

Relational Welfare in Student Life: Exploring Narratives of Belonging, Exclusion and Mental Health

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Abstract

This article examines how students experience well-being and belonging through the lens of relational welfare. Drawing on a large collection of first-person student narratives, the study explores how mental health is shaped by relational and structural conditions in higher education. Students were invited to share personal stories about moments that felt meaningful or challenging in relation to their well-being. These anonymous, first-person accounts provide rich insights into both everyday interactions and significant life experiences. While based on the same dataset as a previous study [1], this article takes a slightly different analytical approach to explore broader patterns related to well-being and belonging. The material was revisited using reflexive thematic analysis [2], grounded in a relational perspective. We read the narratives closely and repeatedly, looking for recurring patterns in how students described what made a difference in their lives. Stories were selected strategically based on whether the student described the experience as having had a lasting emotional or existential impact. These included intense situations that shaped how they related to others, to themselves, or to the university. Our analysis was informed by Sarah White's theory of relational welfare [3] and the Mattering–Wellness–Fairness model [4], allowing us to attend not only to what happened in the stories, but how it was felt, and within what social and institutional contexts. From a relational perspective, our findings show that student well-being is shaped by everyday signals of inclusion or exclusion, and that fostering fairness, interpersonal recognition, and sustained belonging must be seen as shared institutional responsibilities.

Keywords: Student well-being, Belonging, Relational welfare, Higher education

Introduction

Student mental health has become a growing concern across higher education, with research suggesting a range of stressors linked to academic, social, and personal transitions. While well-being is often assessed at the individual level, recent work has drawn attention to broader social and structural influences [3]. Scholars have argued for a shift from individualistic understandings of well-being toward relational frameworks that recognise the importance of connection, recognition, and inclusion [3, 5]. In higher education, this shift has contributed to renewed interest in how universities can support student well-being beyond clinical services or personal resilience strategies. Students frequently report challenges related to loneliness, academic pressure, and feelings of not belonging, with potential consequences for both mental health and academic outcomes [6, 7]. Similar patterns are reflected in earlier work highlighting how students' experiences of belonging are deeply shaped by everyday social interactions and the relational conditions of university life [1]. Recognising the complexity of these experiences, researchers have increasingly called for institutional approaches that engage with the relational and contextual conditions of student well-being, including the learning environment, social connections, and broader cultural and structural factors [8].

This article contributes to this field by examining how students narrate experiences of well-being and belonging across different phases of student life. Rather than focusing only on initial transitions, we explore how inclusion and exclusion unfold over time through everyday interactions and institutional contexts. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from relational welfare [3] and mattering [9, 10], we explore how inclusion and exclusion are felt, signalled, and responded to within the university setting.

Theoretical Framework: Welfare as Relational and Complex

Recent scholarship has emphasised the need to move beyond individual-level understandings of well-being and consider its relational and collective dimensions. Atkinson et al. [11] describe well-being as a shared experience, one that emerges through interactions and social connectedness. This perspective challenges dominant neoliberal approaches, which often place responsibility for well-being on the individual and overlook wider social and structural influences [3]. Prilleltensky [10] offers a three-part model of well-being that incorporates personal, relational, and collective components. From this view, well-being cannot be fully understood without considering how individuals relate to others and to the broader systems in which they are embedded. This framework has recently been expanded to position mattering as a mediating process between fairness and well-being, highlighting the importance of systemic justice in fostering wellness [4].

Similarly, von Heimburg et al. [12] propose a model of universal well-being as a public good, highlighting the need for coordinated efforts across personal, relational, and systemic levels to promote fairness, mattering, and health. In parallel, researchers have argued for the importance of complexity theory in understanding well-being. Rod et al. [13] suggest that well-being outcomes are often shaped by non-linear processes, feedback loops, and interactions across multiple layers of experience. Applied to the university context, this implies that student well-being is influenced not only by individual behaviours or isolated events, but also by cumulative interactions within academic, social, and institutional systems [14, 15]. Together, these perspectives inform our analytical approach and guide our interpretation of student narratives. As demonstrated in previous research, including our own earlier study of social inclusion in higher education [1], student well-being is not only individually experienced but co-constructed through interactions across time, space, and institutional culture.

Methodology

The analysis presented in this article is based on 470 student-written narratives collected via the SenseMaker® platform between October 2020 and October 2023. Students aged 18 and above were invited to share personal stories about experiences during university that had affected their well-being. A total of 604 narratives were submitted, of which 470 were selected for analysis based on their relevance to interpersonal relationships and social experiences. Participants included undergraduate and postgraduate students with variation in age, gender, and field of study. Approximately two-thirds identified as women, and the remainder as men. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the relevant institutional review boards. This article builds on a previous study that analysed early experiences of social inclusion in student life [1]. Here, we revisit the same material from a different angle, with a focus on how well-being is shaped across time and through relational and institutional dynamic.

The analysis followed the principles of reflexive thematic analysis [2]. The data were coded inductively, and themes were developed through an iterative process involving multiple rounds of reading, coding, and discussion. The analytical process was guided by theoretical perspectives on relational welfare [3], mattering [4, 9, 10], and complexity [13]. Particular attention was paid to how students described experiences that had a lasting emotional or existential impact, and to how these experiences reflected relational and systemic conditions.

Findings and Analysis

This section presents the main themes identified through the thematic analysis of student narratives. The findings focus on how students experienced well-being and belonging through everyday relational processes, and how certain conditions contributed to either inclusion or exclusion. Three overarching themes were developed: small signs of mattering, mechanisms of exclusion, and dynamics of vulnerability. These themes reflect the ways in which students navigated social life at university and how these experiences influenced their mental health.

Small Signs of Mattering

Student narratives show that even modest social gestures can carry substantial emotional weight. Rather than functioning as isolated occurrences, these acts formed part of an everyday relational fabric that signalled recognition and belonging. These moments played a fundamental role in students' well-being, aligning with the idea of mattering as a dual experience of feeling valued and adding value



[10]. One student shared, *"I remember so clearly when, last autumn, the person I sat next to in a lecture asked if I wanted to join them for a grocery trip. That question probably changed the entire course of my student life here in Trondheim!"* Though seemingly simple, this invitation embodied a broader social message: you are seen, included, and welcome. Such gestures create the kind of stability and psychological safety that sustain the student environment. These interactions are not trivial; they perform the essential social function of confirming one's existence within a community. Such relational recognition resists the cultural and political pressures that frame well-being as an individual responsibility shaped by market-driven ideals of the autonomous, self-improving subject, a dynamic critically discussed by White [3]. Relationality, in this sense, counters the tendency to reduce well-being to an internal attribute or an individual pursuit, highlighting instead its inherently social and co-constructed character. When these gestures are absent or withdrawn, students reported feeling invisible or peripheral. The lack of social recognition eroded not only their sense of mattering but their motivation to remain engaged in academic life. As one student reflected, *"I realized too late how important it was to find your group... I feel like I'm paying for it now, after graduation, when everyone has their group and I'm left out"*.

Mechanisms of Exclusion

Exclusion was seldom explicit. Instead, it unfolded through everyday practices and norms that positioned some students as belonging, while others were gradually marginalised. Such social systems are dynamic and responsive to feedback; initial experiences of disconnection can trigger reinforcing loops of isolation, deepening students' sense of exclusion over time [13]. In one narrative, a student described how social rituals involving alcohol created invisible boundaries: *"I learned not to skip drinking during the welcome week. I quickly realized that parties were happening without me being told"*. The presence of such exclusionary norms illustrates how cultural expectations function as structural barriers, selectively including those who conform and sidelining those who do not. Another narrative revealed how digital exclusion reinforced social isolation: *"I was excluded and ignored... They had a Facebook group I wasn't part of"*. This act, while perhaps not deliberate, had significant implications. As participation became increasingly tied to digital communication, exclusion from the group meant being cut off from both social and academic collaboration. From a relational and systemic standpoint, this reflects how small exclusions can accumulate and become entrenched. This suggests that well-being might be better understood not merely as an individual state, but as something deeply shaped by the social and structural conditions in which students participate and seek belonging [11]. The student who wrote, *"It was difficult to find a place if you didn't drink or weren't into sports... I felt completely alone,"* underscores this relational misalignment. When dominant practices in student life are not inclusive, individuals may be structurally positioned outside the spaces where belonging is formed.

Dynamics of Vulnerability

Vulnerability in the student narratives was often associated with transition points, beginning university, changing programs, or coping with health crises. Rather than viewing distress as solely located within the individual, these accounts can be read as illustrating how well-being emerges from and is shaped by an interplay of personal, structural and relational forces [12]. One student, for example, wrote, *"I quit a program I had started... The whole process left me feeling alone and like a failure"*. This account highlights how institutional design can either mitigate or magnify personal challenges. Past experiences of exclusion also shaped ongoing engagement. One student noted, *"I feel generally anxious at school, so I stay quiet. That means people don't really get to know me"*. This reflects the cumulative nature of exclusion: it restricts not only current participation but also the development of future connections, thereby compounding vulnerability.

Structural vulnerabilities such as illness, housing instability, and financial strain were recurrent themes. These experiences reveal the inadequacy of a purely individualised view of well-being. One student shared, *"I got seriously ill my first year and had surgery... Ideally, I would have taken fewer courses without financial worry"*. Another reported, *"It started a domino effect... In the end, I dropped out with only a 30-credit master's thesis left"*. These stories are not anomalies but indicators of systemic friction points where institutional inflexibility fails to meet students' lived realities. Still, some students pointed to relational infrastructures that buffered these challenges. For instance, *"The collective I moved into has been crucial... We cook Sunday dinners together and support each other in crisis"*. This illustrates

how co-created community practices can act as scaffolding for those navigating academic and personal uncertainty, aligning with the notion of being well together [11].

Discussion

The findings presented above reinforce the idea that student well-being cannot be reduced to individual characteristics or efforts. Instead, it emerges from the interplay of social recognition, institutional design, and broader cultural norms. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of relational well-being [3], mattering [4, 10], and complexity theory [13], it becomes clear that everyday relational experiences such as inclusion in group chats or being acknowledged in daily interactions can have lasting psychological effects.

When students are recognised, invited, or remembered, they experience what is termed mattering, a core experience that promotes motivation, engagement, and mental stability [4, 10]. In contrast, the absence of such recognition, often subtle and systemic, can erode students' sense of identity and place, initiating negative feedback loops that reinforce disconnection. These processes are not simply interpersonal but are embedded in institutional cultures and systems that either foster or hinder relational opportunities. Understanding well-being as both relational and systemic calls for a fundamental shift in how universities operate. Institutions must consider the cumulative impact of small interactions across time and settings [12, 13]. Seemingly minor exclusions can escalate into marginalisation if not addressed at structural and cultural levels. Therefore, addressing student well-being requires more than providing reactive support services; it necessitates proactive, embedded practices that foster inclusion as an everyday norm. This perspective challenges deficit-oriented approaches to student well-being, which often locate problems within individuals. Instead, the data support a paradigm where well-being is seen as a shared responsibility, co-produced through environments that nurture fairness, participation, and connection. Being well together requires both institutional attention to spatial, cultural and temporal inequalities, and a relational ethic that values students not just as learners, but as whole persons within dynamic social systems [11].

Conclusion

This study examined how university students experience well-being and belonging through everyday relational processes. Drawing on a large collection of first-person narratives, we identified patterns that reveal how inclusion and exclusion are signalled, interpreted, and internalised. The findings affirm that student well-being is not an isolated phenomenon, but emerges at the intersection of institutional design, cultural norms, and everyday interactions. Through a relational welfare lens, we have illustrated how brief yet significant moments of recognition, patterns of subtle exclusion, and layers of structural vulnerability collectively shape students' lives. Rather than framing well-being as an individual responsibility, these insights support a systemic approach grounded in fairness, recognition, and shared responsibility [4]. Such an approach involves cultivating "well-being ecosystems" that foster participation, dignity, and care [12]. Universities must be understood not merely as sites of knowledge transmission, but as dynamic social environments where belonging is co-created. This calls for a rethinking of student well-being, not as individual adaptation, but as something shaped by institutional cultures, relationships, and everyday practices. Efforts to support well-being must go beyond isolated initiatives and instead be embedded in the structures of teaching, student support and campus life. When inclusion and connection are treated as shared responsibilities, relational well-being becomes a tangible goal rather than an abstract ideal.



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