

Guest Editorial

Educator Wellbeing in Higher Education

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Abstract

Research has repeatedly shown that quality of instruction and positive student–faculty interaction are significant contributors to student success and wellbeing in higher education. However, as additional workload expectations and resource constraints continue to impact higher education globally, there are growing concerns about stress, workload, burnout and intention to leave academia which have significant implications for the wellbeing of both students and educators. This special issue of *Student Success* explores the vital contribution of educator wellbeing to student success, and approaches to improving it.

2023 Special Issue: Educator Wellbeing in Higher Education

Wellbeing in Higher Education: Putting Educators in the Frame

In recent years there has been a surge in strikes and other forms of collective action in universities across the US (Sainato, 2023; Thelen, 2023), UK (Williams, 2023) and Australia (Ross, 2023) in response to poorly managed change, precarity, pay, and deteriorating workload protections. Seeking to “bargain for better workplaces, better universities, and better, healthier, working conditions for workers” (NTEU, 2023), the basis for such action is simply this: educator wellbeing is fundamental to providing a learning environment in which students can succeed. Building on prior work on educator wellbeing in this journal (e.g., Abery & Shipman Gunson, 2016; Brooker & Woodyatt, 2019; Gunson et al., 2016) this special issue of *Student Success* explores the vital contribution of educator wellbeing to student success, factors influencing wellbeing outcomes, and approaches to safeguarding and enhancing educator wellbeing.

Papers in this Collection

Interrogating the wellbeing experiences of those employed in higher education is, according to Henning et al. (2018), “a complex task” and one where “[a]t times the links are explicit and directly evident, whilst [at others] ... more subtle and implicit” (p. 2). The nine research articles and three practice reports in this special issue have been prepared by 34 contributors representing a diversity of educational roles including tenured and sessional educators, academic developers and professional staff from universities in Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and the US. The contributions centre educator experience and deploy a range of approaches including autoethnography, survey-based research, and interviews.

You Can’t Put Students First by Putting Staff Last

The first set of papers in this special issue explore the demands on educators that can impact their wellbeing, including tensions between educator identity and expectations of educators. Applying metaphorical analysis, **Kim Johnson** and **Anne Lane** found increasing student expectations of educators to be experts and engaging content creators and to possess high levels of humanistic personal qualities. They found that this does not necessarily align with how educators see themselves and that this misalignment



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can have negative impacts on educator wellbeing. Recognising the conflicting research–teaching priorities many educators face, Abbe Winter’s practice report describes a series of writing workshops created to support educators to develop writing wellness during over-crowded academic semesters to support their publishing aspirations and reconcile the demands of their dual identities as researchers and educators.

Demands on educators can also be created or exacerbated by external factors. In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed the higher education landscape. Educational responses to the pandemic privileged supporting student learning in the newly online learning environments associated with emergency remote education. Educators’ perceptions of their teaching competence contribute to teaching effectiveness and the quality of student learning, however, changes in the educational work environment can result in elevated levels of anxiety if educators feel ill-equipped to respond. Targeted training delivered at the right time has the potential to improve wellbeing through the development of improved skills, knowledge and self-efficacy. **Lauren Woodlands** and **Sarah Dart**’s contribution to the special issue evaluates the success of training workshops to equip novice online educators with the skills and confidence needed to transition to teaching synchronously online in response to the pandemic. They found that the delivery of short just-in-time workshops fostered confidence and expertise, which worked to reduce educator apprehension about using the technology, ultimately contributing to enhanced wellbeing and student outcomes.

The pandemic resulted in a rapid shift not just in the ways that teaching is delivered but also the places that teaching and learning occur. Based on interviews with educators in Aotearoa New Zealand, **Rachelle Hulbert**, **Peter Maslin** and **Sue Baker** focus on responses to the pandemic, identifying learnings from the collapse of institutional practice architecture during lockdowns and how the educators responded to the challenges associated with living at work during this time, and how educator wellbeing and self-efficacy is sustained through relationships.

Staff Working Conditions Create Student Learning Conditions

The second set of papers in this special issue explore the ways that educators have chosen to support their students and each other in the context of increased workloads in an increasingly resource-constrained environment. In their contribution, **Angela Jones**, **Susan Hopkins**, **Ana Larsen**, **Joanne Lisciandro**, **Anita Olds**, **Marguerite Westacott**, **Rebekah Sturniolo-Baker** and **Juliette Subramaniam** use autoethnographic reflection to explore how workload intensification, change fatigue and emotional labour during the pandemic impacted wellbeing of staff working in the enabling education sector in Australia, and the ways that educators prioritised workload and students to the detriment of their own wellbeing.

Many educators take on a significant pastoral care role to support their students (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014) but this can take a toll on their own wellbeing, particularly when they are working against entrenched racial and structural violence (Hamer & Lang, 2015). **Marrielle Myers** and **Lateefah Id-Deen** examine their experiences as Black women faculty mentors working with Black undergraduate students to support them to survive and thrive in an educational environment where they can be exposed to systematic cultural and organisational racism (Arday, 2022). Arguing that affinity mentoring is mutually beneficial for faculty and student wellbeing, they find that notwithstanding the emotional labour involved, mentoring has supported faculty members’ wellbeing, thereby disrupting traditional notions of service leading to burnout.

Collective approaches to supporting individual educator wellbeing are also evident in the final two papers in this section. Describing an initiative offering individual online staff consultations, **Antonella Strambi**, **James Hobson**, **Katherine Baldock** and **Amanda Janssen**, argue in their practice report that academic development offers opportunities for educators to develop professional knowledge and capacity, experience personal growth, and ultimately improve their wellbeing. The important contribution of peer-supported teaching practice is also advanced by **Lauren Hansen**, **Tim Chambers** and **Danni McCarthy**. In their contribution to the special issue, they describe the practice-led development of an institution-wide peer review of teaching program that situated educators as the driver of a relational peer-review process. Based on the idea that peers are best equipped to support each other, they argue that implementing such a program helps to ensure that all staff can access growth-fostering peer relationships regardless of their role, discipline or existing social capital.

Better Workplaces = Better Universities

Due to the “intrinsic interconnection between staff and student wellbeing” (Brewster et al., 2022, p. 584) the final set of papers in this special issue argue for the importance of formal policies and practices to support educator wellbeing. Focussing on those involved in the delivery of work-integrated learning, **Deanna Grant-Smith** and **Alicia Feldman** explore how resourcing, perceptions of support, and the alignment of institutional rhetoric and action through aspects like reward and recognition, shape educators’ assessments and experiences of wellbeing. This idea that institutional strategies have a direct impact on educator

wellbeing was also taken up by **Berni Cooper, Nicole Border** and **Felicity Couperthwaite**. Their practice report describes the development of a whole-of-university health and wellbeing strategy for staff and students using an appreciative inquiry inspired co-design approach. They argue that adopting a strengths-based approach enabled self-determined change and that the process of developing a strategy was itself a wellbeing intervention.

Higher education institutions have a duty of care to their educators; however, they also have a moral responsibility to act in ways that are not detrimental to employee wellbeing. This requires policies to be supported by practical action. Exposing staff to abusive and discriminatory comments causes harm and compromises their wellbeing. In their contribution to this special issue, **Samuel Cunningham, Abby Cathcart** and **Tina Graham** discuss the implementation of an automated screening mechanism to identify and screen out allegations, abuse, and discrimination in the open-text components of student evaluation of teaching surveys using a combination of dictionary and machine learning approaches.

The special issue closes with an integrative review of the literature on educator wellbeing prepared by the special issue editors, **Melinda Laundon** and **Deanna Grant-Smith**.

Concluding Remarks

Ironically, numerous educators who expressed an interest in the special issue were unable to contribute due to heavy teaching workloads, competing research priorities and general fatigue. As a result, a notable gap in the contributions is the voice of precariously employed educators on the impact of precarity on their own and their students' wellbeing. Although precarious employment is a known social determinant of health and wellbeing (Julià et al., 2017), tenuously employed educators underpin the higher education teaching workforce.

Campion and Nurse (2007) describe wellbeing as “being at ease with oneself, having meaning and fulfilment, experiencing positive emotions, being resilient and belonging to a respectful community” (p. s25). We believe that this kind of encompassing wellbeing can only be achieved where there is justice, fairness, equality and dignity for all higher education workers. In recent years we have seen students support industrial action in the higher education sector through remarkable displays of staff–student solidarity in recognition of the reality that educator and student wellbeing are inextricably linked (Cassidy, 2023; Park et al. 2023; Woroni, 2023). This special issue similarly calls upon all of us to act in solidarity to support each other's wellbeing and in doing so, support student wellbeing.



Image: Staff on strike at the University of Newcastle, Australia, 2022. <https://betteruniversities.work/uon>
 Image used with the permission from the NTEU Office (NSW)

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