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Student and staff mental well-being in European higher education institutions

Analytical report



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Student and staff mental well-being in European higher education institutions

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Executive Summary

Context and rationale

In recent years, the higher education sector in Europe (and internationally) has become increasingly aware of – and concerned about – the declining mental health and well-being of staff and students. High-profile media attention towards student mental well-being, together with increasing pressure from sectoral bodies urging care for the mental health and well-being of both staff and students (Hughes and Spanner, 2019; Office for Students, 2019), has made universities more aware than ever that mental well-being must occupy a prominent place in policy and strategy (Hughes and Spanner, 2019; Universities UK, 2020), and has placed it high on academic research agendas (Hartrey, Denieffe and Wells, 2017). Unsurprisingly, research has shown that mental health and well-being can have a significant impact on the likelihood of students achieving success in their studies (Richardson, 2015; Office for Students, 2019). It has also been shown to have significant impacts on the experiences of staff in academia (Smith and Ulus, 2020; Urbina-Garcia, 2020; Shen and Slater, 2021). Research also suggests that the nature, culture, norms and practices of higher education institutions (HEIs) can negatively affect the mental health and well-being of both staff and students (Tinklin, Riddell and Wilson, 2005; Gilbert, 2016; Ribeiro *et al.*, 2018; Neves and Hillman, 2019; Urbina-Garcia, 2020; Lister, Seale and Douce, 2023).

Prioritising interventions to prevent and improve the poor mental health and well-being of staff and students within higher education communities has become an even more acute necessity since the COVID-19 pandemic, given the rising rates of anxiety and depression in the population in general, with the highest rises occurring among 14- to 24-year-olds (Zhai and Du, 2020). Indeed, the Eurobarometer on Youth and Democracy in the European Year of Youth (Flash Eurobarometer, 2022) indicated that improving mental and physical well-being is the fastest-growing priority for many young people in the EU.

Improving mental health and well-being requires a portfolio of approaches spanning from childhood to young adulthood, and into adulthood (Otto *et al.*, 2021). Thus, promoting well-being in HEIs is a key pillar in such a portfolio, as university-based interventions can reach many young individuals. A student's move to university is a high-risk period for the onset of poor mental health and well-being, as it coincides with a critical developmental period and involves exposure to major stressors such as leaving home, academic pressures, gaining independence, developing new friendships and managing finances. Rightly, university student mental health and well-being is increasingly seen as a concern. Meanwhile, as demands on the time of university staff for the purposes of research, teaching, leadership and pastoral support have also increased, this concern is mirrored by worries about staff well-being.

The NESET report 'The impact of COVID-19 on higher education: a review of emerging evidence' (Farnell *et al.*, 2021) documents the novel post-pandemic challenges to the psychological and emotional well-being of students and staff alike, echoing other findings across relevant academic literature. In addition, students and staff currently face many pressures, including financial concerns linked to the cost-of-living crisis, as well as anxiety related to future employment opportunities (Johnson, Bauman and Pociask, 2019), given the uncertainty of the current political and economic climate.

Objectives of the report

This report reviews the international literature that explores mental health and well-being issues for staff and students in higher education, and looks at approaches at institutional and national levels that can support the mental health and well-being of university communities. It presents a review of institutional approaches, with a focus on the EU's higher education sector, highlighting models that have been successfully applied within diverse higher education contexts. Lastly, it provides a set of recommendations for improving mental health and well-being of students and staff at HEIs across the EU through the implementation of holistic, whole-institution approaches.

Language and terminology

The term 'mental well-being' is used throughout this report to describe the positive aspects of mental health, whereas the term 'mental health' refers to the full spectrum of experience ranging from mental well-being to mental illness (Keyes, 2005). An individual's mental well-being is described as both feeling good (hedonic well-being) *and* functioning well (eudaimonic well-being) (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Conversely, 'mental illness' refers to conditions and experiences that involve thoughts, feelings, symptoms and/or behaviours that causes distress and reduce functioning, negatively impacting an individual's day to day experiences, and which may receive (or be eligible to receive) a clinical diagnosis. The terms 'mental health problems' or 'poor mental health' are applied to a broader range of individuals experiencing levels of emotional and/ or psychological distress that go beyond normal experience, and are beyond their current ability to effectively manage. This includes individuals experiencing mental illness, as well as those whose experiences fall below this threshold, but who are not experiencing mental well-being (Hughes and Spanner, 2019).

In this report, the term 'well-being' encompasses a wide framework, of which mental well-being is an integral part, but which also includes physical, social well-being and (where appropriate) spiritual well-being. This uses a model provided by Richard Kraut (2009), in which optimum well-being is defined as an individual's ability to fully exercise their cognitive, emotional, physical and social powers, leading to them flourishing and contributing positively to society. Thus, the conceptualisation of well-being used in the report expands on the definition of well-being adopted in other NESET reports, whereby well-being is seen as 'a multidimensional concept' that is [equated] 'with the terms quality of life, happiness, life satisfaction, and prosperity (Eger & Maridal, 2015)'. Adopting this expanded definition, the authors further explore the societal and environmental aspects of well-being, as well as the interplay between societal and personal well-being. Indeed, this definition can also capture the current focus of the European Commission on well-being as being sustainable and inclusive (European Commission, 2023), with the individual and societies looking at resources for future well-being within planetary boundaries, nature preservation, intergenerational solidarity and inclusiveness (Matti *et al.*, 2023).

Findings

Barriers to well-being in higher education

The report finds that higher education staff and students, both within the European Union and internationally, experience a high prevalence of issues and barriers relating to mental health and well-being. These include issues relating to:

- culture and common practices within higher education, which prioritise individualism and competition rather than community and well-being;
- inequalities, discrimination and marginalisation within higher education, which affect high numbers of staff and students; and
- the impacts on staff and student well-being of wider global challenges and crises, when combined with stressful work or study environments

The report finds that there is little acknowledgement of the interlinked relationship between staff and student well-being within higher education. Instead, institutional interventions and approaches appear to explicitly or implicitly prioritise student well-being, with staff well-being initiatives appearing disjointed, inconsistent or less valued in comparison to those that relate to students. However, there is an opportunity and potential to move away from this current state of play. To achieve this, we should start by identifying how structural and cultural challenges affect both students *and* staff. The existing neo-liberal culture and environment in higher education is associated with additional cognitive, emotional and practical demands on staff that impede teaching, learning, research and well-being for both students and staff. For example, the current cultures and structures regarding workload, which are characterised by unhealthy staff working hours and a lack of work-life balance, can negatively impact staff and student well-being, because stressed and sometimes burnt-out staff are unlikely to be able to fully engage with and support students. As the popular saying goes – ‘one cannot pour from an empty cup’. Wider institutional policies such as competitive outcomes-based performance metrics (Berg, *et al.*, 2016), as well as precarious academic contracts and financial pressures (Morrish, 2019), have seriously detrimental implications for the well-being of the whole university community. Indeed, existing metrics often do not acknowledge pastoral support to students, which substantially increases the emotional and practical demands on staff and impacts the level of provision for students.

Cultural pressures of performativity have a detrimental impact on the well-being of both staff and students alike, as they are both subject to such pressures. Lynch (2010) has argued persuasively that neo-liberal structures in the marketised higher education sector have compounded the Cartesian dissociation of rationality and emotion in academia (Noddings, 2003), promoting a competitive and individualistic culture of ‘carelessness’ that devalues caring responsibilities and self-care, creating obstacles to healthy learn and work. However, if staff productivity can be associated with a positive working culture and environment – one with purpose and well-being – it could enable staff to deliver pedagogical and pastoral support that would sustain student learning and well-being.

Staff and students often face similar forms of discrimination (i.e. in relation to gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, disability, etc.) that act as barrier to their learning and/or working experience and impact on their well-being. These forms of discrimination may manifest differently, but the root causes are the same and need to be addressed.

The above challenges for both staff and students have been exacerbated due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the uncertain economic climate and the ongoing wars in Europe and beyond, which continue to have an impact on both staff and students.

This report posits that staff and student well-being are not separate issues, but need to be considered as mutually dependent parts of the same ecosystem. The literature suggests – and it is the authors’ firm belief – that working towards an integrated, holistic approach to staff and student well-being would be beneficial for all.

A whole-university approach to mental well-being

The literature surrounding mental well-being in higher education clearly recommends that holistic, whole-institution approaches are needed, with university leaders taking ownership of and accountability for ensuring that mental well-being is considered throughout higher education cultures, systems and practices.

A crucial aspect of this leadership is the requirement to have in place policies and strategies relating to well-being, both at institution level and more broadly. An example of this is Ireland, where there is country-wide policy and strategy around mental health (Hill *et al.*, 2020). Closely related to this is the need for governance and accountability – for institutions to continuously monitor the effectiveness of their practices and to continually make changes and enhance practices where necessary.

At a granular level, considerations relating to mental well-being need to be embedded into:

- Institutional culture, i.e. through institutional values and mission statements that explicitly reference mental well-being; through aiming to reduce or eliminate toxic cultures that have a negative impact on well-being; and through a commitment to embedding compassionate leadership, as implemented in health and social care contexts;
- Inclusive student support services and practices, ensuring they are well designed so that students are adequately supported from the very beginning and throughout their studies;
- Curricula (including assessment), pedagogy and practice, i.e. through inclusive curriculum and assessment design; through significant commitment to staff development; through formal quality assurance processes; and through assessment accommodations and adjustments;
- Institutional processes and administration that impact on the student’s university experience, both in terms of the inclusive design of processes (accommodating extenuating circumstances requests, and so on) and in terms of embedding accountability for well-being into processes via measures such as Equality Impact Assessments; and
- Staff recruitment, promotion and staffing practices, and working conditions for staff, through accommodations, adequate training, the provision of relevant support, inclusive practices and commitment to eliminating bias and discrimination.

In addition, there is a need to ensure institutions offer proactive support for mental health and well-being to both staff and students, promoting a culture of well-being for all. A crucial aspect of this is enhancing the well-being and mental health literacy of both staff and students, and offering support to students and staff who are impacted by global or individual circumstances beyond the remit of the institution. This should be operationalised through the availability of counselling and support, as well as through inclusive practices such as deferrals of study, extensions to assignments and the availability of contingency leave or leave of absence for staff, without judgement or impacts on career or study goals. Well-being counselling services should also be culturally competent to respond adequately to the different needs of a diverse university community (Daddow *et al.*, 2020).

By pressing for such a change in culture, focused upon compassion, community, connection and belonging, better well-being can be promoted for all (Hughes, 2020; Riva *et al.*, 2020). Crucially, a successful whole-institution approach should be planned and deployed in partnership with and including the voices of all stakeholders, so that actions taken are timely and relevant to the higher education setting in which staff and students operate.

Recommendations

This report makes the following recommendations:

- 1- Universities should work to implement holistic, whole-institution approaches to well-being and mental health, which are planned and deployed in partnership with staff and students.
- 2- Policies and strategies relating to well-being and mental health should be developed, both at institution level and more broadly (e.g. country-wide), that can inform an effective and continuously monitored practice.
- 3- Change should be promoted in institutional culture, with university leaders taking ownership of and accountability for ensuring that mental well-being is considered throughout higher education systems and practices, and for delivering a strategic vision that supports a culture of compassion, belonging and equality for staff and students.
- 4- Support services (e.g. counselling) and practices (e.g. deferrals of study or leave of absence) should be inclusive and culturally competent, so that students and staff are adequately supported from the very beginning and throughout their studies and/or contract.
- 5- Well-being should be embedded throughout curricula, assessment, pedagogy and practice, with inclusive design becoming the standard.
- 6- Institutional processes, systems and administration should actively consider well-being, in terms of both the inclusive design of processes (accommodating extenuating circumstances requests, and so on) and in terms of embedding accountability for well-being into processes via measures such as Equality Impact Assessments.
- 7- Well-being should be actively considered throughout staff recruitment, working conditions and promotion practices, and should include accommodations, adequate training, the provision of relevant support, inclusive practices, and a commitment to eliminating bias and discrimination.

- 8- Support for mental well-being should be proactive, promoting mental health literacy among staff and students towards a culture of well-being for all.

Conclusion

We are moving towards a future in which higher education must be increasingly relevant to and active in society, playing a substantial role in shaping sustainable, inclusive and resilient societies, economies and leaders. It is essential that universities find ways to counter the toxic and competitive cultures of the past and move towards a strategic vision that supports a culture of compassion, belonging and equality for staff and students.

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