INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL PROSPERITY

"THE WAY UNIVERSITIES ARE RUN IS MAKING US ILL"

Exploring student mental health challenges in UK higher education – the call for an emotional intelligence-based curriculum post COVID-19

by Nomhle Shantel Shenxane Sandawana

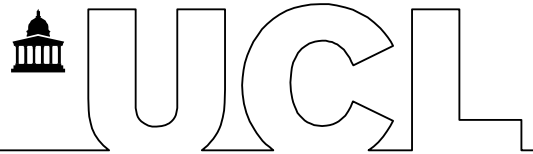A Qualitative study in the Institute of Global Prosperity

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to shed insight on the degree to which the genesis of Covid-19 pandemic has intensified student mental health challenges in higher education and explore the importance of emotional intelligence in curriculum design. Through semi-structured interviews with student support services staff at an elite London university, insight was gathered through qualitative methods and thematical analysis. This study contributes to existing research on UK student mental health and the quest to improve student wellbeing. Based on the findings, the student support department has been overwhelmed with high demands for support and increased mental health reports during to the pandemic. The data shows that alternative holistic approaches such as emotional intelligence training are fundamental for establishing a transformative higher education and student support system. Findings highlight that while intellectual intelligence is important, there appears to be a positive relationship between high levels of emotional competence and academic success in university. Therefore, further research on this topic may indicate that the UK higher education sector and its students may benefit from embedding emotional intelligence training and programmes in curriculum design; to enhance student experience and improve student wellbeing post Covid-19.

Key words: Student mental health, United Kingdom, Covid-19, Higher education, Emotional Intelligence.

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A LIST OF FIGURES

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all university students not only in the UK but globally, who have struggled to cope with the pressures of being a student during the Covid-19 pandemic. As a postgraduate student myself during this time, I fully understand the magnitude of distress and academic pressures that you have experienced. To those who have successfully managed to persevere and reach the end of their student lifecycle (graduation), I would like to say well done and congratulations.

This work is also dedicated to my grandmother (Gugulethu Mavuso) whose support during this process was a constant source of strength, and to my grandfather, who passed away quite suddenly on 2 January 2021. Mkhulu, I have reached the finish line of my master's degree, but the journey continues.

"Driving our universities to act like businesses doesn't just cannibalise the joy of learning and the social utility of research and teaching: it also makes [students] ill"

Crawford, 2019

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Problem statement

Student mental health challenges continue to be an increasing global concern in academic literature, the media, and the Higher Education sector. Particularly, European culture has seen a drastic crisis in suicide, university adjustment issues, depression and anxiety episodes recorded by students studying at universities (Hadulla and Argyraki, 2015). In the United Kingdom, there have been significant increases in depression and suicide in young people aged between 16-24 (UK Psychiatric Morbidity Survey, 2011). As the student population continuous to grow as the British government welcomes more international students into the United Kingdom and encourages more students from "a wider sector of society to attend university" (Macaskill, 2013); more mental health cases have been reported. Although, this is a great move to develop educated and employed young adults but an increase in student population also brings forth more financial pressure, student debt, depression, and high demand for student support services. We cannot deny the fact that mental health difficulties can affect anyone, but the stresses associated with the transition to university are high contributors to the increasing rate of mental health crisis in UK higher education (Montgomery and Cote, 2003). Unfortunately, the Covid-19 global pandemic has intensified these challenges, leading to low student wellbeing and negative reports of student experience and development (StudentMinds, 2020) The difficult adjustments into university have also led to more academic withdrawal, lower academic achievement, and perceived mental ill health (Lindsey et al, 2009).

Given that this is the case, previous reports show that some students in England and Wales are taking their own lives (Office of National Statistics, 2016). Even before the disruptions from the Covid-19 pandemic, The HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2017) data has indicated that the higher education sector has experienced an increased demand for student support services as a direct result of mental health issues. The great concern is that these challenges have been continuous over the years and question the effectiveness of current student support efforts (Lindsey, Fabiano and Stark, 2009). This gives a rise to call out for the UK government, Department of Education, education policymakers and universities to reconsider how they are solving these issues and expand to include a more systemised approach that looks beyond counselling and pastoral sessions (Grove, 2015).

The negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on student mental health has exacerbated the effectiveness of student support services, from students unable to receive face-to face help to long waiting periods to receive support. Research has indicated that the pandemic has

intensified student mental wellbeing with few studies suggesting that the pandemic has served as a reminder that what worked before, cannot work post-Covid; higher education might need a tremendous change (Zwaan, 2020). This poses an argument that "studies of student mental wellbeing should account for student trust and change within higher education institutions and government after the Covid-19 pandemic" (Defeyter, 2021). Some challenges that have been reported since the genesis of the pandemic include financial strain, high drop-out rates, loneliness, fear of uncertainty, lack of self-motivation, online learning challenges with over 53% of students reporting that they were dissatisfied with their academic and social experience (Student Covid Insights Survey, 2020). Similarly results from other surveys indicated that "more than half of students reported that their wellbeing and mental health had worsened due to the pandemic (Office for National Statistics, 2020).

Therefore, in order to transition towards a more transformational and prosperous student support system, curriculum design needs to prioritise holistic approaches and expand to other types of intelligences such as emotional intelligence post-Covid. The author of this dissertation notices a curious absence in recent literature that explores how emotional intelligence might contribute as a solution to improve student wellbeing. Although the author acknowledges that some work has been implemented to develop a support wellbeing curriculum in the past (Fernandez et al, 2016), there is little attention about examining the effectiveness of current student support services and the potential of emotional intelligence training in UK higher education post Covid-19.

1.2 Design and structure of argument

As a result of this curiosity, this dissertation was purposefully designed to address the current gap in literature and asks the question: **How can the UK higher education improve student wellbeing post-Covid?** In order to answer this main research question, the author investigates *(1) How the Covid-19 pandemic has increased mental health challenges amongst students in higher education?* and *(2) How are student support services currently addressing these challenges?* and *(3) how embedding emotional intelligence into the curriculum might solve these challenges post-Covid?* The author has chosen to use the theory of Emotional Intelligence (EI) as a conceptual and analytical framework because of its connection to mental health, which embodies its relationship between student's emotional competence and academic success. This dissertation presents arguments for the importance of emotional intelligence in higher education; in other words, suggesting that UK universities cannot continue using the same approaches for student support services post-Covid. The author presents an empirical study using semi-structured interviews to argue that the way in which current student support services function needs change and should involve more holistic approaches.

To make the author's argument clear, the study uses a qualitative inductive study aimed at understanding student mental health problems, investigate how the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified these challenges and the potential of emotional intelligence training in higher education as a possible solution. Without admonishing the UK education system, this research approach allows for a deeper understanding of student challenges and ignite meaningful discussions about student life and wellbeing in the United Kingdom; with the intention to stimulate discussions for holistic systemised change in higher education policy. To achieve

this, the author will first describe the continuous rise of student mental health crisis over the years in the United Kingdom. Secondly, investigate how the Covid-19 global pandemic has intensified these challenges. Thirdly, the author reviews the effectiveness of current student support services in university. Lastly, the author describes the findings of this research which explore how the concept of Emotional Intelligence (EI) in higher education plays a significant role in equally improving academic success and student wellbeing.

"Student mental health has been the subject of a number of reports as students are increasingly declaring mental conditions and reporting issues with stress and poor mental wellbeing. It has been suggested that student mental health is in 'crisis'."

- House of Commons, 2020

CHAPTER 2
Background and Challenge

The transition from high school to university is an exciting yet challenging time for young people. During this period, students experience a wide range of changes to manage such as leaving home or being by themselves for the first time, making new friends, adjusting to the higher education system, acquiring new study skills, and learning to navigate student life as an independent adult (Parker et al, 2004). Subsequently, these changes require a lot of discipline, resilience, self-motivation, time management, organization, and stress management skills to develop success in university. The student population has shown great growth over the years, a recent report showed that in the 2019/20 academic year there were 2.46 million students at UK higher education institutions (Bolton, 2021). Over the years the United Kingdom has consistently increased in popularity in the eyes of prospective international students, with many global students choosing to pursue their degrees in elite UK universities (International Student Statistics in UK, 2021). The latest international student population report in the UK recorded more than 400,000 international students in the 2018/19 academic year with 32% of first years being non-UK students (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2019).

However, previous reports have indicated that the expansion in student population has also resulted to increased cases of mental health difficulties amongst students in many UK higher education institutions (Bewick et al, 2010). Scholars have been concerned that student mental health issues can have a negative impact on student lifecycle and often students receive delayed support services from their university (Cukrowicz, 2011). Due to the rising concerns about the wellbeing of students, universities in the UK have now increased their budget towards more Higher Education Institutions (HEI) student support services (SSS) [Barrable, 2018].

It is reported that amongst these mental health challenges, high levels of stress, anxiety and depression are the most common; a survey conducted in 2013 on the behalf of the National Union of Students (NUS) showed reports of 8% of students who had "mental health problems but not seeking diagnosis" and "10% having been diagnosed with a mental health problem" (Kerr,2013). This same report found that "80% of its participants experience stress, 70% experience lack of energy or motivation and 55% experience anxiety (Mental distress survey, 2013). Furthermore, researchers found that triggers for such mental health problems could be caused by "academic responsibilities such as course deadlines (65%), exam pressure (54%), balancing of studies and other external commitments (52%), and grades (52%) [Kerr, 2013]. Similarly, the inability to manage stress and its physical implications, have been found to trigger poor social interaction and decreased levels of engagement; these factors have

contributed to the increased dropout rate and lower graduation rates (Salzer, 2012). Therefore, scholars have found that effective student support services and the implementation of alternative wellbeing approaches may have "a positive effect on educational achievement and flourishing" (El and Stock, 2010).

2.1 Universities failing to keep up with demand for mental health support

A recent case report from the HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council England) found that alongside the increasing demand for student mental health care in UK universities, there has been "significant variations in provision" (Williams et al, 2015). This surge in demand becomes a threat and overwhelms current support systems. Therefore, there is pressure on universities to provide more holistic approaches to improve student experience and combat the mental health crisis (Universities UK, 2015). In 2017 the Step Change framework was launched by Universities UK, a framework that encourages universities to take on a 'whole university approach' towards student mental health improvement (Universities UK, 2017). This aims to shift the conversation from solely focusing on specialist mental health services and student support departments towards "considering the university environment in its totality as a space to foster holistic wellbeing" (Barton, 2021). But, since the demand for support services has shown a drastic increase over the years, both higher education institutions and external agencies (GP practices, voluntary organisations and NHS mental health services) have faced a great amount of pressure on supply and demand (Williams et al, 2015). A recent study found that 1 in 5 students still suffer and will suffer from a mental health issue with depression and anxiety ranking relatively high (Fresh Student Living, 2021). And with the international student population increasing in the United Kingdom, the study also found that 33% of students often feel lonely and worried, which means that international students who are experiencing homesickness and isolation are more vulnerable to mental health struggles (Fresh Student Living, 2021). Further concerns are that UK universities have struggled to keep up with the demand for counselling appointments (Kirsch, 2014) and this has resulted to students expecting lengthy waiting times ranging from 9 weeks (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2013). Although, external private counselling services remain available, these come with a cost that students cannot afford, especially when they pay high tuition fees already. As a result, this instability from student support services leaves most of the student population in the United Kingdom with no support and increased stress (Barrable et al, 2018).

Surprisingly, previous research has shown that some students who suffer from mental health issues are often apprehensive to reach out for support (Rickwood, 2005); thus, universities have students who are at risk without anyone knowing. The shame of being "stigmatised" has been found as one of the reasons that students withdraw from seeking help (Eisenberg, 2009). Unfortunately, the late disclosure of mental health problems by students also leads to "lost opportunities for earlier detection and intervention" (Brill, 2015). Even though 2020 was not a great year for students, the global Covid-19 pandemic shaped a new narrative and opportunities whilst imposing threats to the higher education sector. Changes such as remote learning have caused student isolation and reduced student social life (an imperative part of student life and the development of networking skills); this level of disruption produces a 'rare' opportunity to transform the higher education system towards prioritising holistic approaches for wellbeing

(Barton, 2021). Therefore, due to discussed discrepancy between the student mental health crisis and lack of sufficient support, the author argues that this calls for education policy change and improved curriculum designs that foster personal and academic transformation in a post-Covid future.

2.2 The impact of Covid-19 on student mental health

Student mental health has without a doubt been a major concern as discussed previously, but the Covid-19 pandemic era has intensified challenges for the vulnerable student population. A recent study conducted a timely assessment about the impact of the pandemic on student mental health. The below findings from (Changon et al, 2020) research showed the following student mental health challenges due to the pandemic:

- Difficulty with concentration
  This was due to increased levels of online learning and home being a distractive environment for some students. Participants in this research mentioned that other home distractions came from family members, household chores, lack of accountability/discipline and social media.

- Concerns for one's own health and the health of loved ones
  Students were often worried and fearful of their own wellbeing and their family contracting the coronavirus especially for those whose loved ones were vulnerable, older and with existing health conditions. Unfortunately, others had to deal with the loss of a loved one due to Covid-19.

- Disruption to sleeping routines
  Disrupted sleeping patterns have played a huge role to student's academic productivity; many also experienced irregular sleep routines and poor sleep quality as a result of anxiety and depression.

- Social Isolation
  The pandemic has decreased social activities due to lockdown restrictions. Students indicated that their interactions with classmates, family and friends had decreased significantly. One-third shared that the lack of human interactions, zoom fatigue and restricted outdoor activity (hiking, vacation, fitness training at gyms and restaurant hangouts) affected their mental health.

- Concerns about academic performance
  The two biggest academic challenges for students were (1) the transition to online learning and (2) financial instability to continue with university. Students also reflected upon the decreased quality of online classes, lack of student support, technical issues, group projects with team member in different time zones and uncertainty of grades.

- Eating patterns disruptions
  A large portion of students indicated worries about their dietary patterns. Many students reported concerns about their unhealthy eating choices, skipping meals, decreased appetite and a tendency of eating when bored.

- Changes in living environments
  Students indicated that the pandemic resulted to many changed living conditions, the transition back into living with parents made students feel less independent within a distractive environment. Others who stayed in residence halls felt alone and self-quarantine became more difficult.

- Financial difficulties
  Unfortunately, the pandemic brought a lot of financial challenges such as decreased opportunities for paid internships, lower levels of future employment, student loan debt, difficulty completing university and parents receiving pay cuts in the wake of Covid-19.

- Increased class workload
  Students experienced high volumes of individual academic responsibility and overwhelming class workload. Many felt the pressure to catch up with intense amount of module readings, assignments, and group work. Also, the lack of in-person support from tutors and module leaders intensified stress levels.

- Depressive thoughts
  Some of the depressive thoughts that students experienced were loneliness, insecurity, fear, hopelessness, concerns about academic performance and overthinking.

- Suicidal thoughts
  A small proportion indicated that the stresses of the pandemic led to suicidal thoughts with some reporting that these thoughts were mild and moderate. Some reasons for these thoughts were depression, academic performance, financial problems, problems with family as they returned home and fears of uncertainty for the future.

Changon's (2020) study shows that student mental health challenges have always been there, but the negative impact of Covid-19 has intensified these challenges and introduced new challenges. There seems to be a widespread agreement that student mental health has been a continuous challenge over the years even with all the student support services offered and the mental health awareness every year. Therefore, as the higher education sector heightens online learning and emerges from the disruptions of Covid-19, the sector needs to consider alternatives methods of improving student experiences and wellbeing.

"The way universities are run is making us ill"

- Shackle, 2019

CHAPTER 3

Literature Review on student mental health in the United Kingdom

The World Health Organization (2004) defines mental health as "not just the absence of mental disorder but as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential and has the tools to cope with the normal stresses of life. Mental wellbeing is the experience of health and prosperity" (World Health Organization, 2004). Similarly, Yilmazli and Alsandor (2020) argue that having good and [sustainable] mental health includes high life satisfaction, a sense meaning/purpose, and the ability to manage stress, self-management and cultivating emotional competence. Therefore, the author argues that the UK higher education sector appears to have not prioritised the personal meaningfulness of university and the importance of emotional intelligence for student wellbeing. Previous research has reported high levels of psychological discomfort within the university student population year after year, both local UK based (Roberts et al, 2000) and international (Adlaf et al, 2001) students report high levels of mental health challenges compared to their non-academic/student peers. Furthermore, previous research shows that even across the globe, low levels of mental well-being amongst the students are also worrying (Bayram and Bilgel, 2008). Interestingly, these studies indicate that student mental health problems in the United Kingdom are far worse than their European counterparts (Jessop, Herberts, and Solomon, 2005). Although the United Kingdom has made efforts to respond to the student mental health crisis but as the awareness continues to grow, there still seems to be continuous and increasing reports about this crisis. The sad reality is that despite all the mental health awareness in the UK, research states that today's generation of young adults (aged 16-24) are more likely to experience a mental health challenge than previous generations of young adults (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2017). In any given year, it is certain that one in four adults experience or will experience at least one mental health problem ranging from depression, anxiety, or serve psychological illnesses (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2017). Therefore, the author argues that what seems to be missing in academic literature is the extent to which universities in the United Kingdom are equipped to explore other holistic approaches to support students' mental health and wellbeing. Especially, since professional and specialist services cannot solely satisfy the demand of student mental health reports. Other academics even argue that just like physical health, mental health is something that is and will be experienced by everyone but developing coping mechanisms both individually and with the assistance of specialists will help students appreciate its existence and the possibility for effective self-management (Institute of Public Policy Research, 2017).

In the United Kingdom, young adults are categorised as the group at heightened risk of developing mental health symptoms; there is some evidence that suggests that the majority of UK university students fall in this age range of concern (Thorley, 2017). Previous scholars even note that the mental health among young people has been an ongoing crisis which is predicted to carry on until 2030 (Mathers and Loncar, 2006).

3.1 The response from UK government, the Department of Education and universities about student mental health

Over the years there has been some effective efforts from the UK government, Department of Education and universities to address student mental health challenges. But, in response to the increasing need for student support; counselling, pastoral care and personal tutor services have been "challenged to demonstrate the effectiveness of the therapeutic support offered" (Randall and Bewick, 2016). Scholars argue that the problem with these internalized support services within such establishments are that they are only required to work during semester term time; this then makes it difficult for students to access support services during vacations or summer breaks (Brown, 2016). Therefore, the HEPI (Higher Education Policy Institute) report recommends that students should have full access to these support services even during off-campus seasons (Brown, 2016). Even with the various types of student support available in universities such as individual or group counselling, one-to-one support, guided self-help, peer support, mentorship, and online services (Mair, 2016); the unprecedented times of the Covid-19 pandemic have changed the delivery of support to eMentorship and eTherapies (therapeutic advice and support services provided via the internet or mobile). But the author questions the effectiveness of these digital support services. Similarly, Sucala et al (2012) argued that although digital support has become popular in recent years, the effectiveness of these online services is still unclear. There is no doubt that offering various forms of support services to suit diverse student needs is imperative, but other scholars argue that this may create difficulties "for comparing outcomes in different services sizes and educational settings (Broglia et al, 2017).

In the UK higher education sector, new education polices to increase enrolment and raise tuition fees have created distress for students and a high volume of demand for counselling services. For example, the rise of student debt has been linked to poor mental health and decisions for dropping out of university (Cooke et al, 2004) and this has produced many challenges for student counselling services (Kreb, 2015). Surprisingly, concerns of satisfying the higher demands in student support and counselling services were reported since 1969 and still demand continues to be a prominent issue (Goldenberg, 1980). The continuous growth of student population in higher education has also shaped new opportunities to embed counselling services into the curriculum (Kreb,2015). According to previous scholars, one main response to managing the high demand has been to limit counselling to six sessions but the decision for this short-tern support has increased concerns of whether effective support can be delivered in this short period (Mair, 2016). Despite this, some student feedback shows that these counselling services have helped students' ability to cope with academic pressure (Mckenzie et al, 2015). However, the author argues that as student population increases yearly and the uncertainty of

future pandemics post-Covid-19; the severity and complexity of student mental health triggers will also increase (Broglia et al, 2017). Some scholars argue that despite the limitations of support sessions in higher education, there has been a growth of external student referrals to the National Health Service (NHS) which has resulted to lengthy waiting times (Mowbray et al, 2006). In addition, student counselling services on campus also experiences lengthy waiting periods due to students experiencing limited access to support outside of the academic semester or term time (Broglia et al, 2017).

In response to these challenges, the UK government has recently created a new 'student mental health taskforce'; on 7 March 2019 a new group was launched to help students manage mental health challenges in university (Department of Education, 2019). The new taskforce set up by Education Secretary (Damain Hinds) will involve partnerships with the Education Transitions Network, UCAS, National Union of Students, Student Minds, Universities UK, the Association of Colleges, and the Office for Students. This group is said to develop key measures to help create a smoother transition into student life in higher education as well as help students maintain good mental health (Hinds, 2019). Following this, the UK Department of Education has identified four main areas to consider for this framework. They have identified that these include (Department of Education, 2019):

1. Independent Living – helping students manage finances, transition to student life, manage alcohol and drug misuse.
2. Independent learning – improving student engagement with their course, coping with workload and the development of their own study skills.
3. Building healthy relationships – by supporting students with skills to make friendships and network with diverse groups of people.
4. Wellbeing – dealing with loneliness, social media pressure and knowledge of support services available.

The new taskforce is also keen to look at other challenges beyond these four areas that may affect student mental health as part of its future work, such as the transition from university to the work environment (Department of Education, 2019).

In summary, this chapter has given insightful details about the concerns of student mental health in the United Kingdom, the actions being taken in response and suggests that this is still an ongoing issue for the higher education sector even to this day. Within the context of student mental health and personal development, it is crucial to consider how alternative methods such as emotional intelligence may be implemented towards student wellbeing improvement. The next chapter will further discuss the need for emotional competence in the UK higher education curriculum.

"As academic excellence surges upward, the focus on character education, emotional and social competencies have begun to wane" – Covey, 2008

CHAPTER 4

Reviewing the importance of emotional intelligence in higher education

Considerable research exists in literature as to identifying the correlation between student mental health and emotional competence. Much of the findings from previous research indicate the impact of students who have high levels of emotional intelligence with their academic and professional success (Wang, 2020). Similarly, Lawal et al (2018) have found that characteristics of emotional intelligence can help the higher education sector better support students with their relationship with mental health. However, while the literature of higher education and emotional intelligence is abundant, arguments around the training of emotional intelligence have increased over the years, scholars argue that the higher education sector needs to improve their abilities to establish training for emotion management and self-awareness skills (Howe et al, 2014). But, to better understand the relationship between student mental health and emotional competence, we first need to understand the definition of emotional intelligence. As a psychological theory developed by Salovey and Mayer (1993), they describe the concept of emotional intelligence as:

"The ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth."

-Mayer and Salovey, 1993

Additionally, Daniel Goleman (1999) defines emotional intelligence in five components as shown in the figure below:

Figure 1: Daniel Goleman's five components of emotional intelligence
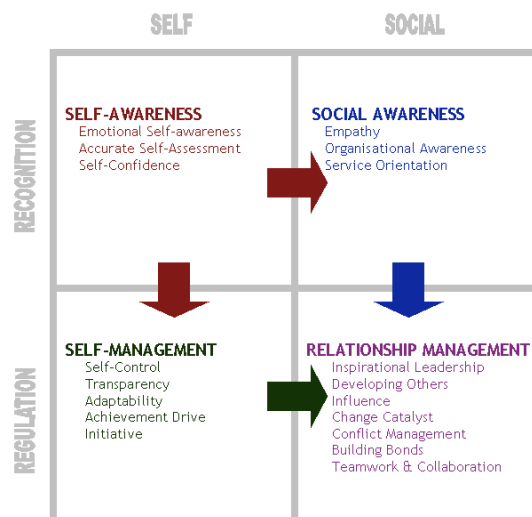
Scholars continue deepening academic discussions that argue that these five components are essential at university level because student's development in higher education plays a huge role in their personal, practical and career life (Khurshid et al, 2018). Hence, emotional competence training can to lead an effective and efficient student life while also improving future job satisfaction (Bern, 2011).

4.1 Alternative holistic methods that have already been implemented to address student mental health

It is evident in the previous chapter that the UK government, Department of Education and universities have had a common response which has been to increase the supply of services such as pastoral care, counselling, proactive courses, and mental health awareness campaigns (Barton, 2021). However, one major downfall about increasing the supply of support services, research by the HuffPost (2019) found that the budgets for student mental health services increased by 71% across the higher education sector between 2012-18. In 2019, it is stated that more than £1 million was spent on mental health support in at least seven institutions (HuffPost, 2019). Unfortunately, while the government and universities continue to spend more money on support services as they strive to respond to demand; scholars argue that there is little evidence to suggest that the current services and provision approaches will reduce the demand for services in the future. Some scholars even note that "it is unsustainable for the current trends in student support services spending to continue indefinitely" (Barton, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the delivery of student support services and has presented both opportunities and threats towards student mental health and wellbeing. The transition to online learning has proven to have challenged student satisfaction (as discussed in chapter two) which has removed the physical 'academic relationship' between a student and the university (Barton, 2021). Higher education expert (Jonathan Barton) argues that this distance can "inhibit the university's ability to identify potential issues early and direct at-risk students to the support they need (Barton, 2021). Although the transition to online learning has presented new opportunities to embrace digital support services methods and increased accessibility; the author also argues that this means students now have full control over how and when they receive academic content and support. Therefore, this level of change provides a great window of opportunity to consider a more holistic approach of student mental health in universities and consider transformational improvements that will make a difference for students and their academic institutions (Barton, 2021).

"Rather than picking up the pieces after something has gone wrong, I believe we should focus on a more proactive approach by creating "a positive and mindful university" – Anthony Seldon, 2017

The author strongly agrees with this statement by Anthony (2017) because there are several higher education institutions who still do not have a broad institutional definition or holistic strategy for student wellbeing and student life (Carter, 2018). Similarly, previous education and student wellbeing experts argue that universities need to adopt "holistic and [transformational] approaches to wellbeing, considering both preventative and positive aspects covering all areas of the student lifecycle" (Carter, 2018). To provoke action, the UK Institute of Public Policy Research has called for the consideration of a holistic and whole approach for

student mental health (Thorley, 2017). In response to this quest, in 2019 The University Mental Health Charter was launched to work alongside Student Minds and the Stepchange Framework to adopt a whole-system approach for student mental health (Universities UK, 2017). The charter as two aims (1) to provide a whole-institution approach and (2) to establish a Charter Award Scheme that will recognise good practice and evaluate effectiveness of this approach (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

4.1 The objectives of initiating this 'whole-institution' approach

The newly formed Whole Institutional Approach considers the fact that there are various causes of student mental health in higher education that require a more broad, collective, and innovative response (Universities UK, 2017). It aims "to transform culture at third level into a health promoting setting that no longer delegates mental health to the support services" (Universities UK, 2017). This approach is established and implemented by sustainable strategic policies in higher education institutions with Academic Heads and full engagement and involvement from staff, mental health committee and institutional leaders (Universities UK, 2017). Simply put, this approach enables wider participation and fair access at all levels of the university, not limited to one department. The three main core features of the whole institution approach include (Thomas, 2020):

- Adopting a 'whole lifecycle' approach
- Not just focusing on enrolment but also prioritising student experience and outcomes in academics and beyond
- Establishing the involvement of staff in all departments and institutional commitment

However, with more that 165 universities in the United Kingdom, critics state that what could work for one institution may not work for another hence it is important to look for other holistic principles that could work (Thomas, 2020).

4.2 What is missing in the whole-institution approach?

Arguably, although good in its approach, this inclusive approach needs to be clear on how these features will be executed. The approach looks at widening participation across institutional departments, but the author argues that it lacks the strategy to enhance student emotional intelligence and individual wellbeing transformation. Similarly, scholars have argued that the whole institution approach should not just prioritise the student lifecycle (from entry to graduation) which is a "vertical alignment" (Felten et al, 2016). He argues that the approach needs to consider student wellbeing throughout students' day-to-day lived experiences, including their academic life, personal and social wellbeing, and their professional development (horizontal alignment) [Felten et al, 2016]. A horizontal alignment may look at improving students' wellbeing through (Felton et al, 2016):

- Mindfulness-based interventions
- Psychoeducational interventions
- Relaxation interventions
- Cognitive-behavioural interventions
- Emotional Intelligence skills and training

- Interpersonal relationships
- Meditation
- Time management and organization skills
- Soft skills

Therefore, the review in this chapter shows that there is a gap in literature for the development of an inclusive 'horizontal alignment' or holistic based approach to tackle student mental health challenges in higher education. Despite the great efforts from the Department of Education, government, and higher education institutions to adopt the whole institution approach, the author argues that both the culture and structure of universities need to be addressed following an intellectual intelligence and emotional intelligence-based curriculum. Similarly, May and Bridger (2010) argued that it was necessary for universities to undertake changes at both the institutional and the individual levels:

... organisational change required to bring about inclusive policy and practice fell into two broad categories: institutional-level change: targeting institutional policy, strategy, structures, systems, processes and/or environmental factors, whether centrally or within departments/faculties; individual-level change: targeting individuals' attitudes, self-awareness, emotional competence, self- knowledge, understanding, perceptions, and assumptions, as well as practice (p. 36).

Therefore, on an educational context exploring the definition of emotional intelligence Devis-Rozental (2017) states that:

"Emotional intelligence is the capacity to integrate cognition, feelings and intuition to acknowledge, understand, manage, apply and express our emotions and social interactions at the right time, for the right purpose in the right context and with the right person. Its overall aim is to have a positive impact on our environment and to engage ourselves and others to be present, authentic and open; in order to achieve a sense of wellbeing and to build effective relationships in every aspect of our lives' (p. 166).

Thus, the author argues that within the context of higher education, this definition could be applied in the setting of developing an emotional intelligence-based approach to tackle student mental health; where students are supported holistically, beyond academics and through cognitive skills training. However, this dissertation will not attempt to assume that a holistic approach will ultimately solve student mental health issues or discredit the effectiveness of current support services. Alternatively, what is of interest to the author is exploring (while allowing for future research) how embedding emotional intelligence training in higher education might help improve student wellbeing post Covid-19. Hence, the purpose of this dissertation is to study how the covid-19 pandemic has intensified student mental health challenges and ignite discussions that see the potential of emotional intelligence as a tool to tackle student mental health issues in the UK. Therefore, the question we ought to ask ourselves in the higher education sector (given the uncertainty of the future and new changes due to the pandemic) is to what extent are the current student support services supporting personal development at a more holistic and emotional level and how do these current services (if at all) are fostering transformational change while interrelating academic gain with wellbeing and the development of invaluable personal skills? Such questions suggest that the higher education sector is yet to completely understand the role that emotional intelligence training plays for student wellbeing.

To investigate responses for the above-mentioned questions, the author conducted a series of qualitative semi-structured interviews with student support staff in UK universities. The

interviews' main purpose was to try and unpack how the pandemic has intensified student mental health and if emotional intelligence would play a positive role in transforming student mental health. This dissertation seeks to further suggest some practical arguments for the importance of embedding emotional intelligence training within higher education curricula and ignite vision for the potential of establishing a meaningful or transformational university environment post-Covid-19. Unintentionally, the interview questions ignited further discussions about the importance of soft skills, resilience, and emotional intelligence in the world of work post-graduation.

CHAPTER 5

Methodology

5.1 Research Method

The adoption of emotional intelligence training as an alternative approach can be seen as a strategy to improve student mental health in higher education. Research on the connection between student wellbeing and emotional competence found that the role of academics in the development of student emotional intelligence is crucial for a successful student life (Rozental and Farquharson, 2020). What we see in the previous chapters (background and literature reviews) is the importance for UK higher education institutions to understand their impact on student personal development and emotional intelligence inside and outside of university walls (Rozental and Farquharson, 2020). Therefore, this chapter outlines the rationale for the chosen methodology aiming to (1) address the gap in literature about the importance of emotional intelligence training for students post-Covid-19, (2) add to literature that emotional intelligence is crucial for student wellbeing and personal development, and (3) broaden what is known about how the pandemic has intensified student mental health problems. The author chose to use a qualitative approach to expand what is known about student mental health by gathering insightful information from student support services staff in a UK university. The purpose was to deeply understand student challenges during the pandemic, the responses from student support department and explore the concept of emotional intelligence as a potential approach to strengthen student mental health.

5.2 Research design

To gather rich and in-depth perspectives, the researcher utilized five semi-structured interviews where she strategically asked participants' questions relating to this study, carefully observing themes in responses, and taking notes of tone and wording used. The reason why this was the best approach for this study is because a qualitative research design is stated to be "an appropriate approach for complex subjects in which it is important to extract nuance and identity differences and commonalities in personal narratives and experiences" (Hughes et al, 2018). The reason for a small sample size of only five interviews is because it produced thorough and meaningful findings while minimizing unnecessary and vague discussions. Individual interviews were used instead of focus groups to allow participants to be comfortable in sharing their perspectives. Furthermore, a thematic analysis was used to analyse responses gathered from the semi-structured interviews. In taking an inductive approach, the researcher developed recursive themes that occurred from the interviews. Using this process, data was collected in a powerful yet flexible method, interpreted to construct patterns and then analysed to derive an answer for the main research question (Kiger, 2020).

5.3 Ethics and Safeguards

All participants were emailed asking consent for their participation in the study. They were sent a letter with the study purposes and details; the letter outlines the duration of the interview and the type of questions that will be asked. Efforts were made to keep the participants

confidentiality; therefore, participants will remain anonymous and will be referred to as participant A, B, C, D, E. A potential benefit for participants within the student support services department includes reflecting on their efforts to improve student wellbeing and introduce new support methods post Covid-19. By engaging in the study's research questions, participants might gain further insight on the importance of emotional intelligence for student mental health. Additionally, possible benefits to the higher education sector includes broadening and deepening its understanding about the need to shift from being academic driven but to establish a more transformational education and support system.

5.4 Sample/Recruitment

This study's sample size was limited to five participants of which three were student support services staff at an elite university located in central London and the other two were education and student mental health advisors. These participants were eligible for this study because of their experiences, knowledge, and academic seniority (Hughes et al, 2017) towards student mental health challenges in UK higher education. Participant's experiences ranged from student services advisors, personal tutors, head of student support and wellbeing, education commentators and experts. As seen in chapter two, the literature, and findings from Changon (2020) revealed how the covid-19 pandemic has intensified student mental health challenges. Hence, to set the tone for discussions, the interview was presented in an intentional and influential format with two cases - (1) Research shows that the Covid-19 has affected both the higher education sector and student wellbeing (Changon, 2020), and (2) discussions in literature suggesting that emotional intelligence training can help the higher education sector better support student mental health and personal development (Lawal et al, 2018). As a result of these to situations, interviewees were asked to provide commentary and their perspective (through their experiences) about the impact of the pandemic in their field of work and future directions towards better support. Initiating these cases from literature allowed the researcher to set the tone and the intentions of the interview, while also stimulating the thought process of participants' experiences or their observations of student behaviour in university. Although, the main objective was to obtain comparable and thematic information about the subject of student mental health in the UK but also aimed to introduce explorations of emotional intelligence training as a support strategy for students. Although this small sample size might have limited the potential for more data, the researcher was intentional about this because it allowed for an in-depth and controllable exploration of themes.

5.5 Data Collection

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews that lasted for a duration of 30-40 minutes, with 40 minutes being the maximum time. This time duration of 30 minutes allowed for enough discussion about the topic of the study and an extra 10 minutes to explore other subjects and personal experiences related to this study. The flexible and casual nature of the questions prompted participants to respond comfortably and allow them to reflect on their personal perspectives, feelings, and experiences (Lofland, 1995). To allow full concentration and attentive listening for the researcher, the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then analysed for possible themes, patterns, and *thematic coding* – a process that allows the interviewer to analyse qualitative data by later reading and assessing the discussion in a more

observative and repetitive manner (Caulfield, 2019). The interviews were presented in an open, broad, scenario/case, and semi-structured set of questions. This method allowed for analysis of insightful and deep discussions of student mental health to emerge from the day-to-day experiences within student support services department. The goal of this method was to expand on what is already known about student mental and prompt discussions about the importance of emotional intelligence. The questions are listed in the interview guide (see appendix B). To learn more about the intensities of responding to student mental health problems in higher education; the researcher had to be free to follow the data wherever it leads and allow the interview to progress organically (Rubin and Rubin, 2011). In line with the study's thematic research design, the researcher left room for data collection to evolve from responses that agree with the intentions of the study but also allowed follow up questions that explored the arguments against the concept of emotional intelligence. A further detail of the participant's demographic is listed in the table below:

Table 1: Summary of academic participants and role descriptions

Role	Department
Head of student support and wellbeing	Student support and wellbeing team
Wellbeing Officer	Student Union
Personal Tutor	Academics
Higher Education expert	Holistic approaches to student mental health
Student mental health advisor and activist	Student mental health charity

5.6 Limitations of chosen methodology

Although this methodology is the most appropriate for the purpose of this dissertation, the qualitative nature of this study implies that the findings cannot be generalized to wider experiences of students who are not in higher education. The sample and recruitment were solely higher education advisors, academics and those involved in the design of student support services. Therefore, this means the decision of this methodology and small sample size does not explore higher education policymakers, the UK Department of Education and the set rules and regulations that all higher education institutions need to adhere to; thus, risking the presentation of a biased analysis. However, the researcher's chose to use previous research and literature about the current standing of UK student mental health, covid-19 disruptions, and the importance of emotional intelligence (as a tool to improve mental health) reduced biases that could have led to the researcher's own interpretations. Finally, while participant's responses were based on their own perspectives and experiences, the researcher acknowledges the role she played in constructing questions to influence the thought process of participants. This may have encouraged responses that were beneficial for the purposes of the study's research question.

CHAPTER 6
Findings

This chapter examines the key findings and themes that emerged from the open-ended qualitative interviews with five student support services staff about their experiences in UK higher education. These interviews served to provide data and responses that relate to the main research question: *How does the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on student mental health call for emotional intelligence training in UK higher education.* Gaining insightful responses for this question will require the following sub-questions to be answered:

1. How has the Covid-19 pandemic intensified mental health challenges amongst students in higher education?
2. How are the current student support services responding to these challenges?
3. How can embedding emotional intelligence training into the curriculum be a potential solution post-Covid?

Therefore, this chapter will outline the findings and results following thematical analysis of interview discussions with participants. These findings are categorized into four content areas: (1) student mental health in UK, (2) the response from student support services, (3) the impact of Covid-19 and (4) the importance of emotional intelligence. In brief, three of the participants identified as having a personal experience with supporting students who presented mental health difficulties in university. All participants had primary knowledge and experience about how the Covid-19 pandemic intensified student mental health and the UK higher education sector while some participants made suggestions about the importance of emotional intelligence in curriculum design. Although, the respondents had a diverse range of experiences in university student support, they all presented similar perspectives and responses.

6.1 Thematical analysis

The next section will present the themes and discussion commonalities that emerged in each of the four content areas (as mentioned in the previous section). The first content area explores UK student mental health and how it has been a challenge in higher education for so many years, including its importance in the student lifecycle. The second content area explores how higher education institutions have responded to this crisis and their current efforts to improve student wellbeing. For example, participants described their current professional role and responsibilities within the student support department as well as the impact of university pressure on student mental health. The third content area explores the participant's experiences due to the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on student mental health and the higher education sector. Discussions in this area also included how the pandemic increased the demand for student support services and what was done to address this demand. The fourth and final content area of the findings explores the participants responses to questions about the newly formed 'whole-institution approach' framework introduced by the Department of Education (as discussed in chapter III). This content area also highlighted the participants perspectives to questions about the importance of emotional intelligence for better mental

health. This content area also explored new discussions that emerged in the interviews about participants personal experience of needing soft, interpersonal and resilience skills when they transitioned into the working environment. This new topic about 'non-academic' skills required in the work environment was developed from the thematic analysis of responses, which led to "the addition of questions in subsequent interviews of this study" (Frawley, 2016).

6.2 Content area 1 findings: The concern of UK student mental health

This area explores how student mental health has been an area of concern over the years in the United Kingdom and the higher education sector. As seen in academic literature (chapter two and three), the transition from high school to university is an exciting yet challenging time for young people leading to increased levels of mental health challenges. In addition, the higher education sector has been overwhelmed by the demand of student support over the years.

Student mental continues to be a great issue for universities. Out of the five participants, three stated that "student mental health challenges are becoming more and more common nowadays, what is astonishing for me is that when I do my research, statistics show that over 70% of all types of mental health challenges are established between the ages of 18-24." "This is an age where we see a lot of students transitioning from high school to university life." Similarly, the other respondents also stated that these statistics were not surprising, given the research that UK student mental health has been a big crisis in recent years. When asked about the causes of student mental health through their experiences in the student support department, the participants responded that "all students are different, and we have seen students come with various challenges." "But usually, the common triggers of student mental health that I witnessed have been the transition to university life, homesickness, feeling lonely and academic pressure." Respondents A, B and C also stated that "academic pressure has resulted to students feeling very anxious and worried about hitting an assignment deadline and receiving high grades." Some respondents even shared their own personal experience of mental health when they were in university, one shared "when I was in university, I struggled with time management and organisational skills and I received no support in that area, it's like you have to figure everything by yourself once you are enrolled you know? (giggles)" …. "Nobody really prepares you for the workload and this really increased my stress levels." Another respondent stated, "obviously university is important but looking back it was really a traumatic experience, so I understand when students come to me about their challenges" (sighs).

6.2 Content area 2 findings: The effectiveness of current student support services

Almost all participants shared mixed reviews about the effectiveness of current student support services (both on campus and external services). The participants expressed diverse responses from hesitantly stating that the higher education sector has experienced a great surge in demand for student support. One respondent stating that "it is very difficult and almost impossible to prevent mental health challenges from occurring." ... "Have the student support services been effective you ask? Of course! but the problem we are facing (well everyone in support services for that matter) is that the demand is too high, and it is overwhelming us." Similarly, another participant responded "…the pandemic has made things worse, the rise in cases and waiting list for counselling services has been unbearable." Within this section, participants felt that the Covid-19 pandemic had made things worse and with everything shifting to online learning,

providing support for local and international students has been a challenge. However, other participants saw this challenge as an opportunity to introduce new innovative methods to improve student wellbeing. When asked if they thought universities could do better or should have done better in previous years, one respondent stated "…I think there is a huge need for more mental health services especially during off-campus (summer holiday) seasons and breaks because when university is closed students are not able to utilise these services." While another responded worried that "higher education institutions must be able to identify symptoms and provide care that is embedded into the curriculum rather than having to wait to make an appointment for support." Interestingly, what the researcher observed in this response is that there is a need for personal development to be embedded within the curriculum to reduce high demand and increased waiting periods for counselling sessions. So, the researcher asked, "Do you think the capacity of services and demand is the main issue?" Two of the five respondents felt that it was important for all students to be able to receive support at the time they need it, and respondents also stressed the importance of finding alternative methods to prevent student mental health problems from occurring. One respondent stated, "this is definitely not something that will happen overnight but requires a combined effort from government, education policy makers, a transformation of curriculum design, student and staff efforts and the overall community to find a solution." Meanwhile, the other participant stated, "there is no one ultimate solution for mental health problems but higher education institutions need to actively prioritise and embed mental health within curriculum design."

In terms of the way each respondent answered the questions in this section, they were all concerned and certain that more needs to be done than just offering counselling and pastoral sessions. For example, they often appeared to use phrases like, "definitely," "yes, I agree", "a lot more needs to be done" and "it is not enough". A theme of open and honest communication about the need for alternative methods (beyond what is currently available in student support services) began to emerge in some of the responses to the questions in this section. Participants described that there needs to be a long-term plan for alternative approaches to combat student mental health. One respondent stated, "…But currently the demand for student support is too high and higher education institutions need enough capacity to manage student problems in the short-term." Another participant even shared that "because of the demand for counselling sessions within universities, the student wellbeing team had to send students to NHS services and other external mental health charities to receive support and avoid long waiting periods." To gain more detail, the discussions chapter will explore in-depth the type of alternative approaches that respondents referred to for student wellbeing improvement.

6.3 Content area 3 findings: The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on student mental health and the higher education sector

The previous section summed up how higher education institutions have responded to student mental health challenges and the effectiveness of student support services. This section will explore how the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified student mental health challenges and some of the reported problems. To set the tone for the questions in this section, the participants were presented with background insight about the negative impact of Covid-19 on students. This enabled participants to engage with the questions and provide their experiences during the

pandemic. The background information stated that the outbreak of the pandemic had resulted to increased levels of anxiety, fear, and loneliness for students in UK universities. Furthermore, the panic and uncertainty resulted to many universities shifting to online/distance learning and students having to be more responsible for their studies than ever before.

As mentioned in the introduction chapter, research shows that student mental health cases have worsened during the pandemic (Student Covid Insights Survey, 2020). Most participants agreed that the changes to online learning were a difficult transition not only for students but staff too. One respondent stated "… we have seen a rise in student cases about isolation, students experiencing a loss of routine and not being able to manage academic workload while at home." The other respondent said, "due to high stress levels caused by the pandemic, some students reported that they were experiencing panic attacks, suicidal thoughts and lack of motivation." When asked about students who took the initiative to seek for help or support from the university, one respondent shared that "…almost half of our students reported their challenges and received some form of support through NHS mental health services, the university counselling sessions, online helplines and charities." However, other respondents said they had received complaints where "students looked for support but had no access to any support from the university during the pandemic period." "…Unfortunately, we had cases where some students who were suffering in silence and did not look for support at all." While most mental health services in the United Kingdom have tried to improve support services, what the researcher gathers from the interview discussions is that many students still felt that they didn't receive sufficient support or the level of support they needed. All the respondents said that "the pandemic has not only intensified student mental health issues, but it will also have a negative long-term effect on student wellbeing post Covid-19." One participant mentioned that their student support and wellbeing team had developed a new way to stay in touch and show support to students through telephone calls. "…our university has many international students and in order to show support during lockdown, we introduced telephone call support and called each student to find out how they were doing and if they needed any help (Respondent B)." However, most of the other respondents had mixed feelings about the digital and virtual support. Respondent C argued "… I agree but although this has been helpful, digital support (practically and emotionally) may not be a form of help that works for all students." This gave a concerning implication that there is still more value for face-to-face support sessions alongside virtual forms of support.

Barriers to support during the Covid-19 pandemic. All participants noted that there were many barriers to support services during lockdown periods, they stated "some barriers in our support department were long waiting periods, support followed by delays, face-to-face counselling session coming to an abrupt end and students losing faith in the university services system after poor experiences." Two respondents in the same field/profession seemed to be concerned about higher education not prioritising social and emotional development. Both respondents said, "university needs to be more than just academics, students need to feel safe, have opportunities to develop both academically, professionally and personally." "I just think the government and the Department of Education needs to be more ambitious in their approach to student mental health." These responses gave a sense that new holistic approaches needed

to be included in the student mental health strategy plan which introduces the fourth content area of the findings.

The next question, "which mental health issues were reported as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic?" showed a pattern of similar responses from all participants. The table below shows some of the reported mental health challenges from respondent's experiences:

Figure 1.2: Table showing impact of Covid-19 pandemic on student mental health

Mental Health Report Cases	Cause
1. Feelings of loneliness and isolation	Mainly caused by lockdown restrictions, reduced social activity and being away from family (for international students).
2. Academic pressure, workload, lack of routine, poor time management and organisational skills	As a result of studying from home, students experienced distractions at home and struggled to maintain a routine/schedule for their studies.
3. Concerns about getting ill or loss of family members	The contagious variants of the Covid-19 pandemic increased fear of getting ill. Many students also lost grandparents and other family members which increased sadness and grief
4. Not being able to access mental health support	Universities student support services had moved online, and the waiting period or increased demand meant some students couldn't get help when they needed it.
5. Concerns about getting a job after graduation	Many companies were closing, and recruitment had been reduced. Students received high levels of rejection from job applications
6. Concerns about money, student debt and not being able to complete university	Financial strains from parents losing their jobs meant that some students couldn't continue with their degrees.

The accounts of the responses in this section regarding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on student mental health suggest the call for alternative approaches to improve student wellbeing and prevent the overwhelming crisis and demand for student support services in the future. This will be explored further in the discussion chapter.

6.4 Content area 4 findings: Exploring the need for alternative holistic approaches to improve student wellbeing

This section explores participant's discussions and perspectives about the newly introduced "whole- institution" approach formed by the UK Department of Education (as discussed in chapter three), as well as their insight about the importance of introducing holistic approaches in higher education student support services.

Thoughts about the "whole-institution" approach and personal development. Although there was no direct question about the whole institution approach, the interview discussions led to participants speaking about the importance of this concept within the higher education sector; and their reflections will be summarised in this section. This section also aimed to influence engagement about the importance of holistic wellbeing to improve student mental health but most importantly to explore the concept of emotional intelligence. Finally, the main intention of this section, was to give a vision for a more transformational higher education student lifecycle that prioritises personal development (in all its aspects) and move beyond the idea that university is just about graduation and grades. One participant's experience as a former university student illustrates the need for a more personal development focused curriculum. The participant mentioned, "…now that I work with students, I realized that academic grades are not the most important thing about university, its more about making sure universities meet the personal development needs of students." Meanwhile another participant stated, "when I was an undergraduate student, I didn't feel like I was fitting "well" into the system of lecture classes, I felt more comfortable in the small community of coaching and mentorship." She added "… I then became passionate about exploring how a learning environment (such as university) affects student's wellbeing and performance. Hence my career path has been in student wellbeing and support." Interestingly, this respondent explicates the importance of a personal development led curriculum in higher education. Through her tone and use of words, the researcher noticed that the respondent was concerned that students may often feel lost in their student life especially when they cannot apply their academic knowledge to their day-to-day personal lives.

Two participants expressed their thoughts about the "whole-institution" approach. One noted that "…Honestly I think this new framework that the UK Department of Education has set out is absolutely crucial now more than ever before. The UK higher education sector is now showing a longstanding commitment to increase diversity (through recruiting international students) and getting all departments involved in improving student experience and wellbeing is a great start." When asked to explore some of the themes that form part of the "whole-institution" approach, the other participant shared "…well the approach is applied to a variety of themes ranging from university planning/improvement, wellbeing, health, inclusion, behaviour management, just to name a few. So, this approach has been implemented long ago in many UK universities, but I think what's more relevant about the framework now is its mission to establish a more collaborative curriculum design." She added "…where students are well included in decision making and having everyone in higher education departments responsible for student wellbeing." What does a holistic approach to student mental health mean to you and what are your views about emotional intelligence as a tool for a more sustained

student support system? The researcher asked. In summary, all participants expressed the potential benefits of holistic approaches and emotional intelligence in curriculum design. One responded stated, "this is a much-needed topic in higher education that needs more exploration, I think holistic approaches allow for universities to look more on individual improvement rather than creating a whole framework of what "we" (as academics) think student's need for personal improvement." Another participant argued "actually what if the very people who seek to help students may be unwittingly contributing to the very student problems they claim to be solving; for example, through their responses and behaviours (pauses); just a train of thought." Two other participants agreed that "I think embedding emotional intelligence in curriculum design will give the higher education sector a chance to consider how emotional competence is at the heart of student mental health; this includes how students think, socialise, learn, behave and even how they attribute meaning and purpose into their studies." In brief, the researcher found that almost all participants agreed to the need of engaging more discussions about emotional intelligence as a potential tool to improve student wellbeing in the future. In the next chapter, the author goes into analytical detail about the implications of emotional intelligence in higher education from the data that she gathered.

CHAPTER 7

Discussion

The main objectives of this dissertation study were to gain a deeper understanding of student mental health in UK higher education before and during Covid-19, investigate the current student support services and explore how emotional intelligence can be used as tool to improve student wellbeing in higher education post-Covid 19. As seen in the previous chapter, qualitative semi-structured interviews with student support services staff were used to answer the main and sub research questions about how the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified student mental health challenges, what services are currently available for students and examining the potential of emotional intelligence as an approach to improve student wellbeing. It has been evident from some of the key findings and previous literature that student mental health has been an ongoing challenge within the UK higher education sector over the years; other findings shed light on some of the positive responses and student support strategies from UK government, the department of education, universities, and mental health charities. However, other findings indicated that student mental health is still a challenge, and a lot more needs to be done such as having an inclusive, whole-institution and holistic focused approach.

This chapter presents an analytical discussion about the key findings of this study and situates these findings on the context of existing student mental health and emotional intelligence literature. The author indicates participants views about the question of implementing emotional intelligence in academia while also expressing the limitations. While some of the responses from participants confirmed what previous literature has found about emotional intelligence in higher education, other responses shed light on the difficulties of embedding emotional intelligence in the curriculum.

7.1 Summary of the key findings regarding emotional intelligence

The summary of key findings in this section pertain to how holistic approaches such as emotional intelligence may help improve student mental health challenges in higher education. Respondents expressed their own personal perspectives about the importance of emotional intelligence and its connections with student mental health. Other respondents even reflected on how previous research has found that emotional competence can result to better academic achievements and provide a positive student lifecycle while some suggested ways to improve paradigms of student mental health in varying contexts. Next, this analytical discussion chapter will be reviewed in relation to previous literature.

7.2 Why we need emotional intelligence in Higher Education?

All participants were asked this question in relation to this study's main research question, participant's mixed responses were analysed and interpreted in the light of previous literature about the links between higher education and emotional intelligence. Participant's positive engagement to this question may reflect some elements of Dr Pool's (2007) belief that providing emotional intelligence training to students can result to improved academic

performance, strong self-awareness skills, increased self-motivation, stress resilience, better team working and a transformational student lifecycle. One participant replied, "It is very important that UK universities ensure that students can manage their own emotions because if we give them the opportunity to develop EI it will help them achieve their aspirations even beyond university life." In Dr Pool's CareerEDGE model, she describes how emotional intelligence also relates to "better workplace performance, engagement, decision making and leadership; while also providing positive outcomes in job recruitment situations" (Dr Pool, 2007). One participant agreed that "whilst student navigate the transition into university, I think having good levels of emotional intelligence will help students develop the ability to recognise and manage their own anxiety and depressive behaviours." Similarly, previous literature also offers an argument stating, "that the period that young people enter university is a huge change in their lives, some may even be at the most vulnerable stage both physical and psychosocial; therefore, being trained about emotional intelligence at university with help deal with some of the student mental health challenges" (AdvanceHE, 2018). While this interview enabled the researcher to capture the participant's experiences with student support, their narrative from this question gives an indication that there more to be done beyond the current student support services.

Additionally, connections drawn from previous research on having emotional competence taught in higher education were similar to participant's responses on embedding emotional intelligence in curriculum design. Participant's responses about teaching emotional intelligence in university were grouped according to similarity, with most answers thematically falling in two main categories: (1) although academic, technical, and theoretical skills are necessary in higher education, (2) it is no longer sufficient, personal development needs to be prioritised (Baker et al, 2013). Higher education needs to make sure that students "develop values and attitudes that guide the transfer and applicability of pure knowledge to real challenges/scenarios of personal, social, academic, and professional progress" (Griffin and Reason, 2010). While this study allowed for flexibility in responses, participants seemed to engage in favour of the study's objectives. Respondents were keen to explore the potential of emotional intelligence training as a method to help students master their emotions (Miller, 2010). Therefore, findings did conclusively support the study's objectives and main research question.

Despite the above, the "how" of implementing emotional intelligence was difficult to assess because of the limitations of this study's methodology design. The findings showed thematical responses where participant's stressed that the higher education system in the United Kingdom is constrained by the exclusive recognition of academic skills and capabilities that they may have disregarded multiple intelligences such as emotional intelligence. Even though participants were positive about the current student support services and student development offered in universities, one participant argued,

"…the pandemic has had a great impact on employability especially for recent graduates, research shows that employers will now be looking at skills beyond academic talents such as adaptability, resilience, emotional intelligence and leadership post-Covid. I think it is really important to re-evaluate how higher education institutions are helping with the personal

development of students; we need to realize that emotional intelligence is a crucial soft skill/mind set skill that all students need to be trained for before they enter the world of work."

Similarly, previous research found that the higher education sector needs to consider teaching skills that provide meaning and access to full life beyond academics (Kruss, 2004). Scholars have argued that emotional intelligence training will provide students with "a comprehensive education for life that will help in overcoming obstacles, addressing problems while maintaining perseverance to achieve own's goals, beliefs and values" (Corbi et al, 2018). It is evident that emotional intelligence in higher education and its impact on students in the workplace were topics that came up frequently amongst all participants. This sheds light on how emotional intelligence is still a concept that is needs to be implemented in curriculum design and the idea that the university environment "presents the ideal climate in which to optimize the emotional management that strengthens multiple learning experiences" (Corbi et al, 2018) even within the whole-institution approach.

7.3 Can emotional intelligence be taught?

Despite the agreement between all participants about the importance of emotional intelligence for improving student development, three out of the five respondents argued about the difficulties of practical applications of emotional intelligence training. Two participants shared similar arguments stating that "emotions and human behaviour are intrinsic and universal; emotions change on a regular basis so it may be difficult to train such a skill." Their argument was similar to Humphrey et al (2007) when they stated that emotions are not learned, and they have more to do with cognitive and personality factors. Participants also argued that there is no clear definition of what emotional intelligence is, so how can it be taught. One interpretation of these arguments between respondents and literature may be that; the problem with the concept of emotional intelligence not being clear whether it is a "single skill" or "a set of skills" will make it difficult to measure how it can be taught in higher education. Despite these arguments, two respondents mentioned how "the growing interest of emotional intelligence in higher education and academic literature shows that it is an essential component to student personal development." This stands in contrast to Pool and Sewell (2007) when they shared remarks that students with high levels of emotional competence can motivate themselves and establish high levels of resilience. The two participants used their experiences to make positive engagements for emotional intelligence in higher education. They stated that "from the feedback we receive from students who have attended counselling sessions in our student support department, what we can gather is that (1) there is a relationship between education and student personal development and (2) both of these processes should be regarded as an emotional and transformative journey." This response showed agreement that higher education and personal development (as far as emotional intelligence is concerned) both have the capability to help students gain academic knowledge and emotional reasoning skills that can help them function better in university (Clayton et al, 2009). Therefore, participant's responses and the discussions in literature suggest that new perspectives on what helps improve student mental health need to be further explored in future research; particularly research that links the complexities between defining emotional intelligence and implementing it to solve student mental health challenges.

7.4 The impact of emotions on student learning

While the complexities of establishing a clear definition of emotional intelligence (as argued in previous literature) make it difficult to explore the validity of emotional intelligence in higher education; there is positive evidence that applications of this concept may improve student lifecycle. Given that all participants had strong agreements about emotional intelligence and its potential to improve student mental health indicates that there needs to be more discussions about implementation in future literature. However, some participants feel that "higher education may view emotions as private (can only be explored in counselling private sessions) rather than it being part of the social learning environment." But Leathwood and Hey (2009) argue that students "do not cease to have emotions when they walk into the lecture theatre, every student's emotion plays a huge role in shaping their [student experience and wellbeing]." Another participant mentioned "I think it is ignorant to eliminate the emotional aspects of student mental health within curriculum design, being aware of emotions and learning how to manage them is a skill that all students need inside and outside of the classroom." Participant's accounts reflect that higher education needs to prioritise emotional competence beyond counselling sessions but also within curriculum design. Responses indicate that although emotional competence is considered in the counselling sessions (through psychology); it remains an unconsidered concept within the realm of classrooms and day-to-day student experiences. Since previous research also suggests that there is a strong relationship between emotional competence and [student] personal development in the classroom (Goleman, 1995); the participants responses give an idea that what happens in the classroom has a major impact on student's emotions. These emotional problems could be triggered by work overload, teachers' negative feedback on assignments, the fear of contributing to classroom discussion or negative feelings of not fitting into university life.

What the researcher derives from these findings is that all participants in this study had a common perspective which can be interpreted that universities still need further approaches for student support beyond what is already available. Thus, this answers the three sub research questions (as seen in chapter one). The researcher derives that all participants expressed strong beliefs that emotional intelligence is still not fully implemented within higher education; given their agreements to the important role EI plays for student mental health. What the researcher finds interesting is how emotional intelligence has been an essential skillset for the participant's personal careers in education. One participant even mentioning that "skills such as resilience, emotional awareness and self-motivation are important in the work environment after graduation but are the least prioritised."

Therefore, in summary, the author concludes this chapter by suggesting that themes and constructed patterns occurred throughout the interview discussions. Given the flexibility of the interviews, there still seemed to be frequency of responses from each question suggesting that the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified student mental health challenges, overwhelmed higher education support services, and increased the need for innovative approaches to improve student wellbeing. Similarly, the findings from this study aligns with literature that indicates the importance of embedding emotional intelligence training within curriculum design and the need for a more systemised approach for student support (Hill, 2020).

CHAPTER 8

Conclusion, Future research recommendations and Limitations

This dissertation adds to the growing body of academic literature about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on student mental health in the United Kingdom and the importance of emotional intelligence training in higher education. As the author indicated in the introduction and literature review chapters, student mental health challenges have intensified during the pandemic and student support services both in university and externally have been overwhelmed by the demand as of late (Student Covid Insight Survey, 2020). As a result of the findings in this study, there is direct agreement with previous studies that have shed light on the importance of holistic approaches to improve student wellbeing in higher education (Dr Pool, 2018), especially post-Covid-19.

While the author recognises the extensive amount of academic literature about student mental health problems and the need for more action, after analysing the findings from this study; it is evident that an implementation strategy is needed to embed personal development and emotional competence in curriculum design. Some research even suggests the possibility of integrating emotional intelligence training in higher education through programs that teach about resilience, self-awareness, self/emotion management, social awareness, and relationship management (Golemans, 1999).

The results derived from the primary data (interviews) show that there are still growing concerns and uncertainties about student mental health in UK universities. As expressed in the findings chapter, student mental health challenges have seen significant increases over the years especially with the growing international student population in the United Kingdom (Hagell et al, 2013). The participants in this study have even highlighted some of the difficulties that student support departments face in higher education, including difficulties relating to increased demand for support services, overwhelming response, long waiting times and virtual support challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. Unsurprisingly, participants felt that their student support teams were under pressure to successfully reach out to students during pandemic alongside adjusting to the new normal. Participants shared similar views that the student support system in universities needs new innovative approaches to improve student wellbeing post Covid-19. For those who expressed the need for further interventions beyond what is already available, the author interpreted participants' responses as a quest for "help" or more transformational strategies to support students.

Most participants connected their own previous student life journey with the current student mental health reports and agreed that the transition to university is a stressful change. From their own experiences, participants felt that the lack of emotional support and training in their university years appeared to exacerbate their transition to the work environment. Consequently, participants had to develop interpersonal, self-motivation and emotional competence skills to cope in the world of work. Through these responses, the author has derived that emotional intelligence plays a crucial role not only for student lifecycle but also for job satisfaction after

graduation. The author interprets participant's responses as an agreement that the five components of emotional intelligence from Daniel Goleman's (1999) theory should be used to train students to have strong emotional competence skills in UK higher education. Therefore, further research using a broader demographic, sample size and other methodologies should seek to corroborate this; if similar findings are interpreted then implementation strategies for emotional intelligence training should be developed. In addition, this further research will be beneficial to establish an emotional intelligence training programme within higher education curriculum design, some important components that these programmes can teach may range from self-awareness, self-regulation, resilience, intrinsic motivation, emotion management, time management, interpersonal and soft and social skills. Moreover, participants in this study have also indicated how the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified student mental health difficulties. In these unprecedented and times of uncertainty, the author stresses that skills such as resilience and self-management are important for students now more than ever.

The concerns of student mental health are amongst the most dominant discussions in the United Kingdom. In response to these challenges, focus has been geared towards providing student support through NHS services, universities support services, mental health awareness month and support programmes from charities. Interestingly, with all these interventions, student mental health continues to increase yearly, and this study suggests that a more systemised and transformational approach needs to be implemented. While it has been evident through literature that the field of emotional intelligence is a relatively ancient concept, and its lack of clear definition indicates the existence of little acknowledgement for emotional intelligence within the higher education sector and other industries. The author argues that if higher education is meant to assist in the adult development of students, then it needs to establish a transformational student lifecycle that looks beyond intellectual intelligence. But one that ensures its students possess different types of intelligences such as emotional intelligence (Wilkens, 2011).

Although this study explored previous conversations in literature and from participants about emotional intelligence and its connection with student mental health; the author concludes that the implementation level of emotional intelligence training is the key to student wellbeing transformation post Covid-19. Even so, previous literature has suggested that emotional intelligence for students plays a significant role in predicting personal and professional development. The question left to be answered now is why emotional intelligence training programs have not been implemented in UK universities? With respect to all the positive student mental health responses from UK government, the Department of Education, universities, and the community at large, the author strongly believes that this study (although limited in its methodology) has proven that more talk and less systemic implementation is the issue. Furthermore, the author challenges the UK higher education sector by asking: will student mental health problems be solved solely through more support services and funding? Considering the 21st century skills required in the world of work post Covid-19 (as discussed in the discussion chapter), the author believes that the future direction of improving student wellbeing is research about implementing programs and training that promote emotional intelligence within the higher education curriculum.

The introduction of the "whole-institution framework" by the UK Department of Education has given universities the responsibility to develop an inclusive approach; through involving all departments for student wellbeing support. However, the findings in this study suggest that in undertaking this framework various intelligences such as emotional intelligence are essential for the success of this approach. Consequently, the author is concerned that the whole-intuition approach method of student support is geared towards having everyone involved in providing student support rather than the promotion and maintenance of training students to self-manage themselves. The findings in this study further suggest that because of reduced access to support services outside term time, support needs to be focused on self-regulation/emotional competence training that students can use as coping mechanism even outside university walls.

The current times of uncertainty and changes within the UK higher education calls for transformational support interventions that help young people navigate student life and work life post Covid-19. Thus, rather than focusing on providing more pastoral care and counselling sessions in response to demand, students could be offered support which is sustainable to the emotional contexts which embed their day-to-day lives

9.1 Limitations of this study

This closing chapter also includes the researcher's acknowledgment concerning the limitations of this study. In this section, the author takes into consideration the disadvantages of not using a large sample size and the researcher's interviewing skills.

In asking the participant's thoughts about the effectiveness of current student support services; the researcher was arguably asking a sensitive question that challenges their department of work. It can be difficult to provide criticism (although constructive) about one's place of work and efforts. The researcher thus acknowledges that the influential interviewing style and questions may have stimulated the participant's thought process and their responses may have favourably impacted upon the data. However, the participants felt very in touch with the interview and presented authentic perspectives; others may have even found it helpful to talk to someone unknown to them about the challenges facing the student support department.

In future qualitative studies about this study's topic, it may be more advantageous to have a larger sample size of interview participants to allow the researcher to establish various perspectives and a less bias rapport that favours a study's intentions. This may allow future participants to pose open-ended arguments or realistic challenges about the implementation of holistic approaches for student support. A larger sample size would have produced more valuable insight from participants experiences in student support and their thoughts about emotional intelligence training. However, it was the researcher's initial aim to interview a small sample size of only five participants because this allowed for more meaningful, focused and thematical findings. Although the researcher did consider having more participants, this was not possible due to the pandemic and the lack of availability of student support staff in other universities. Therefore, future studies on this topic where time limitations and Covid-19 restrictions are not as constrained; it would be possible to interview a diverse range of student wellbeing staff.

Additionally, it would have been beneficial and more insightful to have triangulated findings which explored the perspectives of student support services staff, students, education policy makers and psychologists. This would have produced more detailed understanding on the kind of support that students need, how emotional intelligence affects individuals from a psychological viewpoint and how realistic is it for education policy makers to design policies that make emotional intelligence training a priority in higher education.

The researcher also acknowledges the limitations of her interviewing skills. As the research is positioned within UK higher education and the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on students, the researcher appreciates the impact of her relationship between herself (as a UK MSc student during the Covid pandemic) and the participant's empathetic responses. During the interviews, the researcher felt comfortable within her role as an interviewer, she also felt that participants appeared to be more optimistic in their engagements because the researcher had personal experiences as a student. Her experiences may have shaped the empathetic nature and agreements of responses in favour of this study. However, the researcher believes that her methodological approaches in this study gave true meaning to the connection between student wellbeing and emotional competence, because the participants were able to put themselves in student's situation and be *empathetic* (one of Goleman's, 1999 five components of emotional intelligence).

In conclusion, conceptions of the Covid-19 pandemic effect on student mental health and the UK higher education sector in relation to emotional intelligence training post-Covid are important and understudied topics. This study found that student mental health remains an issue in universities and current support approaches are not enough to combat these challenges. Therefore, the author concludes by stating that more research is needed to further establish ways to embed emotional intelligence training and programmes in higher education curriculum. From a UK student perspective, the author believes that we must rebuild the connection between students and what they need from their universities on a personal level, we cannot improve student wellbeing post-Covid based on approaches from the past. The pandemic has brought a moment of opportunity for the UK higher education sector to bring transformational student support and wellbeing – let's not waste this opportunity!

CHAPTER 9

Author's Reflection

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" – Philippians 4:13

It is based on this Bible verse that I have had the strength to complete my dissertation from start to finish, through good and challenges, sickness and health, happiness and mourning, hopelessness and motivation, uncertainty and divine alignment. While reaching the finish line of this dissertation has been the most challenging period but it has also been the most meaningful stage of my life. This masters journey and dissertation writing process has taught me more about myself more than anything. It is through divine vision for the future that I have enjoyed every aspect of completing this dissertation from start to finish. At first when I chose my dissertation topic, I was apprehensive about not being able to bring to words what was in my heart and obtaining the necessary resources to put this heart-felt topic into 15,000 words. However, through prayers, support from family, friends, and the academic staff at UCL, I was able to keep going.

The most challenging part of conducting this study was playing the roles of a student, the researcher, the author, and the interviewer. All these roles required different skills and at times it felt overwhelming, especially when collecting data and having to interpret and analyse the data into insightful information. The next challenge was that I was researching a sensitive topic that resonated directly with my experiences as a student during the Covid-19 pandemic. Researching and writing about the challenges that students faced was a direct connection with what I was experiencing throughout my journey as a postgraduate student. I was in fact speaking to myself, when writing this dissertation. However, through the entire process I have learned that having strong levels of emotional competence produces self-awareness, self-motivation, resilience, and self-management. These components have made my journey as a student a successful and meaningful one. Therefore, this is the same resilience I wish for all UK and global students who have suffered, are suffering and will suffer with mental health issues in university.

This dissertation calls for a transformational higher education and support system, one that expands to include emotional intelligence training for student wellbeing. From a student perspective, I believe if we start now, we may be on the right path to establish resilient and emotionally intelligent graduates.

Sincerely,
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APPENDIX A: CONSENT EMAIL/LETTER

July 2021

Dear sir/madam

You have been selected as a participant in this research study. Before you give consent, please read the following information below. Participation in this study is completely voluntary, please do not hesitate to email me with any questions.

PURPOSE: The purposes and objectives are this research study are to deeply understand the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on student mental health in the UK, the role that student support services have played and investigate the important of emotional intelligence on higher education. You will be one of the 5 participants to be interviewed in this study.

PROCEDURE: This is a qualitative study; therefore, primary research will be conducted through semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30-45 minutes. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, interviews will be done over a zoom meeting.

BENEFITS: There will not be any direct benefits to you as a participant. However, academic benefits include a reflection of the impact of the pandemic on students and the UK higher education sector and increase discussions/awareness of the positive potential of emotional intelligence training.

CONFIDENTIALITY: All transcripts from the interview discussions will remain strictly confidential. All names and data and name of workplace will be anonymous in the dissertation paper.

I HAVE READ THE ABOVE AND AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE ABOVE CONDITIONS.

Participant Signature   Date

Thank you once again for your positive agreement to participate in this study

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

<u>Interview introduction statement by the researcher</u>

Student mental health in the UK has been a continuous problem over the years. But currently, research shows that the Covid-19 has affected both the higher education sector and student wellbeing (Changon, 2020), and (2) discussions in literature suggesting that emotional intelligence training can help the higher education sector better support student mental health and personal development (Lawal et al, 2018). As result of these two cases/statements please answer the following questions, feel free to also expand on your experiences, perspectives, and arguments in favour or against the purposes of this study.

<u>Interview questions</u>

1. What can you tell me about your experiences and thoughts about UK student mental health?
2. Do you perceive that the higher education has responded effectively to the student wellbeing crisis in previous years?
3. How has the Covid-19 pandemic negatively affected student mental health and the UK higher education sector?
4. Are you able to satisfy the high demand of student support requests?
5. Do you think the current support services approaches offered in university are effective?
6. What do you think about the new whole-institutional framework recently introduced by the UK Department of Education?
7. Do you think the sector needs alternative support strategies such as holistic approaches?
8. What can you tell me about your knowledge, experiences, and familiarity with Emotional Intelligence?
9. What role do you fell EI plays in student mental health?
10. Do you think it is important to embed Emotional Intelligence training and programmes in higher education curriculum design post Covid-19?