

'A' level students typically work long hours in part-time jobs, have vague career plans and are very likely to have experienced some non-academic problem since their courses started.

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The report 'Exam Aid Research Report' is available from the registered charity *Exam Aid* - www.examaid.co.uk

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A profile of Year 13

An examination of the most common sources of stress during the main A level year.

A new survey has provided a profile of the 2000/2001 Year 13, which suggests that A level students typically work long hours in part-time jobs, have vague career plans and are very likely to have experienced some non-academic problem since their courses started.

The study, by the charity Exam Aid, is based on 423 questionnaire returns from students in nine institutions, including school sixth forms, sixth form colleges and F.E. Colleges.

Probable sources of student stress were highlighted by looking at how the rest of their lives mixed with the academic demands and at their own opinions and motives.

The evidence collected is grouped under four headings.

- ⇒ How do students spend their time?
- ⇒ What happens in students' lives during exam courses?
- ⇒ Why do students take A levels and what are their expectations?
- ⇒ What help do students need?

How do students spend their time?

'A' level students are busy under pressure and want more support.

Students were asked about how they divided their non-academic time. The results suggested that the average student has at least another two substantial non-academic demands on time apart from social life. Other demands include part-time jobs, sporting and non-sporting clubs and societies and family duties (baby-sitting and taking charge of

Results from 423 Year 13 students

Part-time work:

- 55% working more than 11 hours a week in Year 13
- 27% working more than 15 hours a week in Year 13
- 42% describe attitude of employers to exam work as 'variable' or 'unsympathetic'
- 28% working to be able to afford university

Life Events

Since beginning of Year 12

- 19% have experienced the death of a parent or other relative
- 22% have lost time though illness
- 11% have moved house
- 7% have been through the divorce or separation of their parents
- 8% have experienced one parent coping with redundancy
- 3% have left home

A levels

- 31% have a specific career in mind
- 54% want good general qualifications
- 43% say A levels 'harder than expected'
- 2% say A levels 'easier than expected'

Help during Year 13

- 82% want training in time management
- 79% want drugs and health education advice
- 81% want advice about part-time work, e.g. employment rights, wages etc.
- 81% want advice about agencies dealing with relationship problems

'A' level students are busy under pressure and want more support.

younger children).

86% of the students had part-time jobs, and the majority of them were working more than 11 hours a week.

There was a certain detachment from their institutions, with a lot more involvement in out-of school/college clubs and societies than those within the institutions.

Some of the gender differences were along traditional lines. Girls were more committed to family duties and boys more likely to take part in sport. The results also suggested that girls' social lives tended to be more outside of their institutions than those of the boys.' Also the part-time working motive of paying for a vehicle applied equally to girls and boys.

Taken as a whole, the spread of activities suggested that sophisticated time management skills are necessary to mix these demands with those of three A levels. Those students who hadn't acquired these skills might well be under heavy pressure.

The figures confirmed this finding when students were asked to approve or otherwise of various methods of providing help. Over 80% backed the provision of time management training.

What happens in students' lives during exam courses?

The examination playing field is uneven. One in five students had experienced a death in the family since the beginning of Year 12. This ratio remained more or less the same from all institutions. Why the figure should be so high is beyond the scope of the report; however, one reason may be related to marrying and/or having children later in life.

Eleven percent had moved house; 7% had seen their parents split up; 8% had experienced one parent going through redundancy, and, 3% of the respondents had left home.

Twenty two percent had lost school/college time because of illness. There are clearly substantial numbers of students facing at least one non-academic crisis during their A level years. Anticipating these events is often regarded as pessimistic or even ghoulish, but these figures suggest that at least making students aware of possible sources of help might support those who could otherwise fail.

Why do students take A levels and what are their expectations?

Some of the surprising results are the higher than expected level of negative responses.

Nearly 30% did not wish to go on to university if they achieved their A level qualifications. 57% named 'getting the qualifications for well-paid jobs' and only 31% actually had a career in mind when choosing their A levels.

Just under a third identified the negative motives of 'pressure from parents' (17%) or 'lack of job opportunities at 16' (15%). In both of the 'one third' cases quoted, the group concerned was disproportionately male.

Those who design and deliver A level courses will be encouraged by the 31% who found the courses 'as interesting as expected' and a further 28% for whom they were 'more interesting than expected'. Induction procedures seem to be less successful, with 43% responding that the A levels were 'harder than expected' Only 2% found the A levels 'easier than expected'.

What help do students need?

This is an area where the questionnaire format chosen has its limitations, since students could only comment on the alternatives put to them.

However, the suggestions were based on previous research work and were generally approved by the majority. The criterion of approval was the answer 'important' or 'very important' to the question of 'how important it is for each provision to be available for A level students'.

In-school counsellors were highly supported, with ratings of 68% for them being members of the teaching staff and 71% for them being entirely counsellors. The highest single rate was 82% for *time management training* in line with the results on time demands.

Almost as many approved the availability of *helpline advice* concerning drugs and health education (79%), part-time work (81%) and relationship problems with parents, between sexes or about different kinds of sexuality (81%).

Conclusion

The whole picture is one of a highly pressurised and demanding experience which seems to be about trying to live up to everyone else's expectations at the same time as being unsure about your own. From the evidence of this survey it could be suggested that educationalists need to pay more attention to overcoming student stress. Many students pay a heavy price for success and some fail for entirely non-academic reasons.

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