

What affects student wellbeing?

Introduction and background

The 2019 HEPI / Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey has revealed that student wellbeing is lower than wellbeing among the general population of young people and that there has been an increase in anxiety levels since 2018. This report by Tim Blackman, Vice-Chancellor of the Open University, explores the data in-depth in order to find out whether there are any links between student wellbeing and practices related to teaching and feedback.

The above-mentioned survey of over 14,000 full-time students included 4 questions on wellbeing with respondents asked to rank themselves from 0 (low) to 10 (high). Inspection of distributions across these scales showed that a score of 7 was a tipping point. It was therefore identified as the differentiator between low and high.

Being happy, satisfied and feeling life is worthwhile are closely related to each other. So, for the sake of simplicity, life satisfaction is used in this analysis, rather than reporting separately on all 3 variables.

Anxiety is analysed separately.

The first part of the analysis explores the effects of 'compositional' variables on life satisfaction and anxiety. These are student characteristics including ethnic identity, home area, residential status, commute and paid work. The author then looks at 'contextual' variables and, specifically, how students' experiences of teaching and feedback affect their life satisfaction and anxiety levels.

Key points

The effect of ethnic identity

- There appears to be a strong relationship between ethnic identity and dissatisfaction with life. Forty-two per cent of Bangladeshi students (highest) have a life satisfaction score of less than 7 compared to 28 per cent of White students (lowest). Other groups with high proportions of students reporting scores of less than 7 are Black Caribbean (41%), Black Other (40.7%), Black African (38.5) and Pakistani (38.3%).
- There is also a relationship between anxiety levels and ethnicity, although it is less pronounced, with scores above 7 ranging from 26.6 per cent for those of mixed ethnicity to 21 per cent for those of Black African ethnicity.
- Simple White / Black or BAME / White characterisations do not fully capture the picture. Both White and Chinese students, for example, tend to be more anxious but also more satisfied with life. Black students tend to be less anxious but are more likely to be dissatisfied with life.

The effect of area of home residence

- POLAR is a classification based on the level of young people's participation in higher education. It groups people into 5 quintiles from low to high. POLAR 1 are the areas with the lowest participation and POLAR 5 the areas with the highest participation.
- Satisfaction with life increases as we move up through the POLAR quintiles. Of those in POLAR 1 areas, 35.3 per cent are dissatisfied with life, compared to 29.7 per cent of those in POLAR 5 areas.

- Anxiety levels follow a similar pattern, although those in POLAR 2 have almost the same anxiety levels as those in POLAR 4. Those in POLAR 1 have the highest levels of anxiety (23.2%), and those in POLAR 5 have the lowest (19.8%).

The effects of residential status and commuting

- There are 2 factors related to travel which are captured in the survey: whether students continue living at home or relocate to study; and whether they have short or long commutes.
- Dissatisfaction with life is highest amongst those who live at home and have a long commute (36.9%). It is lowest amongst those who have moved to be near their place of study and who have a short commute (30.4%).
- It is noteworthy that only 23 per cent of POLAR 5 students in the sample live at home, while 37 per cent of POLAR 1 students do. Similarly, while only 25 per cent of POLAR 5 students have a long commute, 33 per cent of POLAR 1 students do.

The effect of paid work

- It is clear from survey data that students living in more disadvantaged circumstances are more likely to work long hours. While only 13 per cent of POLAR 5 students work 12 or more hours a week, this rises to 20 per cent among POLAR 1 students.

- The decision to stay at home may be influenced by needing to keep a part-time job in the area in which they live, and there is evidence that commuter students' jobs entail longer hours. Whereas only 12 per cent of students who relocate to study worked 12 or more hours a week, this rises significantly to 25 per cent among students who continue living at home.
- Working long hours has no significant effect on anxiety and only a small negative effect on life satisfaction.

institutions should therefore see increasing their students' experiences of helpful teachers and useful feedback not as important, not only for student achievement, but also for wellbeing.

The effects of teaching and feedback experiences

- Students' experiences of teaching and feedback show significant associations with anxiety and life satisfaction. One of the strongest effects is students' reports of the proportion of staff teaching them who are helpful and supportive.
- Overall, 62 per cent of students say all or most staff are helpful and supportive, 22 per cent say half and half and 7 per cent say few or none. As the proportion of staff experienced as helpful and supportive declines, so the proportion of students reporting a high level of anxiety increases, from 22 per cent to 33 per cent. Similarly, of those who reported that few or no staff were helpful and supportive, 49.2 per cent had a high level of dissatisfaction with life. At the other end of the scale, amongst those who said that all or most staff were helpful and supportive, just 24 per cent had a high level of dissatisfaction with life.

Risk factors for dissatisfaction with life and anxiety

- Those who report that they have few helpful or supportive tutors are 2.46 times more likely to have high levels of life dissatisfaction.
- Those who felt that they were not given useful feedback are 1.50 times more likely to report high levels of dissatisfaction with life compared to those who felt that all or most tutors gave useful feedback.
- Those who stayed at home to study are 1.23 times more likely to experience high levels of dissatisfaction with life compared to those who relocated.
- Students who report few or no helpful teachers are 1.65 times (65%) more likely to report a high level of anxiety than students who report all or most teachers as helpful.
- Students who report that they experience few or no teachers giving useful feedback are 1.28 times (28%) more likely to report a high level of anxiety than students who report all or most teachers giving useful feedback.
- POLAR groups 1-4 are 14 per cent more likely to have high levels of anxiety compared to those in POLAR group 5.

Conclusion

- This analysis has identified a number of factors that may be increasing the risk of high anxiety levels and dissatisfaction with life among higher education students.
- It has shown significant effects on both anxiety and satisfaction with life of students' experiences of helpful teachers and useful feedback. The idea that these may be causal is supported by the 'dose-response' relationship: as the proportion of students reporting helpful teachers and useful feedback declines, so the proportion of students reporting high anxiety and dissatisfaction with life rises.
- It is possible that as students become more dissatisfied or anxious for other reasons, they may tend to report their teachers as less helpful or feedback as less useful. However, the patterns found in these data suggest a wellbeing gain from improving teaching and feedback measures. Until this is investigated further, the precautionary principle would suggest acting on the evidence from statistical associations. Higher education

The full document can be downloaded from:

https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/HEPI-Policy-Note-21-What-affects-student-wellbeing-13_02_20.pdf