

Building sustainable and accessible environments for learning and health

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ABSTRACT

Many students in higher education experience different forms of psychological symptoms and stress. Although such experiences could be considered normal human reactions, they might lead to more severe mental health problems, and they might impact learning negatively. This presentation describes an initiative at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, with the aim to help build and promote sustainable and accessible environments for student that promote not only learning but also mental health.

INTRODUCTION

Many students in higher education experience psychological symptoms (e.g., depressive symptoms and anxiety) and stress (e.g., Larcombe et al., 2016). It has been found that students have higher levels of psychological symptoms than same-age peers and that their symptoms are higher during than before entering studies (Rotenstein et al., 2016). Experiences such as stress and anxiety could be considered normal human reactions and responses to challenging situations. In higher education, students are faced with many stressful situations which could include moving to a new town, taking exams, and writing papers. In acute situations, stress helps people to focus and perform. But, if stressors persist over time, and if people are unable to adequately cope with the stressors, it might lead to more mental health problems. There is also a well-established association between aspects of mental health and well-being on the one hand and learning on the other (e.g., Gilar-Corbi et al., 2020). Consequently, there are good reasons to think that mental health symptoms might impact individual and communal learning negatively. Moreover, it is assumed that higher education in itself may contribute to compromised health among students (Nissen et al., 2019).

Many universities offer students individual counselling for students who experience different forms of psychological symptoms. Research has found such intervention to be effective (Regher et al., 2013). What is lacking in the field is environmental (structural or organizational) efforts aimed not at treating individuals or symptoms, but at promoting and building healthy, sustainable learning environments for all students (Fernandez et al., 2016; Winzer et al., 2018).

Currently, there is growing recognition of universities as not only research and education institutions but also potential health promoting arenas (Dooris et al., 2014). The main aspects of the concept “Healthy universities” are (Holt & Powell, 2017):

- Creating healthy, supportive, and sustainable learning, working, and living environments for students, staff, and visitors; and
- Increasing the profile of health and sustainability in the university’s core business – its learning, research, and knowledge exchange.

Thus, rather than being a threat to health, higher education institutions have the potential to promote health. Importantly, such institutions can also help protect students from the negative impact of other threats to their health (e.g., the Covid-19 pandemic and ensuing restrictions, Sarasjärvi et al., 2022)

This presentation describes [an ongoing initiative at the University of Gothenburg](#), Sweden, Sustainable and accessible learning environments (SALE). Although our initiative does not explicitly build on the idea of “Healthy universities”, there are many similarities and a shared goal. SALE aims to help build sustainable and accessible environments for students that promote not only learning but also mental health. In other words, it focuses on proactive communal efforts and solutions rather than individual treatment after-the-fact. The initiative is a broad collaboration between faculty, the faculty leadership, students, and professional support staff.

CONTEXT

The University of Gothenburg is one of Sweden’s largest comprehensive universities. The SALE initiative was implemented at the Faculty of Social Sciences, which includes seven departments: Global Studies, Journalism, Media and Communication, Social Work, Sociology and Work Science, Political Science, Psychology and Public Administration. These departments provide around 11000 students with programs and free-standing courses each year.

From 2011 to 2021, the number of students with documented disabilities in need of study support at the University of Gothenburg grew from 260 to 1757 individuals. In 2021, 49% of the students in need of study support reported documented mental health problems or neuro-psychiatric disorders as the main reason for study support, compared to 30% in 2011. This is a trend that is likely to continue and is cause for concern among teaching and supporting staff at the Faculty of Social Sciences.

As a response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the university made a transition to remote, online teaching on March 17, 2020. Two surveys, one in May and one in November 2020, were sent out to all students at the Faculty of Social Sciences with questions about their well-being and their experiences of remote, online teaching. The results showed that while most respondents suffered from isolation and lack of motivation as a result of remote teaching and other restrictions related to the pandemic, there were also positive experiences as a result of the flexibility that studying online offered. Students who would normally have to spend long hours commuting to participate in a two-hour lecture found that they could spend more time on their studies. Mature

students with families and established social networks were more positive to online teaching than those in their early twenties.

The survey results, together with the statistics on study support related to mental health problems and neuro-psychiatric disorders, raise the question for whom the learning environments at the Faculty of Social Sciences are designed? How can the environments be more inclusive and supportive for all students? What are the common obstacles that students experience when they embark on their studies in higher education? Is there a way to design a course that offers all students, not just some students, the possibility to participate on their own terms, at the same time as it provides students with equal conditions for learning? These are some of the questions that the SALE initiative addresses.

THE PROJECT

The SALE initiative runs during 2021 and 2022 and has three core activities:

1) Student life

This activity is about monitoring, documenting, and drawing conclusions from how students experience their first weeks as students. Students are invited to keep diaries for the first five weeks of the semester and to participate in two successive workshops. In the first workshop, the students read and analyze their diaries together with staff. In the second workshop, the students use their analysis to suggest solutions for how to develop the learning environments to better accommodate students' learning, as well as their social and health needs. So far, students have identified the need for a better integrated flow of information in the period between registration and the course introduction, the need for early group strengthening activities, and improvements in the physical infrastructure such as the need for lockers. An important question in Student life is how students' sense of belonging (to the institution) can be promoted.

2) Student-centered flexibility

The second activity aims to investigate the possibility of giving students the opportunity to choose their own pathway of learning through courses and to build more inclusive courses. For this purpose, Beatty's (2014) HyFlex approach to course design is used as inspiration. The HyFlex course design combines a hybrid approach to teaching (synchronous and asynchronous) with flexibility for students to choose, throughout the course, the modality of their participation. A teacher in public administration has been granted time to develop an existing course using the HyFlex approach. The teacher is expected to include students in the project and to pay particular attention to what the HyFlex course design requires in terms of technical equipment and course hours when fully implemented. The course design was developed in the autumn of 2021 and will be implemented in 2022.

3) Toolbox for sustainable studies

The third activity has resulted in an open, web-based resource. The resource is open to all staff and teachers and others who want to work with student mental health and sustainability, focusing particularly on the study environment and inclusion in the classroom. Recourses include, among other things, an introduction to the field of knowledge concerning students' experiences of relatedness as well as academic and psychological outcomes, in combination with concrete examples and exercises for creating relatedness between students in the classroom provided by teaching staff.

CONCLUSIONS

Higher education encompasses significant transitions and challenges in the lives of students. This has implications for students' health and learning. The Swedish SALE project was designed against the background. Our hope is that the SALE goals to identify the role of learning environments for students' health and learning experiences and to identify ways to develop health supporting learning environments for all will contribute to a more sustainable tertiary educational system that will play a major role in the future development of sustainable societies.

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