**Wellbeing: How is it conceptualised by psychology students?**

*Burton, A. E., Priest, H. M., Dent, H. R., Dempsey, R. C., Hutton, S. & McGarry, S. (Psychology of Wellbeing Research Group, Staffordshire University)*

The transition from school or college to Higher Education (HE) represents a major life transition (Maunder, Cunliffe, Galvin, Mijali & Rogers, 2013). Changes can include moving away from home, establishing new friendship groups, learning about new topics, making sense of course demands (lectures, tutorials, coursework, exams), mastering time management, and getting to grips with living independently. Understandably, this time is also associated with increased levels of stress and physical and mental health issues (Bray, Matthew & Kwan, 2006; Ibrahim, Kelly, Adams & Glazebrook, 2013).

The 2011 white paper *Students at the Heart of the System* (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2011) stressed the need for universities to put student experience and welfare at the top of their agenda. Fostering student wellbeing has therefore become a key concern within HE institutions. Recognition of this need is evidenced by the steady rise in support services including student-led and student developed initiatives to address wellbeing concerns. Initiatives like this highlight the centrality of these issues for students and examples include Nightline, UK Students Against Depression, Student Minds, and The Alliance for Student Led Wellbeing. Furthermore the National Union of Students (NUS) has worked closely with campaigns such as Time to Change to challenge mental health stigma and promote awareness of wellbeing issues.

These issues have also been the focus of academic research which has sought to explore potential relationships between student wellbeing and a number of factors including: the use of coping strategies such as goal setting (Gulati, 2014; Ratellen Simard & Guay, 2013); goal attainment (Ratellen Simard & Guay, 2013); locus of control (Dost, 2006); number of sexual partners (Burris, Brechting, Salsman, & Carlson, 2009); social support (Kong, Zhao, & You, 2013); and creativity (Tamannaeifar & Motaghedifard, 2014). However, despite the rise in services and support for wellbeing issues and the prevalence of research exploring relationships between wellbeing and other factors, the conceptualisation of what ‘wellbeing’ actually is and what it means to students remains unclear.

It may be that this concept differs dependent on the subject the HE student is drawn to. For example, people who enter HE to study psychology often do so because they have a desire to pursue an applied career in health or the caring professions; for example, clinical or health psychology or counselling. Anecdotally, too, some students choose to study psychology degrees to help understand their own mental health experiences or those of their friends or families. Understanding how these students conceptualise wellbeing is important both for tailoring student support and guiding the development of a curriculum in which the understanding of psychological constructs such as wellbeing is critical.

The Psychology of Wellbeing (PoW) research group at Staffordshire University is a collaboration of clinical psychologists and health focussed researchers who have set out to fill this gap in current knowledge through the exploration of what wellbeing means from the student perspective. The team have conducted a series of focus groups with undergraduate and post-graduate psychology students and with lay mental health service users and carers, the latter drawn from a consultancy group who contribute to teaching in the university. The focus groups sought to uncover perceptions, definitions and knowledge of psychological wellbeing as they pertain to university, and specifically psychology, students. Key components of wellbeing arising from the initial analysis include: health; meeting basic needs; emotional stability; social activities; satisfaction; balance and control; and achieving academic success. Salient themes have been integrated with findings from a review of both academic and popular literature and a set of statements for a Q methodology study has been produced. Q methodology (Stevenson, 1953; Watts & Stenner, 2012) is a way of studying people’s viewpoint, opinions, beliefs and attitudes about a topic of interest by asking them to rank-order statements about it. Individual rankings are then subject to factor analysis. We are now inviting our psychology students to participate in individual Q interviews, where they will be asked to consider the statements in relation to university students’ wellbeing, and sort them according to their level of agreement. The subsequent factor analysis and interpretation will enable the identification of dominant and less dominant discourses around the topic, which in turn can be used to inform learning, teaching, and student support strategies within the university and beyond.

If you are interested in the Psychology of Wellbeing Research Group at Staffordshire University or would like further information about our ongoing research please visit our website: <http://www.staffs.ac.uk/research/centre-for-psychological-research/psychology_of_wellbeing_research_group.jsp>

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Wellbeing initiative websites:

Nightline, [www.nightline.ac.uk](http://www.nightline.ac.uk)

Students Against Depression, [www.studentsagainstdepression.org](http://www.studentsagainstdepression.org)

Student Minds, [www.studentminds.org.uk](http://www.studentminds.org.uk)

The Alliance for Student-Led Wellbeing, [www.alliancestudentwellbeing.weebly.com](http://www.alliancestudentwellbeing.weebly.com)

Time to change campaign, [www.time-to-change.org.uk](http://www.time-to-change.org.uk)