

## Philippa Waterhouse

### Wellbeing of HWSC students: the importance of work, family and motivational factors

#### Transcript

Hi, my name is Philippa Waterhouse. I'm the programme leader for the Professional Doctorate in Health and Social Care at The Open University. I was also the PI for the Praxis Project, 'Wellbeing of Level 3 Health and Social Care and Education, Childhood, Youth and Sports students: the importance of work and family factors'.

So this project aimed to examine students' mental health using an established and tested measure and we wanted to consider how mental health was associated with our students' work and family roles, but also, how it was associated with their perceived conflict and facilitation between roles in comparison to research carried out into student attrition on distance education courses.

There's been a lot less research conducted into mental wellbeing, so that's why we were interested in this outcome at the OU. Our students' profiles do differ to campus-based universities in that, due to our flexibility, we tend to attract students who have a range of personal and employment commitments that are ongoing throughout the course of their studies. While there's been a lot of literature into the combination of work and family roles and the consequences for individual, family and organization wellbeing, there's been a lot less consideration of how individuals combine their university studies with also other multiple roles. In addition to exploring mental health, we wanted to also explore how students manage their multiple roles, the support that the university has given them and also if they had any feedback on further support that The Open University could give as well.

We collected our data using our online questionnaire that asked students about their work status, whether they had any unpaid caring responsibilities, whether they were co-resident with children under the age of 18 and their partnership status. We also used the DASS 21 to collect information on mental health, and this asks questions about signs and symptoms of depression, anxiety and levels of stress. We used measures from the work-family literature on role-conflict and role-facilitation to create our item on work to study facilitation, work to study conflict and also family to study conflict and family to study facilitation. We used thematic analysis to analyze our qualitative data and regression analysis to analyze our quantitative data.

Also involved in the project were Dr Rajvinder Samra and Dr Mathijis Lucassen, who are Senior Lecturers in the School of Health, Wellbeing and Social Care.

A major finding from the research was that reporting unpaid caring responsibility was associated with higher levels of mental distress in terms of anxiety, depression and levels of stress, and this was after controlling for social demographic factors such as age sex, ethnicity and prior educational experiences. Our research also showed that students' work and family roles did not necessarily have negative impacts on their mental health and wellbeing. What was more important was students' perception of conflict or their perception of facilitation. The qualitative data led further insights into how students' work and family factors affected their student journeys. So this included families being a source of motivation and also employment roles helping to facilitate deeper learning. However in terms of role conflict, students reported particularly being time poor and this was an experience that was reported quite a lot.

In their feedback there were suggestions of what the OU could do to help and this was particularly around time-management tools and also helping students negotiate having difficult conversations with their employers and their families to gather support for their studies. An important theme that came out of the qualitative data was also navigating complex online environments. So while these issues do not arise from our students' work and family roles, it does point towards the fact that stress from having to navigate complex online environments can compound them being time poor. One of the supports that was advocated by the people in our study was having a single point of contact for pastoral support.

So the impact of our project: so far we've had two peer review publications published in the Journal of Distance Education, one looking at our quantitative results on the association between work and family roles and mental health, and then the other one on our qualitative results, looking at how institutions can better support students. Based on these publications, I was invited to be a part of a panel webinar on the impact of Covid-19 on higher education. While there's been quite a lot of focus on the impact of Covid-19 on campus-based teaching, I think it's really important that distance education institutions also recognize the impact of home schooling changes in our student workloads and sites of employment, and the closure of public spaces such as libraries have on the impact of their studies.

There's a number of ways that this project could be taken further. There's a clear need to design support and interventions. Key questions that arise from our research is how can students with multiple roles and demands be better supported through our learning environment?

So, what did I personally gain from the project? It was an opportunity to work with colleagues that I haven't previously collaborated with, which I found to be a really enjoyable experience. I was able to learn from their expertise. For example, Raj had expertise in questionnaire design, something that I hadn't done previously, and I feel like I have developed my skills and confidence in this area and will be able to apply it to other projects