, A-level students described the 'jump' from GCSEs to A-levels as 'massive' and commented on how the 'leap' was 'so much harder' than expected (Deuker 2014, 68). A-level students in another study described this transition in a similar way, with one participant describing it as 'a massive step up' and 'just so intense' and another describing it as 'overwhelming' and 'a massive change' (Powell 2017, 84). Specifically, participants reflected on how they had been surprised by the scale and complexity of their workload, which made it more difficult for

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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, 85). To cope with the academic demands being made of them, several participants dropped a subject, although one also reported that this made them feel 'a bit stupid' and 'not as normal as everyone else' (Powell 2017, 86), highlighting the sensitivity of adolescents to peer judgement and the self-consciousness that may arise from struggling to adapt to the demands of studying A-levels. Indeed, one participant described themselves as feeling 'a bit lost', 'horrible' and 'stupid' when they experienced difficulties (Powell 2017, 87–8).

In another study conducted in England, when 1335 A-level students were asked to describe their experience of sixth form using three words or phrases, only a quarter (24%) of the terms that participants provided were unambiguously positive (e.g. 'interesting') and the most commonly used term was 'stressful' (Nash et al. 2021). While this indicates that studying A-levels may be an arduous experience for many students, it is also important to note that participants were asked to provide these terms shortly before or after examinations, which could have influenced their perceptions (Chamberlain, Daly, and Spalding 2011). Additionally, the responses offer limited insight into A-level students' experiences because they do not provide any information about why these words were chosen. For example, the terms 'difficult', 'hard' and 'stressful' reveal relatively little about precisely what it is about studying A-levels that is challenging.

It has been suggested that, although the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels can be difficult, many students overcome the challenges that it presents and benefit from doing so. In another study conducted in England, for example, it was found that the challenges associated with the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels acted as an opportunity for 'positive personal change' (Brown 2021, 57). In another study, it was found that although this transition was initially experienced as a 'big jump', participants reflected on how successfully adapting to the demands of studying A-levels had helped them to feel as though they were 'growing up' (Hernandez-Martinez et al. 2011, 126). In light of this, the researchers argue that the academic literature on educational transitions should be reframed more positively because they represent a potentially 'life-affirming ... opportunity to become someone new' (Hernandez-Martinez et al. 2011, 128), so long as sufficient support is provided.

In the current study, A-level students completed an online survey which asked them to: i) describe their experience of sixth form using three words or phrases; and ii) to explain why they had chosen the terms that they did. This study therefore addresses the following research questions: how do students experience studying A-levels; and what factors contribute towards facilitating or frustrating positive learning experiences during this stage of education?

## Methodology

### Recruitment

Headteachers of college and school-based sixth forms in the West Midlands and North of England were invited via email to circulate an anonymous, online survey aimed at understanding A-level students' experiences of sixth form during summer 2020. In total, eight headteachers agreed to distribute the survey, which was hosted on Qualtrics.

### Data collection

Participants were asked to describe their experience of sixth form using three words or phrases and to then explain why they had chosen the terms they had. Participants responded in open-text boxes with no character or word count restrictions.

## Sample

One hundred and thirty-six self-selecting A-level students aged 16–18 participated in this study. The majority were female (79%); White British (70%); studying at least three A-level subjects (94%); and considered their families to be in a financially average (60%) or above average (26%) position. A minority were male (20%); one participant did not disclose their gender. All studied in a college (55%) or school-based (45%) sixth form; approximately two fifths (37%) were studying in the same school in which they had completed their GCSEs.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the first author's departmental ethics committee. Informed consent was gained from participants and signposting to organisations offering stress-related information and support was provided in both the information sheet and debrief at the end of the survey.

## Analysis 1: quantitative content analysis

To generate a better understanding of how students experience studying A-levels, the terms that participants used to describe their experience of sixth form were analysed using quantitative content analysis. This method values concepts of reliability and objectivity, and can be used to compress large amounts of data into a small number of easily understandable content-related categories 'based on explicit rules of coding' (Stemler 2000, p. 8).

In the first phase, the terms were read several times by the first author before being coded once-only using labels that were explicitly based on the language used by participants (e.g. '*welcoming*'). Once an initial list of codes had been generated, similar codes were amalgamated to generate twelve internally consistent categories. In the second phase, categories that shared content-related meaning were clustered and assigned as sub-categories to one of two main categories: *challenging* and *positive*; a third *miscellaneous* category was generated to group the codes that captured infrequently used terms. The *positive* category contained unambiguously positive terms, such as '*engaging*', '*enjoyable*' and '*welcoming*', whereas the *challenging* category contains terms that could reflect desirable or undesirable experiences, depending on the context in which they are being used (e.g. '*difficult*', '*hard*' and '*tough*'). Throughout, the first and second authors discussed and refined the coding scheme. In the final phase, the percentage of participants who used *challenging*, *positive* or *miscellaneous* terms to describe their experience of sixth form was calculated and reported.

## Results

The percentage of participants who used *challenging*, *positive* or *miscellaneous* terms to describe their experience of sixth form is depicted in Table 1, where the main categories are highlighted in bold and the sub-categories that they are comprised of are listed alphabetically below them. The main categories highlight that, although there are several enriching aspects of sixth form, students also find it highly demanding, sometimes to an exhausting or overwhelming extent.

### Category 1: positive

Most (57%) of the terms that participants provided were unambiguously *positive*. Additionally, almost all (89%) participants used at least one *positive* term, indicating that most appreciated at least one aspect of sixth form. Half (52%) of participants used at least one term to describe their overall experience as *enjoyable*, *exciting* or *fun* by using terms such as '*a great experience*', '*amazing*'

**Table 1.** Percentage of participants who used at least one term to describe their experience of sixth form in a particular way.

	Male		Female		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Challenging</b>	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
<b>Positive</b>	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
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	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

and 'happy', although it is not possible to determine what aspects of sixth form these participants valued most solely on the basis of these terms.

A quarter (23%) of participants used at least one term to describe their experience of sixth form from a social perspective as *friendly, inclusive or welcoming*. Additionally, approximately a quarter (29%) of participants used at least one term to describe their experience from an academic perspective as *engaging, interesting or stimulating*. It is notable that a quarter (26%) of participants used at least one term to depict sixth form as facilitating greater *autonomy, freedom or independence* in a positive light by using terms such as '*easier to get on with what I want to do*', '*suited to my independent learning style*' and '*treated more like equals*'. This suggests that the independence that either studying A-levels in comparison to GCSEs, or studying in a college sixth form in comparison to a school, affords students was commonly valued.

## Category 2: challenging

Pointing to a multidimensional experience, most (79%) participants used at least one term to describe their experience as *challenging*, indicating that as well as being socially and academically enriching, studying A-levels can also be a difficult stage of education. Half (50%) of participants used at least one term to describe their experience of sixth form as *demanding, difficult or hard* by using terms such as '*stretching*', '*tiring*' and '*tough*'. Importantly, while the use of such terms depicts studying A-levels as requiring a substantial amount of effort, the widespread use of these terms does not necessarily indicate that studying A-levels is a primarily arduous or unpleasant experience. Indeed, educational experiences that are '*stretching*' can lead to growth and development precisely because they are '*challenging*', '*demanding*' and encourage students to expand their '*comfort zone*', especially if students value what they are studying (Hernandez-Martinez et al. 2011). However, as this is not guaranteed to be the case, because '*tough*' experiences can also be both distressing (Chamberlain, Daly, and Spalding 2011), these terms were not considered to be unambiguously *positive*.

One third (32%) of participants specifically used the word '*stressful*' to depict their experience of sixth form. This was the most used term and indicates that studying A-level was, for a notable proportion of participants, stress-inducing rather than merely challenging. Indeed, approximately two fifths (43%) of participants used at least one term to describe their overall experience as *intense, overwhelming or stressful* by using terms such as: '*a toll on my mental health*', '*almost unbearable*', '*emotionally draining*', '*exhausting*', '*intense*', '*full on*', '*nerve-wracking*', '*overwhelming*', '*scary*', '*straining*', '*stressful*' and '*taxing*'. Interestingly, just two participants (1%) depicted their

experience of sixth form as *disrupted by Covid-19*. Below, the factors that may facilitate or frustrate students learning and development, and therefore attenuate or intensify their experiences of stress, are considered.

## Analysis 2: reflexive thematic analysis

To generate a more detailed understanding of students' experience of studying A-levels, and what factors may contribute towards promoting positive learning experiences, the justifications that participants provided for choosing the terminology that they did to describe their experience of sixth form were analysed using an experientially oriented variation of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022a). Reflexive thematic analysis values researcher subjectivity as an asset that can deepen and enhance, rather than distort or threaten, analytic engagement, and considers notions of unbiased or objective knowledge to be incompatible with the paradigmatic assumptions on which it is foregrounded (Braun and Clarke 2022b).

In the first phase, the justifications were read repeatedly to facilitate data familiarisation. In the second phase, the semantic meaning in the data was coded inductively. In the third phase, the codes were reflected upon and used to generate seven prototype themes based on meaningful across-case patterns that could be unified by core ideas. In the fourth phase, the seven prototype themes were refined to generate five themes, which were assigned definitions and catchy, creative names (Finlay 2021). Throughout, the first author sought feedback from the second, third and fourth authors in an effort to enhance the clarity and coherence of the analysis. In the final phases, data were re-read to ensure that the analysis was plausible and provided useful answers to the research questions before being written up. As the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was mentioned extremely infrequently by participants, with the vast majority appearing to reflect on their experiences of sixth form prior to its commencement, it was not possible to generate a coherent, meaningful across-case pattern-based theme in relation to it (Braun and Clarke 2022b). Instead, the analysis focused on how sixth form, and studying A-levels in particular, may typically be experienced.

## Results and discussion

Five themes were generated from the data. The themes highlight that while studying A-levels is challenging, and can be 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 relationships with their peers and teachers. Thus, studying A-levels has the potential to both hamper or enhance their development.

### Theme 1: 'A-levels are just stressful': hold on tight

This theme captures the idea that studying A-levels is particularly difficult, especially in comparison to GCSEs, and therefore requires students to direct far more effort towards learning in an attempt to maintain their threatened sense of academic self-concept. Reflecting on their experience of studying A-levels in comparison to GCSEs, approximately a fifth of participants explicitly highlighted the magnitude of the '*big jump*' or '*massive step up*' that had been required of them to bridge the '*gap*' 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*

These participants often commented on how the quantity of their workload had increased 'a lot' and was 'tough' to manage ('workload is tough compared to GCSE'), as well as how the complexity of the content became 'much harder' and therefore required 'extra effort' to understand:

*the work is very challenging in comparison to GCSEs which didn't require full focus to achieve well if you have the intelligence, whereas A-levels is exempt from these conditions and does require extreme hard work and focus*

Importantly, even participants who did not make explicit references to the difficulty of studying A-levels in comparison to GCSEs described the former as 'tough and very hard work', highlighting that – as one participant put it – studying A-levels 'is itself difficult'. It is also notable that just two participants explicitly stated that studying A-levels was not especially difficult ('not easy but not ridiculously difficult either'), as this tentatively suggests that this was not a widely shared perspective. Indeed, two different participants explicitly commented that most of their peers appeared to be experiencing challenges ('everyone is struggling just as much as you are'). Furthermore, approximately half of participants either commented on how they felt as though they were expected to work at a 'fast pace' or described their workload A-levels as highly demanding ('one downside is obviously the workload, it can be very stressful at times'). For approximately a tenth of participants, the difficulties that they experienced accumulated to an extent that it made them feel overwhelmed:

*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. [University] applications on top of work is stressful, it seems to just consume your life sometimes*

## Theme 2: 'a lot going on': pulled in different directions

This theme captures the idea that additional commitments, interests and obligations constrain the amount of time that A-level students have to direct towards their learning. Subsequently, studying A-levels can feel 'hectic', 'non-stop' and 'full on', and therefore frustrate students' sense of autonomy by diminishing their capacity for agentic, self-endorsed behaviour. Reflecting on their experience, for example, approximately a quarter of participants commented on how there 'is always a lot to do'. This indicates that, despite studying fewer subjects and having free periods, A-level students may feel under constant pressure ('you are never without something to do'). Supporting this idea, several participants described their overall experience of sixth form as being 'always busy', 'hectic at times' and 'really full on' ('it is quite stressful because there are always deadlines that are looming').

Two participants commented on the need to manage their 'challenging' workloads alongside making 'daunting' decisions about their post-18 educational and occupational choices ('daunting in the sense that you have to make so many decisions and plans for post-18'). For A-level students who do not have clear post-18 plans, this decision-making process is likely to present an additional burden ('a lot of really important decisions in a short space of time'). Furthermore, several participants referred to the need to take greater responsibility for 'juggling' time-consuming but important commitments, interests or obligations, which could be difficult to manage:

*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*

In combination, it seems that the increased difficulty of studying A-levels in comparison to GCSEs, alongside the need to manage additional commitments, can be challenging for students, especially for those who struggle to manage competing demands.



### Theme 3: 'worry of not doing well': under pressure

This theme captures the idea that experiencing stress is an inevitable aspect of studying A-levels because, even when students encounter stress-inducing challenges, they have no choice but to persist in an effort to 'keep up', secure 'good grades' and realise their 'post-18 plans' ('stressful due to the workload and pressures of universities and future life'). Indeed, approximately a tenth of participants explicitly expressed concern about the implications that their performance will have for their prospect of accessing higher education ('unenjoyable and emotionally draining, but I was persistent to get through it to try and achieve the grades I needed for higher education'), which was the most commonly cited reason for aspiring to perform well ('stressful because I want to do well and attend university'). On the line, from participants' perspectives, was not just their grades, but their 'future life':

*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*

*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 referred to placing pressure on themselves to perform as well as they 'possibly could' rather than just to access higher education ('I also tend to put a lot of pressure on myself and so this exacerbates the amount of stress and anxiety I feel'). Additionally, approximately a sixth of participants referred to experiencing pressure from teachers to perform well, which may undermine the fruition of supportive relationships:

*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 – often, teachers label you 'lazy' if your work isn't at a good standard, or if your grades aren't improving*

For several participants, 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*

### Theme 4: 'a lot more independent': a new chapter

This theme captures the idea that because A-level students are expected to accept additional responsibility for managing their time, remaining organised and reviewing content, they are treated – and expected to behave – 'much more like adults'. Consequently, studying A-levels affords students independence which, for some, functions as more of a blessing than a burden. Indeed, a small proportion of participants likened their experience to 'starting a new chapter' and described it as a 'new environment to grow in', thereby framing it as an adventurous new beginning rather than a frightening journey ('a new step in my life and every day is a special day'). Others reflected on being in a more 'grown up' environment and treated 'much more like adults' ('I feel like I am treated more like an adult compared to in a school').

Several participants highlighted that studying A-levels had required them to engage in 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'). Additionally, 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 capabilities are also important during higher education (Walker 2005), which some participants considered studying A-levels to be ideal preparation for (*'a really great step between high school and university'*).

Importantly, many participants framed the additional independence that studying A-levels afforded them as beneficial or *'liberating'* (*'I enjoyed sixth form more because I had more freedom'*). Crucially, while studying A-levels can be *'hectic'*, *'exhausting'* and *'strenuous'*, and can require students to spend their free periods or leisure time revisiting or reviewing content, participants' willingness to do the latter could be thought of as reflecting an adult-like approach to accepting greater responsibility for oneself, predicated upon an understanding that dedication and the careful consideration of opportunity-costs are among the prices of progress.

Approximately a tenth of participants explicitly reflected on how studying A-levels had prompted them to cultivate a better ability to manage their time (*'it can be helpful as it helps time management'*). One participant highlighted that studying A-levels had prompted them to become more proactive (*'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, several participants described experiencing *'many opportunities'* to *'develop skills'* and explore what strategies *'worked best'* for them. It is possible that this enhanced their sense of competency (*'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 despite, being *'faced with challenges'* was a recurring reflection:

*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*

In a similar manner to participants in prior research (Hernandez-Martinez et al. 2011), some participants commented on how they appreciate or *'love'* assuming greater responsibility for their learning:

*you get so much more freedom which I love, how [and] when you study, what you wear, what you learn, who you talk to, it's really your experience and you can almost do what you want which I love [because] helps me study better when I can do it my way*

In addition to appreciating being able to choose what subjects to study (*'learning more about my favourite subjects is awesome'*), several participants commented on how they found their lessons engaging (*'engagement of the lessons'*), as well as fun (*'lessons are fun'*), and reflected positively on the difference between their experience of studying GCSEs and A-levels (*'I have learnt way more since starting sixth form than in my GCSEs'*). It is possible that it is because participants *'finally'* had the opportunity to study subjects that they were *'actually interested in'*, when combined with *'engaging'* or *'fun'* lessons, they felt motivated *'to learn more'* and embraced difficulties as *'exciting'*, *'positive'* or *'special'* opportunities to continue developing:

*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 theme suggests that, if students chose subjects that are genuinely interested in, studying A-levels can provide valuable opportunities for students to develop.

### Theme 5: *'great community and staff': we look out for each other*

This theme captures the idea that that sixth form is a place where students can develop meaningful friendships and receive support from their teachers, enabling them to develop a stable support network. Indeed, it seems that because sixth form enables students to be part of a *'community'* or *'network'* in which they feel able to be *'more open and social'*, students enjoy spending time in sixth

form and are better positioned to persevere when presented with challenges. Approximately a quarter of 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 great network of friends'*). Furthermore, several participants commented on how sixth form had afforded them opportunities to make new friends (*'you get to talk and make so many new friends which is great'*), some of whom they had formed particularly strong bonds with (*'made friends for life'*).

Beyond appreciating their friendship groups, 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'*), inclusive and pleasurable place to be (*'lovely place with great community and staff'*). In addition to describing their sixth forms as welcoming and inclusive, several participants reflected on how being in sixth form had enhanced their confidence and sense of connectedness by allowing them to become less *'isolated'*, *'more social and open'* and able to *'make friends with a wide variety of people'*:

*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, 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 (*'I have found new friends through my subjects'*). From an academic perspective, participants reflected on the amount of hard work that their teachers did for them (*'teachers were helpful with resources and keeping me going when it got stressful'*), and how they *'go the extra mile'* and encourage them to *'gain the most out'* of their potential:

*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*

Approximately a sixth of participants commented on feeling confident turning to their teachers for help (*'if I ever need help with anything there is always a teacher to ask'*). As trust is borne out of active enquiry rather than passive acceptance (O'Neil 2002), actively experiencing help from their teachers may have enhanced these participants' trust in them and overall sense of security (*'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 experienced being supported by their teachers (*'supported me immensely in every aspect'*), they felt able to trust them to offer meaningful assistance or help during challenging or *'stressful times'* (*'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'*:

*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*

This suggests that feeling able to turn to teachers for support may be key to coping well with the demands of studying A-levels.

## Conclusion

This study captures the contradictory ways in which students experience studying A-levels. From the perspective of self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2000), it seems that there are multiple aspects of studying A-levels that can support or frustrate the satisfaction of students' basic

psychological needs for autonomy (the need for self-endorsed, volitional behaviour), competence (the need for a sense of mastery) and relatedness (the need for meaningful relationships). Indeed, this study highlights that, although studying A-levels can be difficult, stressful and overwhelming (Nash et al. 2021), it can also help students to develop healthily by presenting them with opportunities for agentic behaviour (autonomy); the development of their academic and organisational abilities (competence); and the cultivation of meaningful relationships (relatedness). This study therefore provides evidence to support the notion that studying A-levels can facilitate growth, development and 'positive personal change' (Brown 2021, 57), and that this may be especially true for students in college sixth forms, where the degree of actual or perceived independence may be greater or better appreciated than it is in school sixth forms, where students may feel less inclined to feel as though they are 'moving on' and 'growing up' (Hernandez-Martinez et al. 2011, 126). This study also suggests that A-level students may use far more unambiguously positive terms to describe their experience of sixth form when they are not asked to provide them shortly before or after examinations. This highlights the importance of supporting students to cope with examination-related stress (Chamberlain, Daly, and Spalding 2011), while also providing evidence to suggest that the overall experience of studying A-levels may not always be as arduous or unpleasant as previously suggested (Nash et al. 2021). Nevertheless, this study also suggests that studying A-levels can be especially stressful for some students, and that further research aimed at understanding how best to support such students is needed.

This study underscores the importance to supporting students during the initial transition from to A-levels, as those who struggle to acclimatise to the heightened demands may experience greater stress as result of feeling less able to understand or manage their workload (Hernandez-Martinez et al. 2011). This study also challenges that suggestion that most students study A-levels for instrumental reasons (Stoten 2014), as many participants clearly enjoyed studying A-levels, especially when they had (autonomously) chosen their subjects based on genuine interest. This points to the need to encourage incoming A-level students to choose subjects that are inherently appealing to them, because they may otherwise falter when faced with the demands that arise from studying A-levels if they are not sufficiently captivated by – and engaged in – their learning. Opportunities to promote positive learning experiences during sixth form therefore begin before the point of entrance (Deuker 2014). Future, longitudinal research could follow A-level students across the academic year, or multiple academic years, to capture temporal changes in their experiences and what demographic characteristics, institutions (e.g. school versus college sixth forms), motivations and coping strategies are most closely associated with flourishing or floundering during this stage of education. Such research could be complemented by qualitative interviews aimed at illuminating, contextualising and situating students' experiences and perceptions of studying A-levels in both greater depth and outside of the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, our study provides strong foundations for future research and suggests that educational practices that provide explicit guidance on how to adapt to, and cope with, the demands of studying A-levels, and allow students to feel included, listened to and supported, are critical to promoting positive learning experiences and smooth transitions into and out of this stage of education. As many A-level students will progress to higher education, it is possible that by providing them with greater or more targeted support, they will be better prepared for the stress-inducing demands of higher education.

From a methodological perspective, this study provides additional evidence to support the suggestion that brief online surveys can be used to collect sufficiently rich data to enable in-depth, qualitative analyses of experiences and perceptions (Braun et al. 2021), and illustrates that when participants are provided with opportunities to explain or justify their choices, this can produce anchored and detailed responses. A limitation to this study is that it was conducted during the first four months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when most students were learning online and from home. While this may have influenced how some participants reflected on and described their experiences of studying A-levels, with some experiencing greater stress (due to uncertainty regarding examinations or a lack of access to resources, for example) and others preferring online to in person learning (Demkowicz et al. 2020), it seems

that most participants reflected on their experience of studying A-levels prior to, rather than during, the pandemic. The analyses do, therefore, offer a meaningful insight into how many students experience studying A-levels and what factors contribute towards promoting positive learning experiences during this stage of education.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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