

## Building a place for care in higher education

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### Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

### Abstract

Over the past two decades, higher education has become increasingly transactional, while student mental health has continuously declined, suggesting a relationship between these two developments.

A recent survey of 140 university students from three large English universities highlights that the students' mental health was substantially worse than that of 16 to 25-year-olds across the UK.

The survey formed part of a study investigating the role of campus spaces in supporting student wellbeing. Its results demonstrate a need to re-prioritise the role of care in higher education but also that many university campuses have a range of cultural spaces that could be integrated into a more diverse curriculum with a greater emphasis on personal growth, wellbeing, care and compassion.

This paper will consider the implications of the study in terms of how some of the core values of UK higher education appear to stand in the way of achieving student wellbeing.

### Full paper

#### Background

Student wellbeing and Experiential Learning Spaces was a three year project funded by the UKRI SMaRteN Student Mental Health network between 2020 and 2023. The project sought to investigate the role of cultural and natural university spaces could have in supporting university students' wellbeing. It involved a collaboration between University College London (UCL), King's College London (King's) and Gardens, Libraries and Museums at the University of Oxford (GLAM).

#### Methods

The project comprised a mixed methods design comprising as quantitative survey and (qualitative) semi-structured interviews. The survey sought to investigate the student's current and past wellbeing as well as what activities they already undertook to support their own wellbeing, including the role cultural and natural spaces, as well as cultural and nature-based activities played in this. The qualitative interviews were designed to follow on from the survey to explore student's responses to the latter part (on cultural and natural spaces) of the survey, in order to gain deeper insights into the way students engage with cultural and natural spaces around their university campuses.

An interesting, though unexpected element of the research, which for obvious reasons became a dominant part of it, was the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic at the start of 2020, right at the beginning of the project. Consequently, the research offered a unique opportunity to assess the students wellbeing and how their engagement with campus (and online) spaces changed before, during and after the height of the COVID pandemic, associated lockdowns, university closures and an ever greater provision of their education via remote, digital means.

## Results

The survey was completed by 140 students from all three universities, with the largest number studying at King's and near equal numbers of participants from UCL and Oxford. Participants were predominantly undergraduate students, based in the UK and female. The largest ethnical grouping identified as white.

The results highlighted the serious mental health challenges that university students experienced both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. We collected data based on the ONS's 4 wellbeing questions which allowed us to compare the survey results to the 2021 census data for 16- to 25-year-olds. The findings for the areas of Happiness and especially Anxiety demonstrated substantially worse results for the participating students compared to the UK national average of young people of similar age. We also invited participants to complete the Harvard Flourishing Index for a more thorough profile of how they felt about their lives at the time, but sadly there are not many studies that allow comparison with this dataset.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 14 participants, 10 from UCL and two each from Oxford and King's these two were predominantly female and white, but comprised a larger proportion of taught postgraduate students compared to the survey.

Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and transcripts coded separately by two researchers before analysed using Nvivo. Analysis was based on the three deductive themes of Activity, University and Wellbeing. These themes were informed by the trends identified from the survey and potential patterns for further explorations using interviews to confirm or refute the quantitative results. Four additional (inductive) themes were identified during the initial coding, which were Cultural spaces and modules, Experiential learning curricula, Diversifying content and Digital versus physical engagement.

While interviews, also bore out the serious mental health and wellbeing challenges many students experience they enabled more of a focus on the activities and spaces that helped them to alleviate such challenges and focus on other aspects of their circumstances. Students described how different cultural and natural spaces on (or in the vicinity of) their university campus benefit them. Some visit such spaces consciously and relatively frequently, and a number of participants expressed how cultural spaces, such as museums or natural spaces such as parks and gardens enable them to 'recharge' but that they also stimulate and inspire them. The interviews thus demonstrated how spaces such as gardens, libraries and museums support student wellbeing by broadening their perspectives and encouraging them to explore other local cultural and natural 'assets' in the vicinity. In particular, natural and cultural spaces that were visited as part of the student's formal curriculum, for classes and seminars, allowed them to build bridges with one another and provided talking points that brought students together and enabled them to focus on the present moment.

## Conclusion

The SWELS study clearly highlighted the serious challenges UK university students experience. However, the results also highlighted the potential positive contribution that embedding experiential learning opportunities and especially spaces into the curriculum can make.

## References

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