

Beyond Excellence: Rethinking Higher Education for Student Well-being

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Recent academic discussions have highlighted a growing concern for student well-being in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), prompted by rising mental health risks among students. While prior research has predominantly focused on quality systems and satisfaction, this study emphasizes the importance of transcending beyond mere functional quality and its outcomes to achieve student well-being; analyzing core educational quality, student experience and transformative quality as predictors of well-being. Results suggest that high core educational quality alone does not guarantee student well-being. It is a necessary condition for the student to have a positive experience, but this is not sufficient to guarantee well-being. Furthermore, positive experiences enhance students' perception of HEIs as catalysts for their personal and academic transformation, evaluated through transformative quality. To achieve student well-being, it is crucial to ensure that core educational quality influences their experience, thus enhancing the likelihood of student transformation.

Full paper

Student well-being has recently shown considerable interest among HEIs (Khatri et al., 2024). This holds considerable significance, particularly considering the heightened risk of mental health challenges among university students compared to the general population (Ibrahim et al., 2013) and that a concerning proportion of students exhibit diminished well-being (Barbour & van Meggelen, 2024).

Most of the research has paid attention to student satisfaction as a predictor of well-being (Murillo Muñoz & Rentería, 2023; Zalazar-Jaime et al., 2022). However, given that satisfaction is a result of the experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) and the service quality (Mittal et al., 1999), it is more pertinent to examine these antecedents rather than solely focusing on the outcome. Furthermore, the few studies that have investigated antecedents beyond satisfaction have predominantly focused on psychological aspects rather than the quality of the service (Teeroovengadam et al., 2023). And there is a dearth of research analyzing the transformative quality of service, despite its emerging recognition as a redefined measure of quality in HEIs (Gill et al., 2022). To address the gap in literature regarding the relationship between well-being and its antecedents, this study aims to operationalize well-being management by focusing on core educational quality, the student experience, and transformative quality.

The effort to elucidate the concept of well-being has been evident in research centered on HEIs (Khatri & Duggal, 2022). However, there is still no consensus on the indicators for its measurement. Some studies follow the framework of psychological well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) examining specific

domains of positive functioning (Trolan & Jach, 2022). Others (Teeroovengadum et al., 2023) focus on emotional well-being, specifically on the satisfaction with life (Diener et al., 1985). Social well-being (Keyes, 1998) has not received the same attention, despite the psychosocial configuration of young adults being highly complex (Chacón-Cuberos et al., 2020). To achieve a comprehensive understanding of student well-being, the study analyzes it from emotional, psychological, and social perspectives using the Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (Keyes, 2005)

The antecedents examined in this study also lack a universally accepted measurement in scholarly discourse. Quality in HEIs has been measured with specialized instruments, such as SMART-QUAL (Adot et al., 2023), or with the adaptation of marketing management instruments like SERVQUAL (Ahmed & Mehedi Masud, 2014). Nevertheless, considering that the quality of student-faculty interactions is associated with well-being (Trolan et al., 2022) and bearing in mind that the experience with different touchpoints and personnel within a service should be analyzed separately (Gahler et al., 2023), this study conceptualize quality as core educational quality, encompassing teacher attitudes and behavior, competence, curriculum, and pedagogy (Teeroovengadum et al., 2016). The definition and measurement of the student experience pose significant challenges due to the complexity of the student journey (Matus et al., 2021). To address this issue, we incorporate six key dimensions of the experience (affective, cognitive, physical, relational, sensorial, and symbolic) with a measurement tool specifically designed to be applicable to complex omnichannel context (Gahler et al., 2023). Lastly, regarding the transformative quality, its measurement has been disregarded in quality assessment in HEIs (Teeroovengadum et al., 2019). This is noticeable considering that students identify quality with its transformative capacity (Jungblut et al., 2015) and that the experience they have with faculty is critical to reach it (Gill et al., 2022). Given the transformative nature of the HEIs (Abdelnaeim et al., 2023), and following the Transformative Service Research paradigm (Ostrom et al., 2010) we propose transformative quality as a antecedent of well-being, measured by the seven dimensions presented by Teeroovengadum et al., (2016).

To analyze the proposed conceptual model, a cross-sectional survey design was used involving data from a sample of students of a European university. The model was estimated using partial least squares structural equation modelling.

Findings suggest that achieving well-being requires more than just providing a good quality education. For this to happen, educational institutions must focus more on faculty behaviors, as they play a crucial role in ensuring a positive experience. Additionally, it has been demonstrated that a positive experience enhances the perception of the university's transformative quality. In conclusion, HEIs are presented with a clear opportunity. In the face of a fierce competitive environment, where technology appears to threaten the role of faculty, greater efforts than ever must be made to equip this faculty with the necessary skills to create a unique student experience. This is not only to fulfill the transformative mission that universities should have but also to ensure student well-being throughout the process, enabling them to achieve their maximum potential sustainably.

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