

Sample Essay 2

'Interventions focused on improving sleep are most likely to enhance the well-being of students in higher education'. Discuss.

(Word limit: 2000 words plus references)

- 1 Nothing matters more to students in higher education than their well-being.⁽¹⁾ As students pay a great deal to study for their degrees, it is a moral imperative that colleges and universities provide the kinds of support they need.^(1, 2) In this essay, I will present the case that students' mental health is being seriously affected by their educational experience and that there is, therefore, a crucial need for a change in teaching and more learning support if we are not to see a lost generation.⁽³⁾ In particular, this essay will argue that scheduling classes later in the day would do most to improve student experience and well-being.⁽⁴⁾
- 2 Mental health issues are on the rise in higher education and are reaching astronomical proportions.⁽³⁾ The Office for Students (2019) stated 'More students than ever are reporting mental health conditions'. Going to university or college is a time of transition when familiar educational patterns, methods and expectations undergo profound changes. For young people studying away from home, the changes are especially difficult. All at once, students lose the immediate everyday support of parents, and are thrown into tasks such as cooking, laundry and organising their daily lives in ways they are not used to. Friends who have formed part of the social rituals of school and everyday life are now far away. The regular pattern of lessons and breaks is gone, and students are left to organise the bulk of their time for themselves. In addition, they are now responsible for their own finances, and not necessarily aware of the factors required for good financial management across the whole year. Overspending early in the year can lead to financial worries and debt. Even the food they eat can be very different from what they ate at home and school.⁽⁵⁾ With so much to get used to, it is not surprising, therefore, that levels of student stress are rising rapidly and that student suicides are at a critical level.⁽⁶⁾
- 3 Although universities and colleges often provide support services, it is well known that⁽¹⁾ there are long waits for specialist counselling. As a result, lots⁽⁷⁾ of students don't bother to talk to anyone at the institution. Some might talk to a specialist support line such as the Samaritans or Nightline. But when students are depressed or feeling very low, they often don't want to talk to anyone. Support services can recommend talking to other people about your feelings, but as almost all students are over-stressed and anxious themselves, students can feel there is no-one who is feeling strong that they can talk to. They might not want to upset their parents with anxiety and suicidal feelings, or risk friendships by seeming to be in need.⁽⁸⁾
- 4 Anxiety about the amount of academic work and fear of failing their course also have a major impact on student well-being. Whilst students talk about this amongst themselves all the time, now there is actual proof⁽⁹⁾ that well-being affects how students achieve on their courses.⁽¹⁰⁾ Smarte (2022) argues that a study by Woolf and Digby proves that integrating lessons on well-being into the curriculum could provide 'significant benefits' for students' academic achievement.⁽¹¹⁾
- 5 An article by Arturo Pine and Gil Messa (2022) proves that poor feedback and unhelpful teachers cause student anxiety.⁽¹²⁾ As anxiety can be fatal in students, this is shocking.⁽³⁾ As Pine and Messa found that student well-being is worse than other young people's, and this is largely due to bad teaching,⁽¹³⁾ this shows that bad teaching causes students to have worse well-being than they would have done than if they had not gone into higher education.⁽¹²⁾

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- 6 Martin Seligman designed the PERMA model which represents his view of the five core elements of happiness and well-being. These are Positive Emotion (P), Engagement (E), Positive Relationships (R), Meaning (M) and Accomplishment (A). Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) could use this model to gain a better understanding of student well-being (Seligman).^(14, 34) These five issues are important to student life. Research has shown that relationships with people, which are part of Seligman's model, are most important to well-being. The Cacioppo (2014) proved that it is vital to have the support of your family, friends and support groups, and not to suffer from loneliness, in order to have better health and well-being and be less vulnerable of dying early. They even found that social relationships affect sleep, physical health and other aspects of well-being. So, interventions that help sleep might help those who have poor social relationships.⁽¹⁵⁾
- 7 Universities and colleges have experimented with many different kinds of interventions, indicating that a wide range of student well-being issues and support needs have been identified and catered for in higher education. Some examples of these interventions are counselling, support groups, online courses, social events, nature walks, singing, fitness classes, engagement with nature, discussion groups, relaxation and 'mindfulness'. Mindfulness is increasingly popular in health and business sector and is becoming one of the most used interventions for students, with most institutions now offering free or subsidised courses.⁽¹⁶⁻¹⁸⁾ Dalaunay (2023) argues that mindfulness increases empathy, resilience, immune function, interpersonal skills and commitment to academic goals. On that basis, he argues: 'If more colleges made mindfulness training available, it could significantly enhance students' well-being'. Cottrell (2018) and Shapiro et al. (2008)⁽³⁴⁾ summarised multiple studies covering tens of thousands of people and identified benefits such as self-compassion, concentration and ability to manage stress.⁽¹⁹⁾ One important aspect of mindfulness interventions is the range of ways that mindfulness helps with relationship skills (such as empathy, interpersonal skills, and being aware of other people's needs).⁽²⁰⁾
- 8 Another well-being issue affecting students is loneliness. Goncharova (2023) has shown that this is the issue of most concern⁽²¹⁾ to parents and students. A massive⁽³⁾ one third of students are suffering from isolation and homesickness. Loneliness can have a severe effect on mental health. When students are away from home, and have no money, time can weigh heavily and can easily lead to depression and other conditions. For working students, if all their time is taken up with study and jobs, it can be hard to find time to socialise. Therefore, it is essential to pursue interventions such as those proposed by Goncharova. These are to provide structured sports events for immigrants and social study students, set up support networks, and self-efficacy courses, introduce cooperative learning, and provide free games and apps.⁽²¹⁾
- 9 Sleep is an evident problem on many campuses although it is not so obvious whether it affects students in distance learning and work-based courses. The pressures on student time mean that sleep is often a low priority. Also, social events tend to start late, so students cut sleep in order to fit in time with their friends at one end of the day and classes at the other. Social events can be a priority for lots of good reasons, such as to help students to feel they can 'fit in' when they feel isolated, lonely or that they don't belong. For students, the well-being issues of late social events are not necessarily about the lost sleep. Excess alcohol, drugs, safety whilst travelling, security on campus and at events and even the financial burden of social events all add to the pressures. Social life is important to young students and part of what they want from the university experience, so HEIs need to take that on board in their arrangements and budgets.⁽⁴⁾ One thing colleges and universities could do is to make sure there is cheap, safe travel available at night, so that students don't take risks with their safety. Also, if classes didn't start until mid-morning, students could fit in more sleep, which would help their well-being.^(4, 22)

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- 10 There is also the famous ‘all-nighter’ approach to study, fitting too much study into the last minute and completing assignments or exam revision overnight instead of sleep (Javek, 2011). This used to be because it often took to the last minute to get hold of books needed when they were all in hard copy. Now that most sources are available electronically, that should make all-nighters less necessary. Students can sleep badly for many reasons, according to Li (2020), such as skipping class, gambling, alcohol, not taking exercise and feeling badly about themselves and their relationships. Student support professionals such as Calhoun (2022) state that student services could help by offering health education programmes about the effects of sleep deprivation and tips on good sleep hygiene. They argue that if students understood the effects of missing sleep, they would stop those behaviours. However, students probably will not change their behaviours (‘Mika, 2022’).⁽²³⁾
- 11 For many students, food is essential.⁽²⁴⁾ In the USA, 20% of students are treated for food allergies according to the American College Health Assessment.⁽²⁵⁾ More than 84% of students do not regularly consume the recommended ‘5 a day’, or even two portions of fruit and vegetables. As a result of this poor diet, 40% of students reported unhealthy weights and BMI, meaning diet and nutrition are key areas of concern.⁽²⁶⁾ Hunger can have a negative effect on sleep. Improving student nutrition would help improve sleep, meaning enhanced well-being. This is important not just for students but for the HEIs themselves. Lysatte (2022) makes a business case for investing in student well-being: ‘there are legal requirements for organisations with regards to protecting the health and safety of students’. He argued that there are financial implications of inadequate support for students’ well-being because it means students are not able to complete their courses. When they leave, the university loses their income. If the university cannot preserve a good reputation for supporting students, this means new students will not want to come there, again negatively impacting their income. Given the large numbers involved, poor support for students, especially student nutrition, could mean financial meltdown.^(3, 27)
- 12 Of the many factors that affect student well-being, academic stress is the most important to students themselves.⁽²⁸⁾ That is because students want to see a return on the high investment they make in higher education, whether financially or in terms of time and personal costs. Their degree classification or Grade Point average (GPA) matters to students. Orzech et al. (2011) found that GPA is affected by sleep quality. Students experience poor sleep, so their grades are being seriously affected. Indeed, a huge 80% of students in the USA say lack of sleep affects their academic performance.⁽²⁹⁾ That represents a vast amount of under-achievement and failure. As Panesar (2022) shows, this is not a new issue. Research on this issue stretches back for decades, so it is time that something was done about it.⁽³⁰⁾ Furthermore, Panesar has shown that whether we are morning or evening types, our chronotype, is important. Classes that run early in the day would not be as useful for evening types. Again, this suggests as argued above, that HEIs should consider running class times only from late morning⁽⁴⁾ so as not to discriminate against certain chronotypes. Moreover, sleep affects more than just academic grades. Quoting government guidance, Panesar argues that sleep is essential to many aspects of health, such as obesity, heart disease, diabetes and depression. From this we can see why students, a demographic known to have bad sleep, are afflicted by high BMI, as we saw above.⁽³¹⁾
- 13 So we have seen that student well-being is a critical issue as mental health is a major issue of concern. It can have a severe impact on institutional finances as well as being serious for students and their parents. It is important to remember that being unhappy or lacking positivity is not necessarily a sign of poor well-being (Ali, 2022). As Ali advises, everyone experiences times of being

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unhappy, stressed or unwell and these are compatible with good mental health.⁽³²⁾ Nonetheless, as we have shown, students' well-being is in a poor state. Students are stressed about academic work, not sleeping, not eating properly and stressed about not getting the grades they want. As better sleep will improve student grades and help with weight issues, it will reduce stress and improve well-being. Therefore, in conclusion, interventions that improve student sleep are the most likely to enhance students' well-being.⁽³³⁾ (2026 words).

References (Essay 2)⁽³⁴⁾

NB Where there is a text marked *, this is a text from pages 243–8.

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