

TRANSCRIPT

HigherEd in Practice – Podcast series

EPISODE #2: OUR UNIVERSITY IS A COMMUNITY

[MUSIC – Introduction]

Helene Peterbauer

Welcome to HigherEd in Practice, a podcast series from the European University Association. In this series, we introduce you to selected practices in European higher education, covering teacher training and teaching enhancement, well-being, pedagogies and co-creative processes. I'm your host, Helene Peterbauer, and together with some of my colleagues, I sit down with higher education experts to give you insights into practices you might find inspiring, thought provoking, or just interesting. In 2022, the European University Association organised a group of professionals from nine different European higher education institutions. The group developed recommendations for institutions on how to actively support staff and student well-being. In this episode, I interview one of the coordinators of this group, Pieta Sikström from the University of Jyväskylä, in Finland, on her institution's well-being policies.

Helene Peterbauer

So, Pieta, you are here today to tell us a little bit about how your university, which is the University of Jyväskylä in Finland, or JYU in short, supports the well-being of its staff and students. And we will first talk about staff. So just to clarify, because this is a podcast dedicated to learning and teaching, your policies for staff well-being concern all staff, not just teaching staff, is that correct?

Pieta Sikström

Yes, that is correct because we think that our university is a community and all the staff members and students well-being is equally important. That means that well-being of teaching staff, administrators and students is highly valued and it is also supported with good practices in our daily work. valuing well-being comes down to our everyday practices, but it is first reflected on the strategic level of our university. Our strategy is called Wisdom and Well-being 2030, and it states that it is important that all the members of our community have opportunities to grow and develop. This does not concern only education and research, because we need to promote both competence and well-being for people if we want to solve the future challenges here and globally. Wellbeing is also our university's research profile, and JYU has received funding for JYU.Well from the Academy of Finland. It is a multidisciplinary consortium of well-being researchers here at the University of Jyväskylä. Their aim is to strengthen the university's strategy, but also bring together research and education that is done in different faculties and departments.

Helene Peterbauer

Pieta, one particular aspect of the university's policy for well-being struck me as interesting. It grants all JYU staff the right to spend two hours each week on physical activity during the work hours. Do they have to make up for this time, spent on say running or swimming, at some point? Or does this right to take those two hours of physical activity also include the right to simply reduce their overall weekly working time by two hours?

Pieta Sikström

Yes. The opportunity to have physical activity during the workday is one good example of how staff members' well-being is supported in practice. This is so unique that - for good reason - it has raised interest among other universities. But yes, those who use two hours a week for exercising, they don't need to make up these two hours because they are already included in their weekly working hours. However, the hours need to be used in one week, so the hours cannot be transferred to the next week. And before starting this, a staff member needs to agree first with their supervisors. A lot of staff members really use this to gain physical activity during the working days. One nice thing is that employees can choose any kind of sports they want according to what kind of exercise they like. For example, they may want to attend organized sports or exercise on their own or with their colleagues. It is also nice that they can choose to exercise in shorter periods. For example, they can go for a little walk every day after lunch. And one of the most important aspects is that people are free to decide when they want to have the break during the day. I think it's really likely to enhance their well-being when they can choose the time that suits them best. Another benefit related to physical activity is that staff members are also entitled to use the university gym for free, and they can buy a full year sport card only for €60. This entitles them to participate in group sports and all kinds of sports courses. Because our university has the only faculty of sports in Finland, there is a wide range of sports to choose, starting from traditional basketball and ice hockey to salsa and padel. Or people can choose sports courses of traditional dances and skydiving. So, there's definitely something for each and everyone.

Helene Peterbauer

And how is this being taken up by teaching staff? I imagine many of them will have fixed classes, exam periods, assignments to correct, and then probably also research and administrative tasks to fulfill. How does this work for them? Are there some who say they simply don't have the time to integrate these two hours of exercise in their weekly routine, or is this really a widespread practice?

Pieta Sikström

Well, the opportunity to practice physical exercise was started in 2019, when the research project called Active and Creative University Work Community was launched. It was a three-year project that aimed to promote physical activity among staff members. This is because there have been a lot of concerns about that people sit too much and there are too inactive during the days, which is causing health problems like back pain and headaches. And the idea behind this project was to support staff well-being and their occupational health. Of course, through better well-being, to decrease absence of work. I must say that at first people were really excited about it. In a survey in 2019, 90% of staff said

that they are going to use it. But later it has been reported that about 70% of staff members have used two hours per week to exercise. It's interesting that at the same time, there is a lot of people who take benefit of this physical activity, and then there is a group of people who are not using it for different reasons. One of them is that they are not able to fit it in their timetables. Indeed in the same survey, respondents reported that the reasons for not using the benefit were that they didn't have time or they were too busy with their work. Especially teachers, they reported that it is difficult for them to use it. They say that they are overloaded and find it hard to find enough time to do sports. Then there are people who simply just don't want to exercise. And maybe another reason is that part of our staff works according to annual working hours, and some according to fixed working hours. Those who have annual working hours, they have more flexibility in a first place. It seems that this has been more popular among those staff members who have fixed working hours.

Helene Peterbauer

Pieta, I think now we are really looking at a key aspect of this policy. Well-being, whether of staff, students or both became a very central topic of concern for universities recently, especially during the pandemic when everybody was stuck at home and among other issues, didn't get a lot of movement and everybody was just overloaded with work. After this experience, a lot of employers, including universities, vowed to put well-being front and centre. But now you tell me your university already introduced this policy before the pandemic, but essentially with the same rationale. Is that correct?

Pieta Sikström

Yes. Well-being has been recognized as a key factor in university a long time ago. But of course, the pandemic made it even more visible that we need to concentrate on both the mental and physical well-being of our staff and students, in this a little bit changed world. The main goal of this initiative has been to improve physical well-being of staff members. But there is at the same time the belief that by increasing physical well-being, mental well-being can be impacted in a good way. Even though we are talking about physical well-being, it is understood that the well-being of a human is multidimensional, where one factor can affect other aspects of well-being. There is a genuine hope to increase each and everyone's overall well-being. But at the same time, believing that acting beforehand and investing in employees physical well-being will help to prevent more severe conditions that can cause sick leave, for example, burnout.

Helene Peterbauer

So, we have now talked quite a lot about staff well-being, but well-being, or rather the lack thereof, has also recently become a major topic with regard to students. What is JYU doing in that regard?

Pieta Sikström

I'm happy to say that students well-being has been our main concern for years. And there is a concept called student life. It means supporting all our students all through the time that they study in our university. And goodies are one example of how things can be done a little bit easier for our students with such little effort. We know that students are still very young when they start their studies in universities, and many of them move away from their homes. Of course, there is more distance

education these days, but distance education can also cause many problems in student lives, as we know from the near past. Anyhow, starting university studies is a big change in a young person's life, and some students have better networks that support them than some other students. This is why we to guarantee that all the students have the support that they need when they learn and cope with their young adult lives and responsibilities. Goodies are wellbeing advisors that can scaffold students overall well-being, and they are great first hand aid when a student needs to talk to someone. For example, when a student is concerned about their well-being or how they are coping with their life challenges, or if they are stuck in their studies. Goodies are university staff members who have been selected and they have gone through the training where they have learned skills to support the wellbeing of students. How this works is that students can basically come with any issue or problem and the discussions between the students and their goodie are always confidential, and what a goodie can do is that they can help a student to find information on how to promote their well-being, or they can put a student in touch with an available peer support group or, for instance, share ideas about how a student can build their own support network. Quite often this is enough to help a student. But if needed, goodies can guide a student further to find a solution or help by getting in contact with professional health services. Students seem to like goodies. They find it helpful to think about their life with someone a little bit older, who also knows the university as a specific kind of environment. Goodies are one form of support in between peer support and official support. And as goodies say: don't worry alone, come to talk to your goodie. Unfortunately, there could be more goodies, which would make the use of their help more common.

Helene Peterbauer

Well, thank you so much, Pieta. Just one final question, which is perhaps one of the most important ones. You now talked quite a lot about student well-being and how the university is supporting it through the goodies, but are these policies, are the goodies working? Meaning, do they have the intended effect?

Pieta Sikström

I believe the goodies are a necessary add-on to the side of official system. Students and teachers usually get to know each other, at least to some extent, and most of the goodies are teachers. And if a student finds a goodie who is trustworthy, and someone they can talk to, the received help can be really effective.

[MUSIC – Outro]

Helene Peterbauer

Thank you for listening to the second episode of our HigherEd in Practice series. If you would like to know more about the health and well-being programme of the University of Jyväskylä, about its goodies or the recommendations issued by the group Pieta was a part of, have a look at the links in the show notes. In our third episode next month, I will interview Deborah Kelleher from the Royal Irish Academy of Music in Dublin about class sizes and what they mean for the choice of pedagogical methods. If you don't want to miss it, make sure to subscribe to our podcast.