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*Corresponding author: Rynke Douwes, Research Group on Care and Welfare, NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences, Leeuwarden, The Netherlands
E-mail: rynke.douwes@nhlstenden.com

Reviewing editor:
Ah Choo Koo, Faculty of Creative Multimedia, Multimedia University, Malaysia

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EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY & COUNSELLING | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Perceived educators' roles in student well-being in higher education

Rynke Douwes^{1*}, Janneke Metselaar¹, Gerdina Hendrika Maria Pijnenborg² and Nynke Boonstra^{1,3,4}

Abstract: This study addresses the role of teachers in students' well-being in higher education, which has not been well defined in the literature. A qualitative study was conducted at a Dutch university of applied sciences. It explores student beliefs about educators' roles in their well-being, and the requirements to fulfil such roles. In total, 27 students were interviewed. The variety in beliefs were reason to discuss results of the semi-structured interviews in a group discussion ($n=4$). Thematic analysis of results shows that students distinguish between tutors and teachers and perceive tutors as the most crucial figures. The study identifies four roles: confidant, linking pin, a monitoring role (all three for tutors only), and a signaller role for both tutors and teachers. Requirements mentioned include the following: a close and informal teacher—student relationship, availability of time and timing of contacts, ability to provide structure, empathic attitude for both tutors and teachers and a high level of dependability mentioned for tutors only. Furthermore, findings suggest that students especially need involvement that targets their emotional needs and, to a lesser extent, their intellectual needs. Findings also show diversity in needs and preferences and highlight the importance of managing student expectations.

Subjects: Mental Health; Teachers & Teacher Education; Educational Psychology; Higher Education

Keywords: student well-being; educator; support; higher education; student perspective; qualitative methodology

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Rynke Douwes is a member of the research group on care and welfare, Child and Youth Care at NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences, Leeuwarden, the Netherlands. She has a special interest in the mental health of students in higher education. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6262-6565

Janneke Metselaar is Professor, Child and Youth Care, at NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences. Her research focuses primarily on the quality of youth services (prevention, child and youth care, inclusive education) and effectiveness of interventions. ORCID ID: 0000-0001-7137-0306

Gerdina Hendrika Maria Pijnenborg is Professor at the Department of Clinical and Developmental Neuropsychology at the University of Groningen. She is specialised in cognitive impairments and psychotic disorders. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-1461-0649

Nynke Boonstra is Professor of Nursing in Mental Health at University Medical Center Utrecht and Professor, Care and Innovation in Psychiatry at NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences. The main topic of her research is prevention, resilience, and recovery of psychiatric disorders in young people.



1. Introduction

Concerns about students' well-being are increasing globally, especially in higher education. Many students deal with well-being issues, such as psychological and emotional distress, feelings of anxiety and depression, and an increased risk of burnout (e.g., Backhaus et al., 2020; Baik et al., 2019; Dopmeijer et al., 2022); the number of distressed students has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Kim et al., 2022; van der Velden et al., 2020).

The literature shows that higher levels of well-being correlate with higher grades and lower dropout levels (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE), 2015; Lipson & Eisenberg, 2018). Therefore, higher-education institutions play a crucial role in supporting and promoting students' well-being. Institutions devote significant efforts to developing and evaluating programmes that support student well-being in higher education (see, for instance, Conley et al., 2015, 2017). However, substantially less attention is devoted to the role of teachers in this. Some studies contend that teachers help students with well-being issues (Hughes et al., 2018; Rickwood & Thomas, 2012), implementing institutional policies and transforming them into practice (DiPlacito De Rango, 2015). However, the literature raises concerns about the extent to which teachers should bear responsibilities in this regard (Bristow et al., 2020). Other considerations include the difficulty of fulfilling different roles as a teacher (Chory & Offstein, 2017) or the tensions and unclear responsibilities and boundaries regarding how to fulfil this role (Hughes et al., 2018).

This study examines the students' perspective on this issue. Students can be seen as “experts” in student experience (Baik et al., 2019). The teacher—student relationship is crucial for student outcomes such as study progress and dropping out (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014) and non-cognitive outcomes such as motivation and engagement (Stroet et al., 2013). Its role in supporting student well-being is less clear but the relationship between the tutor or teacher and the student seems a prerequisite to fulfilling any role in student well-being. Teachers' roles and connection with students are often examined using Self Determination Theory (SDT), a widely used theory of human motivation, development, and wellness. According to SDT, three basic psychological needs (autonomy, relatedness, and competence) impact human motivation and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The theory has been employed to describe the relationship between teaching practice that aims to fulfil students' basic psychological needs and its relationship with student motivation and engagement in secondary (Stroet et al., 2013) and higher education (Leenknecht et al., 2017). The literature suggests that teachers' availability, individual support, and a caring and empathic relationship between students and teachers are essential to reducing stressors in the learning environment (Baik et al., 2019; Eloff et al., 2021; Ryan et al., 2021). Furthermore, some studies suggest that the frequency and perceived quality of student-faculty interactions affect students' well-being, and is gained over four years of college (Trolian et al., 2020). Student-teacher relationships can mediate the negative link between mental health issues and study progress (Holen et al., 2018). The literature also suggests that students prefer a peer or a teacher over a health professional, when they seek help due to perceived barriers (DiPlacito De Rango, 2015). However, students facing well-being issues may tend to not approach the teachers they perceive as embodying academic success and competition (Kirsh et al., 2016).

Although the studies mentioned above indicate that teachers and their relationships with students affect student well-being, they do not clarify “how” students believe that teachers can support their well-being. Previous studies addressing various types of coaching focus on general helping styles, without explicitly targeting students' well-being (e.g., Klasen & Clutterbuck, 2002; Wallace & Gravells, 2010). With our study, we aim to contribute to the current debate regarding the pedagogical domain of teaching, in which support for student well-being can be a part.

Hence, this exploratory research investigates the teacher's role in student well-being from the students' perspective, specifically addressing the following research questions:

- (1) What are students' beliefs about the teacher's role in supporting their well-being?
- (2) How do students perceive the requirements for teachers to fulfil this role?

2. Materials and methods

This qualitative study explored the experiences and expectations of students at a university of applied sciences in the North of the Netherlands. This university offered approximately 150 different associate degrees, bachelor programmes, and master programmes clustered across 14 academies, targeting over 24,000 students.

This study collected data through in-depth, open-ended interviews conducted by an experienced female interviewer, between May and November 2020. All interviews were held online, through Microsoft Teams, because of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the data collection period, which took place from May to July 2020, all classes were conducted entirely online as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. After the summer break until the conclusion of the data collection, education was provided through a combination of online and in-person formats. The interviewer was employed as a teacher at the university of applied sciences, but the participants and the researcher did not know each other beforehand.

Students were informed about the purpose of the study through a news item on the intranet available to all students, with a link to a sign-up form. The news item described the selection criteria: studying full-time and having experience with circumstances that negatively impacted their well-being as students. The latter criterion was described in general terms, to explore students' perspectives on their well-being. In addition, students were informed that they would receive a gift card worth 10 euros as an incentive after the interview. In total, 113 students signed up for the interview. The study used purposive sampling to select participants. This non-random sampling technique is typically used to address information-rich cases (Battaglia, 2008). Representativity of results was not an aim of this qualitative research, but to avoid selection bias as much as possible, the study's sample was selected in a way to ensure diversity among academies (9 of 14 academies were represented, since no students responded to the call from the other 5), the year of study (varying from the first year to longer than four years), and gender. The selected students received an invitation by email for the interview. Some students did not respond to the invitation ($n = 8$), and some did not attend the online appointment ($n = 2$). The study collected data until no new information was obtained; then held two more interviews to confirm data saturation. Overall, a total of 37 students were invited, and out of those, 27 students successfully completed the interviews. Written consent was obtained before the interviews, which were recorded on video using the Microsoft Teams recording function. The interview guide was semi-structured to provide structure and flexibility and was tested by interviewing three students. After these pilot interviews, the survey incorporated minor changes, for instance, the order of questions and their formulation. The interview started with an open-ended question on how students experienced their studies and university life. The survey questions covered topics such as teachers' perceived roles and responsibilities concerning students well-being issues, and situations in which students did (or did not) feel support concerning their well-being. Examples of questions were for instance "Can you think of a situation in which you were happy (or not happy) with a teacher in relation to your well-being" and "What do you think is important for a teacher to say or do to support student well-being". The interview also covered topics to explore student perceptions on definitions of student well-being as well as impacting factors. The results of this part of the interview have been reported in a separate article (Douwes et al., 2023). The interviews lasted between 28 and 52 minutes, with an average of 34 minutes.

2.1. Analysis

2.1.1. Interview

After transcribing the interviews verbatim, respondents were offered the opportunity to validate and review them. Out of the participants, two students chose to take up this offer and confirmed

the accuracy of the transcriptions without requesting any modifications. Three researchers (RD, JM, and NB) coded the transcription of each interview, and reviewed the main topics and codes for consistency, overlaps, and discrepancies. One researcher (RD) then coded all remaining interviews in ATLAS.ti. The study used thematic analysis to interpret the data inductively and find themes in student opinions and experiences (Saldaña, 2013). First, the study built a line-by-line base, using an open coding approach, to generate initial concepts. Second, it summarised related codes into meaningful categories. After this, it classified these categories into themes. As the last step, the two other researchers (JM and NB) confirmed the clarity of these themes and allocation of data into themes by the first researcher. The study used the coding set to verify whether any initial codes had been missed or needed adjustment. Discrepancies were discussed until an agreement was reached.

2.1.2. Group discussion

As an extra step in validation, the results of the interviews were discussed in a group discussion. During the session, the findings were presented and thoroughly discussed following a structured approach consisting of four steps: 1. recognition, 2. explanation, 3. sufficiency, and 4. improvement of results, as outlined by van Yperen (2017). This method, commonly employed in practice-based research, facilitates the interpretation of results through collaborative dialogue. The discussion was transcribed verbatim and subsequently analysed, using the identified themes derived from the interviews. The findings were summarized, categorized, and cross-referenced with the original interview data.

As mentioned above, the study used purposive sampling to select information-rich cases (Battaglia, 2008). For the session, eight students who demonstrated a strong interest in student well-being and provided peer support to fellow students facing well-being challenges were invited to participate in the discussion. Unfortunately, four of the initially invited students did not show up at the appointment, resulting in the inclusion of four (second-year social work) students (one male and three females) in the group discussion. None of them participated in the initial interviews. The group discussions were held in person at the university of applied sciences. The same well-trained female researcher (RD) who conducted the interviews led the group discussion.

3. Results

3.1. Sample characteristics

Table 1 provides an overview of respondents' characteristics along with categorized well-being issues they reported. For instance, examples of self-reported personal well-being issues include anxiety disorders, AD(H)D, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASS), physical health problems, family-related concerns, and substance use. Study-related well-being issues encompass challenges such as difficulties in planning, performance anxiety, and study-related pressure. Furthermore, Table 1 includes the concepts the respondents mentioned as defining aspects of student well-being. While some of these definitions align with the well-being definitions found in literature, there are also certain deviations and unique perspectives. For a more comprehensive analysis and discussion of the definitions held by students, we refer readers to the article published on this specific topic (Douwes et al., 2023).

The interviewer asks questions about "teachers". However, students make a distinction between teachers and tutors. Since the study reflects students' perspectives, we adopt this distinction. At the university where the study is held, tutors have a coaching and advising role. In approximately two-thirds of the interviews conducted, tutoring is described as an integral part of the teacher's role. This means that the teachers themselves also serve as tutors for the students. On the other hand, in the remaining one-third of cases, tutoring is provided by teachers who are not directly involved in teaching the students in their regular courses. To ensure anonymity, students referred to their teachers and tutors without disclosing their identities. It is important to note that the

Table 1. Respondents' characteristics (N = 27)

Respondent	Academy	Gender	Age	Year of study	Type of well-being issue	Defining concepts of student well-being
1	Hotel Management School	Female	20-22	3	personal well-being issue	Balance between life domains
2	Hotel Management School	Female	20-22	4	personal well-being issue	Combination of well-being "types"
3	Technology and Innovation	Binary	<20	1	personal well-being issue	Support facilities in educational context, mental health, effort achievement ratio
4	Technology and Innovation	Female	<20	1	personal well-being issue	Subjective well-being, balance between life domains
5	Technology and Innovation	Female	Undisclosed	2	Study related well-being issue	Balance between life domains
6	Technology and Innovation	Female	Undisclosed	2	Study related well-being issue(s)	Resilience, subjective well-being
7	Technology and Innovation	Female	23-25	2	combination personal and study related well-being issue	Effort-achievement ratio, stress levels
8	Technology and Innovation	Female	20-22	1	personal well-being issue	Balance between life domains
9	Social Studies	Female	23-25	2	combination personal and study related well-being issue	Combination of well-being "types", stress levels, resilience
10	Social Studies	Female	20-22	1	combination personal and study related well-being issue	Stress levels, balance between life domains
11	Social Studies	Female	20-22	1	personal well-being issue	Balance between life domains, support facilities in educational context
12	Social Studies	Female	23-25	4	combination personal and study related well-being issue(s)	Balance between life domains
13	Maritime Institute	Female	20-22	3	combination personal and study related well-being issue(s)	Balance between life domains, Resilience
14	Maritime Institute	Male	20-22	1	Study related well-being issue(s)	Support facilities in educational context
15	Maritime Institute	Male	<20	1	personal well-being issue(s)	Balance between life domains, support facilities

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Respondent	Academy	Gender	Age	Year of study	Type of well-being issue	Defining concepts of student well-being
16	Int. Business Administration	Female	Undisclosed	2	combination personal and study related well-being issue(s)	Effort-achievement ratio, stress levels
17	Int. Business Administration	Female	23-25	4	personal well-being issue(s)	Subjective well-being
18	Primary education	Female	23-25	4	combination personal and study related well-being issue(s)	Balance between life domains, stress levels
19	Primary education	Male	>25	>4 years	personal well-being issue(s)	Support facilities in educational context
20	Primary education	Female	23-25	4	Study related well-being issue(s)	Balance between life domains
21	Healthcare	Female	23-25	3	combination personal and study related well-being issue(s)	Balance between life domains, support facilities in educational context
22	Healthcare	Male	23-25	4	personal well-being issue(s)	Balance between life domains, combination of well-being "types"
23	Healthcare	Female	23-25	2	combination personal and study related well-being issue(s)	Support facilities in educational context
24	Economics and Logistics	Female	23-25	>4 years	personal well-being issue(s)	Balance between life domains
25	Economics and Logistics	Male	Undisclosed	4	personal well-being issue(s)	Balance between life domains, subjective well-being
26	Commerce and International Business	Female	20-22	1	personal well-being issue(s)	Balance between life domains
27	Communication and Creative Business	Female	23-25	4	Study related well-being issue(s)	Stress levels, balance between life domains

interviewed students come from different study years and academies, making it unlikely that they refer to the same individual in their responses.

At the university where the study takes place, the tutoring role is assigned rather than chosen. Tutors may have received some basic training in tutoring as part of a broader didactical training that teaching staff without a teaching qualification are required to complete. Additionally, the university offers optional training opportunities for tutors. While there are general guidelines for tutoring at the university, the explicit inclusion of tutors' responsibilities in supporting student well-being is not mentioned in these guidelines.

3.2. Perceived roles

Students assign multiple roles to their tutors and teachers concerning their well-being in the interviews. In the group discussion, students confirmed the findings of the interviews. On some topics, they made subtle distinctions, additions, and clarifications. This study identifies four roles: the confidant, the monitoring role, the linking pin role, and the signalling role. The first three roles refer to tutors only, while the signalling role is mentioned for tutors and teachers. The following subsections describe these roles, illustrated with quotes from participants.

3.2.1. Role of confidant

One role mentioned by students is that of a confidant within the university setting, namely someone with whom they may share issues related to their well-being. This role is only mentioned for tutors. Students referring to this role, primarily emphasise the significance of their tutor as someone they can trust and confide in, particularly when it comes to discussing personal matters. Students mainly see their tutor as a listener: *"He knew about it and didn't even have to act, but the fact that he knew gave me confidence"* (R11). Students consider tutors the closest to them, and as the first persons to talk to about personal issues: *"I see a tutor as someone I can talk to. It is important that he knows because ... it's someone you see a lot. So, it's important that this person knows what is going on, I think"* (R1). Some students also feel they should inform their tutors about their well-being, since they have a prominent role in their personal development. Another participant states: *"We always speak about personal development and learning goals related to our well-being, which makes it easier to talk about. Because it's part of it, so to say"* (R23).

3.2.2. Monitoring role

The second role affecting student well-being is monitoring and is only mentioned for tutors. For monitoring purposes, tutors create circumstances and opportunities for students to seek contact and talk about their well-being, but it must be initiated by the student. Students mention a preventive form of monitoring, as tutors frequently contact them (allowing students to talk about problems) and communicate their availability. Students have different preferences regarding the type of contact. For instance, some favour planned meetings, while others prefer the tutor being available on demand. For example, *"...I think a tutor should have talks with students on a frequent basis anyway, for prevention"* (R9). Another student mentioned: *"I think a tutor can prevent problems by communicating with students on time. Like really from the start like... you can always come to me, you can always call, you have my number... and ehm... you just know that in case of problems you can call that person"* (R3). Monitoring requires the tutor to check how a student is doing, and offer study-related support, such as help with planning.

3.2.3. Role of linking pin

The third role for tutors is the role of linking pin. Students consider tutors essential for receiving information about facilities for the support of well-being (for instance, student counsellors or peer support facilities) and for referring students to internal and external facilities if necessary. Students mention that a tutor is often the referrer to the student counsellor. Students have limited knowledge of facilities; hence, they feel dependent on their tutors. Students who see a tutor as a linking pin note that talking to their tutor is the first step, lowering barriers to taking other steps: *I knew she wasn't the one that could help ... She couldn't solve my addiction. But it was like taking it a step*

further every time. Because I could turn to her, it became easier to talk to others. And because I talked to her, we could see together what kind of help would be suitable (R17). The student also highlights the tutor's importance in relation to other teachers, stating: "She took the initiative to contact my other teachers and inquire about the reasons behind their lack of support. Additionally, she coached me on how to initiate conversations with these teachers myself, expressing how their lack of support had impacted me emotionally."

3.2.4. Role of signaller

Students mention the signalling role of both tutors and teachers. This role implies noticing and addressing students with well-being issues:

Of course, a teacher offers lessons, but ... I think there should be a slightly observing function into that. To say like: hey, this student has been absent for a while, or shows up but looks horrible. Or that quality of school work is not what it used to be. Then I think a teacher has a function to notice and also to start a conversation with the student (R22). Students link this role to the initiative of a tutor or teacher in addressing well-being issues. Some students explicitly mention that signalling cannot be expected of tutors and teachers because problems are not always visible, and noticing these issues is not part of their roles. Students' views on addressing signals differ between tutors and teachers. Tutors are expected to address students personally. Some students feel that a teacher should share concerns with the tutor, who should talk with the student. In the group discussion, this role has been linked to the extent of the closeness of the relationship with a teacher. In the case of a close, personal relationship, students believe that the teacher may directly address a student.

3.2.5. Additional findings on teacher roles

All students assign some role to tutors concerning well-being. However, some students do not recognise the role of teachers in supporting their well-being. They contend that teachers' first responsibility is to teach. Therefore, attention to well-being is seen as an extra task that is not part of a teacher's job: "Basically, they don't have much to do with it" (R5). And as another student stated: "The domain of the teacher is the topic he is teaching at that moment. One should not expect them to go beyond that." (R2).

In some cases, students mention a single role for a tutor or teacher, while others describe multiple roles in various combinations. For instance, one student combines the roles of confidant and linking pin, stating: "Well, I think it is important for a tutor to lend an empathetic ear, but also to help you connect with the right people to talk to within the university" (R12). Additionally, another student combines the roles of signaller and linking pin, expressing: "I believe tutors should initiate a conversation with me when they suspect something is wrong, but should also be able to refer me to the student counsellor, for instance" (R2).

Although the qualitative design of the study does not aim to establish relationships between variables, an examination was conducted to determine if any patterns emerged between the type of well-being issues, conceptions of student well-being, and the expected roles of tutors and teachers. For each specific tutor and teacher role mentioned by students, an analysis was performed to identify the corresponding self-reported well-being issue(s) and the student's perspective on student well-being. Notably, there is no clear link found between the type of well-being issue(s) students reported and the roles they attribute to tutors and teachers in relation to their well-being. Students who have dealt with personal and/or study-related well-being issues mention all the roles examined. Moreover, considering the diversity in the concepts that students mention as defining their well-being (see Table 1 and Douwes et al., 2023), no noticeable patterns emerged in the expectations students have towards their tutors and teachers based on their individual conceptions. This observation suggests that the perceived roles attributed to tutors and teachers possess a generic nature. To gain a deeper understanding of the importance of roles and how roles interact, this topic was discussed in the group discussion. In this context, students agree that all

roles apply to the tutor and agree with the signaller role for teachers. They disagree with findings that the teacher has no role in supporting student well-being.

As mentioned earlier, the definition of student well-being is left to the students. Hence, in some cases, it is unclear whether students see a role for tutors and teachers in managing their well-being or its consequences on their learning process. In the group discussion, all students mention that their tutors should pay attention to their well-being and its effect on their learning and study progress. The roles of teachers are more related to study problems. However, some students feel teachers should be concerned with personal, social, and mental health issues. During the group discussion, some students realised that they all shared the same high expectations. One student wonders why she had such expectations, and as a group, they concluded that expectations reflect examples they had previously experienced or seen. If one tutor fulfils their role positively, all tutors are expected to do it in this same way.

Finally, students sometimes display inconsistencies concerning the perceived roles of tutors and teachers. For instance, some students contend that a teacher has no role in students' well-being but expect them to exert monitoring if they become aware of some well-being problems. Another example is that students expect a teacher to inform them of how a student is doing. However, they also mention that this should not happen often.

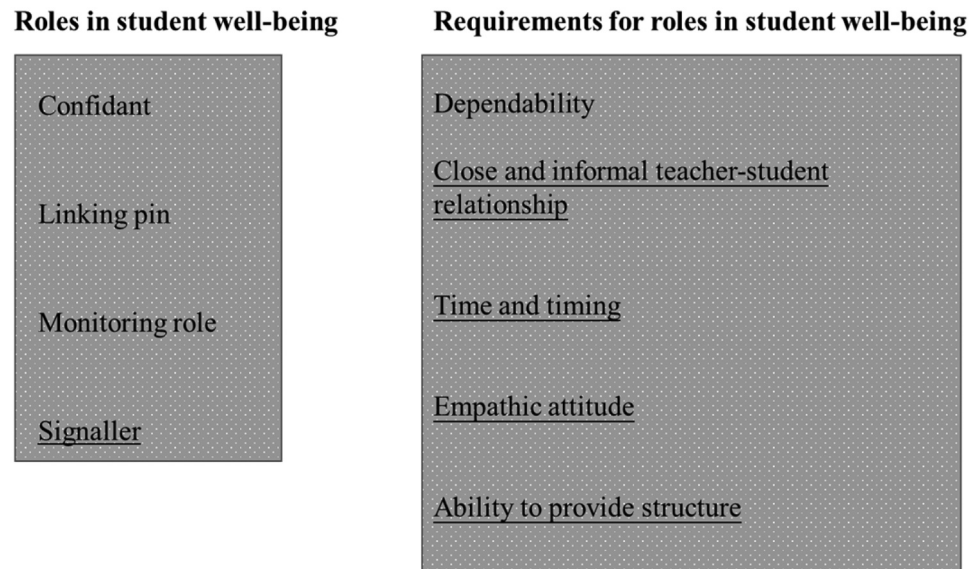
3.3. Requirements for roles in well-being

Students' answers mention the requirements necessary for the teacher or tutor to support student well-being. Results show there is an overlap in requirements between tutors and teachers, while also identifying distinct differences in certain aspects for each role. Students note two essential requirements: a personal, informal connection and time, as vital requirements for a student to feel comfortable approaching someone and disclosing about themselves: *I told about it at our first appointment. But that was just ... yeah he started talking about himself to make clear there was not a big difference in hierarchy between us, I am not standing above you. This made me feel comfortable with him quite quickly* (R8). Different components of "time" are distinguished. The first is the availability of time. Students typically feel comfortable approaching a tutor or teacher only once it is clear that they have the time to offer for them: *"(...) to pay attention to the personal issues of a student takes time. I feel this is done too little. I have to be honest. At my faculty I really sense that, that there basically is no time"* (R13). Students perceive time availability if tutors and teachers communicate they are available when a student approaches them, and provide a swift response: *"I can tell him everything and he always says that if necessary I can always send him a message, even though it's outside school hours"* (R6). Another "time" component is timing, namely planning and continuity in contact. Some students favour a planned contact, some prefer to have contact if necessary. This time component is explicitly mentioned for tutors.

Other essential requirements are related to reactions and attitudes towards students with well-being problems. The first requirement for tutors and teachers is to show empathy. From tutors, students expect acts of empathy, such as providing affective reactions, showing understanding, listening, and encouragement. They expect more cognitive empathy skills from teachers, such as meeting the needs of students, holding realistic expectations, understanding student life, and treating students like adults. The second requirement for tutors and teachers is to provide structure. For tutors, this implies helping with planning issues; for teachers, it involves keeping a realistic schedule and extending deadlines if necessary. Furthermore, for tutors, students mention the requirement of dependability. Students find it essential for their tutors to be trustworthy and reliable. Figure 1 presents an overview of all roles and requirements.

Matching expectations between students and tutors or teachers seems to increase satisfaction. Talking about their dissatisfaction with the support of their tutors, a respondent mentions: *"[the tutor] said: If there is anything, you can always come to me. But it is not like she continuously asks how you are doing. And I would have wanted her to do so more"* (R10).

Figure 1. Overview of roles and requirements for tutors and teachers described by students (N=27).



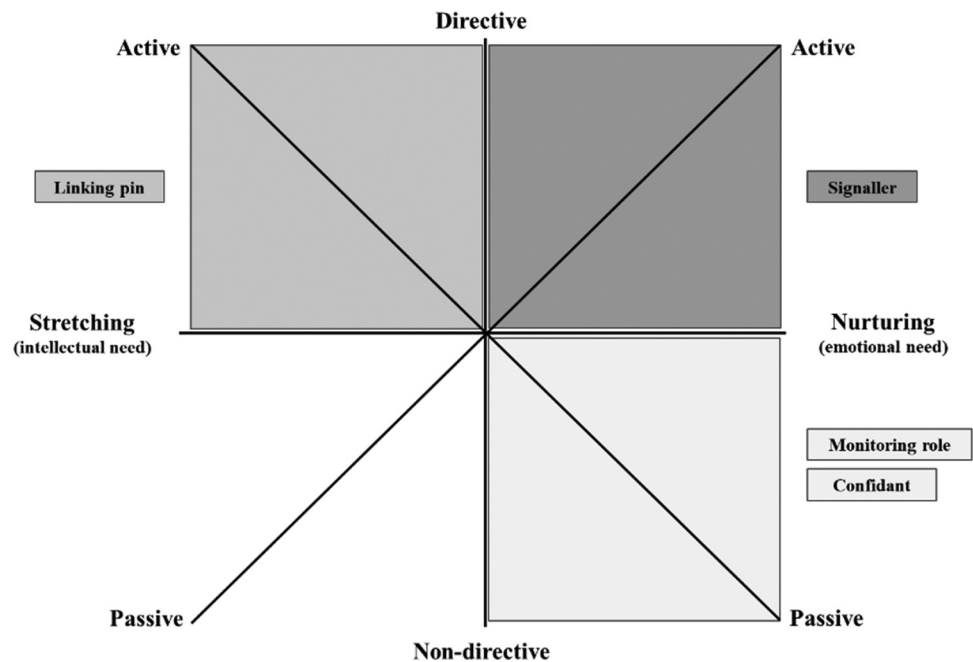
All roles and requirements apply for tutors. For teachers, underlined role and requirements apply.

4. Discussion

This study addresses the student perspective on teachers' roles and requirements concerning their support of student well-being and provides results that are unique amongst the existing literature on the topic. The study adopts the distinction that students make between tutors and teachers. Tutors are teaching personnel with a coaching and advising role, while teachers are only concerned with teaching. The study's results show that teachers are crucial for student well-being, although to a lesser extent when compared to tutors and not according to all students. Overall, four roles are identified for tutors and one for teachers concerning the well-being of students: the role of confidant, the monitoring role, the role of linking pin (all for tutors only) and the signalling role (for both tutors and teachers).

Findings confirm the importance of the relationship between the tutor or teacher and the student as a prerequisite to fulfilling any role in student well-being. Elements of SDT can be recognised in this study in the roles and requirements students mention for tutors and teachers concerning student well-being. Findings indicate that linking pins and providing structure can stimulate the need for competence. The monitoring role can be seen as fostering the need for autonomy. The roles of signaller and confidant and time requirements, a personal, informal relationship with the tutor or teacher, empathy, and dependability may foster the need for relatedness. Various studies have shown that, concerning motivation, involvement is the most powerful predictor of the three basic psychological needs (Leenknecht et al., 2017), fostering the need of relatedness. Also in our study, involvement seems the most critical dimension of well-being support, and how this involvement is achieved differs across roles. To illustrate this phenomenon, this study proposes a model of roles and helping styles for tutoring and mentoring (Klasen & Clutterbuck, 2002). According to this model, helping may vary in directiveness (how much the helper tries to influence the outcome) and the extent to which the helper challenges the person in terms of learning and development (stretching) or supports them at the emotional level (nurturing). Furthermore, helping may vary in the extent to which a helper adopts an active or a passive approach. When using these dimensions as a lens to address roles, this study shows that three of four roles focus on supporting students' emotional needs but differ in activeness and directiveness. Figure 2 shows the positions of roles in the quadrants of the model of helping styles. The role of confidant may be seen as a passive, non-directive role targeting the emotional needs of students and is therefore situated in the bottom right quadrant. The monitoring role is in the same quadrant. However, it requires a more active approach as

Figure 2. Tutor and teacher roles in student well-being are placed within quadrants of the model of helping styles (Klasen & Clutterbuck, 2002).



circumstances for being approached by students need to be created as part of this role. The role of a signaller refers to an active, more directive role focused on supporting emotional needs; therefore, it lies in the upper right quadrant. The linking role is an active, directive role that targets the intellectual demands of students by providing knowledge of sources of help within the university; hence, it is positioned in the upper left quadrant.

This study's findings highlight the diversity in needs and preferences. The roles students identify are not mutually exclusive and are combined differently in students' perceptions. Students have varying preferences regarding whether a tutor or teacher should take the initiative. Findings also indicate that some students hold high expectations of tutors and teachers concerning their well-being, reflected in the (combinations of) roles they mention and the focus on the impact of well-being issues on their study and well-being itself. This ambiguity in needs, preferences, and expectations may reflect different images of tutors and teachers as sources of support. This result is not surprising since the students' well-being is often not part of the job descriptions of tutors and teachers and teacher training. Besides diversity in needs *between* students, some inconsistencies arise *within* students in how they want to be supported. Students seem to project their internal ambivalence on tutors or teachers. Some appear unsatisfied with the support of their tutor or teacher due to their unrealistic or unclear expectations. This is of importance, since students' expectations have been found to impact student experiences (Yale, 2020) and student satisfaction (Cheng et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the study's findings deepen the current understanding of the importance of time availability. Next to the known importance of frequency and quality of contact (Trolian et al., 2020), our study shows that available time is necessary to disclose well-being issues and is crucial for students to feel supported after disclosure. In addition, planning, timing, and continuity of contact are required, with preferences differing from planned moments to more informal moments.

4.1. Implications

First, the study's findings help clarify how tutors and teachers affect student well-being. The study's insights may guide tutors and teachers in their approaches towards students, creating fruitful connections. In addition, they may help universities build and refine the role of tutors and teachers in student well-being.

Second, findings stress the importance of clarifying the roles and boundaries of tutor and teacher roles. First argument for this implication are the high expectations of students, combined with different preferences. The level of closeness and level and type of involvement expected from tutors (and, to a lesser extent, teachers) seem to indicate a need for defining boundaries. To meet students' preferences, tutors and teachers must build a close and personal relationship with students. However, some studies show that the teacher—student relationship should not be too tight (Chory & Offstein, 2017). This consideration may account for tutors as well. Standardisation may help monitor professional boundaries. Hence, the study's results may serve as inputs in discussing the standardisation process. However, the proposed standards should be meaningful, including relevant skills, competencies, and behaviours (Walker, 2020). Furthermore, training and support facilities for tutors and teachers are essential to ensure they possess such skills, competencies, and behaviours. The various roles and requirements mentioned for tutors and teachers imply that they have different impacts on student well-being and therefore both deserve a singular focus here. Second argument that stresses the importance of clarifying roles is that focus on student well-being implies the need to incorporate this aspect alongside other demands and duties of teaching personnel (Bristow et al., 2020). Fulfilling multiple roles and switching between roles is challenging. Adopting a role in student well-being can make teachers (and potentially tutors) feel they must abandon their initial role or devote their time to multiple roles that may be conflicting or incompatible (Hughes et al., 2018).

Existing theories on helping styles and teaching, such as the model of helping styles and SDT, appear as suitable lenses for interpreting tutor and teacher roles in well-being. The advantage of using such theories, especially SDT, is that they aptly address well-being-related areas, such as motivation and engagement.

A suggestion for further research is to verify whether tutor and teacher perceptions of their roles in student well-being match students' perceptions. Insights into similarities and differences between perceptions are necessary to best shape their roles in student well-being.

Future research should also address the relationship between the experienced support from tutors and teachers in student well-being and indicators for learning and development (such as study progress). In line with the holistic perspective on learning and development that underlies this study, support for student well-being from tutors and teachers should not be a separate purpose but should contribute to improving learning and development. Future studies may examine roles and requirements more in-depth since distinguishing between roles or insights into the circumstances impacting role expectations may help capture student needs better. Moreover, quantitative research is recommended to check if findings also apply for a larger group of students.

4.2. Strengths and limitations

To the best of our knowledge, this is one of the first studies to provide deeper insight into the student perspective on tutor and teacher roles in supporting student well-being. The proposed interviews gather rich information on how students approach this issue. However, the choice to only include students who have experienced well-being issues has some limitations. These students may hold different opinions on the tutor and teacher roles compared to students without such experiences. The group discussion is an additional step in validating the data after the initial interviews. We address a relatively small and homogeneous group of students who are active regarding student well-being. However, all the students of the group discussion are involved in peer support on well-being issues and are considered experts on the topic and spokesmen for a larger group of students.

Our study was designed with an open and explorative character. We consider this approach a strength. For instance, we leave the definition of well-being to students. This shows that students consider their well-being as an interplay between study efforts and life outside the study environment. Hence, student well-being is not limited to the university context but requires balancing different aspects of their lives (Douwes et al., 2023). However, what students exactly referred to concerning their well-being is sometimes ambiguous as a consequence of not prescribing

a definition. A second consequence is that the study defines general requirements for tutors and teachers and does not distinguish between roles.

Finally, we collect data during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when social distancing and online education may have affected student well-being substantially (Kim et al., 2022; van der Velden et al., 2020). These phenomena may have impacted students' perceptions of the role of tutors and teachers in supporting student well-being.

5. Conclusion

The focus of our study is on student beliefs about the teacher's role in supporting their well-being and on student perceptions of the requirements for teachers to fulfil this role.

The study contributes to better understanding of the role of tutors and teachers in student well-being in higher education. Their importance, especially of tutors, is very clear from the student perspective and can be distinguished in different roles. Tutors are arguably the people closest to students within the university context and therefore often are the first person a student turns to in the case of well-being issues. Furthermore, important requirements across roles in order to fulfil a role in well-being according to students were identified. Roles and requirements indicate students hold high expectations and often expect a high level of (emotional) involvement. Student perspectives might be helpful in the definition of the tutor and teacher role in the well-being of their students and can be input for higher educational institutions working on policies and practices to support student well-being. Finally, students' high expectations may not always be met; ongoing discussion and alignment are needed between universities, tutors, teachers, and students on how to best suit students' needs and to manage their expectations.

Author details

Rynke Douwes¹

E-mail: rynke.douwes@nhlstenden.com

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6262-6565>

Janneke Metselaar¹

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7137-0306>

Gerdina Hendrika Maria Pijnenborg²

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1461-0649>

Nynke Boonstra^{1,3,4}

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3592-1953>

¹ NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences, Leeuwarden, The Netherlands.

² University of Groningen, The Netherlands.

³ KieN Early Intervention Service, Leeuwarden, The Netherlands.

⁴ Department of Psychiatry, UMC Utrecht Brain Centre, University Medical Centre Utrecht, Utrecht, The Netherlands.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data supporting this study's findings are available from the corresponding author, RD, upon reasonable request.

Ethical approval

The research proposal was submitted to and approved by the Ethical Committee of Behavioural and Social Sciences of the University of Groningen under registration number PSY-1920-S-0483.

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