

Student experiences of the increased cost of living QMI

Quality and Methodology Information for Student Cost of Living Insights Study (SCoLIS) interviews, detailing the strengths and limitations of the data, methods used, and data uses and users.

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1 . Output information

- Study name: Student Cost of Living Insights Study interviews
- Data collection: Qualitative semi-structured interviews
- Frequency: Ad hoc
- How compiled: Data collected and analysed by the Office for National Statistics, commissioned by the Department for Education
- Geographical coverage: England
- Related publications: [Student voices: experiences of the rising cost of living, England 2023](#)

2 . About this Quality and Methodology Information report

This Quality and Methodology Information report contains information on the quality characteristics of the data (including the European Statistical System's five dimensions of quality) as well as the methods used to create it.

The information in this report will help you to:

- understand the strengths and limitations of the data
- learn about existing uses and users of the data
- understand the methods used to create the data
- help you to decide suitable uses for the data
- reduce the risk of misusing data

3 . Important points

- Findings presented in our [Student voices: experiences of the rising cost of living](#) article are derived from qualitative research undertaken by the Office for National Statistics and commissioned by the Department for Education.
- The 25 qualitative semi-structured interviews provide a fuller understanding of the impact of the increased cost of living on higher education students in England, building on the statistics collected through the [Student Cost of Living Insights Study surveys](#).
- The main research questions of this study were: "How has the rising cost of living impacted students' financial situations?" and "How has the rising cost of living impacted students' experiences?".

4 . Quality summary

Overview

Our [Student voices: experiences of the rising cost of living](#) article explores the impact of the increased cost of living on higher education students across England during the 2022 to 2023 academic year. The study helps us to understand the challenges that students have faced and how this has affected their university experience and financial situation.

Uses and users

The research was undertaken by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE). The findings will be used to inform higher education policies. Users of this data include:

- Department for Education (DfE)
- Office for National Statistics (ONS)
- Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR)
- Office for Students (OfS)
- Universities and academic institutions
- Membership bodies and charities (including Universities UK and National Union of Students)

Strengths and limitations

The main strengths of the qualitative research study include:

- the research provides a fuller understanding of the personal circumstances of students, building on the statistics collected through the [Student Cost of Living Insights Study surveys](#)
- the semi-structured interview methodology used has produced a richer and more nuanced insight into the personal experiences of students because of the nature of open-ended questioning, when compared with quantitative survey methods
- the flexibility of the interview structure allowed participants to be specific about how the increased cost of living had affected their university experience, while prompts and probes ensured that important information was captured
- the findings met user needs as the interview guide was developed in consultation with the main stakeholder, the Department for Education, and methodological expertise and advice were applied throughout the development stages
- the thematic analysis approach that we used allowed for identification of important trends across interviews and is consistent with methodology used in prior qualitative research by the Office for National Statistics
- the researchers worked collaboratively to code transcripts and undertake thematic analysis, ensuring a variety of approaches and perspectives were considered and reducing researcher bias
- quality assurance and coding validation was carried out by the other researchers from the Office for National Statistics

The main limitations of the qualitative research study include:

- because of the qualitative nature of the study design, the use of a non-probabilistic sampling method and the small sample size (25 participants), it would also not be meaningful to extrapolate personal experiences of the study participants to the wider student population or the general population, although statistically generalisable data from a wider student population are available in [Student Cost of Living Insights Study surveys](#) datasets
- quantification of the codes and themes is not possible because of the small sample size of 25 participants
- the participants were selected from 20 universities and may, therefore, not be representative of the attitudes and opinions of students at universities and academic institutions not included in the sample
- the research findings are limited to the concepts, attitudes and opinions expressed by participants as part of the interview, which may represent specific contexts or settings and may only be reflective of their current circumstances and, therefore, subject to change; additionally, researchers have assumed that the opinions and reflections of participants have been presented by participants accurately
- participants volunteered to take part in the interviews and, therefore, the findings may be subject to self-selection and non-response bias; the attitudes and opinions expressed by those who did take part in the study may be different to those that did not participate, depending on their ability or willingness to take part
- the interviews took place in May, which may have affected some students' ability or willingness to participate; students may have prioritised exam revision or assignments over interview participation, as university exams and deadlines often occur in May and June
- the research took place towards the end of the academic year, so there is likely to be a retention bias; those students most affected by the increased cost of living may have decided to drop out of their studies earlier in the year and, therefore, would not be represented in the sample
- since 2020, higher education students have experienced major disruption to in-person teaching and socialising as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and associated restrictions; the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on students' university experience should be considered when exploring the findings from this research

5 . Quality characteristics of the release data

This section provides a range of information that describes the quality and characteristics of the data and identifies issues that should be noted when using the output.

Relevance

The data presented in this study were collected during May 2023. As data collection took place towards the end of the academic year, this allowed students to recount experiences from across the majority of the 2022 to 2023 academic year.

Accuracy and reliability

The accuracy of the data has been ensured through all stages of the project through quality assurance processes.

All interviewers were trained and familiarised with the topic guide ahead of the interviews to ensure a consistent approach to interviewing and ensure that all the research aims were met.

Additionally, quality assurance was carried out during interview transcription, transcript coding and data dissemination to ensure accuracy and reliability of data processing, analysis and presentation. Further details of specific quality assurance steps can be found in [Section 6: How we quality assure and validate the data](#).

Timeliness

The findings of the research were published four months after the completion of data collection. During this period, transcription, analysis, quality assurance and article preparation took place.

Coherence and comparability

Findings of this study are not statistically generalisable because of the qualitative nature of the study design. Research findings are limited to the concepts, attitudes and opinions expressed by participants which may represent specific circumstances or settings and may change over time. However, for wider context, the findings have been presented alongside statistics previously published in the [Cost of living and higher education students, England \(30 January to 13 February 2023\)](#) release.

Concepts and definitions

When describing the findings, the terms "some" and "many" have been used to give a relative indication of the extent to which views, experiences and behaviours were reported by study participants. "Some" has been used to indicate that a view, experience or behaviour was reported by relatively few participants, while "many" indicates a view, experience or behaviour that was more widespread.

"Code" is the term used to describe a label that captures what is interesting or significant about the data.

"Participants" is the term that we have used to describe the individuals taking part in this research study.

"Persona" is the term used to describe the grouping or presentation of anonymised quotes. Personas are not intended to portray a single individual but are based around a fictitious persona representing the general student experience.

"Qualitative research" is the process of collecting and analysing non-numerical data, through methods such as in-depth interviews and focus groups. It is used to understand participants' beliefs, experiences, attitudes, and behaviour.

"Quantitative research" is the process of collecting and analysing numerical data.

"Students" in this study refers to higher education students studying foundation, undergraduate and postgraduate level programmes at universities in England.

"Theme" is the term used to describe a pattern in the data which captures a significant or interesting finding about the data or the research questions.

"Transcript" is the term used to describe a written record of an interview showing the conversation that took place between the interviewer and interviewee.

6 . Methods to produce the Student voices: experiences of the rising cost of living data

How we collect the data

The findings presented in the [Student voices: experiences of the rising cost of living](#) article are derived from qualitative research undertaken by the Office for National Statistics and commissioned by the Department for Education. Fieldwork took place during May 2023.

The study explored how the increased cost of living has affected higher education students in England.

The main research questions were:

- How has the rising cost of living impacted students' financial situations?
- How has the rising cost of living impacted students' experiences?

The findings were based on semi-structured interviews with 25 participants. All participants were studying at one of 20 higher education institutions in England. The universities invited to interview were:

- Aston University
- Birmingham City University
- De Montfort University
- University of Derby
- University of Essex
- University of Gloucestershire
- University of Greenwich
- University of Kent
- Leeds Beckett University
- University of Leeds
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- University of Manchester
- University of Northampton
- Northumbria University, Newcastle
- University of Sheffield
- Sheffield Hallam University
- University of Suffolk
- University of Winchester
- University of Wolverhampton
- University of York

Students who had previously completed an online Student Cost of Living Insights Study survey and consented to be re-contacted for further research were invited via email to participate in the qualitative research. The email was sent to a random subsample of 436 students, which equated to one-third of the sample frame.

The invite included information about the research and a link to an online expression of interest form. Responses were used to draw a purposive sample which included participants with a range of different circumstances. The final sample included a mix of undergraduate and postgraduate students, domestic and international students, and mature students.

Prior to interview, participants were provided with further information about the study and details of relevant support services. Participation of selected students was supported by offering a choice of appointment times, rescheduling when necessary, sending email reminders, meeting accessibility requirements and by interviewers being mindful when discussing sensitive topic areas.

Fieldwork took place between 2 May and 19 May 2023. Interviews were conducted and recorded online using Microsoft Teams. Participants were interviewed by Office for National Statistics researchers, with interview teams comprising of one interviewer and one observer. Informed verbal consent was sought at the start of each interview. Participants were asked about how the rising cost of living affected them in the 2022 to 2023 academic year. The interview questions covered how the rising cost of living had affected their spending habits, income sources, academic experience, social experience, mental and physical health, their plans after university and their decision to remain at university.

The average duration of the interviews was 30 minutes. Participants were thanked for their time and effort through a £50 e-voucher.

The recorded interviews were sent securely to Language Empire, the Office for National Statistics' contracted transcription service. Transcripts were then anonymised by Office for National Statistics researchers. All recordings were deleted after analysis was completed.

How we process the data

In the first stage of data processing, each member of the research team coded transcripts independently. The codes from these initial five transcripts were developed into a single coding framework. The framework was discussed, reviewed and refined within the team through an iterative process until all 25 transcripts were coded. Relevant quotes from all 25 transcripts were compiled for each code in the final coding framework. Coding was carried out using Microsoft OneNote and with continual reference to the research questions.

How we analyse and interpret the data

The research team reviewed the fully-coded quotes and identified important patterns in the data through thematic analysis. Each of these patterns, or "themes", had a centralised idea or important point, were distinct from other themes and answered the underlying research questions. Researchers compared, discussed and refined these themes and populated each with relevant interview quotes to ensure themes were accurate, justified and representative.

The final themes were:

- students have struggled with the cost of living increases seen in the last academic year
- financial support from family was increasingly important but was not an option for all students
- many students had to work, use savings or take on additional debt to cover rising costs
- students' health and well-being were negatively affected by the rising cost of living
- students' academic experience was negatively affected by the rising cost of living

How we quality assure and validate the data

Transcriptions by Language Empire, the Office for National Statistics' contracted transcription service, were quality assured by listening back to a sub-sample of the original recordings verbatim and assessing deviations. Transcription was determined to have been completed to a high quality. Transcripts were anonymised by Office for National Statistics researchers.

Coded transcripts were quality assured by Office for National Statistics researchers outside of the project to ensure that all codes had been correctly assigned, to consider if quotes were relevant to multiple codes and to assess if additional codes needed to be included in the coding framework. One-third of the transcripts (eight transcripts) were assessed. Transcript coding was found to be consistent and thorough.

All quotes selected to be included in the publication were additionally verified by manually listening back to the original interview recordings to ensure accuracy.

Interim findings were shared with the Department for Education and subsequent follow up was conducted to ensure that the analysis had met user needs and had effectively answered the research questions.

How we disseminate the data

Findings from the data have been presented in the Office for National Statistics article: [Student voices: experiences of the rising cost of living](#).

There are no datasets to accompany this study because this is a qualitative study; however, direct quotes have been included in the article.

Interviews were anonymous, so some real quotes have been grouped and presented as fictional personas. These personas are not intended to represent a single individual, but to personalise the findings around the general student experience.

The findings have been presented alongside statistics previously published in the [Cost of living and higher education students, England \(30 January to 13 February 2023\)](#) release.

7 . Related links

[Student voices: experiences of the rising cost of living](#)

Article | Released 6 September 2023

Insights from interviews with higher education students on the impact of the increased cost of living in England.

[Cost of living and higher education students, England: 30 January to 13 February 2023](#)

Statistical bulletin | Released 24 February 2023

Experimental statistics from the Student Cost of Living Insights Study (SCoLIS) in England. Includes information on the behaviours, plans, opinions and well-being of higher education students in the context of the increases in cost-of-living.

[Cost of living and higher education students, England: 30 January to 13 February 2023](#)

Dataset | Released 24 February 2022

Statistics based on a survey of 1,964 higher education students in England, who participated in the second wave of the Students Cost of Living Insights Study (conducted 30 January - 13 February 2023).

[Cost of living and higher education students, England: 24 October to 7 November 2022](#)

Statistical bulletin | Released 23 November 2022

Experimental statistics on the behaviours, plans, opinions and well-being of students related to the cost of living. From the Student Cost of Living Insights Study (SCoLIS).

[Student support for higher education in England 2022](#)

Statistical bulletin | Released 24 November 2022

Statistical publication on the student support awarded to applicants and paid to students or their higher education provider for academic years up to 2021/22 with an early indication of academic year 2022/23 figures for domiciled students in England.

[Higher education student finance for the 2022 to 2023 academic year - equality analysis](#)

Analysis | Released November 2021

Equality analysis on how changes made to student finance regulations for the 2022 to 2023 academic year will affect specific protected groups.

[Consumer price inflation, UK: October 2022](#)

Statistical bulletin | Released 14 December 2022

Price indices, percentage changes, and weights for the different measures of consumer price inflation.

8 . Cite this methodology

Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 6 September 2022, ONS website, methodology, [Student experiences of the increased cost of living QMI](#)