

Student belonging and wellbeing before, during and after the pandemic

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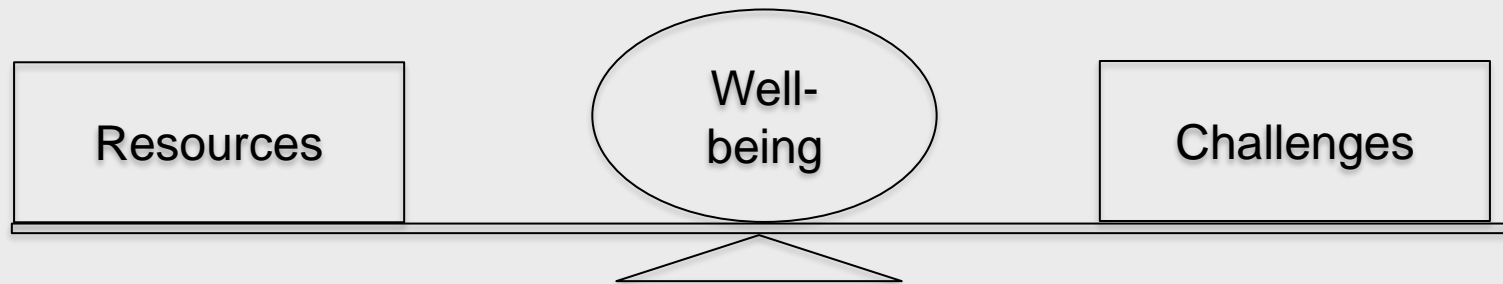
Study into students' sense of belonging

- 2 rounds of data collection
 - November-March 2019-20 (just before UK went into lockdown)
 - November-March 2020-21
- Qualtrics survey (~500 responses)
 - Sense of Belonging Scale (10 items from validated scales) (Gehlbach 2015; Yorke 2016)
 - Free response question: what students associate with 'belonging' to Imperial (Ahn 2017)
- Semi-structured interviews (32 participants; 8 have been interviewed twice)
 - the various communities that participants feel they belong to;
 - experiences of (not) belonging, in education and more widely

Collaborative study with Dr Julianne Viola, CHERS

Psychological theories of wellbeing

- Dimensions (Diener & Suh 1997; Dodge et al. 2012; Ryff 1989; Seligman 2011):
 - (Positive) Emotions
 - (Positive) Relationships
 - Accomplishment or Realising Potential (sometimes includes ‘Autonomy’)
 - Meaning or Purpose
 - Life Satisfaction (sometimes includes ‘Self-acceptance’)



- Mental health problems
 - Increasing among 17-24-year-olds (although *lower* if in HE) (Tabor et al., 2021)
 - Wellbeing distinct from mental health

Belonging and links to Dimensions of Wellbeing

Sense of Belonging Scale results (values on 1-5 scale)

- 'Highest' items relate to academic experience:
 - 'happy to be studying at Imperial' (4); 'an enriching experience' (3.8)
- 'Lowest' items relate to personal relations:
 - 'others understand me' (3.2); 'I matter to others' (2.9); 'connected to staff' (2.8)

Free Response findings

- 'Academic Experience' the most frequent theme (~700 counts; compared with ~500 counts for 'Social Relations'; ~300 counts for 'Social & Physical Environment').
 - e.g. 'proud' to be at 'hard-working', 'prestigious', 'research' university

Implications for how belonging links to wellbeing:

- The strong sense of 'academic belonging' links positively to three Dimensions:
 - 'Realising potential'; 'Purpose'; 'Life satisfaction'
- But less positive regarding the Dimension of '(Positive) Relationships'

Belonging and links to Wellbeing as ‘balance’

Category	Time on Campus	Sense of Belonging score
2020-21 sample: Regularly on campus	6+ hours per week	3.7
2019-20 sample: Fully on campus	Full-time / Normal	3.6
2020-21 sample: Rarely/Not on campus	0-5 hours per week	3.4

- 2020-21 ‘Regularly on campus’ students:
 - report higher levels of interpersonal relations
 - more often mention positive experiences of ‘groupwork’ and peer support
- 2021-21 ‘Rarely/Not on campus’ students:
 - report lowest levels of positive interpersonal relations
 - feel *overworked* rather than enjoying/rising to the challenges they are facing

Implications for how belonging links to wellbeing: wellbeing as balance

- Time on campus linked with greater resources to *balance* out challenges faced
- Low-contact students have fewer resources: risk *imbalance & mental health*

Barriers to belonging & wellbeing

Pre-pandemic (2019-20) interviews highlight long-term issues with interpersonal relations that have been heightened for some students during the pandemic

1. Lack of peer interaction:
 - “I don’t think there’s enough groupwork to form a sense of community”
 - “... you sit down, you listen, after one hour you get up and leave, there’s no opportunity to socialise.”

2. Competitiveness (despite the positives of the ‘hard-working’ atmosphere):
 - “I don't want to see ... you're so competitive that you don't help your friends”
 - “everyone was like, ‘We are Imperial, we are the best’ and then they start trashing other universities... I think it’s a very toxic environment and I don’t feel I belong.”

Barriers to belonging & wellbeing

Evidence of sexism with damaging effects on emotions and relationships

- Participants with lowest sense of belonging (below 2.5 on 1-5 scale) are disproportionately women
- Women more likely to experience 'impostor syndrome'
- Some women interviewees report experiencing sexism, including being made to feel unwelcome by staff and students, and sexual harassment

Questions

- How do we address the barriers to belonging faced by some students?
- How do we get the right resource-challenge 'balance' for all students?

References

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