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:

> 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.

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

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).

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,

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

> 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

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.

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

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.

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.

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

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).
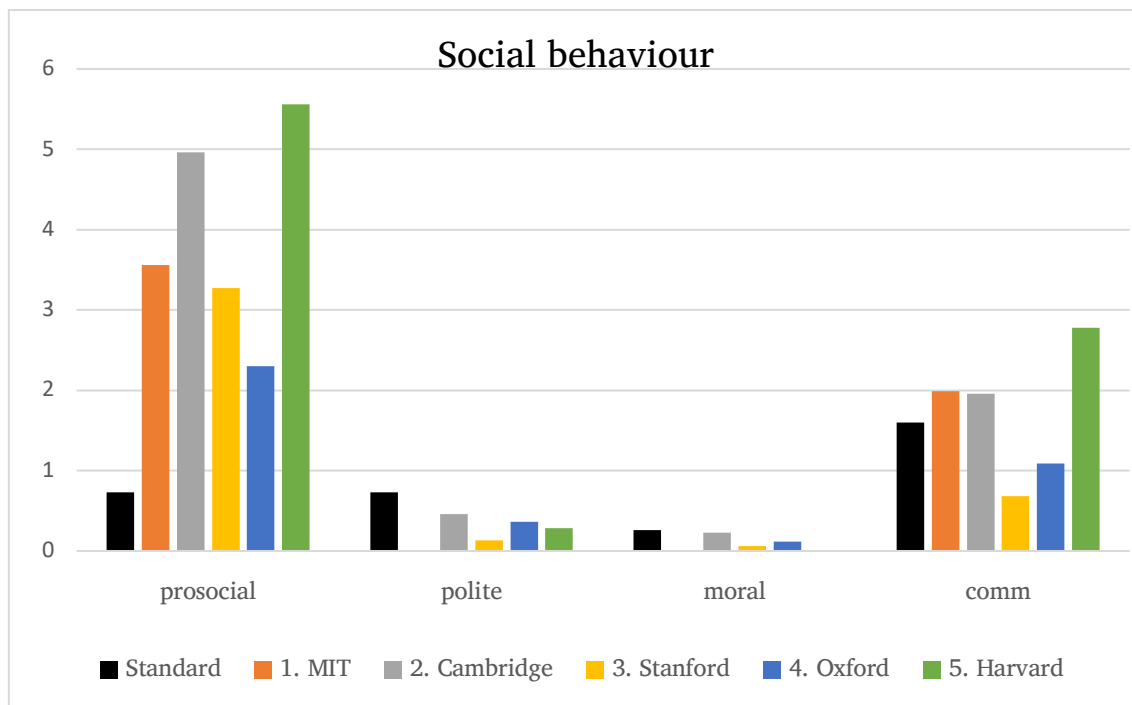

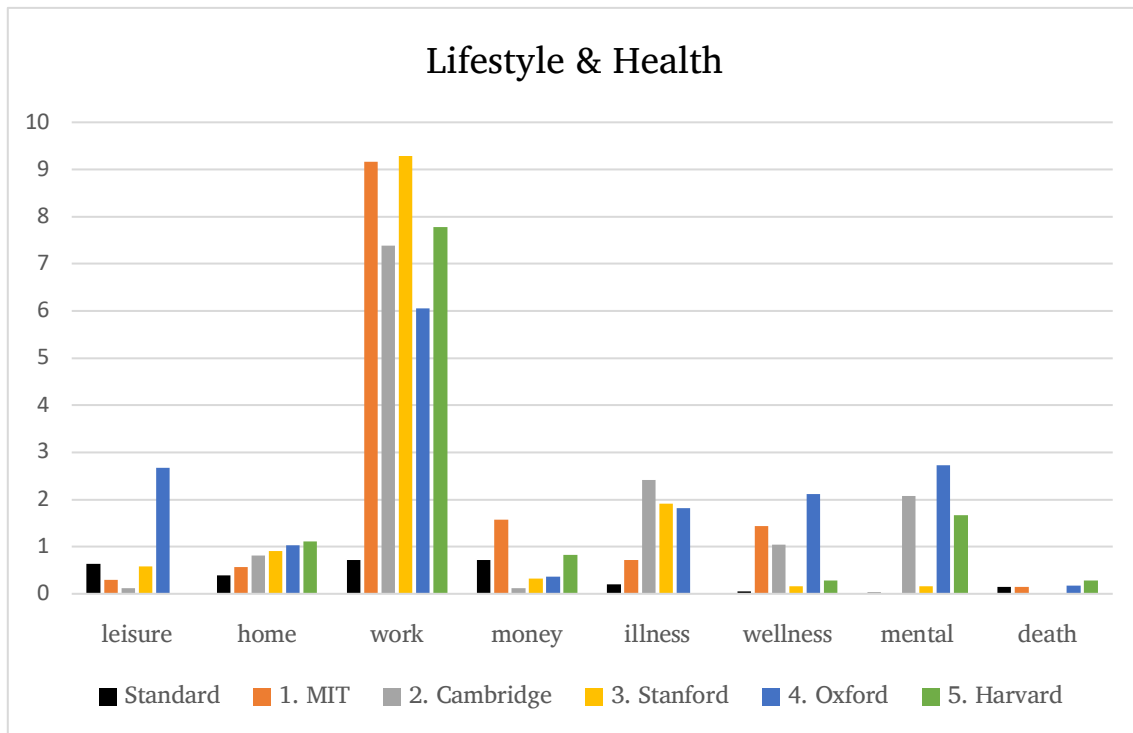***Figure 1***. Social behaviour dimensions (LIWC) in the reference texts (Table 3)

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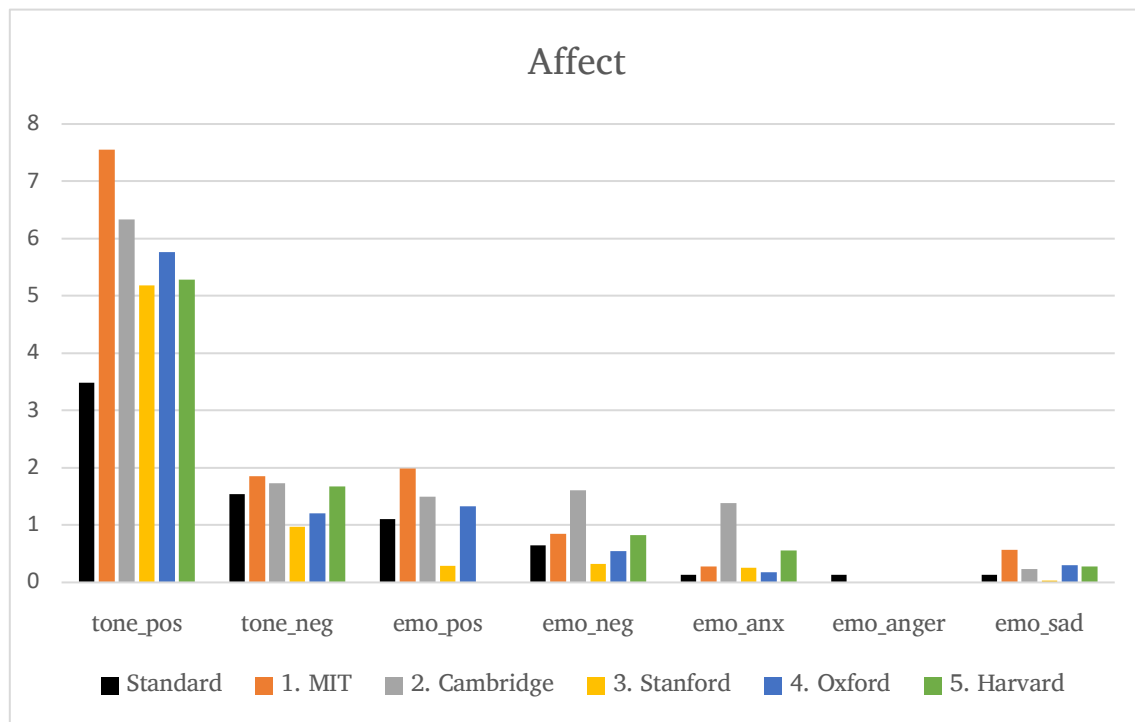
Figure 3. Affective dimensions (LIWC) in the reference texts (Table 3)

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.

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

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

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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