



University connectedness, relational depth, wellbeing, anxiety, and academic achievement in FASS students

Executive summary

The project aimed to support the work of the university to meet the challenge of student mental health. The focus of this project was on examining the connections between student wellbeing and mental health, academic achievement, and relationships at the university.

Background

- Across the university there are multiple initiatives seeking to support student mental health and wellbeing which are led/coordinated by the university-wide Student Mental Health Working Group (convened in 2019)
- Research testifying to an increase in mental health difficulties in students during the pandemic comes on the back of pre-pandemic political and institutional concern around rising levels of mental health difficulties in UK students
- Mental health difficulties have been found to negatively impact module/unit level attainment and progression (Thorley, 2017; Hughes and Spanner, 2019) and whether students complete individual courses/modules (Mojtabai et al., 2015); as well as their degrees (Thorley, 2017)

Methodology

- Emails were sent to a pool of approximately 2000 students who were randomly selected for the study by the SRRP. Of these, 382 responded and accessed the survey and 208 completed it
- Data was collected online through the survey software system Qualtrics

Key findings

- Inspection of descriptive statistics suggested strong links between connectedness, well-being and academic achievement
- Greater connectedness was associated with better mental health outcomes and better academic performance
- Loneliness was a statistically significant independent predictor of academic achievement ($b = -0.24, p < .05$) and loneliness and anxiety were statistically significant independent predictors of academic achievement ($b = \leq -0.21, ps < .05$)
- Loneliness was found to mediate the relationship between mean academic grade in the previous year and recent well-being (95% CI -.02, -.01) and the relationship between mean academic grade and recent anxiety (95% CI -.01, -.00)
- Loneliness also mediated the relationship between self-rated academic performance and recent well-being (95% CI .11, .40)
- There was evidence that university connectedness (but not other connectedness variables) mediated the relationship between loneliness and well-being (95% CI -.26, -.01)
- A comparison of students who were satisfied with their academic achievement ($n = 115$) with those who were ambivalent/dissatisfied ($n = 88$) suggested the following:
 - Students are less likely to have had significant moments of connection at University when less satisfied with their academic performance
 - Students less satisfied with their academic performance experience less connection via tutorials, student communities, and through forums but tend to rely more on connection via their tutor relationships than students who are satisfied with their academic performance
 - Students are more likely to experience a general disconnection with the university and poorer interactions with their tutors when less satisfied with their academic performance

Recommendations or implications

- Since the initial study was small (just over 200 students) and had a cross-sectional design (meaning we were not able to evidence causal relationships) it is important to conduct further research. For this reason we have successfully sought additional FASSTEST funding
- The aim with the new study will be to examine whether we can find impact over time of relational factors on both OU student mental health and student achievement
- The longer term aims with this study are to inform university initiatives around supporting mental health, leading to changes in university practice or policy as well as raising awareness and prompting attitudinal change about the importance of the university promoting staff and peer relationships, including programmes like the FASS mentoring programme and the university-wide student PLAs, as well as better supporting ALs and SST staff to leverage the positive benefits of relationships for students
- Another aim is to encourage the university to better (and proactively) promote students' sense of institutional connectedness

Resources or references

- [Thorley \(2017\)](#)
- [Hughes and Spanner \(2019\)](#)
- [Mojtabai et al. \(2015\)](#)
- [OU Student and Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2020-2023](#)