

Anastasiia Perov, Masters Student

Case Study

Anastasiia lives with her husband in London and having gained a degree in psychology and management, had been working as a psychotherapist for six years until deciding to change career and start a masters degree in Human-Computer Interaction Design at City University of London in 2023.

Anastasiia is financially dependent upon her husband, so although finances are not one of her top concerns, she is still worried that should anything happen, they would be in a precarious situation as they have a mortgage and household bills to pay. This has led Anastasiia to consider finding a job that could coincide with her studies.

Mental health and studying

Having suffered from depression in the past, partially caused by COVID-19 and lockdowns when all studying was put online, Anastasiia knows she reacts better to studying in a physical environment, face to face, and finds online educational interaction difficult. Her mental health along with some other factors meant she had to withdraw from a masters programme she was studying in Organisational Psychiatry and Psychology at King's College in 2020. Anastasiia took some time out to concentrate on her wellbeing and when she applied to do her masters in Human-Computer Interaction Design at City University of London in June 2023, she was, mentally, in a much better place.

"I was very happy during my first term and my mental health was flourishing. I've never met tutors who were so interested in the students and the programme. The first term was really great, but then strikes happened and that's what really hit me."

Anastasiia passed the first term with flying colours, but there had been some unconfirmed information about the possibility of strikes. This led to a great deal of uncertainty for all the students, and it wasn't until the day before her second term started that Anastasiia received an email confirming the strikes were going ahead and there would be no lessons for half of the next term.

"I just started crying. I had a picture of how it was going to be – it was a very intense programme with deadlines in April/May for five very different types of coursework in subjects that I'd never studied before. I felt really lost and began to think I would fail my degree because of this. I'm not good at online education, I need personal contact which is why COVID-19 was so bad for me."



Although keen to emphasise the students all supported their tutors, Anastasiia was understandably upset that she had paid considerable tuition fees for a postgraduate degree that was going to be disrupted.

"We're paying huge money for this education. We have only one year, very limited time and many modules and now we don't know what's happening."

The situation led to Anastasiia's mental health worsening. She managed to book sessions with one of the university's psychologists, but it took three months from her initial request to see a counsellor.

Anastasiia had five counselling sessions and was prescribed anti-depressants by her GP. Although she managed to submit her coursework, she was unable to start to think about her dissertation for a few weeks because she felt completely burnt out. After finally completing and submitting term two assessments, Anastasiia and some of her peers were hit with a marking boycott by her tutors in the form of strike action.

"We understand our tutors' concerns, but we did our bit – we submitted everything on time, and now we can't get marks. I submitted at the end of April, and it wasn't until the end of September that I received all my marks.

It was so stressful, and disappointing because I'd already paid for the course and spent so much time and energy on it. I couldn't do anything about it – it was out of my control - that was the biggest thing that affected me, I couldn't do anything about it."

Anastasiia was keen to emphasise that it wasn't the fact that she didn't get her marks on time, it was the frustration that university employees have to strike to get fair salaries, pensions, contracts and workload.

"I know it's a very complex matter and not an easy financial situation for everyone. It's important to understand that the decision to strike isn't easy for tutors and they all worked very hard to minimise the disruption of our study."

Is better wellbeing support needed?

Anastasiia explained that there are some mental health and wellbeing services available at the university, but they are limited in terms of resources. “You need to wait,” she says. Anastasiia applied in March and had her first consultation in June. The maximum number of sessions you can have is five but the first is an overview/introduction session, so there are really only four mental health support sessions. According to Anastasiia they are limited in what they offer with no real problem solving more along the lines of coping strategies, which still helped with her wellbeing concerns. She surmises that resources and funding are most likely an issue with not enough staff to support many struggling students.

“Long waiting lists need to be improved, maybe some outsourcing is needed.”

Using AI to improve efficiency

When discussing the use of ChatGPT and whether it can help to improve efficiency, Anastasiia agreed that it was, for her, a useful resource. Anastasiia has dyslexia and sometimes finds it difficult to formulate her thoughts into the right words.

“I use ChatGPT when I feel stuck with my thoughts and I need some kind of boost. Also, sometimes I’m writing some text and then I ask ChatGPT to make it more formal, for example. As English isn’t my first language, not all words come to my mind immediately.”

Anastasiia has also used ChatGPT to help write her C.V. and to improve her LinkedIn profile.

