
STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH UNDER PRESSURE

A qualitative research on the effects
of the neoliberal university on the
mental health of students during the
COVID-19 pandemic

MELISSA GRIFFIOEN | S1080054
SUPERVISOR: OLIVIER THOMAS KRAMSCH
Radboud University | MASTER HUMAN GEOGRAPHY
CONFLICT, TERRITORIES & IDENTITIES
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Melissa Griffioen
S1080054
melissa.griffioen@ru.nl

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Radboud Universiteit

Supervisor Radboud University:

dr. O.T. Kramsch

Abstract

The student population experiences relatively more mental health problems than other population groups, as since the rise of the neoliberal university student mental health has declined. Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic, the mental health of students worldwide declined even further. This research aims to deepen the understanding of what role the neoliberal university plays on the mental health of both Dutch- and international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the following question is answered:

What is the role of the neoliberal university during the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of Dutch- and international students?

This thesis consists of qualitative research where both Dutch- and international students were interviewed on their experiences with mental health and the neoliberal university during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, two student psychologists were interviewed about their experiences with student mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. From the interviews, the following results were found.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the effect of the neoliberal university on international students was non-existent, while the effect was more prominent in Dutch students. It became clear that the COVID-19 pandemic had an immense impact on the mental health of both Dutch- and international students. However, the impact on the mental health of Dutch- and international students expressed itself in a different way. The Dutch students were worried more about studying online and not being able to see their friends while the international students worried about not being able to go back home, finding a place to live in the Netherlands and often felt homesick. Often named consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic were stress, loneliness, increase in alcohol- and drug use, anxiety and depression. The international students were in general more positive about the reactions of Dutch universities concerning mental health while the Dutch students had a more outspoken opinion. In general, the students feel like the universities put too much pressure on students and would like to see more support from universities concerning student mental health.

In addition, this research provided four recommendations for the Radboud University concerning student mental health, which are applicable for other universities as well:

1. Re-shape student mental health through seeking more input from students themselves. The input of students will make sure that the resources fit their needs concerning mental health better and makes it more likely that students will use the resources.
2. Include mental health in all introduction programmes. Talking openly about mental health and giving students a clear overview of where to go when they need mental support shows that the Radboud University cares about student mental health. In addition, this will lessen the stigma that still exists about seeking mental help.
3. Student mental health should be the number one priority of Radboud University. However, this research showed that there is for example no budget for more student psychologists. If the Radboud University wants to improve student mental health, more resources should be made available.

4. There should be a more accessible solution for students who need mental support so students are helped earlier and the pressure on other Student Support systems like student psychologists lower.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Student mental health, Neoliberal university

Preface

This thesis marks the end of my Master studies at Radboud University Nijmegen and the end of my student life as a whole. This report is the final product of seven months of dedicated research. This research would not have been completed without the help of many people. First of all I would like to thank my supervisor Olivier Kramsch for his support and valuable suggestions throughout my research process. His own passion for the wellbeing of university students kept me motivated throughout the past months. Furthermore, I would like to thank student psychologists Jerre Mijnaerends and Andreas Galipò for taking the time for an interview while having such a busy schedule. Both interviews contributed a lot to this thesis and offered a different point of view on the topic. Additionally, I want to thank all ten students for their openness during the interviews I conducted for this research. I am aware of the fact that mental health can be a sensitive topic, this also shows when reading the results of this thesis. However, all ten students answered all the questions I had even if the answers were not always easy, which is something I have a lot of respect for. Last but not least I want to thank my family and friends for their endless support throughout the past few months. Especially, I want to thank the friends who were also writing their thesis the whole summer. Without motivating each other to continue even when all our other friends were on holiday and it was 30 degrees outside, this thesis would not have been finished yet.

I hope you enjoy reading my thesis!

Melissa Griffioen

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1. Introduction

1.1 Motivation and research question

Since December 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has been spreading throughout the world. Apart from the risk of sickness or death from infection, the pandemic has also brought unbearable psychological pressure (Cao et al., 2020). This makes the COVID-19 pandemic a mental health risk for society. The uncertainty, the anxiety, the fear of becoming ill or seeing a loved one become ill, the loss of our normal routines, the difficulties of social connection, and in many cases the disruption to education have a profound impact on the world's mental health (YoungMinds, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has been especially difficult for students, as students experience relatively more mental health problems than other population groups. This was the case even before the COVID-19 pandemic, as since the rise of the neoliberal university student mental health has declined (Berg, Huijbens & Larsen, 2016). However, due to the isolation measures and closing of universities even more students started experiencing mental health problems (Caring Universities, 2020). In the Netherlands, concerns about the mental state of students have been rising for the past two years. Different researchers conclude that students are experiencing more anxiety and depression due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Caring Universities, 2020; Grubic, Badovinac & Johri, 2020; Kwong et al., 2020; Youngminds, 2020). One of the concerns is the rising mental health problems in combination with problematic alcohol use and unsafe drug use (Rijksoverheid, 2021; Trimbos, 2021). To research what role the neoliberal university plays on the mental health of Dutch- and international students during the COVID-19 pandemic, the following research question has been composed:

What is the role of the neoliberal university during the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of Dutch- and international students?

To answer the research question, the following sub-questions have been composed:

- *In what way has the neoliberal university affected student mental health before the COVID-19 pandemic?*
- *To what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the mental health of Dutch- and international students in the Netherlands?*
- *How have Dutch universities reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic concerning student mental health?*

1.2 Societal relevance

The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified existing social, economic and political inequities (Chang, Agliata & Guarinieri, 2020). According to a recent study from the Well Being Trust, the high levels of stress, isolation and unemployment due to the COVID-19 pandemic could cause up to 75,000 'deaths of despair' related to deaths to drug, alcohol and suicide (Petterson, Westfall & Miller, 2020). The research of Kwong et al. (2020) on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on society shows that the percentage of individuals with anxiety almost doubled during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to pre-pandemic levels. He emphasises that the mental health problems are not just an initial reaction but potentially the start of a

persistent problem that extends beyond the pandemic. According to Kwong et al. (2020) all efforts must be made to address risk groups who could be disproportionately affected as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and related measures.

The focus of this thesis will lay on university students, as even before the COVID-19 pandemic, heightened levels of psychological distress were more common among students than other population groups. The neoliberal university has a lot of consequences on student mental health and since the spread of the pandemic, strict isolation measures and delays in starting universities across the world has influenced the mental health of university students even more (Cao et al., 2020). This is also concluded in a survey conducted by Caring Universities (2020), which showed that Dutch students experienced more depression and anxiety during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to the years before.

More research on this topic may help with informing student-centred support programs and lessen the long-term negative implications for student education and mental health (Grubic, Badovinac & Johri, 2020). University students are at risk of psychological distress in the case of traumatic events. The evolution of the pandemic is uncertain and may have long-term effects on mental health. Therefore, it is crucial to study the most effective interventions to identify vulnerable subgroups and to plan for acute and long-term psychological services to control and reduce the burden of psychological problems (Villani et al., 2021). This thesis will help with better understanding the potential ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on university students' mental health.

1.3 Scientific relevance

As discussed above, there already has been research published on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of students. All researchers conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic has a negative effect on mental health. However, there is still a lot unknown about the subject and more research is needed. In the Netherlands, most research has been done by the Trimbos Institute, the Dutch Institute for mental healthcare, addiction treatment and social care. However, all research has focussed on quantitative data. This thesis will focus on qualitative research, which I feel is missing in the existing literature. In this way, a more human aspect will be highlighted, which is important concerning this very sensitive topic. Furthermore, no research has included the role of the neoliberal university into the mental health effects of students during the COVID-19 pandemic. To conclude, further research should be done on students under the present dominant neoliberalist ideology as they face current mental health issues related to the neoliberal university and the COVID-19 pandemic (Desierto & De Maio, 2020).

2. Theoretical framework

In this theoretical framework the relevant literature will be discussed. Firstly, mental health in general and the mental health of students before the COVID-19 pandemic will be discussed. Secondly, The neoliberal university and its effects on the mental health of students before the COVID-19 pandemic will be explained. After that more information about the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the mental health of the population in general and specifically on students will be given. Other difficulties for students during the COVID-19 pandemic will also be discussed. Furthermore, the drug and alcohol (ab)use among students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic will be analysed. Finally, the reaction of Dutch universities on the COVID-19 pandemic will be explained.

2.1 Mental health

In this thesis, the mental health of students will be researched. The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2009) defines mental health as ‘a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community’ (p. 1). Bad mental health often leads to a mental disorder. A mental disorder is a ‘clinically significant behavioural or psychological syndrome or pattern that occurs in an individual and that is associated with present distress or disability or with a significantly increased risk of suffering death, pain, disability, or an important loss of freedom,’ which results from ‘a manifestation of a behavioural, psychological, or biological dysfunction in the individual’ (Ahmedani, 2011 pp. 2).

In 2001, the WHO reported that 25 percent of the worldwide population is affected by a mental or behavioural disorder at some time in their lives (WHO, 2001). However, individuals who are in need of care often do not seek help, and those that seek help often do not complete the recommended treatment plan (Ahmedani, 2011). Over the past years, mental health and wellbeing are seen as priority areas by the WHO, the World Bank and government leaders’ (Knapp, McDaid, Mossialos & Thornicroft, 2007). Mental health problems affect all people regardless of age, gender, religion or race. However, mental health problems are most prevalent in young people as three quarters of the people who develop a mental illness do so between the ages of 16 and 25 (Martin, 2010).

2.2 Mental health of students before the COVID-19 pandemic

University students are confronted with multiple stressors, such as academic pressure, concerns about the future, life-stage transitions and financial worries. All of the stressors can cause the occurrence of mental health problems. For this reason, university students are seen as a group generally at risk for developing common mental health disorders and university students show higher levels of mental health disorders when compared to people of the same age that are not university students (Negash, 2021).

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, heightened levels of psychological distress and negative academic consequences were common among students. According to a research of Caring Universities (2020) one in three students worldwide experiences psychological problems such as sadness, anxiety and stress. Other common psychological problems among students are procrastination, perfectionism, performance anxiety, lack of confidence

and sleeping problems (Caring Universities, 2020). According to a survey from the National Union of Students in the United Kingdom, 33 percent of the students has had suicidal thoughts. Among the students who did not identify as heterosexual, the figure was higher at 55 percent. More than half of the students who reported having experienced mental health problems did not seek support (Gil, 2015). This makes student mental health a growing public and political concern (Priestley, 2019). Over the past ten years there has been a fivefold increase in the number of students who disclose a mental health condition to their institution in the United Kingdom (Thorley, 2017). Depression and anxiety make up for 75 percent of the mental health conditions (Priestley, 2019).

However, despite the increasing need for mental health care services at universities, many students do not seek help because of the stigma around mental health (Slavin, Schindler & Chibnall, 2014). For example, a person with a mental illness is often stereotyped as someone who is unpredictable and possibly dangerous (Martin, 2010). The stigma around mental health has immense consequences, as alarmingly, only a small portion of students committing suicide have sought help in the past (Son et al., 2020).

2.3 The Neoliberal University

In the 1980's and early 1990's, shifts in thinking about the economy, politics and culture occurred in many countries. The post-war welfare state was replaced by a neoliberal offensive initiated for example by Thatcher and Reagan who saw the government as the problem instead as the solution. In an attempt to reduce state intervention, privatisation, deregulation, commodification and other market mechanisms were deployed (Karsten, 1999; Giroux, 2017). Neoliberalists believe that governance should be market-driven, social needs should overpower self-interests and that finance culture should govern all of social life (Giroux, 2017). The term neoliberalism in short can be seen as: 'a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms' (Brown, 2015, p. 17) or as: 'a complex, often incoherent, unstable and even contradictory set of practices that are organised around a certain imagination of the "market" as a basis for the universalisation of market-based social relations, with the corresponding penetration in almost every single aspect of our lives' (Shamir, 2008, p. 3). Neoliberalism also has a big influence on education (Karsten, 1999), as higher education should serve corporate interests rather than the public good in neoliberal thinking (Giroux, 2017). This has led to academia becoming economised, which is often referred to as the 'neoliberal university' (Berg, Huijbens & Larsen, 2016).

The term 'neoliberal university' entails that the world of higher education has itself been restructured around market logic, in a way that also non profit universities have become business and can no longer be imagined as a public good (Vernon, 2018). An increasing number of scholars criticise the rise of neoliberalism in universities (Adler, 2018) and conclude that neoliberal education is failing as neoliberal policies are not working for wider educational objectives beyond the exchange of capital (Priestley, 2019).

Over the past few decades, the neoliberal university has spread throughout many developed countries (Troiani & Dutson, 2021) and neoliberalism is now the dominant ideology of global higher education (Desierto & De Maio, 2020). Scholars such as Troiani & Dutson (2021) conclude that the shift to neoliberal universities causes higher education to change from liberal, openly accessible, lesser time pressured and broadly based education to higher

education that only focuses on commercialisation and marketisation of teaching and research for industry and business. This has led to universities operating more like a private corporation which focuses on profit-making while universities are responsible for safeguarding and sustaining critical theory and engaged citizenship (Giroux, 2017). According to Giroux (2017) neoliberalism even attacks higher education as a democratic institution while it should be defended as a public good. 'Higher education should be indispensable to creating the formative culture necessary for students to learn how to govern rather than be governed. Only through such a formative and critical educational culture can students learn how to become individual and social agents, rather than disengaged spectators or uncritical consumers. At the very least, they should learn how to think otherwise and to act upon civic commitments that "necessitate a reordering of basic power arrangements" fundamental to promoting the common good and producing a strong democracy' (Giroux, 2017. p. 10).

2.4 The Effects of the neoliberal university on mental health

Several scholars conclude that the neoliberalisation of academia has had an effect on the mental health of students and staff (Berg, Huijbens & Larsen, 2016) as the neoliberal university has caused higher levels of mental illness, stress and anxiety (Giroux, 2017). The economisation of academia comes with multiple consequences according to Berg, Huijbens & Larsen (2016):

- Reinforcing competition between individual students, individual academics, academic departments, academic institutions and academic disciplines;
- Transforming the academic subject from labourer to human capital;
- Favouring the market valuation of academic scholarship;
- Fostering short-termism (in grants, in writing, in publishing) so as to be seen as 'path-breaking';
- Necessitating, monitoring and accounting systems to ensure both 'value-for-money' and 'control of control' for those who fund research and teaching;
- Encouraging and facilitating 'fast policy-transfer' from centres of calculation - top research universities - to more marginal academic institutions; and
- Producing new understandings of local, national, and international scales of knowledge production.

The creation of intensified forms of competition have had significant impacts on academia in the past two decades (Berg, Huijbens & Larsen, 2016). Universities have become increasingly corporatised. At the same time, over the last couple of decades, mental health among students has declined and the problems that students present have become more complex and severe. This corporatisation of universities has led to students being treated as customers instead of human beings when it comes to mental health which ignores the complexity of care needed (Bal, Grassiani & Kirk, 2014; Desierto & De Maio, 2020; Giroux, 2017; Iarovici, 2015; Saunders & Ramirez, 2017).

In the neoliberal university, students are pushed and trained to become competitive, productive, entrepreneurs that are highly employable and quick to contribute to industry markets (Giroux, 2017). Curran & Hill (2017) conclude that the current generation of university students have higher expectations of themselves and that people on the outside

have higher expectations of university students. Priestley (2019) argues for example, that 'student depression and anxiety are conditions that are (re)defined by, produced by, and (re)produce neoliberalism' (p. 184). Hall & Bowles (2016) agree with Priestly and state that 'the anxiety currently manifest in higher education is not an unintended consequence or malfunction, but is inherent in the design of a system driven by improving productivity and the potential for the accumulation of capital' (p. 33). Neoliberal policy factors are related to student experiences of depression and anxiety (Priestly, 2019). Other psychological problems linked to neoliberal policies in higher education are suicidal thoughts and eating disorders (Curran & Hill, 2017). This stops students from becoming effective, lifelong learners who can contribute to a better society (Desierto & De Maio, 2020). However, while increasing attention is paid to the effects of neoliberalism on universities, the impact on students is under-researched (Karter, Robbins & McInerney, 2021).

Neoliberalist policies have also contributed to student inequality (Berry & Edmond, 2014; Giroux, 2017), for example through escalating student debt, which is considered as positive in neoliberalist ideology (Haiven, 2019; Hudson, 2019; Nissen, Hayward & McManus, 2019). However, student debt in higher education affects students' mental health. Students in debt are less successful in their studies, less committed and more likely to drop out of their studies. They are also more likely to graduate with a lower overall financial worth than students who were able to graduate without debt (Nissen, Hayward & McManus, 2019). All over the world, student debts are high. The highest student debt rates are in the United Kingdom (with the United States second); in the United Kingdom university students graduate with an average debt of 50,000 UK pounds (Nissen, Hayward & McManus, 2019), which is approximately 59,000 euros. The average student debt in the Netherlands is 15,000 euros (CBS, 2021).

The neoliberal university does not only have a lot of impact on students, academic faculty members also suffer from the 'culture of perfection' (Berg, Huijbens & Larsen, 2016). Every year faculty members have to keep up: more publications, more research grants, more students (Ball, 2012; Desierto & De Maio, 2020). The situation has been heightened further because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the turn toward more focused remote working and digital production (Troiani & Dutson, 2021).

2.5 The COVID-19 pandemic

In December 2019, the first COVID-19 cases were reported in Wuhan, China, after which it has rapidly spread over the world. The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared a pandemic on March 12th, 2020. The world has paid a high toll in the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of human lives lost, economic repercussions and increased poverty (Ciotti et al., 2020). In September 2022, two and a half years after the start of the pandemic, there have been over 590 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and over 6.44 million deaths worldwide (WHO, 2022).

To deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, countries all over the world cautioned the public to take responsive care, for example through handwashing, wearing face masks, keeping physical distance and avoiding mass gatherings. To flatten the curve and control the transmission of COVID-19, lockdown and staying home strategies were implemented

(Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). However, the measures have an effect on the mental health of people all over the world.

2.6 The COVID-19 pandemic and mental health

Epidemics and pandemics have always been present in human history. Only in the last century, the Spanish flu, the Asiatic flu, SARS, the Swine flu and Ebola have affected people all over the world. Different researches have been done to examine the psychological symptoms arising from epidemics and pandemics, also called disaster mental health (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). All research suggests that measures like quarantine, isolation and social distancing have had an impact on the psychological wellbeing of people during the past epidemics and pandemics. One year after the SARS epidemic for example, SARS survivors still had elevated stress levels and high levels of depression, anxiety and posttraumatic symptoms (Telavi et al., 2020).

Telavi et al. (2020) researched the psychological reactions to pandemics. The reactions include maladaptive behaviours, emotional distress and defensive responses: anxiety, fear, frustration, loneliness, anger, boredom, depression, stress, avoidance behaviours. During modern pandemics, a new reaction known as 'headline stress disorder' can be observed. It is characterised by high emotional response, as stress and anxiety, to endless reports from the news media, that may cause physical symptoms including palpitation and insomnia.

The same goes for the COVID-19 pandemic, it does not only threaten physical health: global public health and social systems are collapsing under the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic is having an immense psychological impact on individuals. In the initial stage of the COVID-19 outbreak, people experienced psychological distress in terms of anxiety, depression and post traumatic symptoms. Health workers and patients affected by COVID-19 showed more severe symptoms. The female gender and young people also showed heavier symptoms (Telavi et al., 2020).

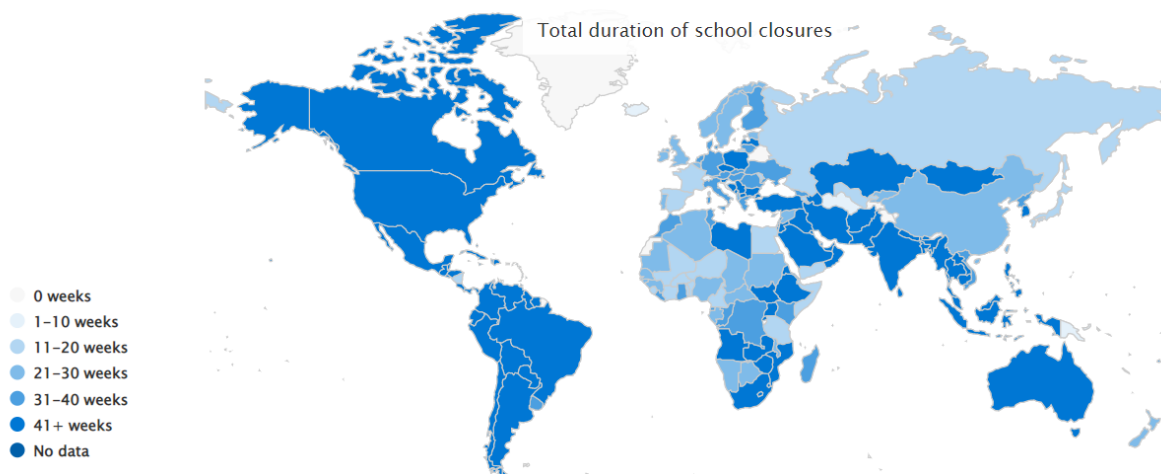
Beyond stresses inherent in the illness itself, mass home-confinement directives (including stay at-home orders, quarantine, and isolation) are new to most people and raise concern about how people will react individually and collectively. A recent review of psychological sequelae in samples of quarantined people and of health care providers may be instructive; it revealed numerous emotional outcomes, including stress, depression, irritability, insomnia, fear, confusion, anger, frustration, boredom, and stigma associated with quarantine, some of which persisted after the quarantine was lifted. Specific stressors included greater duration of confinement, having inadequate supplies, difficulty securing medical care and medications, and resulting financial losses (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020 pp. 511).

2.7 The effects of COVID-19 on the mental health of students

As mentioned before, for university students, heightened levels of psychological distress and negative academic consequences are common under normal circumstances (American College Health Association, 2019). However, the COVID-19 pandemic is the greatest challenge that the education systems have ever faced (Daniel, 2020), as it has created the largest disruption of education systems in human history (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has affected nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 200 countries. Closures of schools, institutions and other learning spaces have impacted more than 94

percent of the world's student population. Figure 2.1 shows how long schools across the world were/are closed. Social distancing and restrictive movement policies have significantly disturbed traditional educational practices (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). This is expected to worsen academic pressure for students (Grubic, Badovinac & Johri, 2020; Kecojevic, Basch, Sullivan & Davi, 2020). The impact of the academic disruption can lead to reduced motivation towards studies, more pressure to learn independently, abandonment of daily routines and higher rates of dropouts as a consequence of the COVID-19 measures. The COVID-19 pandemic has thus placed a mental health burden on students (Grubic, Badovinac & Johri, 2020).

Figure 2.1: Total duration of school closures due to COVID-19 worldwide



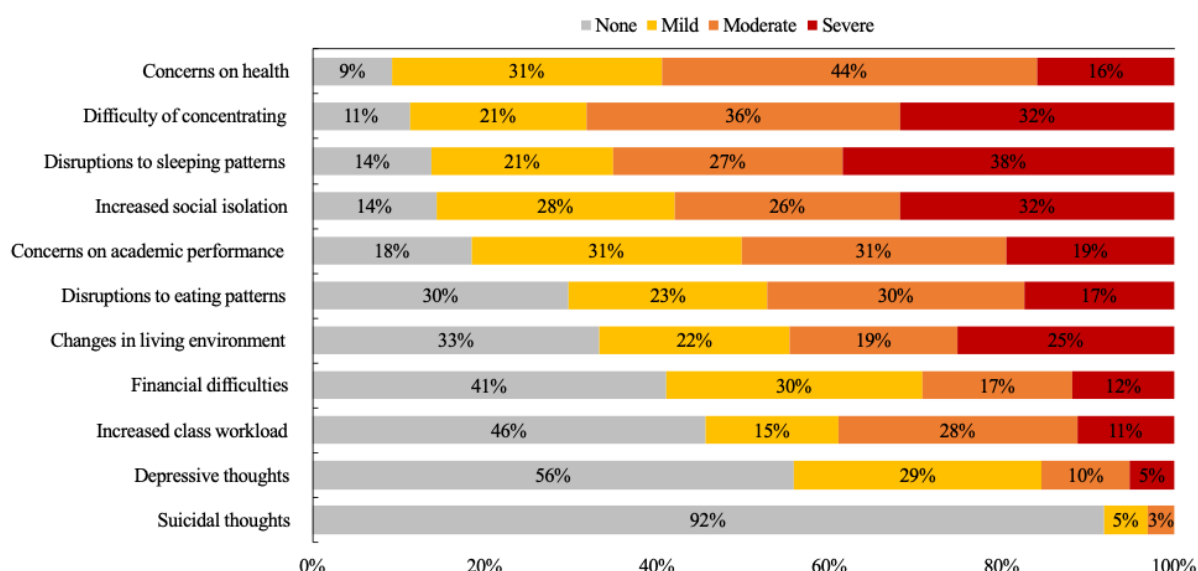
Source: UNESCO (2022)

The research of Cao et al. (2020) supports this. The survey conducted indicated that 24,9 percent of the students experienced anxiety because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on their studies and future employment plays a big role in the anxiety of university students. This is also the case in Youngminds' (2020) research, where the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students who have a history of mental health problems was researched. When asked what impact the pandemic was having in their mental health, 32 percent agreed that it made their mental health much worse, 51 percent agreed that it had made their mental health a bit worse, 9 percent agreed that it made no difference to their mental health, 6 percent said that their mental health had become a bit better and 1 percent said that it their mental health had become much better. One of the main reasons that affected their mental health was that students were concerned about universities closing. The students were anxious about the potential loss of contact with friends, how their grades would be assessed and about the impact of their career prospects.

Another research on anxiety in young adults through COVID-19 restrictions concluded that the percentage of individuals with anxiety almost doubled during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to pre-pandemic levels (Kwong et al., 2020). Another important conclusion is that findings suggest that anxiety in response to COVID-19 is not just an initial reaction but potentially the start of a persistent problem that extends beyond the pandemic. According to Kwong et al. (2020) efforts must be made to address risk groups who could be

disproportionately affected as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and related measures. As can be seen in figure 2.2, Son et al. (2020) also conclude in their research on university students in the United States, that university students suffer from multiple mental health issues due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 2.2: University students' ratings on mental health aspects during COVID-19



Source: Son et al. (2020)

Caring Universities (2020) researched the mental health of Dutch students spread over three universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most important results are that 52.5 percent of Dutch students feel more lonely than before the COVID-19 pandemic and 44.6 percent of the Dutch students feel more sad than before the COVID-19 pandemic. The percentage of students with moderate to severe depression is 10.6 percent higher than before the COVID-19 pandemic. They also conclude that when comparing the data of students to the rest of the Dutch population, students have relatively more mental health problems.

In the majority of the countries, schools have opened again supported by health safety protocols and vaccination programmes. However, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2022) states that tremendous costs have been made concerning learning losses, mental health and drop-outs. To avoid a generational tragedy and recover the educational system, prioritising education as a public good is essential. To be more resilient, equitable and inclusive, education systems must transform, leveraging technology to benefit all learners and building on the innovations and partnerships catalysed throughout this crisis (UNESCO, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic also led to multiple other encounters for students, which will be discussed below.

Getting the blame

During the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, students often felt blamed or stigmatised as a group for the spread of COVID-19. Most students felt blamed by the perception of the media (including social media) or public discourse (including comments directed towards or overheard by students) (Butler-Warke, Mueller-Hirth, Woods & Timmins, 2021). However, research shows that blaming students has the opposite effect, as it makes students less likely to work with contact tracers and less open about symptoms they may have (Syal, 2020).

Financial concerns

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic students often experienced financial concerns (Negash et al., 2021; Nissen, Hayward & McManus, 2019). For many students, the COVID-19 pandemic also has a financial impact, with the additional costs of studying at home and the loss of part-time jobs (Butler-Warke, Mueller-Hirth, Woods & Timmins, 2021). Financial insecurity is settling in for many students, especially students from lower-income backgrounds (Markowitz, 2020). In Germany for example, 25 percent of the students reported having a worsened financial situation than in the time before the COVID-19 pandemic. Worsened financial situations were associated with migration background, parents not being academics, not being able to borrow money and payment of tuition fee by student and loan. This financial insecurity is putting students in a stressful situation and is affecting their mental health (Negash et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic may increase social inequalities among students, as students from non-academic families more frequently rely on employment to finance their livelihood compared to students who come from academic families. Non-academic parents in return were more affected by job loss during the COVID-19 pandemic which may affect the financial support for the students. This has a negative effect on the mental health of students, as a worsened financial situation for students is associated with more depressive symptoms (Negash et al., 2021).

2.8 The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of international students

Because of the neoliberal policies, universities have to look for alternative financial funding as universities are no longer fully financed by the government. In the neoliberal university, international students are important as they bring in a lot of money (Hyatt, Shear & Wright, 2015). Because the neoliberal universities have to stimulate economic growth, a lot of international students are attracted (Carswell, 2010).

Over the past decades, the dream of many students of studying abroad has led to a rapid escalation in student outbound mobility (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). Worldwide, there are approximately 5.3 million international students (UNESCO, 2020). In 2021-2022, 115.000 international students studied in the Netherlands (NOS, 2022). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, international students were more prone to mental health issues than domestic students. International students faced a range of challenges, for example acclimatising to a new culture and language, different methods of learning, different learning conditions and isolation from their social support at home (Harrison & Ip, 2013). International

students also struggled more with the local medical system and were less likely to seek psychological help (Alharbi & Smith, 2018).

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, multiple challenges have threatened the mental health of the international students even more (Chen, Li, Wu & Tong, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has isolated international students as they have less access to public resources due to informational, language or cultural barriers. The mental health of international students worldwide has been severely affected, mostly because of anxiety about their families and friends, meeting their daily needs, isolation and in the case of Asian international students racism and exclusion (Fronek et al., 2021). Universities also often neglect the specific needs of international students as they are the minority. For example, some campuses closed without taking into consideration that international students do not have a residence outside of the campus or the opportunity to safely return home as the borders closed (Sahu, 2020). International students are struggling to continue their studies whilst dealing with being away from their family and friends and having to isolate themselves in their rooms, which has a negative effect on their mental health.

Just as domestic students during the COVID-19 pandemic, international students also suffer financially. Contrary to the belief that all international students are well-off, most international students pay for their studies abroad through high student loans or loans from their parents (Tannock, 2018). In most countries the financial support for international students is not enough and definitely disproportionate to how much money international students bring to the countries' economy (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). Many international students feel angry and dissatisfied with the lack of support from the governments and universities on how they have been treated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fronek et al., 2021; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020).

The psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic may also lead, for both Dutch- and international students, to unhealthy behaviours such as excessive substance use (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). Below, the substance use of students before the COVID-19 pandemic will be discussed, after which substance use during the COVID-19 pandemic is analysed.

2.9 Alcohol- and drug (ab)use among students

2.9.1 Alcohol (ab)use among students

Young people's consumption of alcohol is an ongoing problem (Cox & Blount, 1998). Many young people drink alcohol excessively in binges, which can result in serious negative consequences (Cox et al., 2006). Intentional intoxication or drinking to get drunk has become the norm in youth cultures in developed countries. University is a central place for students' drinking practice (Supski, Lindsay & Tanner, 2017). Heavy and/or frequent drinking by university students has been identified as a health issue in several developed countries (Wicki, Kuntsche & Gmel, 2010). In university context, drinking is understood as liberating, pleasurable and an activity central to belonging at university and being a student. Drinking alcohol is seen as having fun and making the most out of youth, most students see alcohol as bettering the quality of time they spend with friends (Szmigin et al., 2008). However, there is also peer pressure to drink among university students. Not drinking alcohol is often seen

as being uptight or boring, which can lead to social exclusion (Supski, Lindsay & Tanner, 2017).

Reasons for drinking alcohol can be classified in two categories: positive reinforcement drinking and negative reinforcement drinking (Williams & Clark, 1998). The most common reason for alcohol use among students are social motives such as 'pleasure', to 'have a good time' or because students 'like the taste of alcoholic beverages' (Wicki, Kuntsche & Gmel, 2010), this can be seen as positive reinforcement drinking (Williams & Clark, 1998). Less students consume alcohol because of conformity motives like 'social pressure' or as a coping mechanism such as 'drinking when being sad' or 'drinking to cope with stress, anxiety or tension' (Wicki, Kuntsche & Gmel, 2010), this can be seen as negative reinforcement drinking (Williams & Clark, 1998). Negative reinforcement drinking is associated with greater risks for alcohol-related problems than positive reinforcement drinking. Negative reinforcement drinking can also lead to academic neglect (Digdon & Landry, 2013).

In Europe, male students are more likely to drink alcohol, consume alcohol at a higher frequency and have a higher volume of alcohol consumption. Male students have a more hazardous and harmful pattern of alcohol consumption and are more likely to 'abuse alcohol', meaning that they are dependent on alcohol (Wicki, Kuntsche & Gmel, 2010). Students who drink heavily during their time in university mostly do not continue to do so after university (Arnett, 2000). However, students who drink alcohol for coping motives may not outgrow this habit (Digdon & Landry, 2013).

The Trimbos Institute researches alcohol- and drug use among Dutch students. Their research of 2015 shows that among all university students, 17 percent are excessive drinkers. A man is an excessive drinker when he drinks more than 21 glasses of alcohol a week, for a woman this is 14 glasses a week (Trimbos Institute, 2015).

2.9.2 Drug (ab)use among students

During their time in university, students do not only experiment with alcohol but also with drugs (Van Hal, 2018). Specific numbers on drug use among students is limited, as research rarely focuses on only students. The Trimbos Institute (2015) collected three researches that did focus on students. However, the results from the three studies vary. The results of students who have used cannabis at least once, varies between 19 percent and 87 percent and the use of ecstasy between 4 percent and 70 percent. The results of other drugs vary even more. Because of this variation, it is not possible to say what percentage of the students regularly use drugs like cocaine or GHB for example (Trimbos, 2015).

What we do know is that the use of party drugs (like XTC, cocaine and amphetamine) in the Netherlands is high compared to other European countries. Between the ages of 15-34 years, the use of XTC is estimated at 6,6 percent, which is the highest in Europe. The same goes for cocaine and amphetamine use. This number is higher among university students. In 2017 a research among university students in Groningen showed that 39,8 percent of the students have used party drugs in their lives. Members of students associations use significantly more party drugs compared to other students, 55,6 percent have used party drugs in the past year (Van den Bos, Sijtsma & Bieleman, 2017).

2.10 Drug and alcohol (ab)use among Dutch students during COVID-19

The psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic may lead to unhealthy behaviours such as excessive substance use (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). This is the case for some students who have started to drink more alcohol and/or use more drugs since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (S.O.S., 2020; Trimbos, 2021). According to Kecojevic, Basch, Sullivan & Davi (2020), further research is needed to address additional risk factors like substance use among students who are suffering from mental health problems due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 measures had a big impact on students, as for example their social life shut down. This also meant that students were not able to go out anymore, which had an effect on the alcohol- and drug use of students (S.O.S., 2020). One of the measures, for example, was the closing of all non-essential stores. This included coffee shops, which led to long queues, as can be seen in Figure 2.2.

Figure 2.3: Long queue in front of a coffee shop in Utrecht.



Source: Franck (2020)

Another research from the Trimbos Institute (2020) focused on partying and drug use during the first half year of the COVID-19 pandemic. While this research is not only focused on students, the results are still useful for this thesis as it is focused on all 'partygoers' and 62 percent of the respondents (n=3765) are higher educated. From the respondents, 89,3 percent of the partygoers felt isolated and 29,3 percent met the criteria of 'psychologically unhealthy' according to the international standard of mental health (The Mental Health Inventory 5). Moreover, more than a quarter (25,6 percent) of the respondents who used alcohol or drugs, had to deal with negative or unwanted effects during the COVID-19 pandemic.

'Studenten Onderzoeken Samen' (S.O.S., 2021) is an initiative from seven students across the Netherlands. With their research 'Lieve Mark' or 'Dear Mark' (referring to the Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte) they focussed on the welfare, needs and opinions of students concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. One of their main focus points was the (ab)use of drugs and alcohol among students. They asked 1249 respondents if they started using more alcohol or drugs since the pandemic, 41 percent of the respondents indicate that this is the case. 19 percent of the students started drinking more alcohol, 10 percent started to use

more drugs and 12 percent of the students started using both alcohol and drugs more. The main reasons for the increase in use is boredom, feeling better about themselves and because people around them also do (S.O.S., 2021).

2.11 The reaction of Dutch universities

All Dutch universities work with the Binding Study Advice, where first-year students have to earn a certain amount of credit to go through to their second year. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic many students encounter delays in their study programme. The central government has decided with universities that students who have suffered delays because of the COVID-19 pandemic, do not have to fulfil the Binding Study Advice until their second year. It is also possible for students to loan more money per month to deal with the possible more costs due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Rijksoverheid, 2020).

In April 2022, the “Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam” (VU Amsterdam) decided to abolish the cum-laude system from their medicine master. Per september 2021 the master started with pragmatic teaching, where the focus lies on learning and developing without grading the students. By abolishing grading and cum-laude, VU Amsterdam hopes to lower the pressure on students and that students will be stimulated to learn from feedback and will feel free to ask for help when students are performing less (VU Amsterdam, 2022).

3. Methodology

In this thesis the research question '*What is the role of the neoliberal university during the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of Dutch- and international students?*' will be answered. In this chapter, the methodology of this thesis will be discussed and the choices made will be justified. First, the choice for a qualitative research will be explained after which the relevance of in-depth interviews will be discussed. Thirdly, the operationalisation will be explained after which the topic lists are shown. Furthermore, more information about the respondents is given. Finally, the data analysis will be explained.

3.1 Qualitative research

This research will be conducted through qualitative research as the majority of studies describing the mental health effect of the pandemic on university students' have used quantitative methods such as surveys. Gubrium and Gubrium (2021) describe the importance of narrative methods to understand human impacts of an unprecedented global health event. Yet there have been few narrative studies seeking to better understand university students' experiences with mental health during the pandemic or their perceptions about the university response to the pandemic (Kaur et al., 2022).

This study used narrative methods to begin to address these gaps in knowledge. The study's aims were to gain a deeper understanding of Dutch and international students' lived experiences in the Netherlands in relation to mental health during the pandemic and to explore their experiences with perceived university support for student mental health. The study results could inform future studies that aim to develop and test the effectiveness of interventions to support university students' mental health.

3.2 Interviews

Interviews have been conducted as a means of data collection. Interviews are a research method that uses respondents' answers as research data (Denscombe, 2012). The focus of this thesis will lay on interviews as interviews are significant in unfolding opinions, experiences, values and various other aspects of the population under study (Showkat & Parveen, 2017). Interviews are particularly appropriate when dealing with complex issues, which requires in-depth information (Denscombe, 2012). As the mental health of Dutch- and international students during the COVID-19 pandemic can be considered a complex issue, interviews are regarded as a good method to gain better understanding of this subject.

When interviewing students, the in-depth interview method was used. As the topic of this thesis can be very sensitive, it is necessary to approach the interviews carefully. It is important for the interviewer to create a comfortable environment for the respondent. In-depth interviews are seen as a method of extracting more detailed information or deep understanding of a subject or concept. In-depth interviews are one of the most efficient methods of collecting primary data. The most important benefit of in-depth interviews is that it uncovers more detailed information than other data collection methods like for example surveys. In this way, this thesis will add a relevant discussion to the topic as all research done before has been conducted through surveys.

The type of interviews selected for this interview are semi-structured interviews. This interview method allows for more flexibility during the conversation, while still having a clear list of topics and questions based on the literature that need addressing. The flexibility gives the interviewee the opportunity to express her/his ideas and perhaps raise other issues within the topic, which had initially not been captured by the interviewer (Denscombe, 2012). As in-depth interviews are one of the most significant forms of data collection, no more than 10-15 people need to be interviewed (Showkat & Parveen, 2017).

In total, twelve individual interviews were conducted. Five Dutch students and five international students were interviewed on their experiences with mental health before and during COVID-19 and their opinions about the role of their university. It was attempted to interview the same number of Dutch- and international students, so that both were equally represented. Other relevant actors were interviewed as well. Student psychologists from the Radboud University and Utrecht University were interviewed on the mental health of students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this research, the student psychologists were an important source for information as they have dealt with student mental health for many years, thus also before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants of the study provided verbal consent to participate in the study and to have the session audio recorded. The participants were told the audio will only be used for transcribing the interview and will be deleted after. If a participant did not want to be recorded, detailed field notes would be taken. However, all the interviewees agreed to recording the interview. As the interview can be very personal, participants are also told at the beginning that they can always decline to answer a question if they do not feel comfortable answering.

3.3 Operationalisation

Based on the theoretical framework, the topic lists for the interviews with the Dutch students, international students and the student psychologists were composed.

3.3.1 Topic lists

Topic list Dutch students

General questions:

- What is your age?
- Where do you study?
- What do you study?
- How long have you been studying?
- Do you live with your parents, on your own or with roommates? How many?

Questions per sub question

1. In what way has the neoliberal university affected student mental health before the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Before the COVID-19 pandemic, had you ever struggled with mental health issues? Have you ever sought professional help for your struggles?
- Which of these issues were related to being a university student?

2. To what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the mental health of Dutch students in the Netherlands?

- What changed in your mental health compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How did you experience online studying?
- As a student, have you ever felt like you were blamed for the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Has the COVID-19 pandemic affected you financially?
- Do you think that living with/without roommates would have affected your mental health differently?
- Did you start drinking more alcohol since the COVID-19 pandemic? What were the reasons for drinking less or more?
- Have you ever used drugs? What kind of drugs? Did you use more drugs since the COVID-19 pandemic? What were the reasons?
- Do you feel like there is a stigma on mental health?
- Are you open with your friends and family about mental health?
- Have you sought professional help? What are the reasons for seeking or not seeking help?
- Have you had COVID-19 yourself or did you have to quarantine multiple times? How did you cope with quarantining?
- Do you feel like your mental health has improved since there are no COVID-19 restrictions anymore in the Netherlands?

3. How have Dutch universities reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic concerning student mental health?

- How do you feel that the university has supported students and their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic? (communication, resources available/quantity/quality of resources)
- What could the university have done better concerning student mental health during COVID-19 in your opinion?

Topic list international students

General questions:

- What is your age?
- Where do you study?
- What do you study?
- How long have you been studying?
- Where are you from?
- When did you move to the Netherlands?
- For how long are you studying in the Netherlands?
- Where do you live? With or without roommates?

Questions per sub question

1. In what way has the neoliberal university affected student mental health before the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Before the COVID-19 pandemic, had you ever struggled with mental health issues? Have you ever sought professional help for your struggles?
- Which of these issues were related to being a university student?

2. To what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the mental health of international students in the Netherlands?

- What changed in your mental health compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How did you experience online studying?
- What did you find the hardest about moving to the Netherlands during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- As a student, have you ever felt like you were blamed for the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Has the COVID-19 pandemic affected you financially?
- Do you think that living with/without roommates would have affected your mental health differently?
- Did you start drinking more alcohol since the COVID-19 pandemic? What were the reasons for drinking less or more?
- Have you ever used drugs? What kind of drugs? Did you use more drugs since the COVID-19 pandemic? What were the reasons?
- Do you feel like there is a stigma around mental health?
- Are you open with your friends and family about mental health?
- Have you sought professional help? What are the reasons for seeking or not seeking help?
- Have you had COVID-19 yourself or did you have to quarantine multiple times? How did you cope with quarantining?
- Do you feel like your mental health has improved since there are no COVID-19 restrictions anymore in the Netherlands?

3. How have Dutch universities reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic concerning student mental health?

- How do you feel that the university has supported students and their mental health during COVID-19? (communication, resources available/quantity/quality of resources)
- What could the university have done better concerning student mental health during COVID-19 in your opinion?

Topic list student psychologist

General questions

- How long have you been a student psychologist for?
- What is the role of a student psychologist in the university?
- How many students do you see each month?
- Do you feel like students find it hard to reach out to a professional for their problems? Why?
- Do you feel like there is a stigma on mental health? Has that changed over the past years?

Questions per sub question

1. In what way has the neoliberal university affected student mental health before the COVID-19 pandemic?

- What were the most common reasons for students to visit you before the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. To what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the mental health of Dutch students and international students in the Netherlands?

- Have more students reached out to you since the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Have the reasons for students to visit you changed?
- Have the problems of students become more severe?
- How many international students visit you?
- Do you see a difference between the national and international students in the reasons for visiting you?
- Have more students come to visit you with concerns of more alcohol and drug use since COVID? Have their reasons for drinking alcohol and/or using drugs changed?

3. How have Dutch universities reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic concerning student mental health?

- How long do students approximately have to wait before being able to have an appointment with a student psychologist?
- What have universities done concerning student mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic? Do you feel like this has helped students concerning their mental health?
- In your opinion, is there anything universities can do differently concerning student mental health?
- Do you feel like students are informed well enough about what universities offer concerning mental health? Is it used by a lot of students?

3.5 Respondents

As mentioned above, five international students, five Dutch students and two student psychologists were interviewed for this thesis. Both student psychologists agreed to having their name published. The students were interviewed anonymously. All respondents agreed that the interview was recorded for transcribing the interviews. The student psychologists were reached by sending an email to the student wellbeing taskforce of both the Radboud University and Utrecht University. The international and Dutch students were reached through mutual friends and a message in a group app on Whatsapp.

3.6 Data analysis

The interviews with the student psychologists and Dutch- and international students were analysed through deductive and inductive coding using Nvivo. Although the interviews with the student psychologists and Dutch students were conducted in Dutch, the English codes were attached to the pieces of text. The outcomes of the analysis are discussed in the following chapter, where the main takeaways will be supported by quotes from the interviews. As some of the interviews were conducted in Dutch, these quotes were translated to English. Despite the fact that the core message has been converted perfectly, the translation of quotes adds to the weaknesses of this part of the study.

In the next chapter the interviews with the students' psychologists and the students will be discussed and analysed. The analysis will be divided per sub-question as this gives the best overview.

4. Results

In this chapter, the results of the interviews with the Dutch- and international students will be discussed, as well as the interviews with the student psychologists. As discussed above, the interviews will be analysed per sub-question and the different themes that came up during the interviews will be discussed. The Dutch- and international students will first be discussed separately, at the end of the analysis of a sub-question, a comparison between the Dutch- and international students will be made. On the basis of the interviews the research question of this thesis will be answered, which is:

What is the role of the neoliberal university during the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of Dutch and international students?

The results are divided into four parts to create a clear overview of the effects of the role of the neoliberal university during the COVID-19 pandemic on both Dutch- and international students. The first part gives a short overview of the respondents that were interviewed. The second part contains in what way the neoliberal university has affected student mental health before the COVID-19 pandemic, the third part describes to what extend the COVID-19 pandemic has had an affect on the mental health of Dutch- and international students and the final part analyses the role of Dutch universities concerning the COVID-19 pandemic and student mental health according to the interviewed students.

4.1 Overview respondents

In table 4.1, an overview of the respondents can be found. For the student psychologists, Andreas Galipo and Jerre Mijnaerends have been interviewed. Andreas Galipo is a student psychologist who has been working at the Radboud university for the past three and a half years. Jerre Mijnaerends is a student psychologist who has been working at Utrecht University for the past four years. For the international students, five respondents were interviewed. The respondents consist of three males and two females. Two respondents are originally from Greece, two from Romania and the last respondent is from Italy. All respondents are finishing their Master's or just finished their Master's. Four respondents study at the Radboud University and one respondent at the University of Amsterdam. For the Dutch students there were also five respondents interviewed. The respondents consist of three females and two males. Three respondents are finishing their Master's, one respondent is finishing her Bachelor and one student just finished her Master's. Three respondents study at Utrecht University, one at Rijksuniversiteit Groningen and one at Erasmus University Rotterdam.

Table 4.1: Overview respondents

Name/Respondent	Job/Student	Gender	Nationality	University
Andreas Galipo	Student psychologist	Male		Radboud university
Jerre Mijnaerends	Student psychologist	Male		Utrecht University
Respondent 1	Former student	Male	Greek	Radboud University
Respondent 2	Master student	Male	Romanian	Radboud University
Respondent 3	Former student	Male	Greek	University of Amsterdam
Respondent 4	Master student	Female	Italian	Radboud University
Respondent 5	Master student	Female	Romanian	Radboud University
Respondent 6	Master student	Male	Dutch	Utrecht University
Respondent 7	Master student	Female	Dutch	Utrecht University
Respondent 8	Master student	Male	Dutch	Rijksuniversiteit Groningen
Respondent 9	Bachelor student	Female	Dutch	Erasmus University Rotterdam
Respondent 10	Former student	Female	Dutch	Utrecht University

4.2 Experiences with the neoliberal university before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Part two includes the first sub-question of this thesis: *'In what way has the neoliberal university affected student mental health before the COVID-19 pandemic?'*. During this part of the interview, the respondents were asked about their experiences as a student concerning their mental health before the COVID-19 pandemic. As discussed before in the theoretical framework, mental health issues were common among students even before the pandemic (Caring Universities, 2020; Gil, 2015; Negash, 2021 Priestley, 2019; Son et al., 2020) in which the neoliberal university played a big role (Berg, Huijbens & Larsen, 2016; Giroux, 2017).

4.2.1 Dutch students

4.2.1.1. *Mental health of Dutch students during studying*

In the interviews, a clear difference was seen between the students who did not experience any mental health problems during studying before the COVID-19 pandemic and students who did. Respondents 7, 8 and 10 mostly talked about how easy their Bachelor was and that they did not spend a lot of time studying and gave priorities to for example hanging out with friends. All three respondents only felt a little pressure or stress when deadlines were nearing, but described this as completely normal or as their own fault because they started too late with studying.

Respondent 7: 'The bachelor that I did was kind of easy, I had a lot of free time. So I had classes two days a week, then I would spend some time on doing assignments and studying for exams but the rest of the time I could do whatever I wanted. The only time I felt a little bit of pressure was when a deadline was nearing but that was normal'

Respondent 8: 'I was really good at doing nothing during my Bachelor. So in my first year I barely got through to my second year. There were things I found more important than studying and going to class, like partying with friends. So every time a deadline was close I thought to myself why am I such an idiot, but I do not get stressed easily so it was fine.'

However, respondents 6 and 9 did talk about how studying has affected their mental health before the COVID-19 pandemic. Both respondents recalled how they mostly felt pressure from the university to perform well. Respondent 6 also talks about the pressure he put on himself to perform well, and how that affected his mental health negatively. Respondent 9 also talked about not only feeling pressure from the university, but also feeling like she needed to compete with other students, as her Bachelor was international and all the other students were performing really well, which made her feel insecure.

Respondent 6: 'My mental health was definitely better than before COVID, there was just less to worry about in general. I focused mostly on my studies and work, I did not really care a lot about my own mental health while I think that my mental health was quite bad at some points. I felt a lot of pressure as a student from the university to perform well and when that did not happen I took it very personally. I realise now that it was not my own fault, you cannot perform well every time. During the pandemic I started to realise the immense pressure I put on myself, especially when it came to getting good grades. I then concluded that I should have taken better care of myself. So my mental health definitely was not good, I just did not realise it at the time.'

During the two interviews with the student psychologists, they were asked about their experiences with student mental health before the COVID-19 pandemic and the effect of the neoliberal university on this. Both psychologists agreed with each other and explained that the pressure of studying plays a role in the bad mental health of students but is not the only factor. Jerre Mijnaarend named the life phase students are in and Andreas Galipos explained

more about the vulnerability of a student, which is also important when considering the mental health of a student. For example, having a bad family situation.

Jerre Mijnaerends: 'I think that the bad mental health of students definitely comes from the fact that they are studying, which comes with a lot of pressure. However, it also has to do with the stage of life they are in. Most people develop mental problems while being a young adult, which is logical as you do a lot of things for the first time. You start living on your own, maybe you have your first romantic relationship, you start experimenting with your sexuality, drugs and alcohol. You really form your identity during that stage of your life so it is not illogical that this comes with problems. If you also study, where a lot is expected from you, you may fail sometimes and get a lot of freedom, this can play a big role. I do not think only studying is the reason for mental health issues but it definitely is a big factor.'

4.2.1.2. Professional help before the COVID-19 pandemic

The respondents were also asked if they had sought professional help for their mental health before the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondent 6, 7 and 8 had never sought professional help before. However, respondent 6 recalled that he never thought it was necessary as he thought his problems were normal and everyone felt depressed sometimes. Looking back at it now, he would have sought help earlier. This is a good example of how mental health problems are often normalised among students (Slavin, Schindler & Chibnall, 2014).

Respondent 6: 'I never contacted a psychologist for my mental health issues because I thought that everyone around me was just as stressed, because we are all students. I thought it was normal to be stressed or even depressed because it was a part of life, I did not see it as something abnormal you should seek help for.'

Respondents 9 and 10 have sought professional help before. However, for both of them it was for a different reason than being a student. Respondent 9 explained that she was dealing with an eating disorder and self-harm and sought help when she started studying. Respondent 10 has sought help for a trauma that she experienced when she was young.

Respondent 9: 'My mental health has always been difficult for me. Right before COVID my mental health was finally becoming better but before that I was in a really dark place. I was dealing with an eating disorder and just came out of a really toxic relationship with my ex. When I started studying I also contacted a psychologist and my mental health became a lot better. Literally a week before COVID I stopped seeing my psychologist because I finally felt that I was doing alright.'

Both student psychologists were asked about the most common reason for students to visit them. Both answered that the symptoms mostly correlate with the rest of the Dutch population. Andreas Galipo added that when it comes to problems related to studying, stress, perfectionism and performance anxiety is the most common.

Andreas Galipo: 'Before COVID we saw a representation that was almost the same as the rest of the population concerning students seeking professional help. If you look at the psychological problems,

mood problems and anxiety problems are most common. When it comes to problems concerning studying we see a lot of stress related problems, perfectionism and performance anxiety.'

4.2.2. International students

4.2.2.1. Mental health of international students during studying

The international students were asked the same question as the Dutch students concerning the first sub-question. Four out of five respondents recall never having a lot of stress concerning their studies. For example because the university in their home country is very flexible concerning handing in assignments and retaking exams. Another factor named by every respondent is the amount of free time they were able to spend with their friends, which caused them not to have a lot of stress.

Respondent 4: During my Bachelor, of course, there was a lot to study and I always cared a lot about my studies and academic achievements and stuff like that. So of course I was studying a lot. But before COVID, I was always hanging out with friends to study or we were always going out and having parties. We were having an amazing time, honestly. And I was actually really happy. Especially with my group of friends from my Bachelor. They were amazing and I had an amazing time with them.'

Respondent 3 does talk about a high amount of stress during his Bachelor, as he failed too many courses and had to go to the Greek military after his graduation. However, he does mention that the reason for failing so many classes was because of the fact that studying was not his first priority during his first two years in his Bachelor. For this reason, there cannot be concluded that his stress is related to the pressure of the neoliberal university.

Respondent 3: 'After my second year of my Bachelor, I realised that I failed too many courses. So I was like I need to focus more. I pressured myself and I was really stressed to be honest, because male people in Greece need to go in the Greek military for a year when they graduate. So for me, I was feeling the pressure that I need to graduate soon because then I need to go to the military for a year. But I pressured myself, I got stressed, but in the end I managed to do it.'

4.2.2.2. Professional help before the COVID-19 pandemic

The international students were also asked if they had ever sought professional help before the COVID-19 pandemic. From the five international students, only respondent 3 has sought professional help before. This is in line with the respondents not having dealt with a lot of stress concerning their studies. He did not want to explain the reason further, only that it had nothing to do with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Respondent 3: I have been seeing a psychologist for the past four years, so it did not really change during COVID. The good thing with her is that she did not really talk about COVID and that was fine for me. Of course we talked about how stressed I am because of my Masters and everything, but I can not remember myself saying something like, okay, I don't feel well because of COVID.'

4.2.3. Comparison Dutch and international students

When comparing the influence the neoliberal university has had on Dutch- and international students before the COVID-19 pandemic, a limited difference can be seen between the two groups. During the interviews with the international students, none of the five respondents felt like the pressure of studying affected their mental health negatively. The most named

reasons were the flexibility of the universities concerning retakes of exams and assignments and being able to spend much time with friends. Only respondent 3 expressed that he had experienced a high amount of stress after the two first years of his bachelor. However, he emphasises that this had nothing to do with pressure from the university but with his own lack of motivation which caused him to fail too many courses.

A bigger difference was seen between the Dutch students, where three respondents explained that studying before the COVID-19 pandemic did not have an affect on their mental health. The most named reasons were not finding their Bachelor difficult and having enough free time next to studying to spend time with friends. Two respondents explained that studying did have a negative effect on their mental health. For respondent 6, the negative effect on his mental health mostly had to do with the pressure he felt from the university to perform well, which caused him to put an unrealistic pressure on himself. Respondent 9 did not feel this pressure necessarily from the university but more from the students itself, as she felt like she needed to compete with her peers. Both the pressure from the university and the competition between peers is a clear characteristic of the neoliberal university (Berg, Huijbens & Larsen, 2016).

To conclude, the neoliberal university did not play a role in the mental health of international students before the COVID-19 pandemic. The role of the neoliberal university concerning the mental health of Dutch students before the COVID-19 pandemic is more prominent. However, only for two of the five interviewed respondents.

4.3 The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of students

Part three contains the second sub-question of this thesis: *‘To what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the mental health of Dutch- and international students in the Netherlands?’*. During this part of the interview, the respondents were asked about how they experience(d) the COVID-19 pandemic, their mental health and their ways of coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. As described before in the theoretical framework, the COVID-19 pandemic has expected to worsen academic pressure for students which can lead to more mental health issues (Grubic, Badovinac & Johri, 2020; Kecojevic, Basch, Sullivan & Davi, 2020).

4.3.1. Dutch students

4.3.1.1. Change in mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic

The first question of this part of the interview was if the students experienced any differences in their mental health in general during the COVID-19 pandemic. As described above, respondents 9 and 10 had struggled with mental health problems before. Both described that the COVID-19 pandemic had a big negative impact on their mental health. Respondent 10 explained that during the first few weeks of the lockdown in the Netherlands, her mother was rushed to Intensive Care where she was hospitalised for seven weeks. At the same time, her grandmother passed away from COVID. Because of this, her past trauma resurfaced which led to her becoming depressed and being diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, respondent 9 went to a psychologist for an eating disorder and self-harm which led to her mental health becoming a lot better. However, when the

COVID-19 pandemic started, she relapsed as the lockdown affected her mental health in a negative way.

Respondent 9: 'When I started studying I also contacted a psychologist and my mental health became a lot better. Literally a week before COVID I stopped seeing my psychologist because I finally felt that I was doing alright. After my first half year of studying I thought that my life could finally start. I left my ex and the whole eating problem was becoming a lot better. However, then COVID came and I think the wounds I had were still too fresh. I was not able to deal with the situation and it became so much worse.'

The other three respondents who had no history of mental health issues were also affected in a negative way concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. How much they were affected differs much between the respondents. Respondent 8 was the least affected, he explained 'it was not really a fun time but not the end of the world', while for example respondent 6 struggled with depression during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The student psychologists also noticed a change in the mental health of Dutch students. More students sought professional help and the reasons for visiting changed. Especially loneliness and depression symptoms were seen more often. The symptoms were also more complex, which is something the psychologists still experience, even after most of the restrictions were lifted half a year ago. This is in line with the theoretical framework, where was mentioned that researchers emphasise that mental health problems can extend beyond the pandemic (Kwong et al., 2020)

Jerre Mijnaards: 'I think the reasons for mental health problems changed during COVID, but the problems did not. During COVID the reasons changed to I am depressed because I cannot see my friends, my parents or I cannot go on exchange. However, the symptoms they experience, the anxiety and depression, stay the same. I do think that the symptoms during COVID were more intense and even now more complex'

4.3.1.2. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on studying

When asked about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their studies, all five respondents reacted negatively. The most named negative consequences were not being able to concentrate during online lectures, not being able to find the motivation to write assignments or learn for exams and the libraries being closed which led to feeling locked up in their small student room. Respondent 8 for example, quit writing his thesis after two months in lockdown because he was not able to concentrate writing it at home and respondent 6 stopped with his minor for the same reason.

Respondent 8: 'When COVID started I only had to write my Bachelor thesis and complete one more course. However, I always go to the university library to study but it was closed during COVID. Because of this I was not able to concentrate and did not do anything. I stopped writing my thesis after two months of trying because of this reason.'

Another often named reason is the quality of online education. Most of the time, the respondents only got sent a PowerPoint presentation which was read out loud by teachers. The respondents were missing the interactions with teachers and other students.

Respondent 9: 'I did not like it at all, it was terrible. I thought it was really awkward. Before I was a student that some people may have found annoying because I talked so much. We had a lot of discussions in class which I really like and that all stopped during online classes. Everything I liked about studying, working in groups and talking about different subjects, was not possible anymore. The only thing I did was watch online lectures where no-one said anything. I only lived in Rotterdam for six months so the whole experience of meeting new people was also gone, there were no more fun things to do.'

4.3.1.2. The effects of COVID-19 on alcohol- and drug use

As mentioned before in the theoretical framework, there are worries concerning the COVID-19 pandemic and the rising use of alcohol and drugs (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). When the respondents were asked about their personal experience on this topic, respondents 7, 9 and 10 did not see a big difference in their alcohol and drug use. Respondent 7 has never used drugs before and saw no rise in her alcohol use. Respondent 9 only uses party drugs a few times a year with friends, which stayed the same during the COVID-19 pandemic. Her alcohol use became less because there were less social activities. Respondent 10 rarely drinks but did smoke marihuana during the COVID-19 pandemic, otherwise she was not able to fall asleep. However, when her mental health became better, she was also sleeping better and using less marihuana.

Respondent 7: 'I think my student house was different from most houses. We had some drinks together every friday and that was it so I did not start drinking more. Maybe I would grab a beer more often because you had nothing else to do anyway and were hanging out with your roommates but this was nothing compared to what I have heard from other people.'

On the other hand, respondent 6 and 8 both experienced an increase in both their alcohol- and drug use. For respondent 8, the increase was mostly during the first few months, when he would feel bored with his roommates and they 'drank a crate of beer or ordered a gram of cocaine'. He describes that at one point it was not fun anymore, but 'we did it just because we did not have anything else to do'. Respondent 6 started using more alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism to deal with the pandemic.

Respondent 6: 'I started drinking a lot more and using more drugs during the pandemic. Every night when watching a movie I drank a beer, a glass of wine or a Gin Tonic. You need to do something to numb the pain and sadly alcohol is an easy way to do this. The same goes for using cannabis, I started to smoke joints everyday just to have something to do. I could not be sober the whole time, then I would see the reality of the world we were living in. Especially the first few months were terrible, every Tuesday there would be a new press conference with more bad news. It was definitely not healthy but drinking and smoking was my way of coping with the situation.'

When asking the student psychologists about their experiences with alcohol- and drug use among Dutch students during the COVID-19 pandemic, Andreas answered that he thinks there has been a little increase and that he has heard students talking very openly about their use. Jerre explained that he has not seen it more often during the COVID-19 pandemic

but that research does conclude that it happens more often. He emphasised that there is always a difference between what the student psychologists hear and what really happens.

Andreas Galipo: 'I think alcohol- and drug use among students increased a little bit but I do not have any numbers. I hear a lot of students talking openly about meeting with friends and using both alcohol and drugs. This is not necessarily bad, unless it happens too much but it also happens that students use a lot on their own, which is more of a problem. We do offer four free conversations with a project called Moti-4 which focuses on everything concerning addiction.'

4.3.1.3. Stigma around mental health

In the theoretical framework, the stigma around mental health is explained. According to Slavin, Schindler & Chibnall (2014) the stigma around mental health problems among students withholds many students from seeking help. During the interviews, the respondents were asked about their experiences with this stigma. Respondents 6 and 9 both shared personal experiences with the stigma around mental health. Respondent 6 often hears from people around him that he 'should cure his depression by taking a walk'.

Respondent 6: 'I feel like there is a hundred percent still a stigma around mental health. I still hear quite often when I tell someone that I have depression that I should just start being happy, take a walk outside and enjoy the sun. That is just not how it works, it is an illness that you can not cure by taking a walk. I feel like this is the reason many people in our society are scared to look for help, many people think there is something wrong with you when you visit a psychologist.'

Respondent 9 mostly experienced this within her own family, as her parents did not understand her mental illness. She describes how her parents would tell her to 'just start eating' or 'just stop cutting'. For them, a mental illness is not considered a 'real' illness.

Respondent 9: 'My parents still do not believe that a mental health illness is really an illness. When I was dealing with my eating disorder they would say things like why don't you just eat, it is not that difficult. When I tried to explain that it does not work like that they did not get me. I also struggled with self harm for a while and they did not understand that I could not just stop doing it, that for me it was like there was a little devil in my head when I was doing such things and that it was not me choosing to do that to myself. For me that was one of the hardest things'.

Other respondents feel like the stigma around mental health is decreasing and that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a positive influence on this. For example, student psychologist Andres Galipos explained that 'everyone suddenly experienced the same thing of not being able to live your normal life anymore ... I think you hear more often from the people around you that they have talked to a psychologist.'

4.3.1.4. Living situation Dutch students

All respondents live in a student home with between two and nine roommates. When asked about living with roommates during the COVID-19 pandemic and especially during the lockdowns, all the respondents answered the same: that it had really helped them with their mental wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example:

Respondent 8: 'I live with 5 other boys in total right now. I know for sure that I would have had a much harder time if I had lived alone during the lockdowns. You are all in the same boat, no-one really knows what to do but at least you have people around you. I can imagine that If you are alone all the time in your own room, it can be terrible. I feel a lot of pity for the students who were in that situation.'

However, respondent 7 also spoke about the difficulties of living with other students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Everyone shares different ideas when it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic and this makes it difficult to live in the same house and make rules.

Respondent 7: 'At the beginning of COVID, having nine roommates was great, because no-one was able to do anything for three months. We would eat together a lot and always had some drinks on friday so we were still having fun even though we were not really allowed out of the house. However, after a few months, six of the nine roommates moved away and it really changed. In the summer everyone was allowed to do their own stuff again which made it difficult if someone had to quarantine or had COVID because not everyone took it seriously. Some roommates do not really believe in COVID, some roommates are not vaccinated while others are. I am not saying one thing is better than the other but it makes it really difficult to make rules concerning COVID.'

4.3.1.5. Catching COVID-19 & Quarantaining

The Dutch students were also asked about if they ever had COVID and in what way their experiences with quarantaining had an effect on their mental health. All respondents have had COVID at least once. However, their experiences differ, as one respondent describes that his quarantine during COVID was his breaking point while other respondents did not struggle as much.

Respondent 6: 'I had COVID in February 2021 ... That really was my breaking point to be honest because that meant I also had to isolate myself from my roommates and that was really scary. That was the worst thing for me, I already had to isolate myself from anyone else and now even from the five people I was allowed to be in contact with. That's when I truly felt alone for the first time. I fell into some sort of hole where I thought I would stay alone forever. I did not really speak to anyone and it was really hard to get out of that hole, even when I was allowed to go outside again. It took a while until I was able to have contact with people in a normal way again.'

The other respondents who did not struggle as much as respondent 6 either had no symptoms or were quarantaining with other people, like girlfriends or family.

Respondent 9: 'To be honest, my quarantine experience was not that bad. I was with my sisters in our home in Limburg so our parents took good care of us. It would have been a lot worse if I had to quarantine on my own in my room. Other than that time, I never had to quarantine before. However, I have spoken to friends who never had any mental problems who had a really hard time during quarantine. A friend of mine lives in Utrecht with 22 people and they had COVID all the time so one time she had to quarantine three weeks in a row. She was in a really bad mental state during that quarantine, it is crazy what it can do to you.'

4.3.1.6. Professional help during the COVID-19 pandemic

From the five Dutch students who were interviewed, four students sought professional help during the COVID-19 pandemic for their mental health. Respondent 9 and 10 had sought professional help before, for respondent 6 and 7 it was the first time. Respondent 6 explained that he sought help for feeling depressed and not knowing how to handle his emotions. He felt like the COVID-19 pandemic would be a permanent situation which affected his mental health negatively. Respondent 7 recalls waiting too long to contact a psychologist as she felt like it was not a normal thing to do. This fits well within the stigma around mental health which was discussed before. All four respondents explained that seeking mental help really helped their situation become better.

Respondent 6: 'I contacted a psychologist in the summer of 2020. Now I am a lot better at addressing my mental problems and I am better aware when I have a dip or when I have a lot of stress. I contacted her because I was really not doing okay, I did not see how the pandemic would ever end and I could not handle that thought.'

Respondent 7: 'At first I wanted to go to a student psychologist but the waiting list was very long and you had to do an intake first which was scary for me because I found it very hard to talk about my mental problems. I had a really hard time contacting a psychologist because I felt like it was not a normal thing... I doubted it for a very long time but one time it went wrong and I had a really bad panic attack. That is when I thought, I have to know what is going on ... In the end I contacted my doctor and the same week I had an appointment.'

4.3.1.7. Returning to normal life 'after' the COVID-19 pandemic

While speaking to the respondents, it became clear that their lives did not suddenly go back to normal after the restrictions in the Netherlands were lifted. Respondent 8 was the only one who had no difficulties with this: 'I am feeling great again, I was never in a bad place but since the restrictions have lifted I am feeling amazing.' However, the other respondents spoke about feeling overwhelmed when the restrictions were lifted or are feeling anxious about another wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Respondent 7: 'I feel like my social battery is much lower now, when I am on a vacation with friends it can easily become too much for me and I have to be separate myself from them for a little while and then I will be okay. I like small parties but not going out anymore, it kind of depends on how crowded it is. I get really overwhelmed now when there are too many people in one place, I do not know how I ever enjoyed it.'

Respondent 9: 'A little while ago a friend of mine was one of the organisers of the demonstrations to open up nightlife in the Netherlands. I really wanted to go to support her but I was too scared because I was afraid that I would have a mental breakdown over how crowded it was. This was something I struggled with for a while but I feel relieved to hear from you that multiple people struggle with this, I felt really alone.'

4.3.1.8. Blamed for the COVID-19 pandemic?

The respondents were also asked about if they ever felt like the student population in the Netherlands was blamed for the rising number of COVID-19 infections. All respondents felt like this had happened. However, the extent in which it happened according to the respondents did vary. Respondents 8 and 10 did not notice this in their personal environment but did mention the narrative in the media. Remarkably, all respondents used the same example: that it is easy for the rest of the Dutch population to blame students, while they are living in a big house and students are living in their small student rooms. ‘

Both respondents 7 and 9 explained how they felt like students were blamed and forgotten at the same time. Respondent 7 describes how students living in the same house were not seen as a household at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic while respondent 9 describes how this is unfair, as most students live in a small space and are in a different phase than someone who is 40.

Respondent 7: ‘I felt this especially at the beginning of the pandemic, because you were only allowed to go outside together if you were a household and student houses were not seen as households. This made it really difficult because you were not even allowed to take a walk with more than one other roommate while all you wanted to do was go outside for some fresh air ... And it is hard because our friends are so important to us, we just want to keep seeing them. Your group of friends is supposed to be the biggest around when you are 24, I do not have that right now because of COVID.’

Respondent 9: ‘In my opinion, the narrative in the media was really fierce against students. I think it is really easy to blame other people but I also felt like students were blamed and forgotten at the same time. From the age of 18 everyone is seen as an adult and students were treated as adults, while sometimes this was unfair because I was in my room of 15m² and the people who wrote this stuff about students were probably 40 with a house, kids and a garden. I had the feeling that people did not understand that you really are in a different phase when you just turned 18 and left your parents house not even 6 months ago.’

4.3.1.8. Financial problems

As discussed in the theoretical framework, the COVID-19 pandemic also has a financial impact on students, with the additional costs of studying at home and the loss of part-time jobs (Butler-Warke, Mueller-Hirth, Woods & Timmins, 2021). During the interview, the respondents were asked about their financial situation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Three of the students explained that they had no financial problems, either because they were able to keep their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic or because their parents were able to support them.

Respondent 7: ‘Money was not a problem for me but I do have to say that I am lucky because my parents are able to support me a lot with that. During COVID I also had an internship where I got paid 900 euros a month so I never worried about money.’

However, the COVID-19 pandemic did have a financial impact on respondents 6 and 10. Both respondents were forced to quit their job when the COVID-19 pandemic started. Respondent 6 explained that he started loaning more money but still was struggling to do groceries everyday. Respondent 10 emphasised that she was unable to qualify for any financial regulations because she did not earn enough money before the COVID-19 pandemic and because she was a student who received rent allowance. The parents of both respondents were also not able to support them financially. Both respondents admitted that their financial situation caused a lot of stress. Which is in line with what was discussed before in the theoretical framework: Financial insecurity is settling in for many students, especially students from lower-income backgrounds (Markowitz, 2020).

Respondent 10: 'I got a new job right before COVID started but I immediately had to stop when the lockdown started. I did not work long enough in the Netherlands to qualify for the financial regulation because I just got back from Myanmar, if I had earned 30 euros more during my job I would have been qualified. The municipality also offered financial regulations but you were only qualified if you did not receive rent allowance, which I do just like almost all students. This was the case for all regulations, which meant that I had to keep loaning a lot of money as my parents are also not in the situation that they can support me financially. It took me a very long time until I had the courage to look at my debt on DUO'.

4.3.2. International students

4.3.2.1. Change in mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic

The first question of this part of the interview was if the international students experienced any differences in their mental health in general during the COVID-19 pandemic. While all the respondents were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, they were not all affected in the same way. Respondent 1 for example, explained that the pandemic did not affect his mental health a lot: 'I never felt lonely because it might sound a bit cliché but I do like my own company. I am a bit of a gamer guy so sometimes I play videogames or just chill with my friends online. We talked a lot on the computer during COVID so I never felt like I was lonely.' Respondents 2 and 5 spoke about how the first weeks of the lockdown were acceptable, however, after the first few weeks both respondents experienced stress and anxiety about the future. Respondent 5 especially worried if it would be possible to go back home.

Respondent 2: 'However, after those three months, the anxiety started to kick in. I was feeling a little bit too pressured. I don't know, It was a weird feeling not being able to go and socialise face to face, only through discord, Skype, Instagram etc. So I started feeling anxious about my future because I had a lot of time to think about what am I doing with my life? What do I study? Do I really enjoy it? So a lot of overthinking started to kick in since I was mostly with myself and I wasn't like, surrounded by that many people to kind of distract me.'

Respondent 3 talked about how he did not feel like the COVID-19 pandemic affected his mental health a lot. However, he does describe that he was feeling so stressed for his

Master, that he did not have the time to think about the situation. During the interview, he realised that his mental health was worse than he thought.

Respondent 3: 'I think because I was really busy with my Master and the assignments and everything, I did not have the time to really think about the pandemic. Now that I think about this, that is probably a sign that my mental health was not really in a good position. But I did not have time to think about other things, I was really stressed and really 100 percent focused on my Masters because I was struggling. So I would say yes and no but looking back at it now maybe more than I realised.'

4.3.2.2. The effects of COVID-19 on studying

When being asked about how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their studies, the respondents' answers varied. Respondents 3 and 5 were the only international students who experienced a positive side about online education. Respondent 3 named the convenience of online studying for international students who were not able to attend physical lectures and respondent 5 is better at concentrating during online lectures due to the lack of background noise.

Respondent 3: 'During the pandemic, and even though we started the Master on campus, the first period basically was a combination of on campus and online lectures ... I think this was really good. Because I can understand that many people could not travel to the Netherlands because of COVID and the restrictions. So it was really good that they had this alternative to take the lectures online. COVID was here, and people probably could get COVID or could get in contact with someone who has COVID. So at least it was really nice that you had the opportunity to do the lectures online as well.'

The other respondents experienced negative consequences concerning studying during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most named consequences were not being able to concentrate and participate during online lectures, teachers not being able to involve students in an online lecture and having to study at home instead of at the library.

Respondent 4: 'I cannot focus on a screen and listen to it ... I was just sleeping through all the lectures or taking a shower and keeping it as a podcast. Or sometimes if they were like at nine in the morning, I would just open the meeting on my phone and keep it next to my pillow and sleep through the process. I was not that focused and I didn't learn that much.'

4.3.2.3. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on alcohol- and drug use

When being asked about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the alcohol- and drug use of the respondents, all respondents indicated that there was no drug use involved. Respondent 1 also said that he rarely drinks, which did not change during the pandemic. Respondent 4 used to drink a lot more before the COVID-19 pandemic than during, as all social gatherings stopped.

Respondent 4: 'I used to drink a lot before COVID but not in a bad way. I was partying sometimes, and other evenings I was just going out, having a beer, a few chats or a glass of wine or something. While here, mostly because I was not going out and it was kind of sad to just drink by myself I drank less. I do it sometimes because it's nice to have a glass of wine with dinner or something. But just

hanging out somewhere, having a beer and going home was not an option during COVID so I stopped drinking that much.'

Respondent 3 and 5 explain that they did start drinking more alcohol during the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondent 3 recalls drinking a little bit more but mostly being focussed on his Master, so he was not able to drink a lot. He did see people around him starting to use more drugs and alcohol out of boredom. Respondent 5 explains how alcohol and Romanian culture are very intertwined. She and her family started drinking everyday during the lockdown and when she eventually moved back to Bucharest she also started drinking on her own.

Respondent 5: 'In Romania the context is also a bit different, people are drinking sometimes in the morning already ... But after a while I was taking a step back and thinking maybe it's not good that I'm drinking every day ... I was also moving back to Bucharest and I was living by myself there to kind of finish my thesis and all that. So I think then I was drinking more than before ... I remember that during that time I was also kind of drinking. I was also always having some wine. So yeah, I think so, good question. Maybe I just did not realise it during COVID.'

4.3.2.4. Stigma around mental health

During the interviews, the respondents were asked if they had any experiences with a stigma around mental health. Out of the five respondents, respondents 1 and 2 experienced this stigma, respondent 1 explained that some of his friends are narrow minded and immediately have preconceptions about someone who seeks help for their mental health. This is in line with what is discussed before in the theoretical framework, that a person with a mental illness is often stereotyped as someone who is unpredictable and possibly dangerous (Martin, 2010). Respondent 2 describes that he does not tell many people that he visits a psychologist, as he feels like people will criticise him. He feels like mental health is not talked about enough, as it is immediately seen as a negative thing.

Respondent 1: 'With some of my friends yes, with some others no. I'm open to discuss these things because I do believe that transparency is the best key and the best possibility to find a solution. However, some of my friends are more narrow minded? But I don't want to insult them. They do believe that if you go for example to a psychologist or to a psychiatrist that you instantly have a mental problem so that you're crazy or something like that. However, it's only some of my friends and with those friends I tend not to discuss these things because I don't want to argue a lot with them because they have their own approach I have my own approach. In general most of my friends are more open to discuss these things.'

The three other respondents did not experience this stigma and talk about their mental health openly. All three respondents emphasised how talking about their mental health has had a positive influence on their mental health. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, they talked a lot to their friends about how they were feeling, as everyone experienced the same thing.

Respondent 4: 'My group of friends here in Nijmegen definitely went through the same, the same process and the same stress. And this is also why we became so close. Like we were sharing the same experiences. And again, we talk about this a lot and I'm actually really grateful that they were here because I could have not done it alone.'

4.3.2.5. Moving to the Netherlands

During the interviews with the student psychologists, it became clear that international students struggle with different complications during their studies than Dutch students. Which is why during the interviews, the international students were asked about their experience with moving and studying in the Netherlands.

Jerre Mijnaerends: 'International students face other problems than Dutch students. For example, we often see that international students struggle with the Dutch school system. There is a lot of freedom but at the same time there is a lot expected from you. There is also a lot of insecurity combined with feelings of being homesick or not being able to connect with other international- or Dutch students. There is a lot more loneliness and we see a lot of students who come to us with quite heavy problems and who have not had professional help at home before. This is really difficult for us because it is not easy to refer them to someone within the GGZ while they do need that kind of help.'

Respondent 4 and 5 had studied in the Netherlands during the Erasmus programme before they came back for their Master. All respondents moved to the Netherlands right before or during the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondent 1 describes that his main challenge was living on his own, as that took a lot of responsibilities. Respondent 3 struggled with being homesick in the beginning but the amount of work he had to do for his Master helped him. Respondent 5 recalls how difficult it was to make friends when moving to the Netherlands, which is also something student psychologist Jerre Mijnaerends mentioned above.

Respondent 5: 'It was really challenging to make real connections with people at first. It feels a bit worse when you're starting as an international. We want to make friends because we do not have anyone here. And Dutch students, they already have their friends, and they are friendly, but not necessarily wanting to make friends. Maybe that's sometimes a bit of a challenge to step over, because sometimes it feels just like a wall.'

All respondents felt like there was more pressure in Dutch universities compared to their university at home. They describe that back home there were more retake possibilities and more freedom on when to hand in your assignments than in the Netherlands. For all respondents, this caused a lot of stress. This is in line with what student psychologist Jerre Mijnaerends mentioned above, that internationals often have troubles with the Dutch school system.

Respondent 5: 'The work at my university in Italy is not necessarily less, but the teaching method was so different and you had a lot more flexibility when you wanted to take your exams. You did not have only one retake. You can basically take an exam whenever you want and for how many times you want, even if you don't fulfil all of your credits by the end of your Bachelor you can still continue. It's not that much of a problem. You have a lot more flexibility. You don't have assignments every week. You just handle your study and according to your own schedule. So you don't have that much pressure. I had a different experience in the Netherlands.'

5.3.2.6. Living situation

Just like the Dutch students, the international students were also asked about their living situation in the Netherlands. All respondents struggled with finding a place to live, which led to some respondents being unhappy about their living situation. During the interview, it became clear that the COVID-19 pandemic mainly had a negative impact on the international students living alone. Respondent 1 struggled with finding a suitable place to live, which led to him booking an Airbnb during his stay in the Netherlands. However, this led to him feeling lonely during the COVID-19 pandemic and wishing that he had lived with other students. The same goes for respondent 4, the first few weeks she had to sleep at different friends' houses because she had not found a place to stay yet. Eventually she found a studio but she missed having roommates.

Respondent 4: 'It was impossible to find a place. So I actually found a small studio. It's a pretty weird situation because there is this old couple that has this space in their house and they're just letting me stay there. I would rather live with roommates. I miss having roommates, honestly, because during my other years at University, I've always lived with roommates and I always had good experiences. Well not all the time of course but there was at least one of my roommates who was one of my best friends, I miss the company. Every single day I was studying at the University, and then the truth of having to come home into an empty house was terrible, I really don't like it. I mean, I kind of got used to it, but at first I was struggling so much.'

The other respondents lived in student houses with multiple roommates. All respondents explained that living with multiple people during the COVID-19 pandemic was positive for their mental health.

Respondent 3: 'I think living with others affected me in a good way to be honest, because I was also talking with people during the lockdown that were living alone and they were struggling. So at least for me, having roommates was good because I knew that if I'm going to the kitchen, for example, I will see someone there. So at least I could talk with someone, and it is not even about having deep conversations with someone, just like, Hi, how is your day? How are your assignments going? Things like that. So for me, I was liking that change because as I told you before, I did not really meet people from my Master's and now I know many people from the student accommodation so this was a good thing for me. I had someone to have a normal chat with and go out on the balcony to chill a bit to take some pressure off. So this was good.'

5.3.2.7. Professional help during the COVID-19 pandemic

From the five international students interviewed, one sought professional help during the COVID-19 pandemic. She made an appointment with the student psychologist but was disappointed and did not feel taken seriously. This will further be discussed in the third sub-question.

Respondent 5: 'I had an appointment with the student psychologist three weeks ago. I had the intake, but I thought this was a bit disappointing, to be honest. I'm not depressed. I'm in a pretty good place right now. I think that doing therapy or going to talk to somebody is just good wherever you are. You don't have to reach a critical stage. You don't have to be depressed to go and talk to somebody because we all have a lot of things to work on'.

Respondent 4 felt like she should have sought professional help but felt like she did not have the time as she was struggling with her studies.

Respondent 4: 'I was thinking about it, but I just didn't have time. I was like, I'm feeling too stressed for work and I should seek help for that. But my workload is so heavy that I don't even have time to look for professional help. Looking back I probably should have, I should still do it probably. I think I kind of need to talk to a professional but feel like I don't have time right now, so I will think about it later.

5.3.2.8. Returning to normal life 'after' the COVID-19 pandemic

When being asked about their experiences after the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in the Netherlands had been lifted, the respondents reacted in various ways. Respondent 2 is the only international student who did not have any complications after the restrictions were lifted. He describes that his mental health has become better and that he is not anxious anymore.

Respondent 2: 'Yes, I feel my mental health has improved a lot. I'm not feeling anxious anymore because I can go out and see my friends again and do whatever I want. I'm not stuck in my room kind of forced to overthink about everything.'

However, the other four respondents had various problems with returning to 'normal'.

Respondent 4 describes having trouble with having more social gatherings again as she feels like her social battery is lower than before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Respondent 4: 'I think I kind of lost the ability to just spend time with people every single second of my day. I really don't like this change in myself because I've always been really extroverted and really friendly. And now I feel like I can hang out with people for only a certain time. I force myself to do it but I kind of want some time for myself and I don't like this, honestly. I feel my social battery dying at some point, and I just want to be extroverted and social again.'

Respondent 1 explains that he feels a lot of societal pressure to 'get his life back on the rails again' and find a job for example. Respondent 3 talks about being happy that he is able to do activities like going to concerts again but he does feel anxious about the future as 'we live in a very unstable world and never know if for example COVID is going to come back or if something else will happen'. Past research shows that it is not uncommon for people to still have an elevated level of stress and anxiety after a pandemic (Talevi et al., 2020).

5.3.2.9. Blamed for the COVID-19 pandemic?

Just like the Dutch students, the international students were asked if they have ever felt blamed for the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents 3 and 5 did not feel like the student population was blamed at all. Respondent 1 describes that he has never felt like he was personally blamed, but that back home students as a whole group were blamed for the rising

COVID-19 cases. Respondent 2 has the same experience as respondent 1. Respondent 4 experienced the opposite, she felt like she was blamed by her own friends but does confess that she often organised illegal parties.

Respondent 4: 'Especially during my last year of my Bachelor in Italy. So there was still COVID going on. Of course, there were still some strict rules and regulations about COVID and I was the one hosting the illegal parties to be honest. I was like that kind of person. And I didn't receive a lot of stigma from adults, but mostly from other students because especially in my group of friends, we were kind of divided at some point. Like there were the ones who still used to hang out and go places, having dinners and parties and the other ones who were more careful. So there was a lot of conflict in that sense.'

5.3.2.10. Financial problems

In the theoretical framework it was discussed that there is a belief that all international students are well-off, while most international students pay for their studies abroad through high student loans or loans from their parents (Tannock, 2018). Having financial problems can have a negative impact on the mental health of students (Negash et al., 2021). The respondents were asked about their financial situation. All respondents explain that living in the Netherlands is more expensive than living at home. Most respondents did not receive a scholarship, as they were doing their Master's in the Netherlands and were not here through the Erasmus programme. All respondents did have parents who supported them financially or have a stable job themselves. Only respondent 5 mentioned experiencing stress about finance, she talked about having to move back home because of COVID and having a lot of stress because she was not sure if she had to pay back her scholarship.

Respondent 5: I was alone quite a lot. I remember I was taking these long walks outside because I had to accept that I had to leave. That caused a lot of stress because I had to talk to the consulate and the embassies and there were so many procedures that were kind of stressing me out because I didn't know what would happen with my scholarship. I needed to see if I returned home, I would have to give the scholarship money back. It was all this kind of logistics that made it a stressful time. That was not a good time mentally for me.

4.3.3. Comparison Dutch and international students

When comparing the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on the mental health of Dutch- and international students, it became clear that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on the mental health of both groups.

During the interviews with the Dutch students, the two respondents who had dealt with mental health issues before both relapsed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The mental health of the other three respondents was also affected in a negative way during the COVID-19 pandemic. The other three respondents all responded differently to the COVID-19 pandemic, which differed from the COVID-19 pandemic 'not really being a fun time' to dealing with depression. However, all respondents agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on their studies as they felt locked up in their rooms and missed the interaction with other students and teachers. Two out of five respondents noticed an

increase in both their alcohol and drug use, which they used as a way of coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. All five respondents agreed that there is still a stigma around mental health, while some respondents feel like this has become less because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Dutch students all live with multiple roommates, which they all describe as having a positive effect on their mental health during the lockdowns. In addition, all respondents also had the COVID themselves. Only respondent 6 described quarantaining as being his breaking point while for the other respondents it was less of a struggle.

Four out of five respondents sought professional help during the COVID-19 pandemic. The reasons varied from having depression, having a burn-out and struggling with an eating disorder and self-harm. The same four out of five respondents felt anxious or overwhelmed when the restrictions in the Netherlands were lifted. The reasons were being scared of another wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, being anxious of big crowds and having a lower social battery. All respondents also felt like they as students were blamed for the COVID-19 pandemic, while this felt unfair as they also felt forgotten at the same time. Financially, two out of five respondents struggled during the COVID-19 pandemic as they lost their job during the COVID-19 pandemic. The other three respondents either had a job or parents who could support them financially.

During the interviews with the international students, the mental health of some respondents were more affected than that of others, just like with the Dutch students. However, the reasons for some international students to feel anxious for example were different. The international students worried more if they would be able to go back home or if they had made the right decision to study in the Netherlands during the COVID-19 pandemic. The international students were more positive concerning studying during the COVID-19 pandemic than the Dutch students. Two respondents reacted positively to online studying as they could concentrate better and felt safer for not having to go to the university. However, the other three respondents reacted the same as the Dutch students. None of the international students use drugs and two respondents started drinking a bit more than before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, not for the same reasons as the Dutch students, who started drinking more alcohol and using more drugs to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Two out of five respondents felt like there is still a stigma around mental health while the other three respondents felt like they can talk openly about their mental health and also do this with their friends. All internationals struggled in some way when moving to the Netherlands. Some felt homesick while others had trouble making friends. However, all respondents agreed that Dutch universities apply more pressure on students than they had experienced back home. Finding a place to live was the biggest stressor for international students. Eventually all respondents found something and the respondents who lived with roommates explained that this helped with their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. One respondent sought professional help during the COVID-19 pandemic, however, she was not positive about her experience with the student psychologist as she felt not taken seriously. Just like the Dutch students, four out of five international students struggled when the restrictions were lifted in the Netherlands. The reasons were the same: troubles with social gatherings and a lower social battery. When being asked about if they felt like students were ever blamed for the COVID-19 pandemic, two respondents felt like this was not the case while three felt like this happened in their home country but not in the

Netherlands. Financially, one international student worried about her scholarship during the COVID-19 pandemic as she had to move back home. All respondents agree that the Netherlands is more expensive than their home country but they do not struggle financially as they have a job or their parents are able to support them.

4.4 The reaction of Dutch universities

The last part contains the third sub-question of this thesis: *'How have Dutch universities reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic concerning student mental health?'.* During this part of the interview, the respondents were asked about their opinions on the reaction of their university concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, for example how the university supports students during the COVID-19 pandemic and if the university could have handled the situation differently. As discussed before in the theoretical framework, it is important for universities to pay attention to the mental health of students. However, there are still many researchers who wonder if universities are taking proactive measures to support the mental health and well-being of students (Martin, 2010).

4.4.1. Dutch students

The first question of the interviews concerning this sub-question was if the students felt like the university supported students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, the students were asked if the university should have acted differently concerning the mental health of students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Respondent 6, Master student at Utrecht University, has never felt supported by his university. He describes that there was a wellbeing week where the university organised lectures about the mental health of students, but that he cannot remember anything else the university has done to support students and their mental health. The only thing that really had an impact on him was having to pay less tuition money this year but this was invented by the government. He describes how important it is that the university pays more attention to the mental health of students, as in the past year multiple students from Utrecht committed suicide. When being asked the question about what the university could have done differently, respondent 6 feels like the university should try harder to really understand her students, he feels like this is not the case right now. He also explains that the university should involve students more in decisions they make, as the decisions have a huge impact on students. Lastly, he feels like the university pressures students too much by focussing too much on grades students receive on exams. He feels like this is unfair, as some students are great at writing papers and working on projects but can fail a course when they receive a 5,4 for an exam.

Respondent 7, Master student at Utrecht University, feels like the university did try to support students during the COVID-19 pandemic. She also talks about the wellbeing week, where she followed a lecture about being less stressed. According to her, this was a great start but she feels like the university should try to involve more students in these kinds of activities as a lot of students do not know it is being organised. She also described that some of the activities only had fourteen places, which is not enough for how many students study at the university. When asked the question about what the university could have done differently, respondent 7 feels like the waiting list for the student psychologists was too long, as is it impossible for someone with mental health issues to wait eight weeks. According to her,

there should also be more arrangements for students who are struggling with their mental health or that they should be better promoted if they are already there. She feels like this is an important role the university has, as the university is the one who puts so much pressure on her students.

Respondent 8, Master students at Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, feels like he is not the right person to answer this question as he was not interested in what the university offered concerning the mental health of students. He describes receiving multiple emails but deleting them as he did not feel like reading them. He also questions if it is the role of the university to support the mental health of students. He concludes that it is important for universities to take action if there is a problem many students face, but that it is not the role of the university to take care of all the students.

Respondent 9, Bachelor student at Erasmus University Rotterdam, feels like her university failed when it came to supporting students and their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. She describes not feeling like there was the space to talk about how the students were feeling and to discuss what was happening in the world. For example, many students felt overwhelmed at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially international students who had to find a way to get back home before the borders closed. However, there were very strict consequences when missing a lecture, where missing three lectures meant getting kicked out of class. For first year students this meant getting kicked out of the Bachelor. She also felt like there were not enough options for seeking help for mental health issues. When asked the question about what the university could have done differently, she would have liked the university to be more open and start the discussion about the mental health of students and how everyone was doing. She explains that she just wanted to hear that it was okay that she was not feeling well.

Respondent 10, former Master student at Utrecht University, describes that she only got an email from the university a few times that students should let it know if they are struggling with their mental health. However, she felt like the emails were very 'tone deaf'. She also thought about visiting a student psychologist but she heard from other people that they were not taken seriously by them and felt like they were not very accessible. She also felt like the university should have tried harder to help students who were unable to study at home as there were only around 100 students who were able to work at the university. When asked the question about what the university could have done differently, she explains that the role of university psychologists is definitely important. However, from the people around her she hears that the waiting list is too long and that students were scared to go to the student psychologist as they heard from other people that they were not taken seriously. She also emphasised that in case there is a new lockdown, it is very important for universities to make sure there are more places where students can study if they are not able to study at home.

4.4.2. International students

The first question of the interviews concerning this sub-question was if the students felt like the university supported students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, the students were asked if they felt like the university should have acted differently concerning the mental health of students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Respondent 1, Master student at the Radboud University, explains that he does not have a lot of personal experience with the university during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, he has heard from friends who were having mental health issues that they sought help from a student psychologist. His friends had good experiences and felt a lot better after talking to the psychologist. When asked the question about what the university could have done differently, he was not able to devise anything. He feels like if he was struggling with his mental health, he would seek help with the university and that he would know where to find it.

Respondent 2, Master student at the Radboud University, describes that he has never sought professional help from the university but he does have friends who have visited a student psychologist. He follows Radboud University on Instagram and he saw a lot of posts concerning the mental health of students during the COVID-19 pandemic. He does have two personal experiences with not being able to hand in an assignment on time because he was struggling with adjusting to his new life in the Netherlands. He describes that teachers showed him a lot of empathy and made it easier for him to accommodate the situation. When asked the question about what the university could have done differently, he could not come up with anything and felt like the university had done everything possible.

Respondent 3, former Master student at the University of Amsterdam, also has no personal experiences with the university and his mental health. However, he has received multiple emails from the university asking about the mental health of students, which he describes as a positive thing. When asked the question about what the university could have done differently, he explained that he had expected more flexibility from the university. He felt like there were expectations students could not meet because of the online lectures.

Respondent 4, Master student at the Radboud University, does not feel like the university supported her in any way concerning her mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

'If they did, I did not know about it, honestly. I did not really seek help from the University. I think the workload and stress and the pressure for everything was so much that I drove to hate this University and this city. At some point, I was just rejecting anything that came from the University, which is sad because during my Erasmus exchange I loved this place, I loved this University. And I feel like I loved my Master. I love everything that I studied and I learned a lot ... but still I experienced it in a very negative way. So at some point, I mean, I didn't seek any kind of support or help. I was just doing my stuff and trying not to associate myself with this environment ... It is kind of ironic in the sense that you are the institution that is giving us so much pressure and so much anxiety. And then you also say, oh, but here is some mental health lecture. Just follow this lecture about how to not have a burnout and everything will be fine. How does this solve the problem? Honestly, I do not want to seek help from you because you are the one causing my stress.'

When asked the question about what the university could have done differently, she explains that the university should allow more flexibility when it comes to assignments and group presentations. She feels like the university treats her students like they are high school students while students are adults and should be treated like adults. Additionally, she feels like the university does not take into account that students have more in their lives than studying.

'How can a student who is also working either part time or full time handle this workload? It's not possible, it's just not possible to do it with this structure at the university. You have to do all this work and you have maybe three or four courses in the same block and for each of them you have to study so much every single week. You have three assignments per week and you just don't have time to do anything else. Like I used to have a lot of hobbies, I used to like painting, playing guitar and whatever and I lost all of them because I didn't have time.'

Respondent 5, Master student at the Radboud University, describes that she knows that there are many places to go to in the university if you are struggling with your mental health. There are writing labs, student psychologists and the study advisor. For her, this is very positive as she explains that she comes from a place where she did not have those things. When asked the question about what the university could have done differently, she explained that she felt detached from the university during the COVID-19 pandemic. She also heard from a lot of friends that they thought that the Dutch education system did not care about the mental health of the students. She also feels like the university puts too much pressure on students by asking too much from students, while in reality it is not 'the end of the world' if you fail an exam or do not finish your Master in a year.

4.4.3. Comparison Dutch and international students

In general, the Dutch students reacted negatively when being asked about the support from the university concerning their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic and what the university could have done better. Respondent 8 was the only one who did not have an opinion about the support of the university while respondent 7 feels like the university did try but has to promote her activities better. She also feels like the waiting list for the student psychologist should be shorter, which is something respondent 10 also named. The other three respondents reacted negatively about the support of the university, the most named reasons were not paying enough attention to student mental health and not involving students enough, putting too much pressure on students when it comes to getting good grades, not enough options for seeking help and student psychologists not being accessible enough.

The international students were more positive about the support from the university concerning mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most respondents compare their Dutch university with their university at home and conclude that in the Netherlands there are more options for seeking mental support. It also becomes clear that the international students have less personal experiences with the university and see the email and posts on social media as enough support. Respondents 4 and 5 were the only respondents who felt negatively about the support of the university. Respondent 5 is positive about the options for seeking help but does feel like the university pressured students too much during the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondent 4 does not feel like the university has helped her in any way. When asked what the university could have done better, both respondents 4 and 5 replied that the university should put less pressure on students and give them more freedom when it comes to deadlines.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

In this chapter, the research question of this thesis will be answered. Thereafter, the conclusion will be discussed. In the reflection, a critical analysis will be made concerning the research process and the used methods. Lastly, recommendations for further research will be described.

5.1 Conclusion

In this thesis, an answer to the following question was researched:

What is the role of the neoliberal university during the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of Dutch- and international students?

The goal of this thesis was to detect what role the neoliberal university has had on the mental health of both Dutch- and international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. To come to a conclusion, five Dutch students, five international students and two student psychologists were interviewed through an in-depth interview. This thesis was divided into three sub-questions: the role of the neoliberal university on the mental health of students before the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of students and the reaction of Dutch universities to the COVID-19 pandemic concerning student mental health.

As a result of this research, the role of the neoliberal university on the mental health of both Dutch- and international students during the COVID-19 pandemic has been clarified. Between the Dutch and international students, many differences were found. The neoliberal university had no effect on the international students before the COVID-19 pandemic as all respondents describe their universities back home as 'not demanding' and 'flexible'. The experiences of the Dutch students varied, as two respondents felt extremely pressured by the university while the other three respondents also described their student phase before the COVID-19 pandemic as 'easy' and 'having a lot of freedom'. There can be concluded that while the neoliberal university did have a negative effect on the mental health of two of the respondents, the influence in general was minimal.

The other difference between Dutch- and international students was their opinion on the reactions of Dutch universities to the COVID-19 pandemic concerning student mental health. In general the international students were positive on how the universities handled the situation. Respondents compared their Dutch university to their university back home and felt like they had more options for seeking mental support. However, two respondents felt like the pressure of Dutch universities during the COVID-19 pandemic was immense, which had a negative impact on their mental health. This is more in line with the opinions of the Dutch students, who felt like the Dutch universities did not pay enough attention to student mental health and also put too much pressure on students to perform well, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. To conclude, the international students felt like the Dutch universities performed better than the universities back home, however, there is room for improvement concerning the pressure put on students during a situation like the COVID-19 pandemic. Dutch students would like to see more support from the universities concerning student mental health.

There were also similarities found between the Dutch and international students. It became clear that the COVID-19 pandemic had an immense impact on the mental health of both Dutch- and international students. While some respondents were more affected than others, all respondents struggled with studying during the COVID-19 pandemic and all of the respondents had COVID and/or had to quarantine multiple times. Especially the importance of living with roommates became clear, as all respondents who lived with roommates expressed how much it had helped them with their mental health. Another similarity was the struggle with returning back to 'normal' when the restrictions in the Netherlands were lifted. Almost all respondents admitted to feeling anxious for crowds or for another wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the negative impact on the mental health of Dutch and international students expressed itself in a different way. The Dutch students were worried more about studying online and not being able to see their friends while the international students worried about not being able to go back home, finding a place to live in the Netherlands and often felt homesick. In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the mental health of both Dutch and international students immensely.

5.2 Discussion

Through interviewing both students and student psychologists in this research, the effect of the neoliberal university during the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of Dutch and international students was analysed. The results show that the theories on the COVID-19 pandemic and the neoliberal university having an impact on the mental health of students can be confirmed. In the theoretical framework it was discussed that the neoliberal university causes higher levels of mental illness, stress and anxiety (Berg, Huijbens & Larsen, 2016; Giroux, 2017). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic is also having an impact on the mental health of individuals, as people experience more anxiety, depression and post traumatic symptoms (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020; Talevi et al., 2020). The extent in which the students were affected by either the neoliberal university and/or the COVID-19 pandemic was dependent on multiple factors. Important factors were for example having a history of mental illness, studying in the Netherlands or in another country before the COVID-19 pandemic and living with or without roommates. While all respondents were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, only two respondents were affected by the neoliberal university before the COVID-19 pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, more students felt affected by the neoliberal university in a negative way.

Before starting this research, I expected to find that the neoliberal university and the COVID-19 pandemic had an effect on students. The goal of this research was not to verify the existence of the effect, but to understand in what way it affected the students and what the consequences were. The interviews with the respondents showed that every student was affected in their own way. Generalising the results for all students is not possible, as only ten students and two student psychologists were interviewed. However, I feel like all students worldwide have been affected in one way or another. In my eyes, this is a research that is never truly finished, as every student experienced the COVID-19 pandemic in their own way and has their own story to tell.

5.3 Reflection

In this thesis, the role of the neoliberal university on the mental health of Dutch- and international students during the COVID-19 pandemic was researched on the basis of interviews with both students and student psychologists. During this research I tried to be as objective as possible, however, as I am also a student who experienced the COVID-19 pandemic this was not always achievable. I noticed this especially during the interviews with other students. Many students shared stories about their experiences which I could recognize, which led to the interview sometimes becoming almost a normal conversation. However, I felt like this led to the students feeling comfortable with me and feeling more open to share sometimes very heavy stories about their mental health.

Because of the limited time available for this thesis, only twelve interviews were conducted. This thesis would have been stronger if more students were interviewed, as all the interviewed students had many different opinions. Finding students who were willing to contribute to this thesis with an interview was difficult, especially concerning the international students. In the end I was able to find five international students, however, with two students from Greece and two students from Bulgaria there was not a lot of variation between the international students. The same goes for the variation of students in their Bachelor's or Master's. Only one student was still in her Bachelor while it would have been interesting to speak to more students who just started studying when the COVID-19 pandemic began. In addition, all respondents studied a social study. It would have been interesting to hear the experiences of students who for example studied Medicine, as the student psychologist Jerre Mijharends mentioned that these students experience more pressure.

Lastly, this thesis concluded that Dutch students experienced more mental health problems during the COVID-19 pandemic than international students. However, other researchers conclude that international students experienced more mental health problems before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Chen, Li, Wu & Tong, 2020; Harrison & Ip, 2013; Sahu, 2020). For example because international students live in a foreign country away from their social support system and experience less access to public resources due to informational, language or cultural barriers (Fronck et al., 2021). The outcome of this thesis can be explained. As mentioned above, it was difficult to find international students who were willing to contribute to the thesis. While I know many Dutch students who themselves struggled mentally during the COVID-19 pandemic or have friends who struggled mentally during the COVID-19 pandemic, this was not the case with international students. This led to me interviewing the only five international students who responded to my message even if they did not necessarily struggle mentally during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, I interviewed multiple Dutch students from whom I knew that they struggled with their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.4 Recommendations

5.4.1. *Recommendations for further research*

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of students has been researched before. With the focus on the neoliberal university and the qualitative approach of this thesis, a new perspective has been found. However, there are many other topics concerning mental health and the COVID-19 pandemic that would be interesting to research further.

As mentioned before, I only interviewed one respondent who was in the first year of her studies when the COVID-19 pandemic began. From her I heard a different perspective than from the other respondents. It would be interesting to research the effect the COVID-19 pandemic has had on first-year students further, as contrary to Master students they were just starting their student phase and did not have the chance to build new relationships and settle in their new environment for example.

Furthermore, during the interviews it became clear that almost all respondents struggled with going back to 'normal'. Respondents felt overwhelmed in big groups, are anxious of another wave of the COVID-19 pandemic or feel like their social battery has reduced. Pfefferbaum & North (2020) describe that mental health problems related to a pandemic often persist after the measures are lifted. More research on long lasting mental health problems due to the COVID-19 pandemic is important, as this has an immense effect on society.

The student population was the focus of this thesis. However, students are not the only group affected by either the neoliberal university or the COVID-19 pandemic and their impact on education. Berg, Huijbens & Larsen (2016) describe that the neoliberal university also has an effect on the mental health of university staff. While most students also had an opinion on for example the skills of a teacher concerning online education, it felt like they did not consider the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on them. The same goes for the neoliberal university, as academics are also pressured into competition and for example publishing as much research as possible (Berg, Huijbens & Larsen, 2016). It would be interesting to research this from their point of view.

5.4.2. *Recommendations for the Radboud University*

In the theoretical framework, it was discussed that it is important for universities to pay attention to the mental health of students. As addressing the stigma of mental illness is a first and crucial step in getting students to overcome their fears and concerns of disclosing to university staff and gaining access to the support they require. However, different researchers wonder if universities are taking proactive measures to support the mental health of students (Martin, 2010). During the interviews, it became clear that students felt the same way. It is necessary that all universities in the Netherlands take responsibility for the mental health of their students, as they are the institutions that put the pressure on students. However, as this thesis is written at Radboud University, I will focus only on Radboud University.

Firstly, it is important that the Radboud University seeks more input from students. In my opinion, the best way for a university to re-shape their student mental health is to listen to their students, as multiple students in this thesis felt misunderstood and ignored by their

university. For example, the Radboud University can send out a survey at the beginning of every year to all students asking them about their needs concerning mental health. Afterwards, they can create a mental health report to provide the requested resources. The university already offers multiple resources, however the input of students will make sure that it fits their needs better and makes it more likely that the students will actually use the resources.

Furthermore, it is necessary that the Radboud University includes mental health in all introduction programmes. Not just through an email to all students about well-being, this is not enough. For example, take the beginning of the first lecture of students to talk openly about the mental health situation of students. Give students a clear overview of where to go when they need mental support. It is important that students hear from the university itself that mental health is more important than, for example, getting good grades. In this way, the Radboud University shows that it takes mental health seriously, which makes students feel taken seriously and lessens the stigma for students to seek mental help when needed. There is also a role for university staff during the rest of the year. From my own experience, it is important for teachers to emphasise every course that students are always welcome to reach out if for example an assignment will not be finished in time due to personal reasons.

In addition, multiple students mentioned that they either did not seek help from a student psychologist because they felt like they would not be taken seriously or that they went to a student psychologist and did not feel taken seriously. One of the reasons was the long waiting list that sometimes takes up to seven weeks. Students also mentioned that when they finally got through the waiting list, they only had a fifteen minute intake and had to make a new appointment when the time was over. This is definitely not the fault of the student psychologists themselves, the two psychologists I spoke to talked very passionately about their job. The problem is that there are not enough student psychologists for the growing student population, who in addition have growing mental health problems. The logical solution would be to hire more student psychologists. However, Alex Roomer, head of Student Support, mentioned this year that they do not have enough budget to do this (Bakker, 2022). In my opinion, student (and staff) mental health should be the number one priority of a university, which makes it strange that there is not enough budget to hire more staff who could accomplish better student mental health. Especially because a better student mental health is also positive for Radboud University as it leads to an increase of academic performance, retention and graduation grades (Roberts, 2022).

Lastly, during one of the interviews a respondent mentioned that her Master focuses a lot on mental health and well being. Her Master works with a so-called 'Inclusivity Board'. The Inclusivity Board consists of a small team of people who everyone from the Master knows. They are available for everything that has to do with the well-being of students. When contacting them, they are available almost immediately to listen and give advice to the students. For example, they help students with postponing a deadline or looking at other solutions. Also, they are informed about all the other resources the university offers and can help students with getting in touch with the right person. More importantly, the respondent mentioned that she and her other students feel like the Inclusivity Board is more accessible than for example a student advisor or student psychologist. In my opinion, an Inclusivity Board would be interesting for Radboud University to look into. If it works well, students will

have accessible and fast support, which will in turn lessen the pressure on other Student Support systems like the student psychologists.

To conclude, Radboud University should put more emphasis on the mental health of students. Radboud University can achieve this firstly through seeking more input from students so the resources fit the needs of the students better. Secondly through including mental health in introduction programmes so students know that Radboud University cares about their mental health, which lowers the stigma around mental health. Thirdly through making sure there is more budget for mental health, so all the necessary changes can be made. Lastly, there should be a more accessible solution for students who need mental support so students are helped earlier and the pressure on Student Support systems lower.

6. References

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