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Wellbeing in the higher education sector: A qualitative study of staff perceptions in UK universities

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ABSTRACT

The Higher Education (HE) sector is beset with mental ill-health, stress and burnout, negatively impacting staff productivity and retention. These challenges are due to a reduction in financial support for HE coupled with a growing number of students and increased workloads, as evidenced by recent strike actions in the UK. While research on mental ill-health in HE is extensive, our understanding of wellbeing in higher education is limited. Yet understanding wellbeing in the workplace can foster positive experiences and resilience, counteracting more negative experiences. This paper presents findings from 21 in-depth semi-structured interviews with employees (academic and professional staff) in UK universities to understand staff perceptions of wellbeing and the impact of the HE context. Five themes were identified: (1) *factors contributing to staff wellbeing*, such as colleague support; (2) *fragility and duality of staff wellbeing*, on how wellbeing can be damaged as well as its changing nature; (3) the *dichotomy of collegial peer and organizational support*, on university and staff actions toward wellbeing; (4) *outsider from within*, on an experienced lack of belonging; and (5) *creativity and growth*, on opportunities for staff development. Gaps in our understanding of Black, Asian, Minority, and Ethnic staff experiences were also identified. Implications for bolstering wellbeing in practice and future research are discussed.

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Staff wellbeing; higher education; university staff; management; BAME; framework approach

Introduction

High levels of stress and burnout are reported as one of the key factors contributing to teachers choosing to leave the profession in the United Kingdom (UK) (Roffey, 2012). Likewise, research has shown similar trends in the Higher Education Sector internationally, with staff reporting high

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levels of stress and burnout (Le Cornu, 2013; Lester et al., 2020; Santoro, 2019) and highlighting the role of stress in staff wellbeing at work.

Moreover, the long-term impact of COVID-19 on global health and financial security is likely to be significant. For example, in recent years, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was shown to worsen staff wellbeing, with almost half of staff working in Higher Education (47%) reporting poor mental health during the pandemic (Dougall et al., 2021). These findings are concerning, highlighting the growing evidence of stress and burnout among staff in Higher Education (HE) (Jayman et al., 2022; Wray & Kinman, 2021), and have promoted understanding of the effects on staff while further emphasizing the need to support staff wellbeing in higher education.

The impact of stress and burnout on staff working in HE is well known, and includes poor staff health, emotional labor, hypertension, workplace stressors, and the blending of work and personal life (Dreyer et al., 2010; Fetherston et al., 2021; Teixeira et al., 2021). Despite the considerable attention given to stress and burnout in HE, less is known about how staff define their wellbeing and the factors that promote or diminish wellbeing. Wellbeing has a crucial role in building resilience and positive experiences at work, therefore it is imperative to understand staff perceptions of wellbeing in HE. The current state of staff wellbeing in universities requires attention to understand the factors impacting their wellbeing and to provide insights into the solutions required to improve staff wellbeing (Akanni et al., 2020; Mudrak et al., 2018; Wilson & Strevens, 2018; Woods, 2010).

This article starts with a definition of wellbeing, then examines the changing context of HE and the impacts of these reforms on the sector. We then turn to the methodology before considering the study findings about staff perceptions of wellbeing and their assessment of the factors that have promoted or diminished their wellbeing. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for improving staff wellbeing and for future research.

Definitions and theories of wellbeing

We start by examining definitions of wellbeing to contextualize how it was used within this study. Hedonistic and eudaimonic perspectives prevail in the literature (Anderson & Fowers, 2020) with hedonistic wellbeing characterized through happiness, pleasure, optimism, joy, and other pleasurable feelings and attitudes that lead to fulfillment, whereas eudaimonic approaches additionally include personality development, setting, achieving personal objectives, and having a sense of purpose. However, these approaches rely on the person's subjective creation of meaning regarding what promotes their wellbeing and may be prone to positive bias (a tendency to accentuate the good things that happen in their lives) and social desirability (where a

respondent gives a reply they believe will be accepted by the researcher) (Eckersley, 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Wellbeing encompasses a wide range of experiences that are subjective, multifaceted, interconnected, and related to the community and society in which people live and work, while acknowledging the potential limitations of an individual's subjective perception of their own wellbeing (positivity bias and social desirability). This wellbeing framework is grounded in Prilleltensky's (2008) definition of wellbeing as a:

positive state of affair in individuals, relationships, organisations, communities, and the natural environment, brought about by the simultaneous and balanced satisfaction of material and psychological needs; and by the manifestation of material and psychological justice in these five ecological domains. (pp. 359–360)

Therefore, mental, social, physical, and economic aspects all have a role in one's overall wellbeing.

Different theories exist in the literature regarding organizational models of wellbeing. The Job Demands-Resources theory (JD-R) takes as its focus the working conditions that are specific to every occupation. These can be classified as job resources (control over your work, available support to motivate and support staff development, reward and recognition, including, salary, pay scale, job security, and job satisfaction) and job demands (work or emotional demands that can negatively impact an individual's wellbeing and the potential for high work demands overtime to contribute to psychological stress and burnout), with each domain impacting individual staff outcomes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Research has additionally shown that the levels and interaction of job demands, and job resources often influence and are connected to wellbeing experiences (Hakanen et al., 2008). More recently, the JD-R theory has also been applied to the academic work environment (Mudrak et al., 2018). Mudrak et al. (2018) suggests that the dual process, as hypothesized by the JD-R theory, impacts differently on aspects of occupational wellbeing. They conclude that, "distinct interactions between the work environment and various facets of occupational wellbeing should be considered in the context of academic workplaces" (2018, p. 340). In summary, the Job Demands-Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017) is useful for articulating the dual processes of job resources and job demands that might be associated with a range of personal, social, and organizational outcomes in the work context. Each of these has the potential to impact job satisfaction (Santoro, 2011) and staff wellbeing.

Therefore, there is a growing body of research that has focused on wellbeing over the years (Dodge et al., 2012; Pollard & Lee, 2003; Seligman, 2006), with the COVID-19 pandemic leading to an explosion of research in this area as workplaces faced significant challenges (Dinu et al., 2021; Jordan et al., 2021).

However, despite this focus, research into wellbeing has come under criticism for being unclear about how wellbeing should be defined (de Chavez et al., 2005; Pollard & Lee, 2003; Ryff, 1989; Wassell & Dodge, 2015; Travia et al., 2022). Some scholars have cited the lack of theoretical development and the tendency to focus on dimensions or factors that are related to wellbeing has led to overly broad definitions of wellbeing (Dodge et al., 2012; Forgeard et al., 2011).

As a definition of workplace wellbeing, this paper has adopted the approach of Laine and Rinne (2015), which suggests there are three dimensions, including influencing factors at work, subjective wellbeing, and outcome variables. Influencing elements are linked to those that have an impact on employee wellbeing experiences at work. Subjective elements include people's subjective opinions and emotional assessments of their professional experiences. The impact of work on health, performance, motivation, and work competence and ability is referred to as the outcome dimension (Laine & Rinne, 2015).

Wellbeing and staff in higher education

The JD-R theory described above may be useful in terms of explaining wellbeing in the context of higher education and in understanding current staff intentions to leave their jobs in the UK. Statistics have shown there are more staff working in HE year on year (439,955 people in 2018–19 compared to 429,560 in 2017–18) (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2021; <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/23-01-2020/sb256-higher-educationstaff-statistics>). Conversely, the University and College Union report (Shorter, 2022) indicated that 60% of employees in HE plan to leave their jobs in the next five years. The potential effects on human resources and productivity in HE is considerable. Given the above UCU report findings, it is important that attention is given to the factors staff perceive as important to their wellbeing.

According to Williams et al. (2017), both positive and negative factors can impact staff wellbeing in the university context, including high job demands or negative coping strategies, compared with positive personality traits that demonstrate positive coping strategies. As well as individual differences and personality characteristics identified in the above study, it is crucial to understand the organizational processes and interventions available in HE that support staff wellbeing, and how these interventions are used to influence staff wellbeing (O'Brien & Guiney, 2018).

More specific research on the wellbeing experiences of Black, Asian, Minority, and Ethnic (BAME) staff working in UK universities observed that black staff were more likely to experience microaggressions, are

perceived to be incapable of doing their job and subjected to unfair work practices (Mahony & Weiner, 2020). This highlights the impact of racism on the wellbeing of black staff working in higher education. Likewise, Bhopal (2022) suggests that, along with acknowledging racism, institutions must work toward cultural and systemic change.

Considering the paucity of evidence on staff perceptions of wellbeing in this field, several issues are particularly worth exploring. The HE workforce is under more stress due to the changing landscape of HE (Bell et al., 2012). The causes of these changes are well documented, with researchers pointing to funding cuts, job security, an increase in student enrollments, insufficient recognition and reward, and organizational changes frequently prompted by the increase in local, national, and international student competition (Watts & Robertson, 2011). All these factors have the potential to lead to stressful work environments, burnout, and strain for the staff working in HE (Chapman & Ludlow, 2010; Watts & Robertson, 2011).

Three major aspects of educator wellbeing have been highlighted within the setting of schools: feeling appreciated and cared for; feeling overburdened; and job stimulation and enjoyment (Briner & Dewberry, 2007). Similarly, Van Straaten et al. (2016) underlined the significance of having prospects for growth, acceptable workloads, and feeling appreciated by universities. In the context of HE, better understanding of how to enhance employee wellbeing will help to address these issues. Moreover, staff wellbeing is a major concern given that student performance may be affected by the wellbeing of staff (Pillay et al., 2005). Consequently, if we want to improve staff productivity and performance, it is crucial to understand how employees view their wellbeing and the elements that hinder or boost their wellbeing in the university context. The insights gained from staff assessments of wellbeing could also broaden current definitions of wellbeing and highlight the importance of context, which is currently missing in the literature among staff wellbeing in HE.

Research justification and aims

The research provided an opportunity to understand the unique assessments of employee's wellbeing in the HE context. This study aimed to examine the perceptions of wellbeing among university staff. It also aimed to identify factors contributing to or depleting wellbeing at work, and the effectiveness of interventions intended to improve it; thus, addressing the following research question: *What is staff wellbeing in higher education and how can it be managed?*

Methods

Design

This study is grounded in interpretivism, as its focal point is to understand the subjective meanings that staff give to wellbeing and their situation. Furthermore, it is recognized that social situations and contexts in higher education are complex, therefore, the meanings that staff will give to their own wellbeing will be diverse and multiple. A qualitative interview method was adopted to explore staff experiences and perceptions of wellbeing.

Participants

A total of 21 members of staff in HE institutions participated in the qualitative study to share their experiences and perceptions of wellbeing. In terms of positionality, the study's principal researcher was employed at the UK Higher Education Academy (HEA) at the time (now Advanced Higher Education, AHE), a member-led sector charity that collaborates with institutions throughout the world to improve HE for staff and students. Email lists of organizational contacts were accessed (>200 in number) to create the sampling frame, but the exact total number of organizational contacts was unknown. We combined convenience and snowballing sampling, two methods of nonprobability sampling that are often used in qualitative research. Convenience sampling is a method for selecting a sample from people who can be contacted conveniently and who are willing to participate in the study (Scholtz, 2021). It is recognized that there are drawbacks, such as the validity of the qualitative data (Robinson, 2014), and that the community under study may not be accurately represented (Staetsky, 2019). Snowballing typically is dependent on a referral, such as the interviewee suggesting additional participants that may be subject to selection bias (Parker et al., 2019). There were no additional procedures added for exclusion in the sample. All consenting volunteers were included in the study.

Interviews/data collection

A first round of semi-structured interviews, informed by a qualitative descriptive design (Sandelowski, 2010) and analyzed using Framework Analysis (Ritchie et al., 2013), with 13 staff members working in HE was first completed between July and September 2015. Adopting a qualitative descriptive design allows straightforward descriptions in areas about which relatively little is known, allowing the topic under investigation to closely reflect the research question (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Sandelowski, 2010). A review of the respondent's demographic profiles revealed that there were gaps in the selection of staff members who were younger (less than 40 years

old) and of different ethnic backgrounds who work in HE. Therefore, a second wave of semi-structured interviews ($n = 8$) was undertaken between August 2018 and March 2019 specifically to encourage participation from a broad range of ethnicity groups and younger employees in HE. There were no major changes required that seemed relevant to the research analysis and findings due to the inclusion of two phases. The participants' demographic data is included in Table 1.

The interview schedule included questions around three broad areas: (a) experiences of staff wellbeing in higher education (b) organizations' efforts to support wellbeing (c) possible further steps to support wellbeing. The interviewer designed a list of questions relating to the broad areas outlined above. A sample interview schedule was designed to gain feedback and, following comments from staff working in the sector, amendments were made to the initial schedule. This included an additional question to explore staff views about what more could be done to improve their future wellbeing.

Table 1. Table of demographics.

Job Role	Start date	Contract			Age	Ethnicity	University status	Phase	Pseudonym
		type	Male	Female					
Course Leader	2001	P		x	51	White European	Post	1	Gillian
Senior Lecturer/ Programme Leader	2011	P	x		45	White British	Post	1	Nathan
HE Development Manager	2013	P	x		50	White British	Post	1	Simon
Professor/ Head of Social Policy	2013	P	x		62	White British	Pre	1	Brian
Programme Director P/T	2011	P		x	56	White British	Pre	1	Oprah
Head of Student Research and Equality)	2009	P		x	54	White British	Post	1	Judith
Head of Post Graduate Development	2015	P		x	54	White British	Pre	1	Lydia
Professor of HE Pedagogy	2015	P		x	60	Australian Chinese	Post	1	Margaret
Research Support Librarian	1993	P		x	53	White British	Post	1	Mary
Adult Nurse Lecturer	2002	P		x	51	Welsh	Pre	1	Faith
Manager of Student Accommodation	1985	P		x	49	White British	Pre	1	Zoe
Faculty Inclusion and Student Engagement Lead	1987	P		x	58	White British	Post	1	Sarah
Academic Project Lead	2017	P		x	55	White British	Post	2	Melanie
Deputy Head/Subject Lead	2014	P		x	62	Asian	Post	2	Maxine
Visiting Lecturer/ Lecturer	2015	P		x	52	Black British	Post	2	Naomi
Communications Lead	2014	P		x	26	White British	Post	2	Martha
Associate Lecturer	2017	P	x		31	White Irish	Pre	2	Bill
Senior Lecturer	2014	P		x	56	Black British	Post	2	Ruth
Senior Lecturer	2011	P	x		53	Jewish	Pre	2	Matthew
Senior Lecturer	2012	P		x	43	Black Other	Post	2	Sharon
Academic Lead	2011	P		x	41	Black British	Post	2	Cassandra

Key: FT: full time; PT: part time; P: permanent; Post: post 1992; Pre: pre 1992.

The participants were in the UK, and audio recordings of the interviews, which lasted between 40 and 60 min, were fully transcribed.

Ethical approval

The first author's institution granted ethical approval for this investigation in July 2015 (No2105/09). All participants were informed of the purpose of the study prior to the commencement of the interviews, and they gave their agreement to participate. They were informed before the interview began about the confidentiality of their data, their choice to opt out of the study, and the use of pseudonyms to protect participant identity. Access to the data was given to professional researchers engaged in this study and the data kept safely on a password-protected computer. No interviewees used their option to remove their information from the raw data file.

Analytical process

The semi-structured data was analyzed using a Framework Approach (FA) (Ritchie et al., 2013), which is an inductive method that extracts themes from the data. FA promotes attention to the interviewees' accounts and provides a visual framework for analyzing emergent ideas. We followed the recommended systematic process of Framework Analysis approach (Smith & Firth, 2011), performed in three stages of interrogation as follows: (a) data management (developing codes and categories), (b) identifying and testing a thematic framework (developing a coding index to organize a data set), and (c) developing descriptive and explanatory accounts (synthesising coded data and refining final themes). The determination of when data saturation has been achieved is a key consideration for all researchers. After the analysis of 21 interview transcripts, no new themes or novel data emerged, therefore data saturation is assumed to have occurred (Dibley, 2011; Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Findings

A total of five themes emerged from the coding and application of the thematic framework. The superordinate themes are: Factors contributing to staff wellbeing (the salient features of staff wellbeing), Fragility and duality of staff wellbeing (the factors that have challenged their wellbeing, the extent to which wellbeing can be repaired or improved and the oscillating and changing nature of wellbeing), Dichotomy of collegial peer and organizational support (the support strategies organized by and for staff and the university's actions to address staff wellbeing), Outsider from within (lack of belonging or feeling devalued) and Creativity and growth (the

opportunities to grow and flourish, along with suggestions to promote future staff wellbeing). To illustrate the prevalence of the themes throughout, the following terms were utilized: m majority/many (17–21 participants), most/well over half (13–17 participants), several (5–13 participants), some (1–5 participants).

Factors contributing to staff wellbeing

There appeared to be unanimous agreement amongst staff working in HE that wellbeing is the presence of “balance” and “equilibrium,” particularly in terms of having reasonable limitations and expectations of staff. Similarly, it includes acceptable workloads, supported by managers who can approve the resources required and offer the necessary training for them to do the job to the best of their abilities. For example, Gillian:

I think staff wellbeing in High Education is about people feeling as though they are operating within their reasonable sort of limitations so they're not feeling overloaded (Gillian, course leader)

Several factors were seen to positively impact staff wellbeing. For instance, for many, their love for teaching was a source of strength, and they altogether believed their roles made an invaluable contribution to the lives of others, improving wellbeing. As Simon, a senior manager, remarked that knowing you can make a difference in how students proceed with their lives provides an “awful lot of satisfaction” which contributes to “feelings of wellbeing.”

Above helping individual students, contributing to the HE sectors, and the country, also provided a positive sense of wellbeing; for example:

I think we do need to have some recognition of the importance of Higher Education and what we do in Higher Education for the country. (Maxine)

Furthermore, developing new professionals positively influenced their wellbeing. Faith, a senior nurse lecturer for over five years remarked that seeing her students becoming registered nurses, not only influenced her wellbeing at work, but benefited the wider society. Positive wellbeing was thus connected to making a difference to others and the future workforce which has not been fully articulated or appreciated in the previous literature on staff wellbeing in HE.

In contrast to the above, negative factors contributing to declining staff wellbeing were also discussed. These negative factors can be categorized into *behaviors and attitudes of others* and *organizational actions and responses*.

In terms of *behaviors and attitudes of others*, discussion centered around trust, and equality and fairness. The role of trust in staff wellbeing was seen as crucial and that others (managers/colleagues) have confidence in their ability to undertake their jobs. This included being given flexibility

and autonomy in terms of how, when, and where they performed their jobs. Many of the interviewees expressed the opinion that their wellbeing was grounded in the principles of fairness and equality—the equitable treatment of and respect for everyone, and consistent application by managers' and colleagues. A few interviewees even provided examples of management failing to respond to incidents of bullying. Regardless of these incidents, interviewees agreed that both management and staff needed to be involved to improve fairness and equality, and ultimately their wellbeing.

The second category of negative factors, *organizational responses and actions*, consisted of views related to the de-prioritization of staff wellbeing, particularly when related to student wellbeing. Many of the respondents reported that their wellbeing had been ignored and not given priority status by universities. This viewpoint was echoed by another respondent, Margaret a professor since 2015, who commented that universities did not “systematically concern itself with the wellbeing of staff.” Furthermore, many staff suggested that those with the strongest voice, students (the fee payers), are routinely prioritized, suggesting this has been the case for some years. Given that the current student fee system is likely to continue, staff say that the current de-prioritization of staff wellbeing seems likely to persist.

In all cases, the interviewees reported that “time” had a negative impact on their wellbeing, including pressures placed on their time at work and that time was being usurped from their precious families, significant others, and hobbies. Sarah gave an example of diminished wellbeing due to unrealistic expectations being placed on her time, as she continually worked 40/45-h weeks, and on occasions more, to complete marking and in extreme cases taking annual leave to author reports. Similarly, Sharon added that her institution had become quite used to encroaching on people's time at home and had managed to do so for years without challenge. Furthermore, interviewees suggest that the university sector is predicated on the assumption that deadlines should be met at any cost, even if it means staff work in their own time. The need for staff's personal time to be valued and respected represents an important aspect of staff wellbeing in HE.

Concerns regarding uncertainty and lack of security in the HE sector were more widespread. Staff commented that the university sector had seen several changes due to the dominant business culture at the cost of staff wellbeing. For example, as one interviewee (Tony) remarked, the concept of wellbeing from the university's perspective often depicts staff members who can confidently balance all demands and work requests, without it “hindering their job.” This seems to imply that the vision of staff wellbeing presented by universities is unrealistic and uncertain. Not only this, but it has been ethically questioned whether HE should aspire toward or embrace a model of wellbeing in which staff are constantly performing and meeting

targets regardless of the amount of work they are expected to do, and without reasonable boundaries and limitations in place.

In conclusion, staff shared a variety of factors that contributed to their well-being ranging from the love of teaching and the profession, contributing to the development of health and social work professionals and the HE sector. Additionally the role of trust, uncertainty, the importance of being valued, fairness and equality, and aspects of time, including flexibility and autonomy at work. The next theme was concerned with the fragility and duality of wellbeing.

Fragility and duality of staff wellbeing

Throughout the interviews staff articulated how they experienced and conceptualized their own wellbeing within the institution. Within this theme, there are two key subthemes, fragility, and duality. With respect to fragility, there is consensus regarding the ease with which staff wellbeing can be damaged and broken. For example,

... a head of department could damage wellbeing purely by not consulting people about an important or significant issue which affects them and if you don't do that the trust is lost very quickly and once trust is lost morale goes down and you're not in a position where wellbeing is in plentiful supply. I think it is very easy indeed to damage wellbeing and quite hard to create it. (Brian)

The staff interviewed in HE often perceived their wellbeing as fragile, due to the existing business cultures of universities being antithetical to staff wellbeing and could not see a way for their wellbeing to improve without overhauling the negative cultures of universities. Participants expanded on the link to culture, referring mainly to it being shaped and influenced by management. Matthew, a senior lecturer, further believed that many institutions have embraced a culture that is based on meeting broader student expectations over the intellectual purpose of education, which he found depressing and concerning.

Furthermore, the university environment was described as one of "fighting battles" each day. Martha questioned the extent to which the work environment could be improved, and expressed it was futile to challenge the environment as it would inevitably impact one's wellbeing, suggesting that the work demands would need to be accepted as

ultimately everyone still has to complete their work and it has to be completed to time...

Turning now to the subtheme of duality, staff described their experiences of wellbeing as changing over the years. Here, two key ideas emerged with respect to duality: the external factors (institutional and national) that have influenced staff wellbeing, resulting in general periods of increased and decreased wellbeing.

When asked if their wellbeing had changed positively or negatively since working at a university, 11 out of the 21 staff members believed that their wellbeing had improved. Several explanations were shared as to how this had manifested. For example, some staff felt that their wellbeing had increased because of the availability of, and clarity regarding, career progression options.

However, many staff indicated that their experiences of wellbeing have become increasingly negative over time. A few participants indicated several external factors had adversely impacted on their experience of wellbeing, such as the introduction of policies that increased student numbers, and measures that promoted marketization. This was also linked to the culture, as described above, but which, according to Brian, many institutions are increasingly becoming embedded to a business culture which has now become the dominant feature of most universities. Staff felt it was difficult to envision how staff wellbeing would not be damaged by this new working environment. Zoe, an accommodations manager, talked about the difficulties staff faced adjusting to these measures:

... I think the effect of it is in recognizing that there are people who want the best for the business, but they need to understand fully where it's going hence you then get the pressures [...] and this has an impact on their wellbeing.

Yet duality was also experienced with periods of increased and decreased wellbeing, the second subtheme. In most of the interviews, wellbeing was not articulated as being either positive or negative, but instead was characterized by periods of both increased and decreased wellbeing, both co-existing at the same time.

For others, this was not the case, with several reasons given for this, such as the specific leadership culture, and the philosophy of the organization. Melanie observed that the approach taken by the organization to ensure that work was done meant that it felt as though discussions about wellbeing were closer to lip service than reality as there was little consideration of the effects of the increased workload on staff. Similarly, when asked if her wellbeing had changed, Lydia reported that, from a scale of 1–10, it was 5. This was largely since she had been made redundant and how this was handled by her previous university. She said the impact of this change had affected her confidence and, thus, her wellbeing.

Staff indicated that the negative change to their wellbeing had manifested itself through visible alterations to their moods, mental state, and physical health. Tying his wellbeing to his limited chances to exercise, Bill remarked that his wellbeing had changed:

You can't get out and you're tired when you go home mentally which means you don't want to walk, you don't want to exercise because you are mentally exhausted, or you're logged back onto the computer once you've cooked your evening meal. Your workload balance isn't right.

Several participants talked about the effect of working life on their ability to function at home and on their wellbeing. Cassandra, a senior lecturer, stated that her wellbeing was affected:

When I started in academia, I didn't have two children to look after at home, I've had two children and the pressure, the e-mails, it just goes on and it eats into their time as well.

The impact on health was stark. Worryingly, some spoke about how the working environment was affecting their ability to prioritize their health, often forcing them to cancel and put off doctor and hospital appointments to meet work pressures. Gillian recounted that, after a bout of illness, she had put off arranging to see her GP, and talked about the resulting consequences. Gillian said:

I was off work for—well I say I was off work; I had a sick note which meant I could be absent from work but still do some work ... I lost my voice for a long period and the year before I had pneumonia.

Whilst the fact that half of the staff group (11) reported improved wellbeing since joining university might give us cause to be optimistic about the state of staff wellbeing in HE, this should be cautious optimism as the remaining staff that were interviewed reported that their wellbeing has been changing negatively, impacting on their fitness routines, mental health, and their home life. However, as the above accounts indicate, the presence of and opportunities to develop strength, resilience, personal professional growth, and development served as barriers to prevent their wellbeing from being diminished. Although the state of staff wellbeing in HE might seem bleak, the accounts above suggest there are ways to safeguard wellbeing in the workplace.

Dichotomy of collegial peer and organizational support

The dichotomy of collegial peer support and institutional care was explored by the participants. For a majority of the interviewees, the importance of practical and emotional support from other colleagues helped to enhance their wellbeing. For instance, Naomi, a visiting lecturer talked about her experience of being made redundant at her previous university. She also talked about how since working at another university she felt very supported by her colleagues. Naomi described being part of a “family of academics,” all in the same situation and “in the same boat.”

Additionally, for some staff these relationships and support systems were seen to not be within the institutions' control in a direct way. Matthew commented that the best support systems were organic and not forced by

universities through one-off events, such as those celebrating staff at an institution-level.

... I would attend things like that if they just seemed less forced, if it wasn't, these big staff events which are celebrating how great everything is, how great everyone is just seems a bit fake.

Furthermore, interviewees were aware that the universities had processes and interventions in place to support staff to carry out their jobs. Many mentioned a range of available interventions such as occupational health, their organization arranging wellbeing weeks, staff development programmes, subsidized gyms, and more innovative approaches such as guided walks and a rooftop garden to foster a climate of staff wellbeing. Yet, when asked if they would use the provisions provided by their university, the response was surprising, as most participants said they did not wish to use the services available to them.

Participants stated that their reluctance to use their universities' support systems was due to a variety of reasons. Some participants attributed their nonuse of the services to only being accessed in extreme circumstances and related to an event or situation in their home or work life that caused overwhelming upheavals. For instance, Bill stated that the reasons for using these services would have to be "pretty cataclysmic."

Likewise, several participants were determined not to use the services provided by their university because of their desire to achieve work-life distance, which represented a conscious decision to keep work-life and home-life separate. Both Nathan and Matthew expressly communicated that the things related to work should be kept within that context, they felt the less the organization did for their wellbeing the better and wanted to be left alone to find help outside of work if required.

I don't think the organizations should do much, the less they do the better, I want them just to leave me alone and let me be. (Matthew)

Another reason given for the nonuse of services is related to the quality of the services provided. This issue was raised by several interviewees, with comments being made about the quality of the counseling service provided. For instance, Lydia stated that in her institution she only received six counseling sessions which she did not feel was enough to resolve potentially serious issues and had decided for her own health and wellbeing to pay privately, so although the service existed, "it's not really going to solve the issue" for many staff working in HE. Relatedly, Ruth was prepared to give the available support a chance but recognized some challenges in the availability and efficacy of resources to deliver this service. Even when staff are using the services, they find them and the staff working within them are overwhelmed, and overall, the

support experience feels basic and ineffective, due to the lack of follow up provided.

I went to one of these places [occupational health] that you are supposed to [...] and told them I was being over-worked and they gave me suggestions, then sent my boss an e-mail but nothing came of it and the reason why, I think, is not because they don't care but they are overworked too. (Ruth)

Participants were asked who they felt was responsible for staff wellbeing. The majority believed that the responsibility for wellbeing rested heavily on managers. Managers are seen to have a role in supporting the wellbeing of staff and the guidance and support offered to them is of variable quality. For some, managers were a source of support and, yet others believed that their managers did not prioritize their wellbeing, leading many to question if there is “any specific guidance in terms of the training senior managers get” about staff wellbeing.

Participants also discussed the role of HR (Human Resources) which was viewed as marginal and inflexible. Although crucial in the recruitment of staff, some participants felt that HR did not fully appreciate the impact of long-term vacancies and staff absence on the wellbeing of existing staff.

But I think the key is Human Resources acting daily to get a better understanding of academic needs and also what they don't really understand is, they tend to work with the unions, and they are rescued from the understanding of staff needs generally and within that staff wellbeing. (Maxine)

Despite this, there is potential support of wellbeing through staff colleagues. The support gained from working as a team appears to positively enhance wellbeing. In turn, staff recognized that they have a vital role in shaping and contributing to the team, which enhanced their wellbeing. The accounts suggest that the strength of supportive systems is in having authentic, organic relationships with others at work which cannot be artificially produced by senior management interventions.

In general, it appears from staff accounts that universities provide services to support their wellbeing, yet there is some reluctance amongst staff about utilizing the services, and issues related to the number of counseling sessions offered appears to deter engagement. On the other hand, training for senior managers on staff wellbeing and collegial support are emphasized as internal strategies to support staff wellbeing.

Outsider from within

Staff indicated that feelings of despair, and concerns about their work environments, resulted in diminished motivation and morale. Some participants reported not only experiencing a change in their wellbeing, but also feelings of rejection, of not being accepted, and of isolation within their university.

It is worth noting that most of the accounts from Black, Minority, and Ethnic staff members articulated a working context of invisibility. Cassandra, a Black senior lecturer with physical disabilities, described not being recognized as a member of staff and how this reduced her sense of belonging in the institution:

So when I first started lecturing I got stopped by security a couple of times because they didn't think I should be going into a lecture theatre when the lecturer wasn't there so there was always the assumption that I was a student [...] it took some members of staff probably a couple of years to even start saying hello to me in the corridor [...] I think that there is a lack of recognition that people with disabilities or people from ethnic minority backgrounds have a belonging here as a member of staff. (Cassandra)

Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) staff expressed frustration at leaders for not doing enough to diversify the workforce, and it was seen as privileging certain types of academics. Furthermore, black academics stated that in their own institutions, they were less visible, and unheard. Consequently, this has meant many, according to Maxine, "... have never really done well within our HE sector."

A common view among the interviewees was that existing processes, actions and behaviors had resulted in BAME staff being on the outside and leaders were seen as critical in supporting and valuing their contributions. However, concerns regarding the lack of awareness by senior managers to recognize that black staff are working in oppressive structures were more widespread. For example, Sarah shared her experiences of delivering anti-oppressive practices with a colleague to staff. Having run a few sessions, she had recalled thinking:

We are actually working in quite subtly oppressive ways for staff who are working in quite oppressive structures, therefore, any initiatives to address the experiences of BAME staff should reflect on the dichotomy of expecting people to be honest and open in an organisation that isn't. (Sarah)

Despite these challenges, it is important that institutions devise solutions with the people most affected. Further, they should consequently be prepared to feel uncomfortable "because without discomfort you don't get innovation" (Jayne). Furthermore, Sarah commented that HE must avoid becoming a safe, very riskless, and individualized organization that promotes the status quo and perhaps, more worryingly, where everyone looks the same, and where HE continues to be an "uncomfortable space" for BAME staff to be in.

Alongside feelings of not belonging, staff talked about looking different to others around them or feeling pressured to fit in within the wider institution. In one case, Oprah, having moved to a new job in another country, recounted being pressured to reject her past self (culture and identity) to fit in and be "part of the Northern Irish scene" and culture of the University.

As in the experiences of BAME staff, feelings of being an outsider were expressed by some staff that were over 50 years old. They did not feel they belonged in their institution, and that this subsequently affected their well-being. Feelings of rejection and isolation were also felt by older staff members in academia. In their accounts, several staff members referred to themselves as the aging staff population. This experience led many to question their sense of belonging to an organization that was changing and becoming more stressful. In the case of Sarah, she felt that the impact of getting older in HE influenced her “ability to actually physically ... be as resilient.”

Institutions may be aware of this, however, since, in the case of Lydia, she talked about attending a focus group organized by her institution because they were worried about staff in their 50s and their wellbeing.

In summary, staff have shared experiences of their reduced sense of belonging, related to attitudes, behaviors and actions toward staff that have left an indelible and lasting impact on staff wellbeing. In the next section, we hear from staff about what institutions can do to improve and enhance their sense of belonging.

Creativity, growth, and suggestions for improvement

Despite the previous themes, there were elements within HE that contributed positively to wellbeing. The opportunities for growth and development were symbolized as a gift for some staff members. For instance, Sarah commented on how HE had provided opportunities in teaching to be creative in how she shared her knowledge with students in the classroom. She felt this was valued by her institution, leading her to have an improved sense of commitment to HE as whole, and thereby less inclined and “worried about trying to create some alternative lifestyle or whatever.”

Related to opportunities to use their creativity and knowledge, staff talked about how their creativity and development had been fostered in their institution. For instance, in Ruth’s case, this included “doing projects that you are interested in and participating in research” and the availability of training courses. For many, they talked about an environment that offered opportunities compared to other sectors. For example, Monique talked about how she had enjoyed the experience of undertaking her master’s degree programme.

Well over half of those interviewed recognized the importance of the development opportunities through the courses made available to them, but all commented that there were challenges in attending the courses or events due to the increasing workloads. For instance, Gillian indicated that workload pressures would inevitably supersede staff interests and their

developmental needs, implying that aspirations were not realized or that staff were “not able to service those” needs. This suggests that the lack of flexibility in the work environment was negatively hindering and impacting on the developmental goals and aspirations of staff.

A consequence of unmet developmental needs and increasing demands has been a loss of morale, leading to increased turnover of staff across HE. For instance, Matthew commented on a recurrent cycle of staff deciding to leave his institution and the impact on their morale due to “seeing your friends leave.”

Discussion

According to JD-R theory, the dual process of job demands, and job resources can be associated with personal, social, and organizational outcomes in the work context. However, this study has addressed a gap in understanding staff perceptions of wellbeing, and the importance of the academic context on wellbeing within higher education. This is currently absent in the literature on staff wellbeing.

This study sought to define and understand the factors impacting on staff wellbeing in the context of HE, using in-depth interviews with staff in HE. The interviewees illuminated the salient features of wellbeing. Across the staff groups there were similarities in their viewpoints, regardless of job role. However, notable differences were noted in wellbeing experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff.

This study found that staff commented on the value their role gives to others, the profession, and their wellbeing. This feature includes positive aspects of wellbeing which is currently limited in staff wellbeing research. However, they also remarked that their wellbeing was largely ignored by the university sector. Frequent comparisons were made with the perceived higher level of attention devoted to student wellbeing. Staff also commented that if their managers gave more priority to their wellbeing, this would help to create a work environment that was balanced and had reasonable limitations in terms of workloads. This aligns with the literature, where Sang et al. (2013) noted that job stress and burnout is related to work demands and workloads, coupled with policies that had a negative impact on teacher wellbeing (Santoro, 2011).

In this study, it was suggested that external influences such as political, financial and workload factors can affect working practices and potentially diminish staff wellbeing. Another important finding was that this sense of fragility could be managed by overhauling negative work cultures and the existence of a management structure and actions committed to staff wellbeing. Furthermore, this will require senior leaders to listen

and work with staff to co-produce strategies and actions to enhance their wellbeing.

Another finding that stands out from the results reported earlier indicated that increased communication between team members and managers that is rooted in the principles of fairness and valuing staff is likely to increase wellbeing and mediate stress effects. This would support the findings by Van Straaten et al. (2016) who noted that the availability of support services and being valued by the organization are important for staff wellbeing. However, one unexpected result was that some staff commented that they were unwilling to use such services offered to support their wellbeing due to issues with service quality and a desire to achieve work-life balance. Additional research is therefore needed to better understand the relationship between staff usage of the interventions and staff wellbeing.

Most strikingly were the substantial differences in staff wellbeing amongst BAME staff, where some remarked on feelings of not belonging in the University Sector and how their experiences negatively impacted on their sense of wellbeing. This supports the findings by Mahony and Weiner (2020) study where BAME staff in higher education bore the brunt of unfair working practices much more than their white colleagues. They also observed that BAME staff were assumed to be less competent than white staff. This indicates that effective communication is required between managers and BAME staff to redress this potential imbalance and to promote their wellbeing at work.

In summary, this study has extended our knowledge of staff wellbeing in the context of higher education and identified several aspects of wellbeing amongst staff in higher education that are both positive and negative. Overall, staff have enjoyed positive wellbeing gained from the opportunities available to them, personal development opportunities, support from colleagues, and the ability to make a difference to others and teach the future generation of working professionals. Equally, staff wellbeing is continuously threatened and deprioritised by the organization's policies and processes which do not concern themselves with staff wellbeing and privilege students over staff members, resulting in a fragile wellbeing that can ebb and flow. Thus, as this paper has repeatedly illustrated, staff wellbeing is fundamentally characterized by duality, with staff continuously experiencing both the positive and negative wellbeing aspects of working in HE.

The present results may have significant practical implications for wellbeing in at least two major aspects. Firstly, staff talked about the need to overhaul the existing work culture and processes that are currently impacting staff wellbeing. For example, providing staff with the tools to become more resilient in HE and to be able to respond to the changes impacting the sector should be a priority. This suggests that organizations

with a focus on their people and their wellbeing can overcome the changes facing HE.

The results of the study also suggested that there is a need for more regular check-in sessions organized by managers for staff to discuss their wellbeing needs, with the completion of a wellbeing index (to gauge and rate wellbeing levels), at regular points, that would be a focus for discussion with their line manager in monthly meetings and annual appraisals. The findings raise intriguing questions regarding the prioritization of the data and metrics collected from the wellbeing index as having equal priority to the metrics related to National Student Surveys (NSS) and the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The findings are significant as they reinforce the importance of cultural and systemic changes in higher education's response to staff wellbeing. For example, two staff members explicitly talked about universities devising and adopting a staff wellbeing charter that promotes a clear sense and value of its people, supported by the resources they need to make choices and “work collectively” “for their wellbeing and a common good.”

Conclusion and recommendations

Through interviews with academic staff in the UK Higher Education sector, this research has shown that staff wellbeing is shaped by a sense of community, the ability to make a difference to others, support from colleagues and personal development opportunities. It was observed that there was a lack of willingness to use interventions to support wellbeing. This has been explained by the quality of the services available, the availability of services and staff's reluctance to seek support for their wellbeing at work. Nevertheless, to maximize the potential for staff to make use of the services, future research attention should be focused on understanding the barriers to taking advantage of the services. Furthermore, higher education institutions should be mindful that services may be considered as lip service if the core issues of workload demands and poor management and HR practices are not adequately addressed to address the causes of these negative impacts. Additionally, this should also be supported by the provision of leadership and management training on how to support staff wellbeing in the higher education sector, which is crucial for increasing wellbeing at work for staff.

Further research is required to understand the unique experiences of the effects of working in HE on BAME staffs wellbeing and how universities have responded to this. From their accounts, they have experienced exclusion and discrimination in the higher education sector, leading to feelings of being on the outside. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to the barriers that limit and negate opportunities for certain staff, compared to

others, to promote wellbeing, as is the role of leaders and managers in valuing their contributions in the higher education sector. It is recommended that further investigations into solutions alongside BAME staff are therefore crucial to promote a more inclusive and equitable space for Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic staff to flourish and experience wellbeing in higher education.

On a concluding note, this study has shown that the higher education sector in the UK is considered to be the best place to work from the interviewee accounts, but it is not without periods of struggle, battles, and challenges. Within this environment existed opportunities for growth and a sense of community created and shaped by staff.

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