HIGHER EDUCATION – A MECHANISM TO SUPPORT WELL-BEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

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Abstract

In recent years there has been increased awareness of the need to promote mental health and well-being within our communities. In the Higher Education sector this has led to a focus on two areas; support for those with identified mental health conditions, and more general well-being support to counteract the potential stress impact of study and assessment. In both cases aspects of the educational process are seen as potentially problematic or aggravating and the goal is to minimize a negative mental health impact.

Whilst the benefits of educational attainment at society, community and individual levels relating to economic opportunity and lifetime health are widely researched, the potential for individual mental health and well-being benefits whilst actively engaged in higher education seem to be largely overlooked in the literature.

In a study of part-time distance learners' experiences of interrupted study at The Open University, UK, participants highlighted the importance of returning to study in order to support their mental health. The students had taken an unplanned interruption due to being impacted by a range of life events. During the period of their interruption, they revaluated their study plans before reregistering to return. Amongst those students who decided to resume their studies, whilst qualification goals remained important, these leaners also identified a mental health and well-being benefit from being engaged in education which was a key factor in their decision to return.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with thirteen part-time distance learners who had experience of interrupted study. This paper reports on the links these students made between study and their on-going mental health and well-being. Whilst managing their studies alongside work and family commitments was sometimes stressful, several students reported an overall benefit to their mental health from returning to and continuing their studies. This paper is linked to a larger study looking to improve the advice and guidance offered to students considering taking a formal interruption and thus to develop a better understanding of how to support them to continue with their studies when they experience difficulties or, if they decide to interrupt, facilitate their return to study.

Keywords: mental health, well-being, Higher Education, interrupted study, part-time, distance learners.

1 INTRODUCTION

The UK mental health charity Mind [1] report that one in four adults in the UK will experience some form of mental health problem each year and that one in six UK adults are experiencing poor mental health in any given week. Approximately one in eight of those individuals are receiving treatment to support their mental health [1] with the remaining seven not receiving any formal support. These figures are likely to be under reported due to the ongoing stigma around mental health and a lack of clarity on what constitutes a mental health problem. Some individuals may experience poor well-being but not necessarily identify it as a mental health problem.

There has been extensive research into the impact of educational attainment on lifetime mental health, frequently showing that higher educational attainment positively impacts life-time mental health. This is largely attributed to improved employment opportunities and higher economic status [2]. There is a significant relationship between education, income, and life satisfaction, which links to mental well-being [3]. However, these studies are focused on later life impact of prior educational attainment and not concerned with mental health during the period of study. At community and societal levels, greater educational attainment correlates to reduced crime, greater political engagement and improved mental and physical health outcomes throughout the life course [2,4].

In recent years Higher Educations institutions have become increasingly concerned about the well-being and mental health of their students. Research suggests that students with declared mental health conditions have lower rates of completion and lower levels of attainment, both generally [5], and specifically in distance learning [6]. Being an HE student has been identified as a possible risk factor for developing or aggravating mental health conditions [7].

In this study of distance learners' experiences of interrupted study the majority of students who had resumed study after an unplanned break cited supporting mental health as an impetus for continued engagement. This use of education as a support for mental health and well-being was unexpected, particularly in cases where poor mental health was mentioned as a contributory factor in the decision to interrupt their studies.

2   METHOD

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with thirteen part-time distance learners who had taken an unplanned interruption in their studies. Questions explored the students' experiences before, during and post their interruption of studies and encouraged free flowing expression of individual reflective narratives. The students were not directly asked about mental health and well-being, but all participants either directly or indirectly referred to mental health impacts and considerations relating to both pausing and resuming their studies.

Interviews were conducted using Skype and lasted around an hour each. The conversations were recorded, and transcription completed by the author using Sonocent Notetaker and Dragon voice recognition software. Participants were provided with a copy of their transcript for review and given the opportunity to verify agreement for inclusion in the study. Transcripts were coded by hand using an eclectic coding method [8], and key themes identified to enable comparison of the individual experiences. Each of the participants was given a pseudonym and quotes carefully selected to ensure anonymity

This study has been reviewed by the Human Research and Ethics Committee at The Open University, UK and received a favorable opinion.

3   FINDINGS

Of the thirteen students interviewed, eight had returned to study on the following presentation of their partially completed module, three took a longer study break but had returned within three years, and the remaining two had discontinued study.

There was a variety of triggers for the unplanned interruption to studies, including bereavement, relationship breakdown, new baby, relocation, and employment pressures. All the students talked about their studies being a source of additional stress during a difficult period in their life. For example:

> Patrick "there was no way I could keep that pace up […] I had to stop"

> John "I was really overwhelmed […] it just got too hard, and I couldn't do it anymore, so that forced my hand into stopping"

Although most found the decision to interrupt a difficult one to make, most expressed a feeling of significant relief once the decision had been made, with comments such as:

> Jane "I felt like the weight of the world had been lifted off my shoulders"

> Lucy "It was like pressing a button […] it was a relief"

> Ingrid "a huge load was lifted off my shoulders"

Further details of the students' experiences of deciding to interrupt their studies and of the interruption period will be reported elsewhere. The remainder of this paper will report on how the students described their return to study as an enabler of improved well-being and mental health.

The two students who decided not to resume their studies did not mention having felt any possible mental health benefits of their studies, implied it was an expensive, in terms of both time and money, and both felt they could satisfy their wish to continue learning through informal means.

> *George "it's just a hobby to me [...] I was trying to prioritise, you know like St Paul says, you know, put away the childish things [...] I occasionally do MOOCs"*

> *David "I don't think I have lost much on balance [...] If I want to learn about something at night-time, I can go and watch a YouTube documentary about any subject under the sun."*

George focused on time being the scarce resource which prevented him from resuming formal study. With young children and full-time employment he concluded that it was selfish to spend so much time indulging in his hobby of learning. David felt that the current high cost of higher education meant it was no longer good value for money, particularly as the internet now offers many free learning opportunities. However, both rated their formal learning experiences as part-time students very highly and would return if they had unlimited time and money. Both of these students already held degrees from other institutions.

Of the remaining eleven students, six explicitly talked about study as part of supporting their mental health, whilst two others implicitly alluded to mental health or well being benefits.

The implied comments included having a love or passion for learning, a feeling of accomplishment and desire to achieve a qualification goal. Although all the students talked about times of stress relating to their studies, sometimes in quite strong terms such as 'hellish', 'impossible' and 'paralysing', they also mentioned periods of enjoyment and satisfaction.

Those who explicitly talked about well-being or mental health described study as a form of escapism which helped them detach from the pressures of everyday life.

> *Patrick "It's my third space. People talk about home and work and then there being a - you know - the OU is my third space. It's the place where, when I'm studying, I'm almost a different person in that context [...] there are lots of spin-off benefits to my studied, some of which are skills based, but more, its more about mental well-being than anything else, if I'm honest."*

> *Lucy "to be honest, if I didn't do it, I think I would be in trouble mentally, psychologically. [...] you know how sometimes people say having a book is like having a garden in your pocket, this is my little sacred place. I go here and I'm distracted and I'm learning at the same time and it's a bit of a life saver."*

> *Alice "it is sort of a break as well to study, in a way. You can just sit quietly with your books, and it is sort of odd to say but it is sort of relaxation in a way."*

There were multiple references to study boosting self-esteem.

> *Ingrid "I started believing in myself as I went on, I became more self-confident, especially seeing my grades improve."*

> *Louise "I don't know if it is how, I personally, measure my success [...] I'm constantly trying to stretch myself I guess, because of what I was told as a teenager, you know 'you're not going to do anything'. I have always had that mentality of actually well I'm going to prove you wrong."*

Both Ingrid and Louise expect they will have to stop studying in the near future, for financial reasons, and suggested that they will miss both the potential to escape into study and the reinforcement of positive feedback which has become important for maintaining their self-esteem.

Although most of the students felt their family and friends were generally supportive of them studying, there was a theme of these supporters also dismissing its importance or pushing for study to be paused or stopped if the students faced challenges in other areas of their life.

> *Jane "my footballing friends [...] they understand I want to finish this particular degree, I suspect when I tell them that I'm probably going to do another course after that I might not get such a supportive response [...] my mother is very proud of what I do but occasionally she'll say 'you know you ought to think about yourself more and enjoy, go out and enjoy yourself' and I'm thinking well actually I quite enjoy my learning thank you very much!"*

> *Alice "if I've got a TMA due [my children say] 'well you don't have to do it [...] you are only doing it for fun!'"*

> *Mark "she's just like 'well you don't need to do this, you'll be absolutely fine if you don't do this' Its just the way she's built and she's just looking after her kids I suppose, and she doesn't want to see them under stress. Always supportive, but always a worrier I would describe my mother."*

Having had the experience of returning to study after an unplanned break some of the students consciously identified that they needed to give study a higher priority in their lives.

> Lucy "I'm making far more time for it, I'm prioritising it, but I'm also doing far more of it […] it makes it clear to everyone around me this is serious, and I need time to do it."

> Patrick "I do see OU study as part of who I am and therefore I will keep doing it […] its kind of cleansing […] you have to concentrate really hard on it to the exclusion of everything else and in doing so you kind of rinse out a whole load of stuff, and I think OU study is particularly good in that respect"

4   DISCUSSION

The majority of literature on student mental health within higher education assumes engagement in study is a stressor and aggravator, which frequently leads to reduced well-being and mental health. Whilst that is a legitimate concern, and HE institutions should be taking steps to minimise those negative impacts, this study unexpectedly uncovered some students explicitly engaging in part-time distance higher education as an active support for their mental well-being. Whilst these students were learning and are likely to benefit in the longer term from the well documented [2,3] improved health outcomes due to increased employment opportunities which are available to those with higher levels of education, they also perceive an important short-term mental health benefit.

Alongside the increased self-esteem from receiving well-structured feedback [9], and achievement of milestones and goals [10], students reported finding engagement in formal study a useful means to providing respite from other aspects of their lives. The structure of formal study appeared to legitimise regularly spending time away from other responsibilities, allowing a needed diversion, even a form of escapism. Although all the students cited study stress as a factor in their decision to take an unplanned interruptions of studies, in most cases there was also a significant life event that triggered the need to take a break. It appeared that for these students, study only became problematic when the stresses of everyday life peaked due to life events such as births, deaths, divorce, and relocation. In the absence of a stressful life event, study was providing an antidote to more general pressures which might have otherwise led to reduced well-being or poor mental health. The students found the decision to pause their studies to be difficult, presumably because either consciously or subconsciously they were aware that they were losing part of their mental health support at a time when other factors were negatively impacting their well-being. However, from a practical perspective study is the life element which can easily be sacrificed because it is optional, whilst the other aspects (e.g. employment and family matters) are less or not negotiable. These students also felt pressure from other people in their lives to pause or stop studying as it was not seen by outsiders as a high priority activity and was distracting from other more important activities. There was no evidence of family and friends discouraging the students from interrupting their studies and most were reported to be neutral or suggesting caution regarding the student's decisions to resume study.

4.1   Further work

This paper reports on one element of the analysis from thirteen student interviews. Future publications will present other aspects of this data and offer a detailed analysis of these students' experiences of interrupted study. After the completion of the wider study into student experiences of interrupted study, it is hoped to further explore this theme of using part-time study as a positive support for mental health and well-being.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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