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INTRODUCING VIEWS OF WELL-BEING IN ACADEMIA: CASE STUDIES AND PROPOSALS

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The articles that we have had the pleasure to assemble and edit as a thematic issue in the journal *mediAzioni*, with the title *Views of Well-Being in Academia: Case Studies and Proposals*, were originally presented at a one-day symposium hosted by the Department of Political Science of the University of Napoli Federico II in December 2022 as a follow-up to a previous research project, a little wider in scope and framework. The previous project involved many colleagues from other disciplinary areas, including demographics, economics, geography, international relations, and law (Pennarola *et al.* 2021). As linguists working in a Department of Political Science we have always been aware of how language use influences our views of the world and how each discipline conceptualizes the same object of study in different ways. Leaving terminological issues aside, it is the focus on the things out there, namely our objects of study – whether concrete or abstract – that has helped us realize the variety and multidimensional nature of any piece of knowledge as it is constructed through our discipline-based methods, theoretical frameworks and academic writing conventions.

As a case in point, well-being is a topic we are all interested in largely for personal reasons and our deep-rooted desire to improve our condition, striving to achieve perfect harmony in our busy and often chaotic lives. Magazines, TV programmes and social media abound in valuable tips and guidelines on how to boost our physical and emotional well-being and they all seem to point to a common direction and proceed along the same lines: general recommendations and solid good sense. In contrast, the ways in which we approach well-being within the academic disciplines and according to specialized frameworks are not only diverse and wide-ranging, but also elusive and problematic. In place of the perfect solution to the causes of stress and anxiety plaguing our daily lives, we may find more aspects that make us feel insecure and concerned, but at the same

time offer a panoramic view of well-being in social contexts and for communities of practice.

A look at the contributions in the previous book *Specialized Discourses of Well-Being and Human Development: Cross-disciplinary Perspectives* (Pennarola *et al.* 2021) proves the point that even a seemingly clear and well-consolidated concept such as well-being can represent different empirical realities for scholars depending on their fields of expertise and frameworks of analysis. The very title of the 2021 volume, which combines well-being with human development, suggests that for social scientists well-being and human development are interwoven and the individual dimension of well-being must be integrated by a socio-economic and global approach. As pointed out by the economist Mahbub ul Haq (1995: 16) when applying a whole new set of principles, including human flourishing, to economic growth and countries' well-being: "There are four essential components in the human development paradigm: equity, sustainability, productivity and empowerment". According to his framework, which has revolutionized economic theories and found practical applications in the United Nations agenda of the Millennium Development Goals, people are at the centre stage of the whole process of growth, within a holistic frame that takes into account all the many dimensions of human development: social, economic, political, cultural and personal. The contributions in the 2021 book have then explored well-being for groups of people or nations' networks: students, healthcare professionals, statisticians, immigrants, mentally ill offenders, the European Union, western Balkan countries, former Soviet republics, the United States, China. For each category, distinct frameworks and tools of analysis have been used providing insights into the multi-faceted nature of well-being, also offering an open forum for cross-disciplinary dialogue among researchers.

Yet, despite the dissemination of scholarly studies dedicated to mental health and well-being in a variety of geographical and socio-economic settings affected by violations of human rights and unequal access to digital competences and resources, little attention has been devoted to aspects of well-being in academia. The central focus of well-being at university is usually on the students and their way of coping with the demands of academic study and enculturation, while relatively few studies (such as Bell *et al.* 2012; Heiden *et al.* 2021; Kinman 2014; Tsouros *et al.* 1998; among others) have investigated the influence of academic job stress and exposed the burden of hierarchies, social inequalities, emotional struggles and high-pressure competition on the people working at university (Smith and Ulus, 2020), including – crucially – academics, researchers and administrative staff. Some universities have adopted initiatives and policies to help academics cope with stress and health-related issues, for instance by introducing flexible working hours, stress management training opportunities and seminars on work-life balance. However, the majority seem to be unaware of, or unable to alleviate, common issues of well-being, to the extent that feelings of anxiety, alienation and exclusion are accentuated by neoliberal policies that promote a managerial profit-driven agenda, and encourage tough competition among academic staff, both within and across universities, departments and schools.

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Against this background, the aim of this collection of papers is to encourage discussion on the meanings, ideological implications, dynamics and practices of well-being in academia and how these notions may be influenced by personal, cultural and societal models of living and may vary depending on the individual situational contexts and the institutional constraints which characterize our university life.

The opening paper of this collection is by Lucia Abbamonte and Flavia Cavaliere, and aptly focuses on the general interest in the mental health of people of all ages, and in particular in the overall well-being of students in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Acknowledging that students' well-being is now a shared goal in many areas of the world and across domains, and particularly in Western higher education systems, the authors devote their attention in particular to inclusive educational practices for special needs students. Their study looks at a range of key aspects of second-language acquisition and learning, primarily focusing on English as the most widely taught language in Italy, laying special emphasis on students with dyslexia. The thoughtful and well-informed discussion presented by Abbamonte and Cavaliere is aimed at improving the well-being of special needs students at university and, as a consequence, at enhancing their overall academic performance and achievements. They clearly illustrate the main features of these students' neuropsychological mechanisms and learning styles, as well as a number of teaching strategies, techniques and tools that can be effective in accommodating their needs, also with regard to assessing their English language skills.

The next contribution by Stefania D'Avanzo acknowledges that concerns around the mental health of university students are on the rise, with common manifestations including difficulty in managing stress levels, depression, anxiety, all the way up to suicidal ideation. Recognizing this challenging and worrying situation, her thoughtful paper presents a preliminary investigation of how the websites of a sample of the world's top universities from the UK and the US present their support services for students' well-being. In particular, D'Avanzo presents an interesting analysis of the counselling services sections aimed at students on the websites of a small group of elite universities, investigating their commitment to improve students' well-being. Through a combined multimodal analytic and social semiotic methodology that also covers the cross-cultural dimension prominent in top-ranking universities, D'Avanzo's contribution discusses the main differences in the communicative approach adopted by the British and US universities included in the sample, especially focusing on the degree of proximity with which the counselling services address the student populations that they are meant to serve.

Kim Grego tackles head-on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the staff of academic institutions. This reflective paper explores the nature and the effects of some of the key measures that were implemented by a few large, world-leading universities in the US and the UK to help their employees cope with the pandemic, and boost their overall well-being during such a testing time. The sample of English-speaking universities selected by Grego for her study is very similar to D'Avanzo's in the previous paper; in a somewhat complementary fashion, Grego examines the sections of the websites devoted to helping

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university staff cope with the extraordinary and unprecedented work conditions and adjustments that affected virtually all employees during the pandemic, zooming in on how mental well-being was framed in this context. Grego's methodology combines domain-specific discourse analysis, critical discourse studies and critical genre analysis. The results of her exploratory investigation, which covers the five-year span 2019-2023, show that the US and UK universities under consideration addressed the psychological well-being of their employees already before the pandemic, increased their focus on the relevant issues throughout the height of the global emergency, and maintained a high level of attention in its aftermath, carefully packaging their online information and messages concerning Covid-19 support measures for staff. A further insightful finding of this study concerns the tension between contrasting interests in academia: e.g., well-being and personal growth as opposed to marketization, profit and labour law aspects.

Maria Cristina Caimotto's self-declared "experimental" paper employs an autoethnographic approach to reflect on the main challenges of academic careers that have a direct bearing especially on psychological well-being. The author's reflection on the early steps of her academic career highlights the turning points and most difficult situations when her doctoral research ended up intertwined with difficult personal moments of pain and grief, offering a candid and thought-provoking account of the efforts and strength that were required to pursue and finally achieve a fulfilling and rewarding academic career. Having overcome very tough hurdles early on as a PhD student, Caimotto warns against the risks of burn-out and toxic workaholic university culture that relentlessly puts academic accolades and accomplishments first, claiming that instead successful "research needs people who have a rich life, filled with varied interests and relationships that can help scholars to get out of one's own bubble. Mental health and time are required to achieve all this". Caimotto's intimate take on well-being in academia culminates with the presentation of her own MA-level course unit on ecolinguistics and some of the students' reactions to elements of "transformative praxis" linked to Paulo Freire's notion of conscientization, very much in opposition to the neoliberal pressures that seem to dominate teaching and learning in today's academia. In her conclusion, Caimotto argues that introducing elements of social justice in academic courses can help to prevent burnout and dissatisfaction.

Sole Alba Zollo follows on by introducing the role of the chief happiness officer (CHO), that is increasingly common in organizations and businesses that care about their employees' happiness, in the knowledge that staff well-being is closely linked to productivity, as testified by recent scholarship that has uncovered clear connections between job satisfaction and a successful work-life balance, which can lead to increased professional accomplishments and in turn boost corporate profits. Zollo compares this scenario with the generally high stress levels experienced by academics, that can undermine the well-being and performance of university staff, potentially having negative consequences for students, e.g. due to poor teaching and neglect of mentoring and supervisory duties. The discussion reviews the dedicated initiatives that universities around the world increasingly offer to their academic staff to help them cope with the

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demanding professional expectations and avoid symptoms of ill-being and psychological distress. Zollo's paper analyzes the descriptions and presentations of CHOs in a sample of carefully selected websites of English-speaking universities with a multimodal and social semiotic approach, thereby representing a valuable and well-argued effort to kick-start a reflection on the (potential) importance of this role in academic settings, to help promote a new and much-needed culture focused on happiness, job satisfaction and sustainable positivity. By ultimately advocating for a "chief happiness officer mentality" in universities, Zollo's insightful analysis suggests some possible antidotes to the rampant market-oriented policies of many universities, that often end up considering students as customers and consumers, a notion with which committed academics may feel ill-at-ease.

The paper by Cristina Pennarola wraps up the collection, presenting a well-informed study of the role of mindfulness in higher education institutions. Pennarola explains how mindfulness can help busy academics cope with their hectic working lives and deal with the tough demands of often unreasonably stressful duties imposed on them by management-driven priorities that seem ubiquitous in today's universities. Her study describes how a mindfulness-oriented approach can be used to help hard-pressed academics refresh their commitment to the key duties of researching and teaching, by enhancing their focus, skills and perception of self-worth. The paper traces the philosophical origins and historical development of mindfulness from a practice rooted in traditional Buddhism to a feature of contemporary universities, especially in the UK, that negotiate the complex balance between the well-being of academics, staff and students on the one hand, and the "managerial university agenda and the overwhelming ethos of academic productivity at all costs" on the other. Pennarola conducts a quantitative and qualitative lexical and phraseological analysis of a sample of British university web pages focusing on mindfulness, using advanced corpus processing tools within a critical discourse analytical framework, also comparing the specialized institutional data against a web-derived general corpus of contemporary English. Her paper uncovers hidden meanings and (occasionally unexpected and conflicting) ideological implications attached to mindfulness in the British academic context. Very much in line with the overall spirit, title and contributions of this collection, Pennarola's study concludes by signalling that a mindful attitude can be one of the resources through which academics who strive to achieve and maintain well-being can "resist the looming pressure of endless deadlines and quality assessment reports and also re-align the university with a people-centred rather than a product-driven agenda".

In sum, all the papers included in this collection pay attention both to the positive and the negative aspects of university life with regard to well-being and, when possible, they seek to work out some practical solutions and put forward individual and collective suggestions to deal with the challenges involved in pursuing and fostering well-being in academia. We are encouraged by the fact that many of the issues discussed in this edited collection (e.g. precarity, high-performance culture, managerial goal setting, support services for university students and employees) have been mentioned in the international conferences

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we attended in the last few years: even when the focus was ostensibly on discourse analysis, rhetoric, students' assessment and digital technologies, ideas were shared on how to make universities increasingly welcoming places for personal, professional and academic growth and fulfilment. We see these contributions as key steps in fostering a collective consciousness and driving the efforts that are required to trigger positive developments and address the most widely felt needs with regard to promoting well-being in academia in the interest of students, academic, research and administrative staff alike. We hope that the readers of this issue of *mediAzioni* will take some inspiration in this direction, with a view to sustaining much-needed improvements along these lines in universities across the world and ideally instigating gradual change in our institutional cultures and individual approaches.

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ADDRESSING THE WELL-BEING OF ESL STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN ACADEMIA: APPROACHES AND RESOURCES

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Abstract: Our investigation focuses on second language acquisition/learning by students with special needs (SNSs) from the perspective of improving their well-being through effective inclusion policies, in accordance with EU's inclusive educational perspective. Such policies and choices are based on both the consideration of the neuropsychological mechanism of the SNSs (requiring/resulting in different cognitive styles), and specific teaching techniques and tools. To this end, we aim at promoting a reconsideration of some of the currently available strategies for promoting students' well-being, such as the ongoing studies in the field of assistive technology, which include software for facilitating L2 learning processes in dyslexic students and mind maps. There is significant interest at the moment in Italy in multidisciplinary conferences and initiatives such as the National Dyslexia Week, promoted by experts within schools and academia, as well as in numerous awareness-raising activities at various levels. The availability of resources, such as auxiliary care centers and special courses, where researchers, teachers, and computer programmers can interact, is of paramount importance not only for SNSs but also to enable teachers to cope with different learning styles. Overall, these and similar initiatives aim to promote both better teacher training in this area and reflection on existing approaches and techniques that can lead to more effective, less stressful educational interaction in a dimension of greater serenity and well-being.

Keywords: L2 acquisition/learning; dyslexic students; inclusive education; cognitive styles; teaching techniques/tools.

1. Introduction and aims

In the banquet of consequences brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, a widespread interest in the general mental health issues of adults and children and in students' well-being has emerged. Prolonged lockdowns and school closures caused a rise in dropouts and learning losses, worsening levels of satisfaction and well-being (among many others, see De Witte and François 2023; Leeb *et al.* 2020; Parents Together 2020; Patrick *et al.* 2020; U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights 2021).

Significantly, when Yale cognitive scientist Laurie Santos realised the impact of anxiety on her students, she created "The Science of Well-Being" on Coursera. Her "Psychology and the Good Life" course (started in 2018) has become the most popular in Yale's history, and her podcast series, *The Happiness Lab*, has more than 64 million downloads – far above the average in the bustling happiness advice industry. Concisely, her hope is that robust societal structures can be created to support the well-being of students and individuals because while it is possible to intervene and change behaviours in the short term, long-term improvements are much more difficult to achieve (Marchese 2023).

More broadly, we can say that students' well-being is now a recognised goal in all western education systems, especially for special needs students (SNSs).

Indeed, in the domain of inclusive education, we are witnessing an ongoing cognitive revolution that has taken its cue from more or less recent developments in studies on human and machine learning capabilities and artificial intelligence and is increasingly based on integrative software and tools. The availability of resources such as auxiliary aids centres and workshops where researchers, teachers and computer programmers can interact is of paramount importance. While the number of university support centres is slowly rising, albeit not as much as necessary, overall, awareness-raising initiatives have taken place at various levels to promote better training in this domain for teachers, including metacognitive reflections on the existing approaches and techniques through conferences and seminars. In Italy, recent events relating to dyslexia, which is of particular relevance to second-language teaching and a major focus of this study, include *La seconda lingua nelle diverse condizioni di apprendimento. Aggiornamenti e riflessioni sullo stato dell'arte in prospettiva socio-pedagogica* [The Second Language in Diverse Learning Conditions. Updates and Reflections on the State of the Art from a Socio-pedagogical Perspective] (Abbamonte and Cavaliere 2019), *Nei miei panni* [In My Shoes] (Italian Dyslexia Association 2022), and *Settimana nazionale della dislessia* (National Dyslexia Week 2022). Disseminating such initiatives and programmes can also make it easier for university teachers, who might not be familiar with such resources, to be engaged in these contexts so as to be better able to cope with the diverse cognitive styles and expectations of SNSs.

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The present study investigates aspects of second-language acquisition/learning, primarily ESL[1], for SNSs, particularly for students with dyslexia, from the perspective of improving their well-being in the academic setting and, consequently, their academic performances.[2] The main differences in these students' neuropsychological mechanisms (resulting in different cognitive styles), as well as the need for specific teaching strategies, techniques and tools, will also be illustrated.

2. ESL teaching-learning contexts and evolving needs

2.1. Learning needs and the EU's inclusive educational perspective

In the contemporary educational scenario, meeting and possibly satisfying students' learning needs are pivotal parts of the syllabus design and planning of ESL teaching. Fundamentally, when considering human needs, one must take into account how they "arrange themselves in hierarchies of prepotency", as Maslow clarified (1943: 370). Maslow's theory of human motivation is still considered essential and is a widely quoted reference point in research (see also Figure 1):

> Maslow's pyramid of human needs […] has been one of the most cognitively contagious ideas in the behavioral sciences. Anticipating later evolutionary views of human motivation and cognition, Maslow viewed human motives as based in innate and universal predispositions (Kenrick *et al.* 2010: 92).

Figure 1. Maslow's hierarchy of needs

[1] Second (or sequential) language acquisition can refer to the acquisition of any language that is sequentially learned/acquired after a first language is established. In this article, the focus is on English since it is the most widely taught second language in the Italian education system.

[2] It may be worth specifying that official statistical data about the number of school-age students worldwide is freely retrievable (see, among others, an analysis of the EU in Lodej 2016). In Italy, the only official source available is that of the Italian Ministry of Education, University, and Research (MIUR), which states that pupils with dyslexia constitute 1.3% of the total at primary school, and 3.8% of the total at secondary school. No data is available for university education. Greater insights into the academic scenario could be provided by longitudinal studies conducted by psychologists, psychiatrists, pedagogists and educators to record the problems of university SNSs. Such research, which would also require consistent funding, falls outside the scope of this study.

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Maslow defined man as the "perpetually wanting animal" (1943: 370). When a person's basic physiological needs (which include the need for safety and love) are satisfied, they are ready to feel higher needs, such as esteem:

> All people in our society (with a few pathological exceptions) have a need or desire for a stable, firmly based, (usually) high evaluation of themselves, for self-respect, or self-esteem, […] which [are] soundly based upon real capacity, achievement, and respect from others. These needs may be classified into two subsidiary sets. These are, first, the desire for strength, for achievement, for adequacy, for confidence in the face of the world, and for independence and freedom. Secondly, we have what we may call the desire for reputation or prestige […], recognition, attention, importance or appreciation (Maslow 1943: 381–382, our italics).

Significantly, such needs are also identified as basic needs, as is the need for self-actualisation. Furthermore, in Maslow's view, even if/when all the above-mentioned needs are satisfied, often,

> a new discontent and restlessness will soon develop, unless the individual is doing what he is fitted for. A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man can be, he must be. This need we may call self-actualization (Maslow 1943: 383).

The implications of Maslow's theory for the educational domain can hardly be overvalued. Concisely, any syllabus aiming at developing not only students' specific skills but also their potentialities (in other words, the holistic approach) must take it into account – all the more so for SNSs, especially students with dyslexia. Maslow attributes great importance (as preconditions for the satisfaction of basic needs) to the freedom to speak, express oneself, investigate and seek information (1943: 383) – dimensions of socio-cognitive interaction where communicative competence is paramount. Through effective communication based on cognitive capacities (perceptual, intellectual, learning), one is enabled to defend oneself, obtain justice, pursue fairness, etc. Additionally, an increasing number of colleges and universities now require a minimum of two years of foreign language teaching prior to graduation; hence, foreign language competence forms an integral and compulsory part of worldwide educational systems (Nijakowska 2010).

More specifically, in the EU scenario, the way to facilitate inclusion in contemporary societies passes through multilingualism, as the 2019 European Council Recommendation on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages reminds us:

> In the Communication "Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture" the European Commission sets out the vision of a European Education Area in which high-quality, inclusive education, training and research are not hampered by borders; spending time in another Member State to study, learn or work has become the standard; speaking two languages in addition to one's mother tongue is far more widespread; and

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> people have a strong sense of their identity as Europeans, as well as an awareness of Europe's shared cultural and linguistic heritage and its diversity. […] In its conclusions, adopted in Barcelona on 15 and 16 March 2002, the European Council called for further action in the field of education "to improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age". […] Literacy competence and multilingual competence are defined among the eight key competences in the Council Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning. […] Multilingual competence is at the heart of the vision of a European Education Area. With increasing mobility for education, training and work inside the Union, increasing migration from third countries into the Union, and the overall global cooperation, education and training systems need to reconsider the challenges in teaching and learning of languages and the opportunities provided by Europe's linguistic diversity (European Council 2019).

Not only are linguistic skills at stake in promoting the acquisition of a second or even third language, but so are identity issues and the crossing of national borders, which could open new spaces for SNSs where their neurodiversity could find more applications, thus satisfying their need for self-actualisation. Free mobility for everyone across Europe is an increasingly significant part of the European heritage. Furthermore, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education is engaged in collecting data from Member States in a cross-country format in order to directly inform the work of national and European-level policy- and decision-makers with a focus on SNSs (see also note 3). Indeed, the specific needs of learners with dyslexia in particular require special approaches and strategies (as illustrated below).

2.2. Language teaching insights for SNSs

The evolution of language teaching is consistently inspired by developments in psychology and cognitive sciences. Concisely, we can say that the advancement of the communicative approach at the turn of the last century led to consistent changes in teaching methods: gradually, communicative competence and 'can do' rather than grammatical accuracy and 'cannot do' became the main teaching objectives of ELT, an attitude that favours SNSs.

In particular, behaviouristic approaches have proved fruitful for SNSs: "Behavior analysis has already contributed substantially to the treatment of children with autism, and further gains can result from more use of Skinner's analysis of language in Verbal Behavior (1957) and in the resulting conceptual and experimental work" (Sundberg and Michael 2001: 698). Interestingly, valuable insights for teaching SNSs could be found in what are considered alternative or humanistic methods, such as Caleb Gattegno's "Silent Way" (1963). Critical of the language teaching methodology of his days, Gattegno emphasised the importance of utilising language for self-expression and, hence, the need for self-reliance. To achieve such a condition, teachers should focus on how students learn, allow experimentation and minimise interference. The 1970s community language learning (CLL) approach and James Asher's total physical

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response method occupy a similar vein (1969), but neither ever acquired wide popularity.

Conversely, Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner 1983/2011) became very popular among educators[3] (Brualdi Timmins 2019; Almeida *et al.* 2010). This inspirational theory challenged the notion that there is only one intellectual capacity, which can be satisfactorily measured with standard psychometric instruments. Gardner theorised that by addressing the diverse and multiple intelligences students can display, it is possible to develop more personalised syllabi and achieve better educational results (Davis *et al.* 2011), as is explained in more detail below.

Furthermore, the importance of consistent exposure to a second language in a variety of contexts is now a shared notion, as is the need to take into account the affective variables and lower the affective filter in the classroom to enhance natural language acquisition (Krashen and Terrell 1983: 38–39), which is especially useful when teaching SNSs.

Concisely, the integration between the natural and cultural dimensions of language acquisition and the attention to the mental structures and cognitive repertoires involved (Jackendoff 2007) is relevant in this domain, as are the contributions of psycholinguistics (mental processes in relation to language structures, native/second language acquisition and bilingualism, and language disorders and the relation between human and artificial language) and neuroscience/neurolinguistics (brain mechanisms for language comprehension/production and abstract knowledge structure), which are of particular importance when dealing with dyslexia.

3. Dyslexia: An introductory overview

Dyslexia (from δυσ- "difficulty/lacking" and λεξία "words") has emerged as an increasingly important condition for learning – especially for second-language learning. From 1950 to 2020, there was a substantial increase in research and publication on dyslexia, with foci on literacy at the symptomatic level, phonological awareness at the cognitive level, and second language learning as comorbidities (Helland 2022). There is now a general agreement on the multifactorial nature of dyslexia. In more detail, one of the most widely accepted definitions is the one adopted by the International Dyslexia Association (IDA n.d.-a), which describes dyslexia in relation to its biological, behavioural, cognitive and environmental levels (Kormos and Smith 2012; Shaywitz and Shaywitz 2020). Neurological in its origin (biological level), dyslexia is characterised by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities (behavioural level). These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language, resulting in specific disabilities in learning to read, not due to extraneous

[3] Gardner's multiple intelligences are as follows: visual-spatial, linguistic-verbal, logical-mathematical, body-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic. Gardner and colleagues have also considered two additional intelligences: existential and pedagogical (Cherry 2023).

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factors[4], that are often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities (cognitive level) and may require the provision of effective classroom instruction (environmental level).[5] Dyslexia is considered a condition that results solely in a reading deficit that can be overcome by providing students with support in reading (Stirrups and Mitchell 2023).

The dyslexic population is highly heterogeneous since dyslexia presents itself in many degrees, ranging from mild to severe. When dyslexia is mild, a learner may simply need to work harder than their peers to acquire decoding and encoding skills. In severe cases, reading and spelling may be completely interrupted if strategic interventions and appropriate accommodations are not implemented (Snowling *et al.* 2020).

Although there are not yet any official diagnostic types of dyslexia, a classification system has been proposed by Zoubrinetzky *et al.* (2014):

- Phonological dyslexia (also called dysphonetic or auditory dyslexia): people have difficulties processing the sounds of individual letters and syllables and cannot match them with written forms.
- Surface dyslexia (also called dyseidetic or visual dyslexia): people have difficulty in recognising, learning and memorising whole words, probably resulting from visual processing difficulties in the brain.
- Rapid naming deficit: people experience difficulties in naming a letter, number, colour, or object quickly and automatically.
- Double deficit dyslexia: people show deficits in both the phonological process and naming speed. The majority of the weakest readers fall under this category (Heim *et al.* 2008).

According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities and current literature (see, among others, Catt *et al.* 2024; Lorusso *et al.* 2024), dyslexia may co-occur with several other learning disabilities that involve the brain struggling to process information in various ways, such as dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.[6]

[4] These include sensory acuity deficits, severe emotional problems, acquired brain damage and inadequate educational opportunities (Valdois 2010).

[5] Dyslexia can vary from person to person, and accordingly, different levels and ages require the implementation of distinct strategies and (teaching) resources (see also IDA 2000).

[6] Dyscalculia affects the ability to acquire arithmetical skills and numbers and is related to difficulties like struggling to recognise numbers or do simple maths equations and getting maths symbols mixed up. People with dyscalculia can have visual-spatial difficulties and language-processing difficulties as well (Butterworth *et al.* 2011). Dysgraphia is an impairment of handwriting ability characterised chiefly by very poor or often illegible writing (writing letters the wrong way round, randomly misspelling words, mixing up lower- and upper-case letters) or writing that takes an unusually long time and great effort to complete. The term dyspraxia comes from the word "praxis" ("doing, acting") as movement is an issue, impacting an individual's ability to plan and process motor tasks. It is an impairment or immaturity of the organisation of movement, specifically in how the brain processes information, which results in messages not being properly or fully transmitted. Dyspraxia affects the planning of what to do and how to do it. It affects fine and gross motor skills, including coordination, and may result in difficulty stacking bricks or messy handwriting. Dyspraxic children may suffer from clumsiness, slightly slurred speech, awkwardness with walking or short-term memory loss (Portwood 1999). Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), previously known as attention deficit disorder

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Current research suggests dyslexia is present at birth and is hereditary, though adults who have suffered a brain injury, stroke or dementia may develop the symptoms of dyslexia (Pennington and Gilger 1996). The underlying cause of dyslexia remains unknown (Hoeft *et al.* 2006), although "studies show definite brain differences between dyslexics and nondyslexics" (Wood 2006: 18), as represented in Figure 2.

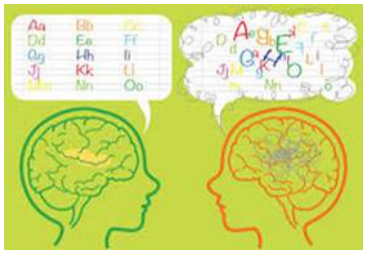

Figure 2. Representing brain differences between dyslexic and non-dyslexics

A set of anomalies has been found in reading-related pathways in the brains of dyslexic persons (Temple 2002), whose perception of written language can be better understood from Figure 3. In this screenshot taken from the documentary "Nei miei panni" [In My Shoes], a group of university doctors participate in tests designed to experience the reading obstacles SNSs encounter in their educational journey (Associazione Italiana Dislessia/Italian Dyslexia Association 2022).

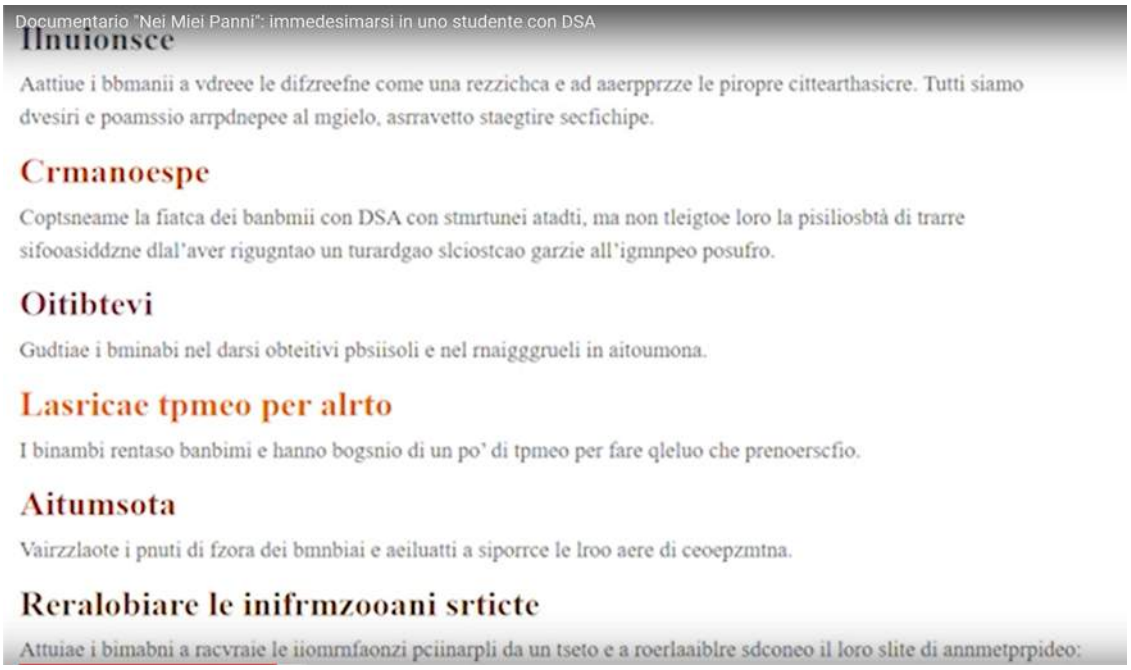

Figure 3. Screenshot from the documentary "Nei miei panni", showing Italian sentences where the orthography of the words is disrupted.

(ADD), has been marked since 1994 by an ongoing pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development (Barkley 2006).

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3.1. Debunking some myths about dyslexia and learning difficulties

In order to better understand (and consequently deal with) dyslexia (Shaywitz *et al.* 2003), Table 1 summarises and disproves some of the most commonly misheld beliefs related to it (Wadlington and Wadlington 2005).

Table 1. Common assumptions about dyslexia (ACTFL 2012; Bruck 1978)

Assumption	FALSE because…
Dyslexics cannot read	They can learn to read, write and spell, but they process language differently than the average person and thus require different training.
Dyslexics see/read things backwards	Reversing letters or numbers is a normal part of development and, on its own, is not a warning sign of dyslexia in the early years. However, if letter reversal does not go away after a few years of handwriting practice, it may be a sign of dyslexia.
Dyslexia is a vision or auditory problem	Studies suggest that dyslexia is not caused by vision problems but results from individual differences in the parts of the brain. It appears to be linked to certain genes that affect how the brain processes reading and language.
Dyslexia is rare	Some studies and statistics report that 1 in 5 people have dyslexia.
People with dyslexia typically have lower average intelligence	People with dyslexia typically have normal or even above-average intelligence.
Dyslexic learners should not study a foreign language	The study of a foreign language is recommended for all students of all ability levels.

According to the literature, dyslexia is a widespread disorder estimated to affect between 15 and 20% of the population and should be perceived as a different way of processing language, leading to different learning abilities. It can also come with positives, such as enhanced creativity, an ability to see the big picture, and a facility for bringing together material from different subject areas, which translates into keen problem-solving skills (Eide and Eide 2011). Some authors even see dyslexia as an advantage or a gift (Davis and Braun 2013), as confirmed by Carol W. Greider, the 2009 Nobel Laureate for Medicine:

> Learning compensatory skills also played a role in my success as a scientist because one has to intuit many different things that are going on at the same time and apply those to a particular problem. Perhaps my ability to pull more information out of context and put together difficult ideas may have been affected by what I learned to do from dyslexia (Quoted in Vaccarino 2013).

Hudson claims that people have to "understand the talents that go along with dyslexia […]. It's a package of strengths, and some areas of challenge […]. It is not a character flaw" (quoted in Embracing Dyslexia 2013). Nonetheless, dyslexia may severely affect self-perception. Hence, early identification is

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essential because these learning disabilities are more successfully treatable with early intervention – in children, the brain is potentially more malleable for the rerouting of neural circuits (Shaywitz 2008). Furthermore, before being diagnosed, pupils are usually described or labelled as lazy, disorganised, stupid, or even dummies owing to their somewhat inconsistent performance (Anderson and Meier-Hedde 2001). This may lead to serious self-esteem problems, which can be the most debilitating long-term effect of dyslexia (Myer and Ganschow 1988).

However, in 1994, Reid (cited in Mortimore 2008: 57) observed that about 15% of children with specific learning difficulties were not diagnosed until they reached secondary education and that some people go through their whole lives not knowing that they have dyslexia. Nonetheless, there are several ways to identify dyslexia when difficulties arise, such as observations (parent, teacher), self-report questionnaires, screening, and diagnostic interviews.

A helpful guide to this diagnostic approach has been provided by Pollock *et al.* (2004), who claim that when a seemingly able and frequently articulate student experiences three or more of the following conditions, further investigation is necessary:

1. has difficulties with expressing themselves on paper – poor and sometimes bizarre spelling, slow or poorly formed handwriting, untidy presentation;
2. seems resistant to or needs extra time for written work;
3. has unexpected difficulties with reading or maths;
4. frequently seems worried or switched off or lags behind;
5. has difficulties with organisation within time and space;
6. has difficulties with situations that involve memory (bringing the right equipment on the right day, remembering spoken instructions, remembering phone numbers, learning multiplication tables);
7. uses inappropriate behaviour to avoid classroom situations in which dyslexic-type learning difficulties might be revealed in public.

Other warning signs of dyslexia may also concern hearing things more slowly than peers, misunderstanding complicated questions despite knowing the answer, finding the holding of a list of instructions in the memory difficult despite being able to perform all the tasks, and having poor penmanship or pencil grip (having trouble remembering the proper sequence of forming a letter).

To sum up, in a teaching/learning context, dyslexic students may show difficulty in

1. putting thoughts into words (vowels may be left out when writing, and generally, and they may use odd spacing in writing and rarely use punctuation and/or capitalisation;
2. processing at speed; they may have poor concentration (and get tired more quickly than a non-dyslexic person) and a poor sense of direction, i.e. they guess what is left and right and confuse directional words (like before/after, first/last, on/under, yesterday/today);

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3. naming letters or symbols, memorising sequences[7] (such as multiplication tables or the alphabet), dealing with figures (e.g. learning tables), and copying notes from the board.

Although dyslexia is a chronic lifelong condition that cannot be cured, it can certainly be treated (Schulte-Körne 2010), and the type of treatment individuals (should) receive depends on the kind of dyslexia they are experiencing. Indeed, "basic science discoveries in neuroplasticity had led to cognitive training approaches for dyslexia" (Vinogradov 2023, n.p.). In short, "Dyslexia is increasingly being defined, assessed, diagnosed, and treated in the educational system […through] well-established evidence-based practices" (Bowers and Ramsdell 2023: 815; see also Steacy *et al.* 2024; Nurseitova and Shayakhmetova 2023; Kerjean and Peyre 2023).

4. Dyslexic students and foreign language teaching/learning

Learning foreign languages is still considered a stumbling block for dyslexic students (Ranaldi 2003: 14–16) to the point that some colleges and universities waive the foreign language requirement for students with dyslexia. In fact, however, "many at-risk students[8] can benefit from the study of a foreign language in the appropriate learning environment" (IDA n.d.-b), which can be a positive and culturally broadening experience (Peer and Reid 2000). Most experts encourage students to expose themselves to the study of a foreign language of their choice early in their schooling and recommend that students recognise how the study of a foreign language may take extra effort on their part while at the same time providing them with a desirable and necessary experience in linguistic and cultural diversity in our global society (Ganschow and Schneider 2006). According to the British Dyslexia Association (2015),

> While it is acknowledged that some dyslexic children are likely to achieve somehow limited competence in a foreign language, it is important to acknowledge that the opportunity to participate in communicative activities brings additional benefits such as enhanced social development.

4.1. Specific learning difficulties

Dyslexia affects language learning according to four main aspects: orthography, patterns, automaticity and motivation. For dyslexic learners, reading and writing difficulties, along with such associated problems as short working memory and problems with automaticity in language, have a strong impact on learning in their native language (Schneider and Crombie 2003: 6–7). When they are introduced to new patterns, sounds and symbols, problems can occur in any

[7] A severely dyslexic child may even have difficulty remembering people, places and the names of objects.
[8] The term "at-risk" describes students who require temporary or ongoing intervention in order to succeed academically, such as those who have difficulties learning a foreign language because of their struggles in a regular foreign language classroom (Ganschow and Sparks 2000, 2006).

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combination and at different levels of severity in three areas of language: phonological/orthographic, syntactic, and semantic.

Although researchers have only started to connect poor phonological skills with dyslexia in the last two decades, for dyslexic students, all skills required to develop a foreign language can be highly influenced by their weaknesses in linguistic coding skills (Schneider and Crombie 2003: 5) and by "weak phonemic awareness", which entails greater difficulties with distinguishing the individual sounds, or phonemes, of a language (Elbro and Arnbak 1996).

Additionally, the differences between one's native language and the foreign language of study can pose problems. When learning a foreign language, its orthographic depth, i.e. the degree of complexity with which a phoneme is transcribed into a writing system, is extremely relevant, as is its granularity, that is, how many letters are needed to transcribe one sound. Needless to say, one-to-one correspondence is preferable. This is the case with Italian, which has a shallow orthography, where each letter stands for a distinct sound, and the vowel sounds are pronounced consistently with how they are spelled.[9] In contrast, the 26 letters of the English alphabet represent 44 phonemes and 577 grapheme-to-phoneme correspondences that must be recognised during the reading process (Selikowitz 1993).[10]

Concisely, the sounds of English could be confusing for Italian students because they are not part of the Italian language. More specifically, with regard to phonetic interference, as outlined by Weinreich (1968: 18–21), three different phenomena may be at work: the under-differentiation of phonemes, the over-differentiation of phonemes and the reinterpretation of particular elements. Therefore, when learning English, dyslexic Italian students may fail to distinguish short and long vowels (under-differentiation of phonemes), impose specific elements of Italian on English (over-differentiation of phonemes)[11], or give excessive relevance to particular elements of Italian despite being superfluous in English.[12]

Dyslexic students' difficulty with automaticity and working memory is closely connected to learning sounds and their retention (Baddeley and Hitch 1974).[13] The challenge for learners with dyslexia is to hold sounds in their

[9] Compare, for instance, the English and Italian words for "race". While *gara* reads exactly as the suite of (g = /g/) + (a = /a/) + (r = /r/) + (a = /a/) as /'ga:ra/, its English equivalent "race" reads as /reɪs/.

[10] British English is said to have 12 vowels, although there are great variations in accents. Consider also the schwa (/ə/), the most common vowel sound appearing roughly once every three vowel sounds in English. The sound is found only in unstressed positions in English. Unstressed vowels and syllables are usually said faster and at a lower volume than stressed words or syllables. As a result, the vowel sound in an unstressed word or syllable can lose its purity.

[11] This is the case, for instance, with the gn sound /ɲ/, which does not exist in English, and therefore dyslexic students generally read the word "sign" as /saiɲ/ instead of /saɪn/.

[12] This happens, for instance, when Italian students reduplicate consonants in English because of gemination, so the word "ball" /bɔ:l/ is pronounced incorrectly as /bəʊl/.

[13] The most popular model of working memory is the multicomponent model proposed by Baddeley and Hitch (1974), in which the main component is the central executive, responsible for the control of executive processes, including actions; the direction of attention to relevant information and the suppression of irrelevant information and undesired actions; the supervision of information integration; and the coordination of multiple cognitive processes to be executed in parallel. The phonological loop permits the retention of auditory information, such as a (short)list of words or numbers, as long as they are continuously repeated. The visuospatial

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working memory long enough to manipulate them. These operations are further complicated if the data is presented in a written format, leading to more toing and froing of information between the phonological store and the articulatory control process. As a consequence, many people with dyslexia like to read aloud to better cope with such complex operations. Taking recourse to spatial and visual support may also facilitate the recall of information from the visual-spatial store, thus alleviating the burden on the phonological loop. Mapping and colour may therefore provide very useful resources.

Another hardship experienced by students with dyslexia in language learning concerns identifying the recurrence of patterns in a language. A learner with dyslexia may not immediately spot the repetition of certain sequences in words, i.e. morphemes. English, in particular, has a complex morphology that allows for numerous additions of words or parts of words. Therefore, students may have to break down long, multisyllabic words into their parts to determine meaning or add one or more affixes to produce grammatically and semantically meaningful information.

Dyslexic learners may also struggle with identifying grammatical functions for words or groups of words like verbs, subjects and objects and with how words pattern at a sentence level. As a consequence, when writing, they will generally favour short, declarative sentences and avoid transformations such as questions and passive forms.

5. What can be done?

The assimilation of a new language system for dyslexic students needs to be planned by means of focused teaching in order to prevent anxiety and failure since their language-processing abilities may encounter continuous obstacles which hinder their learning process and endanger their wellbeing (Rolak *et al.* 2023; Wilmot *et al.* 2023). Much repetition and practice are needed to overcome those challenges. Sensitised teachers will encourage this overlearning and recommend extra resources with which a learner with dyslexia can work.

Nonetheless, even though there is a plethora of literature about dyslexia, there is still not enough literature on the methodology of teaching foreign languages to students with dyslexia. On the one hand, teachers are expected to accommodate their teaching, students' requirements and examination conditions to individual needs, even though they are not systematically trained to identify specific learning needs, to work with dyslexic students, to accommodate their teaching or to develop adequate techniques and strategies. On the other hand, learners often locate their own resources, such as in local libraries and on the

sketchpad, which permits visual and spatial information (creating and navigating mental maps, forming mental images) to be maintained and manipulated, is constituted of two subsystems: one for visual information and another for spatial information. The episodic buffer temporarily integrates phonological, visual, and spatial information, and possibly other forms of information (e.g. semantic/musical information) in a unitary, episodic representation. In this way, it provides an interface between the subsystems of working memory and the part of long-term memory specialised for episodic memory (Tulving 1972) (i.e. recollection of specific events that integrate time, place and emotions) (Pezzulo 2007: 2).

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internet, through personal initiative. A supportive network can also contribute suggestions and encourage the learner to sustain their efforts.

First of all, teachers should find out the particular weaknesses that a student has and help them recognise these, but at the same time, the student should be encouraged with praise and understanding in order to avoid loss of motivation. Reid (2011: 77) suggests that "one of the main ways of ensuring success for dyslexic pupils is to provide a range of means whereby they can demonstrate their competence. This may not necessarily be through writing, and it is important that other means of displaying competence should be provided". Dyslexic college students[14], for example, may successfully learn through investigation in groups, worksheet activities, completing tables, multiple choice or matching tasks, journal writing, fieldwork and enquiring, making posters, learning in pairs, brainstorming, oral presentations and debating, tape-recording, self-assessment, videoing and computer work.[15] These activities are usually very good for dyslexic learners as they involve active participation and do not necessarily require vast amounts of reading (Reid and Green 2008).

In particular, assistive technology enables the promotion of independence and overcoming barriers due to difficulties in processing a linear order, reading, attention, organisation, memory, and the physical demands of tasks related to the coursework. Many special aids to enhance learning are already available, and more are being developed, including as freeware (Nuttall and Nuttall 2013). Assistive hardware and software include reading pens with various scanning capabilities, such as enlarging the font to make text easier to read or text-to-speech/sound software.

Dyslexics learn better by doing than by reading, which is why dyslexic learners succeed better in an immersion environment, such as living in a foreign country or watching foreign-language films and videos. Incidentally, the multi-sensory approach has been proven to work well in teaching languages to non-dyslexic learners; hence, it is possible to implement an inclusive way of teaching that does not marginalise SNSs in the educational context.

Mind maps, where each main idea goes in a bubble with supporting details in smaller bubbles surrounding it, make it easier for dyslexic learners to structure assignments and presentations in a visual manner. Michalko (quoted in Buzan 2012: 3) describes a mind map as "the whole-brain alternative to linear thinking. [It] reaches out in all directions and catches thoughts from any angle". By using

[14] Dyslexic elementary and high school students can also benefit considerably from quizzes and competitions, worksheet activities, drama and role-play, cartoons and comic strips, and songs and poems. A few key instructions/suggestions for teachers who have a dyslexic learner might include the following: learn everything you can about dyslexia and share everything you know about dyslexia with the child's parents; consider inviting a visitor with dyslexia into the classroom (or discuss the success of some famous dyslexics); help other students understand dyslexia (to help prevent bullying); and, if possible, have a classmate who can sit next to the dyslexic learner and help them. However, it is vital to keep dyslexic learners' struggles private, so, in order to avoid humiliating them, teachers should not ask them to read out loud in class, make them participate in spelling bees, write homework answers on the board (as spelling/handwriting issues will become patent to the whole classroom), and so on (Embracing Dyslexia 2013).

[15] Schneider and Crombie (2003: 17) stress the importance of metacognition and suggest making language learning a "discovery learning" process in which students turn into "language detectives".

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images, colours, lines, shapes and different symbols that help to visualise, connect, structure and classify thoughts and graphics to flowchart ideas, mind maps can make use of smaller amounts of written text and provide an audio approach to comprehending/remembering information. With a natural structure that radiates from the centre, mind maps break down complex data into pieces that can be organised into branches and sub-branches to simplify the understanding of information, thus transforming monotonous details into catchy and extremely structured graphs that act in line with the brain's natural way of thinking (90% of the information transmitted to the brain is visual). Their beneficial uses for dyslexic students range from brainstorming and illustrating concepts to structuring thoughts and planning activities visually, from improving note-taking during classes to eliminating the stress associated with the repeated reproduction of information and better organising their thoughts before writing them down.

Using colours or symbols together with things' names can help dyslexic students work more quickly and effectively, as reading letters might be substituted by "reading" colours or symbols. Colour coding for corrections should also be provided, as it can help learners grasp grammatical structures and functions better (in turn helping textual comprehension), whereas abstract linguistic terms should be avoided (Kormos and Smith 2013). If a kind of colour coding is followed consistently, students will soon learn that words in green express the agents of actions, red stands for the action itself, and blue represents the object of the action, as in Figure 4.

Figure 4. "Mum is cooking spaghetti" (adapted from Cimermanová 2015: 52)

In sum, using colours and schemas might be an effective way to visualise grammar that is otherwise abstract.

Similarly, teaching vocabulary is most effective when it is taught explicitly. Since dyslexic students generally have a short-term working memory, they need a lot of repetition to build automaticity and should not be asked to acquire new words implicitly. When they learn lists of words, they usually remember the first and last words. Statistics show that after one hour, students forget 50% of what they have learnt; after nine hours, they forget 60%, and after a month, they forget 80% (Homolová cited in Cimermanová 2015). Therefore, "[n]ew vocabulary taught in one session needs to be revised repeatedly on at least three to four consecutive occasions" (Kormos and Smith 2012: 132).

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Pressley (cited in Schneider and Crombie 2003: 69) suggests avoiding gap-filling activities and incorrect choices whenever possible for dyslexic students as, even in their native language, these students rely heavily on context clues. Schneider and Crombie also point out that "matching activities may be difficult and unfair, because their poor visual perceptual short-term memory is over-challenged by the specific eye-movement task required to match the combined word or sentence parts" (Schneider and Crombie 2003: 69, emphasis in original).

6. Assessing students

When it comes to testing dyslexic students, teachers should make sure an assignment's instructions are clear and appropriate, meet a particular student's needs, and are well understood. Accordingly, instructions should be provided in small steps and read out loud, and a large and well-spaced font should be used when writing them on the board. Technical devices and supplementary materials/aids should be allowed, including (illustrated) dictionaries, additional papers for experimentations with spelling, brainstorming, pens with erasable ink or pencils, etc., and, when necessary, the timing should be extended. Essays and written tests should be graded on content, and the spelling should be ignored and not marked. Instead of written tests, students could also be allowed to do oral tests, provided they are allowed enough time to process the question/task before answering and not forced into immediate responses. Furthermore, classroom accommodations are essential for dyslexic students, and different contexts can either demotivate them or facilitate their memorisation/learning: a calm and quiet environment should be provided for tests, and some students may even need a private room. Generally, students should be graded on interaction and based on schoolwork rather than just tests. This set of strategies and resources aims at enhancing their wellbeing in their educational setting.

7. Concluding remarks

Directing people with dyslexia away from language learning solely on the basis of their dyslexia is scientifically unfounded. Learning (English as) a foreign language can be a great opportunity for dyslexic learners from both a scholastic and a psychological point of view, provided that specific and gradual activities are planned. "True inclusion in the modern languages classroom is about much more than having a presence and being exposed to another language. It is about feeling accepted and involved in a worthwhile learning experience whatever the level that can be achieved" (Reid 2005: 12). Nonetheless, learning styles that work well for the dyslexic learner and ways to increase self-confidence must be identified, and foreign language departments in particular may need to demonstrate flexibility in setting criteria for foreign language study in school or other academic settings (Schneider and Crombie 2003). Yet most obstacles can be overcome with targeted pedagogical interventions, regular work and reviewing, and appropriate accommodations. In any case, teachers should

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provide direct, explicit instruction on language structure and extra time to master the subject matter (Sparks and Miller 2000).

In some cases, implementing curriculum schedules that allow for slowing the pace of foreign language content instruction and/or an alternative foreign language instructional programme is advisable. These accommodations cost no money and do not "require changing the curriculum. They just require an awareness by the teacher that these are necessary" (Embracing Dyslexia 2013). Multi-sensory methods, mind mapping in particular, can significantly improve structure learning and may also be useful for non-dyslexic students to varying extents. Though some extra time and support should be provided to SNSs, their academic wellbeing passes beyond their functional inclusion in the mainstream teaching and learning activities; hence, sharable activities must be promoted. The promotion of specific teacher training is equally important since teachers and lecturers at university level could experience discomfort in dealing with learning needs they are neither well-informed about nor trained in addressing.

This paper has sought to highlight the salient aspects of these difficulties and possible coping strategies in order to raise awareness about such a challenging teaching/learning context. Indeed, academic wellbeing can only be achieved through a fine-tuned, synergistic attitude that incorporates a conscious approach to these special needs and specific training.

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PROMOTING STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH IN ACADEMIA: AN INVESTIGATION OF COUNSELLING SERVICES SECTIONS ON BRITISH AND AMERICAN UNIVERSITY WEBSITES

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Abstract: Mental health concerns among university populations are on the rise. Faculty and students report increasing levels of depression, stress, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Starting from this assumption, the study is a preliminary investigation aimed at exploring students' well-being in a selection of the world's top universities. In particular, counselling services sections devoted to the promotion of students' mental health on a sample of websites of British and American universities included in the World University Rankings will be explored in order to investigate their commitment to improve students' well-being. The methodology draws from studies on multimodality and social semiotics. The preliminary outcomes of this study seem to confirm a different multimodal perspective promoted by the UK and USA universities in terms of less or more proximity with which the counselling services engage with the students.

Keywords: well-being; multimodal investigation; cross-cultural perspective.

1. Introduction

According to a survey by the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors, which is aimed at advancing the mission of higher education, mental health concerns among university populations are increasing[1]. Faculty and students report growing levels of depression, stress, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. In particular, nearly 90% of counselling center directors on college campuses denounced a continually increasing number of students on campus with severe psychological problems.

Conversely, it has been proved that students who are prepared and able to adapt to the changes that moving into higher education involves also experience better mental health. Poor mental health is often associated to a lack of engagement both with learning and leisure activities and poor mental health literacy. Specifically, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the concept of well-being includes the presence of positive emotions and moods, the absence of negative ones (e.g. depression or anxiety), satisfaction, fulfillment, and positive functioning (Andrews and Withey 1976; CDC 2018; Diener 2000). In short, a review of observational investigations measuring factors associated with student mental well-being and poor mental health (Campbell *et al.* 2022) revealed that the promotion of well-being includes developing strong and supportive social networks while keeping a positive attitude towards life.

Student well-being is foundational to academic success (Leshner and Sherer 2021). The CDC and other leading public health organizations state that it includes mental, emotional, physical, spiritual, social, financial, and other dimensions that, individually and collectively, impact a variety of outcomes of concern to colleges and universities. In other words, student well-being is not only about having happy students. A large body of research has shown that mental health challenges significantly affect academic achievement and graduation rates in postsecondary education (Mojtabai *et al.* 2015).

Starting from these premises, this preliminary research focuses on a corpus including the counselling service sections of 6 UK and US-based universities from the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2023. The latter features 1,799 universities across 104 countries and regions, making them the largest and most diverse university rankings to date[2]. Table 1 below shows the six universities under scrutiny:

Table 1. Universities under scrutiny

UK	USA
University of Oxford	Harvard University
University of Cambridge	Stanford University
Imperial College of London	Massachusetts Institute of Technology

[1] www.aucccd.org/assets/documents/CCMH%20Blog1_FINAL2.pdf (visited 10/02/2024).
[2] https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2023/world-ranking (visited 10/03/2024).

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As shown in the Rankings, the universities from the UK context are in the first, third and tenth place, whereas the ones from the USA context are in the second, fourth and fifth place. The rationale behind the choice of these universities was the intention to investigate the actual commitment of the best universities in the world to mental well-being, also from a cross-cultural perspective. The low number of universities under scrutiny can be explained with the intention to provide an in-depth investigation adopting a multimodal perspective. In the future, the corpus could be enlarged in order to provide more comparable data.

The study will try to answer two main research questions: 1) What are the main multimodal tools found on the university websites to promote their counselling services? 2) What kind of preliminary observations can be provided in terms of cross-cultural differences in the UK and USA university contexts?

2. Methodology

Some previous studies concerning cultural implications characterising websites focused on descriptive ("what is there to be found") and interpretative ("what could it possibly tells us about aspects of culture") approaches, which included the possibility to infer cultural features from a multimodal perspective. In particular, according to Pauwels (2012), cultural features are represented by some categories such as "Salient features and Topics", "In-depth Analysis of Content and Formal choices", "Information of organization and spatial priming strategies", among others (Pauwels 2012: 256).

In this study, the attention will be devoted to an "In-depth Analysis of Content and Formal choices", where the relationships between images and written texts are explored. In order to offer a more detailed investigation concerning this specific point, the chosen methodology includes both a systemic functional approach to multimodal discourse analysis (Halliday 1978, 1985; Wignell *et al.* 2018; Jewitt *et al.* 2016; O' Toole 2011) and a social semiotics approach (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). Drawing on Halliday's (1978) metafunctions of language, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) define the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual metafunctions as follows. The ideational is any semiotic mode which is able "(…) to represent aspects of the world as experienced by humans" (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006: 42). The interpersonal metafunction is–any semiotic mode which "(…) has to be able to project the relations between the producer of a (complex) sign, and the receiver/reproducer of that sign (…)" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 42). Finally, the textual metafunction is any semiotic mode which creates texts, complexes of signs which cohere both internally with each other and externally with the context in and for which they were produced (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 43). According to more recent studies (Jewitt *et al.* 2016), a systemic functional approach to multimodal analysis (SF-MDA) involves developing systemic descriptions of semiotic resources organized according to three main metafunctions – experiential, interpersonal and textual meanings. "Experiential meaning" will provide visual happenings in terms of processes, participants, and circumstances. "Interpersonal

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meaning", instead, is more related to gaze, framing, light, and perspective of images. Finally, "textual meaning" involves the concepts of proportion and alignment. This approach allows us to understand "(…) how semiotic choices combine to create meaning" (Jewitt *et al.* 2016: 50). Thus, SF-MDA is mainly based on the metafunctional principle, which plays an important role for understanding the underlying organization of semiotic resources.

In this study, further attention will be devoted to denotation and connotation which characterize images. Denotation characterizes photographs, which represent people or things. This does not mean that they are "neutral" recordings of reality, as subjective perspectives are provided while taking a photo (Machin 2011). According to Barthes (1977), there is no image free of connotation, which represents the ideas and values associated with that image. Connotation is conveyed by connotators, such as poses, objects and settings, as well as photogenia.

In what follows, visual arrangements will be explored also in terms of image act, gaze, size of frame and social distance (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). As far as the image act and gaze are concerned, it is necessary to point out that they are mainly related to vectors, namely participants' eyelines and gestures, which connect the participants with the viewers. When the participants look directly at the viewers' eyes, contact is established. This visual arrangement has two main functions. On the one hand, it creates a visual form of direct address, in that it acknowledges the viewers explicitly, addressing them with a visual "you". On the other hand, it constitutes an "image act", in that the producer uses the image to do something to the viewer (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 117).

Thus, the image can be identified as a sort of "demand", as the participants' gaze and gestures demand something from the viewer. For Instance, gestures, such as pointing at the viewer or inviting the viewer to come closer, convey something the participants want from the viewers, such as staying at distance, or, conversely, creating a kind of bond. Further means, such as facial expressions, may convey different relationships. Participants may smile, so that the viewer is asked to create social affinity with them. Alternatively, they may stare seductively at the viewer, so that the viewer is invited to desire them (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 118).

The way the participants are depicted has been interpreted in terms of "demand" and "offer". For instance, the "demand" picture is preferred in newsreading television and the posed magazine photograph as these contexts require a sense of connection between the viewers and the authority figures, celebrities, and role models they represent. In other contexts, such as television drama or scientific illustration, the "offer" is preferred. In particular, in these contexts, a kind of imaginary barrier is placed between the represented participants and the viewer, where the latter can have the Illusion that the represented figures do not know that they are being looked at, whereas the represented participants can pretend that they are not being watched (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006: 120).

There is a further dimension to the interactive meanings of images, related to the "size of frame" and "social distance". The former has been explored in terms of parameters such as close-up, medium shot and long shot, and so on. In

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particular, the close shot (or "close-up") shows head and shoulders of the subject, and the very close shot ("extreme close-up", "big close-up") shows an even smaller part of the body. The medium close shot cuts off the subject approximately at the waist, the medium shot approximately at the knees. The medium long shot shows the full figure. In the long shot the human figure occupies about half the height of the frame, and the very long shot is anything "wider" than that. (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 124)

A further feature to be taken into account is the horizontal angle of an image, which deals with the two main concepts of detachment and involvement. In particular, the horizontal angle provides information about the degree of involvement between the image-producer and the represented participants. The frontal angle says, as it were, "What you see here is part of our world, something we are involved with." The oblique angle says, "What you see here is not part of our world; it is their world, something we are not involved with" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 136).

Power, rather than involvement, is closely associated with vertical angles. According to Martin (1968: 37–38), "[l]ow angles generally give an impression of superiority, exaltation and triumph […] high angles tend to diminish the individual, to flatten him morally by reducing him to ground level, to render him as caught in an insurmountable determinism". Models and celebrities in magazine articles generally look down on the viewer as they are represented as exercising symbolic power over us. Products in advertisements may be photographed both from a low angle, as having symbolic power over us, and from a high angle, as being within reach and at the viewer's disposal.

Finally, meanings of composition and modality markers related to images will be scrutinized. In particular, three main points can be related to composition – information value, salience and framing. Information values mainly concern the placement of elements (e.g., ideal-real, left and right, top and bottom, centre and margin). Salience, is instead based on elements aimed at attracting the viewer's attention, as placement in the foreground or background, size contrasts in colours, etc. Finally, framing relates to the presence or absence of framing devices, including dividing or frame lines (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 177). In the following sections, the theoretical framework illustrated so far will be investigated in both the American and the British contexts. Specifically, each website section will be explored through a detailed analysis. In short, the following methodological points will be explored:

1) metafunctional principles applied to each image;
2) denotative vs. connotative values;
3) meanings of composition;
4) interactive meanings of the images (when human participants are found in the pictures);
5) visual arrangements and powerful meanings of images (when human participants are found in the pictures).

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3. Analysis

In what follows, the counselling services website sections of six universities based in the UK and the USA are investigated. Particularly, a systemic functional approach to multimodal analysis will help to identify the relationship established between the institutions (i.e., the universities) and their clients (i.e., the students) in terms of proximity when counselling services are offered.

3.1. The UK context

In the UK context, the counselling services homepages of three main universities - the University of Oxford, the University of Cambridge and the Imperial College of London - are examined. Figure 1 shows the counselling and mental health homepage of the University of Oxford:

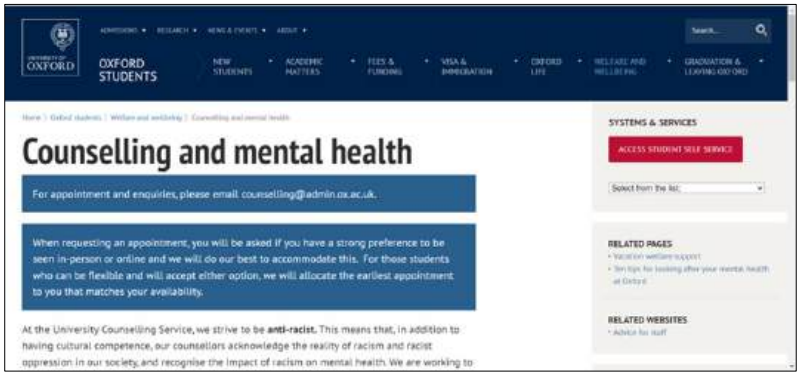

Figure 1. Counselling and Mental health' homepage (University of Oxford)

As can be observed, the first kind of information provided is related to the university addresses to be contacted and possible options offered to the students (e.g. in-person vs online appointment). One of the most relevant points is the focus on racism and its possible relationship with lack of well-being or feeling of oppression. The homepage also includes a video, whose shots (the most relevant ones) are shown in Figure 2:

Figure 2. Video shots from the 'Counselling and Mental health' webpage (University of Oxford)

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The video shots in Figure 2 offer conceptual representations (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006) of the services offered by the university of Oxford along with the people involved in the process. In particular, the second shot iconically represents the different reasons which could cause lack of well-being. For instance, the heart could represent relationship problems, the book may be related to the students' university career. As Dyer (1982: 124) asserted, "The 'icon' is the sign in which "the signifier–signified relationship is one of resemblance, likeness". The various reasons which could encourage disquiet are explicitly conveyed through the description under the images (e.g., "You can bring any problem to us, large or small, study related or not"). Thus, the ideational function is here conveyed through abstract images which iconically represent personal problems or issue. If the compositional features of the pictures are analysed, it is possible to observe some relevant points linked to the informative value of the images themselves. The latter involves the top-bottom position, which is related to real vs. ideal kind of information. Specifically, the upper section usually tends to appeal to the reader to show us "what might be". Conversely, the lower section tends to been more informative and practical showing us "what is" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 186). As regards the salience of the images, this is mainly related to the information concerning the services offered. As illustrated in the methodology section, salience involves elements aimed at drawing the viewers' attention, such as placement in the foreground or background, size contrasts in colours, etc. (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 177). In Figure 2, salience is conveyed through the contrasting colours, namely the green background with and the multicoloured fictitious people on the foreground, who represent the different roles acted while delivering the counselling service and the data concerning the number of students catered for by the service. Thus, as far as the contrast between denotative vs. connotative values is concerned, it is possible to assert that connotation is here emphasized by the representation of abstraction of professional roles rather than people. As Machin (2011: 26) states, "[...] The more abstract the image, the more overt and foregrounded its connotative purpose". In Figures 3 and 4, the counselling services homepages of the University of Cambridge and the Imperial College of London are shown:

Figure 3. University of Cambridge Counselling Service' homepage.

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Figure 4. Student Counselling and Mental Health Advice Service (Imperial College of London)

The three pictures included in Figure 3 are part of a slideshow published on the homepage of the University Counselling service from the University of Cambridge. As far as meanings of composition are concerned, it can be asserted that the pattern "ideal-real" has been followed as in Figure 2, although some differences can be inferred. Specifically, the pictures in Figure 3 look like photos taken from real contexts (e.g., the real room where the Counselling services office is located, a sunset from Turkey or Syria, etc.). The verbal messages below the pictures sound like captions describing the decontextualized images included in the slideshow (e.g., "The UCS is open throughout summer. Average waiting times are currently 3 working days"; "Priority support for students impacted by the humanitarian disasters faced by Turkey and Syria"). A huge amount of information is given through each section shown on the homepage and including individual or group counselling, mental health issues, self-help services along with a range of diseases related to well-being. Informative values are reinforced by clear-cut framing devices, which divide the images from the verbal messages. Although the informative values of the pictures of both universities seem to be relevant, more realism is found in the pictures included in Figure 3.

Specifically, denotative features are found here. In particular, a representation of the room is observed. Realism is found when "[...] Pictures which have the perspective, the degree of detail, the kind of colour rendition, etc. of the standard technology of colour photography have the highest modality" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 159). Each realism has its naturalism, which is intended as the most natural form of representing reality. In our society the main standard by which we judge visual realism remains naturalism as "photorealism". More specifically, the main criteria to distinguish between what we can "normally" see as an object and what we can see of this object in a visual representation is based on currently dominant conventions included in photographic technology. For instance, when colour becomes more saturated, "more than real", it is perceived as excessive. When it is less saturated we judge it "less than real", or "ghostly". In short, pictures that have the features of photography have the highest modality, and are seen as "naturalistic"(Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006: 158-159).

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In addition to naturalism which contributes to the denotative feature of the picture, a textual metafunction seems to be relevant in Figures 3 and 4 as the use of the same colours (i.e. green and blue) in both the verbal messages and the pictures creates a cohesive whole.

In Figure 4 from the "Student Counselling and Mental Health Advice Service' homepage of the Imperial College of London, it is possible to observe only one picture representing hands of different colours depicted one next to the other. In contrast with the pictures examined so far, this image seems to evoke some metaphorical meanings concerning friendship and closeness. According to the Cognitive Metaphor Theory (Lakoff 1993), a metaphor "[…] is not a figure of speech but a mode of thought" (Lakoff 1993: 210). In particular, cognitive linguists assert that metaphors mainly concern the relationship between what is represented visually and not verbally. Thus, they mainly focus on non-verbal manifestations, such as gestures and pictures. Multimodal metaphors, instead, are defined as "[…] metaphors whose targets and source are rendered exclusively or predominantly in two different modes / modalities and, in many cases, the verbal is one of these" (Forceville and Aparisi 2009: 4). Multimodal metaphors are usually found in corporate discourse as they are often aimed at promoting corporate identity or products (Csaba and Bengtsson 2006). In Figure 4, overlapping hands of different colours convey association with positive values including closeness to the students who are welcomed by the people working for the counselling service. The verbal message under the picture seems to reinforce corporate values by directly addressing the viewer (i.e.,"Welcome to the student and Mental Health Advice Service"). In Figures 3 and 4, neither interactive meanings of images nor visual arrangements can be explored as these are usually found when human participants are involved in an ideal interaction with the viewer. In these figures, no direct interaction between participants and the viewers is observed.

3.2. The USA context

This section includes the investigation of the counselling services offered by the three US universities under scrutiny from a multimodal perspective.

Figure 5 presents the "Counseling and Mental Health Service" section of the website of the University of Harvard:

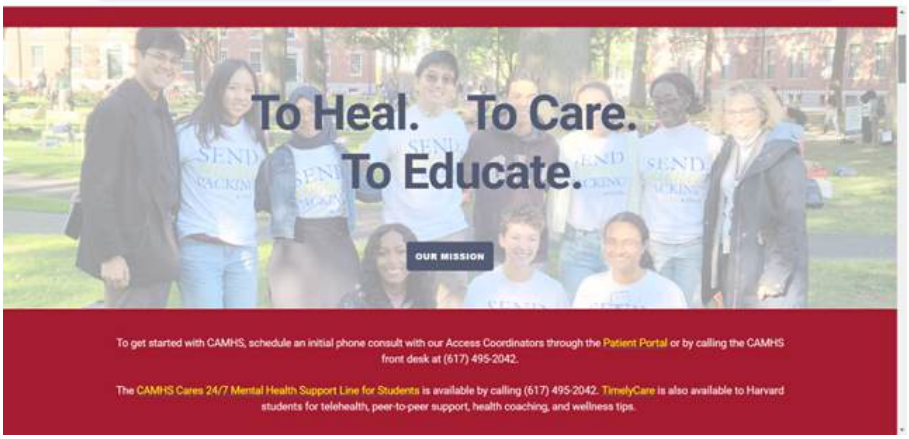

Figure 5. Counseling and Mental Health Service (Harvard University)

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The people involved in the Counselling service seem to be represented, as can be inferred from the name of the Association written on their t-shirts. Specifically, "Send Silence Packing" is a programme promoted by Active Minds, which is "[...] the nation's premier nonprofit organization supporting mental health awareness and education for young adults encouraging suicide prevention and national mental health"[3]. As can be read on the Active Minds website, the programme inspires action for suicide prevention while connecting participants with local and national mental health resources. The people represented in the picture are looking at the camera and smiling. If the semiotic contrast between "demand" and "offer" is investigated, it can be asserted that the "demand" value is the most relevant one, as the represented people are addressing the viewers directly while encouraging them to join the programme. The frontal angle reinforces this concept.

As explained in section 2 above, if something is represented from a frontal angle, involvement rather than power is suggested. Involvement is also explicitly conveyed by the verbal message where the students are invited to fix an appointment (i.e., "[...] schedule an initial phone consult with our access coordinators"). Furthermore, the people are looking at the viewers in the eye, thus a contact is established. This visual arrangement involves the main function to create a visual form of direct address while acknowledging the viewers explicitly, addressing them with a visual "you" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 117).

Thus, the interpersonal function is the most relevant metafunctional principle where *interactive participants* rather than *represented participants* are found. The former are

> the participants who speak and listen or write and read, make images or view them, whereas the latter are the participants who constitute the subject matter of the communication; that is, the people, places and things (including abstract 'things') represented in and by the speech or writing or image, the participants about whom or which we are speaking or writing or producing images (ibid.)

Furthermore, denotative features rather than some connotative ones are observed. As Machin (2011) asserts, denotation is mainly related to photographs. The picture included in Figure 5 seems to be a photograph representing the actual testimonials of the programme they are part of. Finally, as far as meanings of composition are concerned, it is possible to assert that salience is the most relevant feature as the three main words (i.e. to "heal", "to care", "to educate") aimed at catching the viewer's attention are placed in the foreground, whereas, no framing dividing lines are observed between the message and the people represented in the background. This seems to reinforce the commitment by the professionals working for the counselling service, who are involved in the promotion of students' well-being.

Greater abstraction is found in Figure 6, which is taken from the homepage of the "Counseling and Psychological Services" of Stanford University:

[3] https://www.activeminds.org/about-us/mission-and-impact/ (visited 10/02/2024).

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Figure 6. Counseling and Psychological Services (Stanford University)

The figure seems to convey a metaphorical diversity due to the different features characterizing the people represented. Specifically, different skin colours along with different clothing items (i.e., a veil) are the most relevant elements. In the verbal message below the figure, diversity is indeed emphasized as related to both the "diverse range" of the staff working for the services and the different actions introduced ("[…] they see each student as a unique individual with their own intersectional narrative and recognize that healing could and should look different for different people, communities, and presenting concerns")[4]. Thus, connotation rather than denotation is observed in the picture as abstract values including diversity and and a personalized educational action rather than real people are represented. According to the "top-bottom" informative value, which can be conveyed through the ideal-real contrast, the "real" information is here found at the bottom in terms of facts concerning the counselling service, whereas abstraction is observed in the picture. Further observations include the kind of narrative chosen by this university to focus on the service provided. In particular, the institution introduces itself as an association of people ethically committed to provide help to students through some different types of actions (i.e., "We are a diverse range of cross-disciplinary staff who are personally and ethically committed to providing care that is rooted in cultural humility and social-justice values"). Commitment is emphasized by the use of the personal pronoun "we". The short introduction is immediately followed by a direct invitation addressed to the reader to contact the service (e.g. "Contact us and Get Immediate help"). Thus, proximity with the students is built up through communication of ethical values and personal commitment by the institution to offer care and attention to the

[4] https://vaden.stanford.edu/caps (visited 10/02/2024).

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students. The interpersonal function is mainly found here, where students are directly invited to contact the service in order to get immediate help. Notwithstanding, no direct contact is conveyed through the image where the fictitious people represented are in the "offer" position rather than the "demand" one. Particularly, they seem to talk to each other, thus simulating possible interactions. In short, although the figure is characterized by abstraction, the people represented could be described as "interactive participants" as they look like interacting among each other rather than posing.

Figure 7 shows the homepage of "Student Mental Health & Counseling Services" from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology:

Figure 7. Student Mental Health & Counseling Services (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

A naturalistic representation is found, as the photo may be the actual building where the Service is located. Thus, a denotative function rather than a connotative one seems to be conveyed. If the verbal message is analysed, it is possible to assert that a high degree of confidentiality is found along with informality through the use of the imperative and informal utterances, which are usually employed in conversation (i.e., "Give us a call"). Furthermore, no dividing line is found between the text and the image, thus reinforcing the lack of emphasis on the institution, which is physically represented in the photo. Similarly to what observed in Figure 6, in Figure 7 the interpersonal metafunction is mainly established by the verbal message as the reader is directly and explicitly addressed.

4. Concluding remarks

Through the lens of a multimodal perspective, this preliminary study mainly focused on the homepages of the counselling services found on six websites of UK and USA universities listed among the best ones by the World University Rankings. Specifically, as asserted in the research questions, the investigation of the main multimodal tools found on the universities websites to promote their Counselling services was carried out. Furthermore, some preliminary

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considerations concerning cross-cultural differences related to the promotion of well-being by universities from the UK and USA contexts were provided. In the following table, a summary of the main outcomes is provided:

Table 2. Summary of the main findings.

	UK Context	USA context
Metafunctional principle	Ideational / textual / interpersonal (the latter only through informative verbal messages)	Textual, ideational, interpersonal (the latter mainly through pictures and direct address to the reader)
Denotative vs. Connotative features	Connotative features (abstraction) except for denotative features in Figure 3	Denotative features characterizing both the people and the places represented except for abstraction found in Figure 6
Interactive meanings of images / visual arrangements	No actual example found except for abstract represented participants in Figure 2	Interactive participants
Meanings of composition	Top-bottom position as the main value / clear framing devices in all the pictures	Top-bottom position in one picture (Figure 6); no framing devices between images and verbal messages

A more prominent "offer" position was observed in British counselling services websites compared to the ones in the USA context. "When images 'offer', they primarily offer information […] When images 'demand', they demand, one could say, the 'goods-and-services' that realize a particular social relation" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 118). The "offer" position is particularly conveyed through the focus on the institution and the services offered. Thus, a representational metafunction related to the professional roles belonging to the people working for the UK universities is mainly found. In contrast, a more interactive metafunction is found in the USA context, which is particularly conveyed through a more direct address to the viewer according to a certain degree of informality along with more emphasis on the commitment by the institution itself. These outcomes will have to be confirmed in the future through the investigation of a higher number of university websites.

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COMMUNICATING THE WELL-BEING OF EMPLOYEES IN US AND UK TOP UNIVERSITIES DURING AND AFTER COVID-19

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Abstract: The impact of Covid-19 on Western societies has definitely and consistently affected the education field. During the early waves, school-age children and university students alike were forced to stay home, and lessons were delivered online. The academic and administrative staff were also thus heavily affected in their daily routines, teaching activities and methods and communicative styles. This reflective piece explores the measures put into place by a small sample of large, world-renowned universities in the US and the UK, to boost the well-being of their employees. In particular, the sections of these Universities' websites dedicated to these issues are analysed, concentrating on staff resources and on mental well-being, to check whether focus on the latter emerges in the discourse and, if so, in what ways. The method is based on domain-specific languages, Critical Discourse Studies, Critical Genre Analysis and sentiment analysis. The results suggest that attention was being paid to psychological well-being even before the pandemic, it then increased during the emergency and was maintained in the aftermath. The communication of the Covid-19 support measures emerges as carefully constructed linguistically, especially in lexical terms, as it intersects discourses pertaining to health / well-being, labour law and education, with an eye to the affective and emotional aspects. The study may hopefully contribute to reporting the discursive representations of the pandemic from the perspective of specialised discourse within the professional setting of the academia.

Keywords: Covid-19; well-being; academia; websites; specialised discourses; domain-specific languages; discourse; sentiment analysis.

1. Background and rationale

The indelible mark that Covid-19 has left upon various societal dimensions, particularly within Western societies, has not spared the realm of education, which has been considerably affected, experiencing substantial and consistent repercussions. It is common knowledge that the initial surges of the pandemic compelled students of all age groups, ranging from school-age children to university-level students, to retreat to their homes, and the conventional presence/ in-person teaching paradigm gave way to remote lessons delivered through online media. This unforeseen transformation generated an unprecedented shift in the modus operandi of educational institutions throughout the world, which had to swiftly adjust to the new circumstances, transitioning to remote and, later, hybrid teaching modalities. Similarly to what has been happening in primary and secondary education, in tertiary education, too, this substantial adaptation has posed significant challenges for both academic and administrative personnel. It has altered their work routines, forcing them to re-imagine pedagogical methods and technological tools, and prompting a re-evaluation of established communicative styles. Despite the considerable impact, at least up until recently, there has been a paucity of research examining the consequences of Covid-19 on the field of Human Resource Management (HRM) within these establishments:

> there are very few studies on the impact of COVID-19 on HRM, its challenges, and its potential opportunities for HRM in organizations, whereas managers and HRM practitioners need relevant information that will help them to go through this crisis effectively and efficiently, to be able to support their employees and to sustain their company's business (Hamouche 2023: 800).

Watermeyer et al. (2021) offer an interesting sociological report on the subject, which is however limited to UK academia. The gap is even more evident in the lack of linguistic studies on the topic, despite recent research having shown that "linguistically and visually, on websites and brochures, there has been a shift to represent universities in a way that is more akin to private companies oriented to competitiveness, customer relations and self-promotion, than to institutions creating an educated citizenship." (Ledin and Machin 2018: 65).

Acknowledging this lacuna, this study set out from the conviction that HRM practitioners "should also develop wellbeing programs that aim at protecting employees' mental health, and providing solutions adapted to the needs of every employee, in terms of resources and social support" (Hamouche 2023: 810), and that it is essential to investigate how such solutions are described and communicated linguistically. The focus, thus, is on the very special context of universities, which may be considered "citadels" in their own right, made as they are by an assembly of adults who voluntarily attend them, live and even sleep in them when they are organized as campuses, and are ruled by local governing bodies that frequently enjoy a relevant degree of independence:

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> in the United States [alone], over 19.6 million people attend institutes of higher education […], where students often live in highly clustered housing (e.g. dorms), attend in-person classes and events, and gather for parties, sporting events, and other high-attendance events (Klein et al 2022: 2).

Both the UK and the US saw the implementation of various lockdowns and restrictions affecting tertiary education; this study endeavours to provide a preliminary investigation into the initiatives undertaken by a small sample of British and American universities to foster the well-being of their employees during and in the aftermath of the pandemic. In the manner in which such measures are described and promoted, the intersection between the medical and legal specialized languages is believed to take on a unique significance, and will therefore be explored in combination, to verify how they mix and blend to communicate said policies to the academic community in an attempt to nurture an environment of security and continuity amid the prevailing uncertainties.

2. Aims and relevance

Specifically, this study aims to examine the language employed by a selection of universities in the US and the UK prominent in ranking, when implementing well-being measures for their employees during the Covid-19 pandemic. Within this overarching objective, the following research questions are posed:

1. Did universities put in place measures and provisions to tend to the physical and mental well-being of their employees during the Covid-19 pandemic and, if so, were they maintained after the emergency?
2. If measures were taken, how were they communicated linguistically on their websites?

Particular attention is devoted to psychological well-being, widely acknowledged to have been significantly affected by the pandemic due to both fear of the disease and restrictions on freedom of movement. The emphasis is on ascertaining the inclusion and resonance of psychological well-being within institutional discourse. By tackling these questions, the study aspires to highlight the nuanced approaches universities have adopted to holistically safeguard the well-being of their employees.

This sample study may hopefully contribute to the ongoing discourse on the representation of the pandemic in specific work settings. The multifaceted approaches adopted by universities to address the well-being of their employees reflect the challenges and opportunities presented by the Covid-19 crisis. While the results of this investigation have an inevitably limited scope, they may hold relevance for HRM practitioners in developing well-being programs. Additionally, the rationale of the study may serve as a reminder of the delicate balance that institutions must strike between their promotional endeavours and their core role as places of higher education.

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3. Methods

This study scrutinizes the official websites of select universities in the US and the UK to explore the measures implemented for the well-being of employees, focusing on mental health. While bearing in mind the relevance of the student component, which is fundamental in and for any university (cf. Mejia Avila *et al.* 2022 on the impact of lockdowns on UK students), the analysis prioritises the discourse of the well-being of staff, situated at the intersection of health, well-being, and (university) labour law.

Adopting a multi-faceted approach that combines domain-specific languages, Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), and Critical Genre Analysis (CGA), this study draws on methodological insights outlined by methodological insights outlined by Pennarola, Polese and Zollo (2021), Wodak and Meyer (2015), Flowerdew and Richardson (2018), Giltrow and Stein (2009) and Bhatia (2018).

In detail, among specialised languages studies, reference is made to Pennarola, Polese and Zollo (2021), a recent volume within this perspective precisely addressing "the impact of Covid-19 on well-being and its correlates" (Polese 2021: 21). Polese (2021: 21-22) also provides the definition of "well-being" and its correlates "welfare" and "wellness" adopted throughout this research, in which the first ("welfare") tends to consider feelings, the second ("wellness") stresses the related financial benefits, and the third (the word pairing "well-being") implies, in economic discourse, a return to health from a state of illness.

The linguistic analysis carried out in this paper centres around lexical choices. It is necessarily limited, though, by space constraints and by the nature of the verbal content of the webpages examined, which Giltrow and Stein (2009: 12) see as short, impressionistic, "chunks" of text whose linguistic shape is "changed by their new mode of non-linear existence". As suggested by Pennarola (2021), in turn following Halliday (1994), two elements will be sought and commented upon: time references (mentions of Covid-19), and adjectives and modifiers conveying evaluation. To complement the lexical examination, a sentiment analysis tool (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count or LIWC, Tausczik and Pennebaker 2010) was additionally employed. While the multimodal level is not being addressed in this short investigation, which focuses on verbal content only, what Pauwels (2012: 252) maintains about "first impressions and reactions" or how websites "'look and feel' at a glance", may be considered to apply to verbal texts too. In this respect, even the short introductions, descriptions and explanations provided in the pandemic-related and employee-oriented webpages play a promotional role in advertising the respective universities.

Regarding Critical Discourse Studies, as is well-known, these focus on analysing language use in various forms of discourse to uncover how language shapes and is shaped by social, political, and cultural contexts, possibly revealing underlying power structures, ideologies, and social dynamics (Wodak and Meyer 2015, Flowerdew and Richardson 2018). Critical Genre Analysis, on the other hand, concentrates on examining the ways in which genres are used to convey meaning, ideologies, and social dynamics within different contexts, shedding

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light on the intricate relationship between language, power, and communication (Bhatia 2018). For the specific purposes of the present paper, the adoption of a combined domain-specific languages, Critical Discourse Studies and Critical Genre Analysis approach goes beyond policy evaluation, aiming to uncover the linguistic strategies used to communicate well-being measures. It delves into the convergence of administrative policies and communication strategies, and attempts to elucidate not only the explicit articulation of well-being policies but also the latent ideologies that underpin these articulations. By scrutinizing the lexical strategies that weave through the discourse, the analysis seeks to decipher the interplay between the intentions of the universities selected for study and the specific textual articulations. The overarching objective is to unearth the multidimensional nature of the measures deployed, the blend of administrative intent, linguistic representation, and their cumulative impact on academic well-being. The study, in sum, aspires to contribute an understanding of how some of the world"s top universities navigate the landscape of well-being, ultimately bolstering the collective knowledge reservoir concerning the dynamic interface between academia, employee well-being, and institutional discourse.

4. Material

The selection of the universities to be analysed was based on the 2023 QS World University Rankings (QS 2022). Rankings, both local and global, are designed to provide prospective students, researchers, and institutions with insights into the performance and reputation of universities on a global scale. The QS World University Rankings are issued annually as a result of a survey conducted by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), a British analytics company specialising in the field of education. Although it is by no means the only list to report the quality metrics of higher education institutions, QS has been selected for its growing reputation, accountability and reliable methodological criteria. Among the indicators considered to compile the lists, QS includes academic reputation, employer reputation, faculty/student ratio, citations per faculty, international faculty ratio, and international student ratio (QS 2021). In addition, proving its sensitivity to the impact of the pandemic on the education sector, QS has also attempted to facilitate teaching and administrative staff during the pandemic (QS 2023), which adds up accountability to reliability among its qualities.

The first five universities heading the QS rank globally were thus selected for analysis (Table 1).

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Table 1. QS World University Rankings 2023: Top global universities (QS 2022)

QS World University Rankings 2023	Institution
1	Massachusetts Institute of Technology MIT
2	University of Cambridge
3	Stanford University
4	University of Oxford
5	Harvard University

Despite being a small number, this was considered sufficient for a sample investigation on universities in English-speaking countries, since it includes institutions that are all based in either the US or the UK and which, for their history, tradition and current prominence, are well-known worldwide and can be taken to be representative of tertiary education in their countries at the highest level. For each of these universities, the specific sections and webpages dealing with the well-being of staff were manually identified and, making use of the Internet Archive Wayback Machine (https://archive.org) as a simple but extensive data-mining tool, versions of those very pages were retrieved from the years 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023, for analysis and comparison. Although between 2019 and 2023 the QS ranking underwent minor changes, the five institutions considered were consistently among the top seven, thus confirming the relevance of the selection even over the (short) time-span considered. This period, finally, may indeed be limited, but the five years it comprises represents the epochal watershed of the present times: the pre- and post- Covid-19 pandemic.

5. Findings

5.1. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT (US)

When accessing the MIT's website's homepage (n. 1 institution in the QS World University Rankings 2023), the information related to health and well-being may be found under “Home” > “Campus Life” > “Health & Wellness”. Following this path, the viewer is brought to a completely different website that opens up separately and is called “MIT Medical”. Within it, the section called “Stay Healthy at MIT” addresses the MIT community in general, informing users of this wide reach:

> programs from Community Wellness at MIT Medical and other campus resources serve **all members** of the MIT community, **regardless of insurance** coverage. These resources at MIT Medical and elsewhere can give you the health and wellness tools you need to **thrive** at MIT.

The insistence on the widest availability of the programmes in question (without consideration of insurance coverage) strikes the reader as socially attentive,

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given the constantly topical issue of access to healthcare in the United States. Inclusiveness is conveyed by means of the reference to the numeral adjective "all", and positivity through the verb "thrive", which points to not just the mere survival of employees but to their excellent conditions of existence. The most interesting lexical choice is probably that of the noun "wellness" which, Polese (2021) argues, may be seen as economically nuanced. In this sense, the choice of "wellness" over "well-being" would appear to focus on the practical business of restoring good health, and this is how the entire Community Programs at "MIT Medical" should probably be understood.

More interesting information is found on the MIT webpage path "MIT Medical" > "Start Here" > "Campus Employees". MIT Medical differentiates according to the type of users (e.g. students, parents, retirees), one of them being the university staff. To these specific users, the MIT website addresses this comforting statement:

> With a full-service healthcare center on campus and affiliations with the **best** hospitals in the area, **we've** got **you and your family** covered for everything from checkups to emergencies ("Campus Employees").

The tone is friendly and informal (see the contracted form "we've"), inclusive ("you and your family"), and meant to simultaneously a) reassure employees that the medical institution in question is the "best" (superlative) in the area and b) reaffirm the prestige surrounding the MIT in general, which of course is affiliated with only top-quality hospitals.

Moreover, when further investigating mental health and well-being, one finds that an entire section of the MIT website is devoted to "Stress Reduction, Mindfulness & Relaxation", with programmes and resources that include yoga, meditation, mindfulness, qigong. For personnel, in particular, there are resources under the section "MIT Medical" > "Start Here" > "New Employees" > "Employee Support Programs" that address psychological well-being, offered free of charge initially and stressing the protective environment ("confidential"):

> MyLife Services—an employee benefit for faculty, staff, postdoc associates and postdoc fellows, and household members—provides up to four **free** and **confidential** counseling sessions per person, per concern, with a licensed mental health professional.

In spite of the MIT's great offer of services and support, no explicit connection would appear to be made, in the pages examined, between Covid-19, well-being and psychological well-being concerning employees (a mention of students" mental distress was instead present at MIT Medical" > Services" > "Student Mental Health & Counseling Services" > "Self-care resources").

However, when one examines the MIT Human Resources website (https://hr.mit.edu/), that is where the most relevant information is found. In 2019, it already had a section called "Work & Life", and "MIT MyLife Services" were available "[i]f there's something on your mind". In 2020, they introduced

> Specialized support for COVID-19-related crises

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> The Center for WorkLife and WellBeing has created a suite of resources and strategies to provide direct, custom support to DLC leadership in the event of a COVID-19-related crisis,

as well as the "MIT Staff Emergency Hardship Fund" (Allen 2022) for financial relief of hardship related to the pandemic. This remained on offer throughout 2023, along with a section on "Specialized support for crises" introduced in 2021, and increasing space and attention given to mental health by the "MIT Human Resources Center for WorkLife and WellBeing".

5.2. The University of Cambridge (UK)

The University of Cambridge clearly highlights the connection between Covid-19 and well-being. The "Wellbeing" section is accessible following the path "Homepage" > "Staff pages" > "Employee services" > "Wellbeing". Looking at the "Wellbeing" section over the past 5 years, though, it is nonetheless possible to notice that in 2019 stress and mental health awareness were already mentioned: a "Wellbeing Strategy and Policy" was published containing a "Wellbeing Strategy Statement". This, however, was dated June 2017 and thus excludes anything related to Covid-19. Since 2020, the "Coronavirus (COVID-19)" link has been featuring in the page's right-hand menu, and that represents the main explicit connection between well-being and the pandemic:

> Coronavirus (COVID-19)
>
> The following links contain advice for staff and students at the University and Colleges.
>
> Covid SharePoint for Staff
> University Coronavirus home page
> Homeworking protocol
> Looking after your **wellbeing** and **mental** health
> Business Disability Forum - COVID-19 Toolkit
> Covid Recovery - Health and Wellbeing.

During 2020 and 2021, the page "Looking after your wellbeing and mental health" reported abundant and detailed information on the topic, recognising that "[s]ince the outbreak of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) many of us will be deeply anxious about our health, both physical and mental, and that of our loved ones".

5.3. Stanford University (US)

Stanford University already had a "Mental Health & Substance Abuse Care" webpage in 2019. In 2020, it implemented a separate online resource devoted to Covid-19, called "Stanford Health Alerts". This contains a great quantity of information and suggestions, which are also, as in 5.1 and 5.2, categorised according to the user. Employees are specifically addressed in the sections "For Faculty & Instructors" and "For Staff & Postdocs". Both link to the same

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resources, “Environmental Health & Safety” and “Cardinal at Work”. The former contains general information, while the latter is more personnel-oriented, thus more relevant to this brief review. Browsing its contents, the section “Cardinal at Work” > “Employee Support & Self-Care” makes an explicit connection between Covid-19 and wellbeing:

> The **global pandemic** has posed significant **challenges** to our families, our personal lives, and our health. Learn more about the Stanford benefits and **wellness** resources available to help support you and your family during this **difficult time**.

Preference is given to the term “wellness”, pointing to recovery (“wellness resources available to help support you and your family during this difficult time”), while the negative aspect is represented by the noun “challenges” and the adjective “difficult” which respectively open and close the paragraph.

Within “Employee Support & Self-Care”, the page “COVID-19 Family Resources” represents the ultimate strategy for staff in relation to the pandemic: We understand the disruptive impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on families and caregivers. We offer child care options, resources and support to assist families in navigating this challenging moment in time.

Adjectives such as "disruptive" and “challenging” acknowledge the threat represented by the emergency situation, but are balanced by the positively connoted verbs “understand”, “offer” and “assist”. The verb “navigate” represents an interesting metaphor (among the studies of metaphors related to Covid-19, cf. Garzone 2021), quite honest in its cautiousness, implying an attempt at controlling something perceived as dangerous, without the certainty of a felicitous outcome. The “COVID-19 Family Resources” are interestingly categorised according to the type of family member – from infants, to schoolchildren, to elderly parents – with a customised focus on different social actors. They include references to the repercussions of the pandemic on mental health, e.g. “Stanford Cardinal at Work” > “Benefits & Rewards” > “Support Resources for Parents and Caregivers”, which have remained throughout 2023:

> Connecting During the **Pandemic**
> Learn tips to combate [*sic*] **loneliness** and find **connection**
> Find tips on how to make decisions if you're vaccinated but your kids are not
> Learn about how to approach the COVID mental health transition
> Use technology to practice "distant **socializing**"
> Find practical tips to nurture relationships during the pandemic
> Teaching children **empathy** during challenging times.

Also of interest is the section “Employee Benefits”, which was introduced during the pandemic, providing that “[e]ligible employees may be entitled to certain COVID-19 related benefits under certain circumstances”, but is no longer present as of January 2024.

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5.4. The University of Oxford (UK)

The University of Oxford dedicates a section of its website, "COVID-19 RESPONSE" (last reviewed 10/10/2023), to the coronavirus emergency. Here, the connection between Covid-19 and both "welfare" and "wellbeing" is made explicit, with a choice of words ("impact", "pandemic", "deal with") that does not mask a sense of emergency:

> **Welfare** and **wellbeing**
> There is a range of support available to students and staff at Oxford, including help to deal with the **impact** of the **pandemic** (COVID-19 RESPONSE).

However, when following the link to the staff resources, one is taken to a section called "Employee wellbeing", in turn referring to the "Wellbeing: Thriving at Oxford" initiative, neither of which seem to mention Covid-19 explicitly. The initiative rather appears to be an ongoing service, within which the issues surrounding the pandemic have fallen. What is more relevant is the link, in the "COVID-19 RESPONSE" section, to the resource "New Ways of Working":

> For staff
> New Ways of Working
> New Ways of Working supports the **needs** and **circumstances** of professional services staff working in different ways, **building on** our experiences during the pandemic.

This especially addresses employees and refers explicitly to the pandemic, and it is spun in the direction of creating ("building on") something positive out of a difficult time. It is a specific section on novel working arrangements, born out of the coronavirus emergency:

> Why have we created this Framework?
> Work changed **dramatically** for many staff during the **COVID-19 pandemic**, with the requirement for staff to work remotely and communicate virtually. The New Ways of Working Framework aims to support the University to **evolve** - so that how we work enables individuals and teams to be highly effective and **fulfilled** - whilst we support the University s mission ('New Ways of Working').

The discursive construction of the attempt to turn something bad ("changed dramatically") into good ("highly effective") continues, with the use of the verbs "evolve" signalling a passage, and "fulfilled" as the potential objective. The actual 16-page policy document, when manually checked, contains explicit mention of psychological well-being ("mental": 16 occurrences). In this sense, the "New Ways of Working" framework is precisely the kind of response that this study set out to find.

More specific information for employees may be found at "Occupational Health Service" (https://occupationalhealth.admin.ox.ac.uk/), a separate resource. Back in 2019, it already had a "Mental health" section, which was

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updated in 2020 to include the impact of Covid-19. In 2021 the pandemic-related information was expanded. The year 2022 saw the launch of the “Thriving at Oxford” staff well-being programme, which incorporates and adds to the resources that were there before or were included during the emergency. In this sense, it is a clear example of a mental well-being service for university staff born of or developed from the pandemic. The same thing occurred with the section “Employee wellbeing”, also part of the “Occupational Health Service”, which however focuses on physical and not mental health: updated to deal with Covid-19 in 2020, it merged with the mental health resources into the “Thriving at Oxford” programme.

5.5. Harvard University (US)

Similarly to some of the institutions reviewed earlier, Harvard University has a specific website to deal with health, “Harvard University Health Services”, and a “Covid-19 Information” section is still found in there. The section contains a large quantity of information and resources. The page “Resources for Your Health and Wellbeing”, dated 26 October 2020, openly acknowledges the impact of the pandemic on both body and mind:

> October 26, 2020
> Dear Harvard Community Members, Since the onset of the **COVID-19** pandemic, you have heard from the University’s leadership, and from your Schools and units, about resources meant to help you and your family to cope with the **challenges** of studying and working from home while maintaining your **physical** and **emotional health**. For many in our community, increased stress and anxiety have appeared along with the rising impact of COVID-19, uncertainties surrounding the upcoming election, and heightened public dialogue on a range of issues relating to social and racial justice. With that in mind, we want to share information on resources that remain in place for our community members as we all continue to **navigate** these **unprecedented times.**

The connection between Covid-19 and well-being is possibly more evident in the main Harvard University website's section “Wellbeing”, devoted to “faculty and staff”. If in need of specific information about policies, however, the section to look at is “Policies, Forms & Contracts”, which is again part of the university's main website. Here, one may find the “Coronavirus Workplace Policies”, one of which is, for example, the HR policy on pay and benefits related to pandemic (“Infectious Diseases-Public Health Emergencies”):

> Infectious Diseases-Public Health Emergencies
> Human Resource **Pay** and **Time-Off** Guidance for **Benefits** Eligible Employees
> This employee policy outlines the use of paid time off during any **infectious disease** diagnosis or exposure in the context of **public health emergencies**. If an absence is not related to a declared health emergency, regular policies apply.

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Although no explicit mention of Covid-19 is made, the circumstances described seem to perfectly fit the coronavirus pandemic ("infectious disease", "public health emergencies"), meaning that this would represent "welfare" proper ("pay", "time-off", "benefits"). Conversely, not having named Covid-19 specifically, this policy may be understood to apply also in case of potential similar outbreaks. The only other resource connecting Covid-19 and psychological well-being is a PDF document titled "Managing Fears and Anxiety around the Coronavirus (COVID-19)", found in the "Health & Wellbeing" section of the Coronavirus main website.

In addition, Harvard< too has a specific HR website, "HARVie Harvard Information for Employees" (https://hr.harvard.edu/). In particular, the "Work/Life" section is where the relationship between Covid-19 and staff wellbeing emerges. In 2019, the section already included a resource about Mindfulness and its psychological advantages. In 2020, the content of "Work/Life" did not dramatically change to accommodate information on the pandemic, but the landing page – whose text is a sort of monthly newsletter– did mention it, and the right-hand side menu linked to the coronavirus resources within the "Harvard University Health Services" website discussed above. This remained the same until 2023, when mention of Covid-19 was eventually removed. Overall, the sections of Harvad University's website dedicated to staff, policies, contracts and even unions are detailed and thorough. Harvard is one of the institutions that provide the most information on legal aspects, possibly due to the University's tradition in law studies. However, specific resources on psychological and mental well-being did not seem to explicitly appear in connection with the pandemic, at least based on the material examined: resources already existed and are still present nowadays, but did not openly change or adapted for the occasion.

5.6. Summary of results

The quantitative findings of the above review may be systematised as in Table 2.

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Table 2. Summary of quantitative findings.

QS World university rankings 2023	University	Measures promoting mental well-being **existing in 2019**	Measures promoting mental well-being introduced / **expanded during pandemic**	Measures promoting mental well-being **maintained after pandemic**
1	Massachusetts Institute of Technology MIT	Yes	Yes Hardship fund introduced 2020	Yes
2	University of Cambridge	Yes	Not explicitly	Yes
3	Stanford University	Yes	Yes	Yes
4	University of Oxford	Yes	Yes	Yes Converged into 'Thriving at Oxford' staff well-being programme
5	Harvard University	Mindfulness	Not explicitly	Yes

The first research question was aimed at verifying whether employees' physical and especially psychological well-being, was a focus of the universities considered. In the five cases examined, website captures from 2019 show that mental health (Harvard University's HR talked about Mindfulness) was already a concern back then. With the advent of the pandemic, MIT, Stanford and Oxford increased their attention to mental well-being (MIT introduced a relief fund), while Cambridge and Harvard, at least based on the material retrieved and analysed, did not explicitly do so. In all the cases, however, measures promoting mental well-being remained in place well after the emergency and throughout 2023; in the case of Oxford, initiating a new programme that brings together physical and mental well-being as well as the experience of the pandemic.

The qualitative aspect was investigated pursuing the second research question, i.e. how mental well-being measures for the staff were communicated linguistically on the universities' websites. A number of comments were included in the previous subsections on the lexical choices adopted by the various universities. Taken together, these point to a) the use of specialized (labour law) language whenever policies, rules, instructions are conveyed on websites; b) in most cases, explicit references to Covid-19 that place the information in time as per Pennarola (2021); c) evaluative lexicon indicating an exceptional event (**unprecedented** times, **challenges**, **challenging** times, **challenging** moment, difficult time, public health **emergencies**); the repercussions of such an event on the employees' professional and personal lives (**dramatically**, **needs** and circumstances, **disruptive** impact); the measures already there or put in place to address them (amplify **positive** and **hopeful** stories, information from our

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trusted sources, **expert** care, **immediate** support for any type of emotional issue).

To complement these reflections, derived from a manual screening, further observations can be put forth based on software analysis. Among the material viewed and commented upon in this section?, five webpage texts from 2020, one per university, were identified as particularly representative of the measures taken to implement the well-being of employees during the pandemic (Table 3).

Table 3. Texts for sample qualitative analysis

World ranking QS 2023	University	Representative text	Webpage capture	Date	Wordcount
1	Massachusetts Institute of Technology MIT	WorkLife-and-WellBeing-COVID-19-Resources	WorkLife-and-WellBeing-COVID-19-Resources	2020.12.31	693
2	University of Cambridge	Looking after your wellbeing and mental health	Coronavirus (COVID-19)_ Looking after your wellbeing and mental health _ Human Resources	2020.11.26	836
3	Stanford University	COVID-19 Family Resources	COVID-19 Family Resources _ Cardinal at Work	2020.11.02	2966
4	University of Oxford	Mental health	Mental health _ Occupational Health Service	2020.12.15	1636
5	Harvard University	Employee Assistance Program	Employee Assistance Program _ Harvard Human Resources	2020.12.17	356

The five texts were analysed with LIWC (Tausczik and Pennebaker 2010) for a basic, lexicon-based sentiment analysis, to "detect, extract, and classify the subjective information and affective states expressed in a text, such as opinions, attitudes, and emotions regarding a service, product, person, or topic" (Lei and Liu 2021: 1). The scarcity of the documents examined, both in terms of number and wordcounts, was not considered a major drawback. The wordcounts varied

depending on the amount of information that each institution decided to provide online at that moment. The documents were selected for their relevance to the topic; no effort was made to choose texts comparable in terms of lengths. This lack of extensive data was not a significant issue because the goal was not to conduct a major corpus-linguistics analysis but to capture a 'snapshot' of the sentiments expressed in the *hic et nunc* of the pandemic. Three sets of dimensions among those included in LIWC (Boyd et al. 2022a) were analysed, comparing them against the general mean ("Standard", in black, in Figure 13), provided by Boyd et al. (2022b). The first regards social behaviour (Figure 1) and, not surprisingly, the language of all the texts emerges as prosocial ("helping or caring about others, particularly at the interpersonal level" Boyd et al. 2022a: 19), focused on acts of communication (comm), but not providing moral evaluation (moral) or showing exceptional politeness (polite). Secondly, a selection of dimensions connected with lifestyle and health were examined (Figure 2).

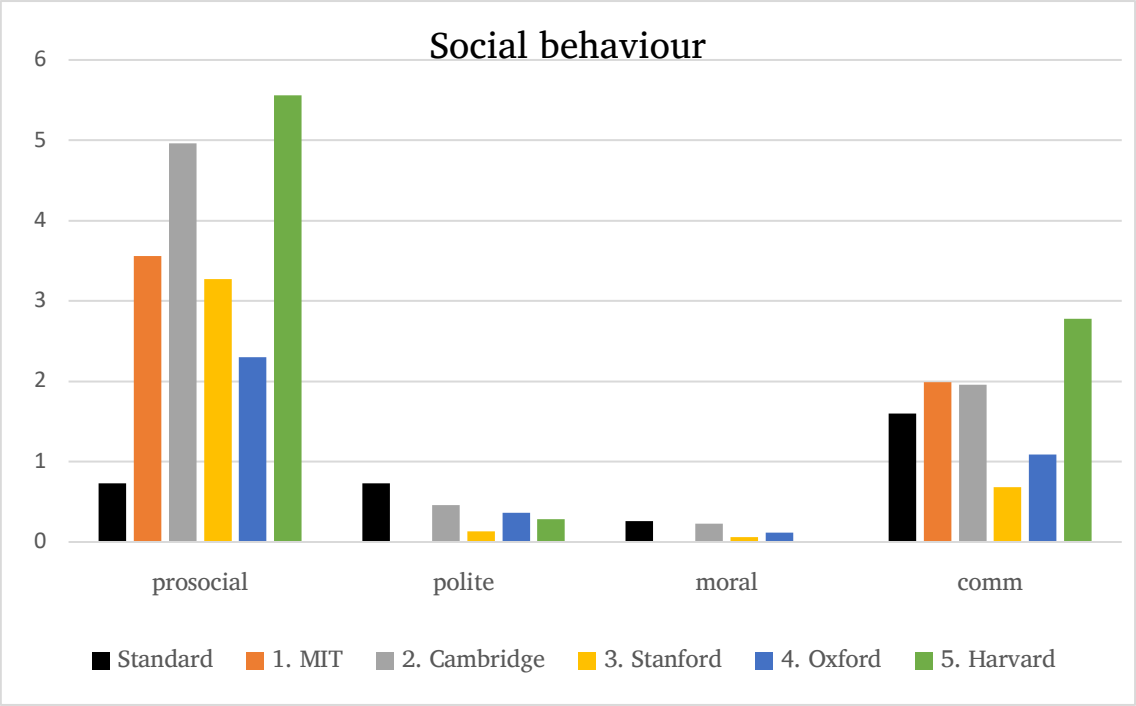

Figure 1. Social behaviour dimensions (LIWC) in the reference texts (Table 3)

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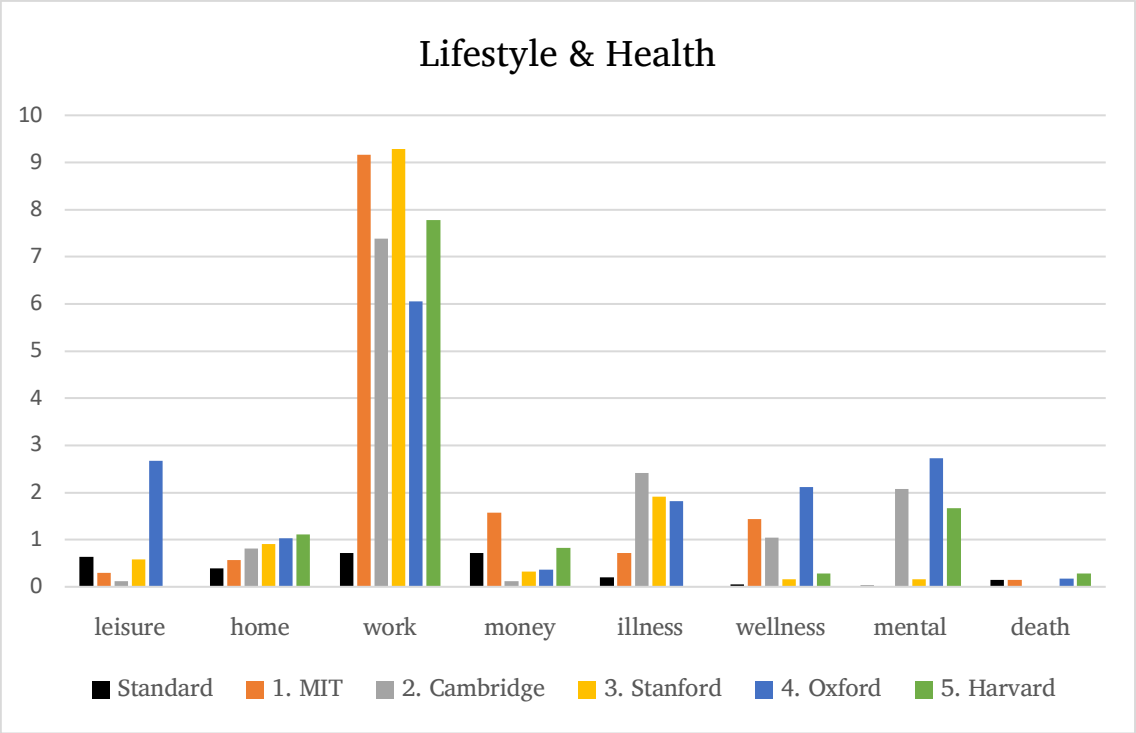

Figure 2. Lifestyle and health dimensions (LIWC) in the reference texts (Table 3)

"Work" was expectedly the dimension with the largest presence, followed by "home": the introduction or expansion of flexible and remote work arrangements stands out as a common theme, relevant in maintaining employee well-being. "Leisure" and "wellness" also feature among the sentiments in the texts. "Mental" health is given relevance by at least Cambridge, Oxford and Harvard, and "illness" is clearly present. On the contrary, "death", although dominating during the pandemic, is a topic that is mostly avoided, certainly to maintain the employer-to-employee communication hopeful and encouraging even or especially during a hard time.

Lastly, the affective dimension was explored, exploiting the staple aspect for which sentiment analysis algorithms are best known, for example in marketing studies (Figure 3).

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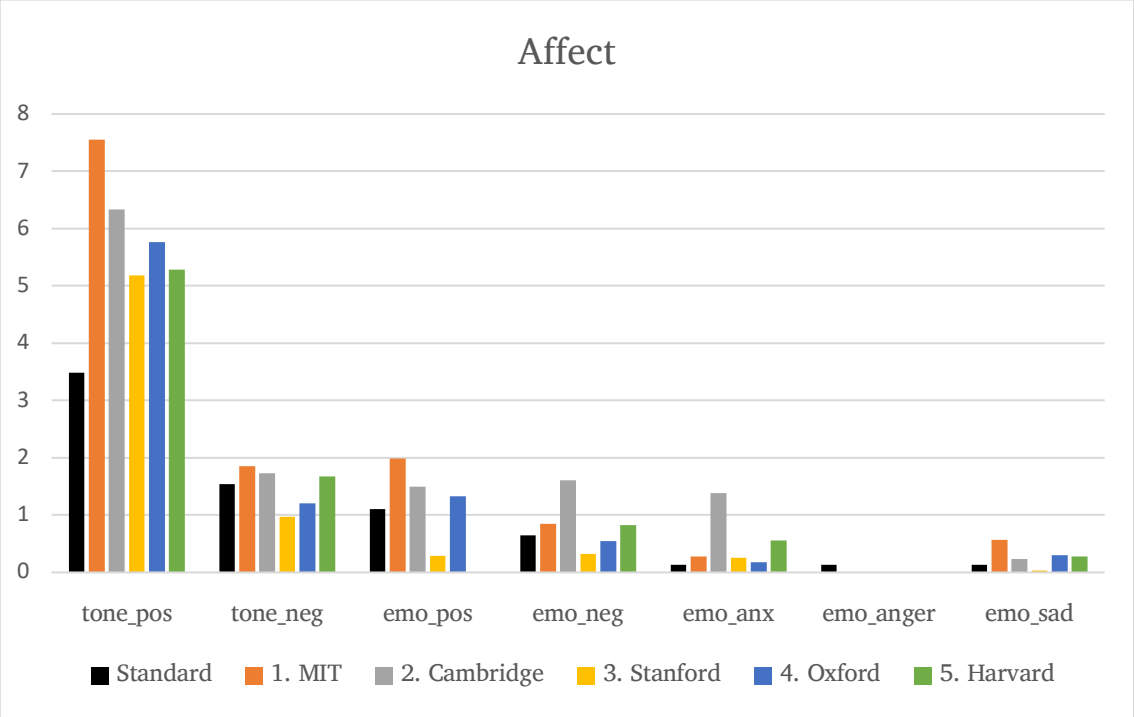

Figure 3. Affective dimensions (LIWC) in the reference texts (Table 3)

With the caveat that sentiment analysis is "an evaluation mainly in positive vs. negative polarity terms" (Lei and Liu 2021: 1) and, as such, subjective and limited to black-or-white outcomes, LIWC interestingly showed how the general tone of the texts was overwhelmingly positive (tone_pos), though limited negative aspects necessarily also emerged (tone_neg). Looking at specific emotions, the positive focus was confirmed (emo_pos), with anxiety (emo_anx) and sadness (emo_sad) also being present, but not anger (emo_anger): perhaps the speed of the viral spread was so shocking that, at least in the midst of it all, in 2020, other negative emotions prevailed.

6. Limits and conclusions

The study acknowledges a number of limitations. Firstly, the potential for increasing the material under analysis to include more universities is obvious, as well as further exploration of rankings adopting different criteria and thus including yet other institutions. Secondly, this being a short-term historical study over five years (2019 to 2023), it could be expanded to include previous years and to monitor the future development of well-being policies in academia. To do so, the material should be collected purposefully and consistently, given the "volatility and chameleon-like properties of Internet genres" (Giltrow and Stein 2009: 9), and the subsequent difficulty in collecting or retrieving outdated material that used to be on websites but often changes and disappears. Furthermore, additional insights could be derived from interviews with HR departments, especially since access to information is occasionally restricted to the public, and to probe prospective policies for the future.

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This said, the preliminary review presented here underscores a notable emphasis on the psychological well-being of academic staff, with institutions integrating mental health policies into their frameworks, often as a response to the pandemic. The persistence of these policies beyond the emergency period reflects a commitment to sustained employee well-being. A common thread emerges in the prevalence of flexible and remote work arrangements, revealing their significance in maintaining staff welfare. On the other hand, what policies exist and were introduced have brought along real and positive changes, especially in terms of telework and flexibility: "the results of the induced experience of smart working for public-sector employees, in this period, are encouraging, suggesting that this new culture of flexibility and results will prevail even after the emergency" (Gaglione *et al.* 2020: 6).

The study also underscores the significance of effective well-being programmes tailored to individual employee needs and effectively communicated, particularly concerning mental health and social support. The carefully chosen linguistic strategies employed reflect the evolving identity of universities, which in English-speaking countries notably and increasingly resemble corporate entities, prioritizing competitiveness and self-promotion. Indeed, Watermeyer et al. (2021) highlight that, based on their data, the corporate nature of universities seems to be intensifying following the pandemic: thus, acknowledging the double pronged purpose of well-being discourse in the academia can contribute to demystifying professional practices that promote corporate interests (Bhatia 2018: 9, 88). In conclusion, one of the lessons that may be learnt from the Covid-19 pandemic's impact on the well-being of academic staff is the importance of robust well-being policies and support mechanisms in educational institutions, and the relevance of communicating them to university staff effectively in times of emergency, with a linguistic construction of messages that includes not only the professional and labour law aspects but also the social, affective and emotional dimensions.

DATASET

1. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT (US)

Homepage, https://web.mit.edu/
Home > Campus Life > Health & Wellness, https://web.mit.edu/campus-life/
MIT Medical, https://medical.mit.edu/community
MIT Medical > Stay Healthy at MIT, https://medical.mit.edu/community
MIT Medical > Stay Healthy at MIT, Stress Reduction, Mindfulness & Relaxation, https://medical.mit.edu/community/stress-reduction
MIT Medical > Start here > Campus Employees, https://medical.mit.edu/my-mit/campus-employees
MIT Medical > Start here > Campus Employees > Employee Support Programs, https://medical.mit.edu/employee-support-programs
MIT Medical > Find Patient Services > Student Mental Health & Counseling Services > Self-care resources, https://medical.mit.edu/services/mental-health-counseling/self-care-resources

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2. University of Cambridge

Homepage, https://www.cam.ac.uk/

Homepage > Staff pages > Employee services > Wellbeing, https://www.wellbeing.admin.cam.ac.uk/

Homepage > Staff pages > Employee services > Wellbeing > Coronavirus (COVID-19), https://www.wellbeing.admin.cam.ac.uk/coronavirus-covid-19-1

Homepage > Staff pages > Employee services > Wellbeing > Wellbeing at Cambridge > Wellbeing Strategy and Policy, https://www.wellbeing.admin.cam.ac.uk/wellbeing-cambridge/wellbeing-strategy-and-policy

3. Stanford University

Homepage, https://www.stanford.edu/

Stanford Health Alerts, https://healthalerts.stanford.edu/

Stanford Health Alerts > Covid-19 > Info for… > For Faculty & Instructors, https://healthalerts.stanford.edu/covid-19/faculty-instructors/

Stanford Health Alerts > Covid-19 > Info for… > For Staff & Postdocs, https://healthalerts.stanford.edu/covid-19/staff-postdocs/

Environmental Health & Safety, https://ehs.stanford.edu/

Stanford Cardinal at Work, https://cardinalatwork.stanford.edu/

Stanford Cardinal at Work > Working at Stanford > Employee Support & Self-Care, https://cardinalatwork.stanford.edu/working-stanford/covid-19-guide/employee-support-self-care

Stanford Cardinal at Work > Benefits & Rewards > COVID-19 Family Resources, https://cardinalatwork.stanford.edu/benefits-rewards/worklife/covid-19-family-resources

Stanford Cardinal at Work > Benefits & Rewards > WorkLife > Support Resources for Parents and Caregivers, https://cardinalatwork.stanford.edu/benefits-rewards/worklife/covid-19-family-resources/support-resources-parents-and-caregivers

4. University of Oxford

Homepage, https://www.ox.ac.uk/

Occupational Health Service > Advice and guidance > Employee wellbeing, https://occupationalhealth.admin.ox.ac.uk/

Home > COVID-19 RESPONSE, https://www.ox.ac.uk/coronavirus

Home > Staff Gateway > Working at Oxford > Wellbeing: Thriving at Oxford, https://staff.admin.ox.ac.uk/thriving-at-oxford

Home > Staff Gateway > HR Support > During Employment > New Ways of Working, https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/new-ways-of-working

5. Harvard University

Homepage, https://www.harvard.edu/

Home > Harvard University Health Services, https://huhs.harvard.edu/

Home > Harvard University Health Services > Covid-19 Information, https://www.harvard.edu/coronavirus/

Home > Harvard University Health Services > Announcements > Resources for Your Health and Wellbeing, https://huhs.harvard.edu/news/resources-your-health-and-wellbeing

https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1974-4382/19496

Home > HarVie Harvard Information for Employees > Wellbeing, https://hr.harvard.edu/wellbeing

Home > HarVie Harvard Information for Employees > Policies, Forms & Contracts, https://hr.harvard.edu/corona-virus-workplace-policies

Home > HarVie Harvard Information for Employees > Policies, Forms & Contracts, Infectious Diseases-Public Health Emergencies, https://hr.harvard.edu/infectious-diseases-public-health-emergencies

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HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE ACADEMIA: TRANSFORMATIVE PRAXIS AND CLIMATE ACTION

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Abstract: Well-being in academia is obviously tied to levels of burnout experienced by academics. Why are these levels increasing and how is their increase related to the marketization and neoliberalisation of universities? What should we, as academics, do in order to counter this trend and improve both our well-being and that of our students as well as society? These questions are addressed through experimental writing, employing techniques that are unusual for linguistics, namely autoethnography, in order to reflect on academic careers and the problems of mental health and harassment experienced by PhD students. Drawing inspiration from "transformative praxis", this paper describes the approach of social justice teaching and conscientization. Focusing in particular on the theme of environmental education, the paper reflects on how introducing social justice teaching in academic courses is likely to prove helpful to prevent burnout and dissatisfaction. The second part of the paper describes the author's experience with university courses about ecolinguistics and the feedback received from students, including a selection of their comments.

Keywords: conscientization; social justice; academic burnout; environmental education; ecolinguistics; cycling advocacy; mental health; climate crisis; marketisation.

1. Introduction

This experimental essay is the result of an attempt to answer a number of questions that at first appeared unrelated. Why are academics experiencing increasing levels of burnout? Why is academia a workplace with higher than average levels of mental health issues? (Urbina-Garcia 2020; Forrester 2023) How can I keep my mental balance and how have I managed to avoid burnout until now? How can I teach an MA-level course on ecolinguistics while making sure I do not affect my students' mental health? How can we all deal with eco-anxiety? Of course, the aim of my work is to provide tentative answers to the last three questions, while the first two questions are covered by the literature review and no further investigation is carried out here. In order to answer questions that are unusual for my research – but, I have realised, also vital – I have explored different disciplines, pedagogical methods and tried research methods that were new to me, in particular autoethnography.

Drawing inspiration from the work known as “transformative praxis” (Luitel and Dahal 2020), this paper introduces the theme of academic burnout and lack of satisfaction and then describes the approach of social justice teaching (Navarro 2018) and conscientization (Freire Institute 2023), which represent a solution to the lack of motivation some academics experience and, at the same time, offer a response to the need of changing the curriculum and society (see also McDonough 2018).

As said, this paper is experimental and its structure follows an unusual pattern. It is divided in two parts, which broadly correspond to a predicament/response structure, and theoretical explorations are exposed at the beginning in Section 2 and then again in Section 4, which discusses strategies to cope with the feeling of burnout and disillusion when teaching. After an introduction to studies concerning burnout and mental health in academia, an autoethnographic section describes how my academic career came about, my struggles during my PhD, and how I dealt with my own anxieties. The second part of this paper moves to a description of the pedagogical methods mentioned above, followed by information and reflections about my own MA-level course. I observe my own teaching through the lens of transformative praxis, describe the approach and activities I have employed up to now and then report the survey responses of my students.

An approach based on autoethnography is employed in this paper for more than one reason. Inviting academics to write on well-being in academia appears as an invitation to introspection. Self-narrative – even if unusual in linguistics – offers a useful method to attempt an answer to the more direct question 'are you feeling well, as an academic?' Self-narrative can help scholars to gain better insights and, in general, it is a useful coping strategy for stress and anxiety. In this sense, this paper is also an invitation to experiment with self-narrative. The second reason has to do with my approach to research, especially since I started writing my first book (Caimotto 2020), which was an experiment as well. The experiment was to investigate one important, non-academic, part of my life – my volunteer work as a cycling advocate – from the perspective of linguistics. My experience, which appears to be different from the career pattern of most

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scholars I have met, may prove useful as a starting point for a reflection over well-being in academia. This is linked to the third reason behind the choice of autoethnography: differently from other forms of self-narrative, it aims to tell personal stories in order to study society and draw observations on the communities of which the author is part (Chang 2008: 33-34).

2. How is it going? Mental health in academia

Thirteen years before I started writing this paper – which of course I started drafting too late, more or less when I had planned to start proofreading my final version – Gill (2010) published a paper with the eloquent title "Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of neo-liberal academia". She argues that “academia represents an excellent example of the neo liberalisation of the workplace and that academics are, in many ways, model neoliberal subjects, with their endless self-monitoring, flexibility, creativity and internalisation of new forms of auditing and calculating.”

However, is the well-being of academics really worthy of attention? After all, we have a fascinating job, we earn good salaries (once we obtain a permanent post, of course) and there are so many people who suffer working conditions that are far worse, not to mention the people suffering from poverty, war, displacement, harassment, discrimination. Gill (2010) convincingly argues that the fact some people are worse off is not a reason to keep silent. I would add that as academics and intellectuals, we have responsibilities. We certainly should be the ones other citizens turn to for guidance when crises strike. We need to be an example for society at large and for our students. If we believe that the neoliberal model is the drive behind the climate crisis (Jackson 2017), then we must set a different example. Our mental health and our well-being are no longer an individual, personal issue, they become political, they become a responsibility towards our students, colleagues, families, the general public and the ecosystem of which we are part.

Jongepier and van de Sande have a few ideas about what academics on permanent contracts should be doing:

> Here’s a (not so) small list: make a real effort to work only the hours you’re paid for (and let the shit hit the fan from time to time); go on holidays (and stay true to your auto reply); avoid bragging about how busy you are (often a twisted form of virtue signalling); leave meetings early to pick up your kids, go on a date or visit friends (and be open about having a life); don’t hire the workaholic with huge publication lists but the team player who wouldn’t be a passive bystander; tell your students that academic excellence, or writing a PhD thesis, does not require 60- let alone 80-hour workweeks; tell them that academia needs people who have rich non-academic lives. And last but not least, publish less and complain more to those in positions of power (Jongepier and van de Sande 2021: n.p.).

If we look at academia from a discourse analysis perspective, Mautner (2010: 216-217) offers useful observations, showing how marketization has spread to

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other social domains. She observes the increasing presence of market-oriented and managerial discourse, arguing that education has been commodified. Her conclusions (*ibid.*: 224) call for our development of a sustainable and persuasive counterdiscourse, which may still allow us to turn the tide. Concerning the neoliberalisation of academia, Bradbury observes:

> our notions of knowledge creation are so impoverished that knowledge is mistaken for a product, overly brain-centric, rather than the social process that it is. This notion needs an update as we are now tested to experiment with post-tribal, collective, systemic solutions at scale. For this we need new knowledge-creation practices powered by social learning processes in the form of collaborative problem solving (Bradbury 2022: 2).

Especially when teaching ecolinguistics and deconstructing the dominant destructive neoliberal discourse (Stibbe 2021), we need to be aware of the toxic effects of neoliberal, marketised discourse on academia and on ourselves, including taking care of our mental health and that of our peers and students. Wamsler *et al.* carried out a systematic literature review to understand the relation that exists between internal change and climate action and sustainability. They convincingly argue that the reason why the negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change have failed to generate the needed actions is due to the fact that

> much of this work originated in the biophysical discourse, which has framed climate change as an external, technical challenge. This has, in turn, narrowed the possibilities for deeper change that tackles the root causes of the problem (Wamsler *et al.* 2021: n.p.).

The current focus on wider external socio-economic structures, governance dynamics and technology change stems from this dominant discourse (*ibid.*: 1). However, they observe the emergence of a new perspective that views climate change as a human problem, rooted in our internal mental states and linked to other crises. They state “Climate change and other sustainability challenges can thus be understood as a subconscious outcome of the way we all live; an unintended consequence or visible manifestation of the life that our minds have created.” (*ibid.*: 1). Writing from a different background, the artist Odell in her non-academic essay “How to do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy”, argues:

> I think that “doing nothing”—in the sense of refusing productivity and stopping to listen—entails an active process of listening that seeks out the effects of racial, environmental, and economic injustice and brings about real change. I consider “doing nothing” both as a kind of deprogramming device and as sustenance for those feeling too disassembled to act meaningfully. On this level, the practice of doing nothing has several tools to offer us when it comes to resisting the attention economy (Odell 2019: 22).

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As explained by systems theory, values, beliefs, worldviews and paradigms are deep leverage points (Meadows 1999), that is places to intervene in a system in ways that will change the system profoundly, leading to substantial, long-lasting change. Wamsler *et al.* (2021: 5) systematise the internal qualities and capacities that can facilitate the needed paradigm shift and group them under five interrelated clusters "awareness, connection, insight, purpose, and agency". They observe that these "underpin people's learning, everyday life choices and decision-taking, […] influence how people process and filter information, take decisions, cooperate and act." The centrality of discourse analysis in their approach will be self-evident to any linguist, and this has a double implication. If, as academics, we need to take care of our mental health because humanity needs our knowledge and skills to address the most terrifying ordeal it has ever faced, as linguists our abilities are particularly precious to accompany other disciplines through this total revision of our epistemologies. This is why looking after our mental health is not only an individual issue.

However, what do we know about mental health in academia? Not enough, according to Urbina-Garcia's literature review (2020: 569), whose research reveals which aspects should be further investigated, namely the link between mental health negatively affecting physical health and the coping mechanisms employed to face academic demands. Moreover, she reports that the understanding of the concept of well-being remains confused, despite the efforts of the scientific community, and it is necessary to reach a better understanding of how we should measure it. What the studies reviewed reveal is that "findings consistently show faculty staff report higher stress levels than other university staff and the general public […], academic staff seems to be in greater need for psychological support compared with community samples" (*ibid.*). Urbina-Garcia's review was published before the COVID-19 pandemic, and surely the experience of lockdowns with the increase of remote work further jeopardized the complex situation. According to Forrester (2023: 751) "The desire for work–life balance is nothing new — but the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath have brought academic workers a greater appreciation of its importance."

Concerning the actual meanings attached to "well-being", Polese (2021) also highlights the confusion around the concept and how in different contexts it is employed to mean different things, sometimes overlapping with "welfare" and "wellness". The notion of welfare focuses mainly on the material conditions, assuming that once the access to economic well-being is obtained individuals will be able to satisfy their material and non-material needs. The shift to well-being requires a more holistic perspective and takes into account many other aspects that make one's life satisfactory. We can once again turn to Meadows (2008: 175–177) and her observations about the importance of quality over quantity. She highlights how many of our attempts to solve problems are based on quantitative information, simply because quantities are easier to measure and to employ as proof. This strategy, Meadows warns, eventually will inevitably create systems that attribute more prominence to quantity rather than quality (using GDP to measure the performances of nations is the most blatant example of this mistake).

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3. Autoethnography

When I read studies about the mental health of academics, I tend to check myself and wonder what do I feel like, where do I stand? The aim of this work is to share my story in the hope that it might be useful for someone else. A short recount of how my academic career came about is necessary. I was a good university student but not an excellent one. Nobody encouraged me or suggested I should apply for a PhD. Actually, when I enrolled for the selection I went to talk to some professors of my Faculty and the responses I had felt rather discouraging. Being stubborn and not having anything to lose, I tried anyway and obtained a scholarship. Exactly one year later, my father died in a crash and the following six years were tainted by grief and having to deal with the complex legal trial that ensued.

About ten days after his death, I had a scheduled meeting concerning my PhD thesis, which I had just started working on just like my PhD colleagues. I was asked why I had worked so little, told my research was not worth, my writing was not good, even my knowledge of English was not up to the required standards. I could not make sense of this conversation, I felt unable to reply. These were the people I had been looking up to during my university years. My father had just died. They knew what I was going through. They had helped me through the ordinary difficulties of a student. They were the ones who had made me love the English language. From them I had learned and loved Smith's poem 'Not Waving but Drowning' (1972). How could they not realize that I was the one drowning then? To this day, I can't tell whether that meeting was intimidation, total lack of empathy or a crooked attempt to protect me from false hopes. Maybe I don't want to know. This was the first and the most difficult meeting, but not the only one of the kind. Am I writing this out of some sentiment of revenge? To brag about how strong I was? No, I simply want my suffering to be useful to someone else, as my story has a happy ending.

I could not bear that conversation then. I decided to put it away without grieving over it, I simply had no grief left. It led me to silently acknowledge and accept I would never have an academic career and I decided I would not pursue the least attempt to choose my research topics with some kind of strategy. I would simply enjoy the ride and dedicate my research to what appeared important, curious, and inexplicable to me. I ended up having an academic career and enjoying the possibility of investigating what I longed for. I was supported and encouraged by many other academics later on and this may be a good occasion to thank them all. Maybe, after all, it actually was a blessing in disguise.

By saying this, I want to explain the origin of my approach to research but, by no means, I want to justify the toxic, dangerous destructive feedback that I received and that many other PhDs students testify (Anonymous Academic 2014), as it can seriously affect people's mental health. Even if in my case it ended well, I simply consider myself a lucky survivor and I am sure the same positive result could have been achieved with encouragement and a healthy environment in which one feels free to research what one deems worthy of attention – which is the environment in which I work right now.

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In the meantime, my personal struggle with unprocessed grief went on, I had nightmares so scary I started dreading bedtime and I realized I could not cope without proper professional help. I was treated with EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) and learned about how we store negative memories in a part of our brain we are no longer able to access and transform into words. Activating both sides of the brain while recollecting the memory makes it possible to access it without feeling the heightened emotions anymore. The effectiveness of the technique is still the object of debate among experts, all I can tell is that it was useful to me. Of course, having read Lakoff's book *The Political Mind* (2008) I knew about synapses, and about how reason and emotion are interconnected. It was fascinating to observe a treatment related to his studies having effects on my own brain. The experience taught me many things that would prove useful in my research work and probably for my teaching activity as well.

Fast-forward a few years, and it was time for me to envisage the publication of a book. The safety of a permanent contract had allowed me to dedicate my free time to advocacy as I got involved in a local cycling association that demands better conditions and safety for cycling. Apart from learning many technical aspects of road planning and social studies concerning how people move around, I started noticing many discursive patterns worth investigating from an ecolinguistic perspective. This brought ecolinguistics from the periphery to the core of my research, allowing me to become involved in interdisciplinary projects about the climate crisis and about urban mobility, which also strengthened my advocacy activities. When I had to start teaching an MA-level course, my choice immediately fell on ecolinguistics and this essay describes the activities and the approach employed in that course, which was also experimental to some extent.

Why am I writing all this and why should it matter to anyone else? I believe some lessons can be drawn from my personal story. First of all, one which will probably appear as a platitude: achieving innovative and satisfying results requires time. Time can be obtained in two ways: one is granting scholars, even those at the beginning of their careers, safe, long-term, reassuring contracts that will allow them to take risks, to follow research paths that are new, experimental and that, as a consequence, may prove wrong without compromising one's whole career. Time can also come from supportive colleagues who do not shovel down too much bureaucratic work to young colleagues, and I am lucky enough to have worked with such colleagues. If young scholars have to start working to secure the next salary as soon as they start researching for the current short-term contract, then of course the space for creative, innovative and fulfilling research will go missing, and with it innovation and satisfaction with one's research and sometimes the quality and relevance of the research itself. Good research needs people who have a rich life, filled with varied interests and relationships that can help scholars to get out of one's own bubble. Mental health and time are required to achieve all this.

What is the second lesson that can be drawn? Psychological support can help. Again, this may sound like a platitude, the reason why I think it is worth repeating anyway is that a stigma still hovers around psychological support and,

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hopefully, normalizing it can help the stigma to dissolve. It is also good many universities now offer psychological support for students and staff. I think I do not need to add that treating PhD students as human beings should also be a goal pursued by academics.

4. Pedagogical methods

The second part of this paper looks for strategies to respond to the predicament described in the first part. As academics we experience burnout, we act in ways that negatively affect our well-being, our mental health and the well-being of colleagues, especially younger ones, and students. As citizens, we all have to deal with the damage, the tensions, the contradictions and the complexity deriving from the climate crisis. Section 4 explores responses from studies concerning pedagogical methods and Section 5 focuses back on my direct experience in my MA-level course about ecolinguistics and the points of view of my students in Section 6.

Tannock's book *Educating for Radical Social Transformation in the Climate Crisis* (2021) engages with all the aspects, pitfalls and contradictions that tend to emerge when we reflect upon the best ways to approach the climate crisis from an educational perspective. Should we revise school curricula or do we rather need to question the way in which we envisage, transmit and evaluate "knowledge"? Should we exploit green nudging or should we rather be critical of the individualistic, neoliberal mindset it actually promotes? What is the right balance between instilling hope and provoking fear when discussing the climate crisis in an institutional setting? Which is the best kind of "connection with nature" that we should promote, in order to avoid the kind of destructive connection with nature that entails polluting journeys to remote places in order to practice resource-consuming outdoor activities? Tannock engages with all these questions and others, offering thought-provoking reflections that cannot be summed up here, but his final chapter makes a point that is relevant for lecturers of English linguistics. He observes:

> Much climate change education focuses narrowly on enhancing climate science literacy; while more ambitious programmes are most likely to focus on facilitating shifts in knowledge paradigms. When action is invoked in climate change education, it is often individualized, apolitical and non-confrontational. Discussions of power, too, tend to be found in relation to agendas of individual "empowerment," that look inward and refer to changes in individual attitudes, abilities and behaviours brought about by increased knowledge and understanding of the climate crisis (Tannock 2021: 229).

Tannock underlines the need to link climate change to other social justice movements – racism, colonialism and patriarchy, for example (*ibid.*: 252). This is a point that is particularly relevant for university courses that focus on the relationship between language and power. Tannock bases his work on that of well-known, influential advocates of using education for social change: George

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Counts, Paulo Freire and John Dewey. The notion I find most helpful and related to the kind of work I carry out in my course is Freire's "conscientização" or "conscientization", as defined by the Freire Institute it consists in

> The process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action. Action is fundamental because it is the process of changing the reality. Paulo Freire says that we all acquire social myths which have a dominant tendency, and so learning is a critical process which depends upon uncovering real problems and actual needs (Freire Institute 2023).

Freire's approach is a main reference for the epistemology known as "transformative praxis", which

> aligns with reflexive research traditions arising from participatory action research, arts-based research, transformative mixed methods, critical policy research, narrative research, and autoethnographic inquiry, to name but a few. […] The goal of such research methodologies is not only to find answers but to gain insights into processes and outcomes of research and practice through critical and reflective knowledge production (Luitel and Dahal 2020: 1-2).

The dominant neoliberalisation of discourse and of academia affects a pedagogy based on transformative praxis in two parallel ways. On the one hand, as discussed in the introduction, neoliberalisation and marketisation are central causes of the climate crisis. On the other hand, the neoliberalisation of academia, and of education in general, promotes and reinforces policies that value standardization, uniform curricula, and forms of quality measurement that create an ideological environment hostile to social justice education. As observed by Navarro (2018), the reduced possibility to apply transformative praxis in one's work leads to teachers' enduring demoralization, which is understood as burnout. Even if Navarro's case study focuses mainly on secondary schools, I believe his observations can also help us understand the feeling of helplessness we academics sometimes feel when invited to focus on the "soft skills", "working readiness" and "employability" of our students – of course, all Anglicisms in an Italian text (see Caimotto 2019 for a discussion about the relation between Anglicisms and greenwashing).

5. My MA course

I have been teaching this course since the academic year 2021/22. The course has a generic title "Discourse strategies in contemporary English" as I share it with two other colleagues who teach different programmes based on their own research work. We teach different students who are divided depending on their surname initials as part of an MA degree in international relations.

The core book is Stibbe's *Ecolinguistics* (2021), which I integrate with analyses of real texts selected from ongoing events. In 2021 we analysed texts

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from COP26, held in Glasgow, and we focused specifically on Mia Mottley's speech (Caimotto 2022) observing how her use of metaphors and pronouns is particularly effective in the way they convey responsibilities and responses concerning the climate crisis. In 2022 Liz Truss offered a new object of study given the contents of the course, i.e. her speech at the convention of the Conservative Party, with the protests from Greenpeace activists and her views about what she labelled "the anti-growth coalition".

Apart from these more traditional activities, students who attend the course (attendance is not compulsory in Italy, it is possible to take the exam by studying on one's own) are required to perform two tasks. These activities have changed from 2021/22 to 2022/23 and I shall describe only the latest version here. In general, lessons are attended by 30-50 students, English is spoken all the time. Most students are native Italian speakers with a level of English between B2 and C2 and less than five are international students and do not speak Italian.

The two activities consist in a debate competition and in the preparation of a pitch speech. As these activities are quite demanding for the students, I tell them that their results will only be affected positively, i.e. if they do well their results will be improved, but otherwise they will not get a bad mark. The rules of the debate competition are the following: each Wednesday they vote which debate topics will be discussed the following week (one per day, classes are held from Monday to Wednesday and last 2 hours) and they are required to read something and have a general knowledge of the topic. I present a list of topics at the beginning of the course and they can add their own ideas. In 2022/23 the topics were Fast fashion, Meat consumption, Veganism, Active mobility, Marijuana legalization, E-cars, Wind power, Solar power, Nuclear power, Private jets, Low-cost airlines, Fossil fuel subsidies, Vinted website, Euthanasia, Remote work, Gender-inclusive language, Cruises, Wind farms, Z library, Intensive Farming, Cheap train tickets, Soy and Avocado plantations, Just stop Oil protests. Before the lesson starts, two names are drawn randomly and one of the students tosses a coin to decide whether they will be pro or against. Then they have to support their side of the argument. I select them on the spot because the aim of the course is to practise discourse strategies and I want them to interact in a real spontaneous situation, not a debate carefully prepared at home.

I allow them to use denialism, fake information etc. so that their opponent will learn to deal with any kind of argumentation, but they tend not to use that kind of strategy, not in extreme forms at least. They are asked to present their arguments in three minutes, followed by a reply of three minutes, and then each gets a rebuttal of two minutes. I focus their attention on their discourse strategies, for example they often say "I think" when they report scientifically sound facts, not opinions. Another common mistake they make is to present or repeat the opposite argument (maybe the one they really agree with) and then try to deconstruct it. By doing this, of course, they are reinforcing the opponent as they are using their own time to present the views that should be expressed by the other student.

Some of the topics generate a spontaneous debate in class after the competition, and I allow that to happen, drawing clear boundaries between the non-linguistic information and the discourses involved. The students and I share

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information we know as informed citizens or activists, sometimes followed by the sharing of links on the course's e-learning platform.

The pitch speech is prepared at home before their final oral exam. They are asked to identify something they want to change in the world, big or small. Identify an action that can be taken and prepare a three-minute speech in which they illustrate their proposal. They can choose a solution that already exists or invent their own. They are also invited to read Meadows' (1999) paper "places to intervene in a system". While these two activities are still in the realm of discussion rather than actual action, my aim in proposing them is to make the students aware of the actual effects that words and discourse strategies can have.

6. What I have learned from my students

One of the unexpected outcomes of my first oral exams was that a few students spontaneously told me that after the course they had become vegetarian. They revealed this after they had obtained their final mark, hence it was not an endearing strategy to improve their results, but a sincere will to share the effect my work had had on their personal life and on the ecosystems we are part of. I was surprised and their commitment made me further reduce my intake of proteins of animal origin (see also Foer 2019). What surprised me was that they were changing their habits to extents I had not foreseen that went beyond what I was ready to do myself and that I had not meant to promote explicitly and specifically.

If I had been asked to guess which aspect of their everyday life my students would change under my influence, I would have focused on their means of transport, using their cars less and cycling more, but these students showed me, once again, that change is not cause-effect or linear as we would expect. As their new behaviour influenced my own behaviour, this fact probably testifies that change, even if different from what was expected, can prove wider and deeper. I believe this has to do with the fact that, through ecolinguistics and the notion of one's own ecosophy, we discussed and questioned deeply held ethical values and beliefs. That is, Meadows' (1999) deep leverage points.

In each of the two courses I had one student who appeared to be very ill-at-ease with ecolinguistics. Both of them, once they had passed the exam, spontaneously commented that at first the course did not really make sense to them and then gradually they understood and appreciated how it was something completely new and different from anything they had studied or read before.

To verify what the actual perception of my course was, I asked students who had already passed the exam to fill an anonymous questionnaire, with questions in English. All our students are required to answer general questions about the course before they can enrol for the final exam, but for various reasons, those answers do not really help to understand their opinions and improve the course contents the following year. Even if the result of my questionnaire cannot be considered significant from a statistical perspective, I share here a selection of the results and their comments.

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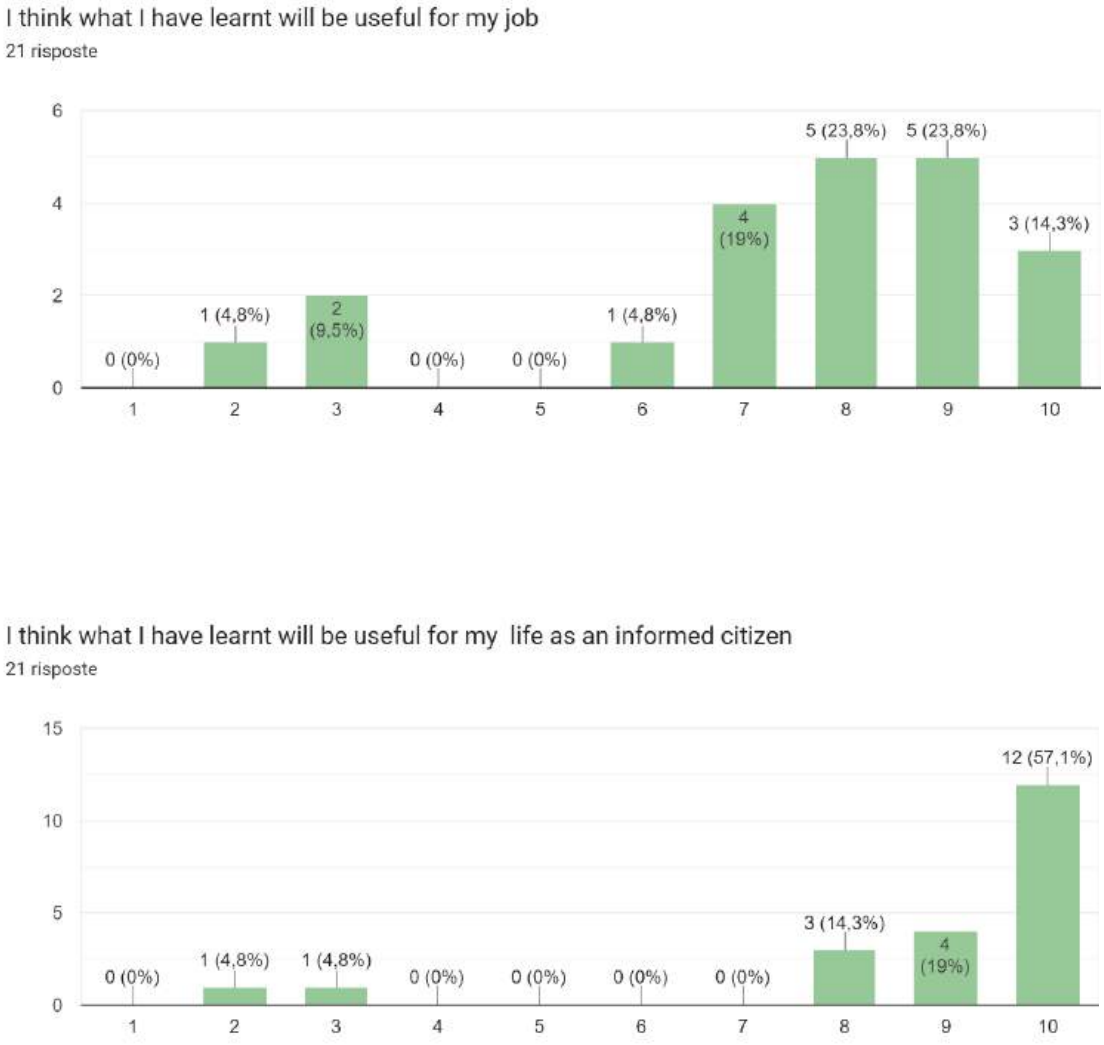

Figure 1. Students' own assessment of the usefulness of the course

These two bar charts taught me two things. Students find my course more relevant to their life as citizens than for their job (or "employability" and "working readiness"), even if their judgement concerning its usefulness in a work environment is not negative. I take this as a confirmation I am doing something useful for them without reinforcing a neoliberal view of academia. The students who were not satisfied and voted only 2 and 3 declared they had not attended the course – a confirmation that attending my course makes a difference but also an aspect I will try to improve for future non-attending students.

In the form, I included non-mandatory empty fields where students could express their views and Table 1 shows the comments I found most relevant to the topics discussed in this paper. The comments are unedited.

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Table 1. Students' comments collected from the non-mandatory open text fields of the anonymous form.

If you want, please share your thoughts on the debates (whether they were useful, too hard, exciting, stressing, challenging...). You can skip this question.
They have been a great opportunity to get more confident with public and debating skills, even if it wasn't easy to sustain a proper position, convince the public it was the good one and preserve it from the attacks of the counterpart. The topics that have been debated are of great concern and this share of ideas and different points of view enriched very much my knowledge about them adding interesting new considerations.
It was stressing, but we, as italians, are not used to take speech in front of a class, especially at the elementary or middle school unlike british or american people. But the idea was really good for me and I think that the fact that we can partecipate in first person to a debate can help ourselves to develop a better coscience about how the world works, as good informed citizen should do.
I really liked the way the debates were introduced, often in the university environment more interactive work is perceived as a negative aspect of a course, but for me they were very stimulating and also personally helped me interact better in other classes and with more awareness.
If you want, please share your thoughts on the pitch speech (whether it was useful, too hard, exciting, stressing, challenging...). You can skip this question.
As for the pitch speech, I must say that I had a lot of fun creating it. At first it was something very new, I didn't know how to approach it and especially what topic was best suited to the course topics. But then I tried not to overthink it and focus, as it was suggested, on simple acts of everyday life that would appeal to our sensibilities. And so it was that in a snowy Turin, I thought of anti-ice salt! So, after talking to anyone about this pitch speech now everyone is informed about the downsides of rock salt :)
If you want, you can add comments, provide details about your answers or share your thoughts.
It has been a very interesting course and personally I attended your lessons with great pleasure. The textbook was easy to understand and a good support to integrate the notes taken in class. With regards to the topics discussed, I think they have been explained and managed very well, providing useful tools and information in order to develop freely our opinion about them. Since the climate crisis is going worst, there should be more academic courses like this one as to raise attention and consciousness about the terrible consequences we will face if we don't act immediately to mitigate the impact of our activities on the planet. Finally, I want to thank you for reporting the project "CLIMI" on climate change and climate migration, that I'm following right now: it is a fascinating workshop!
One last thing I would like to add is your way of lecturing and interacting with the students. Personally, having also attended the bachelor's course, I felt like I experienced the second part during the master's program. In the bachelor's it was the course that opened the door to my first university group work, while now it has

allowed me to interact with more confidence on specific topics. Key memories like not saying "I think" or using the verb to be are still in my mind every time I give a public speech, and so having such a course for this degree program is really important for the work many of us would like to do in the future. And of course, I was amazed that none of us really knew it all about eco-linguistics and that every class was not just for examination purposes, but for critically understanding our human relationships, the world we live in and think about practical changes that we can do on an everyday basis. And although I was already aware of it now I try to practice what we have studied, be more mindful about the environment and buy things only when they are needed and avoid getting too overwhelmed by capitalism. Anyway, thank you for the course, for giving us this opportunity to tell you our thoughts and I wish you a lovely summer too!!
I loved studying for this course because I was unaware of the existence of Ecolinguistics and I learnt new perspectives very useful, interesting and stimulating. I'm grateful to have had this chance because I think it's essential for the evolution of political debate on climate change. E. is able to unveil a lot of the taken for granted in what we heard every day about climate change and environment discourses. Finally, this course is capable to get more aware of the power of language in creating a reality and an imaginary even for things that seem "natural" such as the weather. Of course, it gets a little bit anxious, but I think it's sane and inevitable when it deals with the awareness about issues such as climate change. Indeed, in my case this awareness and findings made me feel stronger and motivated.

7. Closing remarks

The intertextual reference in the title of this essay aims to draw a parallel between the general feeling of anxiety and dread we feel about the climate crisis and the similar feeling people must have felt at the time of the Cold War (Kubrick 1964). It also wants to be tongue-in-cheek as academia corresponds to “the bomb”. But, most of all, it is a way of saying I really love academia and I hope this experimental paper can be a drop in the ocean to promote the change I would like to see both in academia and in society. Instead of closing by repeating the observations that I have made in the various sections, maybe the experimental nature of this work allows me to close with another quotation from another film by other legends of cinema and comedy. Sometimes, comedians are able to tell the simple truth through dark humour in a way that no critical discourse analysis will ever manage to convey as directly and as clearly. It is not competition and productivity that will give meaning to our life, it is being healthy, in touch with one’s environment and community and filling our life with interest.

> Well, that's the end of the film. Now, here's the meaning of life. [thanks the assistant and opens an envelope which reminds of Oscar night] M-hmm. Well, it's nothing very special. Uh, try and be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in, and try and live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations (Jones 1983).

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THE CHIEF HAPPINESS OFFICER IN ACADEMIA: NEW PROFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVES?

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Abstract: Several organisations have recently started to pay more attention to their employees' happiness since they have realized the tight relationship between employees' well-being and productivity. In fact, research studies (Adams 2019; Kossek *et al.* 2014) have demonstrated how staff job satisfaction can be influenced by work-life balance and consequently help increase the profits of organisations. Since the growth of job stress among academics has been endangering their well-being (Bhatia and Mohsin 2020), a few scholars (Bailey and Phillips 2016; Bell *et al.* 2012; Heiden *et al.* 2021) have analysed the link between job pressure stress and health and the negative implications for both the performances of academics and the outcomes of students. In order to fight against the feeling of living in a threatening work context, some universities have begun to promote some initiatives and stress management practices to help their members to cope with increased symptoms of ill-being and psychological distress. As it is becoming increasingly usual that non-academic organisations include in their organigrams a new professional profile, the Chief Happiness Officer (CHO), in order to monitor their employees' well-being, the present paper is intended to be the starting point of a debate on the potential role of the CHO in academia to promote a new academic culture based on happiness, satisfaction and sustainable positivity. In particular, the interest in this new profession raises the question of whether a CHO can actually contribute to improving well-being in academia or whether it can be more beneficial to focus on a "chief happiness officer mentality", rather than a chief happiness officer person.

Keywords: Chief Happiness Officer; Multimodal Discourse Analysis; sustainable happiness at work; well-being in academia.

1. Introduction

1.1. Well-being and happiness at work

In 2015 Oswald *et al.* conducted some research to answer the question "Does happiness make human beings more productive at work?". Through a number of laboratory experiments with more than 700 participants the scholars provided evidence that happy employees work harder. Specifically, by testing young men and women who attended an elite English university, they demonstrated that happiness makes people about 12% more productive.

Until a few years ago companies were more concerned about their employees' safety in the workplace than their well-being. Recently they have started to adopt policies to develop employees' happiness since it has been widely demonstrated (Bell *et al.* 2012; Hoffmann-Burdzińskaa and Rutkowskab 2015) that people's professional well-being is strictly connected to productivity. Adams (2019: 583) underlines that “healthy and happy employees have a better quality of life, a lower risk of disease and injury, increased work productivity, and a greater likelihood of contributing to their communities than employees with poorer well-being”. Other scholars (Adams 2019; Kossek *et al.* 2014) have investigated the importance of physical and psychological health at work and how work-life balance can affect people’s accomplishments and job satisfaction. These studies have, in fact, demonstrated that building a stronger connection between work-life balance, well-being and sustainability can enhance people's performance at work and companies' profits.

In the last decade work-life balance in academia has also been increasingly studied (Bell *et al.* 2012; Kinman 2014), given that job stress increases physical symptoms of ill-being and it has relevant implications for the performances of academics and the outcomes of students. Since the growth of job stress among university members has been endangering their well-being, a few scholars (Bailey and Phillips 2016; Bell *et al.* 2012; Heiden *et al.* 2021) have analysed the link between job pressure stress and health and the negative implications for both academics and students. In order to reduce the sensation of living in a threatening work environment, some universities have begun to promote specific initiatives and stress management practices to help their members to cope with increased symptoms of ill-being and psychological distress.

Organizational strategies for long-term workforce effectiveness such as “promoting sustainable careers, increasing workplace social support, and safeguarding against work intensification” (Kossek *et al.* 2014: 296) seem necessary to help employees to overcome work-life conflict, increase the level of subjective well-being and nurture social benefits.

1.2. The changing academic profession in the Western world

In the past academics were considered privileged people since their job was seen as less stressful compared to other jobs thanks to its stability, flexibility and autonomy. It seemed that these highly respected professionals were protected from stress caused by job insecurity and unpleasant working conditions (Karasek

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and Theorell 1990; Willie and Stecklein 1982). Unfortunately, over the past few years universities have experienced several organisational and structural changes which have had negative consequences on academics' well-being and job performance.

Cuts in public funding and an increase in tuition fees have contributed to the transformation of university policies and the marketisation of education discourse (Fairclough 1993). In order to attract more students universities have started to adopt a market-oriented approach elaborating new student recruitment strategies and communication campaigns. In fact, several linguistic marketing devices are borrowed from the business sector in order to get a wider number of students, who are now considered as "consumers" (Morrish and Sauntson 2013). Consequently, the work for academics has become more demanding and complex:

> Market-led policies encourage regular curriculum design and diverse modes of delivery, requiring a high level of technical expertise and an increasingly skilled classroom performance. Academics are now expected to demonstrate excellence in teaching, research, administration and pastoral care, and frequently through external, entrepreneurial activities (Kinman 2014: 220).

This consumer-oriented approach asks for more efficiency and evidence of research and educational quality. University students' satisfaction is constantly monitored and new mechanisms to measure academics' performance have been introduced. This shift from an educational system based on autonomy and collaboration towards a competitive and managerial one is having a negative impact on the physical and psychological health of academics (Erickson *et al.* 2021; Heller 2022; Teelken 2012).

2. Literature review: Happiness at university

Since the time of the Greek philosophers, happiness has always been considered as the highest goal of human beings. It is something that everyone tries to find throughout life even if it differs from person to person. For Bhatia and Mohsin (2020: 7805) "happiness is essentially a state of subjective psychological well-being in an individual". The term can have several definitions such as "the state of feeling or showing pleasure"[1] and "a state of well-being and contentment"[2], but it is usually described as an emotional state characterized by positive feelings and life satisfaction. Since it is a variously defined concept, in order to avoid its ambiguous meaning, in 1984, psychologist Ed Diener introduced the expression "subjective well-being" (SWB) which focuses on an individual's cognitive and affective evaluation of their life. SWB "is the personal perception and experience of positive and negative emotional responses and global and (domain) specific cognitive evaluations of satisfaction with life" (Proctor 2014: 6437). It is, thus, a notion which varies considerably across cultures and nations and can have

[1] From https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/ (visited 08/03/2024).
[2] From https://www.merriam-webster.com/ (visited 08/03/2024).

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internal and external sources. Traditional factors such as wealth, spiritual life and health are believed to be sources of happiness and some researchers have also suggested that the different phases of a person's development can determine happiness (Abecia *et al.* 2014). Happiness is also seen as something people can develop, pursue and control (Oishi 2012).

Many scholars (Gröpel and Kuhl 2009; Kinman 2014) have conducted theoretical and empirical research in different countries to examine the stressors[3] experienced by academics as the main obstacle to their happiness. Comparative studies on UK academics' working conditions (Kinman 2014) have shown that many factors affect negatively their well-being. In particular, the most common stressors and constraints identified are long working hours, administrative load, pressure to obtain research funding, lack of administrative and technical support in addition to interpersonal conflict, job insecurity and limited opportunities for career progression.

Bhatia and Mohsin (2020) undertook a study between February and March 2020 to examine how teachers in eight higher educational institutions in Delhi faced the challenges due to the coronavirus outbreak. Teachers, who were already under stress because of the rising expectations of the institutions, had to cope with a new threatening situation which constrained and compromised their abilities at work. Starting from the assumption that "happiness is both a process and an outcome" (p. 7805), the scholars identified five factors ("Overall Life Satisfaction", "Quality of Work Life from Home", "Level of positive feeling from Home", "Engagement and meaningful work", and "sense of control") that negatively impact teachers' happiness and work outcomes. These factors fuel anxiety and stress among university teachers compromising their already fragile work-life balance.

Through semi-structured interviews, Bilal and Kinza (2020) investigated the level of happiness of university staff in Pakistan and, even if they define happiness in the same way as defined by western countries, that is life satisfaction, surprisingly the majority of university employees reported being happy.

Other studies (Chan *et al.* 2005; Otaghi *et al.* 2020) have examined university students' happiness. Chan *et al.* (2005) investigated the roles that economic and social factors play in determining students' satisfaction inviting university policy-makers to use the results of their research to develop strategies that can improve the academic learning environment. By using a systematic review and meta-analysis approach, Otaghi *et al.* (2020) demonstrated that happiness and academic achievement are interrelated. The analysis revealed that happiness is an effective factor for improving university students' performance and obtaining better results.

[3] "any event, force, or condition that results in physical or emotional stress. Stressors may be internal or external forces that require adjustment or coping strategies on the part of the affected individual." (*APA Dictionary of Psychology* - https://dictionary.apa.org/stressor (visited 08/03/2024).

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3. Data and scope of the study

In order to engage employees, motivate them and raise performance levels, it is becoming increasingly usual that organisations include in their organigrams a new professional profile, the Chief Happiness Officer (CHO), with the goal to encourage employees' well-being, thereby fostering a healthy, safe, and productive work environment. Given the educational policy trend which encourages universities to compete against one another and act more like private businesses rather than institutions and given the impact of this process of marketisation on academics' well-being, the present paper is intended to be the starting point of a debate on the potential role of the CHO in academia to promote a new academic culture based on happiness, satisfaction and sustainable positivity.

By comparing a small sample of companies' and universities' webpages devoted to this new professional figure, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

- what are the linguistic and visual choices of the organisations to promote this new profession and encourage sustainability?
- Given the commodification of educational discourse, is this new figure already present in the university sector? Has a positive approach to work already entered academia?

In order to answer the aforementioned research questions, I decided to investigate three international organisations' websites which promote the Chief Happiness Officer and three American university websites mentioning this new profession. In particular, for the organisations I took into account the British *The Chief Happiness Officer*[4], which is a consultant firm run by Mandy Baker, a qualified coach and NLP practitioner[5], and her collaborators to help companies master their employees' well-being and reach their potential; the *Chief Happiness Officer Association Limited* (*CHOA*)[6], a non-profitable organisation founded in 2021 with the aim to create a platform which can help companies in Hong Kong to build a happy work environment; and, finally, the *World happiness summit* (*WOHASU*)[7], which is a networking platform with the mission to raise awareness on the benefits of the science of happiness and well-being.

Concerning the university webpages, in October 2023 the study identified the webpages featuring the literal expression *chief happiness officer*, limiting the results to those from university websites, via Google through the search query *"chief happiness officer" site:edu*. Three US universities were taken into consideration: Stetson University (SU)[8], established in 1883, the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UH Mānoa)[9] founded in 1907, and the Texas Christian

[4] The website is available at https://www.thechiefhappinessofficer.co.uk/ (visited 08/03/2024).
[5] The NLP Practitioner is a highly trained professional who uses Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) techniques to help others.
[6] The website is available at https://choassociation.org/ (visited 08/03/2024).
[7] The website is available at https://worldhappinesssummit.com/ (visited 08/03/2024).
[8] The website is available at https://www.stetson.edu/ (visited 08/03/2024).
[9] The website is available at https://manoa.hawaii.edu/ (visited 08/03/2024).

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University (TCU)[10] founded in 1873. Since the present research is a small-scale preliminary study, the first 80 Google results out of 466 were explored. Then, only three US universities' links were taken into account, because I focused on the multimodal webpages which presented the CHO as part of the universities' organigram, excluding all the university pages which only mentioned this profession in articles, reports, comments and brochures.

4. Theoretical framework: Multimodal Discourse Analysis

In this era, more and more often means of communication merge together and intermingle, producing new and sometimes hybrid multimodal texts. It has become obvious that the analysis of verbal language alone is not sufficient anymore (Bezemer and Kress 2008; Jewitt 2002; Lemke 2002). With the spread of new media and the advancement of technology, discourse analysts have started to focus on the semiotic interrelation of modes in contemporary media texts and their peculiar features (Adami 2013, 2015; Burn 2009).

The methodological framework of social semiotics (Hodge and Kress 1988) has been developing for some decades, starting from Visual Grammar (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996/2021) and given definite shape by Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001). Since then, several researchers have been exploring this research field in various contexts, including workplaces, museum exhibitions, online environments, and across a range of genres and technologies (Ravelli 2006; Ravelli and McMurtrie 2016; Zammit and Downes 2002). By drawing on Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday 1973), they demonstrate that a multimodal approach to texts allows new views on the interpretative process of language and communication, since different modes enable different ways of meaning making. As Kress (2000: 157) puts it: "Semiotic modes have different potentials, so that they afford different kinds of possibilities of human expression and engagement with the world". Therefore, the analysis from a multimodal angle is embedded in a broader semiotic frame. Since it is part of a multimodal ensemble, early works have focused on the interplay between words and images (Lemke 1998; Martinec and Salaway 2005). For example, Martinec and van Leeuwen (2008) have focused on the intersemiotic relation in new media texts suggesting that the word-image relations are remade through their reconfiguration in digital media, even though these relations are not completely established. Moreover, the investigation of the interaction between verbal and visual language has confirmed that technological developments have increasingly led images to take center stage (Jewitt 2002, 2008).

Nowadays, technologies allow modes to be configured in different ways and new technologies play a crucial role in how modes are made available and accessed (Jewitt 2008). They can impact on design and text production and on interpretative practices. Several multimodal discourse analysts have, in fact, focused on how different modes are organized on the page or screen of textbooks,

[10] The website is available at https://www.tcu.edu/ (visited 08/03/2024).

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websites and other digital learning resources (Bezemer and Kress 2008; Jones 2005; Norris 2004; O'Halloran and Smith 2011) as well as films, adverts and other new media texts (Baldry 2004; Burn 2009; O'Halloran 2004). Other researchers have investigated more in general the technologization of literacy practices and interaction (Marsh 2005; Unsworth *et al.* 2005). Much of this research examines the dynamics of the interaction between image and writing in narratives, relations between book and computer-based versions of texts, and the role of on-line communities, including hypertexts, which enmesh writing, image and other modes in digital technologies (Lemke 2002; Luke 2003).

Multimodality has gained importance as a methodological approach, since verbal language is not sufficient to understand all the nuances of contemporary communication, in particular the online communicative landscape. A web page cannot create meaning through the use of linguistic features alone, but relies on a combination of verbal, visual, graphic and spatial meaning-making resources. The interdependence of semiotic resources in text is becoming the norm and the shape of discourse communities is changing with the changing shape of texts.

5. Analysis and discussion: Campaigning for the Chief Happiness Officer

It is becoming common that big organisations, such as Apple, Google, and Amazon, include in their organigrams the Chief Happiness Officer (CHO) in order to promote their employees' well-being. Jenn Lim (Delivering Happiness, an offshoot of Zappos), Chade-Meng Tan (Google, actual title: Jolly Good Fellow), Alexander Kjerulf (WooHoo, a Denmark-based consulting company) and Christine Jutard (Kiabi, a French clothing company) are some of the most famous CHOs (*The Guardian*, 26/08/2015)[11].

The role of happiness officer is becoming increasingly high-profile: the first formal position that Prince Harry accepted after stepping down from the royal family was that of chief impact officer at BetterUp, a Silicon Valley startup, to help clients with their "personal development". Then this profession has spread around the world and in France different creative terms are used to name it. "Littéralement, il s'agit d'un 'directeur général du bonheur' parfois renommé feel good manager, 'gardien du bonheur', 'directeur well-being' (Les Echos 2017), 'facilitateur', 'Monsieur Sourire', 'Madame Bonheur', 'créateur de convivialité' ou encore Captain happiness"[12] (Tanquerel and Condor 2020: 8).

The CHO often has skills in psychology, sociology, or human resources and their main function is to improve employees' commitment and ensure a pleasant working atmosphere. It is an innovative profession and a challenge for organisations as it aims at enhancing people's productivity. The CHO, a mixture of communication and human resource manager, has several missions such as

[11] The full article is available at https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/aug/26/chief-happiness-officer-cho-employee-workplace-woohoo-google (visited 08/03/2024).

[12] "Literally, it is a 'directeur général du bonheur' sometimes renamed feel good manager, 'gardien du bonheur', 'directeur well-being' (Les Echos, 2017), 'facilitateur', 'Monsieur Sourire', 'Madame Bonheur', 'créateur de convivialité' or even Captain happiness" (author's translation).

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developing a pleasant working environment, identifying employees' problems and finding solutions, organizing events, offering in-company leisure activities, ensuring new employees' integration, encouraging interpersonal relationships and communication among the employees (Najeh 2019).

More and more organisations offer virtual and in-person courses/workshops, one to one and group training, well-being audits and other services to develop corporate happiness culture focusing on this new professional figure. The three websites under investigation were founded by three women who, in the section "about us", introduce themselves by promoting positive psychology.

Mandy Baker is the founder and CHO of the consultant firm *The Chief Happiness Officer*. In her presentation, as can be seen in extract 1, she uses the persuasive strategy of ethos to appeal to the readership. She conveys her credibility and authority by underling her competences and experience.

Extract 1

> After 20 years running a company with family, I have a comprehensive knowledge of all aspects of business […] as a qualified Coach & NLP Practitioner, I bring a wealth of knowledge & experience to the table.

Moreover, in order to legitimize her job, she explains that she puts into practice the concept of positive corporate culture resulting in better outcomes and profits. Interestingly, even if in the presentation she keeps mentioning her family business to emphasise her competence face (see extract 2), then she infers that the end of her marriage was not a traumatic experience but sharing a 'scrap' of her private life becomes a discursive strategy to convey an image of an independent woman (extract 3).

Extract 2

> Business runs through my blood, my father had his own successful business and I married into an equally successful label printing company.

Extract 3

> After 27 years of marriage - and business partnership! - I decided to go it alone... both in life and business - and here is the result of that decision.

The mixture of formal and informal register ("trust me, we had to check the figures more than once to be sure!") is a way to shorten the distance with the readership, which is visually reinforced by the use of a "demand" and close-up image (see Figure 1).

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Figure 1. Mandy Baker

The founders of the other two websites (*WOHASU* and *CHO Association*), respectively Karen Guggenheim and Mary Suen, are also depicted smilingly in "demand" images, but in long shots (see Figures 2 and 3), suggesting a less intimate relationship.

Figure 2. Karen Guggenheim

Figure 3. Mary Suen

The letter of presentation of Karen Guggenheim is interesting because, even if it contains both exclusive and inclusive "we" pronouns to underline the platform's success thanks to the collaboration of all members, at the end (extract 4) there is a direct address to the audience through the imperative mood and the personal pronoun "you" ("Become an active participant…", "We invite you…"). Such statements are intended to engage readers by simulating informality in the rather formal context of an institutional website. This simulation of intimacy, defined by Fairclough (1989) "synthetic personalization", often appears in promotional texts. The only first person pronoun "I" is in the unusual closing "I choose happiness", which resonates with a product-based advertising slogan. We can therefore say that this text has a double function: the main function of presenting Karen and the more implicit function of promoting the WOHASU happiness movement.

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Extract 4

> *Become an active participant of your life. Instead of letting life happen to you, show up to your life. We invite you to join the WOHASU® happiness movement. I choose happiness.*
> – KAREN GUGGENHEIM
> WOHASU® Founder & CEO

On the contrary, Mary Suen's presentation is in third person making the text more impersonal as it aims at underlining her extensive experiences and beliefs. This more institutionalized text is then followed by Mary Suen's short message (extract 5) which helps make the whole message more personal and informal.

Extract 5

> *These two years have been very challenging. It is uneasy to talk about happiness. The world is constantly changing. We hope the changes can create a new and happier situation for future generations. The establishment of the Chief Happiness Officer Association platform implies innovative methods in the business operation model, with "design happiness" as the value, allowing "people" to release happiness.*
> *Having a happy mindset encourages us to embrace new ideas, appreciate things from different angles, broaden our horizons, and be open to unlimited business opportunities. I am very pleased to see a number of like-minded strategic partners who care about society together while building the "Happy Journey" platform; ultimately everyone can become their own "Chief Happiness Officer".*
> Message From Mary Suen
> Founder and Executive Chairman of the Chief Happiness Officer Association

By examining the academic webpages under investigation it can be noticed that this profession is starting to appear in academia too.

Stetson University (SU) is a college located in central Florida, USA. By browsing the *admissions* section webpage[13], we understand that this university has a peculiar CHO among its staff members. Among the list of undergraduate recruiters, there is Alexis Glenn, director of recruitment, who introduces herself and the CHO (Figures 4 and 5). Surprisingly, the CHO is her dog, Athens-George Glenn, who has been 'hired' to support students during the admissions process.

[13] https://www.stetson.edu/administration/admissions/recruiters/athens-george.php (visited 08/03/2024).

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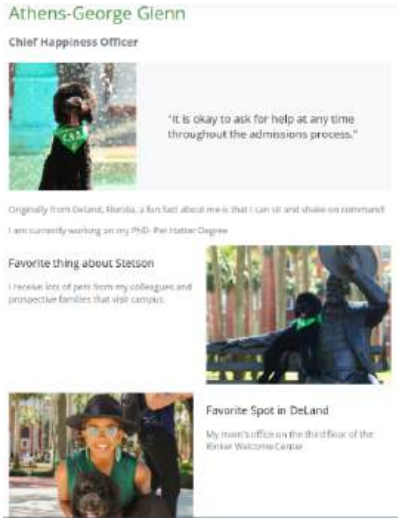

Figure 4. Alexis Glenn's page

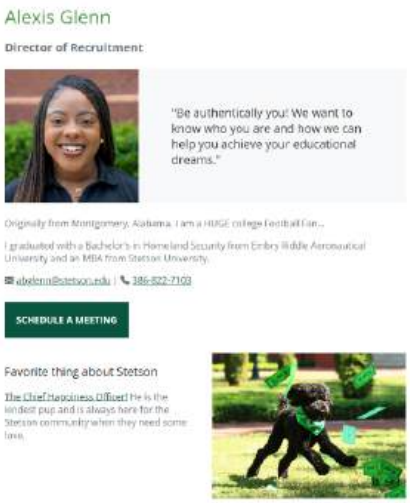

Figure 5. Athens-George Glenn's page

The University of Hawai'i (UH Mānoa) and the Texas Christian University (TCU) include a female CHO in their organigram visually represented in a smiling and welcoming portrait (Figures 6 and 7).

Alice Inoue is a faculty member of the Mini-Medical School on Healthy Aging at the UH Mānoa. She is a CHO and founder of U Happiness, an educational establishment that helps individuals and organisations to develop a positive approach to life. Similarly to the organisations' webpages illustrated above, also on this university website we find a photo of a smiling Alice in medium close shot with a frontal angle looking directly at the viewer. This is an "anchorage" (Barthes 1977) to the text below which briefly describes her job (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Alice Inoue

Figure 7. Jenn Lim

Jenn Lim is one of the speakers of the Center for Connection Culture. The informative text, which is next to the photo, contains several direct and indirect quotations from Lim to make the text more personal. For example, there is her definition of CHO (see extract 6).

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Extract 6

> *A CHO is doing what any CEO does in an organization — putting the people/resources/financing in place to create a sustainable company. The difference between a CEO and a CHO is that a CHO is doing it through the lens of happiness as a business model.*

The attribution brings in another dimension. The whole text acquires a particular tone, which could be described as personal. In addition, the text is full of evaluative expressions ('fearless leader' or 'she focuses so much energy on her speaking engagements today') which emphasise her competence. In order to develop an engagement with readers we also find contracted forms ('What's more', 'she's dedicated') and a very last part titled 'fun facts' (extract 7), which is a list of some of Jenn Lim's humorous statements and acts. This makes the text a clear example of conversationalisation of institutional discourse (Fairclough 1989).

Extract 7

> Fun Facts
> Has a self-proclaimed PhD in parallel parking.
> She cooks once a year (average calculated since birth).
> Summited Mt. Kilimanjaro, and the first thing she did afterwards was drink a bottle of Mt. Kilimanjaro beer. Actually, several bottles.

6. Conclusions

The Chief Happiness Officer is a novel specialized profile which aligns with the *Sustainable Developments Goals Report 2023: Special Edition*[14] and, since new generations long for more responsible and sustainable companies able to implement actions of corporate happiness and positively transform their employees' work culture, it may have consequences for businesses' promotion policies and be relevant for managers and human resources specialists. If happiness in a workplace carries with it a return on productivity, some organisations have started to promote this new hybrid professional figure, by offering courses and services to increase well-being at the individual, community, corporate and civic levels.

The three organisations' webpages under investigation (*The Chief Happiness Officer*, the *CHOA* and the *WHOASU*) show that some verbal and visual discursive features, such as the mixture of formal and informal registers and 'demand' images of smiling people, are recurrent.

Some US universities have started to include this profession in their organigram probably due to the transformation of university policies and the

[14] *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special Edition* is the only UN official report that monitors global progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It is available at https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf (visited 08/03/2024).

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commodification of educational discourse. The analysis of the university webpages (SU, UH Mānoa and TCH) reveals that this new figure is described by a combination of multimodal strategies similar to those adopted by the organisations.

Given that universities' market-led policies are having damaging consequences on the well-being of the academic community, the present preliminary study hopes to encourage discussion around the potential of the CHO in academia to foster an academic culture geared towards sustainable happiness. Moreover, further studies, both theoretical and empirical, are required to verify whether this figure can really help manage the new challenges of academia. In particular, the interest in this new profession raises the question of whether a CHO can actually contribute to improving well-being in academia and fight a toxic culture or whether it might be more beneficial to focus on a "chief happiness officer mentality", rather than a chief happiness officer person.

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THE MINDFULNESS FRAMEWORK IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND WHAT ACADEMICS (SHOULD) CARE FOR

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Abstract: Mindfulness, or the "mental state or attitude in which one focuses one's awareness on the present moment" (Oxford English Dictionary 2023), has often been advocated as an excellent instrument in schools to develop the students' learning potential and their ability to make sense of an increasingly complex society. However, relatively few studies have applied a mindfulness approach to the hectic working lives of academics and presented it as a way out of the stressful demands of management-driven quality parameters. The present study intends to explore the role played by a mindfulness approach in higher education to help academics cope with stressful work conditions and also enhance their focus, skills and sense of worth. On the basis of the quantitative and qualitative analysis of a sample of British universities web pages, the meanings and implications of mindfulness in diverse academic contexts are investigated and conclusions are drawn in light of the managerial university agenda and the overwhelming ethos of academic productivity at all costs.

Keywords: academia; British universities; discourse analysis; mindfulness; web pages; well-being.

1. Introduction

"Universities are places like no other workplaces" (Fanghanel 2012: 2) and working in higher education has always represented a prestigious (if not privileged) way of earning one's living, by carrying out research, sharing and disseminating new ideas in classrooms and lecture halls, developing skills and advancing knowledge. Glamorous as it may appear, "it is also a place of exploitation, inequalities, inaccessibility, precarity, prejudice and abuse" (Boynton 2021: 9). The significant changes brought about by the neoliberal agenda have taken their toll on academia and resulted in endless assessment schemes on academic performance and productivity, hectic working hours, and a lurking sense of disempowerment due to the fracture between the leading principles of academic enquiry and the current requirements based on standards of "quality" aligning with a managerial and profit-driven agenda (Smith and Ulus 2020). Scholars have exposed the risks associated with the transfer of managerial practices to the university system and some have also advocated forms of discursive resistance such as public demonstrations and the open critique of quality assurance mechanisms in academia (Anderson 2008; Gill and Donahue 2016; see Caimotto and Zollo in this dossier for alternative responses to the managerial university agenda).

Faced with the pressure of productivity at all costs (even the cost of rushing research findings for a faster publication rate) and the additional burden of administrative duties, academics risk losing clarity of thinking and may show worrying symptoms of alienation and burnout. As a response to growing levels of stress, the value of self-care and mindfulness as a daily practice can be seen to restore the calm thinking and deep sense of belonging that ensure quality teaching and research for busy academics. Mindfulness has often been advocated as an excellent instrument in schools to develop the students' learning potential and their ability to make sense of the increasingly complex society in which we are living (De Simone 2016; Langer and Moldoveanu 2000 among many others), but relatively few studies have explored its potential for university teachers and researchers (see Emerson *et al.* 2017; Lemon and McDonough 2018).

This paper sets out to review the mindfulness discourses in British universities and explore the manifest and implicit meanings associated with this practice increasingly spreading in educational settings. A sample of university web pages focused on a wide range of mindfulness-related events and resources has been analysed to answer my main research questions: 1. what does mindfulness in academia refer to exactly? and 2. to what extent can a mindfulness approach be regarded as beneficial and empowering by hard-pressed academics?

After introducing the concept of mindfulness and how it has evolved from its Buddhist roots into a popular therapeutic treatment in the Western world, I analyse the web pages' main themes and top-frequency words, with particular regard to verbal processes and noun phrases. On the basis of the most recurrent language patterns, attention is focused on two forms of classification, definitions and naming (Hodge and Kress 1993), as well as on the verbal processes, which shed light on agency and the dynamics of empowerment and control at university

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(i.e., what mindfulness training is supposed to do and what role is played by university staff). The conclusions draw attention to the multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings attached to mindfulness at university and problematize its beneficial value in light of the current trend towards academic entrepreneurship (see Siegel and Wright 2015).

2. Views of mindfulness

The two definitions of mindfulness provided by the Oxford English Dictionary testify to the semantic evolution of this word from its first meaning dating back to 1538, "The quality or state of being conscious or aware of something; attention" to its modern sense first recorded in 1889 and testifying to the British discovery of Buddhism and mindfulness as one of its leading principles:

> A mental state or attitude in which one focuses one's awareness on the present moment while also being conscious of, and attentive to, this awareness. Also: the cultivation and practice of this, esp. as a therapeutic technique. […] Frequently and originally with reference to Yoga philosophy and Buddhism […], but from the late 20th cent. increasingly taught and practised outside these contexts as a formal discipline, often involving meditation with a focus on, or acknowledgement of, one's emotions, thoughts, and bodily sensations (Oxford English Dictionary 2023).

Buddhism was introduced to Great Britain, and the Western world at large by Thomas William Rhys Davids (1843-1922), a distinguished scholar and founder of the Pali Text Society (see Ridding and Maung Tin 1923 for a thorough review of the early studies of Pali and Buddhist sacred texts in Europe). Because Buddhist ethics with its asceticism and all-encompassing benevolence appeared out of touch with individualistic and profit-driven Western societies, its influence was gradual and initially limited to circles of open-minded thinkers captivated by the idea of universal harmony, spiritual enlightenment and human oneness in nature (Cook 2021).

The shift from the religious-philosophical framework to a scientific paradigm took place relatively recently in the nineties, due to the remarkable success of the mindfulness-based stress reduction programme used by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center to treat people showing severe chronic pain, anxiety and depression (Kabat-Zinn 1982; Kabat-Zinn *et al.* 1985). By documenting the positive results of mindfulness and meditation on his patients, and especially by deliberately removing references to the philosophical and ethical aspects of its Buddhist roots, Kabat-Zinn made it possible for this programme to be regarded as an unconventional but well-founded expression of the scientific approach, endorsed by other medical centres and investigated in a remarkably high number of research articles[1] (Booth 2017; Brazier 2018; Stanley, *et al.* 2018). In this scientific reframing, mindfulness was increasingly

[1] My search of the Scopus database from 1916 to 2023 has retrieved almost 30,000 mindfulness-related publications, the vast majority of which are concentrated in the last decade (precisely 25,592 from 2013 to 2023).

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associated with "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment"[2] (Kabat-Zinn 2003: 145).

In line with the advance of marketization in a commodity-driven society, mindfulness has been further adapted from a healing practice for mentally ill patients into a self-help technique for people wishing to restore their balance and peace of mind, thanks to free or paid apps such as Buddhify[3]. The commodification of this complex construct that blends religious, philosophical and scientific threads has been severely criticised as a form of cultural imperialism, disrupting and contaminating Buddhist meditation into a McMindfulness scenario (Hyland 2015; Purser and Loy 2013). For this reason, it seems all the more important to consider the original meaning of mindfulness in its Buddhist roots, also bearing in mind the complexity of this concept and the different interpretations given across different domains[4] (Nisson and Kazemi 2016).

Although mindfulness is central in Buddha's teachings as one of the doorways to enlightenment, it is not defined explicitly but only through the description of its virtuous manifestations (Gethin 2015). According to the early collections of Buddha's discourses, right mindfulness is defined as the tranquil observation and contemplation of human life within a frame of mind liberated from greed, delusion and sorrow:

> And what, monks, is right mindfulness? Here, a monk dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. He dwells contemplating feelings in feelings... contemplating mind in mind… contemplating phenomena in phenomena, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. This is called right mindfulness (cit. in Bodhi 2011: 20).

Becoming aware of the insubstantiality and subjectivity of human knowledge, choosing to focus on what is fundamental (as opposed to what is ephemeral), and directing one's attention with equanimity to what is really worth is the essence of mindfulness, a continuous state rather than a fleeting moment, as essential and natural for humans as breathing: "The aim is surely not simply the ability to pay attention; attention is a means to learning, and the Buddha is looking for such learning as it becomes part of one’s blood and bones" (Brazier 2018: 62).

[2] It seems worth pointing out that definitions of mindfulness often vary depending on their functions and contexts. For example, John Kabat-Zinn (2019: 10) has also pointed to meditation as one of its essential elements: "mindfulness is not merely a good idea, or a nice philosophy, belief system, or catechism. It is a rigorous universally applicable meditation practice — universal because awareness itself could be seen as the final common pathway of our humanity, across all cultures."

[3] See Stanley *et al.* 2018 for an insightful, multifaceted account of the ethical foundations of mindfulness coupled with an extensive review of how the mindfulness movement in the Western world has betrayed its Buddhist roots and hollowed out its layers of meanings.

[4] See Williams and Kabat-Zinn (2011) for an overview of the major developments of mindfulness applications across different domains since the late 1990s.

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The contrast between the therapeutic adaptation of mindfulness and its original meaning within the Buddhist pathway is conveyed by the current labels of utilitarian vs. ethical mindfulness (Brazier 2018), and has originated a heated debate touching on the very essence of human identity torn between religion and secularism (Arat 2017). Even more interestingly, the debate on the ethical foundation of mindfulness has drawn attention to a further consequence of the current neoliberal agenda and its emphasis on subjectivity and individual responsibility (Türken 2017). In line with studies on the current ideology of social welfare and personhood (Gershon 2011; Gill 2008; Nafstad *et al.* 2007), it can be argued that the emphasis on personal mindfulness and the pursuit of one's own well-being also contributes to reducing political responsibility for the rampant distress in our societies by selling the story that people can manage to find the solution to severe systemic problems through an act of meditation (see Cook 2016; Davies 2015; Gill and Donahue 2016).

2.1. Great Britain as a "mindful nation"

Today the mindfulness movement is a global phenomenon rapidly spreading in Europe, the United States and Australia, but British society has proved sensitive to the appeal of mindfulness and meditation since the Victorian age and its discovery of Eastern civilizations, which resulted in the close interdisciplinary dialogue between psychology, philosophy and Buddhism (Cook 2021). It seems noteworthy that mindfulness is officially acknowledged and endorsed by the British Government through The Mindfulness Initiative[5] and the Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group that was set up in 2014 in order to**:**

- review the scientific evidence and current best practice in mindfulness training
- develop policy recommendations for government, based on these findings
- provide a forum for discussion in Parliament for the role of mindfulness and its implementation in public policy (Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group, 2015).

Mindfulness has entered all areas of British society, from education to the national health service, from the criminal justice system to the workplace, in line with the key principles of a mindfulness-based agenda presented in the manifesto, *UK Mindful Nation* (Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group 2015). The application of mindfulness in everyday life is wide-ranging and ever-growing as demonstrated by the wealth of resources available showcased on the British government website as well as blogs[6] and popular publications suggesting practical activities to combat stress and anxiety (e.g. Barnes 2023; Hennessey 2016). Despite a few cautious appraisals of its benefits – for example, at school where students may feel bored by a compulsory exercise in meditation (Weale

[5] The significant impact of mindfulness-related projects in the UK can be appreciated in the regular updates on the official website http://www.themindfulnessinitiative.org/ (visited 15/01/2024).
[6] See https://www.gov.uk/guidance/wellbeing (visited 30/09/2023) and https://www.everyday-mindfulness.org/ (visited 30/09/2023).

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2022) – mindfulness practice is generally presented as beneficial to everybody and in all kinds of environments, including the conflict-ridden political arena (Legget 2022; Simonsson of which 2023).

3. Materials and method

Since the Internet revolution, universities have increasingly relied on online media to establish their credentials and advertise their non-material goods: their web pages providing updated information to the public at large make their values and identity visible to all (Caiazzo 2013). In fact, web pages play an increasingly significant role in the decision-making process of potential students (Saichaie and Morphew 2014). Moreover, the university picture they convey appears to be comprehensive, up-to-date and reliable, and apt to be investigated through discourse analysis tools (Mautner 2005; Nasti *et al.* 2017) as an expression of institutional discourse and identity (Biber 2006).

The present study is based on the analysis of a sample of British university web pages featuring the word "mindfulness" in their titles and retrieved through an advanced Google search where the search query, "mindfulness", was limited to the academic domain, ac.uk, and to one year, from June 2022 to June 2023, in order to gather the most recent web pages. The URLs for the selected web pages were then used to build up a corpus through Sketch Engine, a software application for corpus building and text analysis[7] (Kilgariff *et al.* 2014). Although the corpus is small (based on 143 web pages of 52 universities for a total of 92,032 words), it can be considered a fair sample of the British universities most active in promoting mindfulness courses, and a good starting point for future research. Only a thorough examination of all UK university websites can uncover the extent to which mindfulness training is currently used to promote well-being in British universities.[8]

The quantitative analysis of the British university web pages has then been related to a much larger corpus, the English web corpus EnTenTen21[9], and integrated with the case study of a web page advertising mindfulness courses for students and staff at the University of Edinburgh. The quantitative and the qualitative analysis are both informed by a critical discourse analysis framework that regards language choices as reflective of the "orders of discourse" (Fairclough 1989: 28) and possibly revealing of ideological meanings and hidden agendas in communicative acts, whatever their setting, genre and goal (Hodge and Kress 1993). The analysis draws on the distinction between actionals, i.e., verbs of doing, and relationals, i.e., verbs establishing relations between nouns and other nouns or attributes. Other forms of classification such as definitions (e.g., "mindfulness is") and naming (e.g., "mindfulness chaplains" vs.

[7] http://www.sketchengine.eu (visited 08/03/2024).
[8] This simple follow-up step may hide an unexpected difficulty considering that the definition of a university in the UK is not straightforward and there may be a different count of British universities (108, 138 or 162) depending on the definition adopted (Tight 2011).
[9] enTenTen21 is an English corpus of texts collected from the Internet between October 2021 and January 2022 (52 billion words) and available for analysis through Sketch Engine.

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"mindfulness practitioners") have also been analysed to check a) the explicit and implicit meanings associated with the mindfulness training practiced in university settings and b) the socio-professional identities of the people working with mindfulness as a field of study or as a healing practice.

3.1. An overview of the web pages

The web pages retrieved differ widely with regard to the role of mindfulness in academia, whether as part of the teaching (e.g., degree programmes; curricular courses for undergraduates and postgraduates), research (press releases; funded projects; publication synopses) or services (resources; training for staff and students; public events). As can be seen in Figure 1, the majority of the web pages (n. 71 exactly) feature mindfulness-related resources, meant for the general public (n. 44), explicitly directed at students (n. 22) or staff (n. 5). Research is also well represented with almost one-third of the total number of web pages focused on projects, experimental studies, and research findings. A smaller section of the corpus is about the curricular courses and degree programmes (n. 23), whose details (school or department; credits; duration; learning outcomes; assessment etc.) give an idea of the variety of mindfulness-related studies in UK universities. The different topics also account for the varying length of the web pages, ranging from the abstract of a research project (163 words) to the prospectus of a mindfulness-related degree course packed with information (4,692 words). Regardless of their different topics and length, all the web pages have an informative and promotional function (Garzone 2019; Santini 2007), and typically foreground some attractive features of the university.

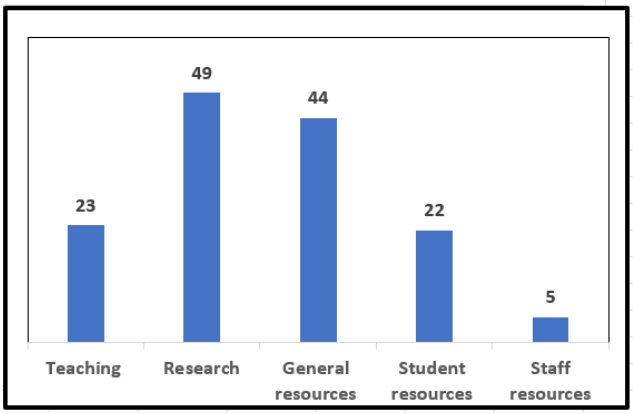

Figure 1. The number of mindfulness-related web pages according to their main themes.

The many functions associated with mindfulness across the university web pages analysed are a valuable indicator of its significant presence and diversified positioning in higher education, cutting across medicine, health, spirituality, education and work management. The general resources appear wide-ranging, as they include fact sheets on the history and benefits of mindfulness; invitations to public events open to all; students' or staff's blog entries on their mindfulness experiences; suggested breathing and meditation exercises made available as podcasts or videos. Additionally, other resources such as practical mindfulness

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sessions are specifically tailored to students (n. 22) and, to a lesser extent, to staff (n. 5), in line with a university model as a client-oriented business where the pervasive concern for students' academic (under)performance can often come very close to a form of "customer care" (Scott 1999).

4. Quantitative analysis

Not surprisingly, the most frequent lexical item in the corpus is *mindfulness* followed, at a great distance, by *course*, *practice* and *research*, which point to the three most relevant dimensions of mindfulness at university: educational (*course*); health-oriented (*practice*) and epistemological (*research*). It also seems noteworthy that the large majority of the 30 highest-frequency words are grammatical. In particular, many of the items in Table 1 – *you, that, this, your, we, our* – have an indexical value as they refer to the here and now of face-to-face communication, typical of many web pages with their conversational style and also in line with the mindful focus on "the present moment".

Table 1. The top 30 words with their absolute and relative frequencies.

Rank	Word	Frequency	Frequency per Thousand
1	the	4,060	44,12
2	and	3,668	39,86
3	to	3,06o	33,25
4	of	2,758	29,97
5	a	1,883	20,46
6	in	1,785	19,40
7	mindfulness	1,716	18,65
8	is	1,064	11,56
9	for	1,037	11,27
10	you	1,033	11,22
11	that	794	8,63
12	with	764	8,30
13	this	762	8,28
14	on	700	7,61
15	as	689	7,49
16	are	654	7,11
17	be	610	6,63
18	your	608	6,61

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19	it	594	6,45
20	we	575	6,25
21	or	530	5,76
22	can	518	5,63
23	our	459	4,99
24	at	438	4,76
25	by	419	4,55
26	course	419	4,55
27	will	404	4,39
28	practice	369	4,01
29	from	356	3,87
30	research	355	3,86

4.1. Verbal processes

Thanks to the Sketch Engine corpus query tool, it was possible to retrieve all the occurrences where *mindfulness* is either the subject or the object of the sentence, and examine its typical verbal processes. As shown in the examples below[10], *mindfulness* has a highly positive semantic prosody; in other words, the favourable connotations of *mindfulness* extend to the verbal processes associated with it:

- mindfulness *appears* to be better than doing nothing for improving our mental health
- mindfulness *becomes* a shared social practice in an organization
- mindfulness *has* high levels of acceptability among teachers and students
- mindfulness *helps* us tune into ourselves
- mindfulness *improves* the mental resilience of teenagers
- mindfulness *increases* prosocial behaviour
- mindfulness *involves* being present
- mindfulness *is* better than other feel-good practices
- mindfulness *reduces* anxiety, depression and stress
- how mindfulness *works*.

[10] Only the verbs with at least three co-occurrences with *mindfulness* as subject were included in this list. The salient words in these examples and the following ones are shown in italics.

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Table 2. Frequency of *Mindfulness + Verb*[11]

MINDFULNESS + VERB	Frequency
Mindfulness is	100
Mindfulness helps	52
Mindfulness improves	16
Mindfulness works	11
Mindfulness reduces	10
Mindfulness has	9
Mindfulness becomes	7
Mindfulness involves	7

The most frequent verb associated with *mindfulness* is the linking verb *be* with the effect that *mindfulness* is characterized according to its properties rather than what it does. In fact, one of the most interesting patterns retrieved in the corpus is the definitional one, "mindfulness is …." with a variety of definitions couched in medical, spiritual or sociological terminology:

1. Mindfulness is *a state of being* that is cultivated through regular practice and guidance
2. Mindfulness is *the awareness* that emerges through paying attention on purpose in the present moment.
3. Mindfulness is an *integrative, mind-body based approach* that helps people to manage their thoughts and feelings.
4. Mindfulness is *a technique* with Buddhist origins which develops self-awareness by focusing on your body and actions at the present moment.
5. Mindfulness is a *non-religious mental exercise* that you can carry to every part of your life.
6. Mindfulness is *a simple and powerful practice* of training our attention.
7. Mindfulness is *the practice* of noticing your experience of the present moment with full awareness.
8. Mindfulness is *a secular practice* that help us to - be present in each moment - give attention to our thoughts, feelings and sensations - learn to work gently and positively with our self-critical voice.
9. Mindfulness is a *skill* that can be learnt and practised.
10. Mindfulness is the *basic human ability* to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us.
11. Mindfulness is an *innate capacity of the mind* to be aware of the present moment in a non-judgemental way.
12. Mindfulness is an *evidence-based, secular and effective means* of alleviating stress, anxiety and depression, and promoting well-being, flourishing, and resilience.

[11] It can be interesting to note how the most recurrent patterns are distributed in the corpus: "mindfulness is" and "mindfuness helps" occur across 22 universities and "mindfulness improves" across four universities.

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13. Mindfulness is *a type of meditation* in which you focus on being purposefully aware of what you're sensing and feeling moment-by-moment, whilst bringing an attitude of kindness and curiosity to what you notice.

The definitions provided across the web pages foreground different aspects that may, to some extent, be in contrast with each other: a state; an approach; a technique; a practice; a skill; an ability/ capacity; a tool; a type of meditation. Some emphasize the dedication required by this practice/exercise/technique (definitions 1, 5, 6, 7, 9); some highlight its beneficial effects in terms of (self-) awareness, inner harmony and positive thinking (definitions 2, 3, 4, 8, 12, 13); others present mindfulness as something natural and intrinsic to human nature (definitions 10 and 11). Other controversial aspects emerging from these definitions concern the secular-religious polarity (definitions 5, 8, 12 vs. definition 4 which alone acknowledges the Buddhist tradition); and the fleeting moment vs. ongoing state dichotomy, which is still a divisive issue in Buddhist scholarship (definitions 2, 4, 7, 11 vs. definition 1). Even from this survey of popular definitions addressing the Internet audience, it is easy to infer the complexity of this concept, as it has evolved from its ancient Eastern roots and the eightfold Buddhist pathway into the perfect solution to the stress and anxiety plaguing the modern way of life. As stated by Bhikkhu Bodhi (2011: 22), "The word 'mindfulness' is itself so vague and elastic that it serves almost as a cypher into which we can read virtually anything we want."

When mindfulness is the object in the sentence, the mindfulness-driven actions project a positive aura in a variety of contexts; from the educational setting to the hustle and bustle of daily life and the workplace, the positive effects of mindfulness and its simple procedural steps are repeatedly foregrounded:

- *Apply* mindfulness to address stress and anxiety in an educational setting.
- you will learn ways to *bring* mindfulness & awareness into the everyday activities of life.
- Through *cultivating* mindfulness, the Exeter Mindfulness Centre has the intention to reduce human suffering, promote well-being and create the conditions in which people can flourish.
- The universities of Oxford and Exeter are assessing how best to train teachers to *deliver* mindfulness to their students
- And we often *explain* mindfulness by describing its opposite: mindlessness.
- Come together with colleagues from across the University and *explore* mindfulness in the workplace.
- The universal processes that we all cultivate as we practice and *integrate* mindfulness within our lives are awareness and compassion
- You can *practice* mindfulness anywhere - on your own, through group sessions or one-to-one.
- As well as *studying* mindfulness, you'll also practice it.
- This eight-week course *teaches* mindfulness to help you manage stress, low mood and other challenges
- To date, businesses *use* mindfulness to improve productivity, and for better mental health

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It also seems worth noting that all the verbal processes, whatever their situational contexts (daily life; university; workplace), relate to the semantic field of education, even when the web pages feature mindfulness as a resource for increasing profit: verbs such as *apply, bring, cultivate, explain, explore, integrate, practice, study teach* connote the growth mindset typical of healthy educational settings while only some of them (e.g., *deliver; use*) are also loaded with utilitarian connotations. This finding seems in line with the ambivalent status of *mindfulness*, regarded either as an end in itself or as an instrument to achieve something else (well-being, success, profit etc.).

The verbal processes are mostly associated with the deictics *we* and *you*, referring respectively to the university staff and the mindfulness recruits, as can be inferred from the extended cotext. The use of these dialogic pronouns levels out the differences in role between university staff and students and make both groups appear equal in their concrete effort to improve their own and others' well-being through mindfulness:

> - At Sussex Mindfulness Centre we aim to improve wellbeing through mindfulness. We bring together mindfulness practice, research and training.
> - You will consider how mindfulness informed approaches to well-being might enhance personal, organisational and wider community ways of being in the 21st Century.

4.2. Noun phrases

A look at the modifiers of *mindfulness* shows new interesting professional figures (Table 3), besides more conventional ones featuring the word "professor" (for example, Professor of Mindfulness and Psychological Science). Compared to the masters of Buddhism, interested in developing wisdom and compassion in their followers, the mindfulness professionals working at university have a variety of backgrounds, competences and agendas, as can be inferred from the examples below:

> - If you wish to discuss whether the course is suitable for you currently, please contact the *Mindfulness Chaplain*
> - Guided by *mindfulness experts*, you'll use reflective journaling throughout this course
> - We aim to run courses frequently throughout the year - led by trained clinical psychologists and *mindfulness instructors*
> - The course offers an opportunity for in-depth learning and aims to foster a community of *mindfulness practitioners and teachers* with the expertise to deliver high-quality MBCT [Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy] in a variety of settings, including healthcare, education, criminal justice, government, and others
> - You can choose from "on demand" videos, to show yourself, or book a live session from one of our *Mindfulness Trainers*.

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Besides the *experts*, a vague and all-encompassing category identified by their procedural and theoretical knowledge, the majority of mindfulness professionals are teachers, trainers, instructors and practitioners, half-way between health care and education (Woods 2009). Given the association of *chaplain* with Christian worship, it seems worth noticing the surprising collocation *mindfulness chaplain*, which seems to point to a more inclusive view of religion, as emphasized in the banner of the university of Edinburgh website: "Multi-faith and belief chaplaincy, for all faiths and none".

Table 3. Frequency of the noun phrases denoting mindfulness professionals.

Noun phrase		Frequency
MINDFULNESS	chaplain	6
	experts	2
	instructor(s)	3
	practitioner(s)	12
	teacher(s)	28
	trainer(s)	3

4.3. Naming

In contrast to the vast array of resources tailored for students, the resources meant for staff are few and far between, as noted in section 3. This partiality for students' well-being can be easily explained as part and parcel of the university system where students are the principal targets of educational activities and services. Nevertheless, it seems perplexing that only a few universities explicitly offer well-being and mindfulness services also to staff when the concern over the alarming levels of stress at university is widespread and exposed by media (Morrish 2017 and 2019). If the way of classifying people and objects is a strong indicator of ideology, naming people working at university *staff* or *employees* rather than *academics, scholars* or *researchers* may belittle their specialized knowledge and expertise and ultimately equate them with the workforce of any company or profit-oriented business (see Grego on this dossier for some case studies of university employees' well-being). In fact, it seems worth noticing that the people working at university are mostly referred to by the generic word *staff* unless their research work is mentioned and in this case they are called *researchers*. Thus, a problematic incongruity can be perceived when people working at university are named: they are generically indicated as *staff* with reference to their teaching but they are called *researchers* when their publications are mentioned. Yet, for academic staff teaching and researching are (or should be) two sides of the same coin:[12]

[12] See Dandridge 2023 for a clear-sighted account of the increasing separation of teaching and research activities in the UK higher education sector due to financial and policy pressures on universities.

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> University staff will guide you through six course modules with recordings of lectures and guided practices. You can engage with these at your own pace.
>
> The researchers concluded that more research is needed but these initial findings suggest that mindfulness training had helped students at Bristol reduce anxiety, excessive worry, negative thought patterns.

Table 4. Frequency of the lexical items denoting the people working at university.

Lexical items	Frequency
Academics	6
Academic staff	2
Employees	9
Researchers	69
Staff	67

4.4. Mindfulness in the web corpus enTenTen21

As shown in Table 5, the verbs collocating with *mindfulness* in the general enTenTen21 corpus have positive connotations and suggest a developmental process: *allow, cultivate, develop, enable, exercise, help, improve, integrate practice, teach*. Even the ambivalent collocate *pay* turns out to have a positive meaning as it is systematically followed by *attention* as in the following concordances:

> - Mindfulness is about paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and without judging
> - True mindfulness is paying attention to the moment, the way your breath feels and the way your thoughts sound
> - The art of mindfulness is paying attention to your reality in this moment in the right way

The developmental and self-empowering process associated with the verbs is further reinforced by the predicative adjectives such as *beneficial, effective, essential, helpful, important key, simple, useful,* etc. (see Figure 2). Even the adjective *difficult*, whose connotations may be less positive compared to the other collocates, points to the challenge as well as the rewards represented by mindfulness training:

> - the reason mindfulness is difficult is that we have a habit of avoidance
> - Mindfulness is difficult to swiftly summarise, but in the long-term, it improves self-understanding
> - There's no need to make mindfulness difficult, uncomfortable or woo-woo.
> - Mindfulness isn't difficult to learn. It just requires us to suspend skepticism and decide to make this tool a part of our life
> - mindfulness is difficult because we're wired to be on auto-pilot

Thus, despite the critique of the Western version of mindfulness (or "McMindfulness") briefly illustrated in the introductory sections, the top

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collocates of *mindfulness* in the general web corpus suggest that the common perception of this practice, therapy or way of life is generally positive.

Table 5. Verbs collocating with "mindfulness" as subject and object in enTenten21.

Verbs with "mindfulness" as subject	**Verbs with "mindfulness" as object**
help	practice
become	base
exercise	use
mean	teach
allow	bring
involve	practise
teach	develop
bring	cultivate
reduce	incorporate
improve	integrate
pay	increase
encourage	promote

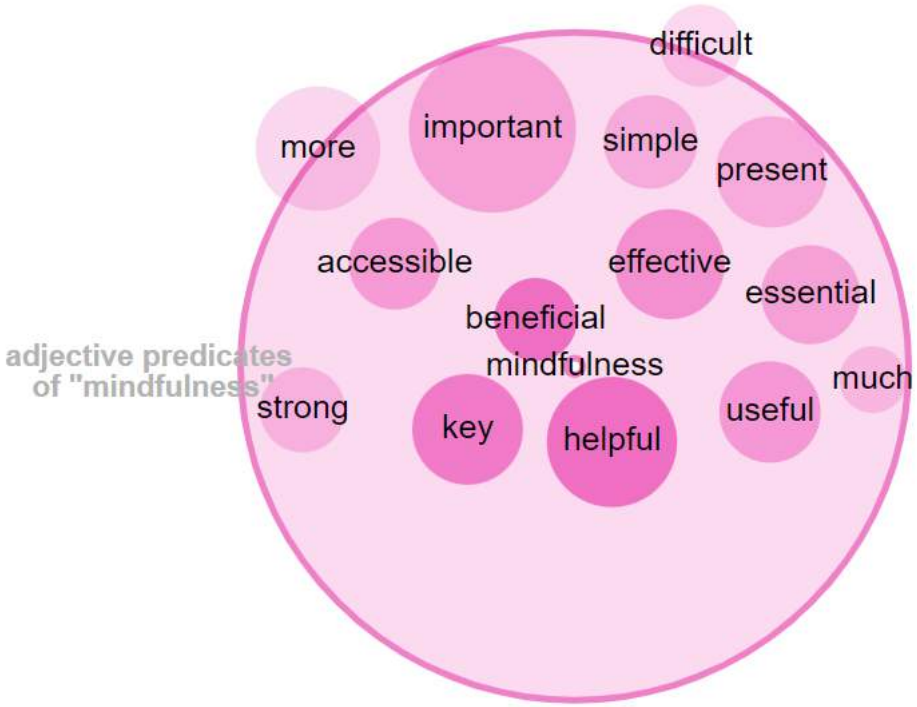

Figure 2. Word sketch of the adjective predicates of *mindfulness* in enTenten21.

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5. A case study: Mindfulness courses at the University of Edinburgh

The quantitative data have been related to the qualitative findings gathered through the analysis of the mindfulness web pages at the University of Edinburgh. As mentioned in the introduction, few university web pages focus on the well-being of academics (only 5 in this corpus). The University of Edinburgh was selected as a case study for its combined effort to cater to the students' and the staff's well-being within a spiritual framework.

The mindfulness courses at the University of Edinburgh are hosted in the section "Multi-faith and belief chaplaincy, for all faiths and none", pointing to a close link between spiritual and physical well-being. Two separate courses, one for students and one for staff and postgraduates, are advertised within the same web page. Although they are distinct, they use the same textual structure and almost the same language. Interestingly, the title of the course for staff and postgraduates differs from the course for students as it also includes compassion: "Mindfulness and Compassion Course for Staff and PGRs." Another substantial difference concerns the amount of the suggested donation, which is 35£ for students and 75£ for staff and postgraduate students, including the cost of the coursebook.

Underneath the details (location, starting date, timetable, course duration, suggested donation) and a brief introduction to the course, a dialogic text revolving around four open-ended questions in bold (reminiscent of frequently asked questions) foregrounds the main pieces of information from the perspective of a potential participant:

> What will I learn?
> How much time will I need to commit?
> What do previous participants say?
> Is this the right course and/or the right time for me to attend?

The use of the first-person pronoun makes this simulated dialogue more confidential and self-focused as if the participant had already started paying attention to their thoughts and doubts, in line with the mindfulness principles. The answers provided by a discreet but knowledgeable teacher reinstate the traditional dialogic structure between *you* and *we*:

> **What will I learn?**
> Mindfulness and compassion training consists of formal and informal practices, cognitive exercises, and psycho-education.
> Over five sessions, you will learn to steady your attention, recognise and work with unhelpful patterns of thought, and orient mental habits towards presence and appreciation. We will investigate the patterns of mind and behaviour that give rise to low mood and a sense of being 'stuck', and those that promote good mental health, wellbeing, and quality of life.[13]

[13] I have underlined the clause "and orient mental habits towards presence and appreciation" as it differentiates the mindfulness and compassion course for staff and postgraduates from the mindfulness course for students, which does not mention this aspect.

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In the shift from an introspective dialogue to a real-life exchange, the tasks and activities of each set of actors are clearly demarcated with *you* the learners ("you will learn to…") and *we* the researchers investigating patterns of mind and behaviour ("we will investigate…"). Yet, thanks to inclusive *we*, the investigation is made to appear as a joint endeavour whereby the course participants and the mindfulness practitioners use their different experiences and competence to mutually enrich each other's sense of awareness. Inclusiveness is emphasized at the very beginning of the course description, where the use of the reflexive pronoun *ourselves* conveys the idea that the benefits of mindfulness and compassion are meant for everybody, regardless of academic role:

> Mindfulness and compassion are well-researched and effective means of alleviating stress, anxiety, and depression, and promoting wellbeing and flourishing in ourselves and our relationships.

Although the personal motivations behind one's decision to attend mindfulness sessions are varied and pertain to the private sphere, the declared objectives of mindfulness training are common to students and staff:

- relieve stress, anxiety and depression
- promote well-being and flourishing

The reasons for stress, anxiety and depression may presumably not be the same for students and staff (e.g., examinations vs research assessment); likewise, the ways of well-being and flourishing that each group experiences is likely to be affected by their different age bands. Additionally, staff are also encouraged to show compassion, and develop an appreciative mindset in order to better respond to their pastoral care duties. However, all in all, an underlying commonality emerges from the Edinburgh web pages promoting mindfulness courses: students and staff alike can feel vulnerable and in need of moral and physical support.

6. Concluding remarks

The examination of a sample of UK university web pages related to mindfulness has shown an interesting variety of functions attached to mindfulness as a curricular course, degree programme, research project and resource, either meant for the general public or specifically tailored for students and, to a lesser extent, university teachers. The linguistic analysis has highlighted the highly positive semantic prosody attached to *mindfulness*, regardless of its subject or object position within the clause. Moreover, a close look at the recurrent definitional pattern "mindfulness is…." has shown multiple and mutually contradicting meanings associated with *mindfulness*: for example, an ongoing state versus the awareness of the present moment; secular versus religious practice; a skill as opposed to an innate ability. The analysis of the mindfulness modifiers has shown that the professionals in mindfulness training have to do

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both with education and health care (e.g., teachers and practitioners), and a few (such as chaplains) point towards a more ecumenical outlook on the part of the Christian church. However, when it comes to the role played by university lecturers either promoting or benefiting from mindfulness training, they seem to undergo a painful split between their teaching and their researching selves.

The audit culture for higher education research and teaching is gaining ground in the United Kingdom, as well as in the rest of the world: we academics are asked to submit to obscure quality assurance processes that deep down may remind us of the rating method for poetry decried by Professor Keating in the 1989 film *Dead Poet's Society*. Despite the protests and the well-documented critique of the rampant managerialism invading the university, imposing profit-oriented assessment criteria and turning knowledge into a set of deliverable goods (i.e., research products), the academics' sense of alienation and fatigue may hardly be lightened by mindfulness sessions. As pointed out by many and using the eloquent words of a university professor, “In one sense, the system inherently pressurises people, while at the same time you’re saying, ‘chill out, relax, it’s all fine’.” (Shackle 2019). While mindfulness training can often result in a placebo effect rather than a real solution, academics, mindful of their own worth, endeavour to resist the looming pressure of endless deadlines and quality assessment reports and also re-align the university with a people-centred rather than a product-driven agenda.

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