Anne Skoglund

Students' perspectives on mental health promotion in student life

Finding me and a place to belong

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Contents

ABSTRACT

Mental health promotion in student life—Students' perspectives

Finding me and a place to belong

Background: Student years are a crucial time of development and a time in life characterized by major transitions, in which youths are detached from the well-known childhood environment, family, and childhood friends. Research on students and mental health promotion is scarce, and there is a need to investigate what promotes mental health in student life.

Aims: The overall aim of this thesis was to explore how students experience student life as promoting mental health. This overall aim was further categorized into three specific aims:

I: To explore how first-year students in university perceive student life as promoting mental health and well-being (I)

II: To describe students' lived experiences of how student life promoted mental health and wellbeing in everyday life under various degrees of lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic (II)

III: To describe students' experiences of student life that are beneficial to mental health (III)

Methods: A qualitative design was used in all three studies. Data were collected from a total of 32 interviews (I, II) and 171 written descriptions (III). Twenty interviews were analysed using phenomenography, 12 interviews were analysed using phenomenology, and 171 descriptions were analysed using thematic analysis. Data were collected at the university (I), via Microsoft Teams (II) and via submission on a web page (III).

Main findings: Having a sense of belonging, a sense of support, and a sense of finding myself were regarded as crucial to promoting mental health in student life (I). The ways in which these needs were fulfilled varied. Support could be provided by family or peers; it could be emotional, financial, or practical. Support could also be provided by the academic community. Being taken seriously by lecturers and other academic staff was regarded as a form of support for one's development into a mature self (I, III). A sense of belonging could best be achieved through the facilitation of and participation in small groups in both social and academic contexts (I). Experiences such as being welcomed, being included, belonging to a social group, finding one's own identity, maturing, and developing were all highlighted in the descriptions (III). Student societies and other forms of civic engagement as well as acceptance by and inclusion in an academic community were fundamental in this context. During lockdown, the promotion of mental health was described as finding a balance between predictability and joy (II).

Conclusions: A mentally healthy student life is a contributing factor to one's ability to find one's own identity and is therefore important. Promoting mental health in student life is a joint responsibility. Students are recommended to be active and take initiative. In addition, the university and cooperating partners can facilitate the establishment of new networks by organizing small groups that lower the threshold required for making new acquaintances and by organizing study programmes in a way that eases the developmental process underlying the establishment of a new everyday life and the discovery of one's own identity.

SAMMENDRAG

Psykisk helsefremming i høyere utdanning- Studenters opplevelser

Å finne meg selv og et sted å høre til

Bakgrunn: Studietiden er en viktig tid for utvikling, og en tid preget av store overganger, hvor ungdom løsrives fra velkjente omgivelser, familie og barndomsvenner. Forskning på studenter og psykisk helse med et helsefremmende perspektiv er begrenset, og det er behov for å undersøke hva som fremmer psykisk helse i studietiden.

Hensikt: Den overordnede hensikten var å undersøke studenters erfaringer med hva som fremmer psykisk helse i studietiden. Den overordnede hensikten ble spesifisert i tre del- mål:

I: Å undersøke hvordan førsteårsstudenter i høyere utdanning erfarer studentlivet som fremmende for psykisk helse og well- being,

II: Å beskrive studenters levde erfaringer med hvordan studentlivet fremmet psykisk helse og well-being i hverdagen i ulike grader av lockdown under COVID- pandemien (II)

III: Å beskrive hvilke erfaringer studenter har med studentlivet som er nyttig for psykisk helse (III).

Metode: Kvalitativt design ble benyttet i alle tre studier. Data ble samlet inn gjennom totalt 32 intervjuer (I, II) og 171 skriftlige beskrivelser. Tyve av intervjuene ble analysert ved bruk av fenomenografi, 12 intervjuer ble analysert ved bruk av fenomenologi, og 171 skriftlige beskrivelser ble analysert ved bruk av tematisk analyse. Data ble samlet på universitetet (I), via Microsoft Teams (II), og via innlegg på en nettside (III).

Hovedfunn: En opplevelse av tilhørighet, en opplevelse av støtte og en opplevelse av å finne seg selv ble ansett som viktig for fremming av psykisk helse i studietiden (I). Dette ble oppnådd på ulike måter. Støtte kunne komme fra familie eller venner, det kunne være emosjonell støtte, økonomisk støtte eller praktisk støtte. Det kunne også være støtte fra det akademiske miljøet. Å bli tatt på alvor av forelesere og andre vitenskapelig ansatte ble sett på som støttende på vegen til å utvikle en voksen- identitet (I, III). En følelse av tilhørighet kunne oppnås best ved å gjennom tilrettelegging for og deltagelse i små grupper, både sosialt og faglig (I). Opplevelser som å bli ønsket velkommen, bli inkludert, å tilhøre en sosial gruppe finne sin egen identitet, modning og utvikling ble vektlagt i beskrivelsene (III). Studentfrivilligheten og andre former for frivillighet, og å bli akseptert og inkludert i et akademisk miljø var viktig. Under lockdown ble fremming av psykisk helse beskrevet som en balanse mellom forutsigbarhet og glede (II).

Konklusjon: God psykisk helse i studietiden bidrar til å finne ens egen identitet og er derfor viktig. Å fremme psykisk helse i studietiden er et felles ansvar. Studentene anbefales å være aktive og ta initiativ. I tillegg må universitetene og deres samarbeidspartnere tilrettelegge for å skape nye nettverk gjennom å organisere små grupper. Slik senkes terskelen for å få nye bekjentskaper. De kan også organisere studieprogrammene på en måte som gjør den utviklende prosessen med å finne seg selv og å skape seg en ny hverdag enklere.

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ORIGINAL PAPERS

The thesis is based on the following papers:

I. Skoglund, A., Batt-Rawden, K. B., Schröder, A., & Moen, Ø. L. (2021). Perception of Student Life as Promoting Mental Health and Well-Being: A Study of First-Year Students in a Norwegian University. International Journal of Mental Health Promotion, 23(4), 487-497. DOI: 10.32604/IJMHP.2021.016199
II. Skoglund, A., Moen, Ø. L, Batt-Rawden, K. B., & Schröder, A. (2023). Students' Experiences with a Mental Health-Promoting Daily Life During COVID19: Balancing Predictability and Joy. SAGE Open, 13(3), DOI: 21582440231200309.
III. Skoglund, A., Hotham, S., Schröder, A., & Moen, Ø. L. (2023). Students' descriptions of experiences beneficial to mental health- a thematic analysis. Submitted.

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Preface

The data used in this thesis were collected in two different contexts that were unforeseen at the start of the project. After approximately seven months of work on the thesis had been completed, the WHO declared the spread of the novel coronavirus to be a public health emergency of international concern (World Health Organization, 2020). A few weeks later, the outbreak was characterized as a pandemic, which led to extensive lockdowns that affected the whole world. Students were a vulnerable group in this context and were highly affected by the lockdown. This situation offered the opportunity to revise the project plan and engage in a new area of research concerning the pandemic. Reports regarding the poor mental health of students during lockdown continued to emerge, and the task of investigating this problem from a health-promoting perspective became paramount. This new knowledge could provide valuable information regarding students' mental health needs during lockdown and could also improve our knowledge of students' mental health in general. Although the context of and prerequisites for student life changed during the pandemic, the need to focus on mental health promotion for students remained central.

My personal interest in this phenomenon derives from my clinical practice in addiction services, in which mental health is a key concept. As an assistant professor, I have also been interested in the subject of mental health and, subsequently, the ways in which students adapt and develop throughout their student life. As a student, I had diverse experiences, from a feeling of being "lost" as a new student in a new place and a new setting with a sense of being a failure socially to later experiencing close and profound friendships that last to this day. Academically, there were also both ups and downs; I have experienced both failing an exam and being the top student in my study program. Through these experiences, I have first-hand knowledge of a student life that is both mentally healthy and a student life that contributes to a reduction in the feeling of well-being.

I received my master's degree in public health and naturally adopted a health-promoting approach to health issues. My thinking towards health promotion is strongly influenced by the salutogenic perspective on health and disease. This perspective had a key influence on the teaching in Nordiska högskolan för folkhälsovetenskap, where I completed my master's degree. Regarding students and mental health, the uncertainty of the students during this transitional period of life causes them to

be receptive to measures that are taken to promote their mental health. I therefore believe that it is of the utmost importance to elucidate the research regarding the measures that can be implemented to promote mental health during this specific period of life.

Introduction

The number of people enrolled in universities has increased in recent decades worldwide. In 2021, 318,105 people in Norway were university students. Among youths, 38.4% of persons between the ages of 19 and 24 were attending university (Statistics Norway, 2022). This group represents a substantial part of the population. The student years are a time in life characterized by major transition, and it is during these years when most mental health problems manifest (Cuijpers et al., 2019).

Students' mental health has received substantial attention in the political context, and several measures have been implemented to address challenges in mental health status among students (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020). In 2019, the minister of research and higher education reported that student welfare organizations in Norway received 90 million NOK of funding every year (Norwegian Parliament, 2019). A subsidy scheme administered by the Norwegian directorate for health in 2022 provides nearly 42,000,000 NOK for the purposes of promoting health and wellbeing among students and preventing drug- and alcohol-related problems (Directorate of Health, 2022). This amount is an increase from 2019, when 20 million NOK of funding was provided (Ministry of Health and Care Services, 2019).

A set of laws regarding universities and colleges (University and University Colleges Act, 2005) regulates the work of universities in Norway. These laws require universities to have "a satisfying internal system for ensuring and developing quality in education" (University and University Colleges Act, 2005, § 1-6). The laws also stipulate regulations regarding academic support for students and oblige the university to develop an educational plan as a tool to allow students to complete their study programme. In addition, the university board and the student welfare organization are required by these laws to facilitate a good environment and improve student welfare. The

environment in this context highlights the factors that affect students' physical and psychosocial health, which may affect their ability to learn and have the potential to promote their health. This task also includes psychosocial, organizational and pedagogical factors (University and University Colleges Act, 2005).

Fourteen divisions of student welfare organizations are represented on the campuses of higher education institutions in Norway (Students welfare organization, 2022). Student welfare organizations are governed by the corresponding laws and are responsible for the welfare needs of students. In addition to housing, these organizations provide food and beverage services, childcare facilities, sports services, career services, student associations and health services. The health services include doctors, dentists, counsellors, and a variety of counselling groups, among others. The student welfare law also stipulates that higher education institutions bear overall responsibility for students' learning environment (The Norwegian government, 2023).

Good mental health is important to all people in all places. In the transformative years of student life, good mental health is crucial (Cuijpers et al., 2019). Seamless transitions between home and university are necessary to ensure that the most vulnerable students receive the help they need after relocation. A vast majority of students are content with the place they study and the way they were welcomed when starting their studies. Additionally, the majority of students regard their own health as good or very good (Sivertsen & Johansen, 2022). Even though this transitional period of life is demanding due to being full of changes and new responsibilities, most students are satisfied with their student life (Sivertsen & Johansen, 2022).

In summary, the importance of good mental health in the transitional time involved with becoming and being a student suggests that it is relevant to explore what moves students towards a mentally healthy student life.

Background

The student years are a time of life that entail substantial changes and transformation for young people (Cage et al., 2021; Cuijpers et al., 2019). It is also a time of life in which young people have great potential to flourish and develop (Knoesen & Naudé, 2018). This potential has encouraged a positive approach to students' mental health in their student years. When students find the transition challenging for their mental health, it not only represents a problem for the students in question but also affects the whole society in which students participate and will continue to be active participants in the future (Dooris, 2022).

According to Rørstad et al. (2019), most research resources allocated to studies on mental health are focused on mental health problems such as anxiety, eating disorders and depression. Fewer studies have focused on mental health promotion, coping and quality of life. According to Eriksson et al. (2019), there is a need to examine the positive aspects of mental health to add value to our understanding of mental health. The Roadmap for Mental Health Research in Europe project (ROAMER) recommends increasing the focus on positive mental health and well-being in research on mental health (Forsman et al., 2015).

Health promotion

Over the years, there has been a change in the way health is understood. There have been notable changes from the first definition of the WHO in 1948 (World Health Organization, 1995), in which health was defined as a state, to the Ottawa charter in 1986, which describes health as a resource (World Health Organization, 1986). Seeing health as a resource has also inspired other scholars, such as Antonovsky (1979), who put forward his theory on salutogenesis. Mæland (2016) described three ways of defining health: as a resource, as well-being, and as the absence of illness. In this thesis, health is seen as well-being and a resource for students transitioning into a new situation.

A focus on health promotion began to appear only 40–50 years ago (MacDonald, 2012), thus making health promotion a relatively new discipline. Although movements towards health promotion mostly emerged starting in the mid-1970s, health as related to peoples' living conditions is not a recent concept (Mollaoglu, 2022). The link between health and living conditions was described by Chadwick as early as the 19th century (Baum & Fisher, 2014). However, throughout the 1970s, there was an increasing focus on health for all, and the Ottawa Conference and the Ottawa Charter of Health Promotion can be considered a starting point for the modern health promotion movement (Kickbusch & Nutbeam, 2017). The approach in the Charter, which focuses on health as a positive condition, is opposite to the biomedical perspective on health that has been dominant for the past 500-600 years. According to the Charter, people are closely linked with their environment, and health is created within the context of everyday life (World Health Organization, 1986).

There is a distinct difference between prevention and promotion in mental health. While prevention has a focus on pathogenic factors and health risks, promotion focuses on resources. A preventive approach to mental health in student life would be aimed at specific diseases, and professionals, e.g., health care providers, would be experts. A health-promoting approach to students' mental health focuses on the resources in the individual, group and/or society and their resources (Aglen et al., 2018). Prevention aims at problems, while the focus in health promotion is resources (Garsjø, 2018). Dooris et al. (2022) suggest that individual-oriented preventive approaches seem to be less efficient than interventions aimed at the system. Although prevention and promotion may overlap and affect each other, there are significant differences in the two concepts' approach to health. A shift from prevention to promotion will require an empowering process in which the individual gains control of their health determinants.

Health promotion is influenced by and based upon several adjacent disciplines (Seedhouse, 2004). Medicine, education, psychology, sociology, and epidemiology are all represented in health promotion. Clarifying the concept of health promotion is therefore a challenging task; however, most health promotion theories are rooted in social or behavioural sciences (Nutbeam et al., 2010). Health promotion has been described as any systematically planned intervention in a community (e.g., schools, workplaces, or prisons) that aims to increase people's control over their own health by

creating a supportive environment (World Health Organization, 1986). Collaboration, empowerment, and partnerships are key elements of health promotion.

Health promotion has been criticized for failing to acknowledge the structural reasons for poor health (Baum & Fisher, 2014; Cragg et al., 2013; Heard et al., 2020). Social factors may be significant drivers of health that need to be addressed in health promotion research. However, the behaviouristic approach, which makes the individual responsible for their health, seems to be a paramount goal in many health promotion theories (Nutbeam et al., 2010), although the WHO's definition of health promotion also describes how health promotion is aimed at groups and communities (collective) contributing to health.

Students' everyday lives are lived in university. A perspective that considers the complete individual, encompassing social factors, and a situation in which universities play a key role in creating and facilitating a supportive environment in which students can develop and increase their control over their health therefore seems relevant. Health promotion has also been criticized for serving dominant groups, especially the behaviouristic approach to health promotion (Heard et al., 2020). Additionally, interventions are often designed according to the needs of preeminent groups (Heard et al., 2020). Thus, when integrating behaviouristic and social approaches to mental health promotion, students belonging to dominant groups may contribute to creating communities that are health-promoting to all students. Research on health promotion is mainly quantitative, community-based and focused on interventions (Jhanwar & Avinash, 2017). As interventions tend to have a preventive approach to risk behaviour (Hutchesson et al., 2022), investigating students' mental health with a health-promoting approach can be of relevance.

In summary, the approach to health promotion as dependent on structural drivers for health has gained increased focus. However, a behaviouristic approach still seems to dominate many health promotion theories. With health promotion focusing on resources, it seems relevant to investigate the positive resources that move students towards a mentally healthy student life. Considering that health promotion is based on several other disciplines, approaching the phenomenon with a wide perspective and utilizing students' own voices to express what promotes health in the context in

which they live their lives seems relevant and may contribute to our understanding of students and mental health promotion.

Mental health

The WHO describes mental health as "… a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" (World Health Organization, 2004, p. 10).

It is argued that defining good mental health has been difficult, resulting in scarce research attention on mental health promotion in young people (Fusar-Poli et al., 2020). A review of perspectives on good mental health in research presents a definition in accordance with that of the WHO: a state of well-being that allows individuals to cope with the normal stresses of life and function productively (Fusar-Poli et al., 2020, p. 34). Other characteristics of mental health include concepts such as resilience (WHO, 2004), self-management (Huber et al., 2011), problem-solving skills (Jané-Llopis et al., 2005) and mental health as a resource (Haro et al., 2014). Mental health is currently seen with two common perspectives across a diversity of approaches; it has a biopsychosocial focus, and it is considered to be something more than the absence of mental illness (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020).

According to the WHO, mental health is part of both our collective and individual health (World Health Organization, 2022). Mental health problems at a young age may affect the person's future as a member of a family, community, and workplace (Newton et al., 2016; Usher, 2020). Therefore, promoting mental health in the context in which young people live their lives seems relevant (Dooris, 2022).

Mental health can be conceptualized in various ways. According to Hughes and Spanner (2019), mental health is not only a matter of the absence of illness but rather refers to a spectrum of

experiences ranging from good mental health to mental illness (Hughes & Spanner, 2019). Good mental health does not mean that a person's mental health is entirely positive (Galderisi et al., 2015). A mentally healthy person also experiences negative emotions such as sadness and anger (Galderisi et al., 2015). Additionally, elevating positive emotions above the more negative emotions excludes people such as migrants or those who fight against injustice from the group of mentally healthy persons (Galderisi et al., 2015).

The Keyes two continua model views mental health and mental illness as related but distinct dimensions of mental health (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). In this model, emotional, psychological, and social well-being are described as the three main components of positive mental health. Experiencing high levels of well-being and low levels of mental illness is described as *flourishing*. According to Keyes (2002), to be functioning well psychologically and socially and to be filled with positive emotions is to flourish. He also describes flourishing as the presence of mental health and argues that a high level of well-being may have a protective effect on mental illness (Keyes, 2007). Thus, when students report having mental illnesses, this does not necessarily mean they have poor mental health, and promoting mental health may, as a consequence, contribute to protection from mental illness according to Keyes (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). The concept of flourishing is commonly used to discuss students' mental health (Knoesen & Naudé, 2018; Volstad et al., 2020). The concept consists of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishments (Seligman, 2011). According to Volstad (2020), flourishing is more about the personal growth that has been achieved by pushing through challenging times than it is about academic growth.

An opposite view on mental health and mental illness is a bipolar perspective (Keyes, 2005). In a bipolar model, (mental) health is seen as a continuum, with health in one end and illness in the other. According to Iasiello and Van Agteren (2020), this perspective has faced criticism for its classification of individuals as either being in a state of health or illness and seeing mental health as the absence of illness. Additionally, the criticism includes that an arbitrary point on the continuum is dependent on factors such as gender and cultural differences (Iasiello & Van Agteren, 2020). However, the main difference between the two models is the Keyes view on mental health and mental illness as being two distinct but related continua, while the bipolar model views health on one single continuum.

In the context of this thesis, both models are relevant. The dual continua model allows individuals (students) to be mentally ill and at the same time experience mental health, thus making the aim of promoting mental health in student life relevant for all students. Additionally, within the perspective of the bipolar model, it may be possible to further investigate the drivers of mental health-promoting student life.

Mental health promotion

Positive psychology is a relevant concept when discussing mental health promotion. Seligman is seen as the founding father of positive psychology, and his main focus was to find the factors that make people flourish (Seligman, 2011). The focus in positive psychology has many adjacent or even similar attributes to mental health promotion (Kobau et al., 2011). Strengthening competences such as an individual's resources and psychological strengths and fostering communities to better promote mental health are all assets that characterize both positive psychology and mental health promotion (Kobau et al., 2011). Positive psychology has been seen as related to the environment, resilience, positive self-evaluation and life satisfaction (Hu et al., 2020). This wide understanding of positive psychology suggests a broader approach to students' mental health and that the key to mental health promotion in students' lives may lie within both their surroundings (environment) and individual traits and actions.

A wide approach to mental health is relevant not only to reflect positive emotions but also to present a framework that includes a balanced state of mind as a key concept. This state of mind could be described as a "…dynamic state of internal equilibrium"(Galderisi et al., 2015, p. 231). This is a different view on mental health than that presented by Westerhof and Keyes (2010). While Keyes uses happiness as the basis for studying good mental health, Galderisi et al. (2015) removes happiness as an important part of good mental health.

Well-being

Well-being is an important concept when discussing both health promotion and mental health. However, the content of the concept of wellbeing has varied (Dodge et al., 2012). Concepts such as quality of life, positive affect, positive psychological functioning, and life satisfaction are described as features of wellbeing (Dodge et al., 2012). Dodge et al.'s (2012) definition of wellbeing is focused on a state of equilibrium, which features a fluctuating balance point between the challenges that one faces and the available resources. The Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project has described wellbeing as the ability to fulfil goals (Challen et al., 2008).

According to Westerhof and Keyes (2010), the meaning of well-being is based on the hedonic and eudemonic understanding of well-being, hedonic focus on happiness and satisfaction, and is referred to as emotional well-being. Subjective well-being is a relevant concept within the hedonic understanding of well-being. The concept consists of the presence of positive emotions, less presence of negative emotions, and life satisfaction (Antaramian et al., 2010). Research suggests that subjective well-being is a protective factor against stressful life experiences for adolescents (Antaramian et al., 2010), thus making it a relevant aim for students in the transitional phase of becoming a student. Eudemonic well-being focuses on optimal functioning and individual strivings, consisting of both psychological and social well-being. The psychological dimension refers to profound elements in student life, such as positive relations, autonomy, purpose in life, environmental mastery and personal growth (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). According to Westerhof and Keyes (2010), the eudemonic and hedonic understandings of well-being together construct the definition of positive mental health. However, as the student years represent a transitional time of life, for many students, this will naturally will bring daily stressors due to being in a new situation (Fernandez et al., 2016), which may make expectations of flourishing inappropriate. Thus, Galderisis´ approach (Galderisi et al., 2015) to mental health as a balanced state of mind, also allowing negative emotions but still being mentally healthy, may seem more appropriate.

In summary, mental health can be defined in various ways. It is, however, crucial to keep a focus on positive mental health when discussing mental health promotion to ensure a sustainable approach to the phenomenon. Mental health is not only important in the student years; mental health during this

period also affects the student's future. There are several factors that may affect students' mental health. To increase the knowledge on mental health promotion in student life and contribute to a better understanding of students' needs, investigating students' own voices about what promotes mental health in student life is relevant.

Student life

Entering university and moving away from parental home is one of the largest transitions in life and, for many people, their first large transition (Conley et al., 2013; Park et al., 2020). From their childhood surroundings, they enter into a complex environment (Lairio et al., 2013) The quality of this transition has an impact on students' socialization later in their student years (Klaiber et al., 2018). In Oslo, which is the largest student city in Norway, approximately 75% originate from outside Oslo (Universitetet i Oslo, 2023). This new situation requires students to take responsibility for their health when the support systems from childhood are altered or even lost completely. Students also develop independence during a period of life when their personal development is also maturing (Lairio et al., 2013). This period is an important time in which students can prepare for adult life and discover how they can fulfil their roles as members of society, such as in the workplace or the local community (Cawood et al., 2010; Newton et al., 2016). According to Dooris et al. (2017), the university is an important institution for students' social and personal development as well as their education. This development impacts both their everyday lives and their futures. The task of promoting mental health during this transitional time therefore seems relevant.

Starting student life will give young people more freedom and more responsibility. It is required that students organize their everyday life and study progression to be able to succeed in their study program. At the same time, student life consists of additional activities such as leisure activities and work (Lairio et al., 2013). Thus, a reasonable balance between studies and leisure time is necessary (Norwegian university of technology and science, 2023).

According to the Ottawa Charter of Health Promotion, health is created within the setting in which people live their everyday lives, such as the university (World Health Organization, 1986). The Ottawa Charter also views health as determined by complex interactions between people and their environment. The frame for promoting health must be the context in which people live their everyday lives, where they "live, love, work, play, shop, travel and Google" (Kickbusch, 2021 p. 59). According to Kickbusch (2021), this is part of a transformative view on health promotion that is necessary in a more complex world. Investigating the movement towards mental health in the setting where students live their everyday life therefore seems relevant (Dooris, 2022).

In summary, student life is a time of major transitions and a time for both education and personal development that will affect students later in life. Student life is the setting in which students live their everyday lives, and therefore, an important arena for mental health promotion (Cawood et al., 2010; Dooris, 2022). Thus, investigating the drivers of mental health promotion in university and student life seems relevant.

Mental health and well-being among students

Becoming a student and relocating to study implies an entirely new role for a young person (Cage et al., 2021). Additionally, this transition features a new environment, new demands, and new support systems. Relocating to study and moving away from one's childhood surroundings can be regarded as stressful (Conley et al., 2020; Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Prevention or treatment by health professionals may be less relevant for many students than the (social) structures that surround them. Discussing mental health problems in student life may also be a semantic challenge that is affected by sociocultural attitudes towards mental health problems (Krokstad et al., 2022); that is, the way we talk about mental health and mental health problems may affect our view of students' actual situation (Grøgaard, 2022). This is also a relevant perspective in a social constructivist approach, seeing the individual (student) reality as one that is continuously affected by their interactions and surroundings (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

The literature on students' mental health compared to the mental health of their nonstudent peers reports divergent results (McCloud et al., 2023). Some studies claim that university students experience significantly higher levels of psychological distress than their nonstudent peers (Browne, 2017; Larcombe et al., 2016). According to Sivertsen et al. (2023), approximately one out of three students experience a current mental disorder. Comparing numbers with nonstudent peers in Norway is difficult, as there are no recent reports on this age group specifically (Bruun et al., 2018). However, the fact that student life features qualitatively different content than nonstudent life should be recognized. According to Dooris (2022), since the establishment of the Healthy Universities Network in the late 1990s, which proposed a whole-setting approach to the university as an arena for the promotion of health, understanding and acknowledgement of the university as a significant contributor to health promotion has led to an increase in the literature on students' mental health.

According to Holt et al. (2015), students have many perceptions of what is believed to be a healthy university; mental health, accessibility to healthy nutrition and water, facilitation of physical activity such as on-site gyms and shelters for bikes, a clean and safe campus, and a well-planned curriculum are among the measures that are perceived as important for health. In a study investigating students' perceptions of a healthy university, mental health was not mentioned in particular; however, features that may affect mental health, such as safety, equality and supporting lecturers, were highlighted as important (Holt et al., 2015).

Mental health promotion in student life refers to factors such as strong social networks, support, and the ability to adjust and preparation for student life (Campbell et al., 2022). In addition, interventions that have been indicated to promote students' mental health are many. According to Lo et al. (2018), mindfulness, relaxation and cognitive-behavioural interventions were suggested to support health professional students' mental health. A Swedish study suggested that a mobile health intervention, conducted through students' mobile phones, providing students with text messages and links about brief tips, well-being, personalized feedback, validated self-help exercises, and self-monitoring, surpassed usual care in increasing students' positive mental health (Bendtsen et al., 2020). Ridner et al. (2016) argued that among interventions that promote college students' well-being, measures that improve sleep quality are the most beneficial. Other researchers argued that skills-oriented, supervised, and class-conducted programmes seem to be the most effective for

mental health promotion (Conley et al., 2013). Whole-setting approaches were suggested to be more successful than one-off activities (Cawood et al., 2010). The perception of social support was suggested to support the students' need for development (Hu et al., 2020). Additionally, according to a systematic review on setting-based interventions to promote mental health in universities, interventions aimed at changing the way students are taught claimed to be promising (Fernandez et al., 2016). Hernández-Torrano et al. (2020) showed, in a bibliographic mapping of the literature on students' mental health, that mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety and stress represent the most commonly investigated keywords in the literature. Keywords such as life satisfaction and well-being occurred less often. This suggests a need for more research on positive aspects of mental health and health promotion.

In summary, several interventions are suggested to have a positive effect on students' mental health. However, this has mainly been investigated with a pathogenic or quantitative approach. Thus, giving voice to the students on what drives them towards a mentally healthy student life may seem relevant.

Lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic

In January 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak was declared to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern by the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2020). This declaration resulted in a societal shutdown that deeply affected students worldwide (Odriozola-González et al., 2020; Savage et al., 2020). Campus facilities were closed to control the spread of the virus. Opportunities for socializing with fellow students were highly restricted. Leisure activities were cancelled, and lectures were conducted digitally. Many students reported feeling isolated and lonely (Sivertsen, 2021). They spent a great deal of time alone in small student accommodations, facing the additional burden of unpredictability. The situation of students was also concerning for university staff; 41% of the respondents in a survey of American college and university presidents regarded the mental health of students to be the most pressing issue faced during the pandemic (Turk et al., 2020).

During lockdown, the students' perceptions of their own health and quality of life exhibited a negative trend (Sivertsen, 2021). The length and comprehensiveness of the lockdown were uncertain, resulting in a high burden for young people during an important time of personal development. This lack of predictability involved the sudden restriction of meeting places at the university and the cancellation of lectures on short notice (Van de Velde et al., 2021). Students' mental health status suffered a dramatic deterioration during the lockdown, and there was a substantial increase in reported mental health issues (Sivertsen, 2021). The Norwegian Students' Health and Wellbeing Study showed a substantial increase in symptoms of mental health problems such as feelings of anxiety, nervousness, hopelessness and excessive worrying during lockdown, and more than 40% of the students reported feeling isolated either often or very often (Sivertsen, 2021). More female than male students reported experiencing symptoms of mental health problems. A search in OVID Medline for the keywords "students," "mental health," "universities" and "COVID" in January 2023 yielded more than 550 articles. Several studies have found that the pandemic and subsequent lockdown had an overall negative impact on students' mental health, with increased depression symptoms (Lyons et al., 2020; Tavolacci et al., 2021; Villani et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2021) and negative impacts on social connectedness, studies and stress levels (Evans et al., 2021). However, these numbers also show that approximately half of the students were content. Some students reported several improvements in their student life during the pandemic. They consumed less alcohol, 80% of students exercised more, and their finances improved (Sivertsen, 2021). Reduced alcohol consumption (Charlet & Heinz, 2017), physical activity (VanKim & Nelson, 2013), and financial wellbeing (Hassan et al., 2021) are factors that have been described as having a positive effect on mental health.

In summary, there seems to be a pathogenic focus on the research that has been conducted on students and mental health during lockdown. Investigating the burden of the lockdown on many students' mental health has been important and necessary. However, the period of lockdown was a whole new situation that also provided an opportunity to investigate the phenomenon of students and mental health in a different context. Therefore, investigating the phenomenon with a positive and health-promoting approach may be pertinent.

Rationale

Throughout the project, database searches were repeatedly conducted in Ovid Medline, Psychinfo, Eric and Embase regarding students, universities, and mental health promotion. The searches reveal few articles concerning the ways in which students experience student life as a promoting mental health and well-being. Much of the research on students' mental health consists of intervention studies aimed at specific health topics (Dooris & Doherty, 2010), such as drugs (Arabyat et al., 2019) and alcohol (Norman et al., 2018). Quantitative studies regarding measurement scales (Karaman & Cirak, 2017), predictors of mental health in college students (Knowlden et al., 2013), or the Norwegian quantitative Students' Health and Wellbeing Study (Knapstad et al., 2018; Sivertsen & Johansen, 2022) are also dominant in this field of research. A literature search on the mental health continuum- short form (Lamers et al., 2011), which focuses on positive mental health and well-being, and students and universities, gave no relevant results. A bibliometric mapping of the literature on students' mental health also concluded that there has been a tendency to focus on pathogenic approaches in this research area (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020). A recent review (Mordal & Ness, 2021) claims that more qualitative studies with a health-promoting perspective—that is, studies that go beyond a focus on poor mental health and towards a health-promoting perspective—are needed due to the complexity of factors that may influence students' mental health.

The scarcity of qualitative studies on mental health promotion among students highlights the need for knowledge about what moves them towards health on the ease/disease continuum. A qualitative, in-depth approach to what empowers students to cope with the various challenges this transitional time in life represents may be useful. Such insight can contribute to research concerning the mental health promotion needs of students. It may also create a better basis for both students and the university with respect to the facilitation of a mentally healthy student life and may contribute to a better understanding of the ways in which students, the university, and its cooperating partners can adopt a setting-based perspective to organize and sustain a mentally healthy environment for students. To systematically explore and describe students' perceptions of contributors to better mental health and well-being may broaden this perspective and provide a more solid basis for the facilitation of mentally healthy student life.

Theoretical framework

The theory of salutogenesis as described by Antonovsky (1979, 1987), an ecological systems theory as described by Bronfenbrenner (1979), and the theory of empowerment are used as a theoretical framework in this thesis. These theories focus on the interactions among resources, stressors, and development. However, although both Antonovsky and Bronfenbrenner have a socioecological approach, salutogenesis focuses mainly on stressors and resources, whereas ecological systems theory focuses more on the systems in which students live their everyday lives and how these systems affect each other. Salutogenesis is closely related to flourishing and is seen as an ecological model, recognizing that health is determined by a complexity of factors in life related to personal, social, behavioural, and environmental factors (Sagy et al., 2015). Therefore, it is useful to include the ecological systems theory as described by Bronfenbrenner as a theoretical framework for the salutogenic factors that move towards mental health in the different levels in which students live their lives. In addition to these frameworks, being empowered may be seen as a prerequisite for mental health in student life, seeing students as the experts on what drives them towards a mentally healthy student life, thus giving a wider perspective on the phenomenon. Combining these theories for use as a theoretical framework is relevant given that student life and the beginning of adult life in a student setting represent both a stressor and a crucial time for development. All three theories are central concepts in health promotion and are therefore relevant to apply as a frame in this thesis.

Salutogenesis

Salutogenesis seeks to explain the connections between health and the ways in which we cope with life. Salutogenesis represents a shift in focus away from pathogenesis; instead of focusing on the what causes illness, it focuses on what makes people healthy (Antonovsky, 1979). Salutogenesis views health as a continuum extending from ease to disease; thus, throughout their lives, people are partly healthy and partly sick. Salutogenesis seeks to uncover the factors that move people towards the ease or health end of this continuum.

The core concept of salutogenesis is the sense of coherence (SOC). SOC is explained as

"... a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that one's internal and external environments are predictable and that there is a high probability that things will work out as well as can reasonably be expected" (Antonovsky, 1979).

Orientation in relation to the sense of coherence refers to the individuals' ability to access resources in situations in which they are required to cope with stressors (Antonovsky, 1979). It is based on the prerequisites for coping with stress, such as the transition to a new life as a student. A strong sense of coherence is strongly connected to health resources such as optimism, hardiness, control, and coping and is strongly related to perceived health, especially mental health (Eriksson & Lindström, 2007). Salutogenesis, similar to the Ottawa Charter, is based on health as a resource and the individual as an active, or empowered, part of their own life. (Lindström & Eriksson, 2011). Although the sense of coherence consists of individual traits such as comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness, it may also be applied to a group or organization, not just the individual (Bauer & Jenny, 2017). Another paramount concept in salutogenesis is general resistance resources (GRRs) (Idan et al., 2017). GRRs consist of the resources available to the individual who may help the individual cope with stressors. As such, GRRs may help students in the phase of transition to university and through their student years. GRRs may be aspects such as material resources, religion, ego identity, intelligence and social support (Idan et al., 2017).

According to Antonovsky (1987), people with a strong sense of coherence also had high scores with regard to meaningfulness, manageability, and comprehensibility. Meaningfulness focuses on the extent to which one feels that different stimuli in life are meaningful, the areas in life that have emotional meaning, and the extent to which one feels that life has emotional content. This term also refers to the extent to which one feels that the problems one faces are worthy of dedication and that these problems can also be viewed as challenges. Manageability refers to the extent to which one feels that they have access to the necessary resources to meet life's demands. These resources can be either formal or informal. Comprehensibility is described as a cognitive dimension that emphasizes whether stimuli are regarded as understandable. A prerequisite to the ability to cope

with a stressful situation, such as the beginning of student life, is, to some degree, the ability to understand it (Eriksson, 2017).

According to Lindström and Eriksson (2015), the theory of salutogenesis has been criticized for having a weak and unclear construct, thus making it challenging to measure. This is supported by Hochwälder (2019). The critique also evolves around the concept's overlap with other health-related concepts, such as hardiness and locus of control. According to Eriksson and Lindström (2008), the main messages in the Ottawa Charter harmonize well with the ideas of salutogenesis. Identifying the general resistance resources that may promote mental health in student life is therefore of importance.

From the perspective of salutogenesis, stressors do not necessarily create a pathogenic reaction that pulls the student towards dis-ease. A stressor response may also be salutogenic and push the student towards ease. The direction on the ease-disease continuum depends on the stressor in question and the degree to which the resistance resources are successful (Antonovsky, 1987). A salutogenic perspective requires a focus on strengthening one's general resistance resources (GRRs) when facing stressors (Vinje et al., 2017). The health promotion aims of increasing people's ability to take control over their own health are in line with the salutogenic aim of strengthening the resources that are necessary to move towards the health pole of the ease-disease continuum.

The ecological systems theory

According to the Ottawa Charter, health promotion must occur in different arenas (World Health Organization, 1986). In an increasingly complex world, it is argued that health promotion must focus on the patterns and interconnectedness between the different environments in which people live (Kickbusch, 2021). It is also necessary to include personal skills. According to Eriksson et al. (2018), both individual and contextual perspectives and the interplay between them can be emphasized when using an ecological approach. Thus, using this approach in research may present useful recommendations for mental health promotion (Eriksson et al., 2018). The ecological systems theory,

as described by Bronfenbrenner, views human development as occurring in interconnected settings, making settings where people live their everyday lives the basis of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For students who relocate to study, some of these settings are dramatically changed when starting student life. At the same time, the "old" systems are intact with childhood friends and with family. According to Dooris et al. (2022), Bronfenbrenner's model includes elements from both developmental psychology and sociology and describes how the individual develops within settings that are connected to each other. Bronfenbrenner argues that development occurs simultaneously in different environments that affect each other (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Ecological systems theory emphasizes both contextual and individual systems and is therefore relevant when discussing students' mental health.

A highly relevant concept described by Bronfenbrenner is ecological transition (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Such a transition happens when the person's (student's) role or setting changes and the person's position in the ecological environment is altered. For students, the transition is therefore a consequence of growing up and starting student life, and starting student life is an instigator for development. According to Bronfenbrenner, development never takes place in a vacuum but rather consists of a reciprocal interaction between the person and the environment. According to Usher (2020), who discussed students' mental health within the frame of ecological systems theory, mental health policies should be implemented in three main domains to ensure a holistic approach: personal, university and home.

Bronfenbrenner described four levels of context. The first level, microsystems, consists of the environments with which the person (student) is directly involved. This applies to peers, friends, family, and the many environments in which students live their everyday lives, such as the university (Amundsen et al., 2021). Bronfenbrenner describes a microsystem as "the pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). The second level, meso, is described as a system of microsystems or as the interrelations among the settings in which the person participates (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Amundsen et al. (2021) describes this as connections between home and university and between home and friendship groups. In this thesis, the interrelations among housing, family, peers, and the study programme are examples of the setting

that constitutes the meso level. The third level, exo, is a level that affects the everyday lives of the student; however, the student is seldom or never directly involved with this level. The exo level could refer to areas such as organization of the study programme, the student's family background, strategic documents at the university, the university's policies, the policies of the student welfare organization and the economy. The macro system, which is the fourth level, is related to society as a whole, i.e., to what Bronfenbrenner calls the "system blueprints" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 26). Namely, to some extent, there are similarities within a society regarding what different systems, such as the educational system, represent. However, Bronfenbrenner acknowledges the fact that there are differences within these "blueprint systems"; they differ across various subcultural groups, such as religions, socioeconomic backgrounds, and ethnicities. Cultural and social values and legislation are examples of application for this level (Amundsen et al., 2021).

Bronfenbrenner presents a four-element model consisting of the individuals' characteristics, context, time, and proximal processes (Tudge et al., 2016). Together, these four elements influence development. Proximal processes are regarded as the driving force in development. Proximal processes are described as the increasingly complex interaction between the individual, the individuals' surroundings, objects and symbols, where the individual is an active participant (Tudge et al., 2016). According to Tudge et al. (2016), Bronfenbrenner claimed that research using ecological systems theory must include a focus on the proximal processes that are involved and that these processes are driven by characteristics of both the individual and the context. The effect of interaction between the four elements is reciprocal (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Framing the developmental student years in an ecological systems theory is relevant, as proximal processes are claimed to be the drivers of development (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1993). The meaning and relevance of proximal processes became especially apparent in the event of the COVID-19 pandemic. One example is the interaction between the individual and their surroundings (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022). This interaction was undoubtedly altered during lockdown. Another context that influenced development, where individual attributes affect the way the student responds to the environment, would also be relevant in the way that students responded to and handled the new situation. The third component that influenced development, the surroundings, was changed at all levels, micro, meso, exo, and macro. Additionally, the fourth component, time, which consists of both chronological time and events, was changed. The lockdown event caused a change in teaching. This

change may have affected lecturers and altered the connectedness between students and academic staff (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022).

Empowerment

Empowerment is a fundamental part and one of the primary goals for health promotion and was a driving concept in the Ottawa Charter (Koelen & Lindström, 2005; Spencer, 2015; World Health Organization, 1986). At this time, there was a need to make the individual and its environment a more active part of health promotion (Tveiten, 2020). The origin of the concept of empowerment was to focus on peoples' abilities rather than their deficits, and motivation, change and/or transitions are a driving force towards empowerment (Halvorsen et al., 2020). Scholars have argued that the literature on empowerment has no broad agreement concerning the basic principles of the concept and lacks conceptual clarity (Joseph, 2020; Koelen & Lindström, 2005). However, there seems to be a coherent view on empowerment as a tool that contributes to the transformation from disenfranchisement to awareness of peoples' own strengths and the dynamics of power (Joseph, 2020).

In the process of transition from a childhood environment to a more independent existence as a student, the process of empowerment may be a useful frame in which to discuss what promotes mental health in student life. A basic element in empowerment is to view people as active subjects who will know their own needs and wants when it is facilitated (Askheim, 2007). Concepts of relevance in empowerment are described as themes such as improvement in quality of life and a participatory relationship, and they enable a sense of mastery and control (Halvorsen et al., 2020). Additionally, other factors may influence the empowerment of an individual, such as locus of control and learned helplessness (Koelen & Lindström, 2005). According to Tengland (2016), empowering people can have long-lasting effects on health; thus, having an empowering approach in this transitional time of life may affect students not only in their student life but also in their future life as professionals, family members and members of a community. Additionally, an empowering approach in mental health promotion means both changing the social and structural drivers for mental health and strengthening the individuals' ability to cope with stressors (Askheim, 2007). This makes the

concept relevant when discussing students' mental health as they transition into a new and unfamiliar everyday life.

Halvorsen et al. (2020) suggests three principles with an empowering focus that can be drawn from the Ottawa charter: redistribution of power, participation, and the individual as an expert on him/herself. Additionally, elements of empowerment, such as strengthening self-determination, enabling mastery, control and competencies, and change (Halvorsen et al., 2020), are attributes that are clearly linked to health promotion and adhere to different understandings of health promotion, such as well-being. In the context of this thesis, empowerment can be seen as a process, rather than a goal, as students are in a process of being empowered through their maturation into adult life. The empowering process views individuals as active and participating, making students' contributions highly relevant. Feeling empowered is closely related to a feeling of being in control (Koelen & Lindström, 2005). A new life as a student, with all its changes and uncertainties, may challenge this feeling and create a need to empower students to make choices that promote mental health.

Empowerment has been criticized for focusing on power and leaving out other important assets for human beings, such as love and compassion. Additionally, when redistributing power, it may lead to others being deprived of their power (Buchanan, 2000). Buchanan (2000) claims that "power to" is inevitably related to "power over," that a distinction is only conceptual, and that these two aspects are inseparable in practical terms. Tengland (2016), however, argues that there might be reasons for this redistribution of power; thus, it is not necessarily problematic. In the context of this thesis, investigating students' own experiences on what promotes mental health may be seen as an empowering approach, where redistribution of power lies within giving students an opportunity to describe what promotes mental health in student life, thus increasing their potential ability to make mental health-promoting choices. Another dimension of empowerment that has been criticized is the assumption that the understanding of health is universal (Spencer, 2015). This assumption underlines the importance of listening to the students' own voices in investigating what promotes mental health in their student life.

Investigating what empowers students towards flourishing is relevant, as a search for literature on students and empowerment gave scarce results. Mousavi et al. (2018) recommends that graduate programs value students' empowerment and recognize students as driving forces for the improvement of mental health.

In summary, the phenomenon of mental health promotion in student life may be discussed within different theoretical frameworks to obtain a wide perspective on the phenomenon of student and mental health promotion. Combining an ecological systems approach as described by Bronfenbrenner (1979) to student life with the focus on resources in salutogenesis (Antonovsky, 1979, 1987) and how to empower students may create valuable knowledge on students and mental health promotion as a phenomenon, both under normal circumstances and during the COVID-19 lockdown. The ecological model approaches the structures of student life and the different levels that affect students in their everyday life and is therefore of relevance. In a transitional time of life, investigating how to strengthen students' resources and what resources may be most appropriate is important. Additionally, investigating how to empower students is relevant to strengthening student voices. Thus, the three theoretical approaches cover the most relevant way of discussing students' mental health from a health-promoting perspective.

Project aims

The overall aim of the study is to explore how students perceive student life as promoting mental health. The specific aims of the three studies are as follows:

Study I: To explore how first-year students in university perceive student life as promoting mental health and well-being (I)

Study II: To describe students' lived experiences of how student life promoted mental health and wellbeing in everyday life under various degrees of lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic (II)

Study III: To describe students' experiences of student life that are beneficial to mental health (III)

All three studies contribute to research on students and mental health from a health-promoting perspective. Seeing the phenomenon of students' mental health with different approaches and from different angles may lead to a wider understanding of the phenomenon.

Methods

A qualitative, in-depth approach that considers the whole context in which students live their lives and what contributes to positive mental health seems relevant. A qualitative design was used in all three studies.

Design

This thesis consists of three different studies of students and ways of promoting their mental health (Table 1):

Table 1: Overview of the three studies included in this thesis

Study	Design	Participants	Data collection	Analysis
I	Explorative	20 first-year students	Interview	Phenomenography
II	Descriptive	12 students in years 1-5	Interview	Phenomenology
III	Descriptive	171 students in years 1-5	Written descriptions in Sensemaker	Thematic analysis

From an ontological perspective, this thesis is founded on the idea that context is socially constructed, and it also asserts that human experiences are perpetually influenced by the environment in which we live our lives. As described by Bronfenbrenner (1979), context is based on several interconnected settings formed by the people involved in the different levels in the environment, affecting each other mutually. Employing the social constructivist paradigm as an epistemological basis for this thesis suggests that knowledge is produced in the context in which we live our lives and in the interaction between individuals (students) and their surroundings (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). The quality reform in higher education (Meld. St. 27 (2001-2003)) stated a need for a more student-active approach to learning and presented a scope for higher education based on a social constructivist and sociocultural view on learning; thus, it may be suggested that this is a relevant approach to investigating mental health in student life.

The social constructivist approach in this thesis implies a belief that knowledge is produced in social interaction, and the phenomenon should therefore be qualitatively investigated. This is reflected through a focus on the experiences of students across all three studies and through in-depth interviews with the participants in the first and second studies. The third study investigates students' own descriptions of their experiences based on written data; thus, this knowledge is not produced in social interaction. However, the constructionist approach, when applying thematic analysis, focuses on the social structures in which the individual is experiencing the phenomenon, not on the individual (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Hence, a social constructivist approach can also be claimed in the third study, although it is not based on social interaction in the data collection.

In cases in which little research has been conducted, qualitative methods may be appropriate for mapping an area, and this method is often described as investigative (Moen and Middelthon, 2015). One characteristic of qualitative research is that it seeks to discover, investigate and develop new theories (Flick, 2018). It is also an appropriate way to deepen the findings of quantitative research (Black, 1994). As quantitative research concerning student health and well-being is a central component of the background of this thesis, it seems relevant to deepen our understanding of this phenomenon by using qualitative methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Method description

To achieve a broad understanding of students' perceptions of mental health promotion in student life, the three studies employed different approaches to the phenomenon. The first study aimed to explore variation in the students' perceptions of mental health promotion in student life (I). The second study aimed to describe students' lived experiences of how student life promoted mental health and wellbeing in everyday life under various degrees of lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic (II). The third study aimed to describe students' experiences of student life that are beneficial to mental health (III). Investigating the phenomenon of mental health promotion in student life with three different methods, phenomenography, phenomenology, and thematic analysis, allows different perspectives on the phenomenon (Moen and Middelthon, 2015). While phenomenography can offer a variety of descriptions of the phenomenon, phenomenology will provide enlightenment by describing the essence, and thematic analysis will reveal a broad range of themes regarding students' descriptions of mental health promotion in student life.

Phenomenography

In Study I, seeking variation was relevant to the task of exploring the phenomenon and the different ways in which students experience mental health promotion in their everyday life. When investigating a field with scarce research, phenomenography seems relevant for attempting to grasp the width of how the phenomenon is experienced (Larsson & Holmström, 2007). Focusing on first-year students and mental health promotion, investigating variation in experiences was of particular relevance, as students are transitioning from a variety of backgrounds and may not yet have been fully integrated into the student community (Cage et al., 2021). The variations are described on a collective level.

Phenomenography as described by Dahlgren and Fallsberg (1991) was applied for this study. In phenomenography, research is distinguished by whether it focuses on first-order or second-order perspectives (Marton & Booth, 2013). Regarding first-order perspectives, the aim is to describe what something truly is. However, phenomenography focuses on the second-order perspective, which

aims to describe peoples' experiences and the ways in which they perceive a phenomenon (Marton & Booth, 2013). The second-order perspective in this study focused on the ways in which students perceive student life as promoting mental health and well-being.

Phenomenography regards the situation as distinct from the phenomenon (Marton & Booth, 2013). However, the situation and the phenomenon are intertwined. While the phenomenon clearly exists within a situation, the experience also does not appear in a vacuum or as detached from earlier experiences. Therefore, the phenomenon and the situation cannot be detached from one another (Marton & Booth, 2013). Accordingly, the phenomenon of mental health promotion in student life is affected not only by the students' various experiences but also by the situation in which it is experienced.

Phenomenology

The second study employed a qualitative, descriptive research design using phenomenology as described by (Collaizzi, 1978). The aim of phenomenology is to describe the essence of the manner in which a phenomenon is experienced (Collaizzi, 1978). Collaizzi (1978) highlights the necessity of investigating human experiences using a method that considers the experience as it is experienced. Collaizzi suggests that this task requires a descriptive approach. He also claims that there is not one particular phenomenological method but rather several methods, depending on the phenomenon under investigation and the aims and objectives of the researcher (Collaizzi, 1978). According to Collaizzi, the researcher's opinion on the value of his or her research influences the approach that the researcher takes to the project. First, I should ask myself why I am interested in this phenomenon. How do I influence or bias the phenomenon, and how do I investigate the phenomenon? The ideal is for the researcher to abandon his or her own lived reality and to describe the phenomenon in its purest sense, a process called bracketing (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Collaizzi (1978) claims that the researcher's influence cannot be eliminated. Therefore, the researcher's presuppositions should be thoroughly examined.

Due to the lack of knowledge regarding the ways in which students coped with the lockdown and the fact that this situation was completely novel, the use of descriptive phenomenology in this second study was relevant to capture the essence of the students' experiences through the first-person perspective or lived experiences (Larsson & Holmström, 2007).

Thematic analysis

The third study (III) used thematic analysis, and specifically, the approach known as reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Thematic analysis is recommended for analysing description materials (Vaismoradi et al., 2013) and is relevant to the study of students' written descriptions regarding their positive experiences with student life.

Thematic analysis is regarded as a flexible method and requires a rigorous approach from researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Researchers should be clear regarding what they are doing and why they are doing it, and they should adopt a stringent approach to the steps of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Thematic analysis emphasizes the context in which a phenomenon occurs and develops themes based on both latent and manifest meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes are developed by reading through the entire dataset several times to obtain a sense of the whole and then constructing themes that represent findings that express key components of the research question at hand (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). According to Braun and Clarke (2019), a researcher is never fully capable of being completely free from presumptions. The coding is therefore to some extent influenced by the researchers' standpoints and values, which makes clarity in the process paramount (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Recruitment

All participants in the three studies were recruited from a university in Norway with approximately 45,000 students.

In Study I, students were recruited from three different campuses at the end of lectures. First-year students were chosen because they were believed to have other descriptions about mental health promotion than the students who had more time to establish in a student situation. To reach as many students as possible, lecturers in three different study programs that had large groups of students attending lectures were contacted. During this short session at the end of a lecture, students were informed about the project and asked to participate. Students who were interested in participating received supplementary information via email. Forty-four students were interested. Twenty-two participants were strategically selected from this group, and twenty interviews were conducted with these participants.

In Study II, a post featuring information regarding the study was shared on my Facebook page. Facebook contacts were asked to distribute the post to their networks. Students who were interested in participating received an email with further information. In addition, students who wanted to participate in Study I but were not admitted were contacted by email and asked whether they wanted to participate in this study. All participants received a letter of consent to sign electronically. In this study, students were recruited from various programmes and students with different student tenures, ages, and genders were also recruited to ensure sufficient variety. Due to the novelty of students, mental health and COVID-19 as a phenomenon in research at the time of the study, both first-year students and more experienced students were selected to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

In Study III, posters about the *In my experience* project were put up on campus by students and employers working for the project to recruit students to write about their experiences. Students were also recruited via social media and through recommendations from friends and students who were employed by the *In my experience* project.

Participants

The university from which the participants in the three studies (I, II, III) were recruited exhibited high scores on overall satisfaction in the Student Health and Wellbeing study (Knapstad et al., 2018). The university offers a wide range of study programmes, such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics), psychology, pedagogy, nursing, art, and linguistics, and its study programmes are distributed across several campuses.

In Study I, the inclusion criteria were that the participants had relocated for their studies and that they were in their first year as students. Twenty-two students aged between 19–28 from each of the three study programmes were selected to ensure sufficient variety. Two interviews were cancelled, one due to a misunderstanding when scheduling the interview and one due to technical problems with the recorder. This resulted in a total of twenty students participating in the study. Regarding gender, six men and fourteen women were interviewed. Seven participants studied psychology either as a one-year study programme or to obtain a bachelor's degree. Seven participants studied STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), while six studied medicine. Participants were recruited from different study programs to ensure variation. Different ages and different campuses also contributed to variation in the participants` backgrounds.

In Study II, three male and nine female students participated. The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 24 years. The participants had been studying for 1-5 years, and the length of their study programmes ranged from 5 to 6 years. The inclusion criterion was that they had relocated for their studies. The participants were studying medicine, engineering, or pedagogy.

In Study III, participants were asked to share an experience using the Sensemaker web program, a program that allows students to anonymously share an experience that has been meaningful to them in their student life. When sharing an experience on the web page, they also categorized their experience with several variables, such as the frequency of the experience, their age, their study program, housing situation, etc.

After receiving the dataset as an Excel file from the project management, the data were filtered. The inclusion criteria were agreed upon by the three authors of the article who were involved in planning the study. The inclusion criteria for this study were that they had relocated to attend university and were between 18 and 29 years of age. The participants included both graduate and postgraduate students who had been studying for 1-5 years. Only descriptions the participants marked as a positive or very positive experience were selected due to the health promotion and resource focus of the study. In addition, the participants categorized their experience as not related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the participants, 149 were female, and 21 were male. One participant did not wish to answer the question regarding gender.

Data collection

Data were collected from January 2020 to October 2021.

Study I

Interviews were conducted on campus. The participants chose the timeslot and the campus that was most suitable for them. The interviews lasted between 34 and 60 minutes each. The median duration of the interviews was approximately 45 minutes.

The interviews started by presenting the study. The participants were reminded of the following research question: How do first-year students in university perceive student life as promoting mental health and well-being? Initially, the students were asked the following question: "Can you describe your student life with a focus on how you perceive it as promoting mental health and well-being?" Based on what the students described, follow-up questions included "Can you describe this in more detail?" "Can you explain this?" "Can you tell me more about that?" and "Is it always this way?" If the

participants did not describe the topics of mental health and well-being unprompted, the subject was raised.

Study II

The data collection was conducted via Microsoft Teams. The participants were interviewed individually. The interviews lasted between 25 and 48 minutes each. All interviews were conducted with a camera, but only sound was recorded using a voice recorder, and the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The median duration of the interviews was approximately 35 minutes.

Initially, students were asked the following question: "Can you describe what you think has been good for your mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic?" The students' answers were followed up with additional questions to obtain a deeper understanding, such as "Can you tell me more about that?". Follow-up questions could also include "Can you please describe what a good day has looked like for you during lockdown?" or "Can you describe what you would recommend to other students in a similar situation?"

Study III

The increased focus on students' mental health has led to a number of projects with the aim of promoting mental health and wellbeing in students. One of these projects is *In my experience*, a project by the student welfare organization in the Norwegian university city of Trondheim that aims to gain more knowledge about what causes students to *feel good, thrive, feel successful and experience a meaningful life* (In my experience, 2019). Based on data collected in this project, other projects have been developed, such as the Greenhouse (Drivhuset), a café and cultural scene in Trondheim, the development of the Students' 12 Sustainable Development Goals, *In my experience* ambassadors, workshops and more.

A web-based tool called Sensemaker was used to collect data. Sensemaker allows students to write about an experience that has impacted their student life positively or negatively. It also allows the

participants to interpret and categorize their own experiences regarding measures such as feeling and motivation. The management of the *In my experience* project invited the author of this thesis to analyse the data collected through Sensemaker. The aim of this process was to describe students' written descriptions of positive experiences in their lives. Description has been defined in a range of different ways, often depending on which discipline the research is conducted (Riessman, 2008). In this thesis, description refers to a research participant's written answer to a single question. The length of the descriptions varied from one to 1143 words; however, most descriptions varied between 30 and 100 words.

Data analysis

Three different qualitative methods for analysing data were used. In Studies I and II, the analysis was facilitated using NVivo software.

Study I

In the first study, Dahlgren and Fallsberg's sequence of activities for analysing phenomenographic studies was utilized (Dahlgren & Fallsberg, 1991). Dahlgren and Fallsberg (1991) describe the phenomenographic process in terms of seven steps. The first step is called 1) familiarization. During the familiarization step, all interviews were read thoroughly to obtain an impression of the data at hand. In the second step, 2) condensation, the data were condensed, meaning that all meaningful statements that were representative of the dialogue were selected, and a pool of meaning was constructed based on the selected utterances. In the third step, 3) comparison, meaningful statements were compared to uncover differences and similarities. In the fourth step, 4) grouping, statements that were similar were grouped together. In the fifth step, 5) articulating, which is what Dahlgren and Fallsberg (1991) describes as a process of delineating the essence of resemblance within each group, the similarities in attributes within each group were described. This process resulted in five conceptions. According to Marton and Booth (2013), categories are a group of different ways that a phenomenon is experienced. Together, the categories are called the outcome space. In the sixth step of the analysis, 6) labelling, the categories were labelled to underline the essence of each category. The final step, 7) contrasting, consisted of comparisons among the

categories with the aim of detecting differences and similarities to ensure that the categories were mutually exclusive.

A critical and flexible view of the categories was adopted continually to determine whether the content was interchangeable. As the steps were related, constant movement between the steps was necessary. A focus on the collective experience was ensured by including all statements that could enlighten us regarding the research question in the same file in NVivo. Categorization of the data was performed based on this collective file.

Study II

The analysis associated with the second study was conducted using Collaizzi's method of analysis (Collaizzi, 1978). This method consists of seven steps. The first six steps were applied in the analysis. 1) The subjects' descriptions were read thoroughly to familiarize with the content. 2) Significant statements were marked and extracted. 3) Meanings were determined based on the significant statements, which were then categorized into various groups of meanings. 4) The meanings were compared to the data to determine whether they represented the data. Based on reflections and discussion among the four authors of the study, the meanings were clustered into two themes reflecting the overall descriptions of the phenomenon. According to Collaizzi (1978), the themes must be common for all participants in the study and must be rooted in the original stories of the participants. 5) An exhaustive description of students' perceptions of the aspects of student life that promoted mental health was developed. 6) The exhaustive descriptions were condensed into a short statement that captured the essence of the participants' perceptions of the phenomenon to produce a fundamental structure. 7) The seventh step recommended by Collaizzi (1978) was not conducted. Collaizzi recommends returning the results to the participants to ensure that they capture their experience. However, the descriptions were compared to the original data to ensure that the results captured the participants' experiences.

Study III

The data used in the third study consisted of 171 written descriptions that were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) description of the six steps of thematic analysis. The first step was to become familiar with the data to obtain an impression of the content. During this process, notes were taken as a first step in the discovery of ideas regarding relevant codes. The second step was creating the codes, and utterances that seemed meaningful for investigating the phenomenon of students and mental health promotion were grouped. An ordinary sheet of paper was used for this purpose. Utterances were numbered, and codes were subsequently created during the process of finding meaningful utterances and based on the content of the utterances. In step three, the codes were organized into themes. Some claim that interpretation in research starts in the initial phase of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For this study, phase three is where interpretation started, with identifying similar codes that form broader themes. In step four, the themes were reviewed and revised to ensure that they matched the data. In this process, a change was required in some of the themes. In step five, the themes were named according to their content and the manner in which they related to the research theme. Based on these themes, in step six, extracts from the data were chosen to illustrate the prevalence of the themes. It was useful to preserve the research question as a headline in the dataset during the analysis as a reminder when exploring the data to extract the relevant meanings.

Ethical considerations

The studies were conducted in accordance with the research ethics guidelines of the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013), the research ethics guidelines of the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committee (Norwegian national research ethics committees, 2019) and the Committee on Publication Ethics' International Standards for Authors (Wager & Kleinert, 2014). The data collection processes used for Studies I and II were approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD reference 873991) and were taped, coded, and stored in accordance with the relevant research ethics regulations. In the third study, students were informed on the web page before submitting their description that the data may be used for research. Principles of research ethics such as beneficence, nonmaleficence, autonomy and justice (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001) were followed throughout the research process.

The participants were reminded that the focus was on mental health promotion and not mental health problems while being informed about the project both in the written information and at the start of the interview. Although it was important to keep focus on the phenomenon under investigation, allowing the discussion of poor mental health in relation to mental health promotion might have given even fuller data.

The principles of beneficence and nonmaleficence

Before the first data collection process began, the research group had a discussion with the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, as the Centre questioned whether the project involved the collection of sensitive data about mental health. We argued that the focus of the study was salutogenic and that we would not be asking about mental health problems. As the participants were given thorough information regarding the background and focus of the interviews beforehand, this issue did not become a problem during the interviews. There was no system for professional follow-up after the interviews. However, the participants were informed that they were welcome to contact the interviewer afterwards if they had questions or second thoughts. If a participant began discussing mental health problems, they were reminded that the focus of the interview was on health promotion.

The participants were not considered to be a vulnerable group; thus, measures towards user involvement in the research process were not considered relevant. However, user involvement was to some extent conducted by using open questions that were not predetermined but constructed as a follow-up of the participant's utterances. The participants were free to express their voices and opinions on the subject at any time. Additionally, a study design with one introductory question followed by questions such as "Can you describe this in more detail?" "Can you explain this?" and "Can you tell me more about that?" gave the students a wide opportunity to be involved in the production of knowledge.

Participation in the studies was not considered to create any risk for the participants. In contrast, participation could be seen as an opportunity to reflect on their own everyday life and the measures that could contribute to a mentally healthy student life and to contribute to the research field. This was also highlighted by several participants, who emphasized the fact that participating in the study gave them the opportunity to reflect on their own perceptions regarding what they found to promote mental health. Thus, participating in the interviews could be regarded as beneficial.

The data used in Studies I and II were stored in files that were encrypted with a password and made accessible only to the research team. Consent forms were stored in a locked drawer or a password-protected email account; they were made accessible only to the first author. The data used in Study III were anonymous and kept in an encrypted file on a password-protected computer.

The principle of autonomy

In the first and second studies (I and II), the participants were given an information letter regarding the project, the first author's background and previous research, the storage of data, anonymity, and a contact person in case of questions. This information was repeated orally before the interview. Furthermore, participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that their data would be deleted. Consent was voluntary, explicit, and informed. The participants signed a letter of consent. In the third study (III), the written descriptions were submitted anonymously. When logging into the *In my experience* website and prior to submitting an experience, the students were required to consent to the sharing of their data with researchers, and they were asked not to use names or other information that could reveal one's identity.

Forty-four students volunteered to participate in the first study. The participants were selected strategically. The recruitment process aimed to recruit the same number of participants from the four study programmes. Students who were not included as participants received an email explaining the limitations of the study and asking whether they would be interested in participating in another study for the same PhD project. Students who consented to this request were later contacted and asked whether they wanted to participate in Study II.

Main findings

This section presents a synthesis of the main findings of the three studies. The knowledge drawn from the three studies can contribute to a broader understanding of mental health promotion in student life. The phenomenon was approached in different contexts; however, the focus on promoting student mental health can be assumed to be common to all three studies. The themes that emerged in the analysis, a sense of belonging, a sense of support and a sense of finding myself, include a variety of concepts. Small groups can be viewed as a theme that permeates all measures and dimensions that influence a sense of belonging, a sense of support and a sense of finding myself.

The findings exhibit a developmental structure (finding myself) with regard to students' needs in the context of facilitating mental health promotion. This structure was especially described in Study III but could also be found in Studies I and II. The findings should therefore be considered from a developmental perspective, as the experiences of student life that are beneficial for mental health are related not only to the start of a new life but also to the personal development that the students experience in finding their true selves.

A sense of belonging

One of the main findings that persisted across all three studies (I, II, III) was the phenomenon of belonging. The students expressed their need to belong similarly in Studies I and III. Although

belonging as a concept was not expressed concretely in data collected by the second study (II), adjacent themes such as *meeting someone* were highlighted. Themes such as *being welcomed* and *feeling included* are strongly associated with a feeling of belonging. Having a sense of belonging to a person or a group was regarded as important in social terms, in academic terms, or in both.

Feeling welcomed was a dimension of the belonging concept that was particularly highlighted in the third study (III). Feeling welcomed could be related to the introduction week, when leaders created a welcoming environment for the introduction week groups. Feeling welcomed was mentioned in the context of being welcomed into student society groups, study program associations, and other civic engagement groups. It was also essential for university staff to make students feel welcomed. An overall feeling of being wished well by peers and university staff was regarded as important (III).

Belonging was described as essential both at the start of student life and later (I, II, III). Initially, the introduction week (sponsorship week) was regarded as a fundamental first step for creating networks and was viewed as important for both personal reasons and with regard to the social environment in class (III). The introduction week was described as an appropriate starting point for creating social groups to facilitate belonging in all three studies (I, II, III). It was not only regarded as a fun and easy way of making new acquaintances but was also used for strategic purposes. Many social groups were constructed during the introduction week, and it was regarded as strategically necessary to participate in these groups to find a place in the corresponding social networks (I).

The introduction week could make students feel welcome and create a sense of belonging to a group (III). However, participants also underlined the fact that it was important to be patient because social groups were not necessarily created during the first, introductory week but could also emerge later in other settings (I). The introduction week could also be a demanding form of socializing for students who did not consume alcohol. Students reported that during the introduction week, they found someone with whom to go to lectures, which was a starting point for establishing a network at the university (I). The mentors or introduction week leaders played a crucial role in the welcoming process by making the new students feel as if they belonged to the group and easing the process of making new friendships and establishing a welcoming social environment in class (I, II).

A sense of belonging could also be created in the study setting through study groups, PBL groups, etc. Engagement in student society was also an important contributor to the feeling of belonging. In the third study, participation in student societies was a measure that was regarded as paramount to the creation of a sense of belonging (III). A variety of options were available for leisure time pursuits, for example, volleyball, discussion groups, theatre groups and study-related groups. The sense of belonging was created by performing activities with someone with similar interests and thereby belonging to a group (III). Through student societies or study program associations, new friendships were established. Finding like-minded people with similar interests was described as creating a sense of belonging.

In Study II, COVID offered a different context that put pressure on the need to experience a sense of belonging, as there were changes to the arenas in which a sense of belonging could be created. However, these findings (II) highlight the importance of the concept of belonging. In marginalized circumstances, the importance of having a sense of belonging became clearer. The students in the second study (II) highlighted the importance of meeting someone, preferably every day. The question of whether the meeting was held in real life or digitally was of less importance. Meeting someone could be regarded as closely related to the concept of belonging, as such meetings satisfy the need to be seen by someone else. However, the need for belonging might also have been less important than expected for some individuals during the pandemic, as some students found that they functioned better in greater seclusion than they would expect in normal student life. It may be concluded that this experience also pertains to students' expectations and that their expectations were altered during the pandemic, as the need for belonging was one of the most important findings of the other studies (I, III). During lockdown, belonging could also refer to belonging to a cohort that, in addition to a sense of belonging, offered a sense of predictability. Meeting with the same group on a regular basis was regarded as highly important during a time of great uncertainty.

A sense of support

Support was highlighted in all three studies in various forms (I, II, III). In the first study, the participants described support as related both to the university as a facilitator of good mental health

and to supportive family and friends. Such support could be both financial and materialistic, such as parents' gifts of food or financial support. Students also described psychological support, such as parents who were proud of their achievements and proud of their role as students. This finding applied both to students who had highly educated parents and to students whose parents had little or no education. Students with highly educated parents described parents who supported their children's choice to pursue university education, while students with less educated parents described support from parents who did not have the same opportunity when growing up (I).

Support from university staff was also described as crucial (I, II, III). Such support could be related to a feeling of support from university staff who cared about the students and were involved in their progress and well-being (I, II, III). Additionally, support was regarded as the result of being part of an academic community or having one's ideas taken seriously by academic staff (III). Feeling support from the university was also related to the ways in which the study programmes were organized. Study programmes that were organized in a comprehensible way and had a well-coordinated time schedule as well as study space on campus were viewed as important.

The organization of the study programme was also highlighted as beneficial for mental health in the normally highly competitive medicine study programme, which was associated with high grades (I). This programme was organized to feature no grades, and instead, was offered as a pass/fail course, which the students described as encouraging noncompetitive and more supportive study attitudes among students. When the programme featured no competition, students developed attitudes of wishing each other the best (I). Other organizational dimensions, such as a well-coordinated time schedule, available space for group work that allowed students to interact with other students and predictable expectations from academic staff, were also highlighted (I). During the lockdown, some students found mandatory digital lectures to be supportive when trying to create routines, while others wanted more flexibility (I). Overall, creating an everyday routine was regarded as supportive in the context of a new everyday life that featured little or no demand for structure from students' social or academic surroundings (II).

In the context of lockdown, support was described mainly in terms of support from family, which was expressed as "calling my mother" (II). Although this form of support was also described as a response to the need for a break from monotonous everyday life, it was explicitly the mother who was called. This fact suggests a supportive dimension to the concept of calling my mother. Meeting someone was also described as a need that clearly has a supportive dimension. Establishing a cohort during the lockdown could serve as a supportive network that was regarded as crucial (II). The significance of creating routines was an important finding of the second study. The main contribution of such routines was described as the presence of something to hold on to and the production of a sense of normality (II). This contribution can also be adjacent to support, as the creation of routines may be viewed as creating a framework for oneself that helps structure one's everyday life in the context of an unstructured existence.

Having a supportive housing arrangement was also highlighted (III). Some lived with people whom they knew before relocating to study, while others found housemates/roommates during their studies. Students reported that they regarded their housemates as family, which clearly adds a supportive dimension to housing arrangements. Some students needed to try different housing arrangements to find their preferred way of living, and through that process, they came to know themselves better. The family dimension of the housing arrangement offered a sense of both belonging and support.

A process of finding myself

Student life was described as a time of life that features a clear developmental dimension. Moving from a home in which the people and surroundings are familiar to a new place where one has only a limited or no network, which also features different housing arrangements, new nomenclature, and the need to manage one's own life for the first time, is a major transition for students. This time of life is also when one develops to become one's adult self and the person who one is supposed to be as an adult in the context of work life, family life and community life. In all three studies, students described the manner in which they came to know themselves and their own needs and preferences better (I, II, III).

The process of becoming me focuses on developing and maturing as an adult as well as being recognized as an adult and a professional person. This is clearly linked to the theme of belonging. Students highlighted the positive experiences of being taken seriously as professionals by academic staff in their study programmes (III). When students' ideas sparked interest from academic staff, this situation improved the students' self-confidence and helped them find their own direction. It was also regarded as highly motivating and enabled students to clarify their own academic and professional preferences.

Being part of student society groups was also described as a developmental process of finding one's own identity. By seeing their own preferences in a different light and in different surroundings, the students had the opportunity to recognize their own identities and to change their perspectives. These groups also represented an arena in which students could manage new challenges that were regarded as helpful for their development (III).

The new start that was offered to students when they relocated to study gave them the opportunity to view their own needs and preferences from a new and freer perspective. It also offered students the opportunity to escape their childhood boundaries as the influence of their childhood friends and family members weakened (III). Both positive and negative experiences provided an opportunity for a change in perspective. Old relationships were also affected by the new start that students experienced with regard to finding friends and networks with the same interests and preferences. The process of establishing new friendships was viewed by some students as the most positive experience associated with becoming a student. Friendships that had been established when starting as a student were regarded as lifelong (III). Additionally, ending old relationships could be a part of the process of *becoming me*, as break-ups required students to redefine themselves and thoroughly reconsider their own needs and preferences.

During lockdown, the arenas in which students could establish new networks and friendships were limited. However, the participants also reported that time spent in lockdown was an opportunity to discover what their needs were. In a marginalized social situation, they were forced to prioritize, and they may have found that their social needs differed from their previous expectations. The lockdown

situation forced students to find alternative ways of socializing and to consider the basic needs of their social life. Although the process of finding myself was viewed as important in all three studies, the lockdown situation clarified students' essential needs and might have accelerated this process.

To achieve maturation and development both personally and academically, students' own initiative was regarded as important (I, II, III), as was the ability of partner entities such as student welfare organizations, student societies and university staff to offer situations in which students could manage new situations and have novel experiences within a safe environment (I, II, III).

Small groups as facilitators

Small groups were an arena in which students could both feel a sense of belonging and support according to the findings of all three studies. Small groups were described as promoting a sense of belonging and lowering the threshold for making new acquaintances. The creation of small groups was viewed as key to the task of attaining a sense of belonging and a sense of support. These groups could be formal or informal and could be organized by study programmes or purely social. In all three studies (I, II, III), student societies and civic engagement were highlighted as essential to the creation of small groups, both as a place to belong and as a source of support. Overall, small groups were viewed both as an umbrella that allowed students to attain belonging and support and as an arena that allowed them to develop into more mature selves.

Small groups could take a variety of forms and could be created spontaneously by the students themselves, organized by university staff, or established by the study programme and student societies or study program associations. Small groups could be formal or informal arrangements over either the long or short term. The role of small groups as facilitators of a sense of belonging and a sense of support were highlighted in all three studies (I, II, III).

The manner in which the study programme was organized was one of the findings pertaining to the importance of small groups. Some study programmes organized different kinds of learning groups,

such as problem-based learning groups, practical training learning groups and learning groups led by senior students functioning as tutors. These learning groups were regarded as a socially safe arena and contributed to students' perceptions of closeness to other students in the study programme. The groups were viewed as both academic and social facilitators. Organizing the programme schedule to facilitate group events was regarded as a contributor to the establishment of a more inclusive community in the study programmes (I).

Introduction week groups were also regarded as highly important by the participants (I, II, III) and facilitated the establishment of a welcoming social environment in the study programme (II). During lockdown, the opportunity to belong to small groups or to seek support from them was altered (II). Students had less freedom to establish and maintain small groups than normal. This situation demanded new structures pertaining to students' ability to socialize and work together. Creating small groups in this setting was described as necessary, as small groups could encourage more rigorous working habits and help students structure their day. Small groups could also function as a social cohort that allowed students to meet their needs for social interaction during lockdown. Thus, a cohort that met every day could accommodate both social and academic needs (II).

Student societies and civic engagement were generally viewed as important measures in all three studies. Student society groups were a place to belong and to seek support, and they led to the creation of communities in which students could feel included and meet based on their common interests across study programmes and academic interests, although some student societies were established based on a particular study programme or a certain area of academic interest. Among student societies, study program associations were important groups that allowed students who belonged to the same study programme to gather for both academic and social purposes. The threshold for joining study program associations was low (none); other student societies differed in terms of their degrees of openness and inclusion; they were mainly open to everyone, but some such societies required a try-out session. Participants in the second study claimed there was always a group in which everyone could be included (II).

Summary of findings

Processes for promoting students' mental health were described by the participants in various ways and in various contexts. A sense of belonging and a sense of support were the main themes; these senses could best be facilitated through the establishment of small groups. The students described both academic and social settings that were relevant to achieving a sense of belonging, and small groups were arranged in both formal and informal settings for different purposes. Student societies were the most highlighted approach in this context. Students described the process of finding a place to belong alongside other students with similar interests and preferences. Additionally, feeling welcomed by the academic community and having one's ideas and thoughts recognized by academic staff were aspects that were regarded as essential. Organization of the study programme was also regarded as important, as each programme was organized in a way that facilitated the establishment of social networks and groups that contributed to the emergence of an academically fruitful environment within its confines.

Support was regarded as important to mental health, and to promote mental health, the creation of supportive environments was viewed as crucial. An inclusive and supportive environment can help students *find themselves*. A supportive environment can be created or found in the context of family and peers both financially and psychologically. Such an environment can also be found in interactions with university staff and the manner in which the study programmes are organized as well as in housing arrangements. Accordingly, it is useful to adopt a broad perspective concerning where and how students may find support.

During lockdown, the students' need for a sense of belonging and a sense of support became clearer. Students needed to be more thorough with regard to recognizing what their needs were, as access to social networks was limited. They were also required to be more active in the establishment of a social network. Students' everyday routines with lectures and a premade time schedule were diminished, which also provided them with the opportunity to reflect on their own needs in terms of their working habits and the need for routines in their everyday lives as students. Although lockdown was difficult for many students, it also represented an opportunity to accelerate the process of *finding myself*.

Although small groups seem to be fundamental with regard to facilitating the establishment of new friends and networks, students in all three studies highlighted their need to be active and take initiative. During lockdown, adapting to the situation required initiative from the students. The first study (I) concludes that students should be open, active, and participatory and that they should be engaged in the task of creating a good student life. Additionally, they should be active in establishing a network and friendships to ensure that they have a supportive environment and can feel a sense of belonging.
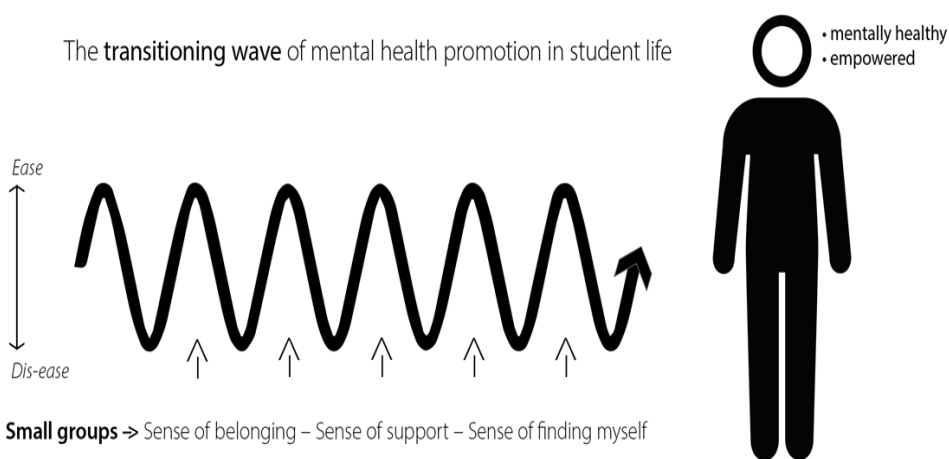
Figure 1: The transitioning wave of mental health promotion in student life

The transitioning wave of mental health promotion in student life shows the movement towards a mentally healthy and empowered student life. The ups and downs of the wave movement show the challenges and joys of students' lives, and a sense of belonging, a sense of support and a sense of finding myself causes peaks in the wave in the student experience of the developmental journey. Small groups may be seen as a catalyst for achieving a sense of belonging, a sense of support and a sense of finding myself. The wave movement is also driven by a sense of coherence, following the students' movements on an ease-disease continuum. Although the wave fluctuates, students may be mentally healthy.

The student years are a time of great transition on many levels. In this thesis, students who relocate to study are considered, as the process of transitioning and adapting to a new network and environment can offer a different viewpoint on the phenomenon than for those who do not relocate. Throughout this transition, students find themselves in a novel situation without many of their familiar surroundings. When students enter a transitional phase in which the well-known support systems of their family, childhood friends, familiar surroundings and everyday life are altered, they may be vulnerable, or at the very least, in need of special attention.

Discussion

The main finding in this thesis is the role of small groups in achieving a sense of belonging, a sense of support, and a sense of finding myself, themes that students regarded as paramount in the task of promoting mental health in student life (I, II, III). Additionally, feeling included and the creation of a balance between predictability and joy was described as important. Small groups, whether social or academic, offered a low threshold for the establishment of new friendships and networks. Considering that these findings are based on students' own voice, this knowledge makes a significant contribution to the research field and enhances our understanding of the needs of students in the context of promoting mental health in their student lives.

All participants had relocated for their studies. Although relocation may be challenging and may represent a major transition in a young person's life, the small groups that provided students with a sense of belonging and a sense of support within the new setting offered them the opportunity to mature and find their own identities. This discussion attempts to explain these findings by examining the main concepts from the perspective of other research in the field of students' mental health and relevant theoretical models. The findings show that the promotion of mental health in the context of student life occurs in several arenas. This process is experienced on both an individual and systemic level. Therefore, the findings are discussed partly in relation to ecological systems theory as described by Bronfenbrenner (1979).

The findings in this thesis show that mental health is promoted in several different arenas, such as during lectures, in leisure time and in the housing situation (I, II, III). The healthy university network works to implement a whole-university approach to health, wellbeing and sustainability in universities (Dooris, 2022). Student life does not occur in one specific geographical setting, such as a university campus. This is in accordance with the view on health promotion as transdisciplinary (Kickbusch, 2021). Student life occurs in a multidimensional setting, where several adjacent arenas, such as campuses, teaching, relationships with academic staff, social networks, leisure activities and family, may be expected to affect mental health promotion in student life. This is related to the levels in ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) that affect student life in different ways, thus making this theory relevant for framing research on mental health promotion in student life. Discussing mental health promotion in student life should take all the settings in which students live their everyday life into account.

Finding my place: Having a sense of belonging

For students to feel a sense of belonging is one of the most prevalent concepts in discussions of the task of promoting mental health in student life (I, II, III). A sense of belonging may be found in several places, such as in shared accommodations, lectures, the student programme, student societies, the introduction week and study program associations. This finding is supported by other research indicating that a sense of belonging offers academic and mental health benefits (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Strayhorn, 2018). The need to belong applies to all human beings (Karaman & Cirak, 2017). Baumeister and Leary (1995) claim that the establishment of social relationships is a fundamental human drive that is described using the term *need to belong*. However, Lambert et al. (2013) argues that the need to belong is not sufficient. To satisfy the need to belong, there must be a sense of belonging. According to their research (Lambert et al., 2013), the sense of belonging exhibits a strong correlation with meaningfulness, and they suggest that there is an overlap between meaning and sociality. Therefore, taking part in student societies and other forms of civic engagement may contribute to a sense of meaning, which is a key concept in sense of coherence (Antonovsky, 1979,

1987). Additionally, introduction week may contribute to a sense of belonging (III), making this a part of developing meaningfulness for students in their transition into adult life. However, this requires the individual to have a sense of belonging to a group. The finding of the developmental process being such an important concept when discussing mental health promotion in universities (I, II, III) suggests that the need to establish an environment in which students feel a sense of belonging to the university is paramount.

Being included is a fundamental part of having a sense of belonging and is mentioned in all three studies in this thesis (I, II, III). Being included requires an effort from students to be accepted into student communities, study program associations and other groups in their study programmes during the student's leisure time. The individual's contribution and active role in driving personal development was recognized by Bronfenbrenner in his later work (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022). Student organizations and study program associations are represented on many levels of life in higher education and may be seen as an empowering measure. Students can participate in several forums that influence student life, such as student parliament, program evaluation and the university's board (I, II, III). The university can be seen as a power structure, traditionally being built up around the academic as an expert and the student as a mere listener (Mukadam, 2020). Although this approach has been altered to seeing the student as a more active part (Mukadam, 2020), students, when encountering the power dynamics within the academic setting, might continue to experience a sense of disempowerment in their daily student life. Thus, groups and structures such as student parliament and the university's board that may contribute to empowering students through active engagement are crucial (I, II, III). A key purpose of empowerment is to awaken this ability in the individual (Askheim, 2007).

Awareness and effort from the student organization is also required regarding the need to include new students (I, III). A wide range of student society groups are available to cover every interest. However, some student societies require students to participate in try-outs to be included (II), which necessitate a certain level of self-confidence and sense of empowerment from the students. Student societies and study program associations refer to Bronfenbrenner's micro level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), where health is promoted in the context in which students are directly involved. According to Bronfenbrenner, it is of paramount importance for the different microsystems to operate in the

same direction and with the same goal (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In Study I, the cooperation between the academic community and student societies was highlighted as important for facilitating a sense of belonging by taking the students' social need into account when planning the curriculum, introductory days, etc. (I). Thus, the introduction week, study program associations and other entities that affect students' everyday lives should be considered and included when planning and organizing a study programme. Taking this further, making students partners in developing study programmes and partnerships may empower students (Mukadam, 2020). The microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) may have different purposes, but it is within their scope to contribute to good everyday life for students. Hence, a coordinated effort among the different microsystems may be beneficial.

During lockdown (II), meeting someone was viewed as highly important for adding joy to a monotonous everyday life. This perspective refers to the hedonic view on wellbeing, which emphasizes pleasure and happiness as important measures (Karaman & Tarim, 2018). Normal arenas for creating a sense of belonging were largely closed, although some activities were continued digitally. However, students found other ways to create a sense of belonging through alternative ways of socializing (II). According to Gopalan et al. (2022), a sense of belonging buffered the symptoms of depression during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interestingly, Gopalan et al. (2022) found no significant changes in the students' sense of belonging during the initial phases of lockdown. While the need for a sense of belonging may have remained consistent, the approach to fostering that sense of belonging was altered (III). In this regard, the study programmes were regarded as important, as it was challenging to start new social groups during lockdown. Gopalan et al. (2022) explain that social distancing norms may have also reduced students' probability of social exclusion.

Some students noted that they functioned better than expected in partial seclusion during lockdown (II). On the macro level described by Bronfenbrenner (1979), a society in lockdown and the accompanying discourse and change in social norms regarding social distancing may have lowered students' expectations regarding student life in terms of social activities and engagement. Students described few demands (II); however, a common demand was social distancing norms. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), there are similarities in the various systems in society, such as the educational system. During the lockdown, the educational system and society contributed to altered expectations of everyday life for students. Additionally, students in study II described altered

expectations of belonging (meeting someone). Hofmann (2014) suggests that deviance from a norm is a criterion that contributes to the conception of a condition or phenomenon as a disease. During lockdown, the sense of loneliness or being secluded may not have been viewed as a deviation from a norm but rather as an expectation, and this situation may therefore have been perceived as not pathogenic. According to Keyes (2002), subjective well-being is the individual's conception of his or her own life. Thus, experiencing a situation such as lockdown is dependent on the interpretation of the situation, and seeing one's situation related to the COVID-19 pandemic may be helpful, as assessing one's life in the context of a normal student life may contribute to a negative conception of life as a student in lockdown.

When relocating for the purposes of higher education, the settings to which students experience a sense of belonging are altered. This transformation requires an effort on the part of students to establish new arenas in which they can create a sense of belonging (I, III), such as the introduction week(s) (I). This happens in what Bronfenbrenner refers to as the meso system, which is defined in terms of a system of microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The meso system is described in terms of the interrelations among the settings in which the person (student) participates (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). When relocating to study, the student experiences a major change in the meso system. Hence, it is significant for the different actors involved in this process to cooperate to promote mental health in students' everyday lives by creating new arenas in which students may experience a sense of belonging.

A sense of belonging may encourage and motivate students to engage in their studies and student communities more fully (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Such engagement may further create a sense of meaningfulness, which is a key aspect of salutogenesis (Antonovsky, 1979). However, while some students find that enrolment in activities may be easy, others may find this threshold more challenging, such the experience of introduction week for students who do not consume alcohol (I). Thus, it may be assumed that the level of challenge in assimilating into a group may vary. This is also applicable to the study situation, where large classes were seen as a barrier, and learning groups, students' assistants, etc., could lower the threshold for asking for help and create a more active student environment (I). Arranging introduction weeks, social groups and learning situations with a low threshold for admission and participation is therefore important and may be seen as a

responsibility for everyone who has an interest in facilitating a mentally healthy student life. However, ultimately, it is the individual's responsibility to overcome the threshold.

Antonovsky (1979, 1987) referred to meaningfulness as the motivational dimension; thus, it is crucial for students to experience a sense of belonging and meaningfulness in their student lives. The link between a sense of belonging and mental health is supported by Gopalan and Brady (2020), who suggest that a sense of belonging may predict better mental health. A sense of belonging is also related to engagement, which affects students' development by enhancing their ability to make psychological adjustments (Wilson et al., 2015). Antonovsky (1979) describes meaningfulness as referring to the extent to which one finds stimuli in life to be meaningful. Since meaningfulness is closely linked to a sense of belonging, students' experience of a sense of belonging may be viewed as a prerequisite for good mental health in the context of student life.

The developmental dimension of being a student

Student life is a developmental period during which students mature and establish their own identities while detached from the childhood environment, family, and childhood friends (III). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), development never occurs in a vacuum. Becoming a student and thereby changing one's lived context is therefore an important arena for development (Lairio et al., 2013). This shift can be described as an ecological transition, a change in which students' position in the ecological system is altered (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). According to Bronfenbrenner, an ecological transition is both an instigator and a consequence of a person's development. Transitioning into student life was also described as an important change for personal development in the third study (III). The notion of an ecological transition is related to what Antonovsky describes as a stressor (Antonovsky, 1979). The ecological transition may be viewed as a tension that requires students to have a strong sense of coherence and to use the GRRs available to them to cope with the stressors connected to the transition.

A social constructivist approach in this thesis is implied by an understanding of learning as continually resulting from collaboration and interaction with peers, family, the university, and other actors (Akpan et al., 2020). Underlying this understanding is the belief that a person's interactions with other people, society and culture represent the basis for the development of their social worlds, which is also reflected in the third study (III). According to McNamee (2010), relational processes are a paramount theme in social constructivism. These processes are interactions that construct or alter the ontology of the phenomenon.

The Ottawa Charter sees health as a resource for personal development. As empowerment entails the recognition of individuals' (students') knowledge of their own needs and wants, personal development and empowerment are closely linked. Thus, personal development, empowerment, and health promotion may mutually affect each other. However, regarding the part of empowerment that recognizes the individual's knowledge about themselves, Askheim (2007) adds that the individual is an active subject that will know their own needs and wants when it is facilitated. As shown in study III (III), students described how beginning student life was an opportunity to become familiar with their own needs and preferences, finding myself (III). However, if students' needs in mental health promotion develop through the student years, as shown in study III, there will be an initial phase in student life where empowerment may be challenged, and students' knowledge about themselves and their needs are not fully developed. Thus, not only is the individual student responsible for their knowledge about their health needs, but the university and other relevant parties may also consider creating an environment where the individual's potential for empowerment and development is facilitated (I, II, III). Thus, creating a student life in which students play an active role in shaping arenas that promote mental health may also benefit less empowered students by minimizing obstacles and creating more inclusive environments where all students may flourish.

Developmental potential was apparent in all three studies, particularly in study II during lockdown. In light of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), major changes took place at all levels through changes in legislation, teaching, social norms and individuals' opportunities to engage with peers and the community (II). These changes could present both flourishing and languishing, depending on how the individual handled them (II). Thus, lockdown was an example of how changes

that were similar for all people (such as changes in social norms) had different effects on different individuals and had the potential to contribute to development. The new situation illustrated how students are affected by both individual attributes and their surroundings on several levels and how this, according to ecological system theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), may have influenced development. Much research on students' mental health during lockdown has focused on the damaging effect that lockdown had on students' mental health (Odriozola-González et al., 2020; Savage et al., 2020; Sivertsen, 2021). The research in this thesis, however, finds that the time of lockdown also consisted of changes that promoted mental health by driving a developmental process forward (II). Thus, the research this thesis is built upon may contribute to understanding some of the attributes that are appropriate for promoting mental health.

During the years spent in higher education, students find their own identities, needs and preferences after relocating away from their childhood boundaries (I, III). Finding oneself in a situation in which accomplishing these goals is not as easy as expected or one is not as happy as one is assumed to be by social norms may increase one's feeling of distance from the social norms that apply to life as a student (Lairio et al., 2013). Through academic support and a safe environment in a social setting, students have the opportunity to manage new challenges in less intimidating surroundings (Baik et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2022). Overall, the promotion of mental health in student life is a mixture of personal, social, and academic measures (I, II, III). Bronfenbrenner claims that deficits at one level can be balanced by sufficiency at another level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This balance could be viewed in relation to the GRRs on which the theory of salutogenesis focuses (Idan et al., 2017), where different contexts require different GRRs for students to use to cope with stressors (II). In situations in which one GRR is insufficient, another may be helpful.

According to Antaramian et al. (2010), subjective well-being in adolescents is a key indicator of positive development. Thus, focusing on diverse factors of subjective well-being in student life is relevant. However, subjective well-being is described as a fluctuating state (Antaramian et al., 2010), the balance of positive and negative emotions, and for students, this may be a relevant clarification. When starting student life and experiencing a large transition that by salutogenic terms may be described as a stressor (Antonovsky, 1979), the weighing of negative and positive emotions may vary. Although subjective well-being may be an aim, experiencing negative emotions in this phase may not

be alarming; rather, as Galderisi et al. (2015) claims, it is an adequate response to stressors and a part of life. Thus, it may be relevant to adjust expectations to student life as being a continuous state of positive mental health.

General resistance resources (GRRs) and subjective well-being are both resources that help the individual (student) cope effectively. There are, however, certain differences in how they are perceived. While GRRs represent a concept that can be applied to both the individual and the community (Idan et al., 2017), subjective well-being is more attached to the individual, although it also consists of attributes concerning the individual's relation to its surroundings and network (Keyes, 2005). The two concepts may also be viewed as intertwined on another level, seeing subjective well-being as a GRR. For adolescents, subjective well-being is claimed to be protective against stressors (Antaramian et al., 2010) and is thus a general resistance resource that helps the individual cope. Additionally, the relation between the two concepts may be reciprocal, as some general resistance resources may contribute to subjective well-being. Thus, both GRRs and subjective well-being may be relevant resources for mental health promotion in student life.

Being included in an academic society was regarded as important (I, III). Students' positive experiences with being included in an academic community show that academic growth is closely associated with flourishing, as being accepted and finding one's own voice in an academic setting contribute to the personal development that is essential to the personal growth dimension of flourishing (Keyes, 2007). Keyes (2002) also suggests that flourishing may function as a buffer against stressful life events. However, being included in an academic community or in student society always requires a minimum of initiative and contributions from the student, which may result in different levels of support from both the academic community and peers (Mukadam, 2020). For some students, this threshold may seem overwhelming, both taking part in academic discussions and applying for membership in a student society. Thus, as it is the individual who in the end makes decisions for their own mental health, a behaviouristic approach that highlights the student's contribution may be relevant (I, II, III). However, the research in this thesis describes how structural measures such as organization of the study program may also be taken to promote mental health in student life through empowering students (I, II, III). Thus, through successful mental health-promoting structures, students who find this partaking difficult may lean on students who find it less

challenging, underlining the responsibility of someone who belongs to a dominant group towards creating communities that are health-promoting to all groups. However, it should not automatically be assumed that holding other students responsible for fostering a mentally healthy environment is a given. Although the findings in this thesis show that taking part in student-led activities is a contributor to mental health promotion in student life (I, II, III), it should be a common responsibility for everyone to create, facilitate and take part in these activities to aim for a sense of empowerment for all students.

Nutbeam and Muscat (2021) claim that in defining empowerment, the emphasis is on community participation and partnership. According to Tengland (2016), empowerment-focused projects often target the underlying structures that cause the problem, such as social factors. It may be relevant to view empowerment as both an individual process and a community process, where the degree of empowerment in the individual and the community affect each other reciprocally (Nutbeam & Muscat, 2021). To empower students as individuals may thereby empower the student community, and vice versa. Additionally, an empowered student community will be beneficial for all students, although the students who already feel empowered may need to contribute more to creating these communities.

The discussion evolving around whether empowering someone will lead to loss of power for others is relevant (Buchanan, 2000). In the academic community, empowering students may lead to less empowerment in academic staff. However, due to the characteristics of the academic system, it is not possible for students to be fully empowered (Mukadam, 2020). In areas such as assessment, there is less opportunity to transform power from lecturers to students. However, student-led study groups were described as important in all three studies (I, II, III). Applying pedagogical methods such as peer evaluation and flipped classrooms and student-led study groups may contribute to a feeling of empowerment in the academic process and academic development (Mukadam, 2020). Empowering students may also be related to elevating the role of students to make them a more active part of the academic system and focusing on social and not necessarily transfer power from academic staff to students, thus accommodating the quest for a social constructivist and sociocultural approach to learning (Meld. St. 27 (2001-2003)).

Creating small groups

Taking part in small groups seems to be important to promote students' mental health (I, II, III). The inclusion of students in small groups, whether formal or informal, may therefore be an overall aim for everyone who is interested in improving students' mental health. According to the findings of the three studies, small groups are described as the most effective tool for facilitating a university environment in which students can perceive and experience a sense of belonging and support (I, II, III). These findings are supported by the research on introduction week groups, as such groups have proven to be essential for establishing student groups and developing a sense of community (Vigen & Tjora, 2023). Although the three studies all highlighted small groups as an arena for creating a sense of belonging and support (I, II, III), it was not described to be relevant how these groups were constructed. Small groups could be organized by the study program, student societies or the students themselves (with peers) (I, II, III). Thus, the university may consider facilitating small groups, but the involvement from the universities needs to be limited, as overinvolvement may reduce the students' opportunity to be empowered about their own situation (Garsjø, 2018). According to Garsjø (2018), there is also a need for empowerment and user involvement to give the individual or group the prerequisites to understand the challenges they are facing.

Derived from the findings this thesis is based on, and a behaviouristic approach to health promotion, students should be encouraged to be active. However, it may also be beneficial if mental health promotion occupies space on the agenda when organizing study programmes, thus applying a more structural approach (I, II, III). The university mental health charter highlights four domains of the whole-university approach that are regarded as fundamental, one of which is learning (Hughes & Spanner, 2019). The main meeting point between students and academic staff is in the context of teaching, learning and assessment, and the ways in which the curriculum and study programmes are organized and implemented are therefore important. Study I show that how the study programme is organized and how assessment is administered have an impact on students' mental health (I). All students are in contact with the curriculum and the academic staff; thus, these contact points are important in promoting mental health (Hughes et al., 2018). However, only 48% of students reported considering consulting academic staff if they were experiencing mental health problems due to stress

(Mousavi et al., 2018). This suggests that the role of academic staff and the curriculum takes a health-promoting approach rather than a problem-solving approach. However, through engaging students and listening to student needs (I), students may be empowered by taking part in the planning of the curriculum and study program (III). The Ottawa Charter of Health Promotion (World Health Organization, 1986) includes "develop personal skills" as one of five actions for the promotion of health. This action entails supporting personal development by, e.g., enhancing life skills. The WHO claims that this goal needs to be facilitated by, e.g., educational entities (World Health Organization, 1986).

Developing appropriate structures to facilitate the efforts of students, university staff and cooperating partners such as student welfare organizations and student societies may contribute to a mental health-promoting student life (I, II, III). This claim is supported by Fink, who concludes that a supportive college environment contributes to student flourishing (Fink, 2014). The facilitation of appropriate structures applies to living-learning programmes, which allow students to participate in programmes that unite their academic and living environments. In these programmes, staff are in a position to positively affect students' sense of support, and they represent an example of Bronfenbrenner's meso system (Fink, 2014), in which different microsystems work together to achieve a common goal (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The need to develop appropriate structures also applies to other kinds of learning communities, such as the "Girls Day in Technology" project (I). To "create supportive environments for health" is another action area that the WHO regards as relevant to health promotion (World Health Organization, 1986). This action refers to the efforts and measures that should be taken by higher education institutions and their partners to facilitate the establishment of small groups and to make such groups accessible to students. Thus, the task of promoting students' mental health should be facilitated at a systemic level to lay the ground for students themselves to create an everyday life that promotes mental health (I, II, III).

Belonging to a small group

A sense of belonging, a sense of support, and a sense of finding myself, which seemingly may be achieved most easily through small groups, may help students move towards the "ease" end of the

ease-disease continuum (I, II, III). In salutogenesis, pathology, such as the strain that students experience when starting student life, is regarded as a normal condition in human life, but some individuals find themselves closer to the "ease" pole of the ease-disease continuum (Antonovsky, 1979). As GRRs are described as the resources that facilitate the ability to cope with stressors effectively (Idan et al., 2017), small groups may function as a general resistance resource (I).

GRRs can be found at the micro, meso, exo and macro levels. Support from a student society group was highlighted in all three studies (I, II, III), and belonging to a small group may be viewed as a GRR that is available on the micro level. Appropriate cooperation between the study programme and student societies may be viewed as a GRR on the meso level. In search of good mental health, students may be encouraged to find a balance among the psychological, social, and physical resources available to them and the psychological, social, and physical challenges they face in student life. The social and psychological resources represented by a small group may constitute such a resource (I, II, III).

The need for support was related to being part of a supportive environment (I, III). Social support can be defined as "the perception or experience that one is cared for, esteemed and part of a mutually supportive social network" (Taylor, 2011, p. 192). Belonging to a small group may contribute to the sense of support, as shown in all three studies (I, II, III). Both social support and emotional closeness have been emphasized as contributors to a sense of coherence (Idan et al., 2017). Additionally, Antonovsky claims that social support is a catalyst in stressful times (Antonovsky, 1987). Such support may be attributed to the stress associated with the transition to university and the process of finding one's place in a new setting. A sense of belonging to a small group may be viewed as an arena for establishing emotional closeness to peers in student life (III). This situation implies that students may be encouraged to make profound efforts in taking part in arenas in which they can receive belonging and support (I, II, III), which represents a vital addition to the efforts of the university and their cooperating partners to facilitate small groups.

A new support system

Having a sense of support was regarded as important by the participants (I, II, III). Support could be social, psychological, practical, or financial (I). The challenge of relocating involves an alteration of major parts of the students' support system. The WHO health promotion glossary (Nutbeam & Muscat, 2021) describes social support as either structural or functional. Functional support can be instrumental, as in the case of gifts, money, practical assistance, or emotional. Structural support focuses on the size of the person's network and the frequency with which they interact with others. Antonovsky (1979, 1987) describes social support as one of the general resistance resources.

The individual's dependency on family is reduced throughout adolescence (Braun-Lewensohn et al., 2017) and is replaced by support from peers and the academic community. Although it is suggested that many students hide their difficulties from friends and family (Worsley et al., 2021), support from parents, peers, and the academic community were all highlighted as important in the three studies (I, II, III). When starting as a student, the individual's social support system may be scarce. Concepts such as calling my mother (II) may therefore be highly important as forms of functional support. Lai et al. (2022) found perceived support to be higher from families and peers than from the university. Calling my mother (II) is also a relevant example of the way in which the functioning of the meso system affects the students throughout their development, with the mother representing a connection between the "old" support microsystem and the new support microsystem, thereby providing students with necessary support. Practical and financial support from parents was also highlighted in Studies I and II. During lockdown, some of the participants in Study II chose to leave their student accommodations and travel home to their families (II). This may be regarded as a manifestation of a need for both structural and functional support. It may also be regarded as an example of students recognizing their own needs through empowering knowledge about themselves. Although students are expected to be independent, the students in Studies I & II recognized the need for family support. In light of empowerment theory (Tveiten, 2020), calling one's mother may also contradict the notion of people's possible want/reluctance to be empowered. This is related to Tveiten's criticism of the empowerment approach, whether it can be taken for granted that everyone wants to be empowered (Tveiten, 2020). However, in this context, normal psychological development suggests that seeking increased control over one's life is most common in adolescence

and young adulthood (Christie & Viner, 2005). Calling my mother may thus be interpreted as an expression of need for support, rather than a lack of want for empowerment.

A supportive environment facilitates an increase in people's ability to address the determinants of their health (Nutbeam & Muscat, 2021). However, support systems and GRRs are altered when the student relocates for the purpose of higher education. In student life, support may be provided by peers with whom the student interacts both in the study setting and during their leisure time in the context of student societies, study program associations and other forms of civic engagement (I, II, III). The introduction week may provide a social support network that offers a high frequency of interaction (I, III). Experiencing social support, both as a receiver and a provider, is beneficial for mental and physical health (Taylor, 2011).

Students might consider developing an alternative to their usual social support network when relocating to study. Creating new arenas for support may also require them to face the challenges that they encounter, such as psychosocial stress and academic difficulties (Kwan et al., 2021), without the aid of the familiar social support system. This fact was especially apparent during lockdown, when many students experienced a stressful situation (Sivertsen, 2021). The developmental dimension of student life became apparent as students needed to discover their own needs for socialization (II), which may have accelerated the process of *finding myself* for some students. In times of transition, such as becoming a student, the individual's sense of coherence may decrease (Eriksson & Lindström, 2007). However, research has shown that for adolescents, a decrease in the sense of coherence due to stress over a limited period of time can be restored once the stressful period is over (Sabato & Galili, 2013).

Predictability in everyday life

A safe, noncompetitive environment was regarded as important by the participants in Study I. In accordance with this finding, the participants in Study II also highlighted the need for a predictable and manageable time schedule (II). A collaboration among the University of Derby, King's College

London, Aston University, Student Minds, and Advance HE developed a toolkit to support university staff in the task of providing health-promoting activities (Advance HE, 2022). Meeting students in a way that enhances students' ability to expand their horizons and offers the possibility of being challenged may be viewed as a contributor to students' wellbeing. However, a predictable curriculum is suggested to be beneficial (I, II), and the learning environment should enable students to experience wellbeing. The toolkit recommends that academic staff establish a supportive environment to enhance students' sense of social belonging. The fear of embarrassment was a barrier to learning and even caused students to drop out of their classes (Advance HE, 2022). By providing a safe and supportive environment, one may lay the groundwork to enable students to overcome academic challenges and make academic achievements. Establishing and facilitating small groups may be a tool for creating a safe and supportive environment in which students can be challenged without fear of embarrassment.

A supportive environment, which includes the manner in which the study programmes are organized, is also important (I, II, III). Study programmes that establish a situation in which everyday life is comprehensible seem to be beneficial (I, II). This requirement was especially interesting in the context of students in the medical study programme, a programme that demands top grades and thereby attracts competitive students; the lack of grades in the study programme was highlighted as a positive attribute (I). Instead, modes of interaction such as cooperation and support were identified as positive alternatives to competition (I). This may be related to what Bronfenbrenner (1979) refers to as the exosystem. A well-functioning exosystem is a system in which decisions are made in a manner in which the student does not participate directly but nevertheless affects the student. As seen in Study I, the decision to cease assessing students' work using letter grades (A-F) was described as promoting the student's mental health by facilitating a supportive system among students.

A holistic approach is pertinent within a health-promoting framework, particularly when the objective is to empower students to gain greater control of their mental health. A synthesis of the three studies shows that transitioning into student life and being a student entails a process of developing a better understanding of one's own needs and preferences in a new and expanded environment (I, II, III), thus increasing empowerment. An environment in which students experience a sense of belonging and support, feel included and exhibit healthy personal and professional

development towards finding their own identity may therefore be relevant for promoting their mental health in their student years.

The knowledge produced in this thesis may empower students by increasing their ability to make choices that promote their mental health. It may also contribute to a knowledge base that is helpful for stakeholders such as universities, politicians, student societies and student welfare organizations when facilitating a student life that promotes mental health.

Methodological considerations

All three studies were conducted in accordance with Lincoln and Guba's criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These criteria needed an assessment of the research from the perspectives of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability throughout the whole research process. A thorough description of the research process used for all three studies and the use of quotations in the articles contributed to ensuring trustworthiness.

The design of the three studies does not allow viewing individual results or comparing statements based on age or gender. In phenomenography, all data construct a pool of meaning and inhibit the possibility of assessing or interpreting single utterances. Thus, these designs do not allow any conclusions regarding differences in age or gender. To examine the differences in perceptions or experiences between age and gender, another study design would be necessary.

This thesis has highlighted user involvement by asking students about their opinion on what promotes mental health in student life. The user involvement approach may also be an empowering process, as participation is a key concept in empowerment (Halvorsen et al., 2020). Acknowledging the student's own knowledge about themselves may empower the student group. Giving students the opportunity to voice their opinions is also an example of the empowering redistribution of power and is in accordance with the Ottawa Charter of Health Promotion (World Health Organization, 1986). The *In my experience* project, from which the data in the third study were collected, is an

example of student involvement in which students were invited to voice their situation and to participate in increasing knowledge about several factors, such as physical health, living conditions, social relations, and mental health (In my experience, 2019). According to Laverack (2004), involving people or groups in defining one's own needs is one of the main characteristics of empowering others; thus, this research project may be seen as empowering students' mental health. Only students themselves can describe what is perceived as promoting mental health. According to Halvorsen et al. (2020), the individual or group need to be asked about one's perspective may be empowering; thus, empowering students by giving voice to their experiences is important.

Other research designs could have been relevant when investigating mental health promotion in student life. However, as most research on this phenomenon has been conducted using quantitative methods, this was not considered relevant. The research in this thesis was conducted using three different methods, which may be regarded as a strength considering the breadth of knowledge produced. Initially, as there was scarce research on this phenomenon, there was a need to grasp its breadth; thus, conducting a phenomenographic study seemed relevant. The second study approached the same phenomenon, but in a novel and unknown context; thus, investigating the essence of experiences with mental health in student life during lockdown seemed relevant. The third study could have been conducted with similar methods, such as context analysis. However, Vaismoradi et al. (2013) describes content analysis as more exploratory and being conducted on sensitive material, which was not the case for the data material analysed in the third study. Thus, thematic analysis was seen as the most relevant method.

Credibility

Credibility refers to a guarantee that the method used is appropriate (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It also refers to the researcher's need to be attentive to his or her own background, prior knowledge and experience, which could influence or bias the research process.

As a former assistant professor at a Norwegian university, it was important to choose another university/campus for data collection. This background entailed that the author was familiar with the situations faced by the participants, but the choice of another university diminished the risk of loyalty conflict with the participants.

The three studies varied in terms of the number of participants. The first study included 20 participants, the second study featured 12 participants, and the third study was based on 171 written descriptions. Because of the aims of Studies I and II, in-depth interviews were required, and phenomenography (I) and phenomenology (II) were found to be suitable approaches for these studies. Between 10 and 20 interviews are recommended to allow the researcher to grasp the relevant variations (Reed, 2006). However, in all qualitative research, the quality of the data is the essential measurement (Baker & Edwards, 2017). Additionally, according to Hycner (1985), the extensive amount of data that can come from only one interview requires a limited number of interviews in a phenomenological study (II). The number of participants that is necessary thus varies based on the data collected. In the third study (III), the use of written descriptions, which varied dramatically in terms of the number of words, meant that thematic analysis was an appropriate method for answering the research question.

Whether the categories emerge, are discovered or are being constructed is a relevant discussion. The Manos paradox, as described by Marton and Booth (2013), highlights the challenge: to be able to investigate something, knowledge about a phenomenon is a prerequisite. According to Walsh (2000), the researcher clearly affects the construction of categories, and a pure construction may not be possible, as the researcher always will bring some predetermined assumptions into the research process. Thus, it was necessary to stay close to the data and adjust the categories in a faithful manner to construct logically related categories (Walsh, 2000) by reviewing the data when constructing categories to ensure that they represented the data faithfully. Additionally, prior to the first study, preconceptions and background were written down and reflected upon, thereby contributing to bracketing.

Dependability

The focus of dependability, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), is transparency regarding the research process. It also highlights the researcher's obligation to employ a traceable and logical research process. All three studies had four authors, thus ensuring dependability in the data. The four authors discussed the study design, methods, results, and ways of making the discussion relevant to the findings constantly.

In Study I, the participants partly chose the location where the interviews were to be conducted. When presenting the study to the participants during the recruitment phase, the author suggested meeting the participants on campus, but the students were given the opportunity to suggest other locations for the interviews. All students wanted the interviews to be conducted on their main campus. The author booked rooms in which the interviews could take place in an uninterrupted manner at a time of the participants' choice. Study II was conducted digitally via Microsoft Teams. This approach may have affected the data collection, as small talk was less natural in this digital context than in a face-to-face setting. These interviews were more focused than the face-to-face interviews. As a result, the interviews conducted via Teams were shorter. It is also possible that small talk could have contributed to the data, as this form of discussion can contribute to a less formal and more relaxed atmosphere. There is, however, no reason to believe that the interviews conducted via Teams were less deep due to this situation. According to Saarijärvi and Bratt (2021), interviews via Teams are a trustworthy alternative to face-to-face interviews. This is supported by Krouwel et al. (2019), who claims that face-to-face interviews are marginally superior to video interviews.

The participants in the individual interviews were between the ages of 19 and 28. Accordingly, the age gap between the author (interviewer) and the participants was the same as that between the participants and their parents (mothers). This fact may have helped create a safe environment during the interviews and may have led to open attitudes on the part of participants with regard to sharing their experiences. However, this situation may also have created distance between the interviewer and the participants depending on the latter's relation to acquaintances of the same gender and age group. There is always a risk of social desirability response bias (Polit & Beck, 2004). To counteract this, the participants were asked to follow up and elaborate on their statements so that they could

speak freely. As a nurse, the author is familiar with ways of creating an open environment and the use of body language to invite the participants to share their experiences. According to the authors' impressions, all the interviews featured a relaxed and secure atmosphere.

Confirmability

To ensure confirmability, it is important to be aware of one's own preconceptions. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), confirmability refers to the extent to which the researcher is able to understand the data as it is presented rather than in terms of the researchers' preconceptions. In this thesis, the author's previous work as a nurse in the field of addiction/psychiatry services and seven years of recent experience working with students in a university setting is relevant. This experience is useful with respect to allowing the author to recognize the everyday life context to which students referred, the mental health challenges they faced, and the university- and student-related concepts they described, but it is also crucial to be aware of this background to ensure confirmability.

It is not possible or necessary to detach oneself fully from preconceptions (Fangen, 2004). According to Gadamer, all understanding encompasses preconceptions, which cannot be excluded from science (Fangen, 2004). Indeed, preconceptions are necessary to approach the phenomenon under investigation in an appropriate way. To avoid bias, it is crucial to be aware of one's own preconceptions (Fangen, 2004). In phenomenology, it is recommended to bracket one's prior knowledge to seek to understand the phenomenon in as unbiased a manner as possible. This practice is known as bracketing or the epoché (Thoresen et al., 2020). As part of an examination in a PhD course in qualitative methods, an assignment was submitted on preconceptions in qualitative research that required a thorough reflection on the author's own preconceptions and generated awareness of the author's own prior knowledge. To ensure the credibility of the three studies, all four authors, who had different professional backgrounds, were involved in the process of research and data analysis. The first author structured the data and made suggestions that were discussed by all four authors.

The interviews conducted for Studies I and II were transcribed verbatim, and the findings were illustrated in the articles using meaningful quotations from the interviews as recommended by Cope (2014). This use of quotations illustrates the fact that the findings were extracted directly from the data material (Cope, 2014). In the third study (III), all descriptions were preserved in their original form throughout the analysis, and these descriptions were also used in the article to illustrate the findings. Cope (2014) suggests that another researcher should follow the trail of decisions throughout the research process. This suggestion was implemented by including all four authors in all steps of the research process.

In the second study (II), Collaizzi's seventh step (Collaizzi, 1978) was not utilized. Returning to the participants to ensure that the results capture their experience is controversial in phenomenology (Morrow et al., 2015). Giorgi (2006) criticized Collaizzi for this step, as he claimed that the researcher and the participants do not have the same perspective. For phenomenography, Åkerlind (2005) claimes that researchers' understanding is developed from the time of the interview by analysing the data. Additionally, the study does not seek to understand the individual experience but rather the experiences of a group; thus, a sense of the whole group of interviews is necessary to understand the categories (Åkerlind, 2005).

Transferability

Transferability indicates the extent to which research can be applied to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this thesis, transferability is ensured by providing thorough descriptions of the research process. This approach allows the reader to consider whether this research is transferable to other settings. Although the university at which the three studies were conducted is quite sizeable in the Norwegian context and the possibilities available to students might differ, the needs of these students can be expected to be similar to those of most students in other countries with a comparable socioeconomic environment. There is, however, a potential for volunteer bias. Volunteer bias is described by the APA Dictionary of Psychology as the difference between those who want to participate in research and those who do not, leading to the participants potentially not being

representative of the population that is being investigated (American psychological association, 2023). In the studies on which this thesis is based, there was no way of reducing this bias, but it needs to be taken into consideration when assessing the research.

In all three studies, male participants were clearly underrepresented. A total of 172 female and 30 male students participated in the studies. This fact may affect the transferability of the results and may result in the findings being less relevant to male students. However, most of the findings, such as those regarding the need to belong and the need for support, the developmental process and the balance between predictability and joy, are gender neutral and applicable to everyone.

Conclusions

- A key to promoting mental health in higher education is the facilitation and use of small groups to lower the threshold for establishing a new network, a sense of support and a sense of belonging.
- Facilitation of these small groups and their accessibility by higher education institutions could be beneficial, and students could be encouraged to participate and engage in small groups both academically and socially. In this way, students may perceive a sense of belonging and support that may help them flourish and develop in their roles as students and adults.
- Social drivers such as housing and financial support that affect students should be recognized in mental health promotion in students' lives, and universities should organize study programmes in a manner that leaves room for social interaction. This criterion applies to the organization of the lectures, the schedule and the manner in which students are met by academic staff. This may encourage students to be active and seek social support both in academic settings and in social settings during their leisure time.
- A health-promoting organization may enable students to strengthen their GRRs and become more resilient to the difficulties they will encounter both during their student years and throughout their process of maturation. This task may be effectively accomplished by establishing small groups in both academic and leisure settings.
- Lockdown consisted of changes that promoted mental health by driving the developmental process forward (II). Thus, research on mental health promotion in students during lockdown

may contribute to understanding some of the attributes that are appropriate for promoting mental health in general.

- The aim of this research is to explore and describe students' perspectives on what promotes mental health in student life and their descriptions of the experiences that may be beneficial to their mental health from a qualitative perspective. As such, this study may provide novel insights into the qualitatively different ways in which students perceive the promotion of mental health. Subsequently, it presents a broader perspective on the topic of students' mental health and may serve as an important contribution to the research field, students, and the higher education sector.

Implications

- Students should be made aware of their responsibility to participate in small groups to establish networks and friendships.
- Higher education institutions should facilitate small groups when organizing their study programmes.
- Lecturers are recommended to facilitate contact among students.
- Leisure time for networking is recommended to be included in the schedule.
- Academic staff should welcome students' ideas and encourage them to take the initiative to increase their feelings of support and belonging to an academic community.
- Student welfare organizations are recommended to offer housing that facilitates the establishment of friendships and networks.
- Knowledge of the impact of small groups on mental health in student life should be incorporated into the curriculum when educating academic staff in pedagogy in the context of higher education.
- Several requests to present the results from this study in universities and other bodies working with students' mental health imply that the findings are of interest to students, universities and those working with students' welfare. The results from this thesis have also been used as a basis for the development of a self-help application in students' mobile phones through a bachelor's degree program in interaction design and a students' welfare organization. Thus, disseminating the knowledge produced in this thesis to students and

relevant stakeholders may have repercussions for other projects in the field of mental health promotion in student life.

Future research

The research conducted in this thesis has raised many questions that should be investigated further. The representation of male and female participants in these studies was not equal. Efforts should therefore be made to recruit male participants to explore and describe their needs with regard to the promotion of mental health during their years as students. Longitudinal studies that focus on small groups in a higher education setting should also be conducted. Additionally, to follow up this thesis further, it would be interesting to investigate students' opinions on how to facilitate the results of this study.

The Norwegian Shot Study used the Hopkins Symptoms Checklist (HCSL) (Derogatis et al., 1974), which measures symptoms of anxiety and depression, to assess mental health. The mental health continuum- short form (Lamers et al., 2011) should be considered for use in research on students' mental health. The short form is validated in Scandinavian versions (Langeland et al., 2013; Söderqvist & Larm, 2021) and should be considered for use in research on students and mental health. Future studies could investigate the health-promoting measures that have been implemented by students facing symptoms of mental health problems due to relocation and entering university. More knowledge regarding students' perceptions of participation in small groups of various kinds would also be helpful to explore the qualities of such groups that enhance a sense of belonging. There remains a need for additional qualitative studies, including qualitative studies on students' perceptions of their expectations of student life and mental health and qualitative studies on students' perception of their mental health—i.e., the ways in which students describe their own mental health.

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ARTICLE

Perception of Student Life as Promoting Mental Health and Well-Being. A Study of First-Year Students in a Norwegian University

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Abstract: In Norway, 300,000 people attend higher education. Elsewhere in Europe, student numbers are also high. In Great Britain, 1.9 million people attended higher education in the academic year 2018–2019. This is a substantial part of the population, and the mental health and well-being of students are of prime importance. The first year as a university student is a transitional period characterized by significant changes and constitutes an essential fundament for students in their student life and later. An increasing number of students report having mental health problems to various degrees. Identifying the variety of perceptions of what may promote mental health and well-being is therefore of importance. This study aims to explore whether first year students in higher education perceive student life as promoting their mental health and well-being. Twenty students were interviewed (n = 20). Phenomenographic analysis was used to reveal variation in the students' perceptions. Two descriptive categories were constructed, "The need to belong" and "The need for support," with five conceptions: the importance of the sponsorship week, small groups as a place to belong, being patient, a supportive environment and the university as a facilitator. How a sense of belonging and a

sense of support was achieved varied among the participants, and the solution for how to achieve this lies in the students themselves, the way the university organizes the programmes and how the students are met by the administration, lecturers and fellow students.

Keywords: Mental health; students; university; well-being

1 Introduction

Attending university is a time of transition for many students [1–3]. Both moving away from the parental home and transitioning from childhood to adulthood are key transitioning points in life, when students must learn to balance demands from family, work, and study life. Being a student is also about developing independence and learning life skills, and a period when students mature in their personal development. In addition, it is a crucial time to develop and prepare for their adult life and future roles in communities, workplaces and society [4,5]. According to Dooris [6], the university is fundamental not only in educating students, but also in stimulating their social and personal development. This development impacts on both their lives as students and their future.

Worldwide, the number of people enrolled in higher education has increased dramatically over the last decades. Schofer and Meyer estimated in 2005 that one-fifth of the cohort of college age people was enrolled in higher education [7]. In Great Britain, 1.9 out of 55 million British citizens were attending higher education in the period 2018–2019 [8]. In 2018, nearly 300 000 people in Norway were higher education students, and more than 35% of those between 19 and 24 were attending higher education [9]. Most students are content and satisfied with their student life even in this demanding time of change and new responsibilities. However, despite their excitement and expectations when starting a new life, both international studies [10–13] and the Norwegian Students' SHoT study, a survey of the health and well-being of university students, show that a significant number of students report having mental health problems [14].

Contributors to mental health and well-being among students

Attention to students' mental health needs has increased in the last decades. Evidence indicates that whole-setting approaches are more successful than one-off activities [5]. There has been a shift from focusing on student-related guidance in single case interventions in respect of drug use and mental health issues to an interest in a more holistic whole-university approach.

There may be several contributors to higher education students' mental health. Usher finds that mental health policies need to be implemented within three main domains to ensure a holistic approach: personal, university and home [15]. Measures such as commitment to activities [16], mentorship, lunch buddy programmes, organizational efforts from both the universities and the students' welfare organization may promote mental health. Architecture that supports social activities is another way of promoting students' mental health, and there is evidence that targeted programmes also have a positive effect [10,17]. According to Ridner et al. [18], interventions that improve sleep quality are most beneficial in promoting college students' well-being. Conley, Durlak et al. [3] found that skills-oriented, supervised, class-conducted programmes seem to be the most effective.

Despite this, database searches in Ovid Medline, Psychinfo, Eric and Embase on students, universities and mental health promotion, report few findings on how students experience

student life as a contributor to mental health and well-being. In addition, intervention studies [3,17,19] and quantitative studies [13,18,20–22] are dominant in research on students' mental health and health promotion, and there are few qualitative studies. This suggests a knowledge gap and a need to explore the qualitatively different ways students in higher education perceive their student life in a mental health-promoting perspective. Exploring variations in the students' perception on contributors to better mental health and well-being may broaden the perspective and provide a more solid basis for better facilitation of a mentally healthy student life. Describing the variation in how the phenomenon is perceived may contribute to a broader perspective.

The aim of this study was to explore how first year students in higher education perceive student life as promoting mental health and well-being.

2 Method

This study employed an exploratory qualitative research design using a phenomenographic approach. Phenomenography seeks to describe the variety of ways people experience or understand a phenomenon [23]. The phenomenon discussed in this study is what promotes mental well-being in students at a Norwegian university.

Phenomenography divides research into research focusing on first-order or second-order perspectives. The first-order perspective describes how something really is, while the second-order perspective describes how people experience or perceive the phenomenon. In this study, the focus is on the second-order perspective and how students perceive student life as promoting mental health and well-being.

2.1 Participants and Recruitment

The participants were recruited from a university in Norway with approximately 45,000 students. Inclusion criteria were that the participants had moved to the city for studies and that they were first year students. The recruitment sessions took place at three different campuses. The first author informed and asked students to participate at the end of lectures. Those interested signed up for further information by email. A total of 44 students wanted to participate. Out of these, 22 participants were strategically selected. Variation was assured by selecting approximately the same number of students aged 19–28 from each of the three study programmes. More female than male students wanted to participate, which gave a selection of approximately 1/3 male and 2/3 female participants. Seven participants studied STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), six studied medicine and seven studied psychology, either as a one-year study programme or a bachelor's degree.

2.2 Data Collection

The interviews took place at the participants' campus. The duration of the interviews ranged from 34 to 60 min, with a median duration of approximately 45 min. The first author conducted the interviews.

To create a friendly and comfortable atmosphere, the interviews started off with the first author presenting the study and reminding the participant about the research question: How do first year students in higher education perceive student life as promoting mental health and well-being?

The initial question was: 'Can you describe your student life with focus on how you perceive it as promoting mental health and well-being?'

Follow up questions were: 'Can you describe this in more detail?' 'Can you explain this?' 'Tell me more about that?' 'Is it always this way?' The topics of mental health and well-being were raised if the participants had not described them unprompted.

2.3 Ethics

The study was conducted in accordance with the research ethics guidelines of the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committee [24]. The participants were given an information letter about the project, the first author's background and prior research, storage of data, anonymity, who to contact in case of questions etc. This was repeated orally before the interview started. Furthermore, they were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and that their data would be deleted. Consent was voluntary, explicit, and informed. The data collection was approved by the Data Protection Officer (NSD reference 873991). The interviews were taped, coded, and stored in accordance with research ethics regulations.

2.4 Analysis

The data were analyzed using Dahlgren and Fallsberg's sequence of activities in analyzing phenomenographic studies [25]. The seven steps of the phenomenographic process are described as: 1) familiarization–interviews were read through, mainly by the first author, to gain an overview impression; 2) condensation–significant utterances that were representative for the dialogue were selected, and a "pool of meaning" was constructed using 597 utterances; 3) comparison–the selected utterances were compared in order to find similarities and variation; 4) grouping or classification–utterances that appeared to be similar were grouped; 5) articulating–the essence of similarity within each group was described. Five conceptions were constructed based on differences and similarities in the student's perceptions of the phenomena; 6) labelling–categories were named in order to emphasize their essence; and 7) contrastive comparison–the categories were compared in order to find similarities and differences, making them mutually exclusive. The conceptions were thoroughly investigated to see if any of the content was interchangeable. Moving utterances between different conceptions constituted an ongoing and continuous process as different meanings emerged. The steps are related, and it was necessary to go back and forth between the steps during the analysis process.

Nvivo was used as a tool to facilitate the analysis. The analysis process was performed primarily by the first author, with critical reflections from the other authors when reading and discussing the material.

3 Results

The results show the variation in how the students perceived student life as promoting their mental health and well-being. Two descriptive categories were constructed: 1) The need to belong and 2) The need for support. The two categories consisted of five conceptions. This is described as the outcome space as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive categories and conceptions

Descriptive categories	The need to belong			The need for support	
Conceptions	The importance of the sponsorship week	Small groups as a place to belong	Being patient	A supportive environment	The university as a facilitator

The outcome space describes how the phenomenon is related to its context (external horizon), and how the conceptions are related to each other [26]. The conceptions are logically related and the categories horizontally structured, as belonging is a prerequisite to achieve support.

3.1 The Need to Belong

The descriptive category *the need to belong* consists of three conceptions that participants perceive as influential to their mental health and well-being: *"The importance of the sponsorship week"*, *"Small groups as a place to belong"* and *"Being patient"*. Having someone to belong to in some way was regarded important, either socially or academically or both.

The importance of the sponsorship week is one of several conceptions that the participants describe that they perceive as important when starting as a student. Participating in the introductory weeks is considered crucial. It was during the sponsorship week many of the participants made friends, found someone to sit next to during lectures, and started the circle of making a network at the university. Some of the participants described the sponsorship group as a family while others found it unnecessary. Sponsorship activities, however, were perceived

as excluding among students who did not consume alcohol, and some described the acquaintances they made as superficial. Sponsorship was used strategically to make networks, both personally and professionally. The positive aspects were described as follows: *Even if you don't drink, you should participate. For strategic reasons* (Interview 20). One student underlined the negative aspects of not participating: *I didn't participate, so when the exams came up, I didn't know anyone I could prepare with* (Interview 10). A more neutral perception was also described: *Many told me it would be hard to make friends if I didn't participate, but that hasn't been a problem* (Interview 16).

"Girls' day in technology" was highlighted as a great help to start with. A small group of girls who were about to start their science programmes met up and had their own sponsors to help them make friends the first days in the city, before the university term started. One girl described the day as helpful on her first day as a student: *Girls' day in technology, I recommend it to everybody. I wasn't scared the first day, because I had someone to go along* with (Interview 21).

The conception *Small groups as a place to belong* and a sense of belonging was expressed in many ways, and views on this were positive. Small groups promoted a sense of belonging among the students. They felt it easier to participate in discussions and had a lowered threshold for initiating dialogue. The students perceived small groups as a social and academic facilitator. Some of the small groups are led by senior students, and the threshold for asking questions and participating in the discussions was lower than in regular lectures. In addition, the sense of belonging and easy access to new acquaintances and friends were highlighted as important.

Conversational keys to acquire new acquaintances were described: *When you're divided into groups, you start talking about your studies. Then maybe you talk some more about other things, and through that comes a social thing* (Interview 10).

A sense of belonging socially was highlighted. Belonging was expressed as crucial to being able to get through their education. This could refer to people they shared housing with, fellow students or someone who had the same academic interests or extracurricular interests. The housing situation was regarded as very important. However, one participant stressed that they did not want to mix private and academic life. *It would be like living with a colleague* (Interview 21). Others found that the housing situation contributed to a feeling of belonging: *It's like coming home to my family, kind of* (Interview 1).

In some programmes, older students tutored groups of younger students and this was perceived as creating a closeness to their fellow students. Problem-based learning groups and other kinds of learning teams were also regarded as a socially safe arena to connect and make new friends. Tutorial groups led by more experienced students were described as '*a great place to meet others, and it's less scary to ask questions. I'm happy that we have them* (Interview 21). Others regarded the student group as a mere workplace. *You don't get to know people well in these groups, you just work on your studies, so they don't have to be my best friends* (Interview 3).

The conception *being patient* was perceived by the participants as important. Networks and friends can be made both outside and after the sponsorship week, even though the sponsorship week is an important arena for many students in the introductory phase of their student life. A recognition that not every day is a great day, that some days are better than others, and that things will work out was highlighted. A future optimism despite initial challenges in student life was expressed as important to maintain a sense of well-being. *In general…don't overthink. Take it easy, 'cause…things will work out eventually* (Interview 1).

3.2 The Need for Support

The need for support category consists of two conceptions. *"a supportive environment"* and *"the university as a facilitator"*.

A supportive environment was related to both family and friends. Psychological support was described as parents expressing pride or support both because the parents were highly educated themselves, or because they had not had that opportunity. *They haven't had the opportunity to higher education, so they kind of wanted me to take the opportunity, as they didn't have any* (Interview 12). Additionally, support could be materialistic–parents who bought food for the students or gave them financial support. *They have given me a little financial support when I need it, because they think it's a nice thing to invest in* (Interview 21). In their everyday life as students, support from fellow students was regarded as important. The feeling that the students wished each other well was highlighted by several of the participants. *People are supportive. We do better if we help each other* (Interview 20). In one of the programmes, only a pass/fail grade was given. This was regarded as a contributor to a culture of sharing and made for a less competitive culture. How to approach a feeling of lack of support from the university was also expressed. *It should be someone to ask. More direct questions and answers. Not the answer, but where to find it* (Interview 22).

The university as a facilitator is expressed in various ways. It is the students' perception of their lecturers caring about them and caring about the students' progress. It also applies to students' perceptions of the programmes being well organized. A coordinated time schedule and clear and predictable expectations from the university were perceived significant dimensions. *It's important that things are clear, that you know where you are going and what you are doing* (Interview 1). Space for working in groups were also important. This gave room for interaction with other students. *We have lectures where we sit together around tables...then it is very natural to engage in conversations during breaks* (Interview 1). In addition, easy access to administrative staff was highlighted.

Engagement from the lecturers were mentioned by several participants. The lecturers were expected to structure the syllabus. The knowledge is new to the students, and they need the lecturer to be structured. The presentation of the subject needs to be close to real life, and the relevance had to be made clear to the students. *You can tell if the lecturer finds it interesting. It needs to be personal and dynamic* (Interview 13). Some saw the organization of the lectures as important socially. For others, the social dimension and the study dimension were clearly divided. *I am mainly here to learn...it's nice to meet smart people who are nice and interesting, but that's not why I'm here. I could probably get that elsewhere* (Interview 19).

Facilitation of a social life from the university was experienced as a supportive dimension. Both activities related to the lectures, and extracurricular activities such as skiing trips that were taken into account and made room for in the formal time schedule. This was to facilitate social networking. *The faculty facilitates for a lot of social activities* (Interview 24). The students appreciated such efforts and felt highly regarded. *When they spend so much time on us, you want to give something back* (Interview 26).

Large classes were perceived a threshold. *You know when you are in primary school and the teacher is in the classroom, and you can just ask. I miss that sometimes* (Interview 5). In such settings, student assistants, fellow students and lecturers were regarded as relevant helpers, although fellow students and older students/student assistants seemed to be preferable.

4 Discussion

Students perceive student life as a contributor to mental health and well-being demonstrated by the descriptive categories the need to belong and the need for support. Within every conception, there is a variation in the extent to which the participants perceive the categories related to mental health and well-being and how they perceive this. Within the category of the need to belong, small groups were a conception that was generally agreed upon as important for the participant. However, how these were constructed and by whom had little importance. The need for support was described through two different conceptions: a supportive environment and the university as a facilitator. The content of the conceptions shows the variety in students' perceptions of how student life promotes mental health and well-being.

Our research showed that a sense of belonging can be accomplished by means of various measures such as small groups within the programme and leisure activities. These groups may be facilitated by the students, but also through the way the university and the different programmes are organized. Additionally, the attitudes of university staff towards the creation of small groups and facilitation of the establishment of a social network were of importance. Students have reported that "feeling valued and cared for, being listened to, having a sense of belonging, feeling part of a social environment and being able to participate in decision-making" are all important factors in enhancing a feeling of health and wellbeing [4]. This supports our findings that a sense of belonging is essential in the students' perception of student life as promoting mental health and wellbeing.

Our findings about the students' need to belong is supported by other research. Belonging is regarded as a fundamental motivation [27]. Baumeister et al. claim that there is a human drive to form positive, close attachments, and call this as "a need to belong" [27]. Their article has been widely cited and describes a natural desire to form relationships. According to Thomas, 'belonging' refers to the students' sense of being included, accepted, and regarded as an important part of classroom life [28]. The majority of dropouts from higher education do so during their first year [29], and although there are a number of reasons for this [28], it indicates that the transitional phase is crucial in creating an arena that is perceived as promoting mental health and well-being. For students in higher education, a sense of belonging has also been highlighted as one out of eight fundamental intrapersonal competencies that are related to student retention and completion of higher education [30]. According to Dunne and Somerset, student health needs in general largely evolve around issues such as the stress of coping with a new environment, new people, loneliness and homesickness [1]. Finding a new social network is therefore of importance. According to Volstad et al. [31], small groups increase the sense of belonging, and constitute a contributor to establishing social networks.

According to Lambert et al., social relationships need to give a sense of belonging. They found a strong positive correlation between sense of belonging and meaningfulness. Moreover, an increase in the sense of belonging is followed by an increase in meaningfulness [32]. The link between these concepts is supported by our findings. Antonovsky's sense of coherence (SOC) highlights meaningfulness as one of the three dimensions that build a sense of coherence. Antonovsky referred to this dimension as the motivational dimension of SOC [33]. People with a high sense of coherence feel that life makes sense and consider aspects of their lives as very meaningful. In this lies the implication that life aspects that are considered meaningful are worth investing and engaging in.

The close link between belonging, which our study shows as essential for students' perceptions of student life as promoting mental health and well-being, and meaningfulness, underlines the importance of students developing a sense of belonging. Our findings

demonstrate this can be achieved through various kinds of small groups. Participation in small groups inspires not only a sense of belonging, but also stimulates a sense of meaningfulness resulting in engagement and investment in student life. A high sense of meaningfulness (e.g., through a high sense of belonging) will stimulate acquisition of the resources at one's disposal that will help in coping with the stressors that arise in this transitional time when starting as a student. The findings in this study do not necessarily support the concept of meaningfulness as of profound importance, but rather highlight the concept of belonging as important for students' mental health and well-being in various ways. It may be concluded that creating a sense of belonging may increase the fundamental sense of meaningfulness.

A sense of belonging enhances academic engagement and attendance at teaching sessions [34,35]. As teaching sessions provide a setting where students create good relationships with fellow students, attendance is one of the situations that may facilitate a sense of belonging. Our findings are supported by Karaman et al. [21]. They found a strong correlation between a sense of belonging to the university and well-being. When the level of belonging to the university increases, students' well-being levels are considered to increase as well.

The descriptive category the need for support could be associated with both academic and social activities. Arenas such as learning groups and leisure activities were created during the first period at the university. Our findings show that activities such as student societies, sports association for students and student subject associations could offer a sense of belonging, as could academic activities such as problem-based groups, learning groups with student assistants, etc. This also applies to participating in community activities related to the sponsorship week, where university and student life can be regarded as a community. Our findings show that the need for support is an important dimension for students to achieve a perception of good mental health and a feeling of well-being. This is also supported in earlier research. Our research shows the requirement for social support can be expressed and perceived in various ways. According to Zhou [36], social support consists of the following concepts: mutual assistance, guidance and validation of one's life experiences and decisions. Support can be regarded as both informational, instrumental and emotional [36]. In our study, informational support referred to the time schedule and the fact that the university provided clear and predictable descriptions of its expectations. Instrumental support included, for example, financial help from parents, and emotional support was described through the feeling of fellow students wishing each other well or parents being proud of their children's achievements. However, research shows that it is not the quality of the support that is of importance, but rather the perception of having support [36,37].

Participants in our study reported that social support allowed them to achieve better academically, and support from fellow students was regarded as important. These findings are supported by other research that shows that social support has proved to be the most protective factor for the students' mental well-being [38]. According to Tinajero et al. [39], adjustment to university is easier when the students perceive social support. Perceived social support seems to improve academic achievement by reducing the stress many students experience in this transitional period [40]. Lack of social support has been linked to higher mortality rates [41]. Research has also shown that for both men and women in their first year as students, when family support decreases, psychological distress increases [42]. This implies the importance of support not only to promote mental health, but also to prevent ill health and enhance academic achievement.

The need for support described in the current study can also be related to Antonovsky's dimension of manageability. Manageability points to the extent to which one feels that one has

the necessary resources (GRR) available to meet life's demands [33]. Our findings show that support from family, the university and fellow students is a resource that contributes to a sense of manageability. It can also be related to Antonovsky's comprehensibility dimension. According to Antonovsky, this dimension of SOC is related to a perception of the surroundings as coherent and structured and presumably predictable [33]. This supports our findings about the university as a facilitator in the need for support category, as important for the students' perception of student life as promoting mental health and well-being.

The ability to access social support has been shown to have positive effects on adjustment [36]. In the transitional period when starting student life, the need to belong and the need for support are intertwined. As our findings show, the feeling of belonging to a group may make a feeling of social support more accessible.

5 Methodological Considerations

The study was performed according to Lincoln and Guba's evaluative criteria for trustworthiness [43]. This demands the establishment of credibility, dependability, transferability, confirmability, and authenticity. Credibility was ensured by verbatim transcription of the interview, and utterances were used in the article to illustrate the findings. Dependability was ensured by cooperation with fellow authors in the analysis process.

With the study's thorough description of sample, participants and method, the findings can be regarded as transferable. Students were recruited to the study at the beginning of their second semester. At this time, the participants were still in the transitional phase, but would also have had time to establish a student life.

The participants were all students with high qualifications in study programmes that are associated with high grades and to a certain extent, status. There may be bias in the study as the students who were willing to participate were hard-working and very serious about their education, and many had worked hard to get accepted to the programme they were in [44]. This may affect some of the results, since themes such as self-confidence, good experiences with learning etc. may be different in other programmes that do not require such high grades. However, some of the psychology students were taking a one-year course with lower admission requirements. Their voices are also included in the material. Altogether, the variety of voices from different study programmes presented in the study helps to make our findings transferable to other students and student lives.

Confirmability was ensured by description of the analytical process. In phenomenography, a goal is to describe variations in conceptions of the phenomenon. Larsson et al. [45] recommend approximately 20 participants in a phenomenographic study to ensure variation. Appointments were made with 22 students. One did not take part due to a misunderstanding, and one interview was deleted by mistake. The data material gave thick description of the phenomenon and gave a good variation in perceptions.

Authenticity is a dimension in which the researcher approaches the data in a faithful manner and is able to express the emotional dimension of the participants' perceptions. This is ensured by adopting a descriptive approach to how the data are conveyed, and the use of quotes.

6 Conclusion

Students perceive student life as promoting mental health and wellbeing in various ways through the descriptive categories "The need to belong" and "The need for support". The

categories demand engagement from students. They need to be active in making new friendships and networks in order to find a supportive environment to belong to. However, the findings also point to the university's responsibility for facilitating the building of networks that promote new friendships and create a place to belong. This requires focus on how the programmes are organized and performed in order to facilitate and promote a feeling of mastery, thereby allowing students to achieve a balanced state of mind and an ability to respond appropriately to expected and unexpected stress.

The findings are consistent with the first call to action of the Health promoting universities and colleges- networks Okanagan charter, that states that health needs to be embedded into all aspects of campus culture [46]. Students need to be active, open and participatory, and universities should organize their programmes in a way that enables small groups of students to work together, such as students learning groups and facilitation of the sponsorship week. This will facilitate participation in network building activities and allow university staff to communicate a supportive attitude toward the students both academically and socially and enhance student life as promoting mental health and well-being, not only as an individual measure, but as a collective effort to improve the situation for first-year students.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study.

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Students' Experiences with a Mental Health-Promoting Daily Life During COVID19: Balancing Predictability and Joy

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Abstract

In March 2020, higher education institutions experienced a lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Numerous studies have shown the negative impact of the lockdown on students' mental health. The lockdown situation was unprecedented and describing the variety of experiences is therefore important. This study aims to describe students' lived experiences of how student life promoted mental health and wellbeing in everyday life under various degrees of lockdown during the pandemic. Twelve students from a Norwegian university were interviewed online. Phenomenological analysis was used. The essence of their experiences can be described as a balance between predictability and joy based on two themes: *making sense in isolation* and *me related to the outside world*. This balance was achieved through the students' own effort to create appropriate routines in their everyday lives and facilitate the achievement of their goals, allowing them to take initiative, feel included and disrupt the often monotonous COVID-19 lockdown. Universities need to offer as many in-person meeting points, spaces where small groups of students can meet, and interactive lectures as possible.

Introduction

On January 30, 2020, the WHO declared the COVID-19 outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). This resulted in a societal shutdown that deeply affected students worldwide (Odriozola-González et al., 2020; Savage et al., 2020). In many countries, including Norway, campus facilities closed to control the virus. Lectures were conducted digitally, leisure activities were stopped, and opportunities to socialize with other students were limited. Small student accommodations and digital lectures made many students feel isolated and lonely (FHI, 2021).

In a survey of American college and university presidents, 41% of the respondents deemed the mental health of students to be the most pressing issue during the pandemic (Turk et al., 2020). Many students were isolated during various stages of the lockdown and spent time alone in small student rooms for long periods with a high degree of unpredictability. Lectures were cancelled on short notice, meeting points at the university were suddenly restricted, and it was uncertain how

long and how comprehensive the lockdown would be, resulting in a high burden for young people during an important time of personal development. Numerous studies have proven a high increase in mental health problems among students worldwide during the pandemic (Chang et al., 2021; Deng et al., 2021; Liyanage et al., 2021). These studies reveal mental health problems such as symptoms of anxiety, stress, depression, and sleep disturbance. The Norwegian student health and welfare study included an additional COVID-19 study in 2021 (FHI, 2021). It showed a dramatic deterioration in students' mental health status during the pandemic and a substantial increase in reported mental health issues. Almost half of the student respondents reported mental health problems such as insomnia, suicidal thoughts, loneliness, depression, and anxiety, and 37% of students felt isolated (often or very often). More female than male students reported mental health problems. In general, the students' perceptions of their own health and quality of life tended to be negative. However, this also suggests that approximately half of the students were content and that several factors in their lives improved during the pandemic: their finances were better; they drank less, and 80% exercised more than two to three times per week (FHI, 2021).

Poor mental health is an immediate problem for affected students. However, the consequences of this problem may be complex. In addition to the acute feeling of poor mental health, students' problems may affect their academic performance, increase their chances of dropping out of university, and affect their adult lives and future roles in communities, workplaces, and society (Cawood et al., 2010; Newton et al., 2016). According to Dooris (2001), universities have an important role in stimulating students' social and personal development, and students' mental health is therefore of great importance from both short- and long-term perspectives.

Wellbeing has been defined in several ways and with varying content (Dodge et al., 2012). Quality of life, life satisfaction, positive affect, and positive psychological functioning have been emphasized as features of wellbeing. Dodge et al. (2012) proposed a definition of wellbeing that centers on a state of equilibrium with a fluctuating balance point between the challenges one faces and the resources available. Wellbeing has also been described by the Foresight mental capital and wellbeing project as the ability to fulfil goals (Government Office for Science, 2008).

The everyday life of students is of great importance in the promotion of mental health and wellbeing. Within social psychology, everyday activities are seen as practices that form the basis of social identities (Gallagher et al., 2015). This may be especially important for young people at transitional points in life, such as early adulthood, when they develop independence and learn life skills, mature in their personal development and prepare for their future roles in adult life (Newton et al., 2016). A health-promoting everyday life is therefore crucial.

The research community has made great efforts to increase knowledge of the effect of the pandemic on students' mental health. A search in OVID Medline for the keywords "students," "mental health," "universities," and "COVID" in June 2021, approximately 16 months after the start of the pandemic, yielded more than 200 articles. The same search conducted in January 2023 yielded more than 550 articles. Several studies have found that the pandemic and subsequent lockdown had an overall negative impact on students' mental health, with increased depression symptoms, worsened sleep quality, worries about contracting COVID-19, and negative impacts on social connectedness, studies, and stress level (Evans et al., 2021; Lyons et al., 2020; Tavolacci et al., 2021; Villani et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2021). Consequently, most research focuses on the negative consequences for students' mental health. There has been limited investigation of the factors that promote mental

health and wellbeing, although most students have remained mentally healthy during the pandemic (FHI, 2021). Only two articles were found that seemed to address a health-promoting perspective; however, one was in French and therefore inaccessible to the authors (Pougnet & Pougnet, 2021). The second study was a recent scoping review focusing on the coping approaches adapted by the higher education institutions to help students cope with the mental health challenges posed by the pandemic. To summarize, very little is currently known about why some students have coped well. This indicates a need to understand the sources, efforts, and measures that promote mental health in this situation. To be prepared for similar situations of isolation or lockdown, it is crucial to investigate students' own experiences of factors that promoted their health and wellbeing in everyday life during this difficult time.

A review of Scandinavian students' mental health and quality of life conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic concluded that there is a need for qualitative research to provide better insight into the complex factors that affect students' mental health (Mordal, 2021). The review also showed a need for studies of universities' role in promoting students' mental health beyond the role of specific professions such as psychologists and therapists. Other researchers have also called for further research on the impact of COVID on students' mental health (Grubic et al., 2020, 2021).

This study aims to describe students' lived experiences of how student life promoted mental health and wellbeing in everyday life under various degrees of lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative, descriptive research design with a phenomenological approach (Collaizzi, 1978). Phenomenology aims to describe the essence of how a phenomenon is experienced. Descriptive phenomenology seeks to describe the essence of the phenomenon under investigation, and the first-person perspective of the phenomenon and the individual's lived experiences are essential. Husserl is considered the founder of phenomenology and stated that the meaning of lived experiences stems from one-to-one transactions between the research participant and the researcher (Husserl, 1995). The ideal, according to Husserl, is what he calls bracketing, for the researcher to abandon his or her own lived reality and describe the phenomenon under investigation in its purest sense (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Collaizzi offers a rigorous and systematic approach and is considered to be highly accessible (Morrow et al., 2015).

A descriptive approach is suitable when the phenomenon has been incompletely or not conceptualized in earlier research (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). In this study, the phenomenon under investigation is students' lived experiences and the factors that promoted their mental health and wellbeing in everyday life under various degrees of lockdown during the pandemic.

Participants and Recruitment

Data were collected from three male and nine female students at a Norwegian university. They were aged 19 to 24 years, and the length of their study program was 5 to 6 years. The participants had been studying for 1 to 5 years. The inclusion criterion was that they had moved to the university city to study. The first author shared a post on Facebook with information about the study. Facebook contacts were asked to share the post on their pages. Ten students who were interested contacted the first author and received an email with more information about the study and a letter of consent to sign electronically. None of the participants were related to the author in any way but were part of the authors' friends' network. In addition, five students who had volunteered to participate in a

previous study by the same authors but were not admitted were contacted via email and asked if they wanted to participate in this study. Two students accepted. The ten students recruited from Facebook network and the two students recruited from a previous recruitment process all met the inclusion criteria's and were selected to participate. Variation was ensured by recruiting students from various programs, lengths of time as a student, ages, and genders. The participants were studying pedagogy, engineering, or medicine.

Data Collection

The interviews were conducted from 19th of January to 2nd of February 2021. The participants were interviewed individually (mean time: 35 minutes) on Microsoft Teams by the first author. Only sound from the interviews was recorded, and no video footage was taken. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

The initial question was as follows: "Can you describe what you think has been good for your mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic?" The initial question was followed by additional questions to obtain a deeper understanding. The follow-up questions included the following: "Can you please describe what a good day looks like for you?" and "Can you describe what you would recommend to other students in a similar situation?"

Analysis

The data were analyzed using Collaizzi's (1978) phenomenological descriptive method.

The Collaizzi method of analysis consists of seven steps. The first six steps were applied in the analysis: (a) the researchers read the subjects' descriptions, termed protocols, thoroughly to familiarize themselves with the content; (b) significant statements were marked and extracted, and each interview was numbered to separate the quotes used in the findings section; (c) meanings were formulated based on significant statements, which were categorized into various meanings; (d) the meanings were compared to the data to determine whether they represented the data and were clustered into two themes reflecting the overall descriptions of the phenomenon based on reflections and discussion; (e) an exhaustive description of the students' perceptions of mental health-promoting aspects of student life was developed to integrate the clustered themes; (f) the exhaustive descriptions were condensed into a short statement that captured the essence of the participants' perception of the phenomenon to produce a fundamental structure; (g) Collaizzi's step of seeking verification of the fundamental structure by returning the result to the participants to ensure that it captures their experience was not used. Verification was ensured by reviewing the data to compare the description with the original data.

During the analysis of the data, the research question was kept in mind to ensure that the search for meaning in the material involved searching for relevant information. Presuppositions were controlled to focus on the phenomenon as it was experienced by the participants.

NVivo was used as a tool to facilitate the analysis. The analysis process was performed by the first author in cooperation with the other authors.

Ethics

The study was conducted in accordance with the research ethics guidelines of the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki (The World Medical Association, 2013) and the Committee on

Publication Ethics' International Standards for Authors ([Wager & Kleinert, 2014](#)). The participants were emailed an information letter about the project that provided information on the first author's background and previous research, data storage, anonymity, contact information in case of questions and that they were free to withdraw at any time. This information was repeated orally before the interviews started. The participants signed a letter of consent and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that their data would be deleted. Consent was voluntary, explicit, and informed. The data collection was approved by the Data Protection Officer (NSD reference 873991). The interviews were taped, coded, and stored in accordance with research ethics regulations.

Findings

The present study was designed to describe students' lived experiences that promoted mental health and wellbeing in everyday life under various degrees of lockdown during the pandemic.

The results indicate that *a balance of predictability and joy in everyday life* is essential to this phenomenon. The essence is grounded in two themes. The theme *making sense in isolation* consists of two meanings: creating routines and achieving goals. The theme *me related to the outside world* consists of four meanings: variety, meeting someone, being included, and taking initiative ([Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Description of Results.

Essence: A balance of predictability and joy in everyday life

Making sense in isolation		Me related to the outside world			
Creating routines	Achieving goals	Variety	Meeting someone	Being included	Taking initiative

A Balance of Predictability and Joy in Everyday Life

The varying degrees of lockdown created new demands for the students that involved a balance between predictability and joy. From a normal student life with largely imposed routines, they now had to direct their own daily lives in a new sense and find a new balance point in their everyday lives.

There was a need for new strategies to create predictability due to few meeting points with both academic staff and friends; digital lectures where they were not seen by anyone; leisure activities that were cancelled, often on short notice; and strict limitations to their unorganized social lives, such as informal meetings with friends. Additionally, from a "normal" life in which social interaction was provided to some extent, they were now solely responsible for their own interactions and had to take a more active approach to meeting their need for joy and creating satisfying leisure time. These challenges had to be met, and with no prior knowledge of their needs or requirements, the students had to determine their own path and handle situations with no external demands for routines and no

social demands from others. It was necessary to create a balance in everyday life that promoted mental health and wellbeing.

Theme: Making Sense in Isolation

To make sense of their daily lives in partial isolation, the students described the need to structure their lives by themselves or with help from others, including peers, university staff, and student societies. The students described their everyday lives as having few demands and few boundaries. Some lectures were mandatory, but compared to normal student life, there were few meeting points and demands from academic activities. The respondents differed in how they regarded mandatory attendance: some found it helpful to structure their days, while others wanted the flexibility of being able to view lectures online when it suited them. However, isolation required them to structure the day in ways different from a normal situation.

Creating Routines

Being partly isolated required the participants to see everyday life in a new way. The interviews revealed that the participants regarded creating daily routines as important. How these routines were expressed was not of great importance but having routines that could provide a sense of normality and something to hold on to in their everyday lives was important.

I would say that finding a structure for the day that works for you. Find a structure and stick to it. Plan your day, work all day, but take breaks. That's important (8)

Making routines was connected to the illusion of a normal daily life. Although many circumstances were not normal, creating routines and activities that mimicked those of a normal daily life, including getting up in the morning, going somewhere to read, dressing properly, and following lectures online, were regarded as balancing factors.

It is important to have a structure so that everything is as normal as possible…[so] that you have a reason to get up in the morning. I need that structure if I want to get through the curriculum. (8)

Physical activity was mentioned as an important routine. The theme was the importance of routine itself rather than the content of the routine, even though a good work/study schedule was highlighted.

Knowing oneself was also part of the meaning of creating routines. It was expressed as an important measure in the search for creating a routine, as routines can vary greatly. It was important to find a routine that worked personally as long as it offered predictability and stability in an unpredictable time. To do this, it was important for students to meet their own needs and organize their own studies.

You kind of get to know yourself in ways you have not thought about before. You kind of just have to deal with things, be alone and get up and have total responsibility for what you will learn (2).

Achieving Goals

Achieving goals was another meaning that involved the satisfying feeling of achieving the goals one set for oneself, whether large or small. This was connected to the creation of routines and the dimension of planning for the day and achieving the day's goals.

When I've reached the goals I have set for myself…studywise [and] I have done the things I planned to do…that's a very good feeling (8).

The constantly varying degree of lockdown was regarded as challenging and required a fair amount of hope. Lectures were planned and called off, and exams were scheduled to be completed in person, changed to digital exams, and then cancelled. This made everyday life unpredictable, and the students often had to deal with it partly in isolation. The extent to which the participants could meet friends also varied and was unpredictable due to restraining orders and physical distancing, which contributed to a sense of hopelessness that had to be managed.

The student choir…you could participate on zoom; it worked quite well…but then, when we ended up in quarantine, it was cancelled a few times. In addition, we had some "real life meetings" again, and then we rehearsed with another choir and realized…this is not going to work. Therefore, we stopped rehearsing too (4).

While coping in everyday life involved focusing on routines and structure, having something to look **forward to and experiencing variation in monotonous everyday life was considered important.**

Theme: Me Related to the Outside World

Instead of an active social life, most students described a need to find an alternative way to relate to the outside world as the normal way of relating was altered. New demands and a new structure in relationships with others required more initiative and the need for constant awareness of how contact with others, both academically and socially, could be appropriately organized. Awareness of the outside world was crucial, and the need for others and relationships to others were suddenly more apparent.

Variety

Creating a break from monotonous everyday life was a recurrent theme. This phenomenon could take a variety of expressions but centered on the same theme related to the world around the individual.

You have to make some appointments…just anything. It could be a big or small activity, just something happening (1).

I am planning to meet someone this weekend. And that helps…to make everyday life more meaningful…that you have something to look forward to (11).

The variation or break did not need to be extraordinary but merely a break in the everyday routine. These breaks could be as small as a trip to the supermarket or more comprehensive activities such as a weekend trip to a cabin or hiking. While students in a normal situation experience variation in their daily lives due to ordinary demands from study programs, family and friends, these variations had to be created individually during lockdown.

One aspect of creating variety involved "calling my mother." When there was no variation in sight, students called their mothers as a strategy just to get a break and experience something other than the everyday routine.

I think the first person I call is my mother…she understands right away when I want to talk just to talk. And it is really nice to able to do that, talk to her while I do something, or just have her on the phone (2).

"Calling my mother" would normally be an expression of support, and it still was; however, the dimension of needing a break, which may not be as urgent in a normal day as a student, was closely attached to the lockdown situation. Calling one's mother was expressed as different from other kinds of support and involved support, care, and relief from boredom.

Meeting Someone

Meeting someone was another meaning that emerged from the data. The participants expressed the importance of arranging to see someone else, ideally every day. The meeting could be virtual, purely social or lectures organized as dialogues, although "real life meetings" were preferred. One meeting a week was regarded as better than no meetings. However, although this was important to all participants, the challenge due to the lack of social interaction varied.

I think I am lucky right now to be someone who enjoys my own company as much as I do. If I was a more social type, I wouldn't be working as much alone as I do…but the most important thing is to get as much social contact as you can…you quickly realize how important the social thing is when you are in a situation like this (8).

Creating small groups was also a dimension of this meaning. A small group in the lockdown situation could serve as a cohort and contribute to more stringent working habits and help structure the day. It also contributed by being a social arena.

Maybe it's crazy to say that a programme is one of the most important arenas, but it is so hard to meet people, but I have been told that the studying years are all about building networks and meeting new people…and then…being isolated in a small student room is not very nice. It's a complete reversal (3).

Due to restrictions on how many people could gather, small groups could serve as important networks both socially and academically and contributed to a feeling of community and belonging in a time of partial isolation.

We have had cohort groups both at the lab and the problem-based learning groups when it was possible. And that has been very, very important….to have that contact once a week or every other week has been important. To be able to meet at the university (2).

Being Included

The way the students related to the university and their lecturers was regarded as important. Feeling that the lecturer understood the situation and that it could be difficult to feel motivated was crucial to some students.

One of the lecturers was like…he was very understanding. And just that he understands that motivation can be difficult…that was helpful. Well…it might not help the motivation, but it is helpful to know that someone understands you. He was like, just send me an email. And even if I did not do it, it was a really nice offer, just to write that to us (11).

The importance of the study program organization was a recurrent theme in the interviews. A study program that provided the opportunity to meet other students from other programs or that was organized into small classes that facilitated closer acquaintances between the students was highlighted as promoting mental health.

We are just a small class, so we have gotten to know each other quite well, and then you have someone to read with…I think that a central part of it, that I have a base of friends or acquaintances that I can relate to and meet and…what can I say, lighten up the day a little (1).

The kind of programmes where you have to meet people you normally don't socialize with is nice. It's a nice way to…even if it's completely different from going to a party or something…you are kind of forced to be acquainted (3).

Disappointment in the negative publicity of the students, especially during sponsorship week, provoked some of the participants. They regarded themselves as very careful and considerate, avoided contributing to the spread of the virus and felt that the media used them as scapegoats.

Taking Initiative

Meeting others was also related to the importance of taking initiative. Isolation and limited social life made it necessary to create a sense of participation and belonging that may be easier to attain in normal circumstances. To achieve a sense of being included, taking initiative to participate was seen as important.

I think I would encourage other students to take even more initiative than usual to socialize and go for a walk and things like that (3).

When there were only online lectures and little or no physical attendance at the university, the students needed to be active in creating an everyday life that was satisfying. Taking initiative could be related to creating variety or creating routines and was regarded as fundamental. Regardless of how the university organized instruction, initiative from the students was still required to adapt appropriately to the situation.

I just want to say…just dive into it…pursue your interest. Because…you have all kinds of student societies and stuff. So, if you like football, try football (10).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to describe students' lived experiences of how everyday life promoted mental health and wellbeing under various degrees of lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our findings suggest that a balance between a predictable everyday life and joyful variation was necessary to promote mental health. This concept consists of themes that are related to how the participants made sense in isolation and their relation to the outside world. Because the COVID-19 situation had not been experienced previously and students did not have previous experience in lockdown, earlier research for comparison is scarce.

Creating Manageable Everyday Routines

The descriptions in this study show that daily structure is important for students to maintain a student life that promotes mental health and wellbeing during various degrees of lockdown. Their everyday lives were turned upside-down, and the students had to find a new way of living given the

constantly changing circumstances. Hasselkus (2006) describes everyday life as the rhythm of our daily lives and claims it is nourishment for our existence. She further states that it is the truth and the primary reality for people. Subsequently, an irregular rhythm of everyday life affected the students' existence and their reality due to various degrees of lockdown and restrictions in this period.

In this study, students' need for mental health promotion in everyday life was shown to be different from their needs before COVID 19. Previous research shows that a need to belong and support are paramount when creating a mental health-promoting environment for students (Skoglund et al., 2021). Additionally, targeted intervention programs and efforts from both student welfare organizations and universities are useful for promoting mental health in normal times (Bang et al., 2017; Fernandez et al., 2016; Viskovich & Pakenham, 2020). Some of these efforts may have also been relevant during lockdown but were partly replaced by other, more profound needs. A sense of belonging and a sense of support remained fundamental when creating cohorts that could serve as a network, but during lockdown, this may have been achieved through other measures.

The results of our study are supported by Antonovsky's sense of coherence theory (SOC) (Antonovsky, 1987). During the early phase of the pandemic, a high level of concern was significantly associated with low wellbeing and a low sense of coherence as well as a low sense of meaningfulness, manageability, and comprehensibility (Dadaczynski et al., 2021). A high sense of coherence and the health resources it provides can therefore be an important coping capacity in a demanding time such as during lockdown to improve and retain wellbeing.

The meanings in the theme *making sense in isolation* can be regarded as creating meaningfulness, as described by Antonovsky (1987). The difficulties the participants faced were manageable, and they described how they could make them meaningful by creating predictable routines and striving to achieve their goals. According to Antonovsky (1987), meaningfulness is the extent to which one feels that different stimuli in life are meaningful. Related to our findings, the challenges of the pandemic had to feel manageable in the sense that the resources available, such as initiative, a social network, and the ability to create both appropriate routines and variation in everyday life, had to be sufficient.

The theme *me related to the outside world* involves motivational content and areas in everyday life that enlighten and break up the monotony of everyday routines. Having something to look forward to and meeting someone were related to the emotional content of students' lives. This can also be related to Antonovsky's (1987) sense of coherence: the dimension of comprehensibility points to a motivational direction, areas in life that have emotional meaning, and the extent to which one feels that life has emotional content.

In our study, physical activity was perceived to be an important part of creating a daily routine during lockdown. In accordance with our findings, previous studies have demonstrated that physical activity had a positive impact on students' mental health during lockdown (Amatori et al., 2020; Coakley et al., 2021; Jacobs et al., 2021). In contrast to the findings of both other research and our study, Wilson et al. (2021) found that physical activity did not protect against deterioration in mental health. However, from the overall knowledge of physical activity and its effects on mental health (WHO, 2018), it can be assumed that physical activity in general also has a positive effect during lockdown.

Variation in Everyday Life

Our findings suggest that seeking help from close acquaintances is an expression of a need for variety in monotonous daily life. According to Chaturvedi et al. (2021), seeking help from close

acquaintances is adopted as a coping mechanism to deal with stress and anxiety. This can be interpreted and explained in the context of the pandemic. When social interactions are restricted, there is a need to find alternative ways to interact and seek help from close acquaintances. Our findings show that measures such as digital meetings, hiking, and phone conversations could provide help from others and variety during lockdown and promote mental health.

According to our findings, a mentally healthy student life is dependent upon both personal qualities and societal factors, and these factors are intertwined when students seek a healthy balance. The sociologist Mills (2000) notes that there is a need to distinguish between personal issues and social issues; however, issues that are challenging individually, such as loneliness, can also be social problems, and the roots of such problems may be found in social structures. The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown proved this point. Solutions to some of the individual mental health problems that increased during the pandemic may be found in the social structures in which students live. Research has shown that a holistic approach to students' mental health needs is necessary and that policies need to be implemented within three domains: personal, university, and home (Usher, 2020). This is consistent with our findings. The needs expressed by the participants in our study were centered on personal factors such as making sense of daily life, measures taken by the university, and the participants' relationships with their families, such as calling their mothers. This implies that the approach to promoting students' mental health may not be different during a lockdown, but actual needs are expressed in different ways than in normal times.

Positive views on how the pandemic may change our ways of seeing have also been advocated. Baybutt and Dooris (2021) argue that the pandemic has shown us the importance of health promotion and that an integrated and holistic approach to health issues is needed. For the participants in this study, similar to many others, the past year and a half forced them to search for new ways of acting and coping due to the decreased structure of daily life because of the lockdown. In a time characterized by a high degree of participation in social activities, new friendships, and new networks, the pandemic heightened the need to find new ways of creating networks or to find a life that is perceived to promote mental health and wellbeing.

Universities' Contributions to Promoting Mental Health

As shown in our study, universities and program design play an important role in promoting mental health among students. Achieving goals, meeting others and having something to look forward to can be enabled by the university, such as by facilitating small groups that create a low threshold for creating networks, making study spaces accessible for small cohorts and organizing lectures in a way that enhances dialogue between lecturers and students and among students. For online teaching, there is a prerequisite that students perceive this teaching to be useful. A feeling of usefulness influences the perception of satisfaction, and satisfaction is the factor that has the greatest effect on learning stickiness (Li et al., 2021).

According to the university mental health charter (Hughes & Spanner, 2019), effort must be centered on several areas of student life: proactive interventions, a mentally healthy environment, residential accommodations, social integration and belonging, and the physical environment. These are all areas that may provide an environment for creating a healthy balance between predictability and joy. The themes and essence found in our study can be implemented in all these areas and may promote mentally healthy student lives both in normal student life and during a pandemic situation, as we have seen with COVID-19.

An outcome of the international conference on health-promoting universities and colleges, the Okanagan charter, concludes with two calls for action: health needs to be embedded in all aspects of campus culture, and higher education institutions must lead action and collaboration on health promotion both locally and globally (University of British Colombia, 2015). This applies to our findings on the university's contribution to facilitating mental health-promoting structures and activities.

On the one hand, creating routines is considered important. On the other hand, creating variation in these routines is equally important. A balance between the routines of everyday life and leisure activities seems to be a relevant strategy for promoting mental health and wellbeing during a lockdown situation or when possibilities for social movement and contact are limited. Supported by Elmer et al. (2020), our study showed the importance of social networks for mental health during the pandemic. Social networks can provide support as a way of making sense in isolation and offer variety during lockdown.

Strengths and Limitations

In this study, trustworthiness was ensured through open discussions and critical reflections among the authors of the study, and the data, meanings, themes, and essence were discussed and modified according to the results of the discussion. Confirmability was ensured by a thorough description of the research process and the extended use of quotes in reporting the results.

Regarding dependability, the last step in Collaizzi's (1978) method, seeking verification of the fundamental structure, involves returning the result to the participants to ensure that the fundamental structure captures their experience, but it is controversial (Morrow et al., 2015). According to Morrow, one can expect participants to be able to recognize their own experiences in the fundamental structure of the study (Morrow et al., 2015). However, among others, Giorgi (2006) claims that the researcher and the participant have different perspectives and that participants are not in a position to judge whether the analysis is correct.

Regarding credibility, none of the participants in this study were familiar with the author. All participants were enrolled in study programs that required devotion and hard work. This may affect the results as students in these programs need to be independent and comfortable with taking initiative and have good self-confidence. However, this does not mean that their mental health needs differ from those of other students, and the results may therefore be transferable to all student groups.

The description of experiences is relevant to elucidate the topic of students' mental health during COVID-19. In a small sample size, volunteer bias may be a concern. However, all students who volunteered were admitted, and there were no refusals or withdrawals from the study. Additionally, the article provides thorough descriptions of the research process. This allows the reader to consider whether the results are transferable to other settings.

Because the interviews were performed online, making small talk before and after the interview was less natural and was more focused than during face-to-face interviews. Thus, the interviews were shortened, but it is possible that small talk could have potentially contributed to the data as it often makes the atmosphere less formal and more relaxed. However, it is our opinion that the interviews were not more superficial because of this.

Conclusion and Implications

In this paper, we have argued that the description of students' lived experiences is centered on the *balance between predictability and joy in everyday life.* Thus, a new way of living daily student life must be constructed that consists of the factors that are important during non-COVID life but are more visible during COVID.

The creation of *a balance of predictability and joy in everyday life* involves important measures to contribute to a student life that promotes mental health and wellbeing during various degrees of lockdown. Creating a mental health-promoting student life is a shared responsibility. The university is required to keep open space for social interaction as much as possible. This could involve creating small cohorts to ensure that all students have a place to belong and providing study spaces where cohorts can meet. Students are recommended to maintain a normal daily routine and separate their normal daily routine from the breaks during everyday life in non-COVID times. This means that the responsibility is on both the institution and the students themselves. Because a marginalized student life was a reality for most students during the pandemic, these descriptions may also reveal the factors that contribute to mental health and wellbeing in normal student life.

Further research should be undertaken to investigate what measures could be relevant for supporting students in a similar situation. Additionally, more gender-balanced research or specific research on male students' experiences with COVID-19 and mental health should be conducted. Although the pandemic and its consequences have been devastating for many, they have created an opportunity to increase the understanding of student needs regarding mental health and wellbeing, which may contribute to a better understanding of the mental-health promoting needs of the student population in general.

Ethical Approval

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Students' Descriptions About Experiences Beneficial To Mental Health

- A Thematic Analysis

This paper is submitted for publication and is therefore not included

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