# 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.

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

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

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

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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