

# Differences in the Self-Assessments of Positive Mental Health of Students of the Teacher Study Programme regarding University Teachers' Support



## Teaching (Today for) Tomorrow: Bridging the Gap between the Classroom and Reality

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## Abstract

In today's rhythm of life and the prevalence of mental health problems among young people, there is a growing need at faculties for strategies that promote and maintain a high level of students' mental health and their well-being. Students face different challenges that can significantly affect their academic success, personal development and overall quality of life, and this requires the involvement of their teachers in creating a stimulating environment that would nurture the mental well-being of students. The goal of this research was to investigate the existence of differences in the self-assessment of positive mental health of students who have and do not have the support of university teachers during their studies, as well as possibly what specific characteristics of positive mental health are involved. The sample of participants consisted of 359 students of the Faculty of Teacher Education of the University of Zagreb, Croatia and the Faculty of Educational Sciences of the Jurja Dobrila University of Pula, Croatia. For the purposes of the research, the Mental health continuum-short form - MHC-SF questionnaire was used and an independent scale related to individual features of the environment support was added. Differences in the self-assessments of individual characteristics of students' positive mental health were examined based on discriminant analysis in order to gain insight into the latent dimensions of these differences. The results confirmed the existence of statistically significant differences in the self-assessment of individual characteristics of students' positive mental health considering the support or lack of support given by their university teachers. Regardless of the characteristics of university teacher support, the results also showed that a certain number of students felt that university teachers did not provide support when it comes to positive mental health characteristics.

**Key words:**

academic success; environment; psychoemotional gain; support strategies; university teachers' competencies

**Introduction**

Research indicates that the academic success of university students is closely related to their mental or psychological state and that the absence of psychological disorders such as anxiety, stress and depression significantly improves the probability of students' academic success (Akram et al., 2022; Cárdenas et al., 2022; Dodd et al., 2021). Students who have an appropriate psychological and mental state are more likely to succeed in an academic environment, which contributes to the well-being of their positive mental health (Wang, 2023).

Mental health well-being generally refers to one's degree of happiness and satisfaction with his/her personal, professional or social life (Fan & Wang, 2022; Garg & Rastogi, 2009; Wang et al., 2021). Emphasizing positive mental health as a priority, some studies (Bandura 1992; as cited in Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994) associate positive mental health with various constructs of competence, self-efficacy and individual empowerment, followed by (Kovess-Masfety et al., 2005) positive affect, i.e. emotions of happiness, a personality type that includes self-esteem and resilience. Because positive mental health affects how we think, feel, and act, as well as how we deal with stress, how we relate to others, and how we make decisions, students with optimal levels of mental health perform more effectively in the academic environment that provides support (Rodríguez-Fernández et al., 2018; Ventura-León et al., 2022).

However, the OECD (2022) states that 49 % of young people do not have access to mental health support and unfortunately, many students have mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and stress. They feel pressured by academic expectations, social interactions and personal challenges, and the protection of young people's mental health is one of the priorities of the EU and its member states. University teachers can play a significant positive role in this process. By recognizing the connection between mental health and academic success, university teachers can have a major impact on the emotional, psychological and social well-being and welfare of students.

Research studies (Derakhshan, 2022; Derakhshan et al., 2022; Feng et al., 2019; Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020; Paloş et al., 2020; Wang & Derakhshan, 2023) which have been conducted worldwide on the interplay of care of university teachers, their support and students' emotions during their studies, which relate to behaviours during mutual communication and their pedagogical consequences, tried to investigate potential outcomes of the care and support of university teachers in the context of teaching and learning, and of the ways to more effectively prevent mental health problems among students, taking into account their special needs. The results of the study showed that caring for students can promote their well-being in an academic environment and that it promotes their mental health and leads them to a deeper engagement with learning.

In the research (Wang, 2023), the connection between the teacher's support in learning process and the well-being of students is elucidate. Namely, students' perceptions of their teachers' caring and supportive behaviours can largely influence their psychological and subjective well-being and this may be instructive for teachers who seek to bring about positive changes in their students' well-being. The author emphasizes that teachers must continuously support them in

the learning process so that it would have a positive effect on the student's mental health.

When it comes to the support of university teachers, especially in times of stress and crisis, young people observe the behaviours and emotions of adults, including student university teachers, in order to learn how to manage their own emotions. In this sense, university teachers are expected to be a good example and support, and to undertake activities to reduce student stress, to provide support for the well-being of students, and to apply positive coping strategies (UNICEF, 2022).

In the context of the prevalence of mental health difficulties among young people, there is a growing need in colleges for strategies that promote and maintain high levels of student mental health and well-being. Therefore, this work wants to stimulate issues related to the need to ensure student education that is inclusive, fair and high-quality for all students, regardless of their diversity. Today more than ever, this refers to the competencies of university teachers, pointing out, first of all, that what is necessary is a whole system of methodical and didactic differentiated approaches and support to those students who need it additionally, along with education and training of university teachers.

The researches on the influence of university teachers on the specific characteristics of positive mental health of students are rare. For this reason, in this research, the question is which aspects of positive mental health are influenced by university teachers. The goal of this research is to find differences in the self-assessments of positive mental health of students who have and do not have the support of university teachers during their studies and, if there are, what are the specific characteristics of mental health for the observed groups of participants. The purpose of the research is related to strategies that promote and maintain high levels of students' mental health and well-being, involving their university teachers with special emphasis on the competencies of university teachers, in order to increase the academic achievements of university students.

In accordance with the above, the hypothesis (H1) was put forward that there are statistically significant differences in the self-assessment of certain characteristics of positive mental health of students who have and do not have the support of university teachers. In this way, based on a set of items that describe the self-assessment of certain characteristics of positive mental health, it is possible to statistically significantly predict the belonging to the group of students who had and those who did not have the support of university teachers.

## **Research Methodology**

### ***Sample of participant***

The sample of participants was convenient, consisting of a total of 359 students of university integrated undergraduate and graduate teacher studies and university undergraduate and graduate early and preschool education at the Faculty of Teacher Education of the University of Zagreb and the Faculty of Educational Sciences of the Juraj Dobrila University of Pula. There were 95.5 % female students and 4.5 % male students participating in the research. The majority of students were between the ages of 19 and 23 (82.7 %), 10.3 % of students were aged 24 to 29, and 7 % of students were over 30 years of age. Most of the participants were undergraduates (57 %), followed by students attending integrated studies (30.9 %) and graduate studies (12 %). Considering the method of study, 83.3 % were full-time students and 16.7 % part-time students.

In the total sample, 59 % of participants estimated that they had support from university teachers, and 41 % that they did not have support from teachers regarding the characteristics of positive mental health.

### ***Measuring instrument, item sample and research method***

The Mental health continuum-short form - MHC-SF questionnaire was used in the research. It was validated on the population of Croatian students (Vuletić et al., 2018), and had good metric characteristics ( $\alpha=0.92$ ). The author's consent was obtained for its use. The original version of the questionnaire consists of 14 items that aim to measure positive mental health (Keyes 2006; Lamers et al., 2011). Confirmatory factor analysis confirmed the existence of three subscales in the Croatian version of the questionnaire: emotional well-being, psychological well-being and social well-being, which also correspond to the assumed structure of the original model (Lamers et al., 2011). The answers in the aforementioned questionnaire related to the frequency of students' feelings in the past three months related to their positive mental health and represents a predictor set of items. Assessments were made on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1= never, 2= once or twice, 3= once a week, 4= several times a week, 5= almost every day, 6= every day).

Another independent Environmental Support Scale related to individual features of environmental support was added to the questionnaire for the purposes of this research by the authors of the manuscript. It consists of 8 items, and for the purposes of this research, the criterion item - support of university teachers - was used. Answers on the Environmental Support Scale referred to the presence or absence of support from university teachers (yes/no). The variable of university teacher support is generally about the degree of assistance, attention, and guidance that students receive within a particular learning environment such as university.

### ***Method of data collection and processing***

Data were collected through a Google form during the 2022/2023 academic year. The questionnaire was sent to every student of the Teacher Training Faculty of the University of Zagreb and the Faculty of Educational Sciences of the Juraj Dobrila University of Pula. Students' access to the questionnaire was voluntary and anonymous, and they could refuse to fill out the questionnaire or decide not to answer a question or statement at any time. The research was previously approved by the Committee for the Evaluation of Ethics in Research of the Juraj Dobrila University of Pula. The data were calculated based on basic statistical parameters, multivariate analysis of variance and discriminant analysis, which are an integrated part of the licensed SPSS program.

### ***Results and Discussion***

Based on descriptive indicators, the self-assessments that are considered high, that refer to positive feelings in the last three months and that are manifested on average "almost every day" (Table 1) are almost entirely related to psychological well-being.

Other items were mostly self-assessed in the range of "several times a week", which is a very good indicator because the items were set in the form of characteristics of students' positive mental health. Also, the "never" category, which is very favourable, was not evaluated by any of the research participants for the first three items that describe emotional well-being.

Also, it is important to note that 41 % of participants report that they did not have support from teachers regarding the characteristics of positive mental health.

Table 1

Basic statistical parameters of the most evaluated characteristics of positive mental health

<i>Items</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
<i>In the past 3 months, how often have you felt...</i>					
1. ...happy.	359	2	6	4.32	.98
2. ...interested in life/that your life matters to you in general.	359	2	6	4.6	1.29
3. ...satisfied with life.	359	2	6	4.39	1.27

4. ...tha t you are contri butin g in any mann er to the socie ty you live in.	359	1	6	3.87	1.31
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5. ...you belon g to the com muni ty and are acce pted by the com muni ty. (it can be the wider com muni ty wher e you live or, for exam ple, the com muni ty of stude nts, sport s, some assoc iation in whic h you are activ e, etc.).	359	1	6	4.39	1.36
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6. ...that the society you live in is good and acceptable to you and other people.	359	1	6	4.32	1.34
7. ...that people are basically good.	359	1	6	3.82	1.26
8. ...that the way society functions makes sense to you.	359	1	6	3.70	1.36
9. ...satisfied with most aspects of your character.	359	1	6	4.37	1.25



10. ... you are copin g well with your daily oblig ation s.	359	1	6	4.22	1.22
11. ... havin g a good relati onshi p of unde rstan ding with close perso ns.	359	1	6	4.77	1.20
12. ...the exper ience of havin g devel oped into a bette r perso n.	359	1	6	4.66	1.19

13. ...fre e to expre ss your opini on and ideas .	359	1	6	4.59	1.30
14. ...tha t your life is mean ingful and has a purp ose (direc tion)	359	1	6	4.57	1.41

Differences in the self-assessment of certain characteristics of positive mental health by students, considering whether students had or did not have the support of university teachers, were examined based on discriminant analysis in order to gain insight into the latent dimensions of these differences. Also, discriminant analysis was also used for the purpose of investigating the overall measure of the intensity of the positive experience of mental health and its specificity between groups. Previously, multivariate analysis of variance was used to test the differences between groups of students who had or did not have the support of university teachers in relation to the combination of individual characteristics of positive mental health. The analysis showed that there were statistically significant differences in certain characteristics of positive mental health between the observed groups of students ( $\Lambda = .811$ ,  $p = .000$ .) Accordingly, in this paper, a discriminant analysis was performed on a set of items that describe certain characteristics of students' positive mental health, namely students who had the university teachers' support and those who did not have university teachers' support. Given that a discriminant analysis was performed on only two groups of participants - students who had university teachers' support and those who did not have university teachers' support, one discriminant function was obtained that is statistically significant at the  $p = .01$  level (Table 2) and discriminates the observed groups of participants. Canonical correlation shows a relatively good discriminating power of this function in a practical sense.

Table 2

# Characteristic root and Wilks Lambda

Function	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Canonical Correlation	Wilks' Lambda	$\chi^2$	df	p
1	100	100	.328	.892	40	14	.000

Table 3

Standardized canonical discriminant function coefficients (C) and matrix structure (S)

Items	C	S
...happy.	.077	.422
...interested in life/ that your life matters to you in general.	.929	.611*
...satisfied with life.	-.334	.379
...that you are contributing in any manner to the society you live in.	.319	.326
...you belong to the community and are accepted by the community. (it can be the wider community where you live or, for example, the community of students, sports, some association in which you are active, etc.).	-.344	.293
...that the society you live in is good and acceptable to you and other people.	.191	.259
...that people are basically good.	-.808	-.023
...that the way society functions makes sense to you.	.134	.120
...satisfied with most aspects of your character.	-.120	.391
... you are coping well with your daily obligations.	.047	.453
...having a good relationship of understanding with close persons.	1.097	.620*
...the experience of having developed into a better person.	-.050	.369
...free to express your opinion and ideas.	-.612	.295

\* variable's largest absolute correlation

From the data presented in Table 3, it follows that students who had the support of university teachers and those who did not have such support differ most from each other in their self-assessments in the following characteristics: ...having a good relationship of understanding with close persons and ...interested in life/ that your life matters to you in general.

Table 4  
Centroids of groups

	f
yes	.289
no	-.416

Based on the insight into the positions of the centroids (Table 4), it is evident that students differ in the mentioned characteristics in such a way that students who had the support of university teachers evaluated the mentioned positive characteristics of mental health. The results can be interpreted on the basis of the main concept of well-being (Keyes, 2002), given that the applied questionnaire can also be used as a diagnostic category (as flourishing, moderately mentally healthy or languishing classification) and it can be concluded that the support of university teachers had the greatest impact on the emotional and psychological well-being of students. This confirms the hypothesis that there are statistically significant differences in the self-assessment of certain characteristics of positive mental health of students who have and do not have the support of university teachers, that is, on the basis of a set of items that describe the self-assessment of certain characteristics of positive mental health, it is possible to statistically significantly predict belonging to the group of students who had and those who did not have the support of university teachers.

In accordance with the above, some authors (Garg and Rastogi, 2009, Lei et al., 2018) find the reasons for the strong connection between teacher support and student well-being in the fact that supporting students to attain their desired learning goals makes students feel happy and satisfied. These two feelings, as pointed out by, are the main indicators of students' psychological well-being.

### Conclusion

The goal of this research was to investigate the existence of differences in the self-assessment of positive mental health of students who have and do not have the support of university teachers during their studies, as well as possibly what specific characteristics of positive mental health are involved. Based on the research results, it is concluded that there are such differences I. e. groups differ most from each other in their self-assessments in the characteristics:

...having a good relationship of understanding with close persons and ...interested in life/ that your life matters to you in general. From an insight into the latent dimensions of these differences in relation to the three subscales of the Croatian version of the questionnaire, it is concluded that the support of university teachers had the greatest impact on the emotional and psychological well-being of students. Regardless of the fact that the results show that the perception of these university students about their mental health is generally positive, regardless of the support of university teachers, the results show that a certain number of students feel that university teachers do not provide them with support when it comes to positive mental health.

The results of this research, in addition to the scientific insight into the influence of university teachers on the positive mental health of their students and contribution to the scarce literature in this sense, open up the possibility to consider and create guidelines for strategies that promote and maintain a high level of students' mental health with special emphasis on the competencies of university teachers and strengthen protective factors at the universities themselves. In doing so, special emphasis should be placed on additional continuous education of university teachers related to the mental health of students in the context of quality inclusive university practice, in terms of monitoring and supporting students with various difficulties during their studies, which is another way of strengthening the competences of university teachers so that they are better prepared for different ways of giving support to students. Based on the above, this research has certain practical implications for university teachers to use different support strategies to motivate students to learn. In addition, there is room for a further research question related to why some students do not perceive the support of university teachers, which indicates the need for further research.

Although the results obtained in this research are satisfactory, it is necessary to point to some limitations and suggestions for future research. The limitations of this research are related to the convenient sample of participants. In addition, the limitations also apply to the answers collected through the Google form, and it can be assumed that students who are more motivated and open to cooperation, and therefore students with a more positive mental health, participated in filling out the questionnaire. Also, on this occasion, the assumptions for linear discriminant analysis as independence and non-multicollinearity were not examined, which, if violated, could affect the interpretation of the results.

Lastly, while inclusion in education was initially focused on groups that traditionally occupy a marginalized position in education, such as youth with disabilities, inclusive education is now conceptualized as the need to transform education systems as a whole, which includes the higher education level (Vantieghem et al., 2023). This understanding of inclusion starts from the point of view of social justice and equality and is known as 'Education for All' (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). Social justice in education in general means that the child and young person, not the subject curriculum, is at the centre of the learning and teaching process. This presupposes that at all levels of education there is an emphasis on recognizing the responsibility of educational fields to take into account differences, in order to create quality learning environments for all, while maintaining a clear understanding of how systemic inequalities in education disproportionately affect certain (marginalized) groups (Ponet et al., 2021, as cited in Vantieghem et al., 2023). Regarding university teacher's competencies in this sense, Blömeke et al., (2015) and Vantieghem et al. (2023) emphasize that for teaching and performance, university teachers' situation-specific skills include processes such as perception and decision-making for students in specific situations. Since the competencies for inclusive education are defined as a complex combination of knowledge,

skills and attitudes that enable teaching professionals to successfully respond to the diversity of those they teach (Crick, 2008), there is a great need for research that provides better insight into the competencies of university teachers, especially in preserving the mental health of students during their studies.

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