



Student and staff mental well-being in European Higher Education Institutions

NESET Analytical Report, 2024

Summary

The analytical report presents an overview of the barriers and issues affecting the declining mental health and well-being of students and staff in higher education across the European Union. In order to advance the search for solutions that could sustain the mental health and well-being of higher education communities, the report examines examples of holistic, integrated 'whole institution' approaches that promote the well-being of staff and students, ensuring that mental well-being is mainstreamed into higher education cultures, systems and practices. It also identifies relevant and successful policies and programmes that have been developed in partnership with staff and student stakeholders and that have been implemented in European and international higher education institutions. The report also provides a set of key policy recommendations for improving the well-being of higher education students and staff across the European Union, which can facilitate the successful implementation of holistic, 'whole institution' approaches.

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Context

The mental health and well-being of students and staff is key to the success of universities, underpinning performance, productivity, learning, teaching, retention and reputation. 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 its staff and students, and universities are more aware than ever that mental well-being needs to be at the forefront of policy and strategy and high on academic research agendas. Within this framework, although steps have been taken to better understand how to address the issue and to implement relevant actions, the need for a more strategic, organic and effective approach to the declining mental health and well-being of higher education students and staff has clearly emerged, and guidance on how to achieve this is needed.

Key findings

The review literature presented in this report shows that higher education staff and students experience a high prevalence of problems and barriers related to mental health and well-being.

These include issues related to

- The culture and practices of teaching and research in higher education, which prioritise individualism and competition over community and well-being;
- Inequalities, discrimination (e.g. gender, sexual orientation, religious belief, disability, etc.) and marginalisation within higher education which affect large numbers of staff and students;
- The impact of wider global challenges and crises on staff and student well-being, when combined with stressful work or study

The report found that there is little recognition of the interconnected relationship between staff and student well-being within higher education, with institutional policies and approaches that explicitly or implicitly prioritise student well-being, and posits that staff and student well-being are not separate issues but need to be considered as interdependent parts of the same ecosystem.

The literature suggests that holistic 'whole-institution' approaches are needed, with university leaders taking ownership and accountability for ensuring that mental well-being is considered throughout higher education cultures, systems and practices. Importantly, the report shows that staff and students have a key role to play in developing such integrated approaches, which must have participatory practices at their core.

Recommendations

Universities should work to implement holistic, institution-wide approaches to well-being and mental health. These should be planned and implemented in partnership with staff and students.	Policies and strategies on well-being and mental health should be developed at both institutional and wider (e.g. national) levels, which can inform effective and continually monitored practice .	Institutional culture change should be promoted, with university leaders taking responsibility and accountability for ensuring that mental well-being is mainstreamed throughout higher education systems and practices, and for providing a strategic vision that supports a culture of compassion, belonging and equality for staff and students.	Support services (e.g. counselling) and practices (e.g. deferral or leave) should be inclusive and culturally competent , so that students and staff are adequately supported from the outset and throughout their studies and/or contract.
Well-being should be embedded throughout the curriculum, assessment, pedagogy and practice, with inclusive design becoming the norm.	Institutional processes, systems and administration should actively consider well-being, both in terms of inclusive design of processes (e.g. extenuating circumstances requests, etc.) and in terms of embedding accountability for well-being in processes such as through Equality Impact Assessments.	Well-being should be actively considered throughout staff recruitment, working conditions and promotion practices , including accommodation, appropriate training, provision of relevant support, inclusive practices and a commitment to eliminating bias and discrimination.	Support for mental well-being should be proactive , promoting mental health literacy among staff and students towards a culture of well-being for all.