

**Students' wellbeing in tertiary environments:
Insights into the (unrecognised) role of lecturers**

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Abstract:

This qualitative study reports on the role of university lecturers in the wellbeing of undergraduate students. A sample of undergraduate student participants (n=335) at a large, urban residential university in the Gauteng Province of South Africa participated in rapid, face-to-face interviews. Interviews were conducted by student fieldworkers during multiple four-hour blocks on all weekdays. Data was analysed by means of thematic analysis. Findings indicate that university lecturers play a substantive role in the wellbeing of undergraduate students. These findings are significant in that they have emerged from open-ended questioning. Furthermore, the role of university lecturers is frequently unrecognised in terms of the psychological wellbeing of students and rather articulated in terms of the academic task. The findings present the role of lecturers in student wellbeing in a multi-faceted way. It is delineated as lecturer support, benevolence, lecturer competence, lecturer availability, interaction, and the lecturer's attitude towards their work.

Keywords

Tertiary education, well-being, wellbeing, university, student support, lecturer support

Introduction

The importance of the wellbeing of students in tertiary education is increasingly being prioritised. Worldwide, university leaders and policy makers are arguing that the wellbeing of students should be equally important to the academic outcomes achieved by tertiary education (Finley, 2016). Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich and Linkins (2009) argue that wellbeing, in addition to teaching of traditional skills, is an essential outcome for education. This notion has commonly been applied to secondary education settings (Noble & McGrath, 2015; Norrish, Williams, O'Connor, & Robinson, 2013) and have shown to have many benefits including decrease of youth depression, increased life satisfaction, learning and creativity, as well as the improvement of social cohesion and emotional intelligence, to name but a few (Kern, Waters, Adler, & White, 2015). Although there are fundamental differences between secondary and post-secondary education contexts, the inclusion of wellbeing as an educational outcome is also applicable to higher education (Oades, Robinson, Green & Spence, 2011).

Studies focussing on the effects of increased wellbeing of university populations, found that it may enhance learning and therefore has numerous benefits for achievement in university environments (Salami, 2010). For example, Howell (2009) found that wellbeing levels predict cognitive and behavioural processes that reflect self-regulated learning, where self-regulated learning is instrumental in student success in the higher education context. Huppert (2009) notes that higher levels of wellbeing enable active learning, critical thinking, and student

engagement. Happy students are flexible and efficient in problem solving and more committed to their academic goals (Salami, 2010). Research indicates wellbeing in students not only affects their functioning within their current university context, but also transcends to benefits for their functioning in future (O'Connor, Sanson, Toumbourou, Norrish, & Olsson, 2016).

Besides the call for student development to include focus on wellbeing, another, and perhaps a more urgent reason for the growing interest in wellbeing of university students, are the current high levels of social distress and mental disorder (Broglia, Millings, & Barkham, 2018). The high prevalence of mental disorders and stress-related health problems in the student population seems to be a global phenomenon. In a study including 14 000 students from 19 universities from Australia, Belgium, Germany, Mexico, Northern Ireland, South Africa, Spain, and the United States, found that 35% of the students reported symptoms consistent with at least one psychological disorder as described by the DSM-IV (Auerbach et al., 2018). A longitudinal study over 23 years among the student population in Japan showed a significant increase in death related to suicide among the student population (Uchida & Uchida, 2017). In another study, rates of treatment and diagnosis of mental health among students increased significantly. The rate of treatment increased from 19% in 2007 to 34% by 2017, while the percentage of students with lifetime mental health diagnoses increased from 22% to 36% (Lattie, Lipson & Eisenberg, 2019). In some studies, the prevalence of mental distress among university students is as high as 40.9% (Dachew, Bisetang, & Gebramariam, 2015).

Even for students who do not suffer any mental illness, university is a time for “heightened psychological distress” (Bewick, Koutsopoulou, Miles, Slaa, & Barkham, 2010, p. 643), where students face many complex environmental stressors and experiences that are emotionally and psychologically challenging (Carter & Anderson, 2019; Cushman & West, 2006). Students entering university may leave home for the first time, experience increased academic pressure, increased opportunities for substance abuse and greater financial responsibility (Bantjes, et al., 2019; Richardson, Elliot, Roberts, & Jansen, 2017). Pressure at university also increases due to increased autonomy and environmental stressors (Carter & Anderson, 2019; Field, et al 2015). Oades, et al. (2011) argue that the high striving environment makes it easy for students to “neglect social relationships, emphasize extrinsic motivation (e.g., grades/promotion) over intrinsic interest (i.e., learning/innovation), work excessive hours and engage in other patterns of behaviour that diminish well-being over both the short and long term (e.g., drug use, inadequate sleep).” (p. 433). Work overload, factors related to work and personal relationships,

and instructor attitudes and behaviour can further contribute to students' heightened stress levels (Cushman & West, 2006). A lack of social and emotional support when entering university is also linked to higher levels of anxiety and distress (Mokgele & Rothmann, 2014; Richardson, Elliot, & Roberts, 2017).

The transition to first year may be especially difficult for students, as they face many new challenges including for example moving from a smaller class setting to a large lecture environment (Nel, Trotskie-de Bruin, & Bitzer, 2009; Bowman, 2010; Leese, 2010; Wilson-Strydom, 2010). However, research shows that students do not only experience challenges during their first year of transitioning to post-secondary education, but also between different degree levels (Marais, Scankland, Haag, Fiault, Juniper, 2018; Turner, & Tobell, 2018). Therefore, psychological distress levels increase shortly after students enter university and will fluctuate during the years of study. It will however never return to pre-university levels (Cooke, Bewick, Barkham, Bradley, & Audin, 2006), and in some instances decline within the course of an academic year (Eloff & Graham, 2020). In fact, psychological distress is higher among university students than among the general population (Stallman, 2010).

Although wellbeing implies more than the mere absence of ill-being (Huppert & So, 2013), students with higher levels of wellbeing may be able to cope better with the challenges presented in the higher education setting (Henning, 2015). Therefore, wellbeing as positive psychological functioning is crucial in enabling students to navigate successfully through their university career (Bowman; 2010). Understanding wellbeing in student populations will enable universities to effectively implement strategies not only to address the high levels of psychological distress, but to also promote student wellbeing (Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012; Field, et al., 2015; Govender, et al., 2018; Stallman, Ohan, & Chiera, 2018). In the current study, the purpose is to explore the role of the university lecturer in student wellbeing from a student perspective.

Various universities have adopted multiple strategies to address student wellbeing despite limited resources and budgetary constraints (Jones, Perrin, Heller, Hailu, & Barnett, 2018; Pakrosnis & Cepukiene, 2015; Schwartz et al., 2011; Stewart-Brown, Cader, Walker, Janjua, Hanson, & Chilton, 2018). Student support services at universities are revisited and service delivery models are reconsidered to optimise support for students (Hlongwane, 2018). Innovative approaches to provide support have often included providing mental health awareness campaigns, discussing prevention strategies, and improving communication

strategies about access to mental health services and support (Bowman, 2010; Carter & Anderson, 2019). Psychological support has typically excluded the direct involvement of academic staff. In this paper, we argue that from a student perspective, academic staff members play a significant role in the wellbeing of students. Whilst we do not attempt to replace any of the existing platforms of students assistance, we argue that the role of the lecturer should not be ignored as one of the factors that has potential to influence wellbeing. Even though most universities have several social and learning support units made up of extracurricular teaching and support programmes in place, it remains critical that lecturers are drawn into the equation, as they are the first point of contact for learning support, owing to their frequent student interaction (Bailey & Phillips, 2016). The lecturer as an active role player in student wellbeing efforts remains relatively underexplored and unrecognised. Despite national studies such as the National Student Survey, the National Survey of Student Engagement, and the Course Experience Survey, the current study concurs with Thomas (2012) that their focus is on different aspects of student performance. They therefore ignore the aspect of wellbeing or address aspects of the student-lecturer relationship only indirectly. The current study aims to address this directly.

Wellbeing theory and the role of student-lecturer relationships

Substantial work has been done on conceptualising and evaluating wellbeing as a psychological construct. As Butler and Kern (2016) note, there is an abundance of definitions and theories of wellbeing, but with little consensus of what it is. In fact, one thing theorists agree on, is that wellbeing is complex and multidimensional (Sun, et al., 2018). In the academic context, wellbeing remains a narrowly defined (if not undefined) term that has complicated several efforts to effectively plan for and monitor wellbeing (Ereaut & Whiting, 2008; Konu & Rimpela, 2002). The evaluation of youth wellbeing in the school context involves quantifiable metrics such as grades, test scores, attendance records, or number of visits to the counsellor. Recent perspectives relate student wellbeing, in turn, to constructs such as physical and mental health, risk reduction and resilience (Stallman & Hurst, 2016). Some scholars have also focused on conditions, contexts and climates that facilitate healthy schooling, for instance safety, challenge, support, relationships, and engagement (Hanlon, 2012; MacKean, 2011). With broader conceptualisations becoming more prevalent, positively framed models are needed that integrate theoretical and empirical scholarship across disciplines, that represent a more holistic

view of student wellbeing, and that address student wellbeing in relation to enhancing educational experiences.

Various theories have proposed different dimensions that are important to, and lead to wellbeing (see for example Ben-Arieh & Frønes, 2011; Bornstein, Davidson, Keyes, & Moore, 2003; Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sandler, 2012; Huppert, 2008; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Seligman, 2011). Although theorists have different views on the psychological, social and emotional domains that bring about optimal functioning, having mutually satisfying, close relationships with other people is an important indicator of wellbeing noted by a number of theories. For instance, the relational dimension (R) of the PERMA-model proposed by Seligman (2011) concerns the development and maintenance of positive relationships and social interactions (Buler, & Kern, 2016), and overlaps with the dimension of Positive Relations (i.e. having warm and trusting interpersonal relationships) in Psychological Wellbeing (Ryff, 1989). The concept regards social integration, creating a network of social support, and the feeling of being cared for, and supported by others (Seligman, 2011).

Wellbeing research shows that positive relationships that allow one to feel socially integrated, included, cared for, and supported by others lead to a decrease in depression, better physical health, and the adoption of healthier behaviours (Butler & Kern, 2016; Kern et al., 2015). Diener and Seligman (2002) found that university students with stronger romantic and social relationships tend to be happier than students who do not, while the study of Kern, et al. (2015) demonstrated that relationships in secondary school learners are related to hope, gratitude, and spirituality. For university students, the three main social support structures are their peers, family, and lecturers (Basson & Rothmann, 2018).

At university level, the relationship between students and lecturers is characterised as an adult-adult relationship in which independent (adult-like) behaviour is expected from students (Halx, 2010). Consequently, one may argue that students need less, or even no caring and support from their lecturer. However, studies focussing specifically on university students show that the relationships and interactions students experience with lecturers do make a difference. Where lecturers act rudely, they are viewed as unapproachable, in which case students evaluate the interactions with lecturers as 'costly' (Cotten & Wilson, 2006). Positive relationships with lecturers may help students work towards learning abilities initially perceived as unattainable, and then impacting their academic achievement (Bailey & Phillips, 2016). Frequent interaction

with lecturers outside the classroom, such as office visits, also result in a greater sense of belonging (Komarraju, Musulkin & Bhattacharya, 2010).

Taking the interrelatedness of the dimensions of wellbeing into account, the impact that student-lecturer relationships have on academic performance and a sense of belonging is indicative of its effect on students' overall wellbeing. Although the relationship between the lecturer and student plays a large role in the trajectory of a student's academic success and social development, it eventually influences wellbeing positively (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). In addition to being a deliverer of pedagogical instruction, the lecturer is imagined as a supplemental aide, key person, or "linchpin" in supporting the social and emotional needs of students or promoting positive student wellbeing (Battalio & Stephens, 2005; Davidson & Locke, 2010). A good relationship with the lecturer assists students to cultivate a positive rapport with a non-parental authority figure. This allows students to define themselves, to adapt to their new environment and to grow their emotional and social intelligence (McCaig et al., 2014; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). In the current study, the role of the lecturer as perceived by the student is explored.

Context and Methods

Higher Education in the South African context

This study was conducted at the University of Pretoria; a large, public, urban university in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. The university was established in 1908 and has grown to serve approximately 50 000 students on seven campuses. Most of these students are undergraduate students.

There are numerous factors that may potentially affect the wellbeing of university students in South Africa. South African universities are characterised by significant changes such as calls for decolonised curricula, increased access to higher education and a strong emphasis on throughput rates (Jaffer, Ng'ambi, & Czerniewicz, 2007; Petersen, Louw, & Dumont, 2009; Singh, 2015; Shefer, Strebel, Ngabnaza, & Clowes, 2018) within an emerging democracy. These debates have taken centre stage in public discourses, arguably perhaps at the expense of student wellbeing (Young & Campbell, 2014). Apart from the context-specific challenges in South Africa, demands for increased access have also resulted in several students enrolling at university with limited to no adequate preparation for life at university (Bitzer, 2010; Mouton, 2007; Webster & Motsoetsa, 2002). The dysfunctional educational system often results in

students arriving at university with massive academic deficits (Daniels & Jooste, 2018). Although this dilemma is not easy to address, bridging programmes such as a foundation programme has tried to address the challenge (Govender, 2013).

South African higher education has also followed the trends of global increase in student numbers (Flecknoe, Choate, Davis, Hodgson, & Johanesen, 2017) with statistics indicating that an increase in student enrolments at public universities from 92 874 in 2000 to 203 076 in 2016 (Statistics South Africa (StatsSA), 2019). Widening the access for students to tertiary education is a strategic priority of the South African Department of Higher Education (Bothma & Rossouw 2019). The increase in student numbers has coincided with a growing need to provide psychological support services to students. In this regard, one should consider that contextual factors in South Africa, such as violent crimes and elevated rates of trauma further contribute to higher levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation in the student population (Bantjes, Kagee, McGowan, & Steel, 2016).

South African universities have extended programmes and provide support in the form of specialised classes that try to develop a supportive learning atmosphere and a community where students are encouraged to ask questions and develop peer study and support groups. These programmes are designed to focus on student learning, to be organic and proactive, and to be responsive to students' needs (Crawford et al., 2016). Some universities also have programmes such as *'the finishing line'*, or *'be your own boss'*, which are all designed to assist students to complete their degrees. In addition, many universities offer counselling, accessibility/accommodation services, intervention programmes, and awareness campaigns to help support the mental health and wellbeing of students (Martin, 2010). Such approaches or systems entail multiple strategies that have a unifying purpose and reflect a common set of values: to create a protective environment that promotes mental health and wellbeing. Universities may also have in place university-enabling programmes, which are open-access tertiary preparation courses that aim to prepare students for university. These programmes tend to involve students from multiple equity groups and diverse backgrounds in age, cultural background, and prior educational experiences (Crawford, 2014; Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016). While many universities globally have well-structured approaches to student wellbeing, only a limited number of approaches are available at most South African universities. Generally, student support is provided by centrally located university support services, although some universities integrate such services into each faculty. Even though these services may be available, most centres have very limited personnel. It is increasingly the case that counselling

staff are dealing with complex cases and higher numbers, which result in increased waiting times (Browne, Munro, & Cass 2017).

Research design and methodology

The purpose of the current study was to explore and describe the role of the lecturer in the wellbeing of the student from a student's perspective. The study reported here, was part of a larger wellbeing inquiry which included 2 513 students at the same university. Data was collected in the 2018 academic year across the seven different campuses. Trained field workers ($n=36$), who were postgraduate students studying psychology or social work collected data in multiple time blocks of four hours each over two-weeks. Students from these programmes are generally well trained in research methods and human behaviour. Time blocks were scheduled to include early to midmorning, midday, and late afternoon sessions. Participants were approached by the fieldworkers, provided with a short description of the project, and invited to participate. Participation was voluntary.

The data was captured by trained data typists on an MS Excel spreadsheet. Of the 2 513 responses, 2 439 were unspoilt and could be used for the larger study. Several themes emerged from the initial analysis of the full cohort. These themes are reported elsewhere (Authors withheld for peer review, forthcoming). For the current study, only the responses related to the role of the lecturer in student wellbeing were extracted ($n=335$) and analysed. These responses were identified during the initial data analysis phase, in which the data was explored by reading through all the responses, case by case.

Participants

The participants represented the various faculties at the university, including Humanities, Commerce, Law, Natural and Agricultural Sciences, Education, Engineering, Health and Veterinary Sciences. Ninety four percent ($n=316$) of the participants were South African citizens, with 3,6% of them from the greater SADC region and only 0.9% and 0.6% from other African and non-African countries, respectively. The participants were between the ages of 18 and 34, with the majority (93.4%) between the ages of 18 and 24.

Similar to the student population at the University of Pretoria, the majority of the participants were from Gauteng Province (65.4%). Most of the participants were female (67.5%). Slightly over half of the participants 53.1% were white and 33.1% were African. Less than 15% of the participants were either Indian (8.7%), mixed race (2,4%) or from other (2,4%) groupings.

The distribution by home language was across all nine of the official languages in South Africa, with most (65%) of the students being either English (32.5%) or Afrikaans (32.5%) (see Table 1).

Table 1: Characteristics of the participants (N=335)

<i>Province</i>			<i>Gender</i>		
	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>		<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Gauteng	219	65.4	Female	226	67.5
Limpopo	27	8.1	Male	103	30.7
Mpumalanga	22	6.6	Other	0	0
KwaZulu-Natal	30	9.0	Missing	6	1.8
Eastern Cape	9	2.7			
North West	6	1.8	<i>Age</i>		
Free state	7	2.1	18-22	284	85.0
Western Cape	9	2.7	23-27	40	12.0
Northern Cape	7	0.3	28-32	7	2.1
*International	2	0.6	≥33	3	0.9
Missing values	4	1.2	Missing values	1	0.3
<i>Language</i>			<i>Ethnicity</i>		
Afrikaans	109	32.5	African	111	33.1
English	109	32.5	White	178	53.1
IsiZulu	20	6.0	Indian	29	8.7
Sepedi	19	5.7	Mixed Race	74	3.0
Setswana	16	4.8	Other	8	2.4
Sesotho	8	2.4	Missing values	1	0.3
Xitsonga	8	2.4			
Other	28	8.4	<i>Citizenship</i>		
isiXhosa	4	1.2	South African	316	94.3
SiSwati	4	1.2	SADC	12	3.6
isiNdebele	5	1.5	Non- SADC	3	0.9
Tshivenda	4	1.2	Non-African	2	0.6
Missing values	1	0.3	Missing values	2	0.6

Data collection technique and instrument

Participants, who were willing to take part in the study, were asked to complete a single question: “What contributes to your wellbeing as a student at the University of Pretoria?” The choice of an open-ended question was deliberate, to increase the authenticity of the responses. The participants were asked to write their responses on a form where they also indicated their age, gender, degree studied and other demographic indicators. The questionnaire was developed in line with the objectives of the study focussing on the exploration of factors that contribute to student wellbeing.

Research procedure and ethical considerations

Ethics clearance was obtained to conduct the study (GW0180232H). The fieldworker training took place prior to the study and included themes such as ethical research conduct, strategies for data collection in the social sciences, wellbeing research in the world, and the work of a research fieldworker. Written consents from participants were obtained after they agreed to participate in the study. The completed questionnaires were sealed in envelopes after the four-hour block of data collection and centrally stored. Data capturers transferred the written questionnaires to electronic formats on Excel spreadsheets that were password protected.

Data analysis

After all the written questionnaires had been captured electronically, the full data set was cleaned and checked for accuracy. The full set of data was read systematically and then revisited and perused to search for broad themes or factors that contribute to student wellbeing. The comments relating to the lecturer or supervisor were marked, extracted from the larger dataset, and saved in a separate Excel spreadsheet to then be analysed by means of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2014). Thematic analysis is an appropriate analytic strategy because it allows for time, place, plurality, and connectivity to emerge from the data (Boje, 2001). An inductive and descriptive approach to coding was used to align to the objective of exploration and description of the research study (Saldaña, 2015). After several coding and categorising cycles, six main themes relating to the lecturer role were extracted. In the section to follow, a detailed explanation of each of the themes will be given.

Findings

Findings from the study indicated six major themes along which the roles of lecturers contributed to student wellbeing: lecturer support; benevolence; lecturer competence; lecturer availability; interaction and the lecturers' attitude towards their work (See Table 2). The six broad themes were then grouped together into two broad categories: 1) Themes related to the lecturer-student relationship and 2) themes related to how the lecturer approach their work (See Fig. 1).

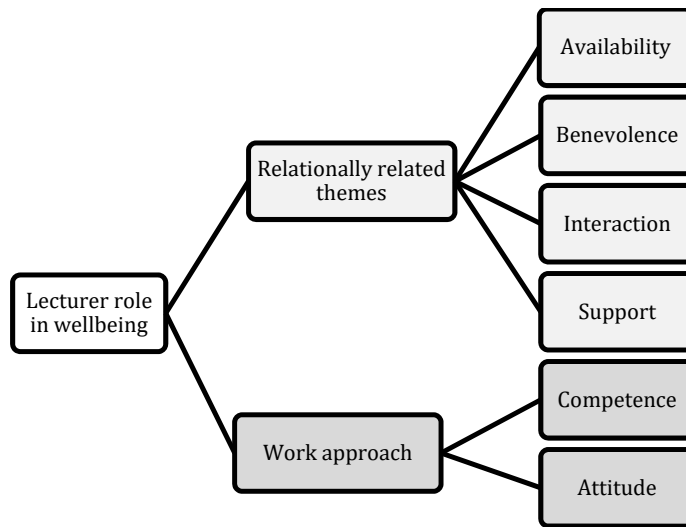


Fig. 1: Lecturer role in student wellbeing: Overview of the themes

Table 2: Summary of major themes

Major themes ¹	Description	Number of times mentioned in text	Examples of student comments
<i>Support</i>	The academic, moral, and emotional support provided by lecturers.	151	"Lecturers who truly care about their students academically and on a deeper human level." [P1273] ²
<i>Benevolence</i>	Treating students with respect, dignity, friendliness, kindness, and compassion.	103	"Lecturers must treat students with respect and answer all our questions without making us feel small." [P343]
<i>Lecturer competence</i>	The ability, aptitude, and skill of the lecturer to teach the subject/field to university students.	72	"Qualified lecturers and they know how to teach." [P481]
<i>Availability</i>	Having access to lecturers (structurally) and lecturers being approachable.	59	"There are opportunities to approach lecturers...should it be needed." [P133]
<i>Interaction</i>	Communication and contact between lecturers and students.	44	"Ability to speak to lecturers." [P771]
<i>Attitude towards work</i>	The approach and mindset of the lecturers towards their own task as university lecturer.	25	"...a lecturer who is passionate about the field they are teaching in." [P94]

¹ In order of prevalence in the dataset.

² Participant numbers from the full cohort are utilised.

The lecturer-student relationship

Many of the factors contributing to student wellbeing that can be related to the lecturer revolved around themes that refer to a direct contact and interaction between the student and the lecturer. Of these factors, the *support* provided by the lecturer to the student was by far the most prevalent theme³. The ‘support’ mentioned, included academic support, emotional support, as well as moral support. Academic support seems to be any activity related to explaining the academic work. Students would mention actions by lecturers such as “sharing important information” [P1167], or that lecturers “help with day-to-day learning” [P2199], provide “extra academic support” [P625], or making sure that “we [the students] understand our work” [P2265].

One of the students [P599] specifically noted support in the form of re-explaining work that has already been covered in class. As put by another student, “the lecturers make sure to go through the work and make sure that we understand it as good as possible” [P1511]. Ultimately, academic support will involve any help that ensures students reach their academic goals, as mentioned by one student saying, “the involvement of the lecturers in making sure we [the students] graduate on time” [P1527].

Academic support can be more than just explaining the work, it may also include encouragement and motivation to attain academic goals. As noted by two students: “...they [the lecturers] really show us that they want us to pass and encourages me to come to class” [P2037], and “the lecturers are caring and very helpful and actually show initiative to try to help us get marks we are capable of achieving” [P1327].

Although most of the comments related to direct, intentional support from the lecturers’ side, there are some students who also noted the unintentional support that may go unnoticed: “Lecturer’s motivational captions at the end of emails. It makes me feel worthy and that I can achieve great things in life” [P105].

Although most data segments related to academic support, there were students who noted that they appreciate support at the personal level. Students would make comments like, “Lecturers in the department are very helpful when it comes to personal and academic problems” [P2407]. Another student noted that lecturers not only give study-related advice, but also advice in terms of personal development and career development [P1071].

³ All participant responses have been quoted verbatim.

Benevolence, or the way in which lecturers conduct themselves towards students was the second most prevalent theme that presented. Many comments related to simply being friendly, for example “the friendly lecturers and tutors make it more comfortable for us to approach them” [P1458]. Some comments however went further and related to lecturers being kind and compassionate, showing understanding for a student’s plight. Students would say, “lecturers that care and are involved” [P2283], or “the lecturers also are so nice and understanding” [P962], and “lecturers trying to understand situations beyond and out of the student’s control” [P1814].

Responses from participants in this study also indicate that it is important to students that lecturers are sincere in their concern, as illustrated in data segments like “sincere concern from the lecturers” [P597], or “students are not just a number” [P79]. While respectful interaction, without bias and discrimination, are also expressed by students as elements that support their wellbeing. Students would say “lecturers must treat students with respect” [P1343], “lecturers that are respectful and willing to listen to student opinions” [P1535], “To know that the lecturers have your best interest at heart” [P2371], “being heard and treated with respect with regards to my opinion in and outside of class” [P1791], and “lecturers not discussing the matters of students with other lecturers” [P1268].

It was furthermore important for the students to have lecturers who create opportunities for interaction and contact with the students. Having access to lecturing staff in order to receive academic support was noted as important by the participants. For example, one participant noted clearly that “the thing/activity that contributes to my wellbeing in the university is the lecturer availability” [P2307].

Another respondent noted that “there are opportunities to approach lecturers and tutors should it be needed” [P133]. For some respondents, these opportunities encompassed availability outside lecture times, for instance allocated consultation times. Students would say, “Lecturers in my course make time out of the class time to consult with students if they are having a difficult time understanding the content” [P2307] and “The consultation hours with lecturers that allows you to go through anything that is stressing you out” [P223].

Some participants referred to lecturers having an open-door policy. They would say, “Lecturers should have an open-door policy where students are able to discuss certain aspects such as schoolwork or personal matters in confidence” [P1268], or very succinctly just, “The open-door policy of some lecturers” [P2164].

Other students noted the need to have the lecturers available on demand. Students indicate, “Availability of the lecturer when students need consultation, sometimes lecturers are not available at the time that I want to consult for a module that I have difficulties with, because of clash of times because I am part time working” [P2257], and “...although there are consultation times, it would be great to have them at any time” [P1431].

Access implies availability, but also that the lecturers show that they are willing to help the students. Students noted that the approachability of lecturers contributes to their wellbeing, when they make statements like, “staff and support staff are always willing to help students... the lecturers are well prepared and very intelligent and approachable” [P289], and “Lecturers who constantly remind us that they are available to help and guide me...” [P2313].

It seemed from the responses that face-to-face interaction with lecturers and maintaining a good relationship are also valued as factors contributing to student wellbeing. As noted by the participants when they state that, “Relationships – keep contact with your friends, family and lecturers to be able to make connections and interact with other people” [P2490], and “I think it would help me in my studies the most would be a closer relationship between me, my lecturers” [P1719].

Lecturer work approach

Some factors noted by the students that contribute to their wellbeing did not have to do with the direct relationship between the student and the lecturer but had to do with the approach the lecturer takes to their work. We grouped these factors into one of two categories, either referring to the lecturer’s competence, or the lecturer’s attitude towards their work in general.

Having ‘good’ lecturers who are adequately qualified and able to do an effective job of teaching the content of the modules or programmes was important to the students in this study. In the students’ opinion, a good lecturer possesses the capability and skill to teach effectively. The participants would comment about the “lecturer ability to teach” [P609] or “a good lecturer that knows how to teach...” [P1843].

Teaching implies not only the time spent in front of the class, but also the skill and aptitude to design an integrated curriculum and to manage the learning activities adequately. In this regard, statements from participants in the study included the following: “Lecturers who explain well and help you to understand the work so that your studies can improve / go well” [P803], “Professional, highly qualified lecturers” [P102], “I must say, what contributed to my wellbeing is that the lectures are good and they (lecturers) are very well prepared when coming

to lecture us...” [P1454], and the “Lecturer give [giving a] reasonable amount of work for studies (manage programme).” [P454]

Specific skills mentioned by the students included being able to work with technology and good organisational and communication skills. Students would say “Lecturers that know how to use technology” [P592], “Lecturers who actively use clickUP [blackboard] and provide proper notes and instructions” [P797], “Well organised lectures/lecturers; necessary information provided in advance to facilitate planning” [P1499], “Lecturers being clear about assignments” [P130], and “Lecturers that are well scheduled” [P289].

Besides the lecturer competence, some students also noted that the lecturer’s attitude towards her/his work also plays a role in student wellbeing. Students would explicitly state “...a lecturer passionate about the field they are teaching in” [P1834], or “my lecturer enthusiasm” [P2318], as a factor that supports their wellbeing. Respondents appreciated those lecturers that inspired them. The students would say, “Lecturers who are interesting and interested in their subject area” [P2228], and “Inspiring lecturers” [P472]. Lastly, those lecturers who go beyond what is expected from them, are highly valued by the students in this study, as evident in statements like, “Lecturers are overworked, but try hard to help everyone” [P2187], and “Lecturers that put in the extra effort onto the lectures” [P2440].

Discussion

Previous studies (Hlongwane, 2018; Stewart-Brown et al., 2018) have provided ample evidence that student support services at universities need to be strengthened and that innovative approaches need to be adopted to support student wellbeing and address a variety of psychological needs (Vogel & Armstrong, 2010). Little emphasis is, however, placed in the literature on the significant role that lecturers may be playing in this regard. Although research from Basson and Rothmann (2018) indicated that lecturer support alone will not contribute significantly to student wellbeing, the current findings show that lecturer support from a student perspective may be critical to their wellbeing. It further supports the reconceptualization of the role of the lecturer as presented by Di Placito-De Rango (2018) as an individual who is not only involved in creating, delivering and facilitating academic curriculum, but also as someone who promotes, or supplements support for the wellbeing of students. The findings from this

study indicate that university lecturers are carrying a significant load in terms of supporting student wellbeing.

Deliberate and direct interaction with the students is encapsulated in the attitude of, and benevolence with which lecturers treat students, affect students and their wellbeing. This may manifest as respectful interactions, listening to personal challenges or being available outside formal lecture times. Students in this study seemed to appreciate their interaction with lecturers and they provided examples of personal interactions that contribute to their wellbeing. Lecturer support is viewed in a broad sense by participants in this study, but it is consistently described at the *personal level*.

A lot of the responses related wellbeing to the academic staff being *caring lecturers* and corresponds to previous research related to the concept of *caring teachers* (Coldwell, Papegeorgiou & Callighan, 2015; Walker & Gleaves, 2016). However, the factors students noted extended beyond this direct relationship the lecturer has with the student, to also include lecturer competence and skills as well as the lecturer overall attitude towards their own work. It would seem as though there is a crossover effect specifically related to the lecture attitudes towards their work that influence students' attitudes towards their studies. Crossover is the transmission of outcomes (e.g. burnout or engagement) between individuals who are in a similar social domain (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2005; Westman, 2001). Lecturers' passion and enthusiasm for their work influence students' passion and enthusiasm for their studies. A similar crossover effect is visible in the findings of Anderson, Rabello, Wass, Golding, Rangi, Eteuati, Briwtowe and Waller (2020) when students describe lecturers' passion as leading to a "conversion experience" (p. 7).

Lecturer support to students, even in a mentoring, advisory or emotional support capacity is usually seen as part of a lecturer's teaching duties (Bezuidenhou, 2015) or part of academic citizenship (MacFarlane 2007). Caring for students is in fact often seen as *good teaching* (Anderson et al., 2020). However, putting forward effort to integrate caring into a lecturer's everyday interactions with students is far more complex and related to contextual factors such class sizes, available teaching time, curriculum renewal processes, assessment practices and the general demands put to lecturers. Academic staff at South African universities are already overburdened with higher-than-average job demands (e.g. high workloads, unrealistic time

pressures) and lower than average job resources (e.g. lack of supervisory support and job security) (Barkhuizen, Rothmann, & Van de Vijver, 2014; Poalses & Bezuidenhout, 2018). Resources do not only include infrastructure and teaching resources, but also institutional support. Poalses and Bezuidenhout (2018) noted the increase in workload owing to academic staff's increase in job demands, for example administrative duties. Lebowitz, Bozalek, Van Schalkwyk and Winberg (2015) note the fact that South African universities have far less resources than universities in developed countries; even though some institutions may be better resourced than others, academic staff across all institutions are overburdened with high workloads (Higher Education South African; HESA, 2011). Many factors contribute to the high work loads of South African academics. Rothmann, Barkhuizen and Tytherleigh (2008) argue that for South African academics it is not only the increasing roles that they need to fulfil, but also the paradigm shifts and new policies and practices that they continuously must adapt to, that contribute to "extreme and specific job-related strain" such as burnout (p. 405).

Supporting the wellbeing of students, in addition to the academic task, may therefore be daunting for most South African lecturers. Massification of South African higher education with a lack of equal focus on increasing academic staff (Bothma & Rossouw 2019) has brought about high staff: student ratios (Coldwell, Papageorgiou & Callaghan, 2016; Department of Higher Education and Training South Africa; DHET, 2015). The current staff: student ratio at South African universities are inadequate to meet the needs of the South African students (DHET, 2015) who are in most cases also inadequately prepared for university teaching and learning (Albertyn et al 2016). Large classes which are also due to massification, brings about change in relationship between student and lecturer "moving from personal mentoring that shape individual development to formal instruction in large classrooms." (Adetiba, 2019, p. 8; Bezuidenhout, 2015). Lectures' inability to bond with students is seen as one of the main challenges of large class teaching in South Africa (Pillay, 2020). It is not only the lecturers that experience this effect of large class teaching, but also students who noted that in the large classes they fail to develop interpersonal relationships and connections with the lecturers (Fakude, le Roux, Daniels, & Scheepers, 2014), which would seem from the data to be one of the ways in which the lecturer can support student wellbeing.

The larger classes not only impact on teaching strategies, but increase the administrative duties related to teaching leaving little time for other responsibilities such as research and community engagement (Albertyn, Machika & Trotskie-de Bruin, 2016; Poalses & Bezuidenhout, 2018), which are key focus areas for most higher education institutions in South Africa (Janse van

Rensburg, Rothmann, & Diedericks, 2018). With the lecturer being time pressured to fulfil his/her role in the most basic sense, there is little time left for ‘over and above’ activities such as having an open-door policy or consulting with students outside the classroom. The pressure for research outputs, teaching and administrative duties in the light of little administrative support contributes to the “work role overload” and “role conflict” of South African academics (Pienaar & Bester 2006). From this study findings, the lecturer clearly plays a crucial role in the South African students’ wellbeing, but lecturers will need institutional support in their own role to provide it. Support should start with institutional recognition of the role of the lecturer in providing student support. This support could include basic support to fulfil their duties effectively, such as administrative support to teach large classes, and careful management of human resources to balance the student: lecturer ratios optimally. Promoting student wellbeing is not legally or ethically identified as a vital component in the functioning of a lecturer. The qualities of an ideal lecturer are often narrowly defined by subject knowledge, student academic performance, or the ability to promote that which is encouraged by traditional models of schooling, for example esteemed education and opportunities for economic development (Di Placito-De Rango, 2018).

The emotional and psychological support that lecturers provide for student wellbeing, is not yet pronounced in terms of the performance assessments and key performance outputs of academic staff at South African universities. The findings from this study suggest that it may be time to do so.

Limitations of the study and future research direction

The study utilised one open ended question format of the questionnaires in order to elicit authentic responses and to increase response rates. However, this may have limited the depth of responses. The geographic coverage in terms of reaching students from a wide variety of fields and on all undergraduate campuses of the university was, however, a strength and provided width of data. Data was also collected during the first semester of the academic year, and therefore data from the second semester might provide different findings. Future research might include data collection points throughout the year, with additional opportunities for in-depth discussion. It should also be noted that the data collected in this study are self-report data. Even though student participants provided numerous indications of the ways in which lecturers support their wellbeing, the establishment of direct *causal* links between the role of lecturers and student wellbeing, should also be investigated by means of further quantitative measures. South African undergraduate students are a highly diverse population and

quantitative studies that consider various biographical variables may be beneficial in terms of understanding the complexities of student wellbeing.

Conclusion

Our study showed that greater prominence needs to be given to the role of lecturers in supporting student wellbeing. Providing optimal student support in a large, urban university setting can be distinctly challenging. Findings from this study indicate that the role of lecturers in this regard is substantial, and that more recognition of the *implicit role* they play may be necessary. Moreover, the importance of understanding the complexities of exactly where student support resides within the university eco-system is stressed, and this needs further investigation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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