WiSE

Well-being Innovations for Students in Europe

Initiatives and strategies in favour of student well-being in Europe

European WISE Survey Report

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About the output:

Please credit this report to:

"WISE Project (2023)", Initiatives and strategies in favour of student well-being in Europe.

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About the project

Many people in higher education suffer from ill-being, as shown by several studies and research. Certain groups of students are particularly vulnerable to ill-being problems. Indeed, some groups already face discrimination (e.g. refugees, people with disabilities…). Since the beginning of the year 2020, the health crisis has had a strong impact on students' well-being (almost no student life, need to adapt to new learning methods, integration difficulties, significant deterioration of mental health, etc.). Moreover, new forms of malaise are emerging, such as eco-anxiety. The well-being of students is therefore a major challenge for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). It is also a challenge for student organisations acting in favour of their peers, who are increasingly taking up this issue.

The WISE project focuses on student well-being in European higher education. The project aims to identify what is important for student well-being. It also looks for ways in which universities and student organisations can act within student life policies to promote well-being. Over the 3 years of the project, the consortium will: develop expertise to better understand the issues around student well-being in student life: quantitative and qualitative research and reports, increase resources and training to help HEIs and student organisations to consider and act on student well-being in student life: vademecum, toolkits, training; strengthen proposals and communications to promote well-being and student life as essential components in Europe.

The partners of the project

7 partners are involved in this project:

- **3 student networks**: Animafac (a network of student associations in France); the European University Foundation (EUF, a university network based in Luxembourg); the European Students' Union (ESU, a network of student associations, based in Belgium) ;
- **4 universities across Europe**: Polytechnic Institute of Coimbra in Portugal; Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in Greece; Transilvania University of Braşov in Romania; Charles University,Prague, Czech Republic.

About the report

This report follows a quantitative report on student well-being available on the WISE website[1]. For this report we led 10 interviews of HEIs and 10 interviews of student organisations in Europe from January to July 2023. Moreover, we conducted 8 Focus Groups between November 2022 to May 2023 among students from different fields, level of studies and gender.

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[1] WISE website : animafac.net/wise

Chapter 1: Why is it so difficult to address students' well-being?

A few years after the Covid-19 pandemic, which severely affected students, their living and studying conditions, student well-being does not seem to be a priority for public policy in Europe anymore. However it is evolving. While there are a number of relatively concrete definitions of well-being, including the World Health Organisation's, student well-being is sometimes harder to pin down because it depends so much on geographical and political contexts, but also on individual factors. The complexity of understanding the notion of student well-being, coupled with the intrinsic visions of this concept held by the actors involved (government, HEIs, Students' Union, students, etc.), often undermines the general battle to improve the learning and living conditions of European students.

I/ An unclear and vague definition, undermining the cause

Throughout the WISE project we tried to define what well-being means. It appears that there are many definitions used which somehow undermine the cause.

A. State of the art

In conformity with Diener's point of view (2000, p. 34), subjective well-being represents "people's cognitive and affective evaluations of their lives."
Veenhoven (1997, p. 34) defines it furthermore: "how good [life] feels, how well it meets expectations, how desirable it is deemed to be, etc."
According to Kashdan (2004), the well-being concept involves two broad elements:

- *'Cognitive appraisal' describes how we consider our global (overall) life satisfaction and our satisfaction with specific domains (e.g., family life, career, and so forth).*
- *'Affective appraisal' concerns our emotional experience. High Subjective Well-Being (SWB) is the experience of frequent and intense positive states (e.g., joy, hope, and*

pride) and the general absence of negative ones (e.g., anger, jealousy, and disappointment).

SWB encloses a huge number of patterns with distinctive concepts, from ephemeral experiences from our everyday lives to much broader global reasoning that we make about our lives altogether (Kim-Prieto, Diener, Tamir, Scollon, & Diener, 2005). It is generally expressed as a hedonic as opposed to an eudaimonic concept (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Huta & Waterman, 2014).

Student well-being has lately come up **as a critical to the educational agenda** because of its comprehensive compensations for students in behaving better at school and later as adults. With the development of student well-being as a priority field in educational policy and system (Hossain et al., 2022). Students' subjective well-being represents an important condition for positive evolution and an expected conclusion of education.

As shown by numerous studies and research, many students suffer from problems of malaise. Malaise can be defined as a general feeling of discomfort, illness, or unease whose exact cause is difficult to identify[2].

Moreover, the consortium understood it wasn't easy to come up with a common definition of well-being. Regarding the different definitions, we accept a broad definition of well-being which covers social, economic, physical and psychological aspects. It is the balance between different factors contributing to well-being or malaise.

B. The WHO definition

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines well-being as "a positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic and environmental conditions. Well-being encompasses quality of life and the ability of people and societies to contribute to the world with a sense of meaning and purpose"[3] while it defines health as " a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity".

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[2] Cambridge dictionary, Malaise definition, consulted on January 2024, available on:
https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/malaise
[3] https://www.who.int/activities/promoting-well-being

This definition is often used by the HEIs or student organisations who do not have formal definitions.

In this definition health is an inseparable element of well-being; indeed, it is its essential precondition. In all the interviews and focus groups we organised, the students recognised the importance of being in good health in order to be able to experience their higher education studies to the full. Illness and disability are both obstacles and factors of social exclusion during their studies. One of the participants in the Focus Group organised by ESU pointed out that "while most major universities have had to adapt their facilities and infrastructure to accommodate people with reduced mobility, for example, many higher education institutions are still poorly adapted and not necessarily practical. Unlike a student with no disability, a person with a disability will have to choose their HEI according to their physical abilities"[4]. Most of the interviews and focus groups highlighted the importance of mental health when discussing student well-being. While at first the students interviewed referred to their primary concerns as students affecting their mental health (exams, lack of sleep, stress), successive crises such as covid and the war in Ukraine have made them take a step back. They now appear more pessimistic about the general living and studying conditions of students. In their view, the World Health Organisation's definition is incomplete in that a complete state of well-being is unattainable in a context where certain achievements have been called into question for many students in Europe with the return of war, very high inflation and even reduced freedom of movement and social activities during the pandemic. Safety is also an issue particularly raised by female students, who often feel unsafe during extracurricular activities such as parties, which are an essential part of student life. Moreover, according to the students the definition provided by the WHO is somewhat **"absolute, vague and general"** and is "*not taking into account cross-cultural differences, since well-being could be defined differently depending on the mentality of the people in different sociocultural contexts". They added, "we are never fully well".*l

In order to give as precise a definition as possible of student well-being, we asked them what were the most important elements and what they were looking for in their studies. According to the focus group participants, they want to be able to study in good conditions; in other words, their studies are their main concern. Developing skills and acquiring knowledge,

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[4] Focus group organised by ESU on (Add date)

social interaction and peer cooperation as well as being included in a community is the main concern in a student's life. Students want to achieve a state of physical, mental and spiritual serenity in a friendly environment. Studying is supposed to be one of the happiest periods of life, but it is often undermined by social and economic problems. While it is not the role of public policy to solve family and personal problems, it does have a responsibility to find solutions in the social, economic and health fields.

In conclusion, well-being can be defined a**s a balance between different factors, and the capacity to live in peace with one's difficulties : in opposition with the WHO definition that says "a life without infirmity".** Students should be free to choose how far to prioritise their well-being, balancing their studies and work and their private life.

C. An effort to conciliate public authorities, universities and students about students' needs.

A multitude of stakeholders are involved and work daily to promote student well-being. In addition to students and their representatives, most European universities now have one or more departments dedicated to these issues. Public authorities, whether local or national, are also concerned, and it is not uncommon for student representatives to meet members of their government to discuss their concerns, as shown by several interviews conducted with the Fage (France), Fzs (Germany), Unione degli Universitari (Italy), and Anosr (Romania).

Covid-19 has helped to raise awareness of the issue of student well-being among those involved in the sector. Coordinated action by student unions, combined with extensive media coverage, has not only prompted the public authorities to take action on this issue, but has also made higher education institutions face up to their responsibilities, as shown in our interview with Carlotta Eklöh, vice-president of the main students' union in Germany: "after Covid, public authorities were more aware of the needs of students also because with the help of the students' services from universities we have conducted many actions such as a large scale survey to assess the needs of students. Moreover, during the pandemic, the media were

talking about it, relaying our actions and asking the policy-makers their political plans to solve this issue"[5].

However, the pandemic of Covid-19 also highlighted the shortcomings of the traditional student support services provided by universities. The growing number of requests from students for access to a specialist to discuss their physiological, psychological and mental state demonstrated the lack of financial and, above all, human resources at the HEIs, which found themselves at a loss. Indeed, according to Claudiu Marin, a Romanian student in psychology and elected in the local association psychologist of his university: "with covid we have mainly seen superficial actions. People seemed to be more open and conscious about the topic. However, in reality, the services were not accessible to most of the students, especially vulnerable people. At least 80% of the students respondents answered that they never use student counselling or health services. For instance, at the national level, there is only one counsellor for 2000 students while, ideally, there should be one for 500 students"[6].

Overall, there is genuine cooperation between university services and student associations in their joint fight for student welfare. In many cases, the activities of student organisations would be greatly reduced without the administrative and financial support of higher education institutions. For example, LieuTopie, a student organisation set up in 2013 in Clermont-Ferrand, France, and committed to helping not only students but also people in need, is able to carry out its activities thanks to the financial support of the University of Clermont-Ferrand and the metropolitan area. The FSDIE enables the university to subsidise the association to the tune of 8,000 to 10,000 per year. "Recently, the university has been providing special funding for the 'Super baskets' scheme via the university health service," adds Mathieu Adenot, a chemistry student and co-president of LieU'Topie. In France for instance, "the FSDIE is a fund primarily intended to finance projects run by student associations whose aim is to benefit other students as well as the university community as a whole. Part of this fund may be allocated to social aid for students in difficulty"[7].

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[5] Interview conducted with Carlotta Eklöh, vice-president of fzs – Free Association of Student Unions, conducted on 12/07/2023.

[6] Interview conducted with Claudiu Marin honorary member of ANOSR- National Alliance of Student Organisations in Romania, conducted on 24/06/2023.

[7] French ministry for higher education and research website, "Développement de la vie associative et des initiatives étudiantes"; available on:
https://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/fr/bo/11/Hebdo43/ESRS1129305C.htm

In addition to the financial support that student organisations receive from HEIs, the traditional services offered are often appreciated by students and their representatives, but they simply need to be improved. For example, Niccolò Piras, student representative from UDU, highlights the efforts made by Italian universities to offer between four and six free therapy sessions to students. However, he regrets the lack of staff, which means that students have to wait a very long time. "Today, UDU is working more to improve existing services than to create new initiatives to be implemented at institutional level"[8].

This cooperation between university services and student organisations is particularly well developed in Germany, where institutional student services play a major role in student welfare. These services, which are organised at both local and national level, manage funds intended for students, offer psychological services and sessions with therapists, and are also responsible for organising student life events. According to Carlotta Eklöh "the German Student Union is cooperating a lot with the students services because they often have the same needs and political ambitions to advocate to the public authorities"[9]. She adds that both regarding the counselling that they offer and the policy campaign that they are conducting; it is in the advantage of the students union to be associated with them because they are providing a service which is more professional; for instance, they have a professional press department and they advocate better than the SU"[10]. In this specific case, the role of the students' union is to support the demands of the institutional students' services by providing a form of legitimacy in the advocacy discourse.

Finally, we may highlight that student life is not only about studying[11]. Indeed, to be engaged in civic society is a factor of well-being as most of the time students are engaged in a cause that matters for them. It is this specific cause that motivates and reinvigorates them, often in accordance with their visions of the world and society. These engagements may be political in nature, but that does not necessarily mean that the students are politically engaged. They can be environmental, social, activist, conviction-based, in favour of equal opportunities or

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[8] Interview conducted with Niccolo Piras, vice-president of UDU – Unione degli Universitari, conducted on 14/07/2023.
[9] Interview conducted with Carlotta Eklöh, vice-president of fzs – Free Association of Student Unions, conducted on 12/07/2023.
[10] Interview conducted with Carlotta Eklöh, vice-president of fzs – Free Association of Student Unions, conducted on 12/07/2023.
[11] European Step : Qualitative report
https://www.animafac.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/O3-Report-English.pdf

anti-poverty engagements. Moreover, student engagement helps some of the students to build their identity. Engagement as a bandage refers to engagement: "as a space for building identity in order to better face problems or doubts"[12].

Because these engagements are meaningful for students they contribute to their well-being. It also explains why student organisations carry out different types of actions in different fields : sport, culture, environment, and so on.

II/ An attempt to classify the needs

A. Economic and environmental needs

While it has been known that the number of students limited in their studies due to a health impairment has been increasing over the last years[13], the international crises of the last two years, such as the Covid-19 crisis and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, have had a profound impact on the economies of the European Union. Students, as citizens and individual economic agents, have been hard hit by inflation over the last two years, particularly in Hungary, Lithuania and Latvia, where it sometimes exceeded 20% in October 2022[14]. Inflation is having an impact across Europe on students' standard of living, affecting their access to housing, healthcare and basic needs such as food and mobility.

An increasing number of students are being forced to work while they study in order to meet their basic needs, particularly in Member States where the cost of living is particularly high, such as the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany. Indeed, among the EU Member States, the

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[12] Claire Thoury, Student engagement in a world of individualisation: identity construction and political careers, Sociology. Université Sorbonne Paris Cité, 2017. In her thesis, Claire Thoury presents the following typology: commitment as a bandage, commitment to Christian charity, commitment with a professionalising vocation, commitment as a response "to identity trials" (Dubet, François, Martuccelli, Danilo, Dans quelle société vivons-nous, Editions du Seuil, 1998)
[13] Comparing EUROSTUDENTs "Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe" 2016-2018 publication VI Figure B1.6 with the 2018-2021 publication VII Figure B1.5, pg. 44.
https://www.eurostudent.eu/download_files/documents/EUROSTUDENT_VI_Synopsis_of_Indicators.pdf
;https://www.eurostudent.eu/download_files/documents/EUROSTUDENT_VII_Synopsis_of_Indicators.pdf
[14] European Commission, "HICP - monthly data (annual rate of change), 2023, available on:
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/PRC_HICP_MANR__custom_3761882/bookmark/table?bookmarkId=4ad27e6f-358a-4a3d-82a0-587d69a833eb

Netherlands has the highest share of students and apprentices aged 15-29 who are currently in employment while still in education in 2022 (2022: 73%, 2021: 70%), followed by Denmark (2022: 52%, 2021: 49%) and Germany (2022: 45%, 2021: 42%). These numbers are being matched by EFTA countries Iceland (2022: 66,1%), Switzerland (2022: 63,6%) and Norway (2022: 53%). On the other hand, the lowest shares of employment among young people aged between 15 and 29 were in Romania (2021 & 2022: 2%), Slovakia (2022: 5%, 2021: 4%) and Hungary (2022: 6%, 2021: 5%)[15], though these numbers do not necessarily indicate that students in these countries are better off. For example, in Prague, almost all students at MA level work despite the fact their living standards are lower than in mentioned countries. On the contrary, young people from eastern and southern European countries often cannot move out from home due to lack of financial resources, which means that low employment rates in these countries are not to be interpreted as students being well-off. Overall, the increase of the share of young people in the labour market between 2021 and 2022 suggests a growing need for additional income.

Additionally, economic factors play a significant role in shaping students' well-being. The rising cost of education, living expenses, and limited job opportunities can create financial stress for many students. This financial burden can have a direct impact on their mental health and overall quality of life. In a study conducted in 2020 for the World Health Organisation, Karyotaki, Cuijpers and Albor have demonstrated a link between financial stress and poorer mental health outcomes; for example, worry over finances has been correlated with mental illnesses like depression and anxiety. They also highlight the weight of debt, demonstrating that students' loans are an aggravating source of stress[16].

Furthermore, accommodation costs continue to be the most important expenditure item for students especially for those who live away from their parents[17]. When looking at the current situation linked to affordable, sufficient and high-quality students' housing in Europe we can see a number of clear patterns affecting the issue in almost all of the countries that answered our survey. In general, students experience an ongoing rise in rent prices especially in bigger

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[15] 2021: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20220829-1 & 2022: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Participation-young-people-edu-labour_V2-280923.png

[16] Karyotaki E, Cuijpers P, Albor Y, et al. Sources of stress and their associations with mental disorders among college students: results of the World Health Organization world mental health surveys international college student initiative. Front Psychol 2020; 11: 1759

[17] Sebastian Berger, "Info sheet, students' housing in Europe", 2019, available on: https://www.esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019_ESU_Student_Housing_Info-Sheet-1.pdf

European cities where most higher education institutions are located. Insufficient provision of student housing and a universal lack of vacancies on the housing market aggravate the problem. The situation is particularly preoccupying for international students that encounter vast difficulties when trying to access the housing market in a variety of countries. International students suffer from structural discrimination and rejection on the basis of racial discrimination both from landlords and fellow students who prefer to share their dormitory with students that share the same mother tongue[18].

In Europe, many students face financial difficulties that hinder their access to basic needs such as housing, food, hygiene products, or transportation costs. One of the most pressing concerns is food insecurity among students. Limited financial resources often force them to skip meals or rely on low-cost, unhealthy options. In 2021, an average of 25% of students reported (very) serious financial difficulties, a further 27% reported moderate financial difficulties[19] This not only affects their physical health but also hampers their ability to concentrate and perform well academically. In addition to food insecurity, expensive hygiene products are another challenge faced by students and especially women. This can have a detrimental impact on their overall health and self-esteem. Furthermore, the financial constraints experienced by students often limit their mobility options. They may struggle to afford public transportation or face difficulties in maintaining a reliable and sustainable mode of transportation for commuting to classes or part-time jobs.

Addressing these challenges requires collaborative efforts from governments, educational institutions, and community organisations. Initiatives such as subsidised meal programs at higher education institutions, affordable housing options for students, access to hygiene facilities on campus, and improved public transportation services can greatly alleviate the burden faced by financially disadvantaged students. By ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to meet their basic needs, we can create an environment where they can thrive academically and reach their full potential. It is crucial that we prioritise finding sustainable solutions that enable every student in Europe to access the fundamental necessities for a healthy and successful educational journey.

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[18] Ibidem.
[19] Kristina Hauschildt, Christoph Gwosć, Hendrik Schirmer, "Social and Economic conditions of Student Life in Europe", EUROSTUDENT VII Synopsis of Indicators 2018–2021, wbv Media GmbH & Co. KG, Bielefeld 2021, available on: https://www.eurostudent.eu/download_files/documents/EUROSTUDENT_VII_Synopsis_of_Indicators.pdf

B. Psychological and social factors

Mental health has emerged as a critical issue among students across Europe. The demands of academic performance, social pressures, the transition to independent living and the transition to a new country and culture for international students can contribute to increased stress levels and mental health concerns. It is crucial to address these issues proactively and provide adequate support systems for students to ensure their overall well-being.

Students who do experience either serious or subclinical levels of psychological distress are at higher risk to fail or underachieve in their academic goals or to drop out of higher education completely[20]. Besides, students who are experiencing mental health issues might consequently study longer and finish their studies later than their peers. This is a big loss not only for the students themselves, but also for the wider society.

When it comes to higher education, non-traditional students often face unique challenges that can hinder their ability to succeed.[21] Indeed, due to their unusual path to studying, they face challenges to integrate within the students' community. Loneliness and a lack of community integration are two significant factors that contribute to the high dropout rates among these students. Moreover, non-traditional students are usually coming from working-class backgrounds and so do not always have the means to take part in the activities offered to young people through student associations. They often combine their studies with a job to support themselves and their family, limiting the amount of time they can devote to their studies.

In order to address this issue, educational institutions must prioritise creating an inclusive and welcoming environment for all students. This involves implementing policies and support systems that ensure the safety and well-being of non-traditional students. By fostering a sense of belonging and providing resources tailored to their needs, we can help these individuals overcome the barriers they face in pursuing higher education.

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[20] Aina, C, "Parental background and university dropout in Italy". *Higher Education*, 2013, *65*(4), available on: https://www.google.com/url?q=https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10734-023-01009-9&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1696250987261688&usg=AOvVaw0sdra5sez-3D0p5wGuXh9Q
[21] Marina Brunner, Laura Eigbrecht, "Towards inclusive student engagement of non-traditional students in Professional Higher Education", 2021, available on: https://inclusiphe.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/39/2021/11/InclusiPHE_IO1-Report_DHBW_V2.pdf

Students who experience discrimination[22] often face additional stressors related to their relationships with other students and professors. Discrimination can manifest in various forms, including racial, gender-based, or ethnic bias, and it can lead to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and alienation. In academic settings, these students may encounter microaggressions or overt discrimination from peers and even from faculty members, which can hinder their academic progress and overall well-being. Developing a supportive and inclusive environment within educational institutions is crucial to address these issues and ensure that all students have equal opportunities to learn, grow, and thrive. Efforts to foster empathy, respect, and cultural sensitivity among students and faculty can help alleviate the stressors associated with discrimination and promote a more inclusive and harmonious learning environment.

It is disheartening to see that many students are still marginalised because of who they are. Indeed, marginalised student groups are more likely to have poor mental health and suffer from depression because of an absence of a supportive and inclusive environment that can lead to a sense of harassment or unsafeness, making it even more difficult for them to continue their studies. Among the students affected by the chronic and latent lack of inclusivity of HEIs and student activities are students with disabilities, people with a low-social background, students from the LGBTQIA+ community, or people discriminated against because of their ethnicity are particularly concerned. Women are also victims of violence and the fear of being harrassed has an impact on their mental health and therefore, on their academic track.[23]

It is crucial that we recognize the value and potential of every student, regardless of their background or circumstances. By actively working towards inclusivity and promoting a sense of community within higher education institutions, we can empower all students to thrive academically and personally. Diversity is both a strength and an asset for every Higher education institution and should be enabled through action plans, with the SMILE principles serving as good practice guidelines.[24]

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[22] Observatoire national de la vie étudiante, "à la tête de l'étudiante, les discrimination perçues dans l'enseignement supérieur", 2017. Available on:
https://www.ove-national.education.fr/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/OVE_Infos_35-Discriminations.pdf
[23] UniSAFE, "Results from the largest European survey on gender-based violence in academia", 2017, available on:
https://unisafe-gbv.eu/project-news/results-from-the-largest-european-survey-on-gender-based-violence-in-academia/
[24] Royo, C; Trevino, D; Frank, A; Nur, M; on behalf of the SMILE consortium (Ed.) (2022): Policy

Recognizing the importance of addressing these challenges, educational institutions and policymakers in Europe are increasingly focusing on enhancing student support services. Initiatives such as counselling programs, financial aid schemes, and mental health awareness campaigns are being implemented to promote students' well-being.

By prioritising mental health support services and addressing economic barriers faced by students, Europe can create an environment where individuals pursuing higher education have access to the resources they need for optimal well-being. It is vital that we continue to advocate for policies that prioritise student welfare while fostering an inclusive educational experience for all.

Chapter 2: Food for thought to improve students' conditions of living

As described above, the existing problems of students and their connection to student well-being are well known and studied. In addition, the results of ESU's comparative analysis of mental health among higher education students,[25] awareness of education professionals and political decision-makers around the topic of student well-being has increased strongly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, with most countries having made it a priority to develop countermeasures. At the same time the question arises, how students' living conditions can be improved in order to combat a further erosion of students' well-being. To this end, the following will present reflections regarding possible actions to be taken by political public authorities, higher education institutions and student unions to enhance student well-being.

I/ Possible solutions to improve students' conditions of living

A. Public authorities

Public authorities have the primary duty to make higher education accessible to all. This is to be highlighted especially in light of student mental health, as the health-status of students correlates highly with their financial situation.[26] With regard to direct costs of studying, such as tuition and administrative fees, education should be free. This would also be in line with the stipulation in Article 26 UDHR "higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit"[27] and, more importantly, Article 13 ICESCR, which stipulates that "[h]igher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the *progressive introduction of free education*."[28]

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[25] European Students' Union, "A Comparative Analysis of Mental Health among Higher Education Students", 2022, available on:
https://esu-online.org/a-comparative-analysis-of-mental-health-among-higher-education-students/
[26] Hendrik Schirmer, DZHW, FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES' RELATION TO STUDENTS' HEALTH, EUROSTUDENT Intelligence Brief 1/2020, available on:
https://www.eurostudent.eu/download_files/documents/ES_IB_Financial_difficulties_health_WEB.pdf
[27] United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1969, available on:
https://www.ohchr.org/en/human-rights/universal-declaration/translations/english
[28] United nations, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966, available on:
https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights

In order to ensure that students can study full time and are not required to have side jobs, needs-based and family-background-independent study grant systems should be in place, encompassing all direct and indirect costs of studying and costs of living. This is important in order for students not to be reliant on their parents or other relatives' income, as currently in many countries students' financial circumstances are highly dependent on their familiar background.[29] This would be especially important in order to alleviate students with migration background, disabled students, students from non-academic backgrounds and students from low socio-economic backgrounds.[30]

Investments into student housing and the provision of necessary infrastructure, such as building land should be ensured. Housing policies should be student friendly.

Student jobs and internships should be included in minimum wage regulations and follow basic labour rights standards in order to ensure that students' labour is paid fairly which in turn enhances financial stability.

Student transportation costs should be financially supported, for example through price reduced tickets or subsidies for public transport, while a variety of transportation options should be on offer.

Furthermore public authorities also have a responsibility as they are responsible for higher education institutions, following European higher education ministries' own stipulation via the 2020 EHEA Rome Ministerial Communiqué Annex II.[31] There should be sustainable and adequate funding for the institutions especially for mental health support services. In addition, policies such as national strategies and action plans targeted at enhancing access and support for students with special attention put on vulnerable students should be in place,

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[29] Kristina Hauschildt, Christoph Gwosć, Hendrik Schirmer, "Social and Economic conditions of Student Life in Europe", EUROSTUDENT VII Synopsis of Indicators 2018–2021,Figure B7.5 EUROSTUDENT VII, wbv Media GmbH & Co. KG, Bielefeld 2021, available on: https://www.eurostudent.eu/download_files/documents/EUROSTUDENT_VII_Synopsis_of_Indicators. pdf
[30] Philipp Droll, HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS' FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES, Intelligence Brief, 6/2021, available on: https://www.praxis.ee/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Intelligence_Brief_6_2021.pdf
[31] EHEA, Rome ministerial communiqué, annex 2, 2020, available on: https://ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique_Annex_II.pdf

which should guideline higher education institutions and other relevant institutions, designate duties and responsibilities as well as be accompanied by appropriate funding schemes. Currently, many countries have top-level strategies regarding the social dimension in place, but lack specific targets and thus follow-ups.[32] The Irish "Healthy Ireland Framework" serves as best practice for an holistic approach to student well-being.[33] Top-offs in funding could be given as additional financial incentive to higher education institutions that perform well with regard to student well-being related policies and offers.

Public authorities should include students in the design, implementation and evaluation of well-being related as well as other measures, following the idea of an holistic policy dialogue.[34] Student- and/or youth-tests should be implemented when designing and implementing new measures in order to determine possible positive and more importantly negative effects of envisioned measures on the young generation.

B. Higher Education Institutions

In the fast-paced and demanding world of higher education, it is crucial to prioritise the well-being and conditions of students. Higher education institutions play a vital role in shaping the lives of young individuals, and it is essential to provide them with the necessary support systems and solutions to thrive.

Economic needs

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[32] European Commission, European Education and Culture Executive Agency, *Towards equity and inclusion in higher education in Europe*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022, https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/fa946919-b564-11ec-b6f4-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-255273612

[33] Ministry of Health of the Republic of Ireland, "A FRAMEWORK FOR IMPROVED HEALTH AND well-being 2013 - 2025", available on: https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/publications/corporate/hienglish.pdf

[34] European Commission, European Education and Culture Executive Agency, *Towards equity and inclusion in higher education in Europe*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022, https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/fa946919-b564-11ec-b6f4-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-255273612

Even though the main responsibility of ensuring financial access to education and a minimum standard of living above the poverty line does not lie with higher education institutions, there are a few means through which they can mitigate the financial burden of students.

Regarding the costs associated with studying higher education institutions could (where this is not the case already) advocate towards political leaders for free education and/or reduce or even abolish fees, but at least at exemption regulations. This is especially needed with regard to international students, for which study fees are increasingly introduced, while being one of the most vulnerable student groups.[35] Building up from that, supplies needed for studying, be it literature, equipment for example for laboratories or technological hardware and software, should be available to students for free, be it through free supply or free of charge leasing systems.[36]

Higher education institutions that offer scholarships should ensure that these are dynamised in accordance with inflation and cover all direct and indirect costs of studying.

Many higher education institutions offer student housing. Student housing should ensure safety, be of good quality and follow non-profit principles, hence be offered at the lowest possible price. A best practice is the offering of student housing including ancillary expenses at a fixed price as well as longer-range rental agreements (with the possibility to give notice on a short term basis) as this allows for planning security while offering flexibility in case of changed personal circumstances. Quotas for international students as well as appropriate housing for disabled students and students with children mitigates burdens of vulnerable student groups.

With regard to student jobs, in those countries where student jobs are not regulated under minimum wage or other minimum labour standards, the hourly compensation should be raised to minimum wage or a level that is similarly appropriate. Wages should be dynamised

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[35] European Students' Union, Rajko Golović, Sebastian Berger, "Functional Overview Tuition Fees", 2020, available on: https://esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Functional_Overview_Tuition-Fees_Golovic_Berger.pdf

[36] European Students' Union, "ESU Resolution on student poverty – 'Education is freezing'", 2022, available on: https://esu-online.org/policies/esu-resolution-on-student-poverty-education-is-freezing/

according to inflation. Work contracts should have an appropriate minimum duration, as to ensure planning certainty.

Student support services

Institutions need to offer support for a variety of services, which should be easily accessed, non-discriminatory and free of charge. These services should be communicated to students and the academic community to ensure awareness of their existence. Students often have an urgent need for support when in a crisis, thus timely support structures should be available to them. To this end, there needs to be enough professionals in proportion to the student population. Service professionals should act in a non-discriminatory manner, taking into account the diversity of the student body and offering all students regardless of their background full support. Moreover, these services need to be based on confidentiality and, especially with regard to sensitive personal information, no medical evidence should ever be required to benefit from the support they provide.[37]

To improve student conditions and well-being higher education institutions should implement comprehensive mental health programs. These programs can include counselling services, workshops on stress management, mindfulness practices, and creating a supportive environment for students to seek help without stigma or judgement.[38]

Another solution is fostering a sense of community on campus. Higher Education institutions can organise social events, clubs, and organisations that encourage students to connect with their peers. This sense of belonging helps combat feelings of isolation and promotes positive mental health.

Furthermore, higher education institutions should invest in physical infrastructure that supports student well-being. This includes well-equipped fitness centres, recreational spaces, quiet study areas, and comfortable living accommodations. Creating an environment that promotes physical health contributes significantly to overall student well-being.

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[37] European Students' Union, "Mental health charter", 2020, available on:
https://esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Mental-Health-Charter_final-version-2.pdf
[38] European Students' Union, "Social Dimension Policy paper", 2019, available on:
https://esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Social-Dimension-Policy-Paper-2019.pdf

Lastly, higher education institutions can implement academic support programs aimed at reducing stress levels among students. These programs may include time management workshops, study skills training sessions, and access to tutoring services. By equipping students with the necessary tools for success academically, higher education institutions can alleviate some of the pressures they face.

Student-friendly study conditions

Institutions need to ensure that all groups of students feel welcome and included in the academic community. There should be good transitions from previous environments whether that be from other education, employment or time outside of both to ensure the best possible learning experience. Many students, not limited to neurodivergent benefit from attending open days or visit days to familiarise themselves with the surroundings before they start. To this end, institutions should fully implement the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA, for which the PAG toolkit can serve as a starting point.[39]

When (re)designing the learning environment universal design and well-being should be put at the centre. This includes the digital learning environment and the online courses. The curriculum and assessments should be designed in a way to support students' learning processes through appropriate and fitting pedagogical techniques and methods, allowing students to develop learning competencies and self-regulation procedures, boosting their self-confidence, which can all have a positive impact on their mental health. Higher education should be of good quality and offer flexible student-centred learning, with the latter being especially important for students with childcare responsibilities as they often face problems due to non-flexibility.[40] Mental well-being should be approached comprehensively and systematically. Voluntary study track counselling, where students are guided in shaping their learning pathways, can help students to find their way through higher education and should also always be conducted with mental health in mind.[41]

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[39] Inclusive Higher Education, PAGs toolkit, 2023, available on: https://inclusivehighereducation.eu/pags-toolkit-0

[40] Madonna Maroun, "Does Higher Education Experience Differ Between Male and Female Students?", Intelligence Brief, 5/2021, available on: https://www.praxis.ee/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Intelligence_Brief_5_2021.pdf

[41] European Students' Union, "Social Dimension Policy paper", 2019, available on: https://esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Social-Dimension-Policy-Paper-2019.pdf

Additionally, the physical environment needs to have designated safe, quiet rooms available for rest, prayer and meditation. well-being needs to be taken into account when designing curriculum. There also needs to be areas and facilities available for extracurricular activities, this could be sports halls, multipurpose rooms, green areas, bars and cafes. In addition, higher education institutions should offer activities that foster the creation of a student community, bringing students together and thus combating loneliness. To this end, sport courses and cultural activities that encompass punctual as well as long-term engagement are already practised at many higher education institutions.[42]

Academic staff should be trained with view to student well-being, be it on creating study-friendly study programs, inclusivity or other related aspects.[43] This is especially important as the social integration of students with lecturers correlates with students' backgrounds and thus lecturers ability to make students feel welcomed plays a role in social inclusion.[44] In addition, staff health and well-being should be supported as well, as they often work in stressful and uncertain conditions while being expected to support students. There needs to be good support systems in place for the entire institution. Staff should have psychological first aid training and know how to signpost students for further support and treatment from professionals.

In conclusion, prioritising student conditions and well-being in higher education institutions is crucial for their overall development. By implementing comprehensive mental health programs, fostering a sense of community on campus, investing in physical infrastructure that supports well-being, and providing academic support programs; higher education institutions can create an environment where students thrive both academically and personally.

ESU strongly believes that it is the responsibility of higher education institutions to ensure that the mental health of students is a priority and is acknowledged on all levels of society, aiming for national strategies to holistically address the ever-growing problems of mental health.

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[42] European Students' Union, "Mental health charter", 2020, available on:
https://esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Mental-Health-Charter_final-version-2.pdf
[43] European Students' Union, "A comparative analysis of mental health among higher education students", 2021, available on:
https://esu-online.org/a-comparative-analysis-of-mental-health-among-higher-education-students/
[44] Muja, A., Mandl, S., Cuppen, J. & Hauschildt, K. (2021). What determines students' social integration in higher education? Wijchen: Benda druk & print. Available on:
https://www.researchned.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ESVII_TR_SocialIntegration.pdf

C. Students, student representatives and student unions

Advocacy and self-representation

Students should be seen as the key stakeholders in higher education, therefore they should be included in all important matters of decision making and policy design, also on the topic of mental health. Representation of students should naturally be seen as crucial also when debating the integration of mental health into policies and curricula.
Participatory processes can be threefold. For the general governance of higher education student representatives, not least connected to student unions as self-representational institutions, should be included in all formal and informal decision-making processes. During the pandemic, but also before and after, many student unions launched campaigns to bring attention to student health issues.[45] In addition, students from vulnerable and disadvantaged groups should be consulted on matters concerning them specifically. Thirdly, through various forms, spaces to voice concerns, opinions and ideas for the student population as such should be created. In conjunction, these three forms of student participation are an important step in ensuring that measures to improve student well-being are accurate and fruitful, as students know best what they need and what they want.

Student social life

Students can offer a lot of peer support both through formally and informally student-lead activities. Through different groups encompassing a number of types of activities ranging from sports teams or subject specific interest groups, the sense of belonging can be strengthened as a preventive measure. Student unions as organised representational bodies which often have their own financial resources can help new students through freshers' weeks and a wide range of cultural activities throughout the year to meet like minded persons and create a sense of belonging. To this end, student-lead organisations can also cooperate with

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[45] European Students' Union, "A comparative analysis of mental health among higher education students", 2021, available on:
https://esu-online.org/a-comparative-analysis-of-mental-health-among-higher-education-students/

actors from the local community and the higher education institution itself to further their outreach.

Additionally, students can successfully study and fulfil their required obligations only when they feel safe and accepted.[46] As students are usually at an age where they self-develop and try to figure themselves out, groups where students from vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds can meet in safe(r) places can positively impact their higher education institution experience and increase the chances of successful completion. It should be highlighted that special emphasis should be placed on female students, older students, students with a migration background and international students as they feel less integrated with fellow students than other groups.[47]

Furthermore, civic engagement in student life through student unionism and other student-lead groups can foster a strong sense of belonging. To this end, student unions and student-lead organisations should promote their existence and activities and ensure low-level entree points and a welcoming atmosphere should be a priority for student-lead initiatives and student unions.

Structural support (services)

Typically student unions have their own financial resources and in some cases are even considered as student service providers. Hence, student unions can play an important role in offering student-lead support services. Best practices encompass for example nightlines, where students listen to students calling for psychological support and many student unions offer counselling services on a variety of topics, be it legal, study-related, financial or other support services.[48] As these are student-led, the advantages are both these services have a lower barrier, are usually free of cost and additionally, that tips and tricks are communicated, that higher education institutional or governmental offices might not share. In addition, if

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[46] Eurostudent, "Students' learning and well-being: a Nordic perspective", 2022, available on: https://www.eurostudent.eu/blog_detail?b_id=199

[47] Muja, A., Mandl, S., Cuppen, J. & Hauschildt, K. (2021). What determines students' social integration in higher education? Wijchen: Benda druk & print. Available on: https://www.researchned.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ESVII_TR_SocialIntegration.pdf

[48] European Students' Union, "A comparative analysis of mental health among higher education students", 2021, available on: https://esu-online.org/a-comparative-analysis-of-mental-health-among-higher-education-students/

resource wise feasible, emergency funds in crisis situations can be a tool to mitigate negative effects for vulnerable students. In some cases, student unions also provide reduced meals through student-lead canteens or have agreements with public transport providers offering students discounted public transportation tickets.

Thus, while student unions' and student-lead initiatives services cannot and should not replace policy-makers' obligations to offer services to the general public that also relate to student well-being, they can be a useful supplement within the higher education sphere**.**

II/ Feedback and sharing of best practices from HEIs

Beyond the focus groups, we led twenty interviews. Ten interviews were addressed to student organisations and ten interviews were addressed to HEIs. We propose you to explore the results of these interviews which present different initiatives led in favour of student well-being.

A. Basic needs

The University of Warsaw (Poland) has a service dedicated to welcoming students. There is a Coordinator of the Welcome Point. They help students to find housing. The university offers more than 2,352 places in six residence halls situated in various parts of the city. Each hall has a quiet study lounge, a TV room, a computer room and laundry facilities. Monthly rent ranges depend on the type of room and dormitory. They also help with fees and visas. They try to welcome the students and include them to ease their arrival at the university.

B. Health: Physical support

At the University of Toulouse (France) we count 100, 000 students. It's a federation of different campuses in Toulouse and its area. As a matter of fact they provide health services to all the students. They have 3 health centres with doctors, social workers, psychologists, nutritionists and nurses. They also provide prevention teams with 17 students who are linking

students and the medical services. They propose preventive measures and try to listen to the students' needs. Therefore, they propose peer-to-peers discussions, psychological sessions, and redirection to student organisations. In the past few years they've introduced multidisciplinary staff to answer to all student needs and not only provide medical and physical care, for example they extended their actions to cultural topics. Moreover, the university services are more and more interested in the inclusion of all students, especially those with disabilities. They also provide new services against gender-based violences.

C. Health: Psychological support

The laboratory of applied psychology - Thessaloniki University's initiative[49] is an initiative led by the university of Thessaloniki (Greece) and managed by its researchers in the field of psychology. It was created in 2019 to face the lack of offers from the private sector when it comes to mental health resolution. For the students; there were already two psychologists, they offer only two or three free consultations because they have to cover a potential audience of 80 000 students. Therefore, Greek students were used to waiting for weeks before getting an appointment which can represent a serious risk. The department needed to have an initiative open for the general public even if most of the patients are students due to the proximity with the university. Consultation cost in average half-cost of the market price thanks to the co-funding received from the university. Finally, the service is offering as many sessions as needed unlike the traditional services provided by the university. `

Even if this service is affordable, there was also a need to improve the offer to receive support to students. Starting from autumn 2024, the laboratory will implement a peer-to-peer programme. The idea is for students in psychology to receive and talk about students' well-being to other students. It would be both a good opportunity for the students in psychology to train themselves but also an opportunity for the patient to talk with someone their age and who understands him/her/them. The university will invest in the project by creating a platform to put students in touch with each other.

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[49] Interview conducted with Andreas Kampas, psychologist, for the Laboratory of applied psychology, of the department of psychology of the university of Thessaloniki, on …

D. Cultural activities

At the University of Lausanne based in Switzerland, they are helping students in staying in good physical and mental shape during their studies. According to them, having good health will help them succeed in their education. They provide support and assistance for example health services such as psychotherapy consultations. The university has long been interested in student well-being. It has designed a questionnaire for students entitled "Comment allez-vous?" ("How are you doing?") and also supports and promotes student organisations. Besides the basic needs the university proposes a large cultural offer with music festivals, theatre, exhibitions, choir… The sport centre has a huge offer for free as well.

Moreover, the office for equal chances is very active to support diversity and inclusion: Finally an "Aumônerie" is also very active towards activities for well-being, welcoming, spirituality, dialogue and mutual respect.

E. Social Life

Oslomet University (Norway) organises a lot of activities with the help of students especially for the new students. It is designed to allow the new students to meet the people in charge of the university. The university maintains close cooperation with external partners such as Norwegian churches. They help students with difficult situations and started before the pandemic and lasted after. They've put in place mentor services in which students are working together. Students of higher levels help new students to include them in the university life. Students found that it was a success.

III/ Feedback and sharing of best practices from student initiatives

A. Basic needs

The AGORAé initiative is conducted by the FAGE association (France). It is a space for exchange and solidarity, comprising a living space open to all and a solidarity grocery shop accessible on social criteria. Supported and managed by young people for young people, AGORAé are non-stigmatising places working to promote equal opportunities for access to and success in higher education. Created in 2011, this initiative is a solution to the fact that,

in 2015, 19.1% of students were living below the poverty line. During the Covid-19 crisis, there was a major mobilisation of social and solidarity grocery shops. This initiative gives students a chance to get involved and take responsibility, while showing solidarity. With the outbreak of war in Ukraine, it was decided to provide free and unconditional access to grocery shops for students from war-torn countries.

Each year, through these grocery shops, the FAGE establishes a back-to-school indicator to assess the spending of students in financial difficulty in September. This enables them to assess inflation for students, and it is not surprising to see this indicator increasing every year, according to Sarah Biche, vice-president of the FAGE.

B. Health: Psychological support

At the national Union from Germany, they have two different approaches:

1- Initiatives coming from the local unions. They deal with the daily issues of students and they have an individual approach. They don't have to do it but they feel like they have to fill a need.

2- They have student services in every HEI which are institutional services. They are non-profit. But they are not run by students. It is the place where you can find therapists but This organisation is working on a local level usually it could be for a university or for a region. They are also organised at the national level and the German SU is cooperating with them because they often have the same needs and political ambitions to advocate to the public authorities.

The counselling students services are offering a bit more professional services while the local SU are offering peer to peer support. Both services are indirectly paid by students with the university's fees. Thus it is free but has not unlimited resources. Thus, they limit the number of the sessions according to the demand which in a sense is quite bad because, in a university where the students well-being is quite bad, you will have less sessions. Especially after the pandemic, they limited this amount of sessions. And if you need help in the long-term, they try to put you in touch with an external professional but currently in Germany, they don't have enough therapists compared to the demand. You have to wait for months to get an appointment. After the Covid pandemic, the demand increased and those services were

overwhelmed and they needed more means. They have a lack of financial resources. They are not able to afford what they want to offer. In Germany, the money for these services is coming from the local level like Länders, city councils and sometimes from the federal government. Recently, they got 30 million euros for student services which could seem like a lot but all this money went to maintain the cost of everything and so the services.

Nightline (France) is a hotline for mental health inspired by the hotlines in the United Kingdom. It is a national student organisation and consists of a hotline for students by students. Their actions are complementary to health services provided by universities. The volunteers act in favour of student well-being in French but also in English. They provide basic help and redirect students in ill-being to structures that help with mental health issues. Lately they've also started to focus on the well-being of their volunteers by offering sessions with psychologists. They have a mensual meeting to give their feedback. Moreover, they carry out public campaigns to promote mental health.Currently, they are trying to develop the nightlines at a European level.

C. Cultural Activities

Student organisation VETH based in Zürich, Switzerland has been representing smaller associations, since the last 30 years. They provide services, providing rooms for the association, organising events, like study parties, hosting bars. The association has delegates in each department of the university. They propose services for the students, being beneficial for the students like having offices in different areas, board members responsible for events, distributing mulled wine, and a student bar in summer. There are different committees offering activities, debates, gaming committee, writing, sustainability committee and so on.

D. Social life

Student scientific society of Poltava State Medical University (SSPMU) (Ukraine). The association was created in 2013 is based in Ukraine and is the student scientific society that teaches and learns medical and scientific development and techniques. The organisation gives volunteers and students the opportunity to implement their ideas in scientific activities,

conducting master classes and webinars. It is complementary to the studies. The events are created by students for students. Students are engaged to promote scientific principles. This way they gather around common interest and therefore socialise. They act for student well-being by applying principles of medicine in their activities. They try to ensure student well-being and reduce stress among students. There is also support from students of higher levels of study to help students to graduate. It's peer-to-peer learning which complements university lessons.

E. Campaigning for student well-being

Unione degli Universitari (Italy) was born in 1994 but some of the local students unions have existed since 1989. They are members of ESU**.** Their main objective is to Promote mental health campaigns and have direct conversations with the administration. They are at the service of students by offering help regarding day to day issues. They consider student well-being within multidimensional aspects. They try to respect the following values : "Freedom of students to self-determine", "Quality of life" and "A complete ability to be free. Therefore, they try to implement a safe environment at university for students to feel accepted and respected. They want to lower the pressure in university as the education system is very competitive. UDU also fights for more equality in gender issues as a part of the general well-being.
Moreover, they led a campaign : "students union for high school students" with the movement of retired people. They launched a survey on mental health linked to the after pandemic who gathered 30000 answers. After this campaign, they published the results on instagram and newspapers. This campaign was also about fighting the stigma on mental health, going to therapy and so on. They noticed that many students would like to have counselling inside the university. Indeed there is mental health support in each university but which are not very functional : only 4 to 6 sessions free of charge with a lot of waiting.

F. Inclusion of students

The French Youth Parliament is an association of informal education. It deals with active citizenship and helps young people to develop a political opinion. They identify Event Safe Persons who are in charge during an event to ensure the safety and the inclusion of the participants. PEJ France or European Youth Parliament France

The French branch allows young people to meet and socialise. They try to offer a safe place for all people and have a policy of inclusion with no discrimination. They propose team building activities, training and simulations of parliamentary sessions. In this context they appoint some Event Safe Persons among their volunteers to ensure the safety of the young people. They lead a policy of inclusion against violence or discrimination. The association also proposes interventions in public high schools to raise awareness among young people. Therefore they also try to meet high school students with university students. Moreover, the Event Safe Persons are also available for the volunteers. They want to make them comfortable in their mission and their engagement. They allow them to take some vacancies if they need to. They have a national ESP who's the contact of the ESP. One of their main current objectives is to welcome more students and high school students with disabilities.

Conclusion

Both the focus groups and the interviews with universities and students' representatives have highlighted the needs for public investment in favour of students' well-being. Covid-19 and then the crisis in Ukraine, and their consequences for living conditions such as inflation, have had a lasting impact on European students in recent years. The impossibility of establishing a definition of student well-being that is broad enough to be universal bears witness to the ever-increasing needs of students. It is obvious that if well-being is difficult to define, it is because it does not mean the same thing everywhere in Europe depending on the specific needs of students, even if certain needs are common to all European students.

The report highlights a number of recurring problems faced by European students, showing that even before worries about study and assessment, students are most stressed about their finances. Housing prices in major European cities have risen steadily in recent years, while basic necessities have also been hit hard by post-Covid inflation, particularly in Central and Eastern European countries. Moreover, mental health has emerged as a critical issue among students across Europe. The demands of academic performance, social pressures, the transition to independent living and the transition to a new country and culture for international students can contribute to increased stress levels and mental health concerns. It is crucial to address these issues proactively and provide adequate support systems for students to ensure their overall well-being. These issues need to be addressed throughout three different institutional levels: public authorities at local and national level, higher education institutions and students' representations.

Public authorities have the primary duty to make higher education accessible to all. This is to be highlighted especially in light of student mental health, as the health-status of students correlates highly with their financial situation. Local and national governments have a duty to provide students with the best possible conditions, in particular by ensuring that students do not have to combine their studies with a job. Granting scholarships and facilitating access to decent accommodation remain the best way of helping European students.

In the fast-paced and demanding world of higher education, it is crucial to prioritise the well-being and conditions of students. Higher education institutions play a vital role in shaping the lives of young individuals, and it is essential to provide them with the necessary support systems and solutions to thrive. In conclusion, prioritising student conditions and well-being in higher education institutions is crucial for their overall development. By implementing comprehensive mental health programs, fostering a sense of community on campus, investing in physical infrastructure that supports well-being, and providing academic support programs; higher education institutions can create an environment where students thrive both academically and personally.

Students should be seen as the key stakeholders in higher education, therefore they should be included in all important matters of decision making and policy design, also on the topic of mental health. Representation of students should naturally be seen as crucial also when debating the integration of mental health into policies and curricula. Students can offer a lot of peer support both through formally and informally student-lead activities. Typically student unions have their own financial resources and in some cases are even considered as student service providers. Hence, student unions can play an important role in offering student-lead support services.