

DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENT HEALTH MANAGEMENT – THE UNIVERSITY AS A SETTING FOR MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY PROMOTION

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Abstract

The general state of health of students deteriorated significantly between 2015 and 2023. Due to the extensive change processes in the German higher education system, e.g., the Bologna reform, but also internationalization and digitalization processes, the perception of complexity and stress as well as emotional exhaustion among students have increased significantly. This is reflected in a significant increase in mental illness. The contribution presents the university's project "Mindful Campus" (MinCa), which aims to promote mental health literacy (MHL) among students of the vocational teaching profession and to establish student health management (SHM) at the university. At the beginning of MinCa, the overarching question is how organizational university structures can contribute to supporting the individual learning of MHL and enabling the integration of health literacy promotion into the curricula in order to establish an SHM at the university, analogous to existing occupational health management. In the long term, the project aims to expand the current internal structures beyond the institutes and central university facilities involved in health promotion. In order to enable a sustainable continuation of the pedagogical content to promote students' MHL, MinCa aims to expand curricularly defined modules in the medium and long term. This is linked to the objective of a permanently embedded micro degree in MHL across degree courses. A micro degree is composed of several micro credentials, which are smaller learning units that can be taken flexibly and are designed to be competence-oriented. In addition to strengthening students' individual MHL, it is also necessary for universities as educational institutions to become aware of their responsibility for the development of a health-promoting environment, to recognize the effects of crises and disadvantages within their organizational structures and to take them into account by designing their university culture in a correspondingly responsive manner. As a result, universities increasingly see themselves as actors in health promotion and anchor the associated values in their self-image, e.g. in the form of an SHM. The aim of the SHM is to create a health-promoting university environment for all students and to systematically implement and sustainably integrate it into the university structures. This contribution therefore examines the question how supporting the individual development of mental health of students can contribute to developing a participatory approach to enable the integration of MHL into the curricula in order to establish a sustainable SHM.

Keywords: *Health promotion, mental health literacy, student health management, micro degree.*

1. Mental health (literacy) of the students

The general state of health of students has deteriorated significantly between 2015 and 2023, which is due to an increase in stress and strain among students and which has led to a significant overall increase in mental illness (Techniker Krankenkasse [TK], 2023). The increased emotional stress of students should be seen as a warning signal for burn-out and other mental illnesses and therefore as a central problem (TK, 2023). In addition to the extensive change processes in the German higher education system, e.g. the Bologna reform, but also increasing internationalization and digitalization processes, as well as study-related factors, such as examination pressure, competition and student financing, social and political phenomena, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the global climate crisis or the Middle East conflict, are also having an increasing impact on the perception of complexity and stress as well as emotional exhaustion and thus on the psychosocial stress of students (Brock et al., 2024). Further challenges can arise due to intersectional health inequalities and inequities in the university context, as various socio-structural characteristics such as disabilities, chronic illnesses, immigration background, sexual orientation or care

responsibilities, e.g., childcare or caring for relatives, can influence the development and maintenance of mental health (Brock et al., 2024). In this way, a conglomerate of challenges can arise for affected students that is usually invisible to the outside world and can have a negative impact on their ability to study (Banek, Gillen, Michele, & Steuber, 2025). This initial situation results in a growing need for individual mental health literacy (MHL) and for a structurally anchored, university-wide Student Health Management (SHM) similar to the existing Occupational Health Management at Leibniz University Hannover (LUH). A sustainably anchored SHM aims to systematically promote the health of students and strengthen their health-related resources (Brock et al., 2024; Kompetenzzentrum Gesundheitsfördernde Hochschulen, 2024). The overarching question of this article is therefore how organizational university structures can contribute on a curricular and structural level to promoting the individual development of students' MHL. The aim of the article is to use the example of the participatory project "Mindful Campus - Promoting mental health literacy among students" (MinCa) to show how the university setting can be a decisive factor in promoting students' MHL and developing an SHM. On the one hand, the focus is on the setting approach and, on the other, on the consolidation of individual curricular MHL support through a micro degree in "Mental Health Literacy".

2. Project mindful campus

The MinCa project, funded for two years by the TK, a German health insurance, has been piloted at LUH since January 2025 in the area of teaching at vocational schools. The overarching objective of the project is to develop a participatory concept and strategy to establish a SHM to promote MHL among students through measures at curricular and structural university level. At the beginning of the project, the overarching questions are how individual development of MHL can be supported, how the integration of health literacy promotion into the curricula can be made possible, and how organizational university structures can contribute to the establishment of an SHM at LUH in this way. In the long term, MinCa aims to expand the university's internal structures in terms of a health literacy-promoting university health management approach beyond the institutes and central facilities at LUH that have been involved in health promotion to date.

The basis for this is a salutogenetic understanding of health, which is detached from the normative concept of being healthy, in which health is understood as a continuum. Analogous to this understanding of health, physical, psychological and social factors are included as conditions of origin and development factors for the individual state of health (Antonovsky, 1991). In this way, the promotion of MHL can develop constructive mechanisms for coping with stress as well as the cognitive, social and motivational abilities and skills of an individual that help them to independently access health-related information that contributes to coping with illness, disease prevention and/or health promotion (Sørensen et al., 2012).

2.1. Participation as a research approach

MinCa pursues a participatory research approach that aims both to develop individual MHL among students and to structurally consolidate an overarching SHM. Participation is understood as the individual or collective involvement of people in health-related decisions for their lives in the narrower sense (Wihofszky, Hartung, & Narimani, 2020). For this reason, close involvement of students as co-researchers in all research-theoretical and operational decision-making processes is essential. As part of an initial needs analysis by MinCa, students were involved in a first step in the form of an exploratory workshop and then qualitative, problem-centered interviews were conducted with other students from various departments at LUH. The student assistants were involved in the evaluation of the interviews as well as in the curricular design of the seminars on MHL content. The student assistants are also involved in the regular steering group meetings of the SHM to be developed, alongside the relevant LUH employees, as well as in the other MHL offerings organized as part of the project, such as the training for mental health first aiders and the LUH health week organized in cooperation with the occupational health management.

2.2. University as health actor

Against the backdrop of the Okanagan Charter (2015), universities have recently come to understand their responsibility as active shapers and actors of health-promoting environments. As a result, they are anchoring the corresponding values in their self-image, e.g., in the form of an SHM (Brock et al., 2024). The aim of the SHM is to create a health-promoting university environment for all students and to strengthen students' individual health resources. It is advisable to systematically implement SHM and integrate it sustainably into university structures (Kompetenzzentrum Gesundheitsfördernde Hochschulen, 2024). The setting approach focuses on health literacy promotion in people's actual living environment and thus addresses both the framework conditions and personal behavior. This makes it the core strategy of health promotion and networking its most important development tool at universities (TK, 2020). Against

this background, the university is understood as a socio-spatial system in which health-promoting measures and processes are implemented in both working and learning contexts. Especially since the amendment of the Prevention Act in 2015, this approach has been increasingly taken up by universities, thus emphasizing the relevance of concrete measures and focused structural development in the university context.

2.3. Project goals and actions at curricular and structural level

The core goals and actions of MinCa can be divided into medium and long-term. These include both the promotion of individual MHL and the anchoring of health-related content in the curriculum, as well as the development of an SHM and networking within and outside the university and, finally, the consolidation of the offerings as part of a micro degree in “Mental Health Literacy”. On this basis, a curricular and structural plan of actions was developed that enables the promotion of MHL at LUH on an individual and organizational level.

2.3.1. Curricular level. MinCa is currently guided by the overarching question of how the organizational structures of the LUH can contribute to supporting students in their individual learning of MHL. To this end, various content-related offerings to promote MHL among vocational teacher training students were designed at curricular level with the help of the university didactic approach of innovative forms of teaching and learning and initially piloted at the Institute of Vocational Education and Adult Education. In further steps, these curricular, individual offers will be extended to other subject areas. In order to enable a sustainable continuation of the pedagogical content to promote students' MHL, MinCa is aiming to expand the curricular modules in the long term. In order to make these modules certifiable, a general LUH-wide micro degree system is currently being developed. This will enable the introduction of a micro degree not only in the vocational teaching profession for MHL, but also in other subject areas such as natural sciences for other content. The corresponding preparatory work, e.g. the necessary LUH-wide structural and organizational changes, is currently being carried out. A micro degree is made up of several micro credentials, i.e. smaller course units with 5 credit points (CP) each, which are designed to be competence-oriented and can be taken flexibly by students from all subject areas. The long-term goal is a permanently embedded additional certificate in form of a micro degree in MHL with 30 CP, which can be taken across all degree programs at LUH.

2.3.2. Structural level. In addition to the individual promotion of students' MHL at a curricular level, universities have recently become increasingly aware of their responsibility as educational institutions for the development of a health-promoting environment. Accordingly, MinCa at LUH has set itself the long-term goal of recognizing the effects of crises and disadvantages within its organizational structures and taking them into account by designing its university culture in a correspondingly responsive manner. As a result, LUH increasingly sees itself as an actor in health promotion, which leads to the associated values being anchored in its self-image and becoming visible in the form of a newly established SHM analogous to the existing occupational health management at LUH. The aim of the SHM, analogous to the setting approach, is to create a health-promoting university environment for everyone by expanding the existing internal structures beyond the institutes and central university health promotion facilities. This includes systematic implementation and sustainable integration of the services into the university structures. As a further measure at a structural level, a steering committee was formed to coordinate and strategically develop the various activities to promote health literacy at LUH under the leadership of the Center for University Sports. The steering committee, which consists of representatives of LUH's internal health stakeholders, two student assistants and the responsible university advisors from TK, will continue to work on the development of the SHM throughout the duration of the project and – in cooperation with the occupational health management – on the development of a university health management in the long term. In this way, it enables the use of synergies of existing measures and initiatives of university facilities and institutions.

Further project measures include cross-institutional, internal networking as well as cross-university, external networking, e.g., since August 2024 as part of the membership of the *Healthy Universities North* network, as well as accompanying research and evaluation on the topic of MHL.

3. Methods

In a first step, ten qualitative, semi-structured and problem-centered interviews were conducted with students according to Witzel (2000) for the needs analysis. In addition to advertising via a news tile on the LUH homepage and via social media, in particular the LUH Instagram channel, advertising flyers were developed to select interview partners via the snowball system, providing information about the

project and calling for participation in the interviews. The flyers were distributed on campus in the current *Zeit Campus Mental Health* 2024 and 2025 magazines.

The core objective of the interviews with the students was to identify content-related and structural factors that influence the subjective mental health perception of students in their living environment and thus in the university setting at LUH. The interviews conducted were then transcribed and analyzed using the thematic coding method according to Flick (2017).

In a next step, the course coordinators involved in the vocational teaching degree program were also included in the needs assessment in the form of a problem-centered survey in order to gain the perspective of those actors who are primarily involved in advising students. Furthermore, additional interviews were conducted with doctoral students in order to supplement the resulting needs analysis with the needs of doctoral students.

4. Discussion

Initial findings from the needs analysis interviews include requirements and needs, such as the need for individual, curricular and organizational support and structural integration of students, as well as perceived study-related stress factors. The initial insights gained from this needs analysis are incorporated into the curricular development of the MHL offerings so that they can be continuously developed and adapted to the current needs of students. As a result of the need for low-threshold counselling services frequently expressed in the interviews, for example, training was organized for mental health first aiders, in which various LUH employees and student assistants are trained to support students as the first point of contact in mental and psychological crisis situations. A central element of MinCa is the curricular innovation of the micro degree “Mental Health Literacy”, which is composed of flexibly assignable, competence-oriented micro credentials. This enables LUH students to follow individual learning paths in the field of MHL. The aim is to establish the course across all degree programs at LUH and to open it up to further education and training, e.g. for teachers, in line with the third mission concept. MinCa thus offers great social potential through the promotion of MHL both at the individual level of LUH students and at the organizational-structural level of LUH in the form of the SHM or even an LUH-wide university health management and thus a high level of sustainability through the structural anchoring of the offerings. Other universities, such as Osnabrück and Bochum, have already recognized the need to promote MHL and have established their services with the “Health Campus Osnabrück” and the SHM Bochum and anchored them sustainably in the organizational structures of the universities.

The high complexity of implementation, which requires good coordination of all LUH stakeholders, is addressed by the established steering committee. The changing student body and the constantly changing conditions at the university are challenges for long-term impact measurement, just as scalability and transferability to other international universities is still open. However, the European Commission has already adopted a recommendation on a “European approach to micro credentials for lifelong learning and employability” (The Council of the European Union [EU Council], 2022) in 2022. This aims to ensure “quality, transparency, cross-border comparability, recognition and transferability” of micro-credentials, as an “effective culture of lifelong learning [...] is key to ensuring that all people have the knowledge, skills and competences they need to succeed in society, in the labor market and in their personal lives” (EU Council, 2022).

5. Conclusions

Universities need to live up to their responsibility to create a health-promoting environment. The MinCa project is pursuing this goal at LUH through a combination of individual support for MHL, curricular integration, structural development of an SHM and the development of an innovative micro degree system. In the long term, this can help to prevent students from dropping out, reduce mental stress and improve student health. Based on the sustainable curricular integration and innovative structure of the micro credentials and the micro degree, in combination with the topic of participative, student MHL and its management at institutional level in the form of a SHM within the framework of the setting approach, a current topic is created that has a high social and practical relevance. In this way, MinCa also addresses current social and political issues, such as the shortage of teaching staff and skilled workers, for example by providing individual support for MHL to prevent students from dropping out of their studies (Wyrwal & Zinn, 2018). The concrete added value of MinCa therefore lies in the short term in the promotion of students' individual MHL, in the medium term in the representation of interests at an organizational-structural level in the form of the SHM and in the long term in the form of the continuation of the offerings via the micro degree “Mental Health Literacy” both LUH-wide for all students and in the form of further and continuing education within the framework of the third mission, analogous to the general demand for lifelong learning and lasting employability.

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