University Students' Wellbeing

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A Case Study of an International Private University in Egypt

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Wellbeing is a crucial topic that is gaining increasing attention in higher education and should be taken into careful consideration. This is a qualitative case study, using a phenomenological approach, which explores the phenomenon of student wellbeing in an international private university in Egypt. Data was collected through semi-structured individual interviews with a total of fourteen participants: eight purposefully selected students who have taken part in wellbeing programs, initiatives, or events at the American University in Cairo (AUC), as well as six faculty/staff members, leaders, mentors, or coaches in the field were interviewed. In addition to the interviews, conversations were held with two key informants about student accommodation letters as well as other relevant information to study wellbeing at AUC. Participant observation was another data collection tool integrated to study one of the most recent mental health and wellbeing events more closely. Key findings on students' experiences with and recommendations for dealing with wellbeing are highlighted, along with the responses of stakeholders on this matter, the responses of key informants, and personal insights from the participant observation. Results portrayed that some of the most common wellbeing issues among AUC students revolved around stress, anxiety, depression, and imposter syndrome. Some coping strategies presented to address such wellbeing issues included mindfulness and meditation, extracurricular activities, journaling, time management, positive affirmations, as well as having support systems and a healthy lifestyle.

Keywords: Higher education, wellbeing, students, Egypt, coping strategies

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

What is wellbeing? Wellbeing may be defined as a state of positive emotions and fulfilling one's potential (Bauer &Mittelmark, 2022). It can refer to feeling healthy and happy (Cambridge, n.d.). More specifically, wellbeing may encompass various dimensions, including intellectual, environmental, financial, spiritual, occupational, emotional, social, and physical (Colorado State University, n.d.). According to OECD (2021), the four main dimensions for student wellbeing are: *psychological*, which refers to students' self-awareness, sense of life purpose, and emotional and mental health; *cognitive*, which addresses students' knowledge proficiency for independent or collaborative problem solving using higher order thinking skills; *social*, which entails students' emotions and relationships with their families, peers, and other members in society, as well as *physical*, including having a healthy lifestyle and physical health.

Wellbeing can be measured both subjectively and objectively, whereby the way one views his/her own life, either positively or negatively, influences one's health (Physiopedia, n.d.; Simons & Baldwin, 2021). Wellbeing can also more specifically be measured using a salutogenic approach, which is originally a model for coping with stress, the core construct of which is introducing a sense of coherence that is shaped by one's life experiences (Bauer &Mittelmark, 2022). This approach/model was introduced in 1979 by Antonovsky, and the term salutogenesis refers to wellness or health origins (Bauer &Mittelmark, 2022).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is a state of wellbeing whereby individuals realize their own potentials or abilities, can cope with normal life stressors and work productively, as well as be able to contribute to the community (Galderisi et al., 2017). Mental health is an indicator of youth's holistic wellbeing worldwide (Coulombe et al., 2020). Wellbeing is an essential aspect of mental health that consists of emotional, social and psychological wellbeing of individuals and communities. Emotional wellbeing refers to feelings of satisfaction, happiness, and overall interest in life, social wellbeing involves positively contributing to society, and psychological wellbeing involves liking one's

personality, properly managing daily life responsibilities, life satisfaction, and having healthy relationships with people (Galderisi et al., 2017). Mental health affects our thoughts, feelings, and actions, and contributes to one's mental wellbeing (Norie, 2019). Being mentally healthy is a state of good overall wellbeing (Better Health Channel, n.d.; Everymind, n.d). This means that both terms are interrelated. However, unlike mental health and wellbeing, wellness does not refer to a state of being; such as being happy or being healthy. Rather, wellness is the active process of awareness and making choices that would eventually affect one's holistic health as well as physical, emotional, spiritual, environmental, mental, and social wellbeing (Global Wellness Institute, n.d.). In other words, wellness may be defined as "a positive state of balance between the four main domains of a person: mind, body, spirit, and emotions" (The American University in Cairo, n.d., para. 1). Based on all the above, one can deduce that a possible holistic, inclusive, and operational definition of wellbeing for this research study may be as follows: Wellbeing is a positive state of psychological, cognitive, social, and physical existence while striking a balance between one's mind, emotions, spirit, and body.

Some of the most common mental health and wellbeing challenges which students in higher education face are: depression, anxiety/stress, suicidal intent/ideation, eating disorders, and substance misuse (BestColleges, 2022; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2022). Other wellbeing challenges encompass family issues, feelings of isolation, financial difficulties, and social pressure (World Economic Forum, 2022). Some behaviors or outcomes which may be associated with poor mental health and wellbeing may include lack of engagement in learning and in leisure activities, as well as poor mental health and wellbeing literacy partially due to lack of knowledge about factors contributing to poor mental health and wellbeing (Campbell et al., 2022).

One of the common challenges which threaten the wellbeing of students in higher education is stress. Stress is "an adaptive response, mediated by individual differences and/or psychological processes, that is a consequence of any external (environmental) action, situation, or event that places excessive psychological and/or physical demands on a person" (Luthans, 2002, p.396). If not managed well, it can negatively affect one's wellbeing or state of feeling happy and healthy (Cambridge University Press and Assessment, 2023). This can lead to potential mental health problems such as anxiety or depression, and can possibly affect one's physical health and students' academic performance as well (National Health Service 2023; Pompilus, 2021).

Stress can be positive (eustress) or negative (distress). The former positively influences one's development and performance, while the latter can negatively contribute to one's mental, physical, and/or emotional wellbeing if not met with appropriate, effective strategies for coping (Luthans, 2005). Research has shown that too much stress can affect physical health and lead to higher blood pressure and heart attack risks, increased heart rate, headaches, upset stomachs, disrupted sleep, memory loss, shallow breath, and sore muscles (Watchwellcast, 2013). It can also drain one's immune system and affect one's ability to concentrate (Watchwellcast, 2013). Moreover, an individual's personality type may influence how he/she deals with stress. For instance, Type A is more tense, is continuously on the move, feels time-pressured, and is more aggressive, impatient, and competitive than Type B, who is slower-paced, more patient, relaxed, and easy going (Luthans, 2005). This implies that Type A individuals are more susceptible to stress impacting their wellbeing in comparison to Type B personalities. Furthermore, the more self-efficacious or confident, resilient, and optimistic individuals are, with a high level of psychological capital within them, the more capable they probably would be of combating stress (Luthans, 2005).

Although external factors can influence one's stress levels and wellbeing, individuals should not entirely blame themselves for this, hold themselves fully accountable for their own wellbeing, or be expected to individually cope with stress (Luthans, 2005). Potential burnout and self-harm may be the result of mental, physical and/or psychological stress overload. More profoundly, psychiatric disorders and poor physical health may lead to an individual committing suicide in light of the 60% global suicide rate increase in the past 45 years whereby 703,000 individuals worldwide die by suicide annually (Cairo University, n.d.; International Association for Suicide Prevention, n.d.). This is not only the individual's responsibility, but more significantly, external factors, such as the surroundings in the educational system, peer pressure, and others, can lead to this. Traumas, for example, which refer to events or situations that are highly distressing or frightening, can largely affect individuals' wellbeing (Mind, 2020). Hence, it is vital to integrate spaces for struggling and traumatized students in particular to express themselves, reflect, participate, and be assessed. They should also be actively listened to, recognized, and engaged with a sense of community and a trauma-informed teaching approach where their needs are met (College Art Association, 2021; Monroe & O'Donnell, 2023). Individual and collective wellbeing involves access to various material resources, including what may potentially constitute financial stressors such as income, wealth, housing, jobs, salaries,

as well as other types of resources such as full equitable access to inclusive development and quality of life, which encompasses health, social coherence/relations, the environment, education, security, civic engagement, and life satisfaction (OECD, 2018). In order to enhance students' overall wellbeing, it is vital to empower their levels of resilience, raise more awareness about this issue, and increase the availability of higher education support services (Kappe& Versteeg, 2021).

This study focuses on some of the most prominent global practices for the wellbeing of students in international higher education systems, such as in North and Central America, Europe, Scandinavia, Asia, as well as the Middle East and North Africa. This includes recommendations to enhance wellbeing in light of higher education reform. It also raises more awareness around the potential threats to wellbeing and the recommendations for a better situation for students. University administrators or management could also be encouraged to further empathize and pay attention to this critical issue, while considering to alter higher education policies, curricula or practices within educational reform, and taking into account that teachers' wellbeing can significantly affect students' and parents' wellbeing too. This can be portrayed as a domino effect: if teachers are in a negative state psychologically, mentally and/or physically, this can influence the wellbeing of their students, and the parents as a result, and conceivably the quality of education as a whole, which means that the educational community needs to be tackled holistically. Hence, it is also crucial to pay attention to the wellbeing of teachers in order to maintain and/or promote the mental health and wellbeing of students, since both can significantly affect each other and are interrelated (Harding et al., 2018).

As a former novice primary school teacher, and a current teaching assistant and graduate student who has experienced wellbeing issues within educational systems in Egypt, I have experienced firsthand and seen secondhand that the wellbeing of teachers and students are interconnected and is a serious issue. This is what drew me to this topic and made me realize how mental health and wellbeing can play a profound role in shaping the experiences of and relationships between both students and teachers in the context of education. Local and international education systems are facing several challenges and obstacles, including strains in infrastructure, poor teaching quality, over-centralized control, dependence on private tuition, emphasis on regurgitation of information for exams and assessments through rote memorization, social inequality, negative attitudes towards vocational training, as well as inadequate university access, research, and funding, especially in light of inflation (Loveluck,

2012). In addition, existing research illustrates various causes of wellbeing issues, such as stress, for novice as well as more experienced teachers in both elementary and higher levels of education, including classroom management, work overload, the school environment, unavailable resources, disruptive student behavior, as well as lack of leadership support and vocational/teacher training (Ahmed et al., 2020; Chaaban & Du, 2017; Dickson et al., 2014; Gallegos, 2015; Zhukova, 2018). Moreover, literature sheds light on how poor wellbeing, such as stress, can significantly negatively affect job satisfaction levels of teachers, rates of attrition and retention, as well as one's overall wellbeing (Voss & Kunter, 2020). All these factors may contribute to negatively affecting the mental health and wellbeing of teachers, which, in turn, may threaten the wellbeing of students too (Harding et al., 2018; OECD, 2020). This specific area of wellbeing in Egypt amongst students in higher education, according to my literature search for terms like wellbeing, higher education, and Egypt, is lacking or remains unclear. This is a research gap that needs to be addressed.

The purpose of this research is to explore practices for university students' wellbeing. This involves a synthesis of existing literature and possible suggestions/recommendations for dealing with wellbeing. The research study will in particular be studying the case of the American University in Cairo (AUC) with consideration given to higher education reform regarding wellbeing at AUC. This specific university was chosen for convenience and relevance reasons, as an AUC graduate student who is a member of the community itself and who was involved as a participant in some of the university's activities or events pertaining to wellbeing and other areas of interest. To achieve the research purpose, this study seeks to address three research questions: **A)** How do students at AUC deal with their own wellbeing? **B)** What support systems are offered to university students to enhance their wellbeing? **C)** What are students' experiences with these systems and their recommendations? As portrayed in the research questions, the main focus is on students, however, data was also gathered from faculty or staff members and other members of the AUC community to add more breadth and depth to the study.

This topic is significant for the benefit of both teachers and students in schools and universities, as well as individuals experiencing wellbeing issues in their daily lives in general, beyond the context of education. It also further expands existing research/literature on ways to deal with wellbeing, which may be relevant to everyday life, including within education systems and/or workplaces, while better preparing university

graduates to manage potential wellbeing issues in the workplace, such as job stress.

This book comprises four main chapters. The first chapter is an introduction to the research topic with an overview of the study and a literature review of global student wellbeing practices, including in North and Central America, Europe, Scandinavia, Asia, and the Middle East and North Africa, as well as a synthesis section, and the theoretical framework. The second chapter covers the methodology used, with reference to the participants, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations. The third chapter portrays the results of the study based on data collected through conversations with key informants, interviews conducted with students and stakeholders on their experiences with wellbeing, and participant observation with reference to the happenings of a particular mental health and wellbeing event at AUC under the wider initiative of the Mental Health Wellness Taskforce. The fourth chapter includes a discussion section with implications of the findings, limitations of the study, suggestions for future research, and a conclusion.

In search of relevant literature for my thesis topic, I used keywords such as higher education, students, wellbeing, coping strategies, and Egypt. Secondary data is gathered from credible sources such as Sage Journals, Google Scholar and/or AUC databases, as well as OECD, UNICEF and UNESCO websites. This data is obtained from diverse, relevant, and fairly recent journals, articles, books, theses, and websites. Additional search criteria addressed 'best global practices for student wellbeing in higher education', 'the most prominent student wellbeing practices in higher education systems worldwide', as well as 'top countries worldwide in terms of wellbeing' and 'countries worldwide with best university student wellbeing'. Relevant data is mainly integrated into the literature review section, as part of the introduction, and countries and universities were selected based on the search criteria above and what was deemed as innovative wellbeing practices offered by them, which are worthy of attention. The study starts with an introduction to the topic, while highlighting its purpose, significance, relevance, research gap, and research questions. Three research questions are addressed: **A)** How do students at AUC deal with their own wellbeing? **B)** What support systems are offered to university students to enhance their wellbeing? **C)** What are students' experiences with these systems and their recommendations? Relevant literature on existing global research is reviewed, accompanied by a synthesis of key findings.

This section is divided into five main parts. The first assesses practices in North and Central America: The United States, Canada, and Panama. The second investigates practices in Europe: The United Kingdom, Spain, and Germany. The third looks into Scandinavian countries within Europe, such as Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The fourth explores practices in Asian countries like India, China, and Japan. These continents and countries have been selected as invaluable examples, including some of the most prominent global practices for student wellbeing in higher education systems worldwide (Bhatia et al., 2020; European Commission, 2021; Keystone, n.d.; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021; State of Global Wellbeing, 2015). The fifth part focuses on the Middle East and North Africa, particularly Egypt, since the study is based in Egypt, and it is pertinent to find out about existing research within this context. This is followed by a synthesis of key findings, including global practices that can be used as standards and indicators to measure and evaluate the effectiveness of mental health and wellbeing programs, initiatives, or events at AUC and the extent to which these components are present. Relevant theoretical frameworks are also presented.

Student Wellbeing Practices in North and Central America - The United States, Canada, and Panama

Practices used for student wellbeing in North and Central America, including the United States, Canada, and Panama are noteworthy. According to Bhatia et al. (2020), some of the most prominent student wellbeing practices in North America include the integration of multimodal methods/approaches and technology as well as interventions fostering the needs and settings of students in universities, such as through mental health services, support teams, counselors, projects and networks along with the promotion of mental health and psychoeducation. Others include the expansion of higher education systems' capacities, including personnel and infrastructure, and enhancing their resources, as well as integrating clinical psychology practices (Bhatia et al., 2020).

The United States

Approximately one in 5 adults in the United States has a mental health issue, one in 24 has a critical mental illness, 80 percent of U.S. students report feeling stressed often or sometimes, and 34 percent experienced depression, which is all partially why it is necessary to integrate a guide

for mental health crises into education systems (Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 2023; Maryville University, n.d.). In comparison to the past, a larger number of higher education students in the United States are experiencing negative wellbeing, such as stress, in universities nowadays (Yorke, 2004). Students who are more likely to experience acute stress are those who are in their first and second years of university, particularly while adjusting to college life away from their families and homes (Misra & McKean, 2000). General and assessment anxiety, perfectionism, low self-efficacy, stereotype threats, and other factors, are all potential causes of negative wellbeing. Stress along with its negative mental, psychological and physical effects on wellbeing and academic or cognitive development among undergraduates, graduates and professional students may be the result of personal, social, developmental, as well as academic and/or job-related challenges such as taking full course loads or working in a pressurizing job (Shapiro et al., 2008).

One of the main elements that can be used as an effective coping strategy for stress and the enhancement of wellbeing is mindfulness. This strategy enables individuals to deeply, consciously and actively direct their attention, thinking and reflection to specific subject matters. This state of mind leads to contemplation, relaxation, and the ability to make life decisions and improve one's wellbeing as a whole (Gethin, 2011). Mindfulness is practiced in some universities in the United States, such as Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, in order to reduce stress, tension, and pain, and to allow students to experience reality as it is, and having their minds control how they relive the reality in a positive light, while avoiding negative thoughts (Chick, 2010). This requires the minds to control the type of interpretation and thoughts individuals carry and project on their realities as a form of introspection. This practice includes classroom activities such as guided meditation on an object, journaling, listening to critical conversations, silence, and reading (Chick, 2010). Moreover, higher education systems in the United States have proved that mindful meditation promotes students' cognitive and academic performance, including their abilities to pay attention and concentrate (Shapiro et al., 2008). Mindful meditation also regulates students' emotions and enhances their psychological and mental wellbeing by mitigating their levels of anxiety, stress, and/or depression. It also nourishes their interpersonal and creativity skills, as well as self-compassion and empathy as part of developing a whole person (Shapiro et al., 2008). Mindfulness is also practiced in higher education institutions, such as North Carolina University in the United States, and is considered as a contemplative practice that can build one's resilience, alleviate stress, and transform one's brain (Stanigar, 2020).

Examples of such practices include: deep breathing exercises, guided meditation videos, taking self-care breaks with meditative coloring, doodling, or drawing, and others illustrated by CMind (2021) in the form of a tree of contemplative practices (see Appendix E).

Training, anti-stigma, or outreach, as well as student engagement and increased access to mental health services were viewed as some of the best mental health/wellbeing practices by university students in the United States (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021). At the University of Nevada Reno, for example, the existence of supportive and inclusive communities is an integral component of good practices with regards to student affairs (University of Nevada Reno, n.d.). In other words, the existence of communities of learners coming from diverse backgrounds, promoting social responsibility, encouraging debates and discussions, recognizing achievements, and strengthening a sense of belonging fosters relationships between faculty, students, and practitioners of student affairs, while giving students the space to grow academically and interpersonally. The university offers several outreach programs and services protecting individuals' confidentiality while enhancing students' wellbeing and helping them manage their stress. These involve individual counseling, group therapy, psychological testing for treatment, urgent care services, online and/or in-person mental health and wellness support consultations, counseling events, workshops and interactive activities to boost individuals' self-esteem and self-confidence and strengthen their stress management skills, as well as training on adult mental health first aid where participants learn to recognize mental health warning signs and offer appropriate help and guidance to those in need (University of Nevada Reno, n.d.). The student advisory board, which consists of undergraduates and graduates, is also present to support the counseling services provided with feedback to promote mental health and wellbeing. The university also offers a self-help center with resources for students to use when dealing with common issues such as stress management, coping with grief or loss, building healthy relationships, living well, improving sleep, and maintaining focus and motivation. According to the University of Nevada Reno (n.d.), exercising, listening to soothing music, taking a warm shower or bath, practicing hobbies and creative work, surrounding oneself with a supportive community, expressing emotions, laughing, better managing one's time, and focusing on the positive are some practices to use for stress management to promote wellbeing. Other longer term practices for stress management and wellbeing may include deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery or visualization, mindfulness, meditation, self-compassion, and reducing perfectionism (University of Nevada Reno,

n.d.). Last but not least, the university offers virtual relaxation rooms, which comprise relaxation exercises for panic attacks and emotional distress, mindfulness to detach from recurring negative thoughts, self-compassion, muscle relaxation, visualization, and stress release with music. The virtual rooms provide individuals with interactive experiences, and the exercises help reduce their stress levels and enhance their wellbeing (University of Nevada Reno, n.d.).

Moreover, other universities in the United States, such as William Paterson University, have staffed academic libraries as the second most visited place on campus after the student center with highly available opening hours to support research, curricula, and students' academic success overall. Such libraries also help develop current, relevant, and accessible collections, while facilitating learning, fostering information skills, and providing a supportive physical environment for study, research, and mental health (Grimes, 2023). More specifically, the libraries are uniquely situated to engage with students and holistically promote mental health and wellbeing among staff, students, and researchers, in a safe environment, through relevant support services (Grimes, 2023).

Universities, such as Purdue University, and the University of Tennessee in collaboration with the University of Melbourne, the University of Wollongong, and others, have integrated the PERMA Model (Kovich et al., 2022; Oades et al., 2011). This model revolves around the following principles: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Rodriguez et al., 2022). With regards to Purdue University, results conveyed that the use of the model enhanced understanding of wellbeing and helped promote it, especially among undergraduate students (Kovich et al., 2022). As for the other universities mentioned, a framework was built in light of the PERMA Model in order to design positive education; for happiness and traditional skills (Oades et al., 2011). This was based on the following aspects: the formal learning and classroom environments, the local community, as well as the social, residential, and faculty/administrative work environments (Oades et al., 2011). Relevant activities were designed accordingly (see Appendix J). Results were generally positive, but it is essential to extend the implementation of this model to the tertiary education sector and the organization as a whole too (Oades et al., 2011).

Canada

In Canada, comprehensive policies at the country level exist in support of university students' wellbeing (Bhatia et al., 2020). Nevertheless, there

are issues such as limited funds and resources, as well as fragmented services within some of its universities, while there is a dire need for wellbeing and mental health initiatives and programs. However, according to Bhatia et al. (2020), Ontario's Center for Innovation in Campus Mental Health provides some of the finest, emerging and promising practices for mental health and wellbeing along with substantial funding and relevant sharing of knowledge through partnerships. Monitoring as well as delivering the least resource intensive and most effective treatments for mental health are existing practices or approaches accompanied by available specialist services addressing individuals' needs. University-based mental health services and the Center for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) include care pathways between them in order to offer experiential learning opportunities for students in clinical disciplines (Bhatia et al., 2020). Student-led initiatives for higher education systems provide resources and programs to address the wellness needs of students. Mental health and addiction strategies and plans to mitigate stress levels and incorporate counseling services were also initiated by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (Bhatia et al., 2020).

Panama

A country in Central America, which can be taken into consideration for implementing some of the most effective wellbeing practices is Panama (Keystone, n.d.). In 2014, Panama was ranked as the top country worldwide in terms of wellbeing, including social and community relationships, sense of purpose, financial security, and physical health (State of Global Wellbeing, 2015; U.S. News and World Report, 2019). Universities such as Harrisburg University of Science and Technology offer various student support services, including personal, educational, and professional ones. Such services help students excel in various aspects of life, while being further supported and guided by success coordinators, as well as academic advising and support; peer mentor/leader programs, and experiential learning and career services (Harrisburg University of Science and Technology, n.d.). With regards to mental health in particular, students have access to relevant resources off and on campus, as well as various free and confidential services and assistance programs. These include workshops, consultations, group and individual therapy, mental health and medical care, food assistance, as well as legal advice (Harrisburg University of Science and Technology, n.d.).

Student Wellbeing Practices in Europe - The United Kingdom, Spain, and Germany

Practices used for student wellbeing in Europe, including the United Kingdom, Spain, and Germany, are highlighted below. Universities in Europe are mainly focused on mental health support and student counseling services (European Commission, 2021).

The United Kingdom

With regards to the UK, several mental health practices addressing student wellbeing are implemented in its universities (Universities UK, 2015). For instance, mindfulness practices were integrated in 2015 across all public policy sectors in the UK, including education, healthcare, the workplace and the criminal justice system. This was part of a plan, which became the primary international jurisdiction (The Mindfulness Initiative, 2015). Furthermore, in England, there is an emphasis on cautious/meticulous design and connection between education, health, and social care services. This is to address and facilitate the individual needs of students; guarantee effective transition, and eliminate any age, organization, or profession related barriers. Special care and quality treatment are provided by the government in Scotland for individuals, families and/or caregivers who are suffering from mental illness. A substantial amount of money is invested to raise mental health/illness awareness through programs, not only in Scotland, but also in Wales. Pivotal policy and legislative directives are also used to upgrade mental health and to address its influencing factors in Wales. The Health Board and local authorities in this country manage legal responsibilities/duties in order to support those in need with access to services concerning mental health. In addition, collaborative work is stressed upon in Northern Ireland in policy and practice at various levels, including governmentally, regionally and locally through programs, actions, partnerships, and public agencies in order to address the issue of mental health/illness. Student-led initiatives and organizations raising awareness about this issue, providing suitable web-based research/resources, and emotional as well as peer support are prevalent within several universities across the UK. Moreover, internal support services are provided through mentoring, counseling, financing, and advising. Additionally, external support services are offered through health authorities, as well as independent/psychological counselors. Higher education staff members are trained in accordance with appropriate protocols and mental health awareness (Universities UK, 2015).

According to GuildHE (2018), stress management, cases of sexual assault, suicide prevention, mindfulness, time management, and eating disorders are all topics that could be integral parts of staff training. Thus, university administrators, policy makers, staff members, teachers, students, parents and others can consider various guiding questions presented by GuildHE (2018) for the promotion of student wellbeing and stress reduction (see Appendix A). Such questions address the culture of wellbeing as a whole, as well as accommodation, community participation and engagement, finance, academic success, and a work/life balance (GuildHE, 2018). In the UK, it has been proven that the relationship between teachers and students affects the wellbeing of both teachers and students, as well as staff members (Riva et al., 2020). Hence, it is essential to enhance and strengthen such relationships, as well as consider emotional intelligence, and integrate student-centered learning and assessment, in order to promote positive wellbeing for all (Riva et al., 2020).

Spain

As for universities in Spain, qualified professionals, such as in Madrid's Complutense University, freely provide psychological counseling/support. This is especially done in light of challenging circumstances brought by COVID-19 (UCEAP Madrid Study Center, n.d.). According to a research study conducted on 461 university students in Spain, 65.6% were at risk of suffering from mental health disorders, and being a woman increased this risk by 63.7% (Rodriguez et al., 2022). In addition, 65% of students suffered from stress, 43% suffered from anxiety, loneliness, and helplessness, and 33% from homesickness and depression. This study portrays how happiness and life satisfaction help maintain and/or promote one's mental health and wellbeing. Some practices that are also useful for this include having a sense of humor, laughing at one's own mistakes, trying to improve one's mood, and affection. Emotional health and wellbeing are also based on theoretical models such as PERMA. As mentioned earlier, this model revolves around the following principles: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Rodriguez et al., 2022).

Germany

With regards to higher education institutions in Germany, experienced psychologists and/or professionals in universities such as the Technical University of Munich, the leading university in Germany for teaching and

research in natural sciences as well as engineering, freely offer psychological support in light of COVID-19 through the Munich Student Union (Technical University of Munich, n.d.). This form of support includes student advice on matters concerning assessment anxiety, contact and isolation, decision-making, coping with partner separations, leaving family or home, addiction, sexual violence/assault, suicidal or self-harm tendencies, uncontrollable eating disorders, as well as dealing with stress and depression (Technical University of Munich, n.d.). The community also offers additional support where necessary through psychological counseling and/or coaching (Technical University of Munich, n.d.).

Student Wellbeing Practices in Scandinavia - Finland, Norway, and Sweden

Practices used for student wellbeing in Scandinavia, including Finland, Norway, and Sweden, are illustrated below. Such countries are considered as a group within Europe, and they have wellbeing practices that are worthy of attention (European Commission, 2021). Some of the top happiest countries in 2021, with the highest life satisfaction rates in 2018, were Northern European countries, some of which include Finland, Norway, and Sweden (OECD, 2018; World Population Review, 2023).

Finland

Among 149 countries, and for the past three years, Finland was reported as the happiest country in the world between 2021-2023 based on categories such as healthy life expectancy, social support, and freedom to make life choices, and was ranked the first in terms of human wellbeing (U.S. News and World Report, 2019; World Population Review, 2023). Universities in Finland, such as the University of Helsinki, which is one of the best universities in Finland for health care programs, address coping with stress and mental health by providing peer support, organizing university events, and offering other forms of support (Keystone, n.d.; University of Helsinki, n.d.). These include webinars, campaigns, anonymous online chats, training, mental health awareness days, counseling and health centers/services, help lines, as well as social/communal and religious/spiritual support, especially in light of COVID-19 (University of Helsinki, n.d.). Moreover, students are encouraged to practice self-care with the help of websites, and to cultivate their emotional, social, self-compassion and stress management skills. There are additional course-related links, resources, and mental health tips on life skills and self-help,

as well as webinars, broadcasts, podcasts, wellbeing packages, activities, and social media platforms. Students are also offered mental health exercises for anxiety, stress, insomnia, and depression, as well as physical and mindfulness exercises accompanied by playlists, relaxation and breathing, and guided meditation for stress relief (University of Helsinki, n.d.).

Norway

With regards to Norway, which was ranked at the top of economic wellbeing in particular (U.S. News and World Report, 2019), student health centers involving available psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses, and general practitioners with Norway's University of Oslo, for instance, offer useful and significant help to students by appointment. They also assist with emergency cases (University of Oslo, 2019).

Sweden

Regarding Sweden, nursing and counseling services, activities, and workshops in Sweden's Stockholm University, for instance, are freely provided by appointment and with high confidentiality. In addition, the Swedish Defense University, for example, focuses on the creation of rules in favor of a healthy, student-friendly, safe, inclusive environment with positive impact on students. This includes effective communication, division of responsibilities, participatory decision-making, a good work/study environment, evaluations of programs and courses, procedures for student complaints, and regular follow-up of the university's influence on students as a whole (Swedish Defense University, 2018).

Student Wellbeing Practices in Asia - China, India, and Japan

Practices used for student wellbeing in Asia, including China, India, and Japan, are portrayed below and are quite significant. According to the Asia Education Foundation (n.d.), there is a profound connection between one's wellbeing, which is a principal component of equity within education, and both students' and teachers' emotional, social, and academic development and learning.

China

During the COVID-19 pandemic in China, particular attention was directed towards wellbeing and mental health awareness with the advent of public health education in theory and practice (Peters et al., 2020). As part of its international education system and governance, risk management was highlighted with special care for student health and wellbeing, along with the promotion of quality education. Various safety measures, strategic policies, and innovations were created for tackling the COVID-19 pandemic in schools and higher education systems, such as the transition to online education (Peters et al., 2020).

India

Universities in India are gradually incorporating a holistic approach in education. This is where students acquire life skills, including resilience, and develop their emotional, social, intellectual, moral, physical, and aesthetic skills using a multidisciplinary approach. The National Education Policy (NEP) supports course design autonomy among teachers with regards to pedagogy innovation/creativity within an acceptable framework, the curriculum, and formative assessments as long as they also meet quality education and take into account the needs of students in schools and higher education institutions (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). Such needs may also revolve around the promotion of wellbeing.

In India, greeting and supporting students coming from abroad is the responsibility of the universities' International Students Offices. Student participation and engagement are embodied in several activities, including the presence of community service, wellbeing and stress management counseling services, sports, hostel, medical, library, and technological facilities, as well as opportunities for financial support and scholarship (NEP, 2020).

There are also plans for community medicine, healthcare, vocational/professional training, the integration of online and digital teaching and learning in schools and universities, as well as the provision of equitable and inclusive education for all students within an engaging and supportive learning environment enhancing wellbeing and academic success (NEP, 2020).

Japan

In Japan, self-esteem, accommodation, family and economic status, leaving home, independent problem solving and decision-making, as well as assessment anxiety are some of the causes of stress and/or negative wellbeing among higher education students. Such causes, along with high social and parental expectations or lack of parental support, can influence the development of students' identities, levels of confidence/self-efficacy, and wellbeing (Kakei et al., 2010; OECD, 2015; Ratanasiripong et al., 2018).

Peer support, wellness chat groups, social/networking skills, and the sharing of knowledge on wellbeing through group conversations or brochures are all strategies or practices used to promote students' wellbeing and mental health, while enhancing their levels of resilience and the skills needed to cope with stress and wellbeing issues (Ratanasiripong et al., 2018). Counseling services are also offered in Japanese universities, but there are very limited counselors available with inadequate time to assist students individually, which is a serious issue within most higher education systems in Japan (Kakei et al., 2010). Also in Japan, the National Center Test, which was a high-stakes higher education admission test that encouraged rote memorization and increased psychological distress among students, was substituted for the Common Test, which assessed students' problem solving and critical thinking skills more fairly and was part of educational reform (Chawala, 2021).

Student Wellbeing Practices in the Middle East and North Africa

This section of the book examines issues related to the wellbeing of students in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly Egypt. The online teaching and learning transition during the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced students' self-efficacy/academic confidence as well as their perceived usefulness or acceptance of the integrated technology (El-Sayad et al., 2021). It has also influenced the effectiveness of the presence of teachers in creating a collaborative, interactive, and safe online environment for student learning and constructive feedback. Such factors, including students' academic self-efficacy and the presence of teaching, have influenced the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement levels of students in Egypt, which therefore affected their persistence, learning perceptions, and satisfaction levels with online learning (El-Sayad et al., 2021). However, students' stress surpasses their online teaching and

learning experiences, and the effects on their wellbeing are not limited to the COVID-19 pandemic. The challenging circumstances of graduate students with part-time and/or full-time jobs and children and/or families to take care of need to also be considered, while shedding light on the significance of social/peer support and programs or workshops on emotional eating, psychotherapy, and other topics.

According to research, teachers should evaluate and revisit their course design, including the integration of low-stakes and descriptive and/or alternative assessments/assignments with constant check-ins, extended deadlines for resubmissions, class participation opportunities and engaging activities that involve peer evaluation/assessment, explicit grading and rubrics, constructive and meaningful feedback to students, as well as useful stress management campus resources and clear communication policies in order to mitigate stress and enhance their wellbeing (Al-Freih& Bali, in press; Harbin, 2015). Teachers could also modify their teaching approaches, if needed, in order to better cater for their students' needs and further reduce their levels of stress, while treating them with care, as well-rounded characters (Al-Freih& Bali, in press.).

Although there are advocates in the Middle East for the wellbeing of students, such as the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), which raises awareness about its significance; introduces tools for data collection, and encourages platforms for stakeholder collaboration (OECD, 2021), wellbeing as a concept is narrowly defined; lacks practice guidance, and necessitates the building ofknowledge, capacity and communication within its various aspects/areas among stakeholders in the Middle East (Dhaoui, 2021). Nevertheless, OECD (2021) further highlights the importance of integrating psychological, cognitive, social, and physical dimensions of wellbeing as a holistic approach which should be carefully considered by policymakers (see Appendix D).

According to Jawabreh et al. (2018), some universities in Lebanon are adopting models from the West to promote their students' wellbeing by training Arabic counselors, offering counseling sessions with skilled guidance in counseling centers, as well as mental health facilities. However, counseling and therapy sessions offered in Lebanon's University of Balamand, for instance, are not carried out through dedicated and specialized centers (Jawabreh et al., 2018). Furthermore, universities, such as in Palestine, lack mental health services even though they have the highest need for it within the region. Moreover, universities in Tunisia offer centralized mental health support services by the ministry of education rather than within each university (Jawabreh et al., 2018). Other universities in Saudi Arabia are gradually integrating wellbeing practices

such as mindfulness in order to reduce anxiety, stress and depression among their students and increase their levels of life satisfaction through programs like the Mindful Jeddah Training Program (MJTP), which involves religiously and culturally inclusive mindfulness training (Al-Ghalib & Salim, 2018).

With regards to Egypt, counseling services similar to those offered in Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates exist on its campuses (Jawabreh et al., 2018). Assiut University, for example, provides specialized centers for psychological support where both students and teachers are trained to handle wellbeing related issues, however, the number of students who make use of such services and the extent to which their needs are actually met is questionable (Jawabreh et al., 2018). Other higher education institutions, such as Ain Shams University and Helwan University have counseling centers. Nevertheless, the type and level of support differs from one university to another, and many students do not benefit from the mental health care services provided when needed. Such services within the Arab countries and the Middle East are far from being universal (Jawabreh et al., 2018).

According to Aly (2017), student-centered teaching enhances the skills of graduates and improves the quality of teaching. The stress and negative wellbeing of students in universities in Egypt stems from high-stakes examinations, assessments, assignments, and grading. Thus, based on the research findings in private universities in Egypt, student-centered teaching accompanied by constructive feedback, teacher-led pre-examination review sessions, and open book exams are recommended in order to mitigate such levels of stress, maintain or promote wellbeing, and particularly enhance the quality of teaching (Aly, 2017). In addition, it is essential to provide social/peer support and networking opportunities as some strategies to cope with stress and enhance wellbeing (House, 1981; Luthans, 2005).

Some higher education institutions in Egypt, such as the New Giza University (NGU), are raising mental health awareness and combating the negative stigma associated with it. This is done through social media platforms, campaigns, and student-led initiatives for wellbeing support (New Giza University, n.d.). Others, such as AUC, use the Jed Framework as an approach to promote mental health and wellbeing, and prevent suicide for universities and colleges (see Appendix H). More specifically, the Jed Foundation (JED) was established in 2000, and the Equity in Mental Health Framework was developed in 2017, integrating strategic planning and equitable implementation for universities and colleges to better cater for and support the mental health of diverse students through the promotion of social connectedness, life skills, and other aspects (The

Jed Foundation, 2021). Universities, such as AUC, have student-led activities related to wellbeing, and have specific centers which conduct relevant in-person and/or online workshops and sessions on stress, wellness, mindfulness, yoga, personality analysis, and psychotherapy, all of which involve recommendations and/or strategies to cope with wellbeing issues (The American University in Cairo, n.d.). Other examples at AUC involve online courses on the science of wellbeing through Coursera, downloadable applications, videos, tips, and events for improving one's mental health and wellbeing, as well as structured webinars and seminars (The American University in Cairo, n.d.). A webinar I have attended on emotional eating emphasized how overeating can be associated with one's thoughts and emotions. Individuals are more likely to overeat when they feel stressed, afraid, worried, pressured, angry, or depressed.

The initiatives, workshops, sessions, and/or events at AUC suggest possible solutions or recommendations for self-care and compassion, search for alternatives to cope with wellbeing issues (The American University in Cairo, n.d.), including exercise, deep breathing, meditation, reading, relaxation, attending therapy sessions when necessary, practicing yoga, as well as keeping a food journal (Center for Student Wellbeing and Student Disability Services & Psychological Counseling Services and Training Center, 2022). For instance, I have attended an online workshop at AUC about stress busters with around 90 participants. The workshop highlighted that coping with stress should be done in a constructive rather than defensive manner (Hussein &Omary, 2023). This means that individuals experiencing stress should confront the issue, rationally think of solutions for it, recognize any disruptive emotional responses or reactions they may have, and try to control their habitual harmful behavior, rather than blaming themselves or others for the situation, withdrawing or giving up, and living in denial (Hussein &Omary, 2023). Besides relaxing, meditating, talking to a family member or friend, having proper nutrition, exercising regularly, getting enough sleep, taking regular breaks, and seeking counseling, if need be, can help to reduce levels of stress. Additionally, religious faith can also help by providing the possibility to reach out to the Creator through prayers and dua, including to express how one feels (Hussein, M. &Omary, I., 2023; Islamestic, n.d.). The AUC initiatives also emphasize learning from failures. It is important to consider that failures should be seen as learning opportunities, and individuals should change their irrational thinking and be in control of the situation instead of allowing it to control them (Luthans, 2005). This can be linked to the Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Model, which conveys that