



Participant Information Sheet

STudent Experience in the Pandemic: **STEP towards Mental Health and Well-Being**

Department of Psychiatry
Principal Investigator: Professor Peter B Jones
STEP@medschl.cam.ac.uk

Before you decide to take part in the STEP study it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. A member of the team can be contacted at STEP@medschl.cam.ac.uk if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Purpose of the study

Most Cambridge students have taken part in the Asymptomatic COVID-19 Screening Programme (ACSP). Many have reported back that they were grateful for the programme, but that some mental health testing may be necessary too. From previous research we know that lockdowns, social isolation, uncertainty and disrupted opportunities can have a considerable effect on mental health and well-being. Moreover, we believe that these unprecedented times are difficult for all, and are likely to affect both those students living in colleges, private accommodation, as well as those who could not return to Cambridge. Therefore, we invite you to take part in the University of Cambridge "STudent Experiences during the Pandemic: STEP towards Mental-Health and Well-Being" study. STEP aims to better understand how mental health and wellbeing are impacted and shaped in Cambridge students during the pandemic.

We are aware that students have raised a number of ideas, questions and concerns about the links between the collective isolation they were facing and their mental health. Collective isolation in households can lead to loneliness, anxiety and low functioning for some; however in others, collective isolation can lead to positive effects from a sense of togetherness and shared endeavour. Besides the specific experience of collective isolation, the COVID-19 experience has been reported to have a notable effect on mental health and well-being in general. Individual student characteristics and contexts may help explain why the impact of COVID-19 on students' mental health is so heterogeneous. To this end, the STEP study does not only track mental health and wellbeing, but also tries to pinpoint risk (e.g. loneliness) and resilience factors (e.g. social support), which can further enhance our understanding of potential ways to better support students.

We also believe that it is crucial to be able to take impactful events such as changes in the University's COVID-19 policy, clarity over examination procedures, changes in governmental lockdown restrictions, or new COVID-specific developments into account. To design the briefest and most informative and acceptable survey we have taken advice on board from undergraduate students, postgraduate students, PhD students, as well as elected student officers.

Why have I been chosen?

All current University of Cambridge students will be eligible to take part in this study regardless of whether they currently reside: in college accommodation, elsewhere in Cambridge or anywhere else in the world before and after they return.

Do I have to take part?

No! Taking part is entirely voluntary.

If you take part you can withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty or loss. You may even request that we destroy all or part of the data that you have contributed before withdrawing from the study (as long as this is requested before data have been aggregated and prepared for publication).

Also, you don't have to give a reason for withdrawing from the STEP Study, though it may help us if you do so because it may be something we can improve in the future. This study will be most valuable if few people withdraw from it once they have started.

What will happen to me if I take part?

After consenting to take part, you will be asked to give your name, University standard unique identifier (CRSid), and email addresses for correspondence and identification purposes. We will also ask you 2-4 questions about where you are currently residing, and 2-4 brief questions about your past mental health, 1-3 question regarding the number and dates of exams, and 2 questions so that you can design your personal, goal-related daily STEP item. This will take about 5 minutes.

Then, you will start receiving an invitation to complete a **daily** online survey with 15 items asking about your wellbeing, perceived support, activities, and feelings about covid-19 and the pandemic over the past 24 hours. This will take less than 2 minutes to complete, involving 5 answer options to respond to each question. This survey will be sent every day for the duration of the Easter term. The daily STEP survey will contain a personalised item, so that you can rate yourself on a goal-related topic that is relevant to you but not captured in our questions. In video 4, on our [website](#), we give some advice on how to make a personalised item (we also offer this advice in a written form, as PDF document). You will receive a daily personal feedback plot, which shows the results of your personalised item.

You will also receive an invitation to complete a **weekly** online survey for a more precise measurement of mental wellbeing and distress. Using cutting-edge technology called computer-adaptive testing, this survey will learn from you so it will not ask you the same questions every time. It will also be brief (5 minutes or less), and it will provide stratified feedback at the end. This survey will be sent every week for the duration of the Easter term.

At the end of the term you will be invited to a final 'exit' online survey (under 10 minutes).

To minimise the burden on you and your peers we shall obtain some sociodemographic information by securely accessing the following study participants' records held by the University Registry: gender, age, degree, school, college, academic year and course, fee status (international/home), ethnicity, disability, dependents, socio-economic classification. If you are part of the University asymptomatic Covid-19 testing programme, we will also securely access your record (as well as your peers' records) in the programme to understand the relationship between testing positive and mental health.

Additionally, we will run monthly STEP Q&A sessions where we discuss preliminary results and answer questions. You are invited to email us your questions (STEP@medschl.cam.ac.uk), and we will try to address them as well as we can.

Are there possible disadvantages and/or risks in taking part?

Questionnaires include questions about emotions (which may include thoughts about self-harm or suicide), and some feedback, which may make you feel uncomfortable; on the other hand, some people find such feedback empowering, legitimising their experiences and feelings. Along with the feedback, and also openly available in the study page, we will include a list with various different sources of support offered by the University as well as offered outside the University.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

This is a unique opportunity to make a significant contribution to research into university students' wellbeing during the pandemic in Cambridge and beyond – and we can't do it without you! The more students that take part, the more reliable the study will be as it will represent a wider range of experiences and help us to understand the impact on different groups of students.

We will post updates on the STEP study website every two weeks with preliminary aggregate and anonymous results to monitor stress levels publicly and live during the term. This will be akin to the ACSP weekly covid-infection case updates. We will also feed this summary data into the University's governing body and the Colleges.

As a thank-you for your time, we will offer a weekly prize draw of a £100 voucher to be spent in the UK to those participants who complete all the daily surveys in the previous week. Finally, you will also receive (a) a daily personal feedback plot, which shows the results of your personalised item, and (b) weekly personalised mental health feedback in the form of benchmarking your score against a data bank of mental wellbeing and distress among young people in the UK before the pandemic. This feedback will just be a snapshot, so it may not accurately reflect your individual situation. It is not designed to support those who need professional support for a specific health condition, or those who are experiencing a mental health crisis. We will give you a list of support services that can help.

By linking the information that you provide to the asymptomatic testing programme data and other events during the term (such as relaxing/strengthening lockdowns, clarity over examination procedures or other University policies, exams, and national events) we shall be able to explore possible determinants of wellbeing and suggest changes affecting the whole student body.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information you give us will be kept strictly confidential. Records will be maintained in accordance with the terms of the Data Protection Act and the Freedom of Information Act. General information about how the University uses personal data can be found [here](#).

All the information you give to us will be made anonymous by a data manager so that researchers will not know whose information it is when they analyse it. All data will be identified only by a code, with personal details kept encrypted in a secure computer with access only by the data manager and some members of the study team.

If you decide not to answer questions or questionnaires this will not affect your course in any way, nor will anything you put on the questionnaire. The daily and weekly feedback that you get will only be accessible to you.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

Results will be presented at conferences and to the University staff and students, the results will also be written up in the form of regular reports and as journal articles. If any individual data are presented, the data will be totally anonymous, without any means of identifying the individuals involved. We will place all the links to STEP study reports and publications on our website.

The data collected during the course of the project might be securely used for additional or subsequent bona fide research.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The University of Cambridge is the organiser and funder of this research. The research team works closely with the Student Wellbeing Team and has benefited from input from the Students' Union, undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Ethical review of the study

The project has been reviewed by the University of Cambridge Psychology Research Ethics Committee.

Contact for further information

For further information please contact the study team at: STEP@medschl.cam.ac.uk.



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