

# The psychological turn in higher education and the new taxonomy of attitudes and emotions: Denmark as a case study

## Abstract

This article explores the increased concern with students' well-being in higher education as a mode of governance that goes hand in hand with new mechanisms of exclusion. Focusing on a new student survey in Denmark that measures students' well-being, we show how the well-being agenda is entangled with a new 'taxonomy of attitudes and emotions' that align with neoliberal ideals about the self-efficient and self-governing individual. Implied is a notion of learning as a smooth and effortless process, which may lead to individualisation of structural challenges. With particular although not exclusive reference to the Danish case, we suggest that this new entanglement between well-being and learning represents a narrowing view on the role and purpose of higher education, which devalues the educational value of doubt, bewilderment and moments of uncertainty. Paradoxically, the well-being agenda may therefore lead to the pathologisation of widespread student experiences.

## Introduction

Everyday uses of 'well-being' refer to happiness and mental health, and often these terms are used interchangeably in the public domain (Oxford English Dictionary, 2022). In recent policy discourse (e.g., OECD, 2004, World Economic Forum, 2020), however, well-being also refers to life satisfaction, quality of life and sustainability. This slightly extended meaning ascribed to 'well-being' comes together with a growing concern with the mental life and well-being in public and institutional policies in education and elsewhere (Ahmed, 2010; Giroux, 2022; Petersen and Millie, 2016). This turn towards the individual's inner life can be

explained as a way to cope with the pressures of the globalised and marketized economy and of bio-political uncertainty with globally expanding climate changes and uncontrollable pandemics, but it can also be explained as new mode of governance that converges with the rise of a biomedical discourse, which sees mental health as the responsibility of the individual (Cabanas and Illouz, 2018; Rose, 2013; Tesar & Peters, 2020).

In this article, we explore the emergence of this discourse in a higher education setting and its implications. In the first part of the article, we outline our concerns related to the emergence of the well-being agenda in higher education and problematise its links to a new mode of governance that fundamentally alters our ideas about the purpose of the university as well as students' learning. Based on theories that point to the production of psychological knowledge as a particularly powerful mode of governance (Foucault, 1977, 2010; Rose, 1989), we introduce the conceptual and analytical framework employed in analysis. In the second part of the article, we present our case study of interrelations between new attempts to measure students' well-being in a nationwide Danish student survey and a new mode of governance with potential implications that have not previously been addressed by any research. The case study illustrates how the survey introduces the well-being agenda in the form of a new 'taxonomy of attitudes and emotions' (our expression) that offers new ways of classifying and segmenting students based on their psychological performance. Also, the taxonomy represents a conflation of well-being and learning that may contribute to pathologizing widespread student experiences. Based on the case study, we show how the well-being agenda marks a paradigmatic turn in higher education: Whereas the current student-centered paradigm has an *outer* orientation towards students' performance in relation to predefined learning outcomes (Sarauw, 2012; Macfarlane, 2016; Madsen, 2019), the well-being agenda revolves around students' *inner* psychological lives, which then become the subject and the object of education. This directs the educational attention towards the

cultivation of particular kinds of subjects, mindsets and attitudes rather than educational relations, knowledge forms, and academic cultures and contexts. In the article's final part, we discuss the wider implications of the implicit erosion of aspects of doubt and struggling, confusion, weakness, tiredness, which others have perceived as key elements in students' learning and becoming in higher education (Aaen, 2019; Biesta, 2013; Dall'Alba & Bengtson, 2021; Rømer et al., 2014) and address possible existential implications for the students and their formation as learners and citizens. We argue that elements of uncertainty and the learning for the unknown (Barnett, 2007) should not be solved or removed but are central to learning in higher education.

### Theorising well-being and governance

Impelled by the pandemics, the biomedical discourse about students' mental health and well-being has moved from a general societal realm into the policy language and management of higher education (World Economic Forum, 2020; Nurunnabi, 2021; Universities UK, 2022). In the United Kingdom and Denmark, the ministries of higher education have established offices with the particular aim of supporting students' well-being. In both countries questions about well-being have been encompassed in the national student surveys, which are used to monitor the quality of the educational programmes. This indicates a conflation between well-being, quality and governance in higher education, which is the topic of this article.

Previous research has addressed serious problematics in relation to what we in this article describe as a 'psychological turn' in education. Rather than explaining the increased concern with students' well-being as a neutral and natural development with the purpose of counteracting the effects of the pandemics and diverse other crises, it has been described in terms of a new mode of governance and self-governance. First, it has been associated with a distraction of attention from power inequalities inside and outside the

system and towards a new ‘therapeutic ethos’ (Cabanas and Illouz, 2018). Second, it has been described as introducing an over-psychologised and poorly theorised ‘snake oil charm of positive psychology (Peters & Tesar, 2020) and an ‘epistemology of the emotions’ with far reaching implications for how institutions and students orient themselves in the world (Ecclestone 2004; Ecclestone and Hayes 2007; Furedi 2003; Farrell and Mahon. 2021). Third, it has been linked with the encroachment of surveillance-driven, standardised and monitored education systems that serve to produce flexible workers in response to fast changing demands and contribute to the detriment of critique (Clegg and Rowland 2010; Petersen and Millie, 2016; Zembylas, 2021).

These perspectives suggest that the new systematic measurements of higher education students’ well-being are far from just a neutral expression of how students’ think and feel but introduce significant changes in the realm of higher education in terms of governance and educational endeavor. A key theme in the works of the French philosopher Michel Foucault is the entanglements between the rise of the so called ‘psy-disciplines’, a collective term for psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and psychotherapies, as new forms of governing at the distance (Petersen & Millie, 2016). In the writings of Foucault, the rise of the psy-disciplines is seen in conjunction with the concept of ‘bio-power’ (power over life), a mode of governing, which is not solely executed and legitimated through juridical strategies but also through strategies that have a preoccupation with how the population lives and how life can be optimized, and which is brought to work through the production of knowledge and categories that contribute to the formation of desirable and governable individuals (Foucault, 2008). As such, the psy-disciplines act as a network inscribed in relations of power and participate in determining or limiting possibilities of thought and action and agency.

Similarly, our starting point in this article is that the increased knowledge, which the student surveys produce about students’ psychological lives and well-being is not

merely a representation of the students' lived experiences, or a democratic attempt to make sure students' innermost voices are heard, but a mechanism through which power is exercised. As there is no clear boundaries between what students know and how they feel, in such discourses, the knowledge production about students' psychological lives may entail a 'subjectification' (Foucault, 1998) or 'governing of the soul' (Rose, 1989) that influence the way they experience and relate to themselves. In the context of this article, the analytic emphasis on the entanglement between knowledge, power and subjectification attempts to show how the incorporation of questions that revolve around students' psychological lives introduce a new normative vocabulary through which the students can internalise particular meanings to their psychological performance. First, in our analysis, we argue that the knowledge that students produce about themselves through these surveys serve to construct the students as psychological subjects with comparable personalities and mindsets and making these governable in line with other intended learning outcomes (Popkewitz & Brennan 1998; Rose, 1989). Secondly, we argue that the survey constitutes new categories of desired and undesired mental behaviour, against which the students are asked to evaluate themselves and make comparative moral judgements about their innermost feelings, mindsets and aspirations (Rose, 1989, 1999).

While most marking systems that form the basis of evaluation, assessment and feedback revolve around students' intellectual mastery of *exterior* matters, such as writing x, analysing z, accounting for y, the psy-questions form a new grit for categorizing, evaluating, and working on *interior* matters. Filippakou (2011) has argued that 'learning outcomes' has introduced a language of positivism in the official curriculum which promotes behaviorism among students in higher education. Following Macfarlane (2016), today's student-centered paradigm is also characterized by a 'hidden curriculum' (cf. Jakson 1968, Giroux 1981) of bodily and emotional performance demands. These demands are not explicit in the official

curriculum, they manifest themselves in, for example, requirements of physical attendance or tacit expectations that the students conform with particular (ideological) arguments and beliefs or share their emotions in essay-writing or similar assignments. In our analysis, we argue that vital parts of this ‘hidden curriculum’ manifest in, for example, the Danish student survey and similar international surveys that ask the students to evaluate their psychological well-being. We show how the Danish survey explicates a new ‘taxonomy of attitudes and emotions’ that defines what counts as desirable and undesirable psychological performance. In line with well-known cognitive taxonomies, such as Bloom’s taxonomy, which informs the Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA, 2005), this ‘taxonomy of attitudes and emotions’ has an air of scientific objectivity or depoliticised truth. Through the lens of Foucault, however, it is possible to question its depoliticised status and outline how it can be seen as a highly normative governmentality technique through which student subjectivities are shaped and reformed, which will be the leading aim of our analysis on the following pages.

### Introduction to case: Denmark’s Study Survey and

Denmark’s Study Survey [Danmarks Studieundersøgelse, in Danish] is an example of the extensive knowledge-production about students’ experiences of the quality of their study programmes, which is taking place on an international basis. Also, it makes an interesting case when it comes to the intensified link between policy, governance and well-being and its implications. First, because students’ self-reported well-being has become a performance indicator with implications for up to five percent of the institutions’ basic grants for education (Danish Ministry of Higher Education, 2017). Second, the survey illustrates the current trend that the discourse and the policies associated with ‘quality assurance’ in higher education are increasingly based on knowledge production about students’ experiences and behaviours and

that elements of what was previously considered as students' private lives are subjected to systematic assessment and (self)governance. Third, it displays how the well-being agenda is entangled with positive psychology (Seligman, 2018, 2020) and a notion of learning as a smooth and straightforward movement towards personal growth.

The Danish survey is comparable to large scale student surveys in other countries, such as National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which was initiated in the United States and Canada in 2000 and taken up in Australia with the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) in 2007, the British National Student Survey (NSS) in 2008 and the Finnish HowULearn in 2017, which have been all developed to sustain the national apparatuses for quality assurance in higher education. Hence, the Danish survey has from the beginning been interwoven with an idea of soundness between knowledge production and governance, which is also implicit to its international sister surveys. However, the governance ambition is in this case highly explicit, since the Danish parliament has agreed that from 2023 the results of the survey should be decisive for up to five percent of the institutional basic grants (Danish Ministry of Education and Research, 2017).

Like many of its international sister surveys, the Danish survey corresponds to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (2015). The guidelines recommend a regular monitoring, review and revision of study programmes' including "student expectations, needs and satisfaction in relation to the programme" (EC, 2015:15). In the Danish survey, however, students are not only asked to give their account of the quality of their study programmes, but to report on their physical, cognitive, and emotional engagement. Since 2018, students in Denmark have been asked to evaluate their own learning strategies, based on measures and categories, defined by the Danish Ministry of Education and Research, and in 2019 the survey was further developed with a series of questions about the students' experienced level of stress, loneliness, and well-

being. Students' psychological lives hereby gained official status as a performance indicator in line with, for example, completion times and employability.

In total, the survey comprises approximately 100 Likert-style questions, which have emerged stepwise as a merger of the following three elements:

- **The Education Zoom** (2015) on students' accounts of the so-called quality and relevance of their study programme
- **The Learning Barometer** (2018) on students' evaluations of the learning environment and their own learning strategies
- **Additional questions** (2020) on students' experiences of mental well-being, level of stress and loneliness

In continuation of one another the three elements illustrate the psychological turn in the governance of higher education, understood as a development from a market-oriented and student-centered discourse towards an increased concern with students' psychological lives as a parameter of success. Recently more than half of the higher education institutions in Denmark have replaced their local study environment surveys with a full-population report from Denmark's Study Survey (Epionion, 2021). In this context, the survey is gaining monopoly in defining students' voice on a political and an institutional level.<sup>1</sup> Data are used by the Danish Ministry of Higher Education in to provide feedback to the institutions about the performance on the politically defined indicators and the ministry may include the data in its dialogue with the individual institutions (Danish Ministry of Higher Education, 2022).

[From student-centered marketisation to psy-governance](#)



The first component, the Education Zoom [Uddannelseszoom, in Danish] was introduced in 2015 as a tool to disseminate and compare data on the so-called quality of the different study programmes and their relevance in relation to the job market's job opportunities. The survey questions revolve around active students' evaluation of the academic and social learning environment, teaching effectiveness well as their own engagement, which is measured by the average number of hours they allocate to their studies a week. The survey is distributed to all students every second year (unlike, for example, the UK NSS that is administered to all the final year undergraduate students). Also, selected questions are sent to recent graduates who are asked to evaluate the relevance of their study in relation to their current occupation on the labour market (Danish Ministry of Education, 2021).

Data from the Education Zoom are published on the platform [www.uddannelseszoom.dk](http://www.uddannelseszoom.dk), which displays comparable information based on questionnaire responses from the survey and national statistics on graduate employment, average salary, completion times, and other information which is believed to support future students in their choice of education. Although all universities in Denmark are entirely publicly funded, the Education Zoom prompts the Danish universities in a more marketised direction, since the politically designated assessment criteria, which are published on the website, incentivize the institutions to adhere to the immediate demands of employers. At the same time, it can be argued that the employability-oriented assessment criteria construct both employers and students as rational consumers of education, who are mainly interested in employability.

The second component, the Learning Barometer [Læringsbarometeret, in Danish], was introduced in 2018. It comprises 38 Likert-style questions in which the students' are asked to evaluate the learning environment and their own approaches to learning. The questions have been adapted to the Danish context from the Finnish student survey HowULearn (Herman et al., 2018). Whereas the Education Zoom mainly gives a

quantitative account of student engagement (measured by the number of hours that the students allocate to their studies), the Learning Barometer asks the students to give a qualitative assessment of their motivation, learning approach and engagement. In one of the question clusters, for example, students are asked to define the degree to which they identify with the following statements:

1. I often find it difficult to understand what I need to learn because it is too complicated
2. I plan my studying in a way that will ensure optimal use of my time
3. I often find that things are difficult to understand, even though I have tried to learn it over and over again
4. I prioritize my work so that I cover most of what I am supposed to during my study program
5. I do my best to relate new knowledge with what I already know about the subject
6. I do my best to connect and create an overview of what I learn in different parts of the programme

(Danish Ministry of Education and Research, 2020, p. 8).

The example shows how the Learning Barometer marks a shift from the more traditional customer-provider-relation of the Education Zoom, where the students (customer) evaluate the study programme (provider) and towards depicting the individual students as co-responsible for quality learning. This is, for example, visible in the above statements where the emphasis is on the students' strategies and approaches rather than the educational offerings and support provided by the study programme, such as for example teaching and guidance. Clearly, the desired student is the one who prioritises and connects the different

study components, whereby this is no longer a responsibility of the institution, and in this manner, the survey can be said to entail an individualization of pedagogical key challenges. Only the first statement insinuates that the academic content may be too complex and may have something to do with the educational offering. The five remaining statements are about the ways in which the students approach their own learning.

Apparently, there is a hierarchy between the different approaches, where some are seen as more desirable than others. This hierarchy resembles Bloom's taxonomy of learning (1956), which is used to indicate good learning throughout the European Bologna process and beyond. Bloom's taxonomy provides a hierarchy of increasingly complex mastery, which the students are supposed to acquire during their studies. The highest level of this Bloom's hierarchy is the level of analysis, synthesis and evaluation, which corresponds to the three last of the abovementioned statements about the student's efforts to prioritize, relate and connect and create an overview. One can therefore say that the taxonomy of Learning Barometer is psy-referential in that it emphasises students' mindsets and attitudes towards studying rather than their applied mastery of knowledge, competences and skills as in the Bloom's taxonomy.

### Assessing students' well-being, power and subjectification

In 2020 a new set of questions about the students' experiences of well-being, stress and loneliness lives were included in Denmark's Study Survey. In line with the rest of the survey, the questions are presented on a Likert-scale where the students are asked to define the degree to which they identify with different statements. While the Education Zoom mainly revolved around easily quantifiable items, such as employability and the number of hours spent on studying, the Learning Barometer concerned with students' attitudes towards learning, and the Learning Barometer hereby marks a shift from 'outer' to 'inner' quality

parameters. With the new questions this inward-orientation is further explicated. In this analysis we argue that this contributes to the formalisation and normalisation of what Macfarlane (2016) has described as a ‘hidden curriculum’ of emotional performance criteria. The survey’s Likert-scale explicates desired as well as undesired student positions that offer a hierarchical grit for self-identification, self-comparison and self-correction, and has a co-constructive effect on the ways in which students perceive of themselves as subjects with particular faculties - and thereby making these faculties governable (Rose, 1989).

In the previous section we identified similarities between the Liker-scale questions of the Learning Barometer and Bloom’s taxonomy, which is already extensively used in higher education (for example, in the framework of qualifications of the European Bologna process) and has a corresponding scale of undesired to desired student positions. The new well-being questions, however, relate to a scale that builds on positive psychology, which is new to European higher education. Positive psychology (Seligman, 2018, 2020) is a popular scientific development within the field of cognitive psychology. By building the individual’s self-efficacy and positive attitude towards the surrounding world, it aims to improve human well-being and quality of life, which is done by underlining positive subjective experiences, positive individual traits, and positive institutions (ibid.). Positive psychology has previously been criticized for individualising structural problems and eliminating the language for critique (Bekerman and Zembylas, 2018; Brinkman, 2015; Zembylas, 2021). In the expert literature and policy reports behind the development of Denmark’s Study Survey (Danish Ministry of Education, 2019; EVA, 2019, 2019b; Herrmann et al., 2017; Hailikari & Parpala, 2014), however, it is argued that there is a positive correlation between learning outcomes, well-being and having a positive attitude to constraints. This insinuates that the present well-being agenda is more about efficiency and less about improving quality of life.

In the survey, the following cluster of statements illustrates the degree of individualization. Albeit the heading of the cluster is ‘Study related wellbeing’, well-being, in this context, has only little to do with the conditions provided by the study programme:

The following questions address your well-being in your study programme. To which extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

1. I can always do what I set out to do in my studies
2. I am certain that I can meet the expectations set for me as a student
3. I am good at using the academic adversity and frustration I encounter in my studies to grow and learn
4. When something does not go as planned in my studies, I often feel discouraged
5. Sometimes I am not sure that I belong in my study programme
6. I have a group of fellow students with whom I feel comfortable
7. I focus my efforts on what I need to know for my exams
8. I often don't ask questions and participate actively in class because I fear that I will look stupid

(Danish Ministry of Higher Education, 2020, p.13)

The eight statements illustrate how ‘Study related wellbeing’ is articulated as a matter that links students’ self-images, self-esteem, and attitudes towards expectations and dealing with adversity and frustration. In this vein the statements in this cluster resemble those of the so-called self-efficacy scale (Bandura, 2006), which is used in various contexts to determine individuals’ ‘self-efficacy’ understood as the individuals’ trust in their own agency and ability

to do meet the given expectations. Psychologist Albert Bandura (1976, 2006) has defined self-efficacy as individuals' beliefs in their capabilities to control their own functioning and events that affect their lives. According to Bandura, a sense of self-efficacy can provide the foundation for motivation, well-being and personal accomplishment – a belief which is shared by positive psychology and its emphasis on positive cognition (Seligman, 2018). Following the self-efficacy-theory, students with a high degree of self-efficacy tend to choose complex and challenging tasks and undertake self-regulated learning, using their own resources to analyse, plan and control the execution of tasks. These positions correspond to statement 1 and 2 in the survey extract above that depicts the desired student as one who is goal-oriented, confident and self-managing in meeting the expectations that are set out for them as students. Last but not least the desired student is able to convert academic adversity and frustration into personal and academic growth. On the downside, the undesired student is depicted as the one who is afraid of asking questions in class and feels discouraged if things do not turn out as expected - the one who lacks the ability to self-correct in relation to the norms for desirable student conduct.

The ways in which the Danish survey simulates the self-efficacy scale represents an individualized view on structural and pedagogical problems related to inclusion in the academic society. First, the survey therefore comes with a social bias since students from academic backgrounds will normally have a higher degree of academic self-efficacy than other students (Bourdieu, 1977). Second, the idea that adversity and frustration should result in a growth and learning represents an instrumental notion of learning, in which students' struggling is only recognised if it includes a personal learning outcome (Bengtzen et al., 2021). Thirdly, the ideal that students must meet the challenges they encounter during their studies with a positive and learning-oriented attitude may lead to the silencing critique as well as pathologisation of students, who experience themselves as struggling (Bekerman and

Zembylas, 2018; Brinkmann, 2015; Roberts, 2015; Zembylas, 2021). Third, the figure of the desired student which is constructed in this cluster has an affinity to the idea of the 'neo-liberal' subject who is responsible for her own actions, can make 'rational' decisions independently of structures and power relations, and who continually corrects herself in relation to expectations from the surroundings.

### From relational to emotional wellbeing

In the Danish survey, the figure of the desired student is further outlined under the heading 'Well-being and experienced well-being':

The following statements address how you have been feeling the last two weeks.

Please indicate how often each of the five statements have described the way you have been feeling.

The last two weeks...

I have felt cheerful and in good spirits

I have felt calm and relaxed

I have felt active and vigorous

I woke up feeling fresh and rested

My daily life has been filled with things that interest me

(Danish Ministry of Education and Research, 2020, p.15)

While the examples in the previous sections could be read as prescriptions of desired and undesired attitudes towards studying, the above statements revolve exclusively around

students' feelings. Furthermore, the statements all appear decontextualized with no explicit relation to the study programme and depict only desirable student positions. As such, the example marks a shift from focusing on the students' relations to the study and towards having positive feelings in general life as an objective in itself, or from a relational to a subject-oriented understanding of well-being, which may have far reaching implications.

For some students this new grit for emotional self-comparison may have a self-corrective effect, for others the depiction of the desired as one who is (always) cheerful and in good spirits, calm and relaxed, active, and vigorous, fresh and rested, and living a life filled with things of interests, may lead to pathologization of students who do not identify with this. Following Bengtson and Dall'Alba (2017) and Bengtson et al. (2021) the idea that students should pursue a positive mindset represents a narrow and excluding view on studying in higher education, since it will always involve moments of doubt and fatigue, degrees of struggling, unrest and stocked places. In the survey these qualities are now positioned as undesirable, and many students may therefore feel excluded or even pathologized by the prevalence of this positive psychology-based depiction of desired student conduct (Seligman, 2018, 2020). Clearly, students may try to adhere but many students - beyond those with a serious diagnosis - may feel so distant from this figure of the desired student that they deem themselves incapable of studying.

In another cluster of statements, the students are asked to identify the extent to which they within the recent weeks have experienced a range of different pressures:

In recent weeks I have felt pressure from... (you may select more than one answer)

- 1) Thoughts about whether I can keep up with my studies
- 2) Thoughts about what I will be doing after graduation
- 3) My own expectations about my academic performance



- 4) The expectations others have about my academic performance
- 5) Practical issues at my institution (rules and regulations, schedule, flexibility, lack of information, etc.)
- 6) My social life, family life and other personal relations
- 7) Practical circumstances outside my studies (work, economy, housing, etc.)
- 8) Having more things on my mind than I can manage
- 9) None of the above

(Danish Ministry of Higher Education, 2020, p. 16).

This list of statements gives a very broad representation of different undesired student positions. On the one hand the presence of these statements in the survey may explain and legitimize that some students do not identify with the desired student positions. On the other hand, the statements project all pressures that relate to the study programme as something that takes place in the mind of the student while structural matters are only superficially mentioned (as rules and regulations, schedule, flexibility, lack of information, etc.) and not related to, for example, pedagogy as a responsibility of the institution. At large, the pressures are discursivised as originating from the students' own negative *thoughts* and *expectations* to themselves. The statements hereby point to the students' lack of self-efficacy as the problem projecting a promise, which is shared by positive psychology, that the desired student position can be accomplished by students working on their self-images. As such, the survey extract shows how the 'psychological turn' may transform higher education from being about something, a concern with the surrounding world, which is larger than the individual, to a regime where the students' psychological lives become the subject and object of education, and where students' working on their thoughts and expectations to themselves takes the center stage.

## The wellness of intellectual and existential discomfort

Students in higher education report that emotional and existential spaces are narrowing in, and that emotions and feelings are being policed by institutional managers ongoingly evaluating their emotional state (Aaen, 2019; Farrell and Mahon, 2021) and such forms of psy-governance risk adding to, and not alleviating, feelings of self-doubt and shame (Wulf-Andersen and Larsen, 2020). As one of the students in Farrell and Mahon's study (2021, p.45) reflects, the institutional scrutinizing of students' emotional lives "makes you feel like you don't have a right to be upset (...). Because you don't have a massive reason behind it". Based on this and other interviews with students, Farrell and Mahon argue that the constant assessment of students' emotional lives risks to "pathologize or medicalise the individual and radically simplify a broad array of emotional and behavioural challenges" (2021, p.46). As they conclude, stigmatizing emotional and existential distress also risk stigmatizing 'human vulnerability' and what makes higher education a humane learning and development process (ibid., p.48). It may be exactly because of allowing for vulnerability that trust between students (and teachers) is being build, which again, in turn, allows for intellectual creativity and imagination (Elliot et al., 2016).

Studying in higher education may cause existential uncertainty as it may change our own self-conception, which may affect students not only cognitively but emotionally as well. Following Barnett (2007, p.76), higher learning can, in fact, only take place through some amount of 'ontological discomfort'. In a similar vein, Batchelor (2008, p.54) underlines that a true contemplative voice is "exploratory, uncertain, not always in control, and suffers periods of obscurity in thought that seem like failure". Higher learning is not an easy ride and students may go through what feels like days, or even weeks, of unproductivity without any immediate or clear result to their learning efforts. As Barnett and Bengtsen (2020, p.101) point out, the "temporary loss of momentum is a well-known experience to many students"

and suddenly we may experience that the course of study or the student assignment makes no sense and the interest and drive fall away. Exploring this ontological uncertainty, Heidegger (2011, p.51) describes how apathy and boredom may stupefy our knowing efforts and we may, legitimately, experience “the presence of the nothing” (Heidegger, 2011, p.51). In profound boredom, we are drifting aimlessly around and there is no emotional or intellectual rest. Boredom assails us like an “abyss of our existence like a muffling fog” (ibid., p.50). It is an unsettling experience, which may extend its duration or become a returning guest.

Implicit to the above-mentioned positions is that higher learning should facilitate the ability to contain cognitive as well as emotional and existential uncertainty. In order to aid learning and formation failed attempts, forced detours and dead ends are essential – even though not often very pleasant and soothing experiences. Bengtson and Barnett (2017, p.124) have termed such educational challenges the “darkness of learning”. They argue that to meet “this darkness of learning in a new way, more thought and language must be given to the ambivalence, tension and conflict many students experience in their learning processes”. Allowing students alike to express feelings covering a broader spectrum may signal a greater existential and emotional diversity and, thus, taking some of the pressure of existential and emotional performativity. To create an existential and emotional buffer zone, Bengtson and Barnett argue that teachers and study programme leaders should offer stories of learning processes that “do not merely speak of progression and personal development but acknowledge that learning processes may also leave us confused and unsatisfied with many ‘half-formed thoughts’ (...) and unfinished arguments and ideas” (ibid.). Not in order to scare students away or cause unnecessary anxiety but in order to also share *their* uncertainties and experience of failure and error.

Like there is no one right way to learn or to teach, there is no one right way of feeling or behaving in higher education. Students and teachers (and leaders alike) do have their own

emotional and existential autonomy. From this point of view, it is essential to higher learning that students respond with doubt, confusion, and bewilderment, when they ask questions their teachers cannot answer, and the students start to not-know. As Dall’Alba and Bengtson (2019, p.1483) have argued, the not-knowing begins when students “reach out beyond their own understanding without being able to see where to step next—there is simply nothing there” and students experience the unsettling effect of reaching the ‘point zero for learning’ (ibid.), as when a student lets herself become vulnerable in the process of arguing, the way she starts to think aloud. This point of view challenges the theories of positive psychology that informs the Danish student survey as well as other current evaluation practices that favour performativity and smooth progression. In its place, Dall’Alba and Bengtson call for “a vocabulary for learning that focuses more on how students start and re-start when learning, not only on observable products and outcomes’ and which allows for ‘stillness, silence, and the not-said [as] important cognitive and relational learning spaces” (Dall’Alba and Bengtson, 2019, p.1484).

## Concluding considerations

While the emerging concern with students’ well-being may be easily explained in the light of the dominant tropes of late modernity, according to which, for example, the escalating climate changes and worldwide pandemics render the world beyond human control and meaning making, our in this article aim has been to explore the entanglements between the apparatuses that are currently developed to measure and sustain students’ well-being, a new governing at the distance and the emergence of a new figure of the desired student. In the analysis we have exemplified some ways in which the survey apparatus, which is launched as neutral and depoliticised indicator of students’ well-being, contributes to the construction of

particular student subjects; students who have a positive mindset, who have a will to perform, who are resilient, and who can function within an era, marked by increasing inequalities.

Rather than explaining the increased concern with students' well-being as a neutral and natural development with the purpose of counteracting the effects of pandemics and diverse crises, we have outlined how the well-being agenda, and particularly the one linked to positive psychology (Baduara, 1977; Seligman, 2020), is entangled with images of the ideal student as positive-minded, self-determined, structured and goal-oriented. In this perspective, the psychological turn in higher education can be seen not only as an aftermath to neoliberal globalisation, but also as a major contributor in reinforcing it by introducing the contributing to the construction of resilient, self-governing, and self-correcting student subjects as defined by the neoliberal economy (Bekerman and Zembylas, 2018).

More precisely, our analysis shows how the survey-based assessment of students' mental health and well-being forms a 'taxonomy of attitudes and emotions' that offers new ways of classifying and segmenting students based on their psychological performance. The survey statements imply new requirements for the students to work on themselves as psychological subjects. The governing at the distance is brought to work both in that the students' are incentivized to work on their attitudes and emotions and in that the institutions are incentivized to support the students in aligning attitudes and emotions expressed in the survey with the figure of the desired student as depicted in the survey, i.e., "cheerful and in good spirits", "calm and relaxed", "active and vigorous", "fresh and rested" and living a daily life "filled with things that interest" (Danish Ministry of Education and Research, 2020, p. 15). Also, the survey hereby contributes to shifting the educational point of gravity away from the disciplines and their entanglements with the world and towards the inner life of the

individual student, while widespread student experiences of uncertainty and struggling are positioned as undesired or even pathologic.

In line with the national student surveys in other countries, the Danish survey illustrates a growing interest in knowing and acknowledging how students learn and how they experience being a student in higher education. It is tempting to see the new psy-indicators as a neutral and objective means for students to communicate more directly with the political level, compared to the traditional democratic infrastructure of the universities with boards and councils. It is tempting to view the new survey-based psy-indicators as a neutral means of voicing the students' perspectives with the purpose of making higher education more inclusive, responsive and democratic. In the UK, for example, a similar trend has been discursively a positive shift away from the market-based conception of 'students as consumers' towards a more collaborative, community-based approach that values students as partners and individuals with particular resources and needs (Wohnke, 2016). In the article, however, we have shown how the new knowledge production about students' psychological lives and wellbeing may be grasped as a means of governance that decouples the institutional level and challenges both the classical, epistemological orientation of the universities towards knowledge and insight and the more recent student- and employability-oriented paradigm that characterized the first two decades of this century.

The survey's projection of self-efficacy and positive mindsets as the solutions to all sorts of well-being issues in higher education comes with a demand that the universities should contribute to development of personal characteristics that will help the students to become more self-efficacious, and in the case of Denmark this scenario is not very futuristic, since students' well-being is now a performance indicator with implications for the economy of the institutions. Hence, universities must teach their students how to lead a happy life by

learning how to control their emotions and thoughts in a positive way and how to be proactive about it (Cabanas and Illouz, 2018). Well-being is then presented as an individual responsibility and teaching the competences that lead to happiness as the way to introduce students to this responsibility.

Among other things, this leaves us with the concern that if the governance of emotional and existential dimensions of learning in higher education continues, there will be only little opportunity for students to experience being part of a world which is bigger than their individual self, and realize how collegiality, camaraderie, and solidarity are foundational to intellectual openness and learning and that students will be stuck in a system that potentially refuses to challenge them beyond their immediate comfort-zone. As we argue above there might be another form of wellness in the intellectual and existential discomfort induced by the challenges and struggles that students encounter in higher education. Not a form of wellness in a medical sense. We are not suggesting that such forms of discomfort will either cause or cure clinical depression and mental disease. We argue that emotional and existential discomfort and strain are part of higher learning and conducive for intellectual growth, imagination and creativity.

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<sup>i</sup> The survey is distributed biannually. All students are invited to respond to the Education Zoom questions (as well as any institution-specific procurement issues), while a sample of students are invited to respond to both the Learning Barometer and the Education Zoom. The additional questions on well-being etc. are sent to all students, but institutions can purchase a full-population survey, which is sent to all students (Danish Ministry of Higher Education, 2022b).