

Student Mental Health and Wellbeing in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Westminster

Research Team:

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Executive Summary

This *Students as Co-Creators* project investigated what Social Sciences students at the University of Westminster felt about mental wellbeing and their university experience. We administered a survey on student wellbeing to a sample of 292 students at levels 3-6 from the School of Social Sciences during semester 2 of the 2018-19 academic year. Results showed that positive student mental health and wellbeing is closely linked to academic success, and to academic support, course organisation, feedback and teaching quality. Having friends and a sense of community is also important for student wellbeing, and results suggested that courses could do more to promote this, particularly with inter-course activities. Most students ranked family and friends above university-provided sources of support in times of difficulty. However, when asked how well the university supports student mental health and wellbeing on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being 'very well', only 4% of the sample selected 'very well'. Students felt the university could do more to support wellbeing, highlighting the importance of wellbeing services, improving funds for student hardship, and personal tutoring.

Background and Aims

In Sociology at Westminster, we have a particular interest in student and staff mental health and wellbeing. For this *Students as Co-Creators* project, we wanted to find out what Social Sciences students at the University of Westminster felt about mental wellbeing and their university experience. While acknowledging the recent rise in students' mental health difficulties, we seek to avoid perpetuating discourses around mental health 'crises', and to avoid individualising approaches to mental wellbeing and resilience that disregard any structural or contextual explanations and critique. Concern has been raised, for example, around the links between the marketisation of Higher Education and student mental health. Jessop *et al* (2005), surveying students at Middlesex University, found that reporting higher levels of financial concern was associated with worse mental health. A recent global study found that medical student debt levels are negatively associated with mental well-being and academic outcomes (Pisaniello *et al*, 2019). Similar concern has been raised about pressure on academics, post-Browne Review, to enhance the student experience resulting in work-related stress (Morrish, 2019). We believe that it is crucial for staff and students to be in dialogue around these issues, and to work together to address shared concerns. Inclusive teaching strategies have an important role to play in student wellbeing (Morris, 2011).

The number of students who disclose a mental health condition to their university has increased dramatically in the past 10 years (IPPR, 2017). Over the past 5 years, universities have seen significant increases in demand for counselling services: 94% report an increase in demand for counselling services, while 61% report an increase of over 25%. In some universities, up to 1 in 4 students are using, or waiting to use, counselling services (IPPR, 2017). While investment in university counselling services is absolutely crucial, research repeatedly finds that students rate family and friends as most important sources of support (Morris, 2011; YouGov, 2016). Students' sense of belonging to university is also extremely important for their engagement (Ahn and Davis, 2019).

In our research, then, we particularly wanted to investigate how students thought the university could improve their sense of belonging to a community. GuildHE (2018) stresses that developing a community where every student feels valued is crucial to mental health and wellbeing, and that wellbeing strategies should be embedded across the provider.

While it would be especially informative to survey and/or interview students who identify as having mental health difficulties, we did not have the resources to carry out a project of that nature. However, we understand student wellbeing and its promotion to be an issue that concerns all students (not only one for those with a diagnosable mental health issue or who have reached a crisis point). Therefore, our research aimed to find out from a sample of level 3-6 students across the Social Sciences:

- What positively and negatively affects students' mental health and wellbeing at the university?
- What course- and university- level services and practices relating to wellbeing are students aware of?
- How can students be better supported at a course- and university-level in their mental health and wellbeing?
- How can greater levels of peer support and community be developed at the university?

Methods

The research was approved by the Centre for Teaching Innovation Ethics Committee. We developed the survey questions as a team and then honed them using a focus group of Sociology students. We

carried out a self-completion survey (see appendix 1) with a sample of 292 students at levels 3-6 from the School of Social Sciences during semester 2 of the 2018-19 academic year. Participants were recruited by student members of the team who attended the end of lectures by prior arrangement with the purpose of seeking participants for the study. Participants were provided with an information and consent form (see appendix 2) that informed them of the purpose of the study, and that data would be collected anonymously and voluntarily with right of withdrawal at any time. Students were given the option to provide their email addresses separately in order to be entered in a prize draw to win a £10 Amazon voucher.

54% of the students in the sample were studying Psychology, 21% were studying Politics and International Relations (with some combinations), 11% were studying Criminology, 9% were studying Sociology, and 5% were studying Sociology & Criminology. Females constituted 81% of the sample, males 15%, and prefer to self-describe/not to say 4%. 40% of participants were White, 35% Asian, 10% Black, and 15% of mixed ethnicity or other. These demographics are broadly (although not exactly) representative of the size of disciplinary areas in the school and of the gender and ethnic distribution of students. However, since this was a non-probability sample, it is not possible to ascertain the extent to which findings are statistically significant. In addition, given that raw numbers of some sub-groups were quite small (e.g. the sample size of Sociology & Criminology students was 15), the findings may not be representative.

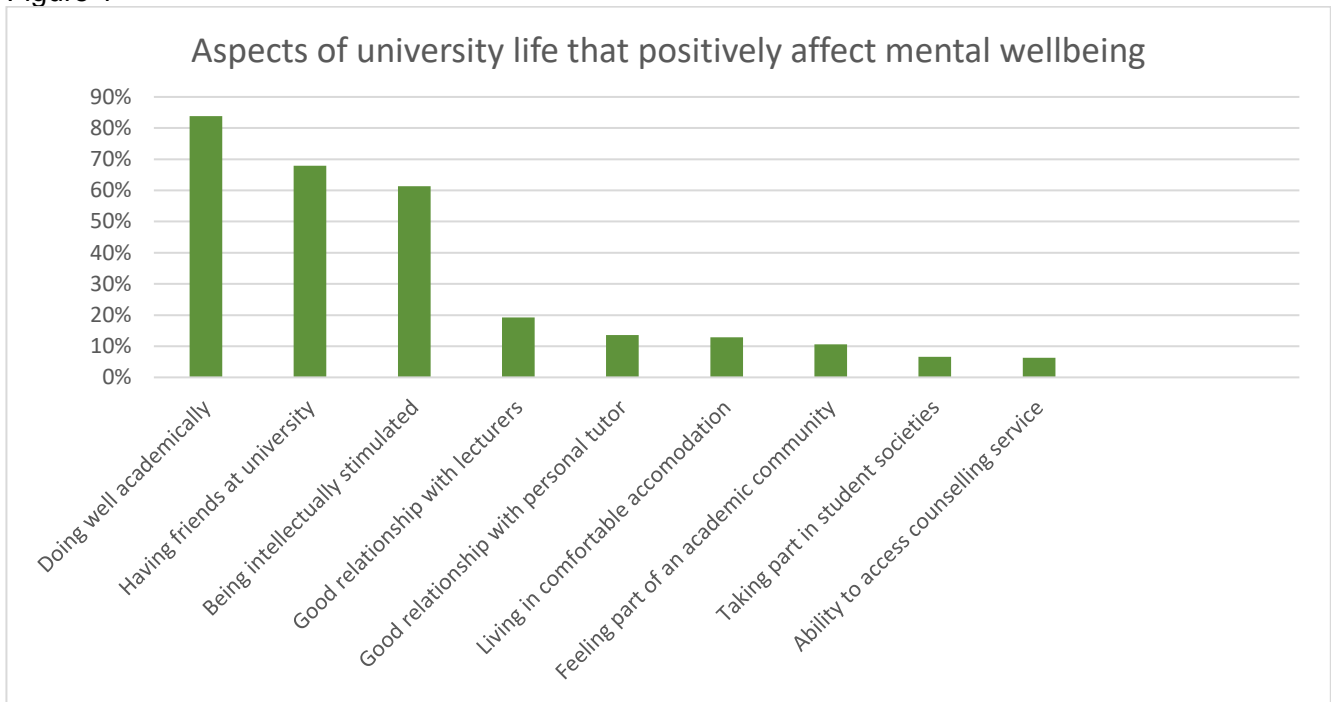
The quantitative data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) which allowed us to undertake univariate analysis as well as create cross-tabulations to compare our variables; for example, we were able to assess the impact of factors such as course, gender and ethnicity on responses. The qualitative data from open questions were analysed thematically and then combined with the quantitative analysis.

Results and Discussion

What positively affects students' wellbeing?

Students were asked to identify from a list factors that positively affected their mental well-being at university. The factors that were of overwhelming importance were succeeding academically and having friends at university, as is shown in Figure 1:

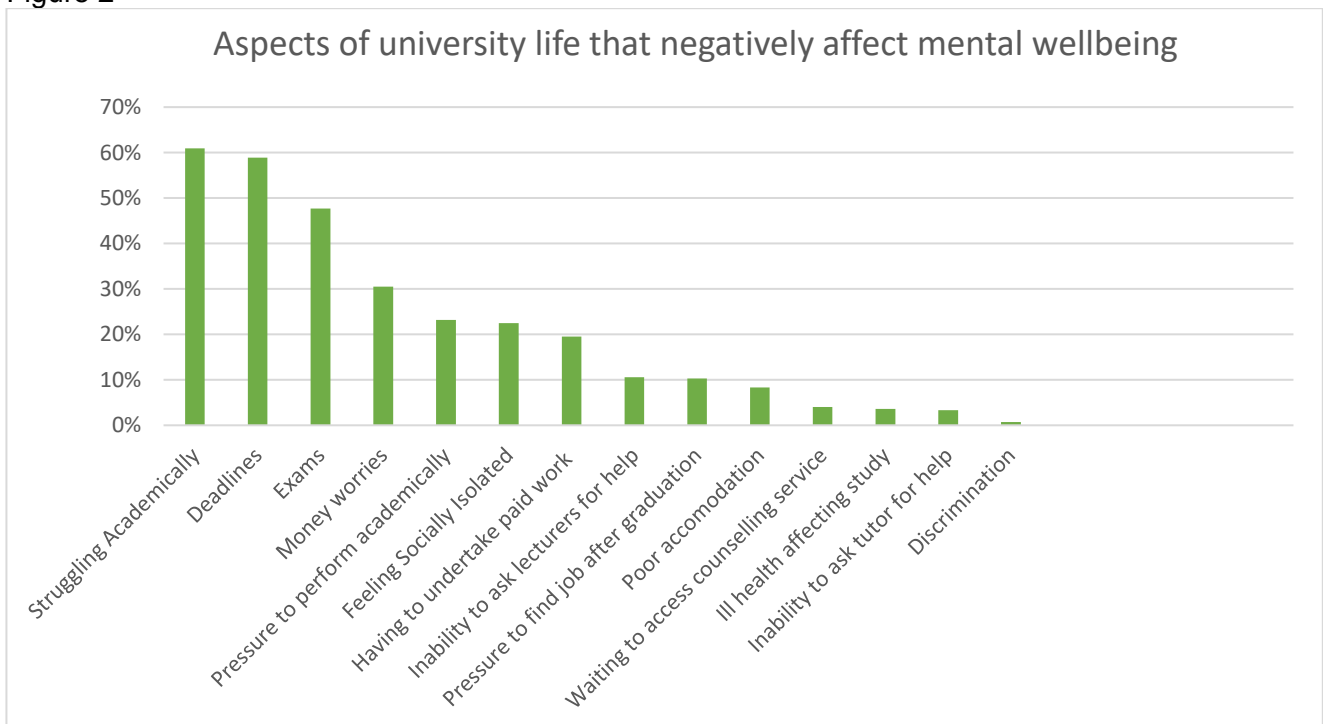
Figure 1



What negatively affects students' wellbeing?

When asked to identify the aspects of university life that negatively affected wellbeing, struggling academically was the biggest aspect. This was followed by worries about deadlines and exams. Money worries and having to undertake paid work while studying were also important factors (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

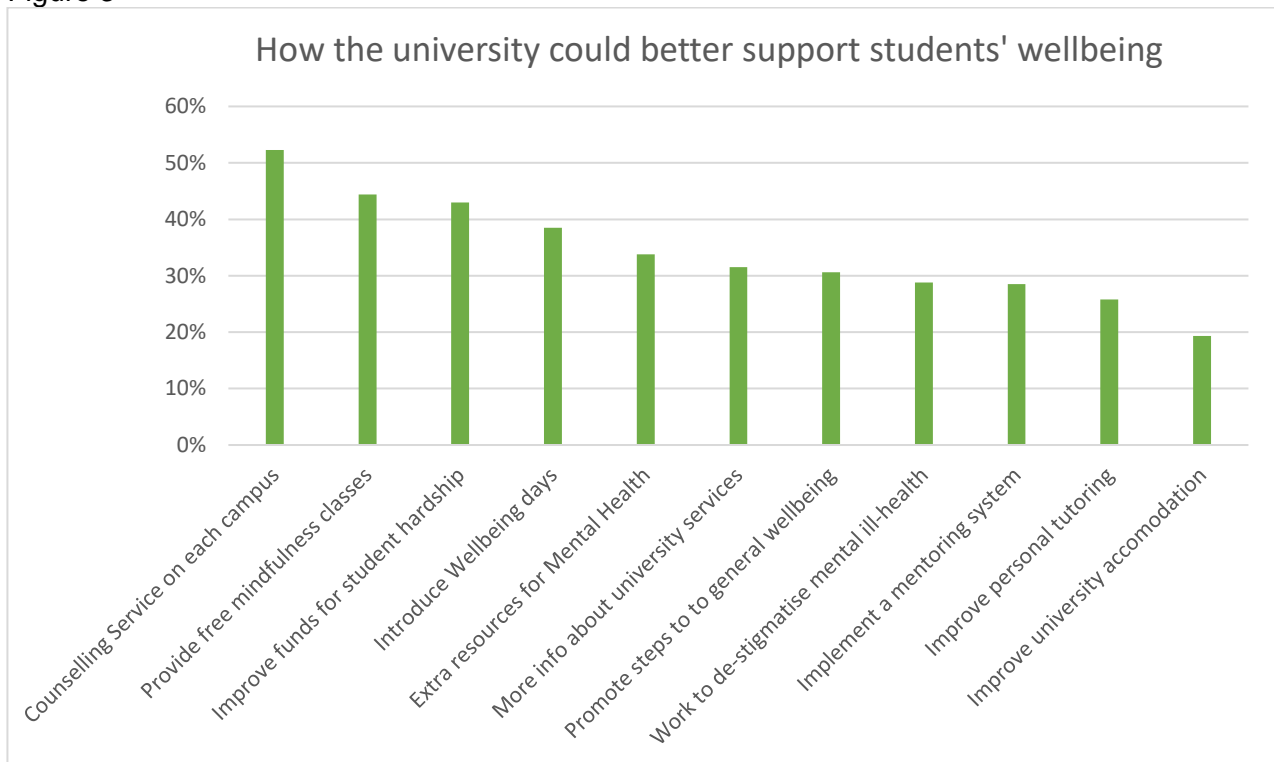


Bivariate analysis here showed that a higher percentage of black and minority ethnic participants selected exams and deadlines as negatively affecting their mental wellbeing than white participants: 55% of Asian students and 52% of Black students felt exams negatively affected them, as compared to 39% of white students. 69% of Asian students and 59% of Black students felt negatively affected by deadlines, compared to 46% of white students.

How can the university better support students' wellbeing?

Students were asked how the university could better support students' wellbeing, again from a list of options. The most selected option was to provide a counselling service on each campus, followed by free mindfulness classes, improving student hardship funds, and introducing Wellbeing Days (see Figure 3).

Figure 3



Again, bivariate analysis demonstrated a discrepancy between white and ethnic minority students' responses in relation to student hardship: 36% of white students selected improving funds for student hardship, compared to 46% of Asian students and 52% of Black students.

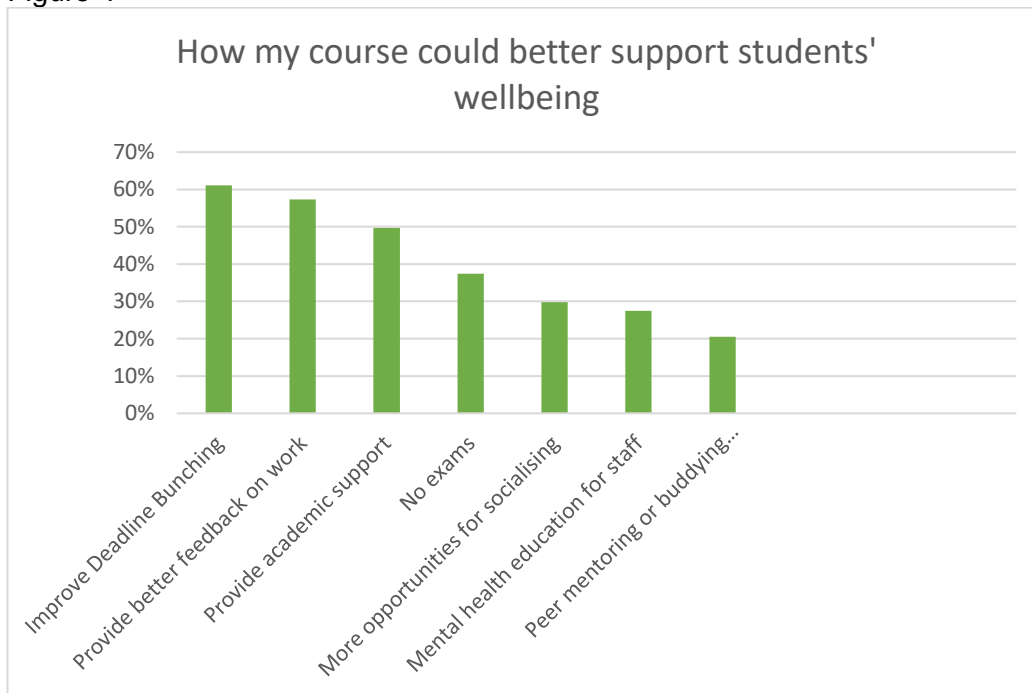
Awareness of help

When asked if they were aware of the university counselling service, only 67% said they were aware of it (this compares to 75% of students in a YouGov (2016) survey who said they were aware of their university counselling service), and 7% had made use of it. When asked about awareness and use of their personal tutor, only 75% of students said they were aware of their personal tutor, and 50% said they had made use of their tutor.

How can the course better support students' wellbeing?

Students were asked how their course could better support students' wellbeing, and here the most selected options were improving deadline bunching, followed by providing better feedback on work and more academic support, followed by removing exams as an assessment method (see Figure 4).

Figure 4



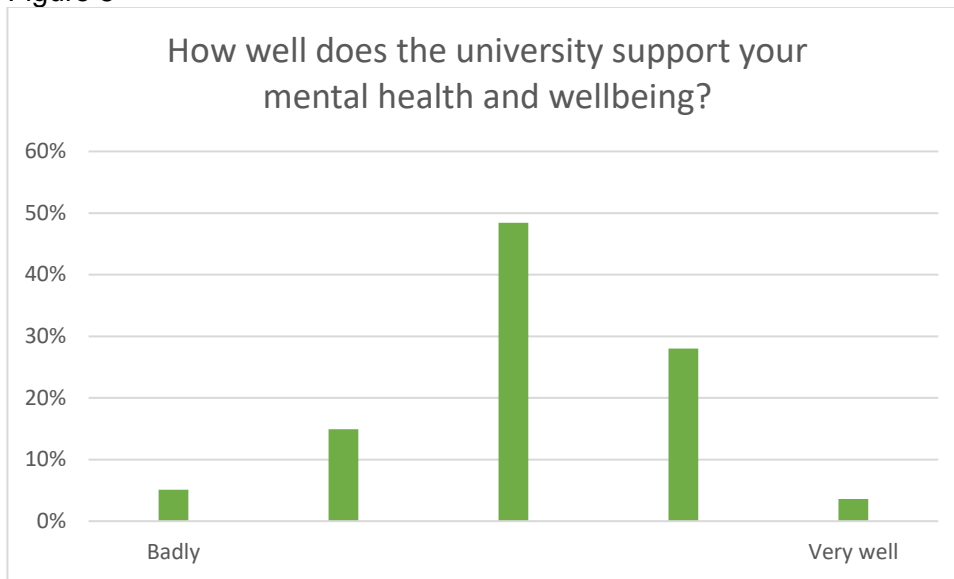
Notably, in another question relating to course provision, only 50% of students said their course provides them with opportunities to socialise with students and staff.

Students' responses to how their course could better support their wellbeing varied significantly by course. 60% of Psychology students selected 'provide more academic support' in this question, compared to 47% of Criminology students, 31% of PIR students, and 33% of Sociology and Sociology & Criminology students. 71% of Psychology students selected 'provide better feedback on work', compared to 49% of PIR students, 44% of Criminology students, 33% of Sociology students, and 13% of Sociology & Criminology students.

How well does the university support mental health and wellbeing?

When asked to state on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being badly to 5 being very well, how well the university supported their mental health and wellbeing, the majority of students selected the middle option (see Figure 5), and only 4% selected option 5 ('very well'), suggesting that students are not overwhelmingly positive about the way the university currently supports mental health and wellbeing.

Figure 5



Belonging

When asked about the extent to which students felt a sense of belonging to their course, to the School of Social Sciences, and to the University, students felt the strongest sense of belonging to their course (90% felt they somewhat, quite a lot or very much belonged to their course; 88% to the University, and 81% to the School).

Who to turn to in the event of personal difficulties

The vast majority of participants (88%) said that, in the event of experiencing personal difficulties, they would most prefer to turn to their family and friends, as opposed to either a lecturer, personal tutor, university counselling service or other.

How can the university develop a better sense of community for students?

The questionnaire contained one completely open question: 'How can the university develop a better sense of community for students? Please list your ideas.' The most predominant theme was students wanting more opportunities to socialise (events and parties), and in particular, many specified that they would like to have opportunities to socialise with students from other courses (some example responses are listed here):

Have more social events for students to interact.

More course activities/parties.

More inter-course socialising.

More integration between courses.

More social activities not just within Social Sciences but the uni as a whole.

The other dominant suggestions were for more trips and more support services. Two students suggested that the university bring in therapy dogs to help with stress reduction.

Conclusions

This research shows that student mental health and wellbeing is closely linked to academic success, and to academic support, course organisation, feedback and teaching quality. It is important to students to succeed academically, and students feel that effective academic support and feedback on work, as well as reducing deadline bunching, are crucial in contributing to this. Morris (2011: 18) suggests that teaching strategies ‘which are characterised by good communication, clear information and positive interactions, along with opportunities for students to develop confidence and effective learning skills, contribute to a positive learning culture’. Academic staff could perhaps do more to promote the positive correlation between attendance/engagement and achievement to students. Staff can also help students, who may be overwhelmed by the workload when they first arrive at university, to instil good academic skills and independent study right from the start, bearing in mind that the student experience is not homogenous, and students may be affected by a range of barriers to study (GuildHE, 2018). As is evident from the results from this project, attention needs to be paid to the particular challenges faced by ethnic minority students at university.

This research also shows that having friends and developing a sense of community is extremely important for students. As demonstrated in the open question about community, students indicated that more opportunities to socialise, and to socialise between courses, would help with building community. The World Health Organisation defines mental health as ‘a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community’. Given that students felt the lowest sense of belonging to their School (compared to their course and to the university), and expressed desire to socialise between courses, this is an area that could perhaps be developed in the School. Exploring how course social events could be embedded into or extended out from core contact time would perhaps increase attendance and engagement.

Our study suggests that the development of student wellbeing services may be an area for the university to consider. While a counselling service on each campus may not be feasible, it may be possible, for example, to explore (as some universities provide) a wellbeing services drop-in facility on each campus during term time. Our study also demonstrates a possible issue with student awareness of help available to them, particularly in terms of personal tutors and university counselling. The School of Social Sciences continues to promote tutor awareness vigorously via mechanisms such as Personal Tutor Weeks. Students are informed of tutor meetings both through a weekly all-student and staff newsletter, and by their individual tutor. Ways to promote awareness of university services could be further explored by course leaders with course Student Representatives.

Much research cites the importance of a ‘whole university’ approach to student wellbeing (GuildHE, 2018; IPPR, 2017), and indeed, we believe that attention to student wellbeing is a whole university responsibility that includes academics and professional services. However, the growing emphasis on enhancing the ‘whole’ student experience needs careful consideration. The impact of austerity measures is a concern to the HE sector, which ‘faces the challenge of ensuring that student-facing services that aim to enable students to complete their academic studies are not confused with the treatment, therapy or ongoing support that are the responsibility of the NHS and local government’ (Universities UK, 2015: 19).

We also want to stress that student and staff wellbeing concerns are inter-related: ‘if staff are to be effective in recognising, guiding and supporting students with complex difficulties or ill health they need to have the personal robustness and appropriate institutional guidance and support’ (Universities UK, 2015: 10). Focusing on student experience and wellbeing, as well as staff wellbeing, relies upon institutional investment in both training and support for staff, and in appropriate resources and workload allocation to enable staff to enhance and dedicate time to student experience. The School of Social Sciences already

holds this investment as a priority, and is constantly reflective and responsive in terms of how best to utilise time and resources.

There were several limitations to this study. While the sample size as a whole was considerable, the raw numbers for some sub-groups were relatively small and so this means findings may not be representative. Additionally, our data could not capture accurately how many participants themselves had experience of mental health difficulties, although 7% of the sample said they had used the university counselling service.

Future studies could entail exploring research with students who identify as having mental health issues, as well as examine staff's mental health and wellbeing at the University.

Recommendations

- Course Leaders in the School of Social Sciences could explore the possibilities to develop opportunities for students to socialise both within and between courses, as well as ways to develop student awareness of services.
- University could consider how to develop wellbeing services for students, including access to and awareness of counselling services, student wellbeing activities and campus drop-ins, and promoting steps to wellbeing.
- University could further develop its strategies for student and staff wellbeing, including a focus on training and resources for staff.

Dissemination

This report will be sent to the following members of staff at the University:

Course Leaders for Psychology, PIR, Sociology and Criminology
 Head of the School of Social Sciences, Dibyesh Anand
 Assistant Head of the School of Social Sciences, Alan Porter
 Head of Student Support and Residential Life, Sally Olohan
 Director of Student and Academic Services, Caroline Lloyd
 DVC Education (Student Experience), Roland Dannreuther
 Counselling Service Manager, Viju Patel
 Associate Head of College (Education and Students), Thomas Moore
 College Disability Tutor, Claire Robertson
 School of Social Sciences Senior Tutors, Celia Jenkins, Ipshita Basu, Mags Cahill

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Jessop, D., Herberts, C. and Solomon, L. (2005) The impact of financial circumstances on student health, *British Journal of Health Psychology* 10 (3), 421-439.

Morris, C. (2011) *Open Minds: Towards a 'mentally well' university*. In: Marshall, L. and Morris, C. (eds.) (2011) *Taking wellbeing forward in Higher Education: Reflections on theory and practice*. University of Brighton Press.

Morrish, L. (2019) *Pressure Vessels: The epidemic of poor mental health among higher education staff*. HEPI Occasional Paper 20. Available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/HEPI-Pressure-Vessels-Occasional-Paper-20.pdf>

Pisaniello MS, Asahina AT, Bacchi S, e., al. (2019) Effect of medical student debt on mental health, academic performance and specialty choice: a systematic review. *BMJ Open*;9:e029980.

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Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1

Student Mental Health and Wellbeing in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Westminster QUESTIONNAIRE

Please read this definition of mental health and wellbeing:

'Mental health encompasses the emotional resilience that enables us to enjoy life and to survive pain, disappointment and sadness, and an underlying belief in our own, and others' dignity and worth. It also allows us to engage productively in and contribute to society or our community.

A positive sense of mental wellbeing is for all of us to consider all of the time, as we might consider our physical, social and spiritual wellbeing. It is quite possible to have a good sense of mental wellbeing and yet be living with a diagnosed mental illness' (Universities UK, 2015, p8).

1. What aspects of university study and life would you say, in your actual experience, positively affect your mental health and wellbeing? [please tick the three that most apply]

- doing well academically
- learning new things and being mentally stimulated
- having friends at university
- feeling part of an academic community
- having a good relationship with your lecturers
- having a good relationship with your personal tutor
- taking part in student societies
- being able to access the university counselling service
- living in comfortable accommodation
- other (please specify)

2. What aspects of university study and life would you say, in your actual experience, negatively affect your mental health and wellbeing? [please tick the three that most apply]

- struggling academically
- exams
- deadlines
- feeling socially isolated
- feeling unable to approach your lecturers for help
- feeling unable to approach your personal tutor for help
- having to wait to access the university counselling service
- poor accommodation
- money worries
- having to undertake paid work while studying
- pressure to perform well academically
- pressure to find the job you want upon graduation
- feeling unable to come to university due to ill-health
- discrimination (e.g. racism, homophobia, transphobia)
- other (please specify)

-
-
3. Which of the following university-level services related to general wellbeing are you aware of, and which have you used? (please tick all you are aware of, and have used)

	Are aware of	Have used
Your personal tutor	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Disability Learning Support	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
University counselling service	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Student Health Service	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
University sports facilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Information on managing your money	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Students' Union and societies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4. How could the university better support students' wellbeing? (please tick all that apply)

- Introduce 'Wellbeing Days' once per semester or year with free sessions for students
 - Promote practical steps to general wellbeing and/or provide more self-help resources
 - Provide free mindfulness classes for students
 - Have counselling service available on each campus
 - Extra resources for mental health services (e.g. for more long-term counselling)
 - Improve funds for student hardship
 - Improve university accommodation
 - Improve personal tutoring
 - Provide more information about university services and what they offer
 - Implement a mentoring system for all students who want it
 - Do more to de-stigmatise mental ill-health
 - Other (please specify as many as you like)
-
-
-

5. How could your course better support students' wellbeing? (please tick all that apply)

- Improve deadline bunching
 - Remove exams as a method of assessment
 - Provide more academic support
 - Provide more opportunities for socialising
 - Provide better feedback on work
 - Improve lecturers' knowledge of mental health issues
 - Implement a peer mentoring or buddying system
 - Other (please specify as many as you like)
-
-
-

6. Which of the following course-level activities does your course provide? [please tick all that are relevant]

- Opportunities to become involved in and give feedback on the course (e.g. Course Rep, student forums)
- Systems such as buddying or peer mentoring
- Opportunities to socialise with students and staff (e.g. parties)
- Field trips
- Overseas trips

Other (please specify) _____

7. Please circle from 1 to 5 according to how well you think the university supports your mental health and wellbeing (from 1 = badly, to 5 = very well):

1 2 3 4 5

8. To what extent do you feel a sense of 'belonging' to your course? [tick one]

Not at all Somewhat Quite a lot Very much Don't know

9. To what extent do you feel a sense of 'belonging' to the School of Social Sciences? [tick one]

Not at all Somewhat Quite a lot Very much Don't know

10. To what extent do you feel a sense of 'belonging' to the university? [tick one]

Not at all Somewhat Quite a lot Very much Don't know

11. How can the university develop a better sense of community for students? Please list your ideas:

12. To whom do/would you prefer to turn in the event of experiencing personal difficulties? [please tick the one that most applies]

Your family
 Your friends
 A lecturer
 Your personal tutor
 The university counselling service
 No one
 Other (please specify): _____

13. Which course are you studying on? Please specify: _____

14. Which level are you studying? [Tick as appropriate]

Level 3 Level 4 Level 5 Level 6

15. What best describes your gender? [Tick or complete as appropriate]

Female
 Male
 Prefer to self-describe: _____
 Prefer not to say

16. Choose the option that best describes your ethnic group or background: [Tick or complete as appropriate]

Black/African/Caribbean/Black British
 Asian/Asian British
 White

- Mixed/Multiple ethnic background
- Other ethnic group (please describe): _____

17. What is your sexual orientation? [Tick as appropriate]

- Bi
- Heterosexual/Straight
- Gay man
- Gay woman/Lesbian
- Queer
- Prefer to self-describe: _____
- Prefer not to say

Thank you for your time. All students in the School of Social Sciences will be notified about when they can come and listen to a presentation on the results of this survey later in 2019.

Appendix 2

Student Mental Health and Wellbeing in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Westminster PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

This survey is being conducted as part of a *Students as Co-Creators* project by Sana Khan, Yudum Barut, Harkiran Bharij (second year BA Sociology students) and Dr Naomi Rudoe (Senior Lecturer and Co-Course Leader, BA Sociology). The project understands student wellbeing and its promotion to be an issue that concerns all students (not only one for those with a diagnosable mental health issue or who have reached a crisis point). This survey aims to find out from a random sample of students across the Social Sciences:

- What positively and negatively affects students' mental health and wellbeing at the university?
- What course- and university- level services and practices relating to wellbeing are students aware of?
- How can students be better supported at a course- and university-level in their mental health and wellbeing?
- How can greater levels of peer support and community be developed at the university?

Please answer as many questions as you are able. You are not obliged to answer all the questions. You are able to withdraw from this research study by simply handing the questionnaire back to one of the project team and informing them that you do not wish to take part.

This is an anonymous survey which should take up to 10 minutes to complete. Please do not write your name on the survey.

If you would like to be entered into a prize draw for a £10 Amazon voucher, please give your email address to the member of the project team who gave you this questionnaire.

The results of this survey will be available after July 2019. All students in the School of Social Sciences will be notified about when they can come and listen to a presentation on the results. The project results will be made available to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Student Experience at the University.

If you have any questions or concerns about this project then please email Dr Naomi Rudoe (n.rudoe@westminster.ac.uk).

To find out about the health and wellbeing services offered by the university, you can go to <https://www.westminster.ac.uk/current-students/support-and-services> and scroll down to Health and Wellbeing. Please tick this box to confirm that you have read and understood the above, and consent to take part in this research:

Please keep this information and consent sheet. Once you have ticked the above box you will be provided with the questionnaire, which will be collected by one of the project team when you have completed it.
