



Lessons in belonging, inclusion, and wellbeing across five European universities

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Investment into Inclusiveness and Student & Staff Wellbeing

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1. Introduction

This comparative report provides insights into the belonging, wellbeing, and mental health of academic staff and students at the consortium partners of the BELONG project: Comenius University in Bratislava (UNIBA), Central European University (CEU), Masaryk University (MUNI), University of Madeira (Uma), Nottingham Trent University (NTU).

The wellbeing and mental health experience of students and academic staff has received considerable attention lately. According to US research (American College Health Association National College Health Assessment, 2021) academic staff and students face more mental health challenges than before, almost half of college students (47.8%) experienced psychological challenges, such as stress, anxiety, or depression. These challenges are not restricted to students only, university staff also experience mental health barriers, 35% of higher education staff faced burn out challenges (Marken & Agrawal, 2022).

In the UK, Aronin and Smith (2016) reported that one in four students faced some type of barrier related to mental health problems. One of participating institutions also provided evidence for psychological challenges among students and academic staff members. The findings of UNIBA in Bratislava show that 36% of participants reported “elevated symptoms of depression and 26% higher levels of anxiety” (Hajdúk et al. 2019). Baumeister & Leary, however, argue (1995) that depression and anxiety can be associated with belongingness needs, people who fail to satisfy their need for belonging are likely to experience mental health barriers.

The context of the participating universities is not only characterized by the deteriorating state of mental health among university students and academic staff (Hajdúk, 2021; Hajdúk et al. 2019), but also by further shared challenges. One of these shared challenges is how to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body across participating institutions, including with respect to ability, ethnicity, sexual/gender identity, social background and previous learning experience. Another challenge manifests itself in a marked increase in expectations from academic staff at their institution to attend to their students’ mental health and wellbeing needs.

To address these challenges, participating institutions aimed to map the situation of student and teaching staff mental health, wellbeing, and sense of belonging at project partner institutions (R1,2) and to design a plan for improving the conditions in near future (R3). The report is utilizing the systems thinking approach, notably the [Impact Gaps Canvas](#) (Johnson et al., 2020) and [Six Conditions of Systems Change](#) (Kania et al., 2018) frameworks. The findings of survey data, interviews and focus groups show that the participating institutions actively engage in activities that address student and academic staff wellbeing, mental health and belonging, yet these opportunities are not being fully exploited by students and staff, despite the shared challenges they experience.

Our findings are based on the collected qualitative and quantitative data. A quantitative survey was conducted for staff and students across the partner institutions in November 2022. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the survey data. The student and academic staff focus groups and expert interviews were conducted between November 2022 and January 2023. The analysis of the collected data took place between January and June 2023.

The report begins with situating the context and providing the background for the research project through the literature review. A comparative analysis of the sense of belonging in relationship to mental health problems and wellbeing in all participating institutions follows. After the analysis, the problem landscape and solutions landscape are mapped. Then the gaps between the problems and

solutions landscapes are investigated to offer recommendations. The analysis provides a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between the various units and how the different stakeholders cooperate at the consortium partner institutions.

2. Literature review

There is a burgeoning literature on the themes of belonging, wellbeing and inclusivity in higher education. We have reviewed literature broadly from the last decade since 2010, so that we speak to the latest state of the art. This is important for identifying how the BELONG consortium's innovative knowledge exchange approach can both be informed by recent research and help develop a new perspective in the field. Our review discusses two sets of literature — (1) belonging and inclusion; and (2) wellbeing — and the connections between them. The themes covered include the meanings of belonging, the associated positive consequences of belonging, the varied ways in which students experience belong, the factors influencing wellbeing in university settings and recommendations provided in the literature. We will offer concluding thoughts on this report's international and comparative approach and how this contribution adds to the growing field.

2.1. Belonging and inclusion

Publications offer various empirically-based conceptualizations of belonging, particularly with regard to the *student* experience. Anh and Davis (2020) identify four domains of belonging: academic, social, surroundings (i.e., networks, solidarity, living space, geographical and cultural location) and personal (i.e., life satisfaction, identity, personal interest). Their study underscores the important role of *each* domain in promoting student success and wellbeing. In other words, universities should avoid assuming that the student experience is limited to academic belonging. Other researchers have collected short quotes and testimonials to demonstrate the wide range of words that students use to describe what belonging means to them. Students associate belonging with being: “‘at home’” or ‘comfortable’; that they were ‘meant to be there or had ‘found their place’; that they felt ‘safe,’ ‘welcome,’ ‘happy,’ and free to ‘truly be yourself’” (Nunn, 2021, p. 2). Likewise, students’ descriptions of “community” were shown “to focus on not feeling ‘judged,’ not having to ‘worry’ about what others think or say about them, and a sense that members of the community are ‘working together to make each other better’” (Nunn, 2021, p. 2; see also Kelly and Mulrooney, 2019).

Furthermore, it is widely recognized that belonging is integral to the student experience. It has been found to positively impact student success (Anh and Davis, 2020), participation and social inclusion (Weiss, 2021; Glass et al., 2015), personal, academic and professional development, including in the cultivation of persistence, perseverance, effort, attention and self-esteem and enjoyment in learning (Freeman et al., 2007; Glass et al., 2015; Hausmann et al., 2007; Nunn, 2021; Pedler et al., 2022; Zumbrunn et al., 2014). Belonging is also recognized for its important role in enhancing student engagement and retention (Kelly and Mulrooney, 2019; Pedler et al., 2022). Relatedly, it can encourage students to perceive staff as models and to develop more meaningful relationships with them (Glass et al., 2015; see also Carroll-Meehan & Howells, 2018; Kelly and Mulrooney, 2019; and Thomas, 2015). Interestingly, another study found that “social activities and the establishment of supportive friendship groups were highlighted much more than the role of staff, tutor-related activities and pastoral care were acknowledged as things that the university could do to facilitate

belonging among students” (Kelly and Mulrooney, 2019, p. 7). Finally, some contributions also recognize the conceptual and empirical link between belonging and wellbeing, including the role of social identity in fostering belonging and, thus, improving health and wellbeing (Anh and Davis, 2020; Glass et al., 2015; Jetten et al., 2012).

However, it is also widely recognized that experiences of belonging are varied. In a qualitative study involving over 600 students, participants recognized the importance of belonging, but not universally (Kelly & Mulrooney, 2019). It is “multidimensional, personal and geographical in nature” (Kelly & Mulrooney, 2019, p. 2), with students more likely to experience belonging in “smaller groups” than to “the wider campus” (Nunn 2021, p. 9). Belonging can be positively or negatively affected by factors such as extracurricular and social opportunities, university resources, personalities, other external commitments (e.g., jobs, caring, commute times) and organized activities which may exclude certain students for “cultural, personal or religious reasons” (Kelly & Mulrooney, 2019, p. 7).

Self-confidence and self-worth also play an important role for student belonging. There is evidence underscoring a “significant difference in the level of belonging between students whose parents had completed university and those whose parents had not,” including in cases where only one parent attended university (Pedler et al. 2022, p. 397). First-generation students often report lower levels of belonging, which can affect their engagement, academic motivation, and ultimately lead to higher attrition rates (Gillen-O’Neel, 2019). Finally, the ill fit between a students’ “self-construal” (i.e., the understanding that one’s worth and value is independent of others) and the “perceived independent university norms” has shown to “undermine their sense of belonging to the university [...] wellbeing and motivation” and to contribute to “a higher drop out intention” (Menkor et al., 2020, p. 101 and 109).

2.2. Wellbeing and stress reduction

Teaching is widely recognized as one of the most challenging and stressful professions, characterized by high levels of strain, burnout, turnover and diminished professional wellbeing (Benevene et al., 2020). Roos and Borkoski (2021) assert that the stress levels and wellbeing of faculty are often overlooked, with workload demands assuming consistent achievement. Importantly, they also point to the influence of academic staff wellbeing on student learning and engagement Roos and Borkoski (2021). The wellbeing of academics is influenced by various factors, including academic demands, workload, social support, lack of autonomy and personal circumstances, which can lead to high levels of stress and burnout. However, the research shows that social support and work-life balance were important factors in promoting wellbeing (Rony et al., 2023). Therefore, in staff various protective and risk factors might dynamically interact and subsequently lead to mental health problems or lower wellbeing. Targeting only one factor may be less effective in improving the outcomes of staff.

Studies on stress factors have indicated that the wellbeing, job satisfaction, self-perception and professional competence of educators are all contingent on the extent of attention that educational establishments devote to their workforce. The effectiveness of interventions designed to improve the wellbeing of students and staff in higher education is crucial. Research shows that a variety of interventions, including mindfulness-based programs, physical activity interventions, and counseling services, can be effective in improving wellbeing outcomes (Pitowska, 2014).

Research shows that organizational management plays a key role in promoting wellbeing in higher education. Ogamba and Ohadomore (2020) emphasize the significance of management-led strategies in mitigating workplace stress within higher education institutions. They examine the role of university management to support the mental health of academic staff. As an example of

interventions, they suggest the promotion of existing mental wellbeing initiatives, regular wellness assessments, mindfulness workshops, the establishment of writing retreats, and the prioritization of academic staff members as key stakeholders in these plans are all essential components of a comprehensive approach to mental health in academic settings. Research investigating the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction course for teachers, showing that it potentially reduces psychological symptoms and burnout, improves classroom organization and affective attentional bias, and increases self-compassion, while changes in mindfulness correlate with changes in several outcomes (Flook et al., 2013).

In terms of encouraging student wellbeing, research shows that peer support plays a significant role (Richard et al., 2022). The authors found that peer support, delivered through various modalities such as in-person, group, internet-based, and telephone-based, is associated with improvements in mental health outcomes, including reductions in depressive symptoms, anxiety, and psychological distress, and increases in self-esteem.

Research shows that mental health and wellness of college students, and the role of counseling centers and student affairs are important in addressing these issues (House, Lynch & Bane, 2013). The authors argue that a comprehensive approach is needed to promote mental health and wellness among college students, including prevention, early intervention, and access to a range of services and support services. Another important strategy is to lower barriers and to dismantle stereotypes about mental illness.

2.3. Recommendations in the literature

There is a plethora of recommendations on how universities can more effectively foster belonging, inclusivity and wellbeing. These include “small-scale informal discussion forums such as coffee club” (Mannay & Ward, 2020), online third spaces and other low-cost opportunities to enhance students’ wellbeing (Weiss, 2021). Meanwhile, other researchers offer more systems-based recommendations. Menkor et al. (2020) call on universities to: “(a) design degree programs that allow students with diverse self-construals to adjust their norms or (b) offer interventions that help students with different self-construals cope with the given [university] norms (Tibbetts et al., 2016)” (p. 109). Meanwhile, Nunn (2021, pp. 159-166) offers a rich array of practical actions that also address core challenges, including:

- messages that encourage students to “find their place” on campus (“Welcome Home: What will you explore today?” or “This is your library, come browse your books”);
- allowing campus eateries, shops, and common spaces to reflect the tastes and interests of an increasingly diverse student body;
- making sure that specific support services are a “central, visible part of campus”;
- investigating why certain groups of students don’t engage in some programs/offerings;
- making offerings more affordable for low-income students;
- “understand[ing] how the relationships between social belonging, academic belonging and campus- community belonging play out on your campus”
- evaluating the structures and policies affecting those dimensions;
- “offering curricula and co-curricular programs that address inequalities”;
- making it easy for students to establish new campus clubs and societies and to collaborate across organizations;
- helping faculty to understand the needs of first-generation students, including “small everyday ways”;

- “streamlin[ing] and simplify[ing] logistics” so that students do not have to feel “that they do not know what they are doing.”

2.4. Existing gaps and this report’s contribution

Our research report builds on the existent research in university belonging, inclusion and wellbeing in a number of important ways, including in its geographic scope and systems thinking approach, which treats student *and* staff as two sides of the same coin. Firstly, while there are certainly cross-institutional comparative studies (e.g., Menkor et al., 2020; Nunn, 2021; Weiss, 2021), our international study compares five universities from different higher education traditions and systems – spanning the UK, Central European, and Southern European. We consider the wider implications of our research for two reasons: (1) are matters of isolation, exclusion and ill (mental) health in academia a more global phenomenon? (2) If so, why, and how can we facilitate meaningful exchanges between institutions situated in these different contexts?

Secondly, the publications belonging (and by association *inclusion*) that we have reviewed tend to focus on the student body and much less on academic faculty or staff. Our project treats the belonging, inclusion and wellbeing of *both* staff and students as two sides of the same coin. Therefore, we offer a more balanced approach than the existent research. To that end, our project employs a whole-systems thinking approach, which treats phenomena not in isolation or occurring in a vacuum, but as a complex entity where one part impacts directly or indirectly on another. This allows for an impact gaps analysis, involving a more systematic understanding of the problems, the solutions and, very importantly, the points at which existing solutions fail to facilitate meaningful impact on the problems (Johnson et al., 2020).

Relatedly, we seek to identify problems and impact gaps, which are common across the universities in order to highlight the patterns in higher education which are potentially more globally salient – particularly in the post-pandemic context. It also therefore generates a set of joint actions to promote knowledge exchange and mutual learning through site visits, network and relationship building across the institutions and joint pilot projects to test innovative ideas.

3. Survey data across five institutions: A comparative analysis of the sense of belonging in relation to mental health problems and wellbeing

3.1. Comparison of sense of belonging across universities

Our first step in the data collection was to conduct a quantitative investigation across the five partners. Surveys were completed by both staff and students in November 2022. Mean scores across universities were compared using one - way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Post-hoc comparisons were performed using t-tests with applying Bonferroni correction for accounting for multiple comparison.

In case of students, results suggested a significant difference in the sense of belonging across universities ($F=7.824$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.015$). Post-hoc comparisons revealed several differences across sites (see table 1). CEU and UMa scored lower than MUNI and UNIBA. I (See table 1 and Figure 1).

Figure 1 Distribution of Belong scale score in case of students across universities

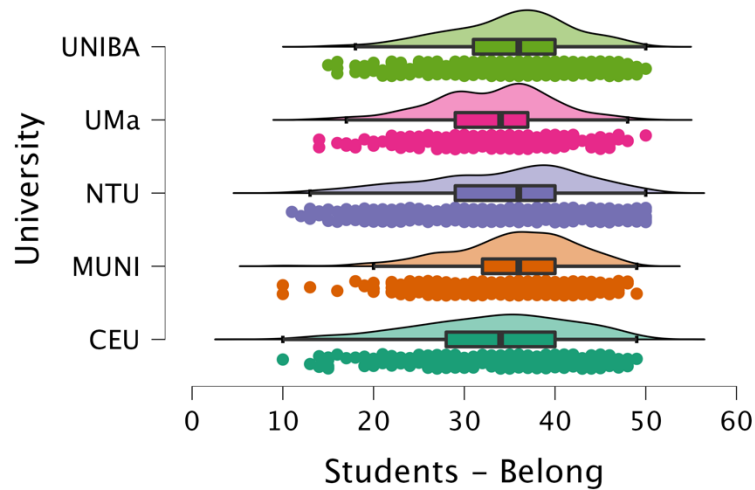


Table 1 Post Hoc Comparisons - Staff

		Mean Difference	SE	t	Cohen's d	p_{bonf}
CEU	MUNI	-2.042	0.577	-3.538	-0.278	0.004
	NTU	-0.906	0.569	-1.591	-0.106	1.000
	UMa	0.292	0.613	0.476	0.040	1.000
	UNIBA	-1.845	0.552	-3.345	-0.257	0.008
MUNI	NTU	1.136	0.482	2.359	0.147	0.184
	UMa	2.334	0.533	4.380	0.353	< .001
	UNIBA	0.197	0.461	0.427	0.030	1.000
NTU	UMa	1.197	0.524	2.284	0.154	0.225
	UNIBA	-0.940	0.451	-2.084	-0.124	0.373
UMa	UNIBA	-2.137	0.505	-4.231	-0.326	< .001

Note. Cohen's d does not correct for multiple comparisons.

Note. P-value adjusted for comparing a family of 5

In case of staff, ANOVA omnibus test was significant ($F=3.653$, $p=0.006$, $\eta^2 = 0.030$), suggesting differences in sense of belonging across sites in staff sample. The post hoc test revealed significant differences. Staff at MUNI scored higher than CEU ($d=0.469$, $p=0.054$) and significantly higher than NTU ($d=0.421$, $p=0.047$). There were no other significant differences across sites. Raincloud plot displaying distributions and box plots are shown in figure 2. Results of the post-hoc test are presented in table 2.

Figure 2 Distribution of Belong scale in staff across universities

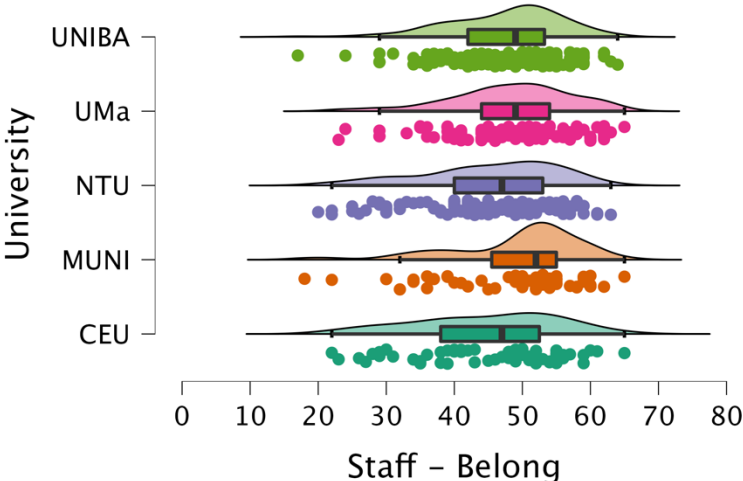


Table 2 Post Hoc Comparisons - students

		Mean Difference	SE	t	Cohen's d	p _{bonf}
CEU	MUNI	-4.705	1.683	-2.796	-0.469	0.054
	NTU	-0.578	1.483	-0.390	-0.057	1.000
	UMa	-3.682	1.531	-2.406	-0.388	0.165
	UNIBA	-2.922	1.448	-2.018	-0.324	0.442
MUNI	NTU	4.127	1.452	2.843	0.421	0.047
	UMa	1.023	1.500	0.682	0.112	1.000
	UNIBA	1.783	1.416	1.259	0.204	1.000
NTU	UMa	-3.104	1.272	-2.440	-0.329	0.150
	UNIBA	-2.344	1.171	-2.001	-0.258	0.460
UMa	UNIBA	0.760	1.231	0.618	0.089	1.000

Note. Cohen's d does not correct for multiple comparisons.

Note. P-value adjusted for comparing a family of 5

Overall, results highlighted a comparable level of belonging among students across universities. Similar results were present in the staff sample. If tests were significant, effect sizes suggested only medium effect size (Cohen's d approx. 0.4). A further question that might be answered is whether the sense of belonging is the same construct across sites. Due to translations, some meanings of items might be shifted and therefore the measured construct might be slightly different across sites. Future analysis should look at the measurement invariance across sites before making strong conclusions about differences across sites. This type of analysis is beyond the scope of this report.

Thus, in our primary analysis, we focused on understanding the role the sense of belonging plays and the way it impacts other relevant indicators of mental health and wellbeing in students and staff.

3.2. Interaction between sense of belonging, wellbeing, and mental health - Network Analysis

Based on the bivariate level analysis, it was shown that indicators of wellbeing, mental health problems, and sense of belonging in staff and students were highly correlated, with some differences across sites. With the aim to look at the data globally and specifically on-site differences, we utilized advanced multivariate statistics. To model complex associations between sense of belonging, satisfaction with life, wellbeing, depression, anxiety, and loneliness, we utilized a statistical procedure called Network Analysis (Borsboom & Cramer, 2013; Epskamp et al., 2018). This method enables visual inspection of complex associations between large number of variables in parsimonious and easily interpretable way. With this approach, we could disentangle the role and importance of the variables of interest. For example, we could make conclusions about whether depression severity is more important than anxiety level. These relationships are presented as networks. Here we estimated a separate network for students and staff. The site comparisons are presented after the main results. In all presented networks, nodes represent observed variables (raw scores on questionnaires measuring depression, belonging etc.) and displayed edges are indicators of strengths of the relationships.

The thickness of the edges represents the strength of relationships after accounting for the role of other nodes in the network. In network analysis, variables that have strong association (negative or positive) are placed next to each other and the magnitude of this relationship is represented by thickness. If nodes are unrelated, there is no edge between them.

Blue color represents positive partial correlation and red color depicts negative partial correlation between nodes. For example, the blue edge in figure 3 depicts a strong positive association between dep (depression) and gad (anxiety), i.e., that people with higher levels of depression experience more severe anxiety. The relationship between dep (depression) and SWLS (satisfaction with life) is an example of a negative association indicated by a red line: people who scored higher on depression also reported a lower quality of life. These associations are present even after accounting for the effect of other variables (this is partial correlation, Costantini et al., 2015). This means that correlation coefficients presented visually are the number we control for all other variables within a network.

To make interpretations of networks more parsimonious, we utilized the Extended Bayesian Information Criteria Lasso procedure (EBIC Lasso) (Chen & Chen, 2008). It is a form of network regularization that suppresses and does not display very small or near-zero associations in the estimated network (Epskamp et al., 2018). For example, figure 3 expressed a near-zero relationship between gad (anxiety) and SWLS (satisfaction with life) with no edge between these variables. This procedure leads to more parsimonious and more interpretable networks.

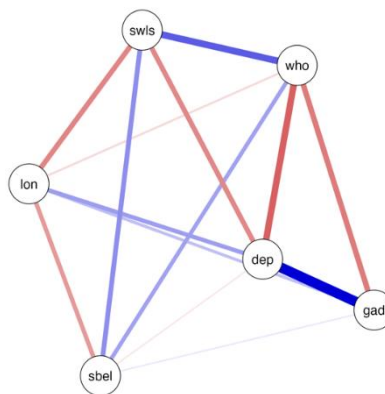
As an indicator of the role of nodes, we calculated strength centrality. Higher values mean that the node has more and stronger associations with other nodes in the network (thus more important in general because it is connected). For example, in figure 3, node with high degree of strength centrality is dep (depression), because it has many and strong association with other variables.

We must consider that the staff networks might be substantially biased and inaccurate due to the small sample sizes. Our results are more exploratory in this part of the report. All networks were estimated using the JASP software.

3.3. Network analysis – students

The estimated network for students is presented in figure 3. In case of students, depression and wellbeing were the most important nodes in the network, showing the highest values of strength centrality. In the whole sample belonging was linked to loneliness, higher satisfaction with life and higher wellbeing. In whole sample, links to depression, and anxiety were generally weak.

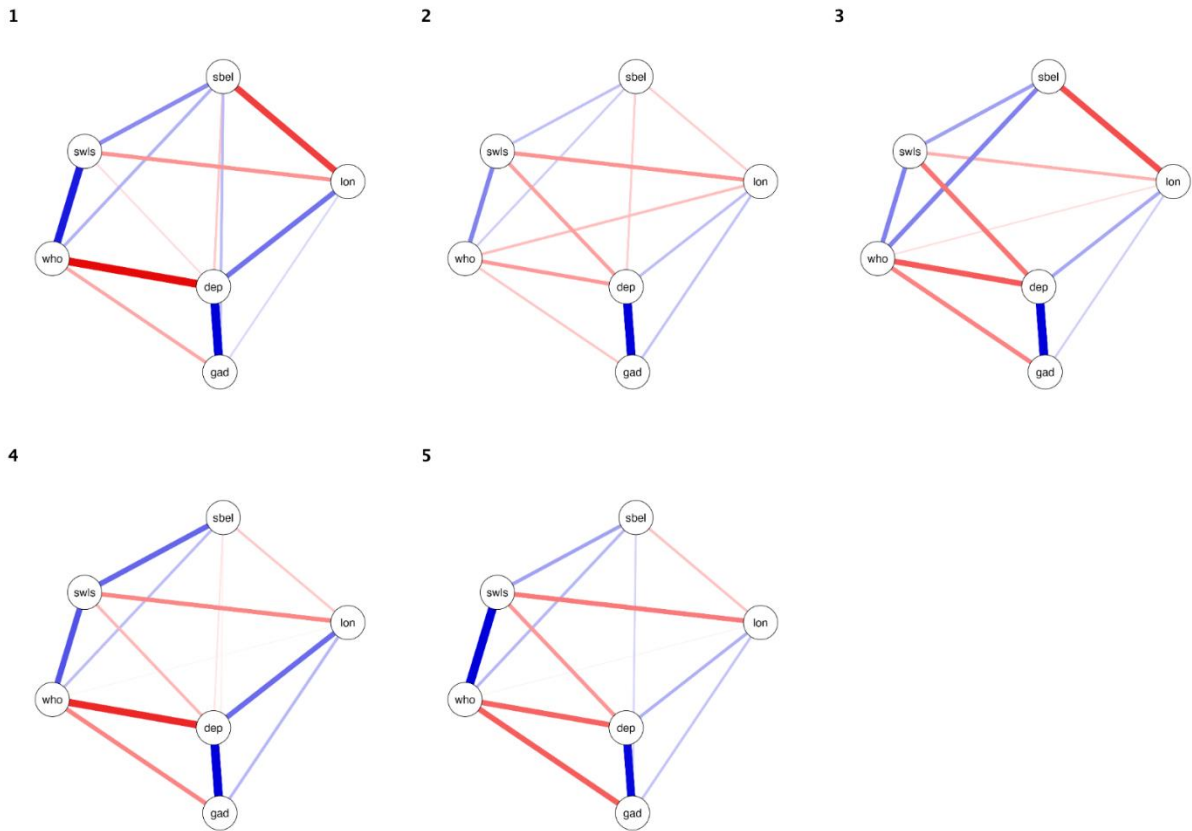
Figure 3 Estimated network for whole student sample



Lon – loneliness, sbel – student belonging, swls – satisfaction with live, who – wellbeing, dep – depression, gad – anxiety

Figure 4 displays the structure of associations between variables across sites. Across all sites, the link between depression and anxiety was strong suggesting co – occurrence of these symptoms. Similarly in all sites, satisfaction with life and wellbeing were positively associated and showed negative associations with psychopathology. At CEU and NTU, higher sense of belonging in students were associated with less severe intensity of loneliness.

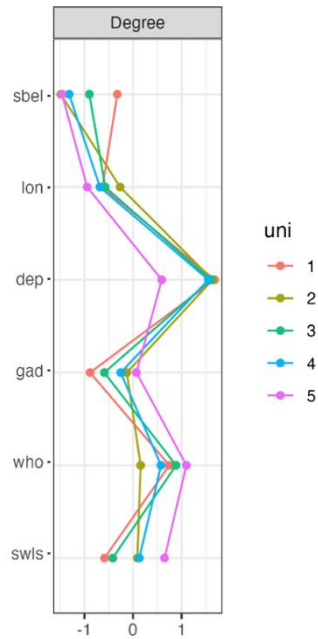
Figure 4 Estimated networks for students – site comparison



1 – CEU, 2 – MUNI, 3 – NTU, 4 – UMa, 5 - UNIBA

In figure 5, we presented differences in strength estimates across sites. Overall, sense of belonging showed smaller strength centrality than other nodes.

Figure 5 Centrality indices for nodes – site comparison (students)

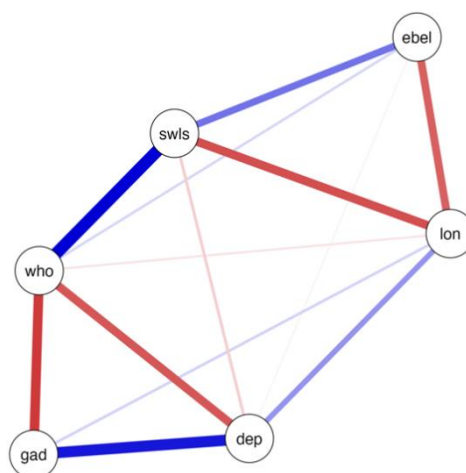


1 – CEU, 2 – MUNI, 3 – NTU, 4 – UMa, 5 – UNIBA

3.4. Network analysis – staff

The network for the whole staff sample is presented in figure 6. In the whole sample, nodes representing satisfaction with life (swls) and wellbeing (who) showed highest strength centrality. Sense of belonging was more closely related to general loneliness and satisfaction with life than to psychopathology (depression, anxiety).

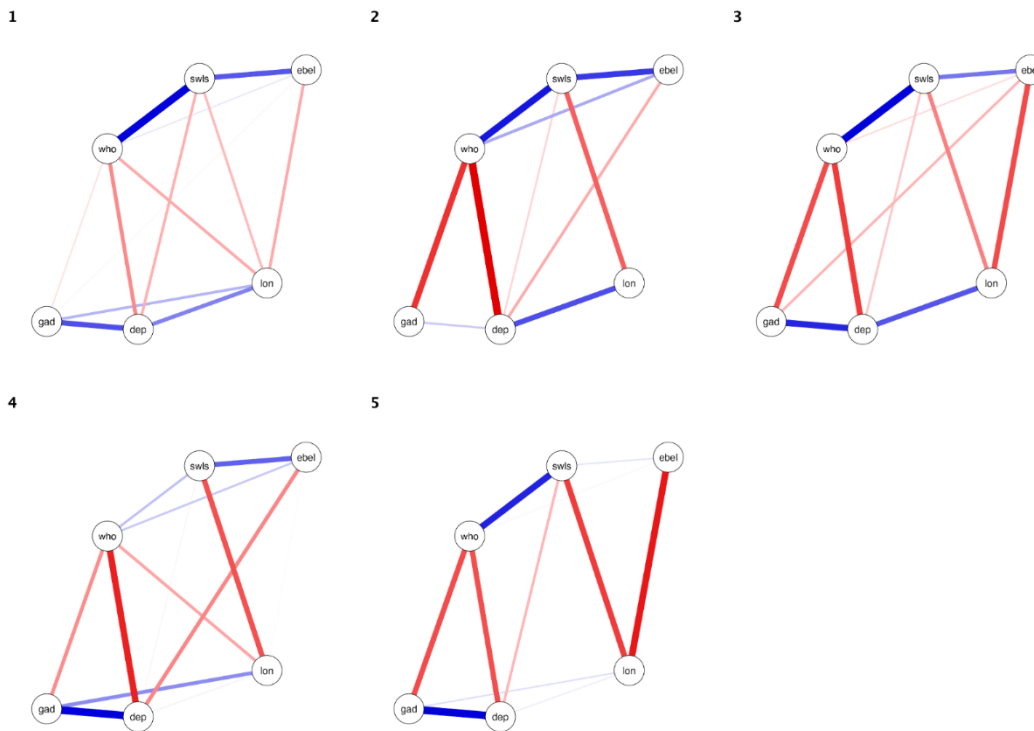
Figure 6 Network estimate for whole staff sample



Next, we estimated networks for each site separately. Based on the visual inspection, it is possible to see that nodes were differently related to each other across sites. Some edges are present/missing depending on site. But due to the small sample sizes, we are very cautious to interpret differences

across sites in staff. One of the observed differences across sites is, that in UNIBA sample, sense of belonging was strongly negatively associated with loneliness, but only mildly related to satisfaction with life. A link to general satisfaction was present at all other sites.

Figure 7 Estimated network for staff–site comparison



1 – CEU, 2 – MUNI, 3 – NTU, 4 – UMa, 5 - UNIBA

4. The Problem landscape

4.1. Experiences of belonging, inclusion and wellbeing among students and staff

Several challenges emerged from the interviews and focus groups across the five universities, which impact belonging and mental health. Given the diversity of understandings, we report the views of students, academic staff members, and experts across the five institutions. The current mapping of the problem landscape is based on the survey data and reported experiences of the focus groups and semi-structured interviews with experts representing the distinct functions that relate to institutional work on belonging, inclusion and wellbeing among students and staff.

The challenges that were common to all five institutions are as follows: (a) isolation and physical barriers; (b) barriers and overload in information; (c) staff workload overloading; (d) decreased willingness/capacity to take advantage of initiatives that universities offer to staff and students; (e) difficulties with relational boundaries and respect between staff and students; (f) complexity of mental health issues; (g) managing inclusivity of increasingly diverse and international student body (UMa, CEU, MUNI, NTU).

4.2. Isolation and physical barriers

Isolation is an important topic that appeared among staff and students as an obstacle to creating/supporting a sense of belonging. Isolation can be understood as physical isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic, where students reflected that they only felt minimal connection to academic staff. Alternatively, the feeling of being isolated can take a different form in the context of face-to-face teaching. Even though students are physically present, they feel left out, and their sense of belonging is low. (UNIBA; CEU, NTU) The survey did not capture the relationship between the length of studies and the perceptions of belonging. Covid-19 pandemic might have caused a delay in establishing a sense of belonging; therefore, may not be a significant difference between students in their first or third year. Similarly, for staff, the sense of belonging was not related to how long they have been affiliated with their institution.

Academic staff also raised the issue of different working hours of colleagues (UNIBA, NTU) at the workplace/department, which creates a barrier to informal meetings, deepening relationships, and/or cooperation. Since staff perceives the department as central unit across most of the participating consortium institutions to which they belong, different working hours may present a challenge. Departments are seen as isolated bubbles that are barely connected with other departments and units of the institution.

4.3. Barriers and overload in information

Both students and staff mentioned the lack of awareness of information and communication channels, barriers in communication, and communication overload. The volume of emails is perceived as very high, and for staff in particular the entire communications system/infrastructure is too complex and puts further pressure on workloads. Emails are a key method of teachers' communication with students. However, teachers' experience suggests that students often do not read them. (NTU, UNIBA). Students don't regularly visit institutional websites, and therefore do not have access to important pieces of information. A commonly held perception is that "what is not available through social networks [is] as if it would not exist". Yet many students prefer not to follow social media of their institution. Lack of information and communication (UMa,) can be acute when students begin to struggle to cope either with studies or personal issues. Excessive communication via email is particularly burdensome for staff, while it does not seem to be an effective way of reaching students.

4.4. Overloaded staff

The increasing load of responsibilities is a major challenge in academic staff's life. Both staff and experts have noticed the heavy teaching load (UMa), or work overload of employees (UNIBA). Especially in the group of employees, several problems resonated such as the accumulation of functions/activities, the perceived feeling of pressure to increase the quality of education in conjunction with while experiencing more pressure to produce higher quality and/or more research outputs, difficulties when trying to keep maintaining a work-life a balance, and at the same time, relatively low financial compensation and low social status (UNIBA). The staff perceives overload as a direct obstacle to participating in activities that would develop a sense of belonging. The practice of taking vacation, when one needs to catch up with work—especially activities related to research publications—contributes to overloading. The workload and organization of work do not allow the full use of vacation to which the staff is entitled.

Moreover, academic staff noted a lot of changes in working practices and expectations during the pandemic which have not completely receded and created a feeling of ongoing unsustainable expectations. Staff stepped up to many challenges during the pandemic, and combined with shortage of staffing, and working from home, the expectation to be available all the time, and to be able to respond to short deadlines and rapid turnaround times continues. Some of these issues were present prior to the pandemic and were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis.

4.5. Reduced capacity to take advantage of support

For both staff and students, the will to be involved in the activities of the faculty/department beyond the scope of duty fosters belonging. Respondents reflected that a large part of students and staff are not interested in getting involved (UNIBA). The reasons for staff and students are different. With staff, we see a clear connection with overloading. For students there exist “a wealth of opportunities to engage in different communities and networks, develop academically and professionally.... However, several unaddressed obstacles and unintended consequences” prevent students “to engage properly” (NTU). This may be also connected to the fact that during pandemics students got used to not being physically present in their institution.

4.6. Problems with relational boundaries and respect between staff and students

Challenges become visible through issues of respect between staff and students. As obstacles, we identified non-inclusive and inappropriate behaviour or inappropriate language, such as microaggressions by staff towards students, but also towards each other (disrespect, sexism, low inclusive language, xenophobia, sexual harassment, etc.) (UNIBA). Also, on the part of students towards staff, especially in the anonymous evaluation of courses e.g., humiliation of teachers. These behaviours demotivate students to study and staff to teach. As a result, relationships between colleagues may worsen at the workplace.

4.7. Complexity of mental health issues

Based on the qualitative and quantitative analysis we have identified another challenge which is significant for our topic. *Mental health issues affect* a wide range of life areas. In general, students feel much more loneliness than academics (MUNI). Learners are more likely to feel isolated from others, left out, and lacking companionship. Data from interviews and focus groups suggest that many students struggled with loneliness during the pandemic, severe disruptions to the ability to be able to socialize, and being able to make new friends, which affected their mental health.

Interviews and focus group respondents shared the view that there seems to be mounting anxiety and social anxiety. Participants also noted that stigma around mental health issues persist in the context of persisting wider societal stigmatization (NTU). This can lead to issues being hidden and compounded. It was also raised that some students were not represented when the return was made to in-person teaching: some students have preferred online teaching because it lessened their social anxiety when they did not need to be on campus for lessons.

4.8. Managing inclusivity of increasingly diverse and international student body

All five universities have a greatly *diverse student body*. We have identified many different groups of students: there are students with socio-cultural differences (e.g., students with different ethnic and cultural background, religion, native language, disability etc.), students with different gender identity, and students with mental health issues. These diverse student groups present different challenges for the teaching staff in terms of dealing sensitively and respectfully with them (MUNI, UMa). International students across participating universities face even more challenges compared to their peers. These students take on responsibilities of an adult by moving away from their home country and their families and develop new competencies to succeed in a distinctive style of education (CEU, NTU) Therefore, these participating students are likely to feel *alone, and isolated*.

5. Solutions landscape

The existing provision of services and initiatives across institutions constitutes the solutions landscape. The so-called 'solutions' common to all institutions include mental health services, student support, disability/special needs and advisory services, student representation as well as a range of policies and systems in place to promote inclusion and equality. There are notable differences, including in the provision of career support to students and promotion of wellbeing awareness.

In the first place, all institutions provide access to mental health services for their students. Institutions take different approaches to how and where they are provided, how the services are structured, and the help that is offered. All mental health services are located within or aligned and linked closely to student support or advisory services. Mental health services vary in the levels and types of counselling or support available. For example, some have psychological counselling and medical practitioners on campus (CEU, NTU). Several universities face challenges with overburdened mental health services (UNIBA, NTU). Provision of mental health support is available for staff in some institutions, for example, through employee assistance programs. Online provision of resources for mental health and wellbeing, or apps to assist students and employees, are sometimes used (CEU, NTU).

Secondly, all institutions have existing student support or advisory services set up to provide a framework to help and assist students with a range of issues they may experience, including academic or personal challenges. This includes support for students with disabilities or special needs. CEU has a *Disability Rights Officer* for employees and students, who, among other things, is responsible for the implementation of the '[Accessible CEU](#)' initiative. Similarly, NTU has a whole range of [disability and inclusion services](#). CEU has a *Disability Funding Scheme* to help with additional funding, and NTU has access to a similar scheme through nationally provided funding, called the '[Disability Students' Allowance](#)' (DSA). MUNI runs *Teiresias*, a support centre for special needs students with the aim of providing maximum accessibility. UNIBA operates with a university by-law to provide an accessible academic environment, whilst NTU adheres to the Equality Act (2010) legislation which requires reasonable adjustments to be made to improve accessibility for staff and students.

Furthermore, each university has a range of institutional programs, networks and/or HR policies in place for staff and student inclusivity. This includes gender equality and diversity and inclusion policies. CEU has a new *Office of Inclusion, Diversity and Equality*, and a *Gender Equality and Diversity*

Officer, gender equality plans and an *Equal Opportunity Officer*. MUNI has a newly established ombudsman to investigate and uphold protections of rights for students and staff. Two contact persons are available within the Faculty of Education who are specially trained in dealing with sexual harassment cases and providing victim support. At UNIBA, there is a new university gender equality plan which aims to initiate structural changes that will ultimately lead to the creation of an open, supportive, inclusive and non-discriminatory environment for all staff and students and is linked to the implementation of the international [EQUAL4EUROPE](#) project and Horizon Europe program. Similarly, there are new regulations with regard to sexual harassment and systems in place for confidential whistleblowers. NTU has staff networks for underrepresented groups including women, race, ethnicity and cultural heritage, disabled employees, and LGBTQ+ staff. NTU also has policies and initiatives for improving diversity and inclusion across recruitment, training, and practices, including efforts to decolonise curriculums.

With regard to student voice, all institutions regularly collect student feedback. This is done at different levels and time periods. For example, at NTU student feedback is collected by module yearly, and by course annually as part of a national survey of graduating students. In addition, independent of the university institutions themselves, there are student unions at UMa, CEU and NTU, offering socializing opportunities, support and advice. NTU also has a staff trade union which represents staff and has ongoing working relationships with university management.

Nevertheless, there are more visible institutional differences. The level of awareness regarding general wellbeing, including physical health, is mixed across institutions, staff and student groups and faculties. However, all institutions do seem to have some awareness and the desire to promote general wellbeing, including physical and mental health. There have been recent wellbeing initiatives at MUNI which promote wellbeing through improving physical spaces and facilities. This includes a new staff and student canteen, a modernised cafeteria, an events and conference centre and additional classroom space. CEU promotes wellbeing, offers training and workshops, and provides online resources. Similarly, NTU has ongoing wellbeing and health initiatives which offer events, training, and campaigns on many aspects of physical and mental health and wellbeing.

A number of the institutions offer career development services for both staff and students. MUNI and UMa have pedagogical development centres. NTU academic staff have access to support and training for pedagogical development and career progression. Finally, MUNI and NTU both have a student career centre that offers career guidance, support and advice for current students and recent graduates.

Finally, at MUNI there have been recent changes to staff communication, improving the flow of communications and access to information to increase transparency. A revised employee portal brings together information. Improvements are being made to staff evaluations, including work on incorporating qualitative factors into workloads (in addition to quantitative elements).

6. Common impact gaps

Despite the notable solutions landscape across the five partner institutions, there are persistent impact gaps common to all of the universities, which present opportunities to not only evaluate and bolster those existing solutions, but also to explore new approaches through joint knowledge exchange and production. Impact gaps which are common across at least two or more universities in the consortium include: (a) problems with availability and take-up of information related to community, wellbeing, and other support; (b) increasing workload pressures for academic staff; (c)

poor staff recognition and career progression opportunities; (d) poor academic staff capacity and capability to provide adequate pastoral care to students; (e) inadequate mental health support for both students and staff; (f) lack of interactive spaces; and (g) a disconnect between policies and actual implementation.

Notwithstanding these commonalities, universities have distinct approaches to belonging, inclusivity and wellbeing, which offers fertile ground for sharing good practice. In particular, CEU and NTU may be able to transfer their blueprints and lessons learned to MUNI, UMa and UNIBA. At the same time, despite their relatively advanced practice, CEU and NTU have their own shortcomings, which widens the scope to explore solutions together.

6.1. Availability and take-up of information

The most cross-cutting impact-gap is about the **availability and take-up of information**, in particular, the **communication channels** that support these. With regard to the former, some institutions are **missing key information** which would be useful for evaluation, including about staff job satisfaction, staff needs, workload pressures and burnout and their impact on leave and student feedback on the effectiveness of communication channels (UNIBA, UMa). At the same time, **lack of information** about key support provisions and community-building opportunities and/or take up of this information plagues all the universities. This includes: **poor signposting and absence of clear and/or accessible information platforms** (not only so that staff and students know who to contact, but also to promote inter-departmental cooperation); lack of information available to special needs students about the availability of support; **lack of awareness** among both staff and students of the various opportunities to develop, connect with others and to seek support; **students' relatively low use of official university email** to receive information (they would prefer social media); an **information overload problem** where both students and staff are overwhelmed by the volume of communications that they tune out; **poor uptake of available support services**, which may in part be due to a lack of trust or fear of exposure on the part of both students and staff even, if in cases where these opportunities are otherwise known (CEU, MUNI, NTU, UNIBA, UMa).

6.2. Workload pressures for academic staff

Another major commonality is diminishing **academic staff capacity** and **increasing workload** pressures. This includes **unsustainable work patterns**, the encroachment of increasing workloads on leave (i.e., the use of official leave to 'catch up' on work duties instead of regeneration), **poorly defined roles and work distribution** (including cases where a program rests on the shoulder of one person), and **less awareness of and investment in staff wellbeing** relative to student wellbeing (CEU, MUNI, NTU, UNIBA, UMa).

6.3. Poor staff recognition and career progress opportunities

The institutional reports identified **career development, progression, recognition, and mentorship support** as key aspects of academic staff wellbeing. Yet, staff do not always feel valued, recognized and sufficiently rewarded for their level of work. Staff would need mental health support to help

them manage workloads and to develop teaching competences (MUNI); coaching, career guidance, training, sabbaticals and additional support around personal and work-related problems and sabbaticals (UNIBA); better prospects for career progression and improved working conditions (UMa) as well as reduced workloads and flatter hierarchies that would allow staff to take better advantage of employee benefits and professional development opportunities (NTU).

6.4. Reduced academic staff capacity to provide adequate pastoral support to students

Against this backdrop and common to all universities, academic staff are **ill-equipped to provide adequate pastoral care**. Staff may not be interested or receive little support/training in creating inclusive environments (UNIBA), and the quality of personal tutorial support for students may vary considerably across staff (NTU). Similarly, supervisors may need more effective management and/or leadership training so that they can better support staff (CEU, NTU).

6.5. Inadequate mental health support for both students and staff

In a similar vein, all universities reported that they are **ill-equipped to provide adequate mental health support to both students and staff**. However, there are nuances between the universities. In some cases, the mental health support available to staff is **underdeveloped (or non-existent)** compared to the support available to students (CEU, MUNI, NTU, UMa). In other cases, guidelines and workshops on how to deal with mental health problems - both in terms of self-help and staff helping students - are poor or non-existent (MUNI, UNIBA). NTU CEU and UMa may be able to offer transferable frameworks and practices in this regard. For example, both NTU and UMa have student (mental) health 'ambassadors' or 'champions.' UMa has undertaken a unique approach through its WellBEING project, which aims to promote mental health literacy through various forms of expression, such as art, music and theatre.

6.6. Lack of interactive space

Interactive spaces and opportunities for discussion and community-building are lacking at some institutions (CEU, NTU). CEU's new location in Vienna has thus far not catered well to **facilitating discussions in physical spaces**. Retreats and/or opportunities to bring together people from different departments could create a stronger sense of belonging. Similarly, the UMa research team also identified the need to bring colleagues and families together during weekends. At NTU, **opportunities for students to socialize** (outside of a drinking culture), **for staff to build friendships** with colleagues and for both staff and students to make connections across the school or university are likely inadequate or inaccessible. There is a broad range of testimonials which support this assertion. Nevertheless, NTU has recently made efforts in the area – for example the School of Social Sciences' 'Kulch-ed' program, which allows students to take part in cultural events in Nottingham free of charge and to avoid the drinking scene. Another example is the Department of Social and Political Sciences' 'coffee mornings' which are regular, informal gatherings of students and staff.

6.7. Disconnect between policies and actual implementation

Finally, institutions experience a disconnect between policies and their implementation (MUNI, NTU). Policies are visible when they are broken, which results in reactionary rather than preventative measures, e.g., the Dignity and Respect Policy appears to be weakened by implementation gaps (NTU).

7. Action plan: Recommendations for knowledge exchange and joint learning

There are numerous opportunities for the universities to exchange good practices and organize joint actions to explore solutions to common impact gaps. As the abovementioned gaps are numerous and complex, the project's strict timeline limits the scope of feasible action. Therefore, we will distinguish between 'knowledge exchange opportunities,' on the one hand, where two or more universities can share information on their own volition, and 'joint actions,' on the other, where we identify opportunities to take joint action with all consortium partners to work toward a common target. Recommended KE opportunities should involve matching and facilitating initial conversations between strategically selected specialists/managers across institutions.

7.1. Persistence and increase in staff workload pressures

There is great scope here to put heads together to delve into the problem of unsustainable staff workloads, the institutional gaps in addressing it effectively and to explore feasible solutions that can work across a range of different contexts. The UNIBA report (p. 20) offered a recommendation to establish a staff/faculty mental health center, while MUNI recently received a European Commission HR award for recently introducing a [counseling service as a new employee benefit](#). Hence, these developments offer a window of opportunity to explore new and innovative approaches.

Recommended joint action (1): Research models for employee 'wellbeing' centers and draft recommendations as part of the final comparative report.

7.2. Information and communication gaps

Arguably the most prominent issue emerging from the institutional reports is the twin impact gap of poor communication and poor provision and uptake of information. There are many facets to this shortfall, including lack of data/information, communication of existing information about services and opportunities as well as staff/students' relationship to that information. Therefore, we argue that this necessitates a more thorough investigation and solutions map.

Recommended joint action (2.1): The consortium should prepare a workshop to: (1) explore and discuss alternative approaches to information and communication provision; (2) decide on a small-scale pilot project which can be jointly tested and evaluated in time for the BELONG project completion in 2025; (3) the establishment of an accessible (online) platform bringing together information, resources and expertise in inclusivity, belonging and wellbeing. In addition, while both

the NTU and UNIBA reports mention the existence of support systems for 'special needs' students, they also cite insufficient monitoring of impact and benefits to students (UNIBA) and students' lack of awareness of these opportunities (NTU, UNIBA).

Recommended joint action (2.2): Student support personnel specializing in special needs from both NTU and UNIBA should be invited to take part in the abovementioned workshop, small-scale pilot project and evaluation.

7.3. NTU as a consortium hub for knowledge exchange and joint learning

There is a **major opportunity for NTU to share its models and frameworks concerning inclusivity, community and wellbeing** with the other universities in consortium – as it appears to be more advanced in these areas due to legislative requirements and unique cultural factors. However, a caveat is warranted. “The main message emerging from the interviews and focus groups is that NTU offers and does a lot, but that much of these offerings and opportunities are out of reach, inaccessible and passing people by. There is a persistent and considerable problem with informational congestion and ever-growing constraints on people’s capacity. [...] there is a persistent lack of awareness among both staff and students of the various opportunities to develop, connect with others and to seek support” (NTU report, p. 23).

Secondly, “there is a lack of uptake in (mental) wellbeing services despite high or potentially hidden demand and, similarly, a lack of real uptake in annual leave among staff.” These twin phenomena appear to be rooted in an overwhelming institutional environment--reflected in informational communication overload, the sheer volume of activity as well as stressed systems and services, including academic, student support and line management, which are struggling to cope, in particular, since the pandemic. However, uptake of the above services and programs may also be due to a lack of trust or fear of exposure on the part of both students and staff” (NTU, p. 23). In other words, implementation and actual practice suffer from some impact gaps. NTU still struggles with duplication of (sometimes uncoordinated) efforts and severe shortfalls in system capacity due to its large size and current resourcing challenges. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that NTU’s strength is the existence of models, approaches, and structures, which otherwise appear to be mostly absent from many of the other institutional environments.

For example, **NTU’s models and guidelines** could be informative for CEU, MUNI, UMa and UNIBA in the areas of recognizing/de-stigmatizing mental health, establishing mental health response protocols; procedures for handling student evaluations in a transparent, consistent and fair manner; protocols and programs for addressing and preventing unethical behavior among staff and students; establishing governance structures – including institutional bodies, committees and processes – which oversee mental health, teaching innovations, and student voice.

NTU has received national recognition for its **mental health awareness and support efforts** and is also prioritizing this area as the Vice Chancellor was recently appointed ‘the student mental health tsar; by the UK government One notable example is NTU’s complex student support system, this includes a more recently launched effort to better coordinate student wellbeing, other support services, peer mentoring/support and pastoral care/personal tutorials. This coordination effort is partly operationalized through the ‘student support advisor’ roles across the university. NTU also offers numerous trainings, workshops, and online resources (‘Silver Cloud’) which are intended to help empower students and staff to seek self-help and to navigate the system of support. A more recent effort is the NTU School of Social Sciences’ new Associate Dean position, whose remit now recognizes staff wellbeing as a priority area.

In terms of **belonging and community**, the School of Social Sciences is offering two models via the 'Kulch-ed' program and 'coffee mornings'. However, while there exist many opportunities to build staff community, the institutional report highlights how staff are often unable to take advantage. For example, while there is a 'Theory Aloud' social gathering where colleagues can debate theory in a pub setting, this tends to exclude colleagues who have caring duties and other responsibilities outside of work. While there are numerous staff networks on offer – organized around identity and career development – it is questionable how many colleagues can participate in any meaningful way given workload pressures.

Finally, NTU's **governance structures** which in part aim to coordinate cross-institutional dialogue and collaboration on achieving the university's strategic goals could offer an interesting model for internal and external community building. Notably, NTU's 'enriching society' goal is supported by a web of cross-cutting institutions including the Centre for Student and Community Engagement, the Trent Institute for Learning & Teaching and the Institute for Knowledge Exchange Practice and other supporting bodies.

Recommended joint action (3): Organize a half-day conference at NTU in May 2024 where strategically identified managers and specialists can share examples of the university's best practice in the abovementioned areas through talks, tours, etc. Delegations from the other universities should invite one or two specialists/managers from their own institutions who can be paired with the relevant NTU counterparts for one-to-one KE meetings.

8. Conclusion

Statistical tests highlighted a comparable level of belonging among students across universities while significant differences in the sense of belonging were found across the staff samples. Furthermore, statistical analysis has shown that wellbeing, mental health problems and sense of belonging in staff and students were highly correlated, *albeit* with some differences across institutions.

We used systems mapping, focus groups, and interviews to better understand these statistical results, identify problems, systems gaps and make an action plan with recommendations. While each institution has their own particular barriers and shortfalls as well, we identified the following seven issues that challenge all five consortium partner institutions: isolation and physical barriers; barriers and overload in information; staff workload overloading; small willingness/capacity to take advantage of initiatives that universities offer to staff and students; difficulties with relational boundaries and respect between staff and students; complexity of mental health issues; managing the inclusivity of increasingly diverse and international student bodies.

Partner institutions seem to be aware of many of these issues and responded to these issues to varying degrees and with diverse solutions. However, several gaps still remain in their responses: problems with availability and take-up of information related to community, wellbeing, and other support; increasing workload pressures for academic staff; poor staff recognition and career progression opportunities; poor academic staff capacity and capability to provide adequate pastoral care to students; inadequate mental health support for both students and staff; lack of interactive spaces and a disconnect between policies and actual implementation.

We recommend tackling the remaining gaps through knowledge exchange by ways of cross-institutional dialogue of several kinds. Some issues (e.g., communications) would benefit from joint discussion and a shared search for solutions, while other issues (e.g., students services) that are

shared by some (but not all) institutions should be explored by the affected pairs or groups of partners. Finally, in areas where some partners have already produced advanced solutions while others are catching up, an evaluation of existing practices would help all partners to institute the most effective responses or to improve existing services.

Finally, in this way our project makes three important contributions, including conducting comparative investigations in various geographic contexts, its systems thinking framework (which strikes balance between staff and student focus) and its innovative knowledge exchange. Our project treats the belonging, inclusion and wellbeing of *both* staff and students as two sides of the same coin, recognizing that the belonging, inclusion and wellbeing of students strongly depends on the workplace satisfaction of academic staff. Therefore, we offer a more balanced approach than the existent research.

Relatedly, we seek to identify problems and impact gaps which are common across the universities in order to highlight the patterns in higher education which are potentially more globally salient – particularly in the post-pandemic context. It also therefore generates a set of joint actions to promote knowledge exchange and mutual learning through site visits, network and relationship building across the institutions and joint pilot projects to test innovative ideas.

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