

Longitudinal Study of the Impact of COVID-19 on Stress, Loneliness, and Risky Drinking in University Students

GENEVIEVE A. DINGLE¹, RONG HAN¹, & MOLLY CARLYLE^{1,2}

¹ School of Psychology, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

² Lived Lived Well Group, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

Presenter's Email: dingle@psy.uq.edu.au

Introduction and Aims: The COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions on travel and social contact caused significant stress and disruption for university students in Australia. This two-wave survey study tested the hypothesis that, compared to pre-COVID levels, stress and loneliness increased during the pandemic and that drinking as a way of coping with these negative states also increased (H1). It was further hypothesised that international students were more negatively affected than domestic students due to travel restrictions and lack of certainty about returning to the university (H2).

Design and Methods: The study used a 2 (enrolment: domestic and international students) x 2 (cohort: 2019 and 2020) between groups design. The total sample (n = 874; 28% males, 71% females, 1% others) had a mean age = 19.75 years (SD = 3.89) and included 32% international students. Measures included stress items adapted from the APS stress and wellbeing surveys; the 3-item UCLA loneliness scale and the AUDIT-C screen for risky drinking.

Results: The number of stressors ($p < .001$) and loneliness ($p < .001$) were worse during COVID-19 than in 2019, supporting H1. Contrary to H2, domestic students were more lonely than international students across both years ($p = .044$). Unexpectedly, risky drinking did not increase during COVID-19, with domestic students more likely to engage in risky drinking than their international counterparts ($p < .001$) in both years.

Discussion and Conclusions: The COVID-19 pandemic was associated with increased stress and loneliness in first year university students in Australia. There was no associated increase in risky drinking, which may have been due to lockdown conditions and the lack of social gatherings in which young people typically consume alcohol.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Universities should provide resources to increase student connectedness and stress management while online and blended learning systems remain in place.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.