

Do resilience and socio-demographic characteristics predict university lecturers' well-being? A cross-sectional study.

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Abstract A substantial proportion of lecturers in higher education experience low levels of well-being. The aim of this work was to examine the predictive role of resilience and demographic variables such as gender, working hours, nationality, teaching experience and faculty in relation to the well-being of university lecturers. An online survey was sent to a sample of 684 lecturers at a Dutch university. A multiple linear regression showed that nationality, working hours and resilience were significant predictors of well-being. The results of this study highlight the importance of assessing predictors of university lecturers' well-being and the need for resilience-enhancing initiatives.

Keywords lecturers, higher education, well-being, resilience, socio-demographic characteristics

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1 Introduction

University lecturers are known to be at heightened risk of experiencing low levels of well-being (Biron et al., 2008; Kinman, 2014; Kinman & Johnson, 2019). In this regard, Gorczynski (2017) found that out of a sample of 158 university lecturers, about 43% exhibited symptoms of at least a mild mental disorder, which is nearly twice the prevalence of mental disorders in the general population. In addition, Wray and Kinman (2021) reported that out of a 2016 sample of university lecturers, less than one-third of respondents (i.e., 29%) showed average levels of well-being, while more than half (i.e., 53%) showed indications of potential depression. Poor well-being is problematic because it can lead to increased absenteeism rates, as lecturers may need to be absent from work to address their mental health issues (Morrish, 2019). This can in turn disrupt work schedules and impact the overall functioning of the institution. Furthermore, poor lecturers' well-being can hinder employees' ability to perform at their best, resulting in decreased efficiency and work performance (Brunzell et al., 2018; Morrish, 2019; Turner & Thielking, 2019). In previous research, several terms have been used to encapsulate the concept of well-being. Well-being, as conceptualized in this study, refers to a holistic and positive state of mental health characterized by positive mood, vitality, and a general interest in daily activities. It encompasses the subjective experience of one's psychological state and reflects a multidimensional construct that goes beyond the absence of mental illness. This conceptualisation, based on the World Health Organization's WHO-5 Well-Being Index (Topp et al., 2015), aligns closely with conceptualisations of well-being used in previous studies of lecturers' well-being, including subjective well-being (Hu et al., 2021), occupational well-being (Brouskeli et al., 2018), psychological well-being (Holliman et al., 2020), quality of working life (Fontinha et al., 2019) and general health (Pretsch et al., 2012).

It is worth noting that the terms used to refer to well-being often vary depending on the specific context in which it is considered (e.g., work, health, education). Based on these different conceptualisations of well-being, previous studies have assessed the predictors of university lecturers' well-being. In their systematic review, Hascher and Waber (2021) classified correlates and predictors of university lecturers' well-being into subjective variables (e.g., emotion regulation, conscientiousness, coping strategies and resilience) and objective variables (e.g., gender, ethnic background and years of teaching). In this paper, we investigated the relationships between resilience, socio-demographic factors and well-being in a sample of university lecturers.

Exploring predictors of well-being is important not only to identify factors that contribute to positive mental health outcomes, but also to inform targeted intervention efforts and facilitate the creation of supportive environments that promote well-being. By proactively addressing these factors, we can work to

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reduce the risk of ill-being and create healthier and more resilient academic communities in which university lecturers can thrive both personally and professionally.

Resilience and well-being

The relationship between personal resources and university lecturers' well-being has attracted considerable attention over the past decade (e.g., Holliman et al., 2020; Puertas Molero et al., 2019). However, the role that resilience plays in relation to well-being in the specific sample of university lecturers has not yet been investigated. Resilience is a personal resource defined as the ability to bounce back or recover from stress, to adapt to stressful circumstances, to not become ill despite significant adversity, and to function above the norm despite stress or adversity (Carver, 1998; Tusaie & Dyer, 2004).

Among school lecturers, resilience has emerged as a protective factor (Burić, Slišković and Penezić, 2019) that can support and promote well-being (Brouskeli et al., 2018; Howard and Johnson, 2004; Hu et al., 2021; Pretsch et al., 2012).

The first aim of this exploratory study is to assess the relationship between university lecturers' resilience and well-being.

Socio-demographic characteristics and well-being

Previous studies assessed the relationship between socio-demographic characteristics and lecturers' well-being. For example, Soykan et al. (2019) found that hours worked per week and the gender of school lecturers are significant predictors of the emotions related to their job. In particular, being female and working fewer hours per week were associated with higher positive affect.

Previous research showed higher levels of well-being among female (Milfont et al., 2008) or male lecturers (Liang et al., 2017). However, most studies in the literature have not shown gender differences in lecturers' well-being (e.g., Aelterman et al., 2007; Kaur & Singh, 2019) and a lack of relationship between years of teaching and lecturers' well-being (e.g., Burns & Machin, 2013; Collie & Martin, 2017; Soykan et al., 2019). In higher education, Fontinha et al. (2019) found that overtime work negatively affects the quality of working life of university lecturers. Other socio-demographic factors that have been studied in relation to well-being are university faculty and nationality. However, previous works have only focused on students in various faculties such as art, medicine, engineering and law, thus neglecting university lecturers. Given the absence of studies on university lecturers, we drew on the existing literature focused on university students that explored the role played by nationality (Gardner et al., 2014; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008; Larcombe et al., 2016; Larcombe et al., 2021; Redfern, 2016; Rice et al., 2016; Said et al., 2013; Skromanis et al., 2018) and field of study (Bunevicius et al., 2008; Honney et al., 2010; Kiltz et al., 2023; Larcombe et al., 2015) in relation to well-being.

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To expand our knowledge on the socio-demographic predictors of well-being, the second aim of this study was to investigate the role played by various socio-demographic characteristics (i.e., nationality, teaching experience, gender and faculty) in relation to well-being of university lecturers.

Research questions

The following two research questions were explored in this study:

Research question 1: How does resilience relate to the well-being of university lecturers?

Research question 2: How are socio-demographic characteristics, such as nationality, full-time equivalent status, teaching experience, gender, and faculty, related to the well-being of university lecturers?

2 Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Cross-sectional data were collected at five time points (i.e., November 2020; February 2021; April 2021; June 2021; November 2021) by sending an online survey to a sample of 2219 (inter)national lecturers at a Dutch university. This research is classified as institutional research and was conducted for quality assurance purposes. Participants were presented with an informed consent form at the beginning of the study, and all data were collected anonymously. Due to the absence of unique identification numbers across the five time points, data of the different waves could not be used longitudinally. Therefore, they were merged after conducting independent sample t-tests to examine potential changes in resilience and well-being scores over time.

The survey was administered in Dutch as well as in English. Participants with more than 10% missing data were excluded from the analyses. The final sample consisted of 684 lecturers (395 males= 57.7% and 289 females= 42.3%). Of the sample, 32.2% was from Social Sciences (i.e., Behavioural and Social Sciences, Spatial Sciences, Economics and Business), 34.8% from Humanities (i.e., Theology, Arts, Law and Philosophy), 27% from Science and Engineering, 2.9% from Medical Sciences and 2.8% from specific selective programmes. Moreover, 3.4% of the participants were PhD students, 65.7% lecturer and researchers, 23.9% lecturer, and 1.4% guest lecturers. With regard to the teaching experience, 66.8% had between 0 to 5 years of experience, 28.8% from 6 to 20 and 4.4% from 21 to more than 30 years. Of the lecturers, 11% worked up to .40 full-time equivalent (FTE) (i.e., up to 16 hours per week), 23% from .41 to 0.80 FTE (i.e., between 16.40 and 32 hours per week) and 66.1% more than .80 FTE (i.e., > 32 hours per week). Finally, 69.4% of the sample was Dutch, 21.8% European (non-Dutch), and 8.8% non-European.

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2.2. Measures

Socio-demographic characteristics. The sample of lecturers provided socio-demographic information such as gender (0 = males, 1 = females), FTE (0 = up to .40, 1 = between .41 and .80, 2 = >.80), years of teaching experience (0 = 0-5 years, 1 = 6-20 years, 2 = >20 years), nationality (0 = Dutch, 1 = European non-Dutch, 2 = non-European) and faculty (0 = Social Sciences, 1 = Humanities, 2 = Medical Sciences, 3 = Science and Engineering, 4 = Campus Fryslân, University College Groningen, Honours College).

Resilience. The English and Dutch versions of the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) (Smith et al., 2008) were used to assess resilience.

The instrument consists of 6 items on a 5-point Likert scale (1=Totally disagree; 5=strongly agree). Example items are: “I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times” and “I usually come through difficult times with little trouble”. As items 2, 4 and 6 are negatively worded, they were reversed before calculating the results. In the present study, the English (Cronbach’s alpha: .88) and Dutch (Cronbach’s alpha: .84) scales showed good internal consistency.

Well-being. The English and Dutch version of the World Health Organization-5 Well-being Index (WHO-5) (Topp et al., 2015) was used to assess well-being. It consists of five items, which are rated on a six-point Likert scale from 0= At no time to 5= all of the time. Example items are: “I have felt calm and relaxed” and “I woke up feeling fresh and rested”. In the current study, the English (Cronbach’s alpha: .93) and Dutch (Cronbach’s alpha: .92) scales showed excellent internal consistency.

2.3. Statistical analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 26, was used to assess the Cronbach’s alphas, descriptive statistics (i.e., means and standard deviations), standard errors and independent sample t-tests. Student t-tests showed only one significant difference ($p < .05$) between well-being scores collected at time points 2 ($M = 2.39$; $SD = 1.17$) and 3 ($M = 2.66$; $SD = 1.21$). No further differences in resilience and well-being scores were found between the other time points. Therefore, given the small differences, the participants were retained as one single group. Moreover, one multiple linear regression was performed to investigate the relationship between resilience, categorical variables (i.e., nationality, full-time equivalent, teaching experience, gender and faculty) and well-being. Before entering the categorical variables with more than two levels into the multiple linear regression, they were dummy coded.

The following variables were included in the multiple linear regression: “European nationality (non-Dutch)”, “non-European nationality” for nationality; “up to .40 FTE”, “.41 to .80 FTE” for working hours; “0 to 5 years of experience”, “6 to 20 years of experience” for teaching experience; “gender (0=male,

1=female)”; “STEM”, “Humanities”, “Medical Science”, “selective programmes” for faculty and “resilience”. Whereas, “Dutch nationality”, “FTE>.80”, “21 to more than 30 years of experience”, and “Social science faculty”, were used as reference categories (referred to as ref. in Table 2) and not entered into the regression. Significance levels were set at $p < .05$.

3 Results

First, we calculated Pearson’s correlations between the variables under study.

Table 1

Correlation matrix

Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Nationality	-	-	-	-	-	-.13***	-.22***
2. Full-time equivalent		-	-	-	-	-.07	-.20***
3. Teaching experience			-	-	-	.14***	.15***
4. Gender				-	-	-.03	-.05
5. Faculty					-	-.04	-.01
6. Resilience						-	.46***
7. Well-being							-

Note. * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$

Table 1 shows positive correlations between resilience, well-being and teaching experience. Conversely, the associations between nationality, resilience and well-being were negative and significant. Likewise, well-being showed a negative correlation with full-time equivalent.

Table 2

Multiple linear regression showing factors associated with well-being

Background characteristics	M(SD)	Well-being		
		b	β	SE
Nationality				
Dutch (ref.)	2.73(1.14)			
EU (non-Dutch)	2.31(1.22)	-.22*	-.08*	.10
Non-EU	1.99(1.21)	-.58***	-.14***	.15
Full-time equivalent				
up to .40	3.16(1.1)	.40***	.10***	.14
.41 to .80	2.66(1.06)	.17	.06	.11
> .80 (ref.)	2.45(1.23)			
Teaching experience				
0 to 5 years	2.48(1.20)	-.18	-.07	.19
6 to 20 years	2.77(1.15)	-.03	-.01	.20
> 21 years (ref.)	2.71(1.13)			
Gender				
Male	2.62(1.22)	-.08	-.03	.08
Female	2.50(1.15)			
Faculty				
Social sciences (ref.)	2.63(1.18)			
STEM	2.53(1.20)	-.06	-.01	.10
Humanities	2.50(1.17)	.06	-.04	.10
Medical Science	2.83(1.12)	-.04	.01	.24
Selective programmes	2.86(1.59)	.46	.06	.26
Resilience				
	3.15(.25)	2.07***	.43***	.08

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

As can be seen in Table 2, resilience is significantly related to lecturers' well-being. Therefore, the capacity to adapt positively to adversity, maintain a positive outlook, and effectively cope with stressors is associated with higher levels of well-being.

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In addition, being Dutch is associated with higher levels of well-being than being EU (non-Dutch) and non-EU. This suggests that lecturers of Dutch nationality experience higher levels of relaxation, positive mood and vitality in daily activities than their counterparts from other EU countries or non-EU countries. Likewise, working up to .40 FTE is related to higher levels of well-being than working above .80 FTE. Therefore, lecturers who work between 16 and 32 hours per week experience greater well-being than those working more than 32 hours. Table 2 also shows that teaching experience, gender and faculty were not significantly associated with lecturers' well-being. The predictors of our model explain 26% of the total variance in well-being.

4 Discussion

This exploratory study assessed factors related to well-being of lecturers in higher education. Specifically, we analysed the role played by resilience and socio-demographic variables, including gender, number of working hours, nationality, teaching experience and faculty, in relation to university lecturers' well-being.

We found that resilience is significantly associated with lecturers' well-being. Concerning the relationships between socio-demographic characteristics and well-being, we found that being Dutch and working up to .40 FTE were associated with higher levels of well-being. In contrast, years of teaching experience, gender and faculty were not significantly associated with lecturers' well-being. Our results are consistent with previous works showing a positive association between school lecturers' resilience and well-being (Burić et al., 2019; Brouskeli et al., 2018; Clarà 2017; Johnson and Down 2013; Howard and Johnson, 2004; Pretsch et al., 2012).

Likewise, our findings are in agreement with previous studies showing no association between years of teaching experience and well-being (e.g., Burns & Machin, 2013; Collie & Martin, 2017; Soykan et al., 2019).

In line with our findings, most studies in the literature have not shown gender differences in lecturers' well-being (e.g., Aelterman, Engels, Van Petegem, & Verhaeghe, 2007; Kaur & Singh, 2019). In contrast, fewer studies found higher well-being among female (e.g., Milfont et al., 2008) or male lecturers (Liang et al., 2017). Interestingly, the current study has shown that faculty is not associated with the well-being of university lecturers. Whereas, most of the research conducted among university students indicates differences in well-being based on their fields of study (Bunevicius et al., 2008; Honney et al., 2010; Kiltz et al., 2023; Larcombe et al., 2015). Furthermore, we compared the results on nationality with the existing literature on students, as there is no research focusing on lecturers. Unlike most previous studies among university students that found no distinctions in the levels of well-being between international and

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domestic students (Gardner et al., 2014; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008; Larcombe et al., 2016; Larcombe et al., 2021; Rice et al., 2016; Said et al., 2013; Skromanis et al., 2018; Stallman et al., 2010), our results suggest that domestic lecturers experience higher levels of well-being than European (non-Dutch) and non-European lecturers. In conclusion, our study offers novel perspectives on the links between resilience, socio-demographic factors, and lecturers' well-being within higher education, shedding light on nuanced patterns that could inform the development of interventions, as we discussed further in the Implications and Conclusions section.

Limitations and future directions

Some limitations should be considered. First, the study employs a cross-sectional design due to its exploratory nature. Cross-sectional studies are particularly suitable for initial investigations where the aim is to gather preliminary data and identify potential relationships or patterns. However, this design choice restricts the ability to draw causal conclusions about the predictive role of resilience and socio-demographic characteristics. Thus, future studies should investigate the causal relationship between these variables using a longitudinal design.

Second, the sample of lecturers was drawn from only one Dutch university and was predominantly Dutch. We recommend that future research examine these relationships using a more balanced sample of Dutch and international teachers. Future works can also investigate the mediating and moderating variables influencing the relationship between resilience and well-being. For example, it can be explored whether variables such as the balance between demands and resources (Simmons et al. 2019), and the enhancement of various resources (Owen, 2016) mediate the relationship between resilience and well-being of university lecturers, as previous studies have only considered samples of school lecturers. Moreover, future studies can use the Aligning Well-being and Resilience in Education (AWaRE) model (Hascher, Beltman and Mansfield, 2021) within the context of higher education, as it was not applied in this study. The primary reason for this decision was the exploratory nature of our research, which aimed to identify baseline relationships without the constraints of a specific theoretical framework. The AWaRE model, originally developed for use in secondary education, serves as a valuable framework for investigating the relationship between resilience and well-being, along with the key components of the resilience process. By adapting this model to the higher education context, researchers can gain deeper insights into the factors mediating or moderating the relationship between resilience and well-being.

Implications and Conclusion

First, our results showed that resilience of university lecturers is associated with

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well-being. Our research is significant because it adds to the growing body of studies examining university lecturers' personal resources in relation to well-being (e.g., Holliman et al., 2020; Puertas Molero et al., 2019). In particular, our study contributes to the understanding of the role played by resilience in relation to the well-being. This provides a foundation for further research and practical interventions aimed at enhancing resilience of university lecturers.

In this regard, resilience intervention programmes were found to be effective in improving school lecturers' well-being (Beshai et al., 2015; Cook et al., 2017; Griffiths, 2014; Johnson et al., 2014; Mahfouz, 2018). Also higher education institutions have started to provide resilience training programs, such as the Building Resilience in Teacher Education (BRiTE) (www.brite.edu.au), which helps early-career lecturers become more resilient during their teaching career. These initiatives are important because resilient lecturers are able to build stronger relationships with students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), are more productive, perform better under pressure (Kohll, 2017) and are less likely to leave their profession (Mansfield et al., 2012). Therefore, it is crucial that professional development programs include components that help lecturers develop resilience skills. Resilience-building components can also be integrated into workshops or training sessions to ensure that lecturers have the tools they need to face challenges and setbacks in the academic environment.

Second, the results of the current study suggest that Dutch lecturers and those who work up to .40 FTE experience higher levels of well-being than European (non-Dutch), non-European and lecturers working more than 0.8 FTE. In this regard, our work can be useful for policy makers and stakeholders to understand the population of university lecturers who deserve special attention and intervention in academic domain.

However, it is essential to interpret our results with caution as they stem from data originally collected for quality assurance purposes. Moreover, the exploratory nature of the current study underscores the preliminary nature of our findings. Hence, the implementation of initiatives targeting specific socio-demographics to improve university lecturers' well-being should be accompanied by a recognition of the complexity of the environment in which they work. Indeed, it is important to also consider the broader context and environmental factors that contribute to the well-being of university lecturers. In light of these insights, we advocate for a holistic approach to the design and implementation of initiatives aimed at improving university lecturers' well-being. It is crucial to examine and address the surrounding conditions and systemic factors that may influence their well-being.

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Samenvatting

Voorspellen veerkracht en sociaal-demografische kenmerken het welzijn van universitaire docenten? Een cross-sectionele studie.

Een aanzienlijk deel van de docenten in het hoger onderwijs ervaart een laag welzijnsniveau. Het doel van dit onderzoek was om de voorspellende rol van veerkracht en demografische variabelen, zoals sekse, werkuren, nationaliteit, onderwijservaring en faculteit, te onderzoeken in relatie tot het welzijn van universitaire docenten. Een online enquête werd verstuurd naar een steekproef van 684 docenten aan een Nederlandse universiteit. Een meervoudige lineaire regressie toonde aan dat nationaliteit, werkuren en veerkracht significante voorspellers waren van welzijn. De resultaten van dit onderzoek benadrukten het belang van het in kaart brengen van voorspellers van het welzijn van docenten en onderstreept de noodzaak van initiatieven ter verhoging van veerkracht.

Trefwoorden docenten, hoger onderwijs, welzijn, veerkracht, socio-demografische kenmerken