

REFLECTIONS ON STUDENT WELLBEING IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Presentation at HSE

Irma Eloff
*Dept of Educational Psychology
University of South Africa
Pretoria, South Africa*

28 May 2024

Make today matter



The Student Wellbeing@ UP project

- Longitudinal study (developed in 2017, implemented from 2018 to date)
- Mixed methods: online surveys, brief interviews, focusgroups & psychometrics; all faculties
- Interdisciplinary research
- Informing university and faculty leadership teams
- Empirical evidence for strategic decision-making
- Teams of wellbeing researchers



Some findings

- Flourishing scale
- MHCSF
- Fragility of Happiness scale

Global Mental Health

cambridge.org/gmh

Teaching and Learning Original Research Paper


Cite this article: Eloff I, Graham M (2020). Measuring mental health and well-being of South African undergraduate students. *Global Mental Health* 7, e34, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gmh.2020.26>

Received: 11 June 2020
Revised: 20 October 2020
Accepted: 26 October 2020

Key words:
Student mental health; student support;
student well-being

Author for correspondence:
Irma Eloff, E-mail: irma.eloff@up.ac.za

Measuring mental health and well-being of South African undergraduate students

Irma Eloff¹  and Marien Graham² 

¹Department of Educational Psychology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria 0002, South Africa and ²Department of Science, Mathematics and Technology Education, University of Pretoria, Pretoria 0002, South Africa

Abstract

Background. Increased investment in optimal student mental health and well-being has been noted by universities around the world. Studies show the need for contextually relevant, granular understandings of specific aspects of student mental health and well-being.

Methods. A survey was conducted at two time points – at the beginning and end of the academic year – at a large, urban university in South Africa. The Mental Health Continuum-Short Form, the Flourishing Scale, and the Fragility of Happiness Scale were used in the testing of undergraduate students from a variety of scientific disciplines. Two separate comparisons were made, based on the baseline data ($n = 551$) and the follow-up data ($n = 281$). In Comparison 1 (baseline, $n = 443$; follow-up, $n = 173$), two independent, biographically (very) similar groups were compared. Comparison 2 ($n = 108$) compared the results from the baseline and follow-up of the same group of students who completed the instruments at both time points.

Results. Results indicate a significant decline in mental health and well-being for both groups (independent and dependent) over the course of the academic year. Both follow-up groups were found to have lower psychological, emotional and social well-being, psychological flourishing, and reduced mental health, in comparison with the baseline groups.

Results indicate a significant decline in mental health and well-being for both groups (independent and dependent) over the course of the academic year. Both follow-up groups were found to have lower psychological, emotional and social well-being, psychological flourishing, and reduced mental health, in comparison with the baseline groups.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/gmh.2020.26>

Some findings

- Flourishing scale
- MHCSF
- Fragility of Happiness scale



International Journal of
*Environmental Research
and Public Health*



Article

Comparing Mental Health, Wellbeing and Flourishing in Undergraduate Students Pre- and during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Marien Alet Graham ^{1,*} and Irma Eloff ²

¹ Department of Science, Mathematics and Technology Education, University of Pretoria, Pretoria 0002, South Africa

² Department of Educational Psychology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria 0002, South Africa; irma.eloff@up.ac.za

* Correspondence: marien.graham@up.ac.za; Tel.: +27-(0)-12-420-6637

Abstract: There has been a preponderance of studies on student mental health, wellbeing and flourishing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Few studies have compared data on student mental health and wellbeing before and during the pandemic. The purpose of the current study was to compare mental health and wellbeing in undergraduate students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Survey research was conducted with three groups of undergraduate students (n = 905) from diverse scientific fields at a large, urban university in South Africa. Data was collected by means of electronic surveys, combining full-scale items from three instruments, the Mental Health Continuum Short Form, the Flourishing Scale and the Fragility of Happiness Scale. Data was analysed by the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), the Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) and R software. The results indicate that while the mental health and wellbeing of students declined during the pandemic concerning their perceived ability to contribute to society, having supportive and rewarding social relationships and them being engaged and interested in their daily activities, it also improved in terms of their perceived ability to manage their daily lives (environmental mastery), being challenged to grow (personal growth) and in terms of their views that society was becoming better (social growth/actualisation).

Keywords: student wellbeing; student mental health; flourishing; mental health continuum short

The results indicate that while the mental health and wellbeing of students declined during the pandemic concerning their perceived ability to contribute to society, having supportive and rewarding social relationships and them being engaged and interested in their daily activities, **it also improved** in terms of their perceived ability to manage their daily lives (environmental mastery), being challenged to grow (personal growth) and in terms of their views that society was becoming better (social growth/actualisation)

<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph1912743>

Some findings

Brief interviews: first year of the pandemic

Findings indicate various sources of support for student wellbeing along five key themes: emotional support, academic support, selfcare and agency, social interaction, and a sense of purpose coupled with intentional future orientations.

The findings present high resonance with previous studies on student wellbeing, but present amplified dimensions of student wellbeing during a pandemic, i.e. substantive levels of student agency and future foci and a prioritization of academic success.

African Perspectives of Research in Teaching & Learning – (APORTAL) Vol 6 (1) (2022)

Dimensions of Wellbeing of University Students During a Pandemic

Eloff, I., Mampane, M.R., Omidire, F., Ayob-Essop, S., Bester, S and Kgopa, B.
Department of Educational Psychology, Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria,
Pretoria, 0002

Corresponding author: irma.elloff@up.ac.za

ABSTRACT

This study explored the wellbeing of undergraduate students at a large, residential South African university during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative methodology, that utilized online, individual, brief interviews as a data collection strategy, was adopted. During the brief interviews, the participants were asked the following question: “*What supports your wellbeing at university?*” Undergraduate students (n=212) from a variety of degree programmes participated in the interviews. Most of the participants (58%) were female and the mean age for participants was 21.8 years (SD=1.8 years). Verbatim responses from the interview data were interrogated via a theme analysis. Findings indicate various sources of support for student wellbeing along five key themes: emotional support, academic support, self-care and agency, social interaction, and a sense of purpose coupled with intentional future-orientations. The findings present high resonance with previous studies on student wellbeing, but present amplified dimensions of student wellbeing during a pandemic, i.e. substantive levels of student agency and future foci and a prioritization of academic success. Findings from this study can potentially inform planning processes for wellbeing interventions for undergraduate students during a pandemic.

Keywords:

academic support, student wellbeing, university students, wellbeing, wellbeing agency, pandemic

<https://www.ul.ac.za/aportal/index.php?Entity=Volume%206%201%202022>

Some findings

Online survey: first year of the pandemic

Journal of Psychology in Africa, 2021
Vol. 31, No. 3, 254–260, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2021.1939055>
© 2021 Africa Scholarship Development Enterprise



College students' well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic: An exploratory study

Irma Eloff 

Department of Educational Psychology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa
Correspondence: irma.eloff@up.ac.za

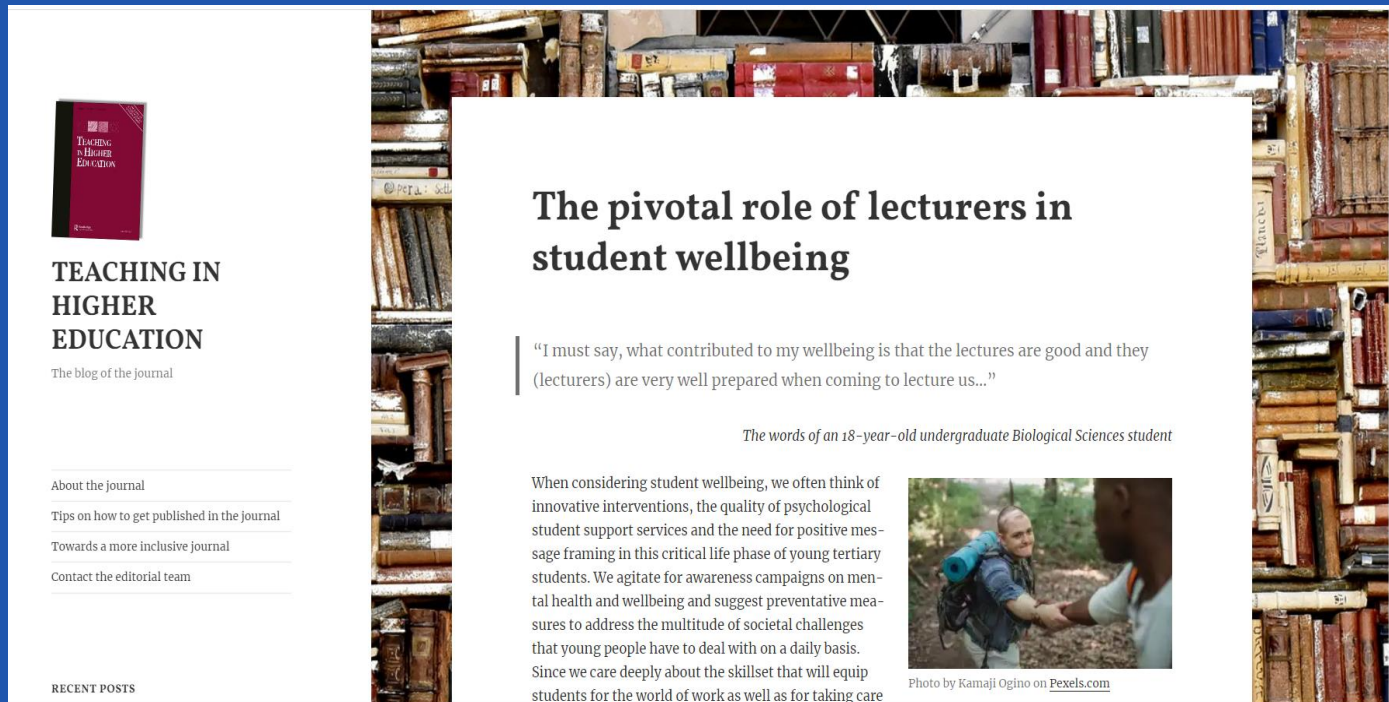
This study explored college student's well-being priorities and capabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 2 213 South African undergraduate students answered an open-ended question to elicit interpretive, reflective, analytic, and evaluative written response types on the factors that support their well-being at university. Two thirds of the participants were female, almost half (48.94%) were black African, and most (67.46%) were between 18 and 21 years of age. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) of the data revealed COVID-19 mitigation that prioritised support from family, friends, and lecturers by spending time together and connecting online. The students also relied on a variety of spiritual coping strategies to manage feelings of despair and despondency, and to cope with high workloads, social distancing, and online learning. The study revealed high resourcefulness of undergraduate students in supporting their own well-being.

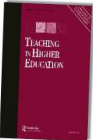
Keywords: COVID-19, relationships, SDG 3, student well-being, undergraduate students

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2021.1939055>

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) of the data revealed COVID-19 mitigation that **prioritised support from family, friends, and lecturers by spending time together and connecting online**. The students also relied on a variety of spiritual coping strategies to manage feelings of despair and despondency, and to cope with high workloads, social distancing, and online learning. The study revealed **high resourcefulness** of undergraduate students in supporting their own well-being.

The role of lecturers





TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION
The blog of the journal

About the journal
Tips on how to get published in the journal
Towards a more inclusive journal
Contact the editorial team

RECENT POSTS

The pivotal role of lecturers in student wellbeing

“I must say, what contributed to my wellbeing is that the lectures are good and they (lecturers) are very well prepared when coming to lecture us...”

The words of an 18-year-old undergraduate Biological Sciences student

When considering student wellbeing, we often think of innovative interventions, the quality of psychological student support services and the need for positive message framing in this critical life phase of young tertiary students. We agitate for awareness campaigns on mental health and wellbeing and suggest preventative measures to address the multitude of societal challenges that young people have to deal with on a daily basis. Since we care deeply about the skillset that will equip students for the world of work as well as for taking care




Photo by Kamaji Ogino on Pexels.com

<https://teachinginhighereducation.wordpress.com/2021/07/03/the-pivotal-role-of-lecturers-in-student-wellbeing/>

How do we collect data?

- Brief interviews annually
- Online survey every 2nd year
- Online psychometrics every 2nd year (3 scales)
- Targeted focus groups



Brief interviews

- Training student fieldworkers
- Interviews, ethics, wellbeing
- Random and snowball sampling
- Brief interviews on campus and online
- 6 – 8 week period, various campuses

Brief interviews

- Capturing consents and verbal responses
- Transfer to excel template
- Master template



Brief interviews template

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
What contributes to your Wellbeing?	Province	Citizenship	Gender	Age (yrs)	AgeGrp	Race	Qualification	Language	Campus	Fieldworker name	Fieldworker student number
Coffee and taking time out.	Gauteng	South African	Male	19		Indian	LLB	English	Hatfield	Curiosity Botha	u01234567
I really need to think about this. Wellbeing? What do you mean? Well, I think doing well in my studies contributes to my wellbeing.	Mpumalanga	South African	Female	20		Black	B Ed (ECE)	Seswati	Groenkloof	Curiosity Botha	u01234567
In this column you capture the verbatim response from your participant - the exact words they said. If they provide a long response, you can wrap the text, by clicking on "Wrap Text" on the toolbar. <u>DO NOT SHIFT THE WIDTH OF THE COLUMN.</u> If you asked a follow-up question, you can write your follow-up question in [block brackets] and then indicate their response to your question, also in this column.	Write the name of the province of your participant; the province they call "home".	Write the citizenship.	Write Male, Female or Other.	Write ONLY THE NUMBER with the age of your participant; Do not add "years" or "yr", only their age.	You can leave this column open.	Indicate race.	Write their qualification	Write their home language; if they indicated more than one, write both.	Write the place where the interview was conducted. If it was in-person, write the name of the campus; if it was online write "Online", if it was by telephone, write "Telephonic".	Write your own name.	Write your student number.



Online survey

- Email to all undergraduate students
- Second semester
- One question: *"What contributes to your wellbeing at the university?"*
- One follow-up reminder



Online survey

Excerpts from raw data

What contributes to your wellbeing as a student at the University of Pretoria?

My friends

Lecturer's attitude

Enough time to complete everything

Managing stress

Psychiatrist

Having enough time to rest, take part in my favourite hobbies and praying.

The amount of work and stress and suddenly being on campus which is much harder than being online.

Support from Tutors and lecturers.

Knowing that I have everything I need.

Nothing

Equality

Nothing yet

Having Fridays no lectures

My health

Friends and family

Good support from lecturers.

Healthy Mental State

My classes start late on a Monday

Communication regarding classes, assignments and tests.

Constant and reliable communication with regards to studying material, lecture times and assignment dates. Also fun activities and sports to balance work and socialising.

Being given reasonable work loads and time to complete assignments

Classes, friends, lecturers and the amount of workload

Getting to come to campus and distract myself from the concerns of life, going shopping for groceries, spending time with peers, gyming.

Clearly defined dates and schedules

Support in all aspects - mentally, emotionally, physically, etc.

I don't necessarily understand the question

Good Healthcare

School counsellor

Good Security, Cleanliness, Good WiFi, Affordable Places to Eat, Adequate Amount of Parking Space for Day Students

n=1125
(on 24 August 2022)

Online survey

Excerpts from raw data

n=1125
(on 24 August 2022)

Having access to information and help centers.

interactive activity can assist us as student

Submitting assignments online

Wine

Academics

Trying to be optimistic at all times

Being up to date and getting enough rest.

Social life

I'm so happy and satisfied to be a student in UP

Support from all aspects.

Having a schedule of your time to study and to rest

Nothing. It is the worst structured course I've engaged with in my life. It is incredibly poorly put together, not to mention the communication is laughably poor. This has been a HUGELY disappointing experience from the start.

Respect

Work, relationships/friendships, health

Self care and my family and friends back home

Having places for peace of mind like the lawn, the Amphitheater, and the Student Center. I get to socialise with my friends on campus and this helps me breakaway from the stress of my course. I feel UP's space is able to help with my mental wellbeing by its environment where the trees are always surrounding us and it provides a cool shade from the heat. Also the chess boards are really fun.

Good balance between free-time and work, opportunity to socialise with fellow students, dedicated professors/lecturers

Managing my workload, succeeding in my academics, good friends

Going to the gym, resting, counselling

Accessibility of information that is timely and relevant, good social relationship with our lecturers, module co-ordinator, and active participation of all individuals concerned to course enrolled for.

My mental state, work and home issues

Friends

SecurityFace-to-face lecturesAccess to the gymProximity of accommodation

Emotional support outside of school.

Family and friends. Mental well-being and a sense of safety and success.

My friendships

Being in a good state of mind(mental health), and right now it's being compromised.

The availability of lecturers.

Prayer

Opportunities to participate in committees, as well as communication between the university and myself (which needs drastic improvement)

Access to resources, family, safety, security and good health.



Online psychometrics

- Combining three instruments
 - Mental Health Continuum Short Form
 - Fragility of Happiness Scale
 - The Flourishing Scale
- Second semester



Focus groups

- Various faculties
- Student residences
- Students in extended programmes
- Specific populations
- Facilitated by experienced researchers in the helping professions



How do we analyse data?

- Interpretive phenomenological analysis
- Statistical analysis
- Vignette research

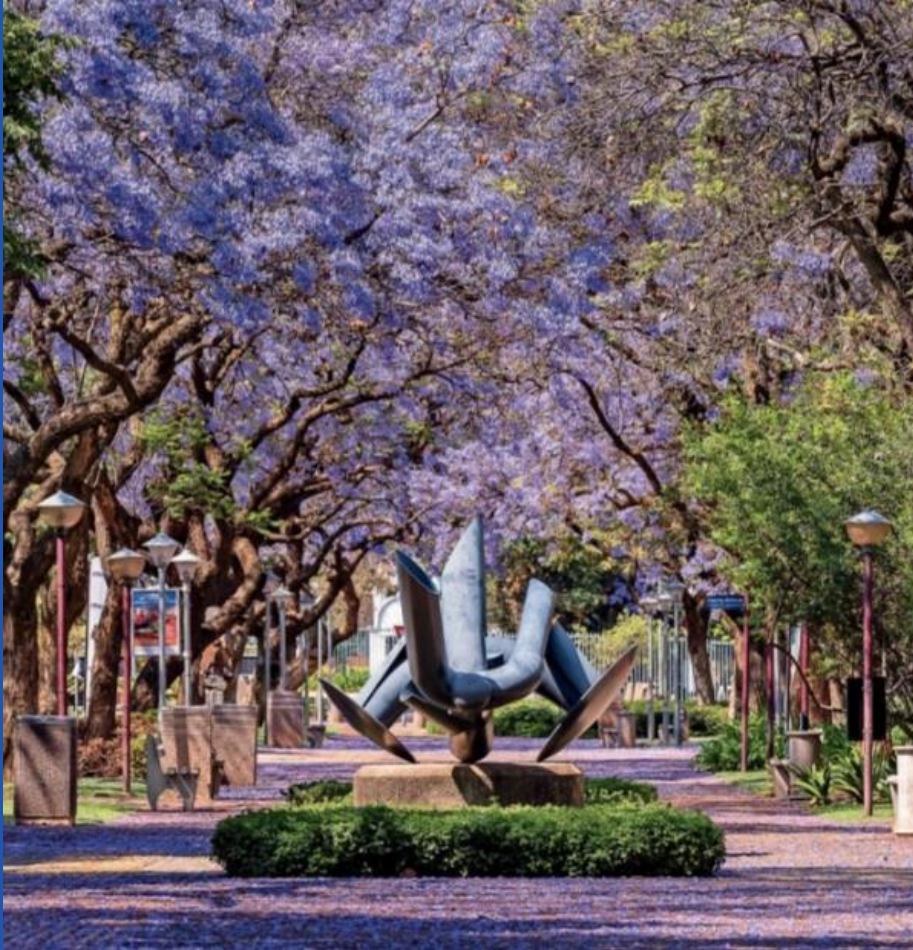


Available in open access:

<https://www.bloomsburycollections.com/monograph?docid=b-9781350299412>



What do we know?



The quality of
the learning
environment

What do we know?



The role of
lecturers

Read more here:

The pivotal role of lecturers in student wellbeing (blog):

<https://teachinginhighereducation.wordpress.com/2021/07/03/the-pivotal-role-of-lecturers-in-student-wellbeing/>

Students' well-being in tertiary environments: insights into the (unrecognised) role of lecturers (article):

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1931836>

Factors Contributing to Student Wellbeing: Student Perspectives (chapter):

https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-85924-4_10

Wellbeing during the pandemic:

Turned
towards
friends &
family



During the pandemic:

Faith-based coping



During the pandemic:

Student agency & resourcefulness



Read more here:

College students' well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic: An exploratory study (article):

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2021.1939055>

Student Wellbeing and Access to Technology: Changing Landscapes in Student Support (chapter):

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-70228-1_15

Positive effect of existing university initiatives on Wellbeing:

- Residences
- Library
- Fly@UP
- Student Counselling Services
- Sport & cultural activities

Across faculties:

Close relationship between
academic success and wellbeing



Studies by Postgraduate students

- Students in Health Sciences
- Students in Law
- Student leaders
- Students with disabilities
- Students and spaces
- Daily routines of students

Strengths & limitations

Limitations

- Limited language diversity
- Lack of case studies & individual in-depth interviews
- Unmined data-sets

Strengths

- Ongoing study
- Mixed methods approach

Future initiatives

- Integration with Student Success project
- Focus on belonging/inclusion
- 'Random Acts of Kindness' initiative
- The role of technology in wellbeing
- Bridges between student and staff wellbeing



Thank you

Contact details

Irma Eloff

irma.eloff@up.ac.za



To cite this presentation:

Eloff, I. 2024. Reflections on Student Wellbeing in an African Context. Centre of Modern Childhood Studies, Institute of Education, HSE. Presentation at Research seminar (online), 28 May 2024.