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Student perceptions and proposals for promoting wellbeing through social relationships at university

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ABSTRACT

Whilst existing evidence has demonstrated the imperative of social integration, inclusion, and belonging for student mental health, students often report relational challenges, barriers, and stressors at university. Drawing on thematic analysis of six student co-creation panels conducted during the Student Minds University Mental Health Charter consultations, this paper aims to elucidate student perspectives and proposals for promoting mental health at university by enhancing interpersonal interactions and social relationships. In particular, student panels identified existing challenges and opportunities to address social isolation, conflict, and exclusion in interactions with peers, academic staff, and the local community. The findings of this paper both echo and develop the principles of good practice propounded by the University Mental Health Charter, whilst the implications for university policy in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic are also discussed.

Introduction

Student mental health and wellbeing is a growing concern, with some evidence that UK students score lower on wellbeing outcomes than the age-equivalent non-student population (ONS, 2020). Loneliness and isolation have consistently been highlighted as prevalent student mental health risk factors (McIntyre et al. 2018; Hurst and Baranik 2013), with students twice as likely to report loneliness than the general population (Jopling and Valtorta 2018). Against a backdrop of increasing numbers of students reporting mental distress and accessing university mental health services (Broglia, Millings, and Barkham 2017; Thorley 2017), Universities UK (2020), – the representative body for higher education institutions in the UK – promote a whole university approach extending beyond the provision of isolated mental health services and interventions, to incorporate preventative social, cultural, and structural influences on mental health and wellbeing at university (Newton, Dooris, and Wills 2016). The University Mental Health Charter (Hughes and Spanner 2019) outlines principles of good practice to operationalise a whole university approach and improve mental health outcomes for the whole university community. The Charter contains five dimensions and 18 themes in total, with social integration and belonging constituting one theme within the 'Live' domain. Six principles of good practice are propounded, relating to: community; social integration; social isolation; loneliness; discrimination; and social cohesion. The

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Charter thus substantiates the imperative for further evidence-based review of these principles to understand how social relationships at university can facilitate or impede student wellbeing, as part of a whole university approach.

Community

Existing evidence clearly outlines the importance of creating a sense of belonging within a diverse safe community for student mental health and wellbeing (Pedler, Willis, and Nieuwoudt 2021). The belongingness hypothesis theorises that, alongside social interaction, emotional connection and identification with a larger community endows purpose, identity, and ameliorates emotional distress (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Student accounts of belonging describe the importance of social connection including contact with 'friends', 'societies', and 'clubs'; academic interactions including communication with lecturers (see also Thomas 2012); and 'experiences of living in the geographical, environmental, and cultural context of the local community' (Ahn and Davis 2020, 628). Whilst social identification with a university city is significantly predictive of lower depression and anxiety (McIntyre et al. 2018), students often report experiencing exclusion, resentment, and hostility from local residents amid tensions relating to alcohol-related anti-social behaviour, degradation of the physical environment, displacement of local services and families, and pressure on local infrastructure (Long 2016; Sage, Smith, and Hubbard 2012).

Social integration

Social integration, connection, and sense of belonging are all significantly positively associated with mental health and wellbeing outcomes within the UK student population. Indicatively, both Alsubaie et al. (2019) and McIntyre et al. (2018) found that the quality and/or quantity of student's social relationships significantly predict lower depression, anxiety, and higher quality of life. Similarly, in a large random sample of students in the US, Hefner and Eisenberg (2009) found that higher perceived quality of social support from friends, family, and romantic partners was negatively associated with depression, anxiety, suicidality, and disordered eating. Indeed, social relationships have been theorised to provide emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support in the management, amelioration, or prevention of psychological distress (House 1981). Social integration has equally been found to predict student physical health outcomes (Klaiber, Whillans, and Frances 2018) and academic outcomes, including engagement, retention, and grade point average (Thomas 2012). Students primarily form friendships through extra-curricular clubs and societies, on their academic course, and in residential accommodation (Foulkes et al. 2021).

Social isolation

Whilst social isolation is conceptually differentiated from loneliness based on the emotional discrepancy between desired and actual social connection, isolation significantly increases risk of loneliness (Mansfield 2019). Hefner and Eisenberg (2009) found that increased social isolation is associated with a 600% and 300% increase in depression and anxiety, respectively, among US students whilst, particularly in student accommodation, social conflict, exclusion, and isolation is reported as a major source of distress (Foulkes et al. 2021). Moreover, existing evidence has consistently found that certain student groups experience practical and cultural barriers to social integration and belonging at university (Brereton and Mistry 2019), and are therefore at increased risk of social isolation, including postgraduate, international, BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic), working class, disabled, and mature students (Dickinson 2019).

Loneliness

Notwithstanding the benefits of social connection and belonging at university for student academic, mental, and physical health outcomes, existing evidence indicates that between 15% and 22% of UK students report feeling lonely every day (Jopling and Valtorta 2018; Dickinson 2019), with 13% reporting that they do not have any 'true friends' at university (Jopling and Valtorta 2018). McIntyre et al. (2018) found that loneliness was a stronger overall predictor of depression, anxiety, and paranoia among UK undergraduate students than other academic and non-academic stressors, whilst Richardson, Elliott, and Roberts (2017) found that, controlling for demographic and baseline mental health, greater loneliness predicted higher anxiety, stress, and depression in UK under-graduate students over time. Loneliness has also been found to predict decreased cognitive function and academic performance (Baumeister, Twenge, and Nuss 2002; Cacioppo et al. 2000).

Discrimination

Existing evidence has consistently confirmed that marginalisation, discrimination, and harassment negatively impact on the mental health and wellbeing of minority student groups (Arday 2018). Minority stress theory (Meyer 2003) posits that discrimination produces accumulative stress which render minority groups at greater risk of mental health difficulties. Among ethnic minority students, experiences of daily discrimination have been found to adversely affect depressive symptoms, anxiety, self-esteem, isolation, and imposter syndrome (Jochman et al. 2019; Cokley et al. 2017). Equally, hostility and harassment towards LGBTQ+ students, particularly Trans students, has been found to be prevalent in UK universities (Bachman and Gooch 2018) and associated with depressive and anxiety symptoms (Woodford, Yoonsun, and Shelley 2014). Concerns have also been raised about the prevalence and impact of bullying and sexual harassment at university (Cowie and Myers 2015). Indeed in a sample of 4,491 students and recent graduates from 153 institutions in the UK, 62% reported experiencing some form of sexual violence (70% of all females and 26% of all males), whilst incidences of rape among female students at university are estimated at 8% compared with 4% of the UK general population (Revolt Sexual Assault & The Student Room 2018).

Social cohesion

A key element of wellbeing in higher education is the promotion of social cohesion whilst protecting diversity and individual difference. Consistent with self-determination theories of wellbeing (Deci and Ryan 1985), autonomy, relatedness, and competence have been found to be independent yet interconnected predictors of student wellbeing (Reis et al. 2000). Furthermore, balancing autonomy and relatedness with staff in an independent learning environment reciprocally shape student and staff relationships, wellbeing, and performance (Kiltz et al. 2020). Available evidence indicates that a perceived respectful, academically challenging yet personally supportive, pastoral and pedagogical relationship with academic staff can impact positively on student's sense of belonging, wellbeing, and retention (Hagenauer and Volet 2014; Komarraju, Musulkin, and Bhattacharya 2010). By contrast, negative or conflictual staff–student relationships negatively impact on wellbeing, with Blackman (2020) finding that students who experience few or no helpful teacher interactions are 146% more likely to report a high level of life dissatisfaction and 65% more likely to report a high level of anxiety than students who report all or most teachers as helpful.

The present study

Student voice and participation is identified as an enabling strategy in the University Mental Health Charter to understand student lived experience, and ensure that initiatives are effectively attuned to the emergent mental health needs and challenges of the diverse student community

(Hughes and Spanner 2019). To date however, student perceptions of the roles, responsibilities, and recommendations for universities in facilitating social relationships to support wellbeing have not been examined (SMaRteN, nd). This paper presents qualitative analysis of student data obtained during the University Mental Health Charter consultations, aiming to elucidate student perspectives and proposals on how to symbiotically optimise social relationships and mental wellbeing at UK universities, which underpinned the Charter's Principles of Good Practice

Materials and methods

Design and setting

Data are taken from six student co-creation panels; each conducted across six UK universities in 2019 during the Student Minds University Mental Health Charter Roadtrip. Panels were hosted in Scotland (University of Strathclyde), London (University of Arts), the West Midlands (University of Staffordshire), Wales (University of Cardiff), Yorkshire (University of Leeds), and Northern Ireland (University of Ulster).

Modelled on Student Voice Forums (Piper and Emmanuel 2019), co-creation panels employed a 'future retrospective' creative ideation strategy wherein students collectively imagined the ideal university culture and environment for mental health (Jones et al. 2021). Students were asked, for example, '*What is different about the day to day culture of universities in 2029 that means mental health is better supported?*' Engaging students in this way enables their experiences to be holistically encapsulated, whilst noting and promoting recommendations for change to subsequently be triangulated against existing evidence of good practice (e.g. Priestley et al. 2021).

Participants

Panels ranged in size from 6 to 13, with 65 participants in total. Participants were recruited by Student Minds through an extensive network of national and local stakeholders. Participants were all current undergraduate or postgraduate students or Student Union officers, with and without lived experience of mental health difficulties, from a range of institutions, disciplines, ages, gender, and nationalities.[1] Each panel lasted approximately 40 minutes in duration, providing a total of 244 minutes, which was audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Transcripts were anonymised to protect participant identities, meaning that data could not be attributed to individual students within our findings. Rather, data is delineated by the panel host university, although participants were recruited across numerous institutions. Participants provided full informed consent for their data to be used in the development of the Charter. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Derby Arts Humanities and Education Ethics Committee (see Priestley et al. 2021).

Analysis

Two reviewers [AH and MP] initially coded the transcripts separately, before conferring [with SW & VM] to iteratively synthesise congruous themes. Befitting the tenets of co-production (Priestley et al. 2021), transcripts were thematically analysed using a grounded theoretical approach wherein conceptual codes and categories inductively emerged to ensure that recommendations were grounded in the student voice and experience (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In particular, open, axial, and selective coding was applied to sub-categorise the main themes into current conditions, recommended actions, and the envisioned outcome in the ideal university (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Results

Five themes emerged from the data: namely university culture; mental health culture; structural environment; teaching, learning, and assessment; and student relationships. This paper exclusively presents the findings from the student relationships theme. Three sub-themes were identified, namely: *Addressing prejudice and conflict; Facilitating regular positive social interaction*; and *Creating inclusive community cultures*. Each sub-theme synthesises categorisations of current conditions and recommended actions, combining students' perceived challenges and proposed opportunities for enhancement. Taken together, the findings demonstrate that lack of interaction in students' relationships with peers, staff, and the local community constitute both a cause and effect of preconceptions, exclusivity, and conflict, which collectively and cyclically undermine student wellbeing. The findings underscore the imperative for positive, inclusive, social interaction as part of a whole university approach. Findings are triangulated against existing evidence and the implications in a Covid-19 context are considered.

Theme 1: addressing prejudice and conflict

Panels consistently identified prejudice as both a cause and effect of conflictual relationships and barriers to interaction with peers, staff, and the local community, and discussed ways this impacted on wellbeing. Student panels described conflictual interactions with peers, compounded by an academic culture of '*competition between students*' [Strathclyde University], creating a barrier to establishing supportive relationships by encouraging students to '*just focus on exams and not really seek out opportunities to do things around their studies*' [Strathclyde University] such as extra curricula activities. Academic competition was identified as a further barrier to social identification with peers, given that '*a lot of people are going to push themselves down to being inferior or push themselves to be superior, instead of coming along somewhere where they connect with the rest of us*' [Strathclyde University]. Indeed, where '*there is so much competition between people*' [Strathclyde University], this can manifest in '*work comparing, comparisons of workloads and comparisons of time spent in uni as an indicator of effort*' where '*it's kind of a guilt*' if another student visibly completes more work [Strathclyde University]. That is, in a competitive environment, students identified a pervasive perception that staff will '*give out a certain number of firsts*' [Strathclyde University] whereby other students symbolise a direct threat to personal achievement, sense of competence, and self-worth, resulting in avoidance and isolation. Indeed, participants explained how friends' comparative academic performance could compound anxiety and undermine self-efficacy and mood, when '*you've got friends around you and they've all done really well, you've maybe really struggled . . . I got a C, it was just like everyone else got an A, "Where did this go so badly wrong?"*' [Strathclyde University].

In addition, students described '*a hierarchy*' of unfair and unequal '*power*' relationships with staff [Ulster University], particularly manifest through perceived marking bias where students that raise academic or wellbeing concerns are marked down, which '*affects your mental wellbeing generally because you feel like you were treated unfairly*' [Staffordshire University]. Panels perceived that '*quite a lot of academics find it really difficult to be challenged or explain yourself*' '*because they haven't got the courage to admit that you're right*' [Strathclyde University], with some students advocating more structures '*to hold staff accountable*' through '*an improved system for submitting complaints*' [University of Arts London]. However, student's did recognise that tuition fee reforms '*had increased expectations on staff*' [Ulster University] because students feel insufficiently supported given the cost, alongside a transactional relationship with staff '*where you pay a large amount of money, show up, you get given something and you're totally passive in it*' [Strathclyde University].

Prejudicial staff '*assumptions about the drinking culture*' [University of Leeds] were also perceived to be emblematic of a disconnect from student experiences, worries, and challenges. '*Quite often lecturers say, oh, students were late because they were hungover*' whereas if they'd taken ten minutes to talk to those students, they'd realise', for example, '*that actually, they missed the bus because they had*

to take their little sister to school' [University of Leeds]. *'It's assumed that everyone is from the same background'*, and this sense of *'not being recognised or heard or letting your story be told is so disempowering and can be really isolating'* [University of Arts London]. These prejudicial assumptions can also result in *'tutors giving students a real hammering totally unfairly'* [University of Leeds] when they experience academic or mental health difficulties, with *'a high number of people ending up in misconduct panels because of mental health and because they just didn't do well, and they didn't want to help them'* [University of Arts London]. Some students subsequently perceived academic staff to lack understanding and empathy regarding student challenges and mental health difficulties, resulting in inadequate or inappropriate support which can exacerbate distress and deter help-seeking *'if you've taken a serious problem to them, and they brush you off'* [Strathclyde University]; *'people are really being failed by their tutors'* [University of Arts London].

Panels proposed that academic staff therefore receive additional training to better understand the challenges and diversity of student life, in order to appropriately support diverse student needs. Whilst the student panels did generally concur that *'staff need to be educated on mental health'*, panels emphasised *'that is not training a lecturer to be a counsellor, an expert in mental health'* or encouraging academic staff to *'be giving advice they aren't qualified to give'* [Cardiff University]. Rather, *'it's just an awareness of the kind of issues that do come up'* [Cardiff University] so that staff can adjust their expectations and teaching practices accordingly to enable a relationship where students felt seen, understood, and valued, whereby staff proactively identify and signpost students experiencing difficulties. Moreover, hostility towards staff was countered by a desire for additional social contact and an appreciation that staff experienced their own pressures. Panels identified *'a value for developing a community with academics'* *'with closer relationships between academics and students'* [Ulster University]. *'It would be good to show that in university, there is not this teacher/student divide'* [Cardiff University]. By extension, panels also recommended that initiatives to support staff workload and wellbeing could promote better pedagogical and pastoral relationships with students.

If you've got really unhappy lecturers or, for whatever reason, they're not being paid enough, they're working really long hours, they've not got the support network that they need, that's going to directly affect their quality of teaching for students. They need to be supported just as much as the students do'. 'This isn't prescriptive, 'Change this so that students are having a better experience and you're having a more **** experience'. It has to be done in partnership and everyone's wellbeing needs to be considered with any change that is suggested* [University of Arts London].

Student panels additionally identified *'a strict division between the university and community outside of the university'* [Strathclyde University]. Residents *'assume everyone is exactly the same';* that *'students do this, students act like that, whereas actually students are a very diverse group of people'* [Cardiff University]. In particular, panels described how *'residents always speak so negatively about students'* [Cardiff University] and the public perception that students are *'entitled' 'snowflake'* *'lazy party goers'* [Ulster University] negatively impacts on students sense of belonging, self-worth, and wellbeing; *'using [these] labels for young people is quite damaging'* [and] *"can really put you down'* [University of Leeds]. Whilst panels did acknowledge that a small minority of students do behave anti-socially, generally the hostility to students in the community was considered to be unfair and unjustified. Panels described the emotional impact of students not being recognised for their community contribution; *'they do, like, a weekly or monthly litter pick, but as soon as some residents will hear about it, they'll say, "That's just a token gesture. Why aren't you actually doing something important?" That's quite hard because there are students that are giving up their afternoons, week in, week out, to do things. Yes, they're not doing it for the recognition, but then they're getting spoken about negatively or not recognised at all'* [Cardiff University]. Panels therefore recommended that universities highlight the *'contributions that students make to their communities'* and *'promote more positive sides of students . . . [and] the assets students are in the communities they live in'* given that *'there are lots of students in our university that do a lot of amazing things with a lot of amazing volunteering programmes and things like this, they just don't get recognised for what they do'* [Ulster University].

Theme 2: facilitating regular positive social interactions

Panels welcomed initiatives for dialogue, interaction, and understanding between diverse groups of students, staff, and local residents in order to build community, belonging, and wellbeing. Panels recommended additional socialisation opportunities embedded across the whole university, including the physical environment, accommodation, and curriculum such as '*more communal space*' across campus [Ulster University], '*games in student accommodation to help make friends in halls*' [Staffordshire University] and '*peer learning*' '*to build and embed that sense of community at the course level*' whilst '*allowing for more socialisation so we can improve mental health as well*' [Strathclyde University]. Panels advocated university-led initiatives such as pre-entry questionnaires to identify student interests, disseminate targeted information, and coordinate student socialisation during transition '*to get connected in early on about things that they care about and fit in*' [Ulster University]. Explicitly referencing the social, psychological, and physical benefits to wellbeing, panels advocated a greater variety of sports, societies, and extra-curricular activities at universities, because with '*sports clubs, it's not just about being active that's beneficial for you, it's about being part of that collective group where you feel like you belong*' [Ulster University]. Friendships and belonging '*make students want to leave the house, make them want to go and learn so there's more chance that they're going to be doing better in their course and have good mental wellbeing, rather that if they're feeling like 'oh well I don't know anyone. I'm just going to withdraw*' [Ulster University]. Panels recommended a '*buddy system where the first years are sort of buddied up with third years to help them through that transition*' [Ulster University] and support their social and academic integration, alongside formal peer support programmes for students experiencing isolation so that students can '*help each other more*' [Strathclyde University].

Reflecting on relationships with academics, some panellists described experiencing '*a divide between students and staff*' [Ulster University] which can negatively impact on mental health and wellbeing. In particular, students perceived academic staff to lack interest in relationships with students, given that '*research and funding will always come first and foremost*' [Strathclyde University] meaning academic staff do '*not invest in personal relationships or engagement*' with students and '*get to know*' their individual circumstances and needs [Ulster University]. Moreover, '*the attitude of treating students as clients is detrimental to student mental health*' because students '*feel they are just paying fees and do not add value to the university*' [Cardiff University]. Panels envisioned a culture that is facilitative of dialogue between students and staff, where '*you can say hi to your lecturer and they won't blank you*'. '*I think your mental health will be better if you see lecturers as approachable, and willing to have conversations with you . . . taking that time to understand who their students are makes a massive difference*' [Strathclyde University].

Students also voiced a need for more positive interactions with the local community. Panels perceived that universities should facilitate '*better integration with the residents*', through participation in '*community-led projects*', and '*representation with the communities*' [Cardiff University]. For example, '*communities and universities could work together, universities could undertake research for community groups and give back to the local community, that will help promote that kind of positive image and people will start talking positively about students*' [Leeds, University].

Theme 3: creating inclusive communities and cultures

Students described experiencing isolation and loneliness at university, with emphasis on ensuring equality, diversity, and inclusion within university culture. Panels described the prevalence of '*isolation and loneliness*', noting how '*people collect to be part of a group*' and exclude '*those who are outside the group*' resulting in social isolation and '*segregation*' across the student body [Ulster University]; '*there tends, for example, to be a divide with international students, they tend to stick together*' [Ulster University]. Whilst sports, societies, and extra-curricular activities were identified as instrumental in developing social relationships, isolated students who do not '*feel truly part of that community don't*'

want to go' [Staffordshire University]. Panels further identified an exclusive *'drinking culture'* and *'a move to a drug culture'* [University of Leeds] as negatively impacting on student mental health by, on the one hand, *'putting unnecessary pressure on students' to drink more to fit in'* [University of Leeds] and on the other, reinforcing prejudicial beliefs, behaviours, and tensions among peers, tutors, and the wider community that harm social interactions, cohesion, and sense of belonging.

Panels subsequently emphasised a *'university responsibility to embed a cohesive community culture'* through *'more connection with the students as a community'* [Ulster University]. Students envisioned a *'culture that's centred around creating a community where people want to talk to each other'* and where *'people help each other and feel included'* [Strathclyde University]; *'it needs to bring more of a community'* by *'being more open to each other and strangers, and people who are not your friends'* [Ulster University]. Students particularly encouraged action to address prejudice, and contribute to a culture where *'universities would be more inclusive'* [University of Leeds] and understanding of the diversity of the social challenges and barriers experienced by different student groups, facilitating varied relationships by *'broadening and expanding your friendship groups and people you know'* [Cardiff University]. Whilst recommending socialisation initiatives, panels emphasised the importance of *'including everybody in the activities'* [University of Leeds] by addressing the cultural and practical barriers to participation. Panels also particularly recommended *'less alcohol-based'* sports and society socials to promote *'a day to day culture where people won't be judged because they don't want to drink'* [Ulster University].

Panels further noted how exclusion, conflict, and lack of social integration with the local community can detrimentally impact on student's self-esteem, sense of belonging, and *'how much you want to stay and how much you feel involved with the city'* [Cardiff Universoty]. Panels described particular tensions over parking, alcohol consumption, noise, degradation of the physical environment, and local services, which could be enacted through social media groups, with one panellist describing the emotional impact of being targeted online and *'called a bitch'* by local residents; *'my name was getting dragged through the dirt . . . and at one point I just burst into tears'* [Cardiff University]. As a result, *'students don't really want to go'* into resident spaces or engage *'with resident committees or get to know their local counsellor'* which is a further barrier to community cohesion, identity, and belonging [Cardiff University]. Panels aspired to be part of a more *'integrated community ´* and *'a better relationship with residents'*, where *'the borders between students and residents will have gone'*, with *'students a bit more integrated with the community and where they live or where they stay'* [Ulster University]. Campus universities were perceived to particularly prevent *'integration with people'*, with one panellist noting that *'the locals really got on with the people at the uni in the city, and really hated the students in the campus'* [Cardiff University]. Students recommended universities *'emphasise the importance of having a good relationship between the two'* and encourage open communication, with respect *'that goes both ways'*, so that *'residents actually appreciate and see the good things that they [students] do and students respect that back'* [Cardiff University].

Discussion

This paper has identified the challenges and opportunities to supporting students' social relationships with peers, academic staff, and the local community at UK universities, and the intersections with mental wellbeing. Taken together, the findings highlight sources of conflict and misunderstanding that underpin student relationships with peers, staff, and local residents, alongside opportunities for more positive and inclusive social interactions. Consistent with literature on prejudice and stereotypes (e.g. Stephan and Stephan 2001), lack of interaction was evidently both a cause and consequence of perceived discrimination and discontent; generalisations about and by students remained unchallenged due to lack of contact while the resulting feelings of anxiety, rejection, and threat reinforced negative assumptions and attitudes. The findings ostensibly reiterate the importance of a whole university approach to mental wellbeing, inclusive of staff and the wider university community (UUK, 2020).

Panel suggestions for interventions to support student social interaction and belonging echo existing evidence that students involved in extracurricular activities are twice as likely to report having a large group of friends (29% vs 14%), and report higher social integration and wellbeing at university, including self-efficacy, personal growth, and purpose in life (Griffiths, Dickinson, and Day 2021; Kilgo, Mollet, and Pascarella 2016). Pre-entry lifestyle questionnaires, peer mentoring, and buddy initiatives have all been previously propounded as part of a whole university approach (Foulkes et al. 2021; Cage et al. 2021). Other recreational social interventions such as arts, or exercise programmes, bibliotherapy, and ecotherapy have all been found to significantly increase social integration, wellbeing, and self-esteem (Chatterjee et al. 2018). Consistent with the Charter's enabling theme of inclusivity and intersectionality, panels advocated social inclusionary initiatives that demonstrably support community belonging (Lower-Hoppe et al. 2020; Arday 2018). Whilst some students echoed calls to integrate peer-supported learning and mentoring within curriculum design to support student interaction (Thomas 2012), other students may respond to this with anxiety and distress (Jones et al. 2021).

The importance of relationships with academic staff for student wellbeing was emphasised by student panels. Improving student–lecturer relationships can have positive, sustainable impact on students' academic and social development (Kiltz et al. 2020; Adeyele and Yusuff 2012). Whilst international evidence in a school context indicates that perceived teacher support may account for between 11% and 16% of variance in student wellbeing (Suldo et al. 2009), there is a relative lack of evidence on how academic staff relationships with students in a UK university context can impact on student mental health outcomes (Hagenauer and Volet 2014). Interestingly, student panels echoed sectoral concerns regarding staff wellbeing (Morrish 2019), whilst foregrounding the relational and cultural implications for their own work and wellbeing. Evidence has found that staff and student wellbeing are strongly interrelated and influenced by institutional policies and cultures relating to workload, audit, and competition (Jones et al. 2021). Furthermore, panels extended Charter recommendations for academic staff training to engender understanding and empathy in relationships with students. Existing evidence suggests that, despite 55% of university teaching staff having provided mental health and wellbeing support to students, between 50% and 71% of academic staff have never received mental health training, despite evidence of effectiveness (Gulliver et al. 2018; Massey, Brooks, and Burrow 2014).

Where existing literature has examined the social, economic, cultural, and physical implications of studentification on student relationships with the local community, the psychological implications for student wellbeing have not previously been examined. Volunteering has been found to have a positive impact on student wellbeing (Chatterjee et al. 2018) and panels recommended that universities communicate student contributions to the wider community. Positive effects of studentification can include the regeneration of local retail and service provision, improvements to local transport links, and community action initiatives (Sage, Smith, and Hubbard 2012; Chatterton 2000). The UUP Foundation Civic University Commission Progress Report (2018) found that local residents equally desire additional opportunity to engage with universities, but relatively few universities have a strategic approach to civic activities with the local community, with 35% of local participants unable to name one thing that their local university had done to benefit residents.

Emerging evidence ostensibly reaffirms the importance of implementing these recommendations in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. Students and young people reported higher levels of social isolation and loneliness during mandatory lockdown both than prior to the pandemic and compared to other age demographics (Labrague, Alexis, and Falguera 2021; Elmer, Mepham, and Stadtfeld 2020), significantly increasing risk of stress, anxiety, and depression (Ellis, Dumas, and Forbes 2020). The sudden transition to online learning increased isolation and inflamed tensions with academic staff (Hall 2021; Nambiar 2020), whilst pressure on local services exacerbated conflict with the local community (Lasater et al. 2021; Turner 2020). Moreover, barriers to social integration were experienced disproportionately by at-risk student socio-demographics, alongside heightened hostility and harassment towards particular groups including BAME and international students

(Alrawashdeh 2020). Panel recommendations for regular inclusive interaction between diverse students, staff, and the local community to challenge prejudice and conflict are arguably even more pressing post-pandemic (Lasater et al. 2021).

Strengths and limitations

This paper makes an original contribution to existing knowledge on student wellbeing with novel findings regarding the role and dimensions of relationships with local residents and academic staff. The commitment to co-production ensures that recommendations are relevant to student experiences drawn from a national dataset, although the student sample is relatively small and self-selective. Data was collected prior to the Covid-19 pandemic which may limit the generalisability of some of the findings in a post-pandemic context. For example, students made no reference to relationships online. The validity of student experience can be further compromised by a range of emotional and cognitive recall biases and unawareness of the perspectives of the wider university community. For example, students did not report positive examples of relationships with staff or residents, often drawing on prejudicial archetypes and with little acknowledgement of the complexity and challenge of facilitating inclusive regular social interaction in the current higher educational context. Indeed, because the future retrospective activity prioritised the ideal outcome rather than process, the specificity of the student recommendations is limited, whilst the emphasis on future change may have led students to report areas of dissatisfaction and not elicit current examples or evidence of best practice. This underscores the need to triangulate these findings with secondary evidence, adapted to local context. Future research would particularly benefit from further interpretation and interrogation of issues and inconsistencies in both staff-student and staff-resident relationships and identification of existing good practice.

Conclusion

This paper presented student perspectives and proposals regarding how social relationships at UK universities can influence wellbeing. Taken together, the student panels identified existing challenges and opportunities to address social isolation, conflict, and belonging in interactions with peers, academic staff, and the local community. The recommendations underscore universities' role and responsibility in addressing cultural and structural barriers to social integration and inclusion, and facilitating social interaction with academic staff and local residents.

Note

1. The sample demographic composition is unavailable.

Disclosure statement

Leigh Spanner is employed full time by Student Minds as Sector Improvement Lead and project manager for the University Mental Health Charter. Gareth Hughes is employed by Student Minds as a self-employed consultant and the Content Development Lead for the University Mental Health Charter. Gareth is also a member of Student Minds Clinical Advisory Group. Michael Priestley is employed by Student Minds as a self-employed pilot reviewer for the University Mental Health Charter award scheme and a content creator for a University Mental Health Charter Self-Improvement Tool. Michael is also a member of the Student Minds Student Advisory Committee. Susan Wilbraham, Angela Hall and Virendra Mistry all attended at least one of the University Mental Health Charter consultation events.

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