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The paradox of university student well-being: the discrepancy between abstract definitions and the perceived experience of time pressure, isolation, and anxiety

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Background: Student mental health is a significant public health concern, characterized by increased psychological distress and reduced well-being in university settings. However, a clear description and conceptualization of university students' well-being as a distinct construct are lacking and needed especially since the COVID-19 pandemic may have introduced contextual changes that altered the understanding and experience of well-being among these students.

Objective: The primary contribution of this study is to provide a context-sensitive conceptualization of student well-being at the University of V. The existing gap in literature has been addressed by using a qualitative approach to uncover how temporal pressure and anxiety—often overlooked in abstract frameworks—shape the Italian university experience considering both abstract conceptualizations and stakeholder mediated perceptions of the student experience of well-being.

Methods: From a constructivist perspective, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 29 privileged observers including faculty members, administrative staff, psychologists, and student representatives and tutors. The data were analyzed using inductive qualitative content analysis supplemented by a descriptive frequency analysis to clarify conceptual boundaries and explore the current state of well-being.

Results: The findings showed that observers defined well-being in abstract terms through three core categories: satisfaction (hedonic), a full and complete educational experience (eudaimonic), and social relations and support. However, these definitions and students' lived experiences, as reported by respondents, differ. References to being in situation of discomfort accounted for 85% of the data, indicating distress characterized by contextual determinants including academic anxiety, loneliness, and peer competition. Perceptions of time also emerged as a central experiential factor, with students expressing significant uncertainty and negativity about their future careers. The findings also highlighted generational differences; student respondents emphasized the need for student-centered services and institutional support, while adults noted students' lack of satisfaction and social isolation.

Conclusions: Overall, the findings suggest that students often perceive the university experience as a demanding challenge, marked by exhaustion rather than the joy of personal growth and impacting their general well-being. These findings underscore the need for a context-sensitive understanding of student well-being, grounded in the specific institutional and socio-historical conditions of contemporary university life, to inform the development of responsive support services and proactive interventions that effectively address the needs identified through these mediated stakeholder accounts.

KEYWORDS

anxiety, competition, content analysis, isolation, student well-being, temporal pressure, university, well-being

1 Introduction

Students' mental health is a significant public health concern (Bantjes, Hunt, and Stein, 2022). Recent empirical evidence indicates a decline in student well-being (Emmert, Camilleri, and Sammut, 2024; Muja, et al., 2024) and increase in psychological distress, characterized by higher levels of anxiety, depression, and stress-related symptoms (Beiter, et al., 2015; Pérez-Jorge, et al., 2025; Sheldon, et al., 2021) that often originate in adolescence (Auerbach, et al., 2016) and frequently intensify during university years (Cosma, et al., 2021).

The transition into higher education is widely recognized as a critical period marked by crucial challenges, including separation from family and friends (Deng, et al., 2022), assumption of new responsibilities related to independent living, academic management and performance (Poots and Cassidy, 2020), and needs to develop new social relationships (Brett et al., 2023) and ability to regulate emotions to manage stress and anxiety (Zheng et al., 2023).

Despite a growing body of research in this area, two key issues persist. First, the conceptualization of student well-being remains largely underdeveloped. Most studies have focused mainly on predictors or antecedents of well-being at university through general well-being frameworks extended to student populations (Dodd, et al., 2021). Despite providing valuable overarching frameworks, they do not fully capture the domain-specific and context-dependent nature of well-being in higher education. In particular, they tend to overlook the university experience and contextual determinants that shape students' lived realities (Bauer et al., 2017).

Second, recent contextual transformations—mainly those associated with the COVID-19 pandemic—have impacted educational settings, redefined social expectations, and imposed developmental challenges, altering the conditions under which students conceive and experience well-being (Bersia, et al., 2024; Bonsaksen, et al., 2022; Holm-Hadulla et al., 2021; Watermeyer et al., 2025). These transformations underline how educational contexts are not neutral backdrops, but active environments that shape the conditions under which student well-being is produced, constrained, or undermined. These changes highlight the need to reconsider well-being as a contextually embedded and temporally dynamic construct also considering the Italian context, where the pandemic has exacerbated existing difficulties and worsened mental health problems (Gambolò, et al., 2025; Villani, et al., 2021).

Thus, the limited research on the dimensions and structure of student well-being within higher education contexts (Douwes et al., 2023), highlights the need for a more theoretically grounded

and context-sensitive conceptualization to reflect the complex and demanding situation experienced by university students. Without a shared and context-sensitive understanding, efforts to assess and promote well-being in university settings may be fragmented and insufficiently targeted. From this perspective, systematic monitoring of student well-being is essential from a preventive standpoint, enabling institutions to design responsive support services and proactively intervene before difficulties increase.

In line with this, the existing literature points to the need for a shared, empirically grounded account of what constitutes student well-being on contemporary university contexts. Recent social, cultural, and institutional transformations are reshaping both the determinants and lived experiences of student well-being (Bersia, et al., 2024; Holm-Hadulla et al., 2021). This growing complexity calls for an integrated approach that combines conceptual frameworks with experiential insights, examining how student well-being is defined, perceived, and lived in everyday university contexts, in the words of privileged stakeholders.

This would enable a more comprehensive understanding of student well-being that incorporates critical contextual factors such as cultural norms, institutional climate, and the role of organizational structures and support services (Douwes et al., 2023; Figueira et al., 2017; Park et al., 2020). Moreover, comparing conceptual definitions and what are perceived to be the students' experiences would help reveal potential discrepancies, offering a more nuanced understanding of student well-being.

Qualitative inquiry is particularly suitable in this context for exploring a broad range of experiences and meanings constituting student well-being (Upsher et al., 2023). It enables the identification and interpretation of the defining characteristics, potentially contributing to the development of a conceptual framework and examination of the factors associated with perceived well-being levels (Muja et al., 2024). Unlike quantitative approaches that rely on predefined dimensions often not tailored to student population, qualitative methods capture the depth and contextual specificity of students' interpretations, emotions, and everyday within educational environment (Camfield et al., 2009). Indeed, expanding qualitative inquiries would help refine and enrich existing frameworks by identifying additional or context-specific dimensions, thereby strengthening the empirical foundation to build more precise and meaningful quantitative analyses (Shorten and Smith, 2017).

Understanding student well-being through the lenses of those in close contact with students is therefore essential not only for

theoretical refinement, but also for informing context-sensitive interventions within higher education institutions.

The present study operationalized this approach by drawing on the perspectives of “privileged observers”—individuals who maintain sustained and structured contact with the student population and therefore, are uniquely positioned to provide informed insights into how student well-being is understood and manifested. Collectively, this group would provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of student well-being.

Importantly, this set of observers included a specific subset of the student population in representative or peer-support roles. While these individuals provide a vital mediated perspective on the general student body, their insights are uniquely informed by their dual status as students and institutional actors. Furthermore, another subset included adult members of the university community, such as faculty, psychologists, and administrative staff. Accordingly, the sample was meaningfully divided into two groups, students and adults, based on their institutional roles and positions. Given the established generational differences in well-being perceptions (Botha and Vera-Toscano, 2022; Middleton et al., 2021), distinguishing between these groups enabled a systematic examination of potential divergences in the conceptualization and interpretation of student well-being. This distinction is both analytically and practically significant: while institutional interventions aimed at promoting student well-being are typically designed and implemented by adults, their effectiveness ultimately depends on how well they resonate with students’ lived experiences.

Therefore, the present study investigated student well-being at the University of V. by exploring its conceptualization and perceived experience within the university context, while examining potential divergences in interpretation between student representatives and adult members of the university. Following an inductive qualitative design, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. RQ1: How is student well-being conceptualized in abstract terms by different university stakeholders?
2. RQ2: How is the current state of student well-being experienced and described within the institutional and temporal context of the university?
3. RQ3: What are the specific generational divergences in the perception and interpretation of well-being between student leaders and adult staff/faculty?.

By doing so, this study aimed to contribute to research on university student well-being, with particular relevance to the Italian context, and provide empirically grounded insights to support universities in designing more contextually informed community-level interventions.

First, the manuscript provides a general overview of the concept of well-being and its main macro dimensions. Then, it reviews the existing literature on university students’ well-being, highlighting recent developments and the growing importance of contextual factors in shaping well-being in higher education. Finally, it presents the qualitative analysis to address the identified research gaps.

1.1 Conceptualization of well-being

Well-being is generally considered a multi-dimensional construct composed of subjective, psychological, and social dimensions (Keyes, 2005; Shojaee and French, 2014). The construct of subjective well-being originates from the Greek perspective of hedonia (Delle Fave et al., 2011) and is defined as an individual’s cognitive evaluation of own life satisfaction and an affective appraisal of the positive and negative emotions (Diener, 1984; Diener and Lucas, 1999; Diener et al., 2009). This conveys the idea that well-being includes experience of pleasant emotions, low levels of negative mood, and high life satisfaction (Oishi et al., 2009). Psychological well-being, originating from the Greek eudemonia, denotes the idea that well-being is a function of virtue and purpose in life (Kashdan et al., 2008; McMahon, 2006) and focuses on optimal psychological functioning (Ryff and Keyes, 1995), comprising purpose in life, autonomy, relatedness, personal growth, environmental mastery, and self-acceptance. Although scholars initially tried to create a hierarchy between subjective and psychological well-being (Waterman, 1993), they now see these as distinct parts of a comprehensive model of well-being (Kashdan et al., 2008), supported by a strong correlation observed between them (Waterman, 2008).

Social well-being has recently been included in this framework, following the idea that it goes beyond individual experiences and the importance of social integration, support, and meaningful relationships. Bonds with family, friends, and colleagues, civic engagement, and trust appear to be independently and robustly related to happiness and life satisfaction (Helliwell and Putnam, 2004), as individuals are embedded in social structures and face social tasks and challenges. Keyes, 2003 presented a multi-faceted model consisting of subjective, eudaimonic, and social dimensions, which is endorsed in many research contexts and conceptualizations of well-being (Gallagher et al., 2009; Hervas and Vazquez, 2013; Micheletto et al., 2020; Paiva et al., 2025).

While these models offer valuable theoretical foundations, their application to higher education contexts often overlooks how institutional structures and academic temporalities concretely shape students’ well-being.

1.2 Research on student well-being

Within higher education research, student well-being has been predominantly operationalized through quantitative indicators, limiting insight into how students experience well-being in relation to everyday academic practices and institutional demands. Therefore, qualitative insights have played a limited role in informing its conceptualization. Existing qualitative works have focused on school contexts rather than higher education (Hascher, 2007; Holzer et al., 2022) or prioritized faculty perspectives over students’ (Smith, et al., 2022). Importantly, Gokcen et al., 2012 contributed to this area by exploring and conceptualizing flourishing in higher education through the three interrelated dimensions—self-actualization, success, and engagement. However, the broader field of student well-being is predominantly characterized by quantitative research approaches (Hossain et al., 2023).

These approaches have examined student well-being in terms of its antecedents and predictors, impact on academic life, and the effectiveness of interventions designed to enhance it. Particular attention has been paid to social relationships, with family and peer relationships playing key roles in student well-being by enhancing institutional belonging (King et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2024; Graham et al., 2016). Social support influences life satisfaction (Yildirim and Tanrıverdi, 2021) and subjective well-being (Brannan et al., 2013), while self-esteem remains an essential determinant of social well-being in Generation Z (Odua, 2023). Conversely, the absence or fragility of social relationships can be linked to experiences of loneliness, which, although less frequently explored in quantitative models, is closely associated with diminished well-being.

Simultaneously, emotional factors such as anxiety, especially test anxiety (Steinmayr et al., 2016), stress (Rassaby et al., 2021), and depression (Bersia et al., 2024) are consistently associated with lower levels of well-being in universities. Importantly, positive psychological resources such as hope, optimism, self-efficacy, and resilience are able to shape well-being (Datu and Valdez, 2016; King et al., 2024; Rand et al., 2020; Yu and Luo, 2018). Furthermore, recent research also highlights emotional intelligence (EI) as a critical resource that can mitigate test anxiety and enhance academic performance. EI is not only a direct predictor of psychological well-being but also functions through the development of other protective characteristics such as resilience, motivation, and self-efficacy, which empower students to navigate academic demands and conditions of uncertainty (Vasiou et al., 2025; Shengyao et al., 2024). Recent evidence also suggests that basic psychological needs are positively associated with undergraduate students' psychological well-being, while academic engagement and autonomous motivation may help explain how need satisfaction is linked to well-being in higher education contexts (Li et al., 2025).

In addition, while less explicitly addressed in the existing literature, time perception represents an important dimension that intersects the social and emotional aspects of student life (Kooij et al., 2018; Liao and Carstensen, 2018; Omosehin and Smith, 2019). A negative perception of time, characterized by feelings of pressure, lack of control, or overwhelming pace, can exacerbate anxiety and contribute to reduced well-being, particularly in demanding academic environments. Although this dimension has been largely underexplored in prior research, it complements the existing evidence of stress and academic pressure, highlighting the need to consider how students subjectively experience and manage time in relation to their well-being.

Moreover, student well-being has important consequences for academic life; however, findings on this are inconclusive. Some studies have shown that well-being is positively associated with academic outcomes (Stanton et al., 2016) and improved performance (Kaya and Erdem, 2021). However, a clear and positive relationship between well-being and academic achievement has not been firmly established (Holzer et al., 2022). Nonetheless, high levels of well-being are associated with greater persistence, social responsibility, and cognitive performance (Seligman, 2012). Students with higher well-being also report reduced psychological problems, lower dropout rates (Douwes et al., 2023), and improved learning skills (Govorova

et al., 2020). Academic optimism is positively correlated with academic achievement (Hoy et al., 2006). The implications of student well-being extend beyond university years, as well-being during college years influences personal and professional life in adulthood (Hoyt et al., 2012) and predicts later academic performance and personal growth (Yu et al., 2021).

Finally, a growing body of research has examined interventions to enhance student well-being. Evidence suggests that online courses can improve well-being and study skills (Asikainen et al., 2019), whereas curriculum-embedded programs generally produce positive effects (Bannigan et al., 2025), especially for students with low initial well-being (Young et al., 2022). These inconsistent findings (Upsher Nobili et al., 2022), indicate that the effectiveness of such interventions may depend on contextual and individual factors.

Overall, while the literature provides extensive quantitative evidence of the factors influencing student well-being and their consequences, the limited use of qualitative approaches limits deeper understanding of the experience of well-being. In this respect, the present study contributes by foregrounding the role of social relationships, experiences of loneliness and anxiety, and subjective perception of time, thereby addressing dimensions that are insufficiently captured in existing conceptualizations of student well-being.

2 Methodology

2.1 Design and participants

Following a constructivist perspective (Dueñas et al., 2025), this qualitative research was guided by the above-mentioned research questions to explore student well-being by interpreting textual data (Elo, et al., 2014) collected from semi-structured interviews with privileged observers of the student community, including tenured professors, students with representative or tutoring roles, administrative staff, and university psychologists. Expert researchers well acquainted with university dynamics and experienced in qualitative studies conducted the interviews. This study complied with the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association) and General Data Protection Regulations. Ethical informal pre-approval was obtained prior to the start of the interviews followed by the formal approval from the University Ethical Committee (numbered protocol).

Research participants were selected through a purposive and criterion-based sampling strategy. The research design involved the inclusion of key informants, a widely used technique in qualitative analysis, particularly in health, social welfare, and education research (Cossham and Johanson, 2019) when the objective is to capture systemic and recurring patterns within a population rather than individual subjective accounts (Pahwa et al., 2023). Key informants represent privileged observers with a crucial role in the community, with knowledge of the context—where individual student may hold limited and singular perspectives—and frequent engagement with substantial student cohorts (Cossham and Johanson, 2019; Lokot, 2021; Tremblay, 2003). Previous research highlights the value of key informants' perspectives in contextualizing well-being within organizational environments (Herttuala, et al., 2020). In the

present study, this approach was chosen to prioritize breadth of institutional insight over depth of individual experience. Consequently, a mixed-methods design was not adopted, as the exploratory and context-sensitive nature of the study required a focused qualitative approach capable of capturing nuanced institutional perspectives, and the integration of quantitative components would have risked diluting the depth and coherence of the analysis.

Therefore, the cohort comprised key informants within the university environment, specifically including administrative staff dedicated to student relations, faculty members holding student-oriented institutional roles, university psychologists, and students serving in tutoring or representative capacities. Potential respondents were initially identified through professional referrals and subsequently validated by cross-referencing institutional roles on the official university portal.

The study ensured representation across four main academic areas and the university at large. The Humanistic campus provided the largest group with nine individuals, the majority of whom were students in representative or tutoring roles (7), along with one administrative staff member and one teacher. The Economic campus followed with seven participants, showing a more even split between administrative staff (3) and students (3), plus one teacher. The Scientific campus contributed six participants, consisting of three students, two teachers, and one administrative staff member. The Linguistic campus had five participants, primarily driven by student leaders (4) and one administrative staff member. Finally, two psychologists participated in the study; unlike the other roles, they were classified as serving “All campuses” rather than a specific department. The sample was deemed sufficient for the analysis because it maintained a fair distribution across academic areas, with each campus represented by a plurality of institutional roles, thereby ensuring the many-sided perspective necessary to identify systemic patterns within the university ecosystem.

Eligible individuals were formally contacted via email, provided with a comprehensive project overview, and invited to participate in a scheduled interview. Forty-two individuals were invited to participate. Of them, 29 accepted and completed the interview (69% women, mean age = 36.17; SD = 14.95; 83% held a first degree or higher). The final sample included four faculty members, six administrative staff members, two psychologists, and seventeen students with representative or tutoring roles. A trial interview was conducted prior to the main process.

For analytical purposes, participants were grouped into two main categories based on institutional role and generational position: adults (faculty members, administrative staff, and psychologists) and student leaders (individuals holding representative or tutoring roles). This distinction informed both the comparative interpretation of the data and the examination of potential generational differences in the conceptualization and experience of student well-being.

2.2 Data collection

The interviews were held in the spring of 2025 via Google Meet and lasted between 56 and 111 min (mean = 66 min, $ds = 17.67$). Prior to the interview, written consent, along with

privacy information, was obtained through a dedicated Google Form.

A pilot-tested semi-structured interview guide provided a list of topics to be investigated while allowing flexibility. After an introduction explaining the research purpose, the interviewer recommended that the participants answered based on own experiences with students. Each participant was asked to provide a brief introduction about their jobs and the extent of their relationship with students. The interview protocol was organized into distinct thematic sections: the first focused on respondents' definition and perception of student well-being, the second explored more specific aspects of students' university life in greater depth. For the purpose of this research, the analysis focused exclusively on the first section, as it provided the most relevant data required to address the study's core research objective on well-being. All interviews were audio-recorded, and the anonymized, securely stored transcripts were uploaded to QSR International's NVivo 15.2 Qualitative Data Analysis; original recordings were eliminated following transcription.

2.3 Data analysis

The data were analyzed using inductive qualitative content analysis using NVivo 15.2. To assist in identifying patterns across the dataset, the qualitative findings were quantified by calculating the frequency and percentage of references for each category. These numerical summaries are merely used for descriptive purposes to highlight the thematic prominence within this specific cohort of stakeholders. They are not intended for statistical inference, nor do they suggest that the frequencies are generalizable to the broader university population (Sandelowski, 2001).

Following established guidelines (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005), the analysis comprised three phases: preparation, organization, and reporting.

During preparation, the two researchers involved read the data individually to familiarize themselves with the materials. They constructed a category-based codebook through a collaborative process specifically focusing on the research objective. In the organization phase, the researchers individually worked at the open coding on a common subset of data with the objective of generating preliminary codes that were then compared and discussed in order to solve ambiguities, bias or differences. A consolidated list was then created. This list was formalized into a structured codebook, where each code was clearly defined, inclusion and exclusion criteria were set, and examples were added. The related codes were then grouped in higher order categories, grouped into two main domains, creating a coherent conceptual structure. Further verification of the codebook was made to find out any possible discrepancies, to refine definitions and ensure consistency. The cycle of independent application, comparison, and revision continued until conceptual agreement was finally reached, after which the finalized codebook was applied to the full dataset, with continuous checks to ensure consistency, reliability and transparency. To ensure the robustness of the coding process, inter-rater reliability is granted. Two researchers independently coded a subset of the dataset (36% of transcripts), and agreement was calculated using Cohen's kappa.

The resulting coefficient ($\kappa = 0.843$) indicated almost perfect agreement according to established benchmarks (Landis and Koch, 1977). Agreement within the domain of student well-being definitions ranged from 0.732 to 0.855, while agreement within the domain describing the current state of student well-being ranged from 0.753 to 1.000.

The development of these categories followed a purely inductive logic, where academic concepts and prior literature were consulted only after the completion of the coding process to contextualize and validate the findings through comparison.

Finally, the findings were synthesized and interpreted in the reporting phase.

3 Results

Two main domains emerged from the transcripts, each encompassing categories of references for analysis. The first concerns how well-being is defined and is referred to in this paper as Conceptualization, whereas the second, the perceived experience of well-being in university context and is referred to as Experiences.

The first domain described the general characteristics of student well-being in abstract terms and comprised three categories: *satisfaction*, *a complete educational experience*, and *social relations and support*. *Satisfaction* included nodes describing students' internal state of contentment and their perceived ability to manage the emotional and practical demands of university life. *A complete educational experience* encompassed descriptions of university life as a holistic journey of growth, focusing on the connection to the institution, the quality of services and the perceived value of the student's presence. *Social relations and support* included nodes related to students' relationships with peers and other stakeholders and perceived social support.

The second domain described the current state of student well-being from the perspective of those observing and supporting it and had two subdomains: being well and being unwell. Each subdomain included three categories: *individual factors*, *relational factors*, and *time-related factors*. *Individual factors* focused on the internal psychological states of the students as reported by the observers, including academic anxiety and perceived lack of competence in the being unwell subdomain and self-confidence and personal achievement in being well. *Relational factors* included loneliness and competition in being unwell and feeling good with others, being well. Finally, *time-related factors* emerged only at the experiential level and were not identified as a relevant component of well-being by respondents in the Conceptualization domain. These factors referred to the ways in which students seem to perceive time and the future. These perceptions, as reported by the observers, were characterized by negative future projections and haste in the category of references to being unwell and positive feelings about the future, being well.

The following results present both the emerging themes and their relative frequency within the analyzed transcripts. The percentages reported (e.g., 85% for being unwell) should be interpreted as the 'thematic weight' of these issues in the observers' discourse during the interviews, rather than as a statistical prevalence of these conditions among the student body.

3.1 Description of student well-being

The content analysis confirmed that student well-being is multi-faceted (Table 1). The most frequently mentioned category was *a complete educational experience* (43%). It emphasizes that the development of human potential involves more than academic learning, including personal growth, competence acquisition, and fulfillment through a meaningful academic life:

Student well-being means experiencing university life while being able to manage the challenges, emotions, and positive events that may occur during the years at university. (Respondent 25, faculty member)

This highlights the idea that in the university period, individuals have the opportunity to cope with challenges and achieve optimal functioning arising from a comprehensive and maturing experience. This experience enables them to develop, find paths in life, learn to act and interact, and have own voices.

The participants also described well-being as the possibility of living in a challenging and engaging period of personal growth beyond academic learning, including competence acquisition and a sense of mattering to the institution. Adequate university services (17%), such as suitable classrooms, housing, and spaces for socializing, student-centered practices (13%), and the opportunity to live a complete university life (11%) enrich this experience.

The *satisfaction* category (32%) reflected a more hedonic dimension, in which well-being was associated with emotional balance, cognitive acknowledgement of satisfaction (Diener et al., 1985) and self-regulation, and the ability to manage stress and uncertainty (Kahnemann et al., 1999). In fact, the respondents' focused on personal fulfillment and self-efficacy (Caprara, 2001) and mentioned being satisfied with activities (8%) and ability to manage anxiety and university challenges (8%):

A student must be satisfied with what they are doing and studying. (Respondent 16, tutor student)

The category *social relations and support* (25%) highlights the social component of student well-being as perceived by the key observers. Peer relationships (18%) were crucial for sharing time and experience, whereas relationships with professors were considered less important (5%). Following are some statements on the role of peers:

By well-being, I mean feeling good with classmates. (19, tutor student)

In my opinion, the key to student well-being at university is also teaching them how to manage peer interactions. (13, faculty member)

The second comment shows the implicit assumption that relationship management skill needs to be taught because students are not inherently capable of handling interpersonal relationships. Given that this was stated by the faculty group, it may reflect a perspective in which respondents do not fully

TABLE 1 Nodes and references for the definitions of well-being.

Categories	Code	References n. (n = 29)	Percentage (n = 29)
Satisfaction		32	32%
	Being satisfied with what one is doing	8	8%
	Being able to manage anxiety and critical situations	8	8%
	Having the skills to cope with life	5	5%
	Not experiencing difficulties	4	4%
	Having a positive outlook toward the future	4	4%
	Not having worries about practical matters	3	3%
A complete educational experience		43	43%
	Having adequate university services	17	17%
	Studying at a student-centered university	13	13%
	Enjoying a complete university experience	11	11%
	Achieving a good academic performance	2	2%
Social relationships and support		25	25%
	Having a good network with peers	18	18%
	Having good relationships with professors and others	5	5%
	Feeling socially supported	2	2%
Total		100	100%

Note: Bold values indicate the total number of references and their corresponding percentages of the total references for each main category.

share students' ways of dealing with interpersonal interactions, suggesting the presence of a generational gap.

The following statement underscores the importance of social well-being and focuses on the utility of a social network to address students' problem of feeling alone and the importance of social support:

Creating a social network at university helps you get an idea of what the difficulties are, so you don't feel alone in the problems you have within the same program. Obviously, it helps you create a support network because you are all facing the same problems. (10, tutor student) This sentence, attributed to an administrative staff member, highlights that well-being can also be related to structural efficiency or individualized support.

Student well-being is ... trying to offer clear services, allowing students to have classes that do not overlap rather than offering additional services to students. (12, administrative staff)

Overall, these findings suggest that the respondents conceptualized student well-being as a multi-faceted construct encompassing academic, personal, and relational dimensions, with a strong emphasis on educational experiential quality and the fundamental role of peer relationship as key determinants of overall well-being.

3.2 The state of student well-being

The Experiences domain described the current state of student well-being. The respondents references to distress were more frequent in the coded material. References indicating discomfort

TABLE 2 References for being unwell.

Being unwell		References n. (n = 29)	Total % (n = 29)
A. Individual factors		60	44%
	Academic anxiety	28	21%
	Practical difficulties	10	7%
	Lack of self-efficacy	Emotional 9	7%
		Life-skills 10	7%
		Academic 1	1%
	Resignation	2	1%
B. Relational factors		45	33%
	Isolation and loneliness	19	14%
	External pressure and expectations	13	10%
	Competition	11	8%
	Need for social connection	2	1%
C. Time- related factors		30	22%
	Negative future outlook	19	14%
	Haste	11	8%
		135	100%

Note: Bold values indicate the total number of references and their corresponding percentages of the total references for each main category.

subdomains accounted for 85% (Table 2), while those indicating well-being, 15% (Table 3). Across both subdomains, three categories emerged: *individual factors*, *relational factors*, and *time-related factors*.

TABLE 3 References for being well.

Being well	References n. (n = 29)	Total % (n = 29)
A. Individual factors	15	66%
Self-efficacy	6	27%
Satisfaction	4	17%
Practical stability	3	13%
Absence of difficulties	2	9%
B. Relational factors		
Social well-being	4	17%
C. Time-related factors		
Positive future outlook	4	17%
Total	23	100%

Note: Bold values indicate the total number of references and their corresponding percentages of the total references for each main category.

In the domain indicating distress, the *individual factors* category comprised 44% of references (60), indicating that observers attributed ill-being mainly to individual issues, such as academic anxiety (21%) and lack of self-efficacy (total 15%), reflecting students' reported feelings of being unprepared to face university-related challenges. Nodes such as anxiety, performance pressure, emotional struggles, lack of self-efficacy, and low life skills competence highlight psychological vulnerability and limited coping resources. Practical issues also significantly threaten student well-being. Ten references (7%) addressed difficulties in managing practical matters, such as paying taxes, adapting to local living conditions, and organizing schedules.

The *relational factors* category (33%, 45 references) reflected concerns about social isolation and loneliness (14%) and competition (8%), which were interconnected as competition and social comparison may increase isolation and weaken supportive networks. Pressure from broader relational contexts, including family and institutional figures, was also evident, denouncing expectations to perform properly and achieve positive examinations and degree outcomes (10%). Considering that the descriptive domain of well-being identified relationships as crucial components of well-being, it is noteworthy that family relationships emerged strongly in this experiential domain, whereas only friends and professors, in the abstract relational domain.

The *time-related factors* category (22%) included two types of time-related perception. The respondents perceived that student well-being was affected by negative feelings about the future (14%), characterized by uncertainty and pessimism regarding job prospects and life opportunities. They also evidenced a sense of haste or time scarcity (8%), characterized by a perceived acceleration in academic life and the need to continuously keep on track to avoid losing moments and missing opportunities.

The future often generates a lot of anxiety. Thinking about the future usually means imagining yourself in a profession, which can immediately cause worry—what if I do not like it, or what if I have made the wrong choices? (15, tutor student)

When we talk about the future, we often take for granted that it is not about building a family or something similar, but

rather a future focused on work and career. You can't have both. (24, representative student)

The first quote evokes a dark and uncertain future characterized by unpredictability, lack of control (and enthusiasm), and consequently, anxiety. This sense of unpredictability intensifies fear of making incorrect decisions. The second statement is more puzzling; it implies that starting a family is difficult when one is committed to a career. This suggests that work is perceived as highly demanding and time-consuming, alike family-making, and is prioritized over family.

The most frequent references were regarding academic anxiety, isolation, loneliness, and negative feelings about the future. These indicate that the experiences of being ill are complex, multi-faceted, and only partially aligned with the respondents' abstract definitions of well-being. In particular, concerns related to time emerged as marginal in conceptual definitions but central to the experiences of ill-being reported by the observers.

Students' distress that seems to emerge through student leaders' words was attributed to performance anxiety and competition; external pressures from family and society; and concerns about immediate career prospects, which were often imagined as burdened by financial, professional, and personal difficulties. Overall, these findings describe student well-being as undermined by academic demands, emotional vulnerability, relational disconnection, and temporal pressures.

Axial coding showed that academic anxiety was highly referenced (28), whereas the lack of school self-efficacy, minimally stated. This suggests that anxiety does not primarily originate from perceived academic incompetence but from competition (11), external expectations (13), and negative future projections (19). In the stakeholders' words, students appear less doubtful of their abilities than their inability to position themselves within a context perceived as relationally and socially challenging.

They are anxious about taking exams in front of other students because they might be judged by them. (6, psychologist)

I think much of the anxiety is due to a sense of haste, which is not limited to this university but is amplified by this town. This rush includes graduation and the peer pressure to succeed, to arrive, and to finish. (11, tutor and representative student)

References to being well were limited (23) and mainly concentrated in the *individual factors* category (66%), with an emphasis on self-efficacy (27%), satisfaction (17%), and absence of practical difficulties. Well-being is closely tied to effective self-management, feelings of competence, autonomy, and cognitive acknowledgment of satisfaction with one's university life, combining both hedonic and eudaimonic aspects. *Relational factors* category (17%) encompassed as feeling good with others and confirmed that social connectedness and belonging were protective factors of student adjustment. *Time-related factors* (17%) highlighted optimism and goal orientation, reflecting eudaimonic perspectives and emphasizing meaning and future-directed motivation (Scheier et al., 2001). Overall, well-being

emerged as a fragile equilibrium between internal efficacy, relational harmony, and optimism about the future.

References to being well and to distress revealed a polarized view of university life; well-being is rooted in self-efficacy and relational balance, whereas ill-being, academic anxiety, isolation, and future uncertainty. This duality highlights the shift between empowerment and vulnerability in student stakeholders reported experiences, which is influenced by contextual and personal resources. Academic factors serve as sources of growth and stress, and temporal aspects (e.g., hope vs. future anxiety) indicate the centrality of future concerns regarding students' experiences as reported by the observers. Although university attendance is inherently future-oriented, students seem to enroll without confidence about improving their prospects.

3.3 Student well-being from adult and student leaders perspectives

Table 4 shows that adults' and student participants with representative or tutoring roles' views of student well-being differ, especially, in the emphasis placed on the three areas of well-being. For student leaders, well-being was a *complete educational experience*, perhaps showing high expectations to fully engage with university life and benefit from it. On the other hand, adults placed greater emphasis on the category of *satisfaction*, possibly marking its lack in current students' ability to be content and to live in the moment.

Student leaders particularly emphasized the code of having adequate university services (25%), together with studying at a

student-centered university (14%). This suggests the importance of context and that students believe they must attend an institution that prioritizes their significance, treats them with care, and makes them feel comfortable and pampered for well-being. Student participants with representative or tutoring roles also attributed considerable importance to maintaining positive relationships with their peers, an aspect in which they were more aligned with the adults. Adults seemed to affirm that having a complete university experience (20%) was essential to student well-being. Examining the percentages in Table 4 and cross-referencing the data, it can be stated that, according to adults, well-being is also closely linked to factors such as the ability to manage anxiety, possession of skills to cope with life difficulties, relational issues, and student-oriented university experiences.

Experiences reported by adults and student leaders differed in the subdomains of the references referring to being unwell (Table 5). At the categorical level, student leaders primarily reported student distress in the *individual factors* (49%), whereas adults emphasized the relational difficulties that often resulted in social isolation (41%). Within the *individual factors* category, the student leaders main themes were academic anxiety and difficulties with practical matters. Adults generally concurred with the relevance of self-efficacy and academic anxiety; however, they did not identify significant challenges related to the management of practical issues. Regarding relationships, adults highlighted isolation and loneliness, which they believed limit young people's well-being (25%), and external pressures. By contrast, the student participants with representative or tutoring roles focused on peer competition, which many found particularly difficult to bear. The divergence in relational perceptions suggests that adult observers and student

TABLE 4 Conceptualization of well-being by adults and student leaders.

Codes	Adults (n = 12) Ref n. %		Student leaders (n = 17) Ref n. %		Total (n = 29) Ref n. %	
Satisfaction	15	37%	17	28%	32	32%
Being satisfied with what one is doing	1	3%	7	12%	8	8%
Being able to manage anxiety and critical situations	5	12%	3	5%	8	8%
Having the skills to cope with life	5	12%	0	0%	5	5%
Not experiencing difficulties	2	5%	2	3%	4	4%
Having a positive outlook toward the future	2	5%	2	3%	4	4%
Not having worries about practical matters	0	0%	3	5%	3	3%
A complete educational experience	16	39%	27	46%	43	43%
Having adequate university services	2	5%	15	25%	17	17%
Studying at a student-centered university	5	12%	8	14%	13	13%
Enjoying a complete university experience	8	20%	3	5%	11	11%
Achieving good academic performance	1	2%	1	2%	2	2%
Social relationships and support	10	24%	15	26%	25	25%
Having a good network of peers	7	17%	11	19%	18	18%
Having good relationships with professors and others	1	2%	4	7%	5	5%
Feeling socially supported	2	5%	0	0%	2	2%
Total	41	100%	59	100%	100	100%

Note: Bold values indicate the total number of references and their corresponding percentages of the total references for each main category.

TABLE 5 Being unwell according to adults and student leaders.

Being unwell	Adults (<i>n</i> = 12) Ref n. %		Student leaders (<i>n</i> = 17) Ref n. %		Total (<i>n</i> = 29) Ref n. %	
A. Individual factors	22	39%	43	49%	65	44%
Academic anxiety	12	21%	17	21%	29	21%
Practical difficulties	0	0%	10	13%	10	7%
Lack of self-efficacy						
Emotional	5	9%	4	5%	9	7%
Life skills	4	7%	6	7%	10	7%
Academic	1	2%	0	0%	1	1%
Resignation	0	0%	2	3%	2	1%
B. Relational factors	23	41%	18	28%	41	33%
Isolation and loneliness	14	25%	5	6%	19	14%
External pressure and expectations	6	11%	7	9%	13	10%
Competition	1	2%	10	13%	11	8%
Need for social connection	2	3%	0	0%	2	1%
C. Time-related factors	11	20%	19	23%	30	22%
Negative future outlook	5	9%	14	17%	19	14%
Haste	6	11%	5	6%	11	8%
Total	56	100%	80	100%	136	100%

Note: Bold values indicate the total number of references and their corresponding percentages of the total references for each main category.

leaders utilize different benchmarks; while adults may prioritize visible social integration, student leaders are more attuned to the internalized pressure of peer competition that characterizes their current social interactions. Indeed, student leaders’ concern with competition could be the most evident sign of relational difficulty of which they may be unaware. Regarding *time-related factors*, the student leaders stressed on a lack of confidence due to the uncertainty of the future, both personal and professional. This burdened their plans, making them uncertain, changeable, and, above all, short-term. For adults, well-being was most affected by the rush and pressing pace of student lives, which increased anxiety and stress.

Finally, the fact that references to being well were fewer than those indicating distress, suggest that the student population was not at peace. Of the three categories considered, individual issues were mentioned more by adults than student leaders in their perception of well-being. However, the individual aspect still played a primary role in well-being from student leader’ perspective. For adults, self-efficacy stood out, whereas for students with representative and tutoring roles, satisfaction and social well-being were more prominent. However, these data are limited in quantity and may not provide concrete indications.

4 Discussion

Well-being is fundamental to the development of young people and their future lives (Hoyt et al., 2012), yet, the well-

being of university students appears to be seriously at risk, as documented by a growing body of evidence highlighting increasing levels of psychological distress and declining mental health in higher education populations (Campbell et al., 2022). Subjective well-being constantly declines from 20 to 50 years (Blanchflower, 2021), and life satisfaction and happiness have diminished in young adults in the last 15 years (Twenge and Blanchflower, 2025). Furthermore, emerging adults’ well-being is lower than that of adolescents (Stroud et al., 2015), and university students’ well-being is lower than that of their peers entering the workforce (Neves and Hillman, 2019). In the long term, well-being experienced during the university years seem to significantly influence the quality of personal and professional life in adulthood, predicting academic performance and personal growth later (Yu, et al., 2021).

Institutions can play a crucial role in monitoring, fostering, and enhancing student well-being (Douwes et al., 2023). This qualitative analysis of what constitutes student well-being can help develop effective interventions aimed at improving well-being within the university context (Muja, et al., 2024).

This study identified the contours of student well-being, established its perceived dimensions, and assessed it in students of the University of V. The generational comparison highlighted discrepancies in the perceptions of well-being between adults and students with representative or tutoring roles.

The analysis highlighted three noteworthy aspects, offering a deeper understanding of the concept of student well-being and enriching the research in the field. First, general and abstract definitions of student well-being differ from the mediated accounts of student life provided by the observers. Second, time play a significant role, particularly in fear of the future; this aspect emerged most prominently at the experiential level that the observers reported. Third, in this study, the university setting is often described by observers as a highly demanding environment that can become a source of significant academic anxiety.

4.1 Student well-being: abstract vs. experiential

Well-being was identified as a multi-dimensional construct, in line with the literature, in which emotional well-being, positive psychological functioning, and social well-being interact to build psychological health and flourish (Gallagher et al., 2009; Keyes, 2003). In the university context, student well-being is primarily described as a true, intense, full, and complete university experience that goes beyond learning content and concepts, encompassing comprehensive personal growth and development. This aligns with eudaimonic well-being (Ryff and Keyes, 1995) and previous research in the field conceiving education as a holistic experience (Douwes et al., 2023; Khatri et al., 2024) reflecting academic development and eudaimonic aspects, such as feelings connected to the university, a sense of mattering, and benefitting from student services (Flett, et al., 2019; Okros, et al., 2025). The social relationship category identified in the analysis is consistent with the literature findings (Keyes, 1998) and shows that connections with others play a protective and motivational role in higher education (Poots and Cassidy, 2020; Wu and Dong, 2024). Combined with hedonic and social

components, this understanding aligns with the general conceptualizations of well-being (Keyes, 2003) while remaining strongly connected to the university environment. Hedonic elements relate satisfaction and its influencing factors such as anxiety management (Serin et al., 2010) and life skills development (Warda and Mohammed, 2020).

The respondents defined well-being at an abstract level, distancing themselves from specific issues and focusing on the key elements that shape student well-being. In contrast, the reported accounts of students' conditions required contextualized responses to delve into the specific situation based on concrete experiential elements that were reported by the privileged observers. This provides important indications: analyzing student well-being using general conceptualizations yields valuable and useful insights that are generally consistent with existing literature findings (Bauer et al., 2017); however, contextual and experiential elements related to students' university paths and future construction should not be ignored (Hossain et al., 2023). This confirms the manuscript's initial thesis: that a context-sensitive conceptualization is required to capture also the dimensions of temporal pressure and academic anxiety that tend to be absent from broader, non-qualitative frameworks.

Several elements emerged consistently across the abstract and experiential levels. Managing anxiety and avoiding excessive practical difficulties in university life contribute to satisfaction (Modaresnezhad et al., 2021); their presence in everyday experiences shows continuity between the two levels. Simultaneously, some aspects such as time or self-efficacy were more prominent at the experiential level, in the words of the observers but did not emerge at the abstract level.

The relational aspect, generally emphasized in the definition, especially regarding peers, is described more specifically in terms of *being unwell*, with issues such as competition, loneliness, and isolation. This demonstrates that this crucial element has various ramifications in the reality of university life and is perceived more in problematic areas than in comforting ones.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings align with Ryff's model of well-being (Ryff and Singer, 1998) and with the foundational psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness—which are crucial to psychological well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Emotional intelligence and the basic psychological needs satisfaction have also been associated with university students' happiness, suggesting that emotional resources and need fulfillment play a key role in shaping well-being in relation to anxiety, perceived competence, and institutional support, particularly when these needs are met through supportive relationships, self-efficacy, and meaningful academic engagement (Caprara, 2001; King et al., 2024; Vasiou et al., 2024; Yu and Luo, 2018).

Overall, this reflection on abstract and experiential well-being emphasizes two points: the importance of clearly defining student well-being as a prerequisite for addressing deficiencies and the central role of context. Abstract approaches often lead us to focus on individuals and their relationships without situating them within the specific spatial and temporal environments with which they constantly interact. However, context is crucial, and further analysis could be suggested to view student well-being

from a socio-ecological perspective in which intrapersonal and interpersonal levels intersect with institutional and community levels (du Toit et al., 2022).

4.2 The role of future time perception

Time perception acts as a critical factor in student well-being, specifically regarding future orientation. The participants reported the idea that students had negative perceptions about their professional and personal development, manifesting apprehension about an undefined and confusing future. This anxiety seemed to regard academic failure or post-graduation employment and contributed to a generally negative outlook on the future (Hammad, 2016) increased with the COVID-19 pandemic (Holm-Hadulla et al., 2021) leading also to severe levels of resignation (Watermeyer, et al., 2025).

Future-time perspective is a construct that affects well-being, happiness, life satisfaction, and anxiety (Kooij et al., 2018). Positive future-time perspective strongly influences goal pursuit, preferences, and emotional well-being (Carstensen, 2006; Liao and Carstensen, 2018). Having a positive outlook on the future not only enables a calm vision of it and reduce fears, but also provides emotional value and a motivating impact on future actions, health-oriented behaviors, and well-being (Carelli et al., 2014). Time anxiety contributes to poor well-being, which aligns with previous findings, as this perspective negatively affects optimism and positively impacts pessimism, leading to lower well-being (Öztekin, 2025).

Therefore, university should support conditions enabling students to be positive about the future. It is crucial to help students focus on optimism, as their internal locus of control impact well-being through the mediation of a positive future-time perspective (Kooij et al., 2018; Micheletto, et al., 2022).

4.3 Anxiety and uncertainties in a challenging university setting

Uncertainty and anxiety regarding academic life emerged across different levels and themes related to a lack of well-being. According to the observers, anxiety often originates from contextual factors, such as exams, peer competition, family and social expectations, and external pressures. It should be constantly monitored as it contributes to a lack of psychological safety and significantly affects learning and academic performance (Turner and Harder, 2018).

Perception of the university environment is a significant element that emerged from the analysis, particularly when comparing student leaders and adult perspectives. Young people often experience universities as complex and demanding environments that require significant commitment and effort without guaranteeing the desired results. In the words of the respondents, the university experience is perceived by students as a challenge dominated by worry and a sense of fatigue rather than by the joy of discovery or hope (Alshehri, et al., 2024). In this context, the role of individual psychological resources is paramount, as recent literature suggests (Vasiou, et al., 2025; Shengyao, et al., 2024), emotional intelligence serves as a foundational resource that facilitates resilience and self-efficacy, helping students manage the discrepancy between high

academic expectations and their perceived competence. While in student leaders' accounts of diminished well-being, the reported focus was not on learning or personal growth but on exams, contextual difficulties, and factors generating heaviness and exhaustion, well-being can also be a function of the student's internal capacity to regulate emotions and maintain motivation amidst the uncertainty of their future prospects.

This heaviness can be intensified by environments such as the city of V, a highly distinctive town. It is described as "dominated by heritage, logistically isolated, impervious to physical renovation" and challenged by mass tourism and complex architectural features (Casagrande, 2016). Although students generally are reported to find the town fascinating, they experience significant organizational and logistical challenges: accommodation issues, a lack of common spaces, the distance between university buildings, and even, the need to navigate crowded tourist areas, further complicating their daily lives.

4.4 Limitations and implications for future studies

This study has several limitations. It was conducted at a single urban institution in V., north-eastern Italy, a town with several logistical and organizational challenges, which are reported to complicate student life. While this study stresses the role of context in shaping student well-being, the distinctive physical and historical configuration of V. limits the direct transferability of these results to other university settings. For instance, the 'sense of haste' and 'temporal pressure' identified here may be intensified by the specific logistical problems of this city. Consequently, these findings should be viewed as a context-sensitive case study; replication across diverse institutional and geographical settings is required to determine if these patterns represent broader systemic trends in higher education or are unique to this specific urban environment.

Secondly, the authors opted to utilize privileged observers for this research, positing that these individuals possess a broader experience of the student population and are uniquely positioned to identify institutional and systemic patterns. While this represents a significant methodological strength, it is essential to emphasize that the study relies on an indirect and mediated perspective rather than on direct student self-reporting. This choice introduces an inherent layer of interpretive mediation, as the data are filtered through the perceptions, assumptions, and positional biases—professional, institutional, or personal—of the interviewees. Such biases may shape, distort, or selectively emphasize specific aspects of student life. Consequently, the results reflect how well-being is 'manifested' to external observers rather than how it is internally experienced by the students themselves. To minimize these biases and capture the immediate student experience, future research should incorporate direct self-reports from a broader and more diverse student cohort.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the identified generational differences are subject to an interpretive filter. The data reflect the observers' institutional positions—where adults often view well-being through a lens of 'coping

skills' while student leaders prioritize 'structural services'. These results should therefore be interpreted as complementary but situated perspectives rather than as a definitive comparison of generational traits.

A further limitation concerns the absence of a mixed-methods design, as the integration of quantitative data might have enhanced the robustness and generalizability of the findings through methodological triangulation.

Finally, while frequency data was used to identify the most salient themes, the sample size ($n = 29$) is optimized for qualitative depth rather than quantitative power. Consequently, the numerical data provided should be viewed as descriptive indicators of the narrative focus of our participants and not as a basis for statistical generalization.

This study contributes to the literature on student well-being in higher education through a conceptual analysis of its nuances. The findings offer suggestions for educational institutions, including adopting a holistic perspective of students and learning (Douwes et al., 2023), and more importantly, considering student well-being from a socio-ecological perspective (du Toit et al., 2022), recognizing contextual factors as crucial to a complete and satisfying university experience. This study also provides insights for educators and administrators regarding their role in supporting student well-being.

Fostering student well-being requires a double approach: optimizing the institutional context (through better communication and social spaces) and supporting the development of individual psychological resources. Programs aimed at enhancing emotional intelligence and resilience should be integrated with structural changes, as well-being is shaped by the dynamic interaction between the student's internal strengths and the socio-ecological environment of the university.

At the basis of this, active listening to both adult and student perspectives and collaboration among institutions, stakeholders, and students in the co-construction of meaningful interventions would be crucial. Given the close relationship between student well-being and institutional communication—which directly influences academic performance, motivation, belonging, and retention—addressing communication practices represents a critical area of intervention. Effective institutional communication fulfils informative, relational, and motivational functions by enhancing clarity, trust, participation, and a sense of belonging. Making support services visible and accessible signals institutional commitment to student well-being and strengthens students' social capital. In this sense, communication should be regarded not merely as a managerial tool, but as a structural determinant of well-being and academic success.

Moreover, promoting student-to-student communication and creating shared social spaces where students can interact, exchange experiences, and reflect collectively may play a key role in reducing isolation. Similarly, services such as career guidance and future-oriented counseling may help mitigate time-related anxiety by supporting students in constructing coherent and meaningful future perspectives.

Overall, this study frames student well-being as a collective, cultural, and institutional responsibility, underscoring the central role of universities in shaping environments that support both personal and professional development.

5 Conclusion

This study provides a context-sensitive conceptualization of university student well-being, revealing a significant discrepancy between how well-being is defined in the abstract and how it is perceived to be experienced in practice by key stakeholders. While stakeholders initially define well-being through the lenses of satisfaction, a complete educational experience, and social support, the reported experiential reality is overwhelmingly characterized by perceptions of ill-being, marked by academic anxiety, loneliness, and intense temporal pressure.

The primary contribution of this research lies in its qualitative approach, which uncovers dimensions often overlooked by universal frameworks, such as the subjective perception of time and the “haste” of academic life. By situating the study within the specific socio-historical and institutional context of an Italian university, the findings demonstrate that educational environments are not neutral backdrops but active determinants that can either produce or undermine student health.

Practical implications derived from this study highlight well-being as a collective and institutional responsibility. Universities should prioritize structural determinants, such as optimizing institutional communication to foster a sense of belonging and providing adequate physical spaces for social interaction. Furthermore, addressing “time-related anxiety” requires specialized services like future-oriented career counseling to help students navigate the uncertainty and pessimism currently associated with their post-graduation prospects.

Finally, the limits of these conclusions must be acknowledged. The study’s focus on a single urban institution in Venice restricts the generalizability of the findings to other settings with different logistical or cultural configurations. Additionally, the use of privileged observers provides a mediated perspective; while this is a strength for identifying systemic patterns, it filters student reality through the biases and institutional roles of the interviewees. Future research should aim to triangulate these findings with direct student self-reports across diverse geographical and institutional contexts to further refine responsive and proactive support frameworks.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this study can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository/repositories and accession number(s) can be found below: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19473103>.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Protocol 10/25 of 7/11/25 Ca’ Foscari University Ethical Committee. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

VM: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AF: Conceptualization, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. VR: Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AJ: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Resources, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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The author(s) declared that generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. In preparing this manuscript, the authors utilized ChatGPT (OpenAI) for assistance with grammatical editing and clarity enhancement. All recommendations were reviewed and approved by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the manuscript’s content.

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