

The compassionate aspect of universities and teaching has been of interest to me throughout the PgCert. With a background as a qualified Massage Therapist with over 10 years experience, the welfare and well-being of others has been an ongoing concern for me, sometimes to the detriment of my own wellbeing in not always prioritising myself when needed. As a Person of Colour, I bring with me a commitment to enacting Social Justice, specifically challenging Racism and other forms of discrimination. Given past and current experiences of Racism. Given my work in Alternative Healthcare, coupled with my values, I decided that I would focus my research question around university students and their Wellbeing

*“Sometimes we say we believe in something, but are unable to live according to what we believe, for a variety of reasons. Here we would experience ourselves, in Jack Whitehead’s words, as ‘living contradictions’. A point of entry for action research would be to find ways of overcoming the contradiction so that we might live more fully in the direction of our values.” (McNiff, 2020, pg13)*

I began to see that in focusing on the Wellbeing of students I could also bring myself back into alignment with my own values centred around Self Care and Wellbeing

Initially I had thought back to all my training, and specifically the Massage in Schools Program (M.I.S.P) that I had undertaken. I wondered if I could transfer the benefits that primary school aged children gained from consensual peer to peer massage (statistics showed that the incidents of bullying at school significantly decreased when students engaged in M.I.S.P) and translate that to a university setting.

*“Self-compassion plays an important protective role in our own wellbeing, as well as that of others. By nourishing the relationship we have with ourselves, we can re-fill our emotional reserves and have more to offer those that need us.” (Bunting Hill 2023)*

### Stress, Wellbeing and students

According to medical research, up to 90 percent of illnesses and diseases are believed to be related to stress (Thames, n.d.) Experiencing stress involves a chemical reaction within your body, creating a kind of chemical mixture that activates in response to stress.

Evolutionarily, this response is designed to help us survive immediate threats, such as being chased by a lion or charged by a hippo. The body is designed to cope in this highly stressed state for say ten minutes, as the high amount of adrenaline in your system causes your blood pressure to go up. When the cause of the stress, for instance an assessment deadline, has passed whilst your conscious mind will know your body won't until you actively do something to signify that you're no longer in the stressful situation otherwise you will get stuck in a 'stress cycle' which can lead to chronic stress which in turn can lead to illness. The stress cycle has a beginning middle and end, and it is signifying to your body that the stressors that have activated the response are gone that completes the cycle – which we often don't do ((Brown, Nagoski and Nagoski, 2020)

To help students to manage stress and complete the stress cycle Nagowski and Nagowski suggest that amongst several approaches box breathing is highly effective at lowering stress levels

From my own experiences, talking to colleagues and personal observations, stress and anxiety has significantly risen in students since the Covid 19 Pandemic. A colleague from the university shared that the change in students stress levels was apparent in the levels of anxiety witnessed and reported since the lockdowns finished and face to face teaching resumed, and that their anxiety levels were higher than previous to the pandemic when approaching assessment deadlines

According to a report by student minds on student mental health during the Covid 19 pandemic ((Frampton et al., 2021) 74% of students questioned reported that the pandemic had had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing, and that there was a disproportionate impact on particular groups including BME students, with a report by The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities in 2021 (CRED) finding that other factors including family influence, socio-economic background, religion and culture had more of an impact on life chances than the existence of racism, which many from the Black community found deeply wounding, if not ridiculous.

The findings of the student minds report reinforce the importance for universities to prioritize the mental health of all students. Given these findings I decided to look further into universities and their objectives and what they are doing to support and aid students to thrive?

As stated in The Dearing Report (Dearing 1997) the purpose of Higher Education is fourfold; along with enabling and inspiring students to

develop their capabilities to their highest potential, increase knowledge and understanding for its own sake and serve the needs of a knowledge-based society, the last purpose specified was

*“to play a major role in shaping democratic, civilised, inclusive society”*  
(Dearing 1997)

However, according to the new economics foundation (2008), universities are placing excessive emphasis on economic interests in determining value, and how value is understood and defined, potentially neglecting other crucial responsibilities. This was before the introduction of austerity measures in 2012 by the conservative government, Brexit, The Covid 19 Pandemic and the cost of living crisis which are all impacting young adults especially. They argue that more consideration is needed towards value from the perspective of students with regards to their wellbeing and the wellbeing of the wider economy, environment and society. This highlights the need to integrate notions of both personal and collective well-being at the core of higher education. Similarly, in their paper ‘Is the Health and Wellbeing of University students associated with their academic performance?: Cross sectional findings from the UK’ El Ansari and Stock argue that

*“The results support a focus on comprehensive health programmes at universities that take into account the multiple factors influencing students’ achievement”* (El Ansari, Stock pg14)

As noted by Finnigan & Richards (2015), there persists an attainment and retention gap for BME students compared to Home White students. By incorporating Self-Care techniques into my teaching, I am promoting one of the five key principles of social justice: equal access to resources. Introducing Self-Care techniques not only provides BME students with tools to cope with the additional pressures of racism, both within and outside the institution, but also extends the same opportunity to non-BME students, also affected by living within a society that centres and values ‘whiteness’ at the expense of non-white others

The intervention focuses on Self-Care, emphasizing that fostering compassion for oneself is a prerequisite for extending empathy to others. While Self-Care isn't a cure-all—considering issues like soaring tuition fees, limited affordable housing, and the global climate crisis etc—prioritizing one's well-being can enhance the ability to manage life's stresses. This approach goes beyond the university experience, offering

valuable skills for post-graduation life and with the potential to also improve academic performance

Research suggests that a desire for a deeper understanding of Self-Care and access to effective techniques has the potential to heighten students' comprehension of wellbeing and compassion (Bunting Hill 2015) For BME students this could be engaging with strategies that combat the pressures of racism by learning techniques to combat the impacts of stress, and for White students engaging with Wellbeing and self-care can lead them from self-compassion towards greater empathy towards others. This, in turn, can empower all students to promote social justice not only within the university but also in their broader lives beyond graduation.

Universities have the potential and responsibility to create supportive spaces for students to flourish.