

RELEVANCE OF STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY

Rasa Pocevičienė¹, & Rainer Rubira García²

¹Šiaulių valstybinė kolegija / Higher Education Institution (Lithuania)

²Rey Juan Carlos university (Spain)

Abstract

Mental health and wellbeing of students in European higher education institutions have gained significant attention in recent years, moreover after Covid-19 pandemic. And even though a couple of years have already passed since the pandemic, the current events in Europe and in all the world as well as the problems of mental health and psychological well-being now are no less relevant, which is why it is appropriate to study them. Educational management plays a crucial role in addressing these concerns, as it encompasses various practices and policies that can either support or hinder students' mental health. This study aims to execute a comparative case study to explore the relationship between educational management, mental health and wellbeing of European higher education students in two countries: Lithuania and Spain. Research in two countries will enable to validate the methodology and the questionnaire, which could be applied in other contexts also. This survey also enables to assess students' mental health status, levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as their perception of the support services and resources available to them. Comparative analysis of survey responses will provide insights into the variations in educational management approaches and their impact on students' mental health and wellbeing. The comparative case study approach will enable the identification of best practices, effective strategies, and innovative initiatives that positively influence student mental health outcomes. The study's outcomes will inform policy recommendations and provide guidance for higher education institutions seeking to enhance their educational management practices to better support student mental health and wellbeing.

Keywords: *Mental health, wellbeing, higher education institutions, Spain, Lithuania.*

1. Introduction

Mental health and wellbeing of students in European higher education institutions have gained significant attention in recent years, moreover after Covid-19 pandemic. And even though a couple of years have already passed since the pandemic, the current events in Europe and in all the world as well as the problems of mental health and psychological well-being now are no less relevant, which is why it is appropriate to study them. Educational management plays a crucial role in addressing these concerns, as it encompasses various practices and policies that can either support or hinder students' mental health.

Quality of life represents a core concept of this proposal and is understood in the sense of the realization of the possibilities of satisfying basic or survival needs (food, shelter, shelter), as well as other equally important needs, since they make existence richer, fuller, more dignified and happier, especially in relation to health and mental well-being.

How to ensure that students as future full citizens participate effectively in the various spheres of economic, political and cultural activity; that they have the opportunities to live in dignity and develop their capacities; that they can choose and acquire power over their lives, in harmony with individual and social values and interests?

Objectives: The purpose of this study is to develop a research methodology and instrument and to conduct a comparative case study, the purpose of which is to investigate the relationship between educational management, mental health and well-being of European high school students in two countries - Lithuania and Spain. Research in two countries would allow validation of the methodology and questionnaire, which could be applied in other contexts.

Methodology: The comparative case study approach was chosen for the empirical research, which enables the identification of best practices, effective strategies, and innovative initiatives that positively influence student mental health outcomes. Creating instrument and method of the research

there was chosen method of survey, which also enables to assess students' mental health status, levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as their perception of the support services and resources available to them. Comparative analysis of survey responses enables to provide insights into the variations in educational management approaches and their impact on students' mental health and wellbeing. Taking into account these elements, we posed the following goals in this study: to determine the factors of students' psychological feeling and well-being; to assess the emotional feeling of students, to identify the needs of students to use psychological consultations, to evaluate the existing competencies for the reinforcement of psychological well-being and psychic health in different cultural contexts.

The research methodics and instrument was tested in a pilot survey, where 40 students from both countries and different study programmes were participated. One of the aims here was to design a comparative case study to explore the relationship between educational management, mental health and wellbeing of European higher education students in two countries and validate it for wider research in those as well as in other countries and contexts.

2. Design of the research

An approach that has nowadays gained significant consensus is based on understanding education as a mechanism for satisfying human needs, since it allows us to respond to our demands for subsistence, participation in social, economic, cultural and political life, self-realization, creation, mutual understanding with other people, among others (Lavin de Arrivé, 1996).

Certainly, education is an indispensable condition - although not sufficient on its own - for development and improvement of the quality of life. However, it should not be forgotten that the debate on educational quality might be a utopian and distant discourse in many regions and vulnerable groups, which face the daily scourges of economic decline, critical poverty, foreign debt, population explosion and the weakening of the social fabric.

Education is a fulfilment of human needs, but above all, it is a right protected by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Therefore, policies in this field must ensure, as stated in the Report of the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century, the double objective of quality and equity, which is ultimately linked to profound socio-structural changes and to the problem of mental health and well-being.

At the same time, UNESCO considers that the necessary transformations to achieve this end must be based on three primary functions to be enhanced by education: the acquisition, updating and use of knowledge from a holistic point of view with mental health. Indeed, the development of the information society has led to the vertiginous production and renewal of science and technology, which requires people to be able to obtain, select, process and apply these large volumes of data with a view to their successful performance in the various social spaces and, therefore, to greater stress in the teaching-learning process (Comission Internationale sur l'Education por le Vingt et Unième Siècle, 1996). Precisely, the issue of performance profiles has currently become one of the driving forces behind educational changes and the learning revolution, considering that the new production processes require new competencies, knowledge, skills and abilities that traditional curricula are unable to develop in the younger generations. For example, if production tends to become increasingly decentralized in terms of organizational management, performance in the corresponding spheres requires great autonomy, creativity, mastery of strategies to solve problems and seek alternatives, among other competencies that today's schools and universities do not promote in most cases.

Psychological well-being, as a socially important aspect of a person's well-being, is increasingly being actualized. According to the Description of the procedure for the provision of psychological well-being and mental health strengthening services (2020), psychological well-being is satisfaction with life and its individual areas (family, friends, financial situation, etc.), oneself, the experience of purposefulness and meaningfulness of life, happiness. In February 2021, the Lithuanian Students' Union conducted a survey, the topic of which is "Psychological state of students and support", in order to identify the well-being of students and possible reasons for changes, taking into account the changes in schools and the quarantine of the last two years. The results of the study emphasize the deterioration of the students' psychological state, three out of 4 students experience severe stress, every third - a panic attack. Negative psychological states such as great anxiety, fear or severe stress, depression, eating disorders, etc. are also experienced.

Lithuanian Students' Union in 2021 initiated and signed an agreement with Lithuanian higher schools on strengthening mental health in March. In March-April 2021, the research group of Šiaulių Valstybinė Kolegija (hereinafter - ŠVK) conducted a psychological well-being study of ŠVK students, the purpose of which is to find out the psychological well-being of students during the Covid-19 pandemic and quarantine. The survey data revealed that:

- the majority (56%) of those who participated in the survey stated that the study load increased during the quarantine;
- that their daily life (81%) and daily routine (80%) changed or changed completely;
- 57 percent stated that he/she goes to bed and gets up at different times, the sleep and activity regime is not balanced, it is difficult to plan daily activities, the beginning and end of the working day changes, the working day is extended, and rest breaks are rarely taken;
- 69 percent of respondents indicated that they had disturbed sleep during the last two weeks, for 70% - it was difficult to overcome various difficulties, 62 percent - felt constant tension, but 67 percent did not have the opportunity to discuss the problems that oppressed them during the study process;
- according to the respondents, both general mental health (49%) and emotional well-being worsened during the second quarantine (44%);
- when assessing their emotional state, the respondents stated that in the last two weeks they often felt unhappy and depressed (76%), lost self-confidence (61%), nervous (54%) and restless (43%);
- during both quarantines, the majority (74%) named conversations with family/friends/colleagues as a way to help themselves.
- However, if there was an opportunity to use psychologist's consultations in the institution, 46 percent would use it subjects.

Successful professional and social activities of students, as well as integration, require not only high professional, but also sufficiently developed general competences, which should be developed permanently. In addition to other generic competences, lifelong learning competences, especially competencies of self-directed learning (Pocevičienė, 2014, 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c) are very important in this regard. All these competences are equally important, many of them are related and complement each other - aspects specific to one area strengthen the abilities of another area. Skills such as critical thinking, creativity, initiative, problem solving, risk assessment, decision-making, and constructive emotion management play a central role in the development of all eight competencies.

The study of psychological well-being in order to identify changes in the psychological and mental health of students would help to reduce the risk of similar problems in professional and social activities in the future. Especially in the case when the students themselves are actively involved in the research. In this case, students' scientific competences and positive attitudes towards evidence-based practice are also developed.

Scientific sources state that the psychosocial learning environment is an environment that includes psychological and social factors that can influence students' satisfaction, health and opportunities to study. The learning environment has a direct impact on the development of students' higher order thinking skills, psychological well-being and learning. Since the psychosocial environment also contributes to the effectiveness of learning, it is very important to assess the psychosocial factors experienced by students that affect their psychological well-being and health. Academic adaptation is also considered a key factor in the quality of academic results, as students' successful adaptation to the life of the academic community also leads to better learning outcomes. In addition, academic achievements are influenced by students' self-esteem, which increases as students' results improve and vice versa, having more knowledge and abilities increases students' self-esteem. It should be emphasized that a negative psychological learning environment can lead to the emergence of anxiety, stress, and depression among students. Stress can be related to the difficult adjustment in higher education, especially for first-year, Erasmus+ students and students from foreign countries. Students use a variety of coping strategies to deal with the stress of academic challenges, from problem solving, help seeking, healthy eating, meditation, or other pleasurable activities to tranquilizers, addictions, and other addictions.

In 2022 in the project "Strengthening the psychological well-being and mental health of Šiaulių Valstybinė Kolegija students", financed by the Lithuanian State Study Fund, after each implemented activity, students submitted written reflections on how they evaluated the organized activities. Most of the students said that participation in the activities (seminar series, individual psychologist consultations, training, board game workshops, etc.) was very useful for them, gave them the opportunity to develop practical skills and competencies (self-knowledge and assessment, stress management, emotion management, etc.). In addition, the majority stated that such activities are very necessary and useful, so they should not be one-time events, but organized regularly. Taking into account the results obtained during this project, students' general competencies will continue to be developed through the activities carried out. By creating a favourable psychological learning environment, students will have the opportunity to improve their ability to learn, cognitive and scientific competencies. In order to strengthen the adequate expression of emotions and reduce stress, project participants will strengthen mental health

competencies. By implementing activities in a multicultural environment, cultural and social civic competences will be deepened.

Based on theoretical and empirical content analysis the main parts of the survey were identified:

1. Living and studying conditions (physical aspect). Here students were asked to evaluate their living and studying conditions in their residential setting (Where they live, how they evaluate the living and studying conditions, how many people live together etc.)
2. Studying conditions (academical aspect). The main focus here is on the academical aspect of studying. The main questions are the following: How many hours per day on average do you spend studying (including lessons and independent work after lectures); How, in your opinion, the load of your studies has changed in this academic year; What do you think is a possibility that you are going to discontinue or suspend the study process in the near future (in six months) and etc.
3. Evaluation of material condition. To know about students 'material status is also relevant because if because of the lack of incomes even for the essential needs students need to work and combine studies and work their living and studying conditions could become even more complicated. Psychological welfare is related with objective factors, but it is also very important and subjective feeling and evaluation of students themselves. That's why in the survey were included questions about their opinion about how they could describe their material state; their opinion about how their material state will change in the near future (for example, in six months) and etc.
4. Evaluation of feelings. Evaluate how often in the past two weeks they felt relaxed, nervous, energetic, incompetent, active, restless, happy, annoyed, fun, do everything with great efforts, attention, negligible, cheerful, isolated, quiet, marginalized, positive, left, necessary, angry and etc. In addition, how their routine changed when they started their studies. Here could such questions as, for example, do you get up and go to bed at similar times or at different, do you plan your work time and follow the agenda, do you have regular breaks; are the beginning and end of your work day changed depending on the amount of work; is your sleep and work routine disordered, is it difficult to plan the day's activity, is your work day prolonged very often. Also, how they evaluate their feeling in general or are and what differences they meet when they started their studies.

Because psychological welfare has big impact not only on physiological but also on social aspects of people's life, into the questionnaire it is also logical to include questions about sleep, mood, happiness and etc. It is no less important to know where they able to concentrate on their present work/studies; to make important decisions independently; to find the ways to overcome different difficulties; to be confident; even to enjoy their daily activities.

It's obvious that stress, tension, especially permanent, can lead to the emergence or strengthening of bad habits (for example, drinking alcoholic, using drugs or different kinds of stimulates) those questions also were included into the questionnaire.

Living in the global world it would be difficult escape influence of the events that physically take place far from us, but psychologically, because internet, social media etc., seems that they happened near. Therefore, the reaction to them also is important and can influence about psychological welfare even if we are not directly related with them. On the other hand, some events, situation or phenomenon (for example, Covid-19 pandemic and quarantine, the war in Ukraine, inflation, the economic and energy crisis) has direct relation with our feelings and, of course, our welfare. Not less relevant, especially for the support in future, is knowledge how students overcome complicated situations in their life and daily worries. What they prefer more : to talk, to communicate a lot with family/friends/colleagues; to fall at work/studies; to look for an interesting activity, to do hobbies, physical activity (for example, walks, running, sports, manual work, etc.), to do regular exercises; to spend time on social media or/and play computer games; to go to a psychologist/psychotherapist or to psychiatrist; to take homeopathic medications/products; to read psychological articles, use emotional help apps; to write, I call emotional help lines, or even to do nothing. In addition, what opportunities are to do all this in the higher educational institution.

5. Skills evaluation. This aspect is very relevant and much related with the previous question, because to overcome challenges and difficulties it is not enough to have knowledge. It is necessary to have proper skills. And the most important skills here are general skills, especially those that are related with self-directed learning skills and competences (Pocevičienė, 2014, 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c) such as to be able to reflect and evaluate problem areas and changes as well as state of psychological well-being and mental health; to integrate into the execution of project activities; to identify, indicate and overcome difficulties; to set a goal, manage time and

etc. Some special skills, that is, calculation, logical and strategic thinking, reading skills, development of creativity, etc.), to educate and use as a self-help method to overcome stress, also could be relevant.

The questionnaire was validated by the pilot research with small group of students and the results confirmed its suitability for deeper and wider research, already at least in the two countries.

Conducting a similar study in another country, i.e., in other social, cultural, economic and/or other in an environment that would enable us to understand the context of existing data, see the deeper causes of emerging challenges and problems, and provide more optimal measures for solving and/or preventing these problems.

3. Conclusions

- A survey was designed and administered to students in participating institutions.
- The main focus of the survey assessed students' mental health status, levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, emotional status, as well as their perception of the mental health support services and resources available to them.
- Comparative analysis of survey responses provides insights into the variations in educational management approaches and cultural contexts and their impact on students' mental health and wellbeing.
- An exploratory analysis was conducted with a small intentional sample of subjects in both countries to refine the research instrument. In particular, cultural, language biases and contextual specific adaptations were addressed.

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