



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY

Shamsiah Banu Mohamad Hanefar,
INTI International University, Malaysia

REVIEWED BY

Katerina Kedraka,
Democritus University of Thrace, Greece
Ceryn Evans,
Swansea University, United Kingdom

*CORRESPONDENCE

Arnfrid Farbu Pinto
✉ arnfrid.farbu.pinto@ntnu.no

RECEIVED 06 August 2025

ACCEPTED 22 September 2025

PUBLISHED 07 October 2025

CITATION

Pinto AF, Mjølén OM and Reed NP (2025)
From school to university: staff perspectives
on supporting student inclusion and
wellbeing.
Front. Educ. 10:1681017.
doi: 10.3389/feduc.2025.1681017

COPYRIGHT

© 2025 Pinto, Mjølén and Reed. This is an
open-access article distributed under the
terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution
License \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). The use, distribution or
reproduction in other forums is permitted,
provided the original author(s) and the
copyright owner(s) are credited and that the
original publication in this journal is cited, in
accordance with accepted academic
practice. No use, distribution or reproduction
is permitted which does not comply with
these terms.

From school to university: staff perspectives on supporting student inclusion and wellbeing

Arnfrid Farbu Pinto^{✉*}, Odd Morten Mjølén and
Nina Petersen Reed

Department of Mental Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health Science, Norwegian University of
Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim, Norway

This study explores how university staff perceive students' needs in the transition from school to higher education, and how they reflect on their own role in promoting students' wellbeing. We conducted five focus group interviews with 27 staff members across five university campuses. The material was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify shared reflections on transitions and support for student wellbeing. Our findings show that staff perceive students' expectations to be shaped by their prior schooling, particularly the structured and closely guided environment of high school. This may generate some challenges for students when integrating into the more autonomous learning culture at university. University staff perceive that students' needs and expectations have changed over time, alongside increased student diversity and a widened gap between resourceful and vulnerable students. They discussed how these developments bring about both academic and social challenges for students and university staff, requiring greater efforts to support student wellbeing, inclusion and academic achievement. Further, they highlighted the difficulty and tension of balancing tailored support with the need to uphold academic standards. Drawing on these findings, we discuss how university staff respond to shifting student expectations, how institutional frameworks shape everyday practice, and whether current university models adequately support inclusive and sustainable student wellbeing.

KEYWORDS

student transition, academic expectations, university staff, individual accommodations, academic integrity, wellbeing

Introduction

Transitioning to university requires academic competence; but also involves adapting to a new institutional culture and developing a sense of belonging, all of which are closely linked to student wellbeing (Conley et al., 2020; Larcombe et al., 2016; Stallman, 2010). Many students find this transition challenging as they navigate unfamiliar academic and social environments (Thompson et al., 2021). Moving from smaller, structured classrooms with close guidance to larger, more impersonal learning environments can contribute to a sense of lost identity (Scanlon et al., 2007). In these settings, students must navigate greater independence (Leese, 2010; Read et al., 2003; Scanlon et al., 2007), unfamiliar teaching practices (Christie et al., 2004; Elander et al., 2010) and new modes of communication (Scanlon et al., 2007). The uncertainty associated with the student role can be a source of stress (Young et al., 2020), and for some, this uncertainty makes the early years of university particularly challenging, impacting both overall wellbeing and academic performance (Conley et al., 2020; Larcombe et al., 2016; Stallman, 2010). These challenges are especially pronounced for minority, first-generation, and educationally disadvantaged students, who may struggle with expectations of academic

independence and participation (Gale and Parker, 2014; Read et al., 2003). As the student population becomes increasingly diverse, there is a growing need for holistic strategies that integrate academic support with initiatives that foster social inclusion (Christie et al., 2004; Gale and Parker, 2014; Read et al., 2003).

Several studies show that students perceive university staff as playing a key role in easing the transition from high school to university by supporting them both academically and socially (Baik et al., 2019; Cage et al., 2021; Leese, 2010; Pinto et al., 2024a; Tlalajoe-Mokhatla, 2024; Wilcox et al., 2005). Moreover, research indicates that this need for support extends beyond the first year, as students require ongoing guidance to facilitate their inclusion throughout their academic journey (Christie et al., 2004; Gale and Parker, 2014; Read et al., 2003), employing a broad range of strategies to ensure support is accessible to as many students as possible (Wilcox et al., 2005). Studies show that students emphasize the importance of lecturers being accessible, engaged, and responsive to their diverse needs through clear communication and an empathetic approach (Baik et al., 2019; Guzzardo et al., 2021). Schaeper (2020) highlights the importance of learning environments that promote student engagement, collaboration, and active participation, as these elements support students' academic integration and success. Research also shows that such academic and social communities enhance student wellbeing, reduce stress, and counteract isolation, while fostering learning, a sense of belonging, and social connectedness (Baik et al., 2019; Larcombe et al., 2022; Leese, 2010; Wilcox et al., 2005; Young et al., 2020).

As students adapt to higher education, previous research highlights how university staff must also navigate evolving expectations of their roles. Studies show that staff recognize the important role they play in supporting students' wellbeing and emphasize the significance of actively fostering inclusive and supportive learning environments (Brinkworth et al., 2009; Cage et al., 2021). From the staff perspective, many students are seen as poorly prepared for the level of independence and academic demands required at university (Brinkworth et al., 2009). In response, staff are often described as adopting multiple roles during this transitional phase, seeing themselves as mentors who promote engagement, critical thinking, and autonomy (Postareff and Lindblom-Ylänne, 2011; Postareff et al., 2015). At the same time, research underscores how staff are mindful of the need to maintain professional boundaries and clarify roles and expectations (Cage et al., 2021). Several studies report that staff observe students expecting close supervision and individualized guidance, expectations often shaped by prior experiences in high school (Brinkworth et al., 2009). However, such expectations vary considerably across academic disciplines and cultural backgrounds (Sander et al., 2000). According to the literature, this variation in student needs places considerable pressure on staff, who must strike a balance between offering tailored support and fostering independence, an ongoing challenge that has been shown to be both complex and demanding (Hagenauer and Volet, 2014).

While the role of university staff in supporting student adaptation and wellbeing is acknowledged, their perspectives are less frequently highlighted in research. Both Schaeper (2020) and Larcombe et al. (2022) point to the need for greater attention to how course structures, teaching practices, and learning environments affect students' inclusion and wellbeing. In a previous study on student perspectives, we found that lecturers' social and emotional support can affect

students' wellbeing and engagement (Pinto et al., 2024b). Yet, there is still limited insight into how university staff themselves understand their role in this context. To address this gap, this study aims to explore how staff members perceive students' needs during the transition to higher education, and how they reflect on their own capacity to support student wellbeing.

Research question: How do university staff perceive students' needs in the transition from school to higher education, and how do they reflect on their own role in promoting students' wellbeing?

Methods

In this study, we use focus group interviews as a method to explore university staff's reflections on the student transition to higher education. This method seeks to provide access to nuanced experiences and collective perspectives that might otherwise be difficult to uncover (Malterud, 2017). The data material is analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, which emphasizes the researcher's active role in interpretation and allows for a flexible and in-depth exploration of patterns in the material (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

Recruitment and participants

The recruitment process was designed to ensure a diverse selection of staff with different roles and experiences related to the learning environment. Participants were recruited through a multi-step process. The first author initially contacted key individuals in the departments of Health Sciences, Teacher Education, Design, and Information Technology at a Norwegian university, requesting them to distribute information about the study by e-mail to all staff. These departments were purposefully selected to ensure diversity in the participant group. Approximately one third of the study participants contacted the first author expressing wish to participate after receiving this email. Further recruiting was done through subsequent phone calls by the first author to a random selection of staff who had received the email. Lastly, snowball sampling was used, where participants suggested other relevant colleagues, some from other departments, which further contributed to participant diversity. Interviews were conducted at a Norwegian university, where all three authors are employed. Participants were recruited from five different campuses in two cities, representing distinct geographical locations and academic environments. Participants were from a range of academic fields, ensuring a broad foundation for the study. Recruitment continued until the final interview was completed. The study ultimately included 27 university staff members, most of whom were employed as lecturers, with some working as student counselors. All of whom had direct contact with students in their daily work. The sample had a balanced gender distribution and participants ranging from long-time employees to newcomers.

Data collection

We conducted one focus group interview at each of the five campuses over 6 months, using a semi-structured interview guide. There were five to seven participants in each session. Two moderators

facilitated open discussions while ensuring that key themes were covered. In four of the interviews, the first and third author were moderators. In the interview at the authors' campus, the first author moderated the interview together with a research fellow from another campus. This to enhance distance between researchers and participants. As an opening question, participants were asked to share their thoughts on student wellbeing and why research suggests many students struggle. The guide included themes such as staff-student relationships, the creation of a supportive psychosocial learning environment, barriers to student wellbeing, interdisciplinary collaboration between staff and potential measures to enhance student wellbeing. The discussion evolved naturally, with participants bringing up the key themes themselves as they emerged in the conversation. Follow-up questions were used to explore staff perceptions of their role and to further elicit the group's reflections on the various aspects that arose. The first author facilitated the interviews, while the last author primarily observed but contributed follow-up questions when relevant. The conversations were conducted in meeting rooms at each campus, audio-recorded, and lasted approximately 90 min. The recordings were first transcribed using a transcription program, then manually reviewed and corrected by the first author.

Ethical considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with national legislation and NTNU guidelines on research ethics principles to protect participants' rights, privacy, and integrity. Following approval from SIKT—Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (104826), participants provided informed consent, including consent for audio recording of the interviews. During transcription, all data were anonymized to ensure anonymity. Participation was voluntary, without institutional pressure, and data were stored in compliance with applicable privacy regulations. Given the participants' professional background and the non-sensitive nature of the topic, direct recruitment by phone was seen as ethically appropriate in this context. As researchers, we have been mindful of our role in interpreting the data and have worked to ensure that the findings reflect participants' perspectives in a fair and nuanced manner.

Data analysis

We used reflexive thematic analysis as our analytical approach, following the six-phase process outlined by [Braun and Clarke \(2022\)](#). The coding process was conducted in collaboration by all authors. After each interview, the first and last author discussed initial impressions and potential themes, which were then further reviewed in discussions with all authors. Once all interviews were completed, we moved into a structured coding process, where the first author developed codes and suggestions of initial themes. These were discussed and redefined several times through discussions with the co-authors, ensuring that the themes accurately reflected the data, at the same time remaining reflexive about our potential biases as university employees. Throughout the process, we iteratively revisited the data to assess whether the emerging themes captured the core patterns in the interviews. Writing out initial analytical text also played a key role in refining and adjusting the themes, helping us to

identify the most coherent and meaningful "story" within the data. This ongoing refinement ensured that our themes remained well-grounded in participants' reflections and that our analysis was both systematic and reflective. The table below illustrates this process with an example, showing how individual statements were coded, categorized, and integrated into the final themes.

Statement	Codes	Initial theme (first interpretation)	Initial theme (category)	Final theme (main theme)
"Some are very much teenagers when they arrive."	Lack of maturity.	Staff describe challenges related to the transition to university.	University staff reflections on student challenges in the transition to higher education.	The transition from school to university—university staff reflections on academic and psychosocial adjustment.
"We spend a lot of time creating reading lists and overviews for the students."	Providing structured support.	Staff describe efforts to provide structured guidance for students.	University staff reflections on institutional support during student transition.	The transition from school to university—university staff reflections on academic and psychosocial adjustment.

The findings are structured around three main themes:

- 1 The transition from school to university—university staff reflections on academic and psychosocial adjustment.
- 2 Changing student expectations—university staff reflections on balancing adaptation and academic standards.
- 3 Student diversity—university staff reflections on inclusion and differentiated support.

Each theme follows the same analytical process outlined in the table, ensuring a structured and consistent presentation of findings.

Results

In the following section, we will present university staff reflections on student needs and key measures to support their wellbeing. Quotations are labeled according to their respective focus group interviews. All interviewees are referred to as "participants."

Theme 1: the transition from school to university—university staff reflections on academic and psychosocial adjustment

Participants in several focus groups shared the understanding that students' transition from high school to university involves not only acquiring new academic skills but also significant psychosocial adjustment. The participants reflected on how students must recognize that university life requires greater independence and self-directed effort than high school. Several participants emphasized that this

adjustment can be challenging and requires attention: “*Maybe we need to do more to address this transition. Even though we often think ‘now you are an adult, now you should manage on your own,’ there may be a need for a little extra support to help them master this phase*” (4). Ensuring a smoother introduction to university life was seen as a strategy for easing students into their new academic environment. Participants discussed various strategies to do so. One key approach was ensuring that all students could keep up with the teaching from the very beginning. As one participant explained: “*By setting the bar a bit low and breaking up the teaching into different blocks, I can facilitate an easier start*” (2).

Across the groups, participants also discussed how students’ prior educational experiences may influence their ability to keep up with university teaching and shape their expectations of teaching and learning methods. They shared experiences of how many students seem to expect clear and structured guidance, focusing primarily on syllabus content and exams. As one participant noted: “*Students are very concerned that everything taught must be in the syllabus, and that there should be nothing outside the syllabus*” (1). To accommodate these expectations, participants described how they adapt their teaching. As one staff member explained: “*We spend a lot of time creating reading lists and overviews for the students*” (4). This was seen as efforts to structure learning resources in ways that are accessible and familiar for students transitioning from high school, and to make the transition less overwhelming and more manageable.

Participants further reflected on what they experience as a gap between students’ expectations for clear, concrete answers and the more open-ended teaching methods typical of university culture. Some noted that students often focus on completing assignments rather than engaging deeply with the subject matter. However, they wondered if such task-oriented approaches can make it difficult for students to adopt the more analytical and exploratory mindset expected at university. Participants also highlighted how prior schooling may have shaped students’ expectations toward detailed feedback and close supervision. As one participant noted: “*I have had students who say that in high school, they had someone supporting them all the time, but here, they have no one*” (2). They discussed further how such expectations of close supervision may make the transition to a more independent learning culture challenging.

In several groups, participants noted that students often referred to themselves as “elev,” a Norwegian term used for high school students, instead of “student,” which is used at universities. They discussed this as a sign that some university students view their role as similar to their role in high school. It was noted that this might suggest a lingering “school mindset.” Participants further argued that such self-identification could make the transition to higher education even more challenging. The importance of what distinguishes being a high school student from being a university student was further discussed. One participant described how becoming a student is a developmental process: “*The transition from being a high school student to a university student involves learning to take responsibility for one’s own learning and understanding that student life requires effort, independence, and reflection*” (5). One participant stated: “*Clarifying this difference explicitly can be useful for strengthening students’ identity as independent and responsible students*” (5). It was reflected on how this distinction can help students embrace their new academic roles.

Thus, from the discussions in the focus groups presented here we understand that university staff observe a range of both

psychosocial and academic transitional challenges for students, and further that they may employ several measures to ease these challenges. However, even though they acknowledge their responsibility and possibility to provide support and adjustments to ease students’ transitional processes, they also discussed the importance of safeguarding academic integrity. To illustrate, one participant said: “*It is important not to fall into the old mindset where we see [university] students as high school students. When we work at the university, we are at a different level, and it affects both our approach to students and how we communicate with them*” (4).

While understanding the gaps between student expectations and university life as natural transitional challenges experienced by all individuals who start university studies, participants also reflected on whether there have been broader generational shifts in student expectations. In the next theme we present our results of how several participants wonder if today’s students struggle more with this transition and have different expectations for teaching and supervision compared to previous generations.

Theme 2: changing student expectations—university staff reflections on balancing adaptation and academic standards

In several of the focus groups, participants reflected on how students’ challenges in the transition to higher education seems to have changed over time. This was discussed in relation to how students appear less mature and less prepared compared to previous generations. One staff member observed: “*When we look at students today, it seems as if they are generally younger than before*” (4). Participants argued that students in the past often had more life experience from work or other education, which helped them navigate the transition to university more effectively.

One of the issues that emerged during these discussions was a perceived increase in students’ expectations for individual accommodations. One participant commented: “*They are more concerned with what they are entitled to and how it can be facilitated for them. Previously, it seemed that many just accepted the situation as it was, without addressing it. Now we see a change*” (5). Students’ approach to knowledge acquisition was another central theme of involvement in the discussions. Several participants shared their observation that students appear to prioritize minimizing workload over engaging deeply with learning. One staff member noted: “*Students are more likely to ask: What can we avoid doing? rather than: What do we need to learn?*” (1). They discussed if such learning habits may be linked to changes in school pedagogy during the recent decades, the influence of digitalization, and generational shifts of expectations regarding individual academic support. One participant questioned: “*Is there something about previous schooling that we should be aware of? Are students prepared in a different way than before?*”, and further: “*Should we think differently about teaching?*” (3).

Participants also reflected on how these perceived generational changes in expectations for support have shaped university practices, including greater demands placed on lecturers. Participants described how they adjust their teaching methods to align with students’ changing expectations, but at the same time strive to uphold academic standards. However, they questioned if too much adjustment could lower academic standards in the future. One staff member remarked:

“Today’s students receive significantly more support, especially in their first year, than we did in the past. While this can ease the transition into university studies, it is difficult to determine its long-term effects” (4).

In addition, participants in several focus groups reflected on how students are increasingly perceived as vulnerable and insecure, and how they no longer seem able to tolerate direct questions or criticism in the same way as before. One participant described how a colleague was informed by student representatives that asking direct questions to individual students in class is no longer acceptable. Another lecturer mentioned that he has had to significantly adjust his teaching because students withdraw when challenged too much: *“I still do it a little, but to a much lesser extent. I have adjusted my teaching quite a lot in recent years. Simply put, you just sense the changes”* (1). The participants emphasized the importance of equipping students with strategies to manage these challenges, fostering the academic and personal resilience necessary for joining the workforce. One participant articulated this challenge as follows: *“We need to give students the tools to handle uncertainty and non-mastery because it is part of the learning process”* (1). Another participant stated: *“We need to find a balance between adapting to students’ needs and ensuring that they meet the requirements necessary to succeed in the workforce”* (4). This discussion underscored the importance of strategic curriculum development, not only in terms of course content, but also in shaping learning activities and support structures, to ensure that students receive necessary support while preparing them for the expectations of future employers.

Thus, the participants reflected on how to balance adaptation to new generations of students, while at the same time preserving academic and professional standards. In their discussions they also reflected on whether changes in students’ attitudes and expectations may have been influenced by university practices. The participants talked about how adjustments made in response to resource constraints at the university may have lowered academic demands, and may further have unintentionally reinforced a school-like mentality among students. One staff member posed the question: *“Do university students resemble high school students more because they have changed, or because we as an institution have facilitated this?”* (5). This reflection highlights concerns that institutional incentives focused on student completion rates may compel educators to lower academic expectations. Several participants expressed similar concerns: *“How much should we adapt to get everyone through? After all, we are rewarded based on the number of students who pass”* (1).

The discussions presented in this theme illustrate the ongoing tension between pedagogical adaptation and the preservation of academic integrity. While the discussion focused on how student expectations seem to have shifted and how universities have adapted, participants also reflected on the increasing diversity within the student body. In the next theme, we explore how university staff perceive the variation in students’ academic and social needs, and the strategies they discuss to foster inclusion.

Theme 3: student diversity—university staff perspectives on inclusion and differentiated support

In the focus groups, participants reflected on the diversity of student needs, noting that while some students adapt quickly, others

require substantial support. This variation in academic and social adaptation was highlighted by one participant:

Our students come from very different backgrounds and experiences, which makes the range in the group large. There is a great variation in age, previous experiences, and interests. What often surprises, is how skilled some students are, while there is a clear gap to those who struggle the most academically (4).

Their discussions explored how the divide between academically and socially strong students and those who struggle seems to have widened. Some participants even suggested that parts of the student population appear more resourceful than before, while others are increasingly falling behind: *“I feel that the gap is larger between those who function well and those who function less well”* (1).

Recognizing the diverse needs of students, participants discussed a range of strategies, such as creating groups with students from mixed backgrounds and mentorship programs, to foster both academic and psychosocial inclusion for all. One participant described this challenge: *“Those who perform well are often very strong and motivated, while those who struggle require a lot of resources and support”* (1). Social relationships and a sense of community were highlighted as crucial factors for student wellbeing. One participant noted: *“Those who are socially strong often manage on their own. They are skilled and have an extensive network. But it is those who are not as outgoing, those who may isolate themselves, who need extra attention”* (2).

A recurring theme in the discussions was the impact of social belonging on academic success. Some participants reflected on how students who struggle to integrate socially may also face greater academic challenges: *“I believe that it is the social context that helps when things get difficult. But for those who do not find their place in the environment, it can get worse”* (2) and *“We believe that having a connection to campus helps foster the feeling of being a student and belonging”* (3). To mitigate these issues, several participants emphasized the value of structured group activities in fostering both academic and social inclusion.

Attendance was further identified as an important factor in student success, with several participants noting that those most in need of support are often the least likely to attend classes. One participant commented: *“Those who need the most help are often the ones who do not show up”* (1). Participants reflected on how this concern has prompted discussions in several study programs about whether mandatory attendance might be necessary. While some participants argued that students should take responsibility for their own learning, others worried that without structured requirements, those who struggle the most may disengage entirely:

This is a concern, and we are considering reintroducing mandatory attendance. It may be necessary to ensure that students show up and receive the necessary training, even though it can feel like reverting to a high school model with requirements for a certain number of hours of participation (4).

There were also reflections on how the growing diversity among students presents challenges that may require additional support at the institutional level. Limited resources and large student cohorts were frequently mentioned as barriers to effective individual follow-up, particularly for vulnerable students. One participant noted: *“It takes a*

lot of time and resources to try to take care of everyone, especially those who struggle the most" (1). This concern aligns with earlier reflections on how increasing expectations for individual follow-up and structured support shape both students' transition to university and the role of academic staff. Participants also discussed broader institutional responses, highlighting the importance of universally designed learning environments. One participant explained: *"We have discussed universally designed learning environments as an additional project, and how we can make the overall experience as good as possible for everyone"* (4). This was seen as a way to facilitate academic and psychosocial inclusion and wellbeing for a diverse student population without placing excessive demands on university staff to provide individualized support. The potential benefits of general measures were also emphasized: *"If we focus on general measures, we might be able to include more students and avoid some falling behind"* (4).

Participants widely agreed on the importance of creating inclusive learning environments that accommodate diverse student needs. They reflected on how such environments could help reduce barriers and foster both a sense of belonging and academic success.

Discussion

In this study we explored how university staff perceive students' needs during the transition to higher education, and how they reflect on their own role in promoting student wellbeing. Our findings suggest that staff increasingly experience tensions as they navigate the professional demands of supporting student wellbeing while also meeting institutional expectations and standards. The tensions described were particularly evident in relation to the growing diversity of the student population. We recognize that these accounts reflect staff members' perceptions rather than definitive descriptions of the student body. At the same time, similar concerns have been reported internationally in contexts of massification and widening participation (Baik et al., 2015; Christie et al., 2004; Gale and Parker, 2014; Read et al., 2003), suggesting that such views are shaped by broader changes in higher education rather than by Norwegian conditions alone. In the following discussion will focus on three central themes. First, we explore how staff navigate role uncertainty as they respond to student expectations and the traditional norms embedded in the institutional habitus of the university. Second, we reflect on how institutional pressures and governance frameworks may shape staff practices. Finally, we reflect on whether current university models are equipped to meet the needs of a changing student population and what a more inclusive and sustainable approach to student wellbeing might involve. Throughout this section, we refer to the study participants as staff to more clearly reflect our research question.

Role uncertainty: navigating expectations and institutional culture

The staff described uncertainty regarding their responsibilities, especially as students increasingly look to them for both academic guidance and personal support. These findings are consistent with previous research (Brinkworth et al., 2009), which shows that university staff experience pressure from students' high expectations for accessibility, prompt responses and clear feedback, while limited

resources and heavy workloads make it difficult to meet these demands. Our findings suggest that this uncertainty, concerning the extent to which staff are expected to provide both academic guidance and personal support, influenced how they interacted with students, the kinds of demands they felt comfortable making, and the expectations they, in turn, developed. Institutional norms and individual understandings of academic roles seem to shape this uncertainty, an uncertainty that can, in turn, negatively affect students' wellbeing. As Cage et al. (2021) point out, it is crucial to communicate expectations for student behavior in a clear and realistic manner, as unclear or unrealistic expectations can exacerbate students' feelings of failure and emotional stress. When staff are themselves unsure of where their responsibilities begin and end, they may struggle to provide the clarity that students need. These reflections do not only reflect individual uncertainty but also point to a broader need to critically examine academic roles, institutional values, and the traditional norms that continue to shape university life.

Building on Leese (2010), one can argue that university staff need to critically reflect on their own practices and consider the structural forces that shape these dynamics. This involves becoming aware of the factors that contribute to their own sense of uncertainty, rather than focusing solely on students' behaviors and expectations. One way to understand the role uncertainty experienced by university staff is through the concept of institutional habitus, as developed by Bourdieu (1986) and applied in educational research by, among others, Thomas (2002) and Leese (2010). This involves understanding that, rather than being neutral, universities are shaped by norms and assumptions that privilege certain ways of being a student, expectations that also shape how staff understand their own roles. We argue that, in order to lay the foundation for student wellbeing, it is important to reflect on and understand the institutional habitus and its impact on both staff and students.

Institutional pressures and the marketisation of higher education

Reflections from university staff on role uncertainty and institutional habitus highlight how expectations placed on both students and staff are not only shaped through interpersonal and cultural dynamics, but also through broader structural and policy frameworks. Several noted that their pedagogical choices are increasingly influenced by formal expectations tied to employability, retention, and student feedback. These reflections echo wider concerns in the literature about the effects of market-oriented reforms in higher education (Allen and Withey, 2017; Macdonald, 2000). In the Norwegian context, this shift has been described by Lackner and Stensaker (2022) as part of a long-term transformation in public policy, where universities are increasingly framed both as welfare institutions and as competitive enterprises. This dual framing introduces tensions for academic staff, who must navigate between traditional academic values and externally imposed goals. Staff described the pressure of balancing externally imposed goals with students' individual needs, often within conditions of limited time, staffing, and institutional support. As several staff members in our study pointed out, structural constraints including large student cohorts, short study periods, and limited continuity in student groups make this particularly challenging. This tension highlights not only logistical difficulties, but also deeper concerns about the kind of

educational environment universities are currently fostering, and whether it truly supports students' wellbeing in a sustainable way.

Toward more inclusive and sustainable university structures

Baik and Larcombe (2023) highlight that creating more inclusive and sustainable university structures requires a deliberate effort to improve students' overall university experience, particularly by promoting psychological wellbeing and social inclusion. Their perspective reinforces the need for a systemic approach to student wellbeing that goes beyond individualized support considering the broader conditions under which students are expected to learn, connect, and succeed.

Given the increasing diversity in student backgrounds and the growing complexity of their needs, it may no longer be realistic to assume that all students can, or should, adapt to a standardized university structure based on independence and limited guidance. Several staff members in our study described how students arrive with different expectations and levels of preparedness, often shaped by their previous experiences from school and the degree of support they have had access to. The transition to higher education may therefore be seen as a multifaceted and uneven process, which challenges the assumption that one uniform approach can meet the needs of all students. For some students, the university may still function as a space that privileges particular forms of symbolic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), leaving others to navigate uncertainty or self-doubt. We must also account for how broader shifts in governance, particularly the rise of neoliberal management models, have shaped both student experiences and institutional priorities (Waghorne, 2023). We argue that viewing students as consumers, even when implicit, may foster a transactional atmosphere that undermines their sense of mattering, that is, their experience of being valued and able to add value. As Prilleltensky et al. (2023) argue, mattering is a fundamental psychosocial need and its absence can lead to feelings of insignificance and distress.

These reflections invite further exploration of what it might mean to support student wellbeing in more holistic and sustainable ways. While university staff in our study describe doing their best to meet students' diverse needs, often through informal guidance, emotional support, and adapting their teaching practices, they also point to a growing sense of overload. Rather than simply expanding the range of individualized support, such as counseling or academic accommodation, it may be more fruitful to ask how universities can design academic and relational structures that promote students' autonomy, capacity to manage uncertainty, and sense of belonging without placing the full burden of care on individual staff members. As Baik and Larcombe (2023) reminds us, wellbeing is not about the absence of discomfort, but about the capacity to face challenges, contribute meaningfully, and function within a supportive environment. So how can this be achieved? In a time marked by digitalization, shifting course formats, and evolving student-staff relationships, there is a growing need to reconsider how institutional structures and practices can make wellbeing an integrated and natural part of the university experience. This may involve embedding support into the fabric

of everyday university life through structured mentoring schemes, inclusive approaches to group work, and designated spaces for both academic and social interaction.

Conclusion and future directions

This study reports findings of how university staff experience growing complexity of supporting students in the transition to higher education. We understand that rising expectations, increasing diversity, and institutional constraints may challenge their ability to provide adequate support of inclusion and wellbeing while maintaining academic standards. By foregrounding staff reflections, this study offers insight into how structural reforms and evolving norms may reconfigure academic habitus, potentially generating role uncertainty with implications for student wellbeing. Our findings point to the need for clearer role definitions, more responsive institutional structures, and sustainable strategies that can inform policy and practice by recognizing the varied backgrounds and support needs of today's student population.

Ensuring that students can thrive both academically and in terms of wellbeing may require institutions to re-evaluate longstanding assumptions held by staff about student readiness and how autonomy, participation, and academic growth are fostered within the university context shaped by diverse student backgrounds and young people's expectations of support. Future research should continue to explore how higher education systems can adapt to these evolving challenges. In this context, the student-staff relationship appears as a key but under-supported resource of student wellbeing, particularly within systems that are not always designed to prioritize such relational dimensions.

Strengths and limitations of the study

This study is based on focus group interviews with university staff and thus reflects their perspectives on students' needs and challenges. While it provides valuable insight into how staff perceive and facilitate student wellbeing and academic adjustment, it does not capture students' own experiences directly. Furthermore, the findings are context-dependent and influenced by institutional and structural factors that may vary across different higher education institutions. One of the strengths of this study lies in its inclusion of a diverse group of staff, whose varied perspectives enabled a rich exchange of shared reflections and ideas about the university's purpose and its role in supporting students. Since all authors are employed at the same university, this insider position may have influenced recruitment, group dynamics, and interpretation. We considered this positionality throughout the project by being transparent about our roles when inviting participants, ensuring voluntary participation, and engaging in reflexive discussions during the analysis. To mitigate potential bias from conducting the interview at the authors' campus, we took an additional measure to ensure that participants were not influenced by the presence of a researcher at the same campus by inviting a research fellow from another campus to moderate the interview.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not publicly available due to confidentiality and privacy considerations. The focus group data contain potentially identifiable information, and sharing could compromise participant anonymity in small academic communities. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to arnfrid.farbu.pinto@ntnu.no.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by SIKT—Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

AP: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. OM: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. NR: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article.

References

- Allen, P., and Withey, P. (2017). The student customer phenomenon. *J. High. Educ. Theory Pract.* 17, 45–56.
- Baik, C., and Larcombe, W. (2023). “Student wellbeing and students’ experiences in higher education” in Research handbook on the student experience in higher education. Eds. C. Baik and E.R. Kahu. (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing), 74–88.
- Baik, C., Larcombe, W., and Brooker, A. (2019). How universities can enhance student mental wellbeing: the student perspective. *High. Educ. Res. Dev.* 38, 674–687. doi: 10.1080/07294360.2019.1576596
- Baik, C., Naylor, R., and Arkoudis, S. (2015). The first year experience in Australian universities. Melbourne: Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). “The forms of capital” in Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education. ed. J. G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press).
- Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2022). Thematic analysis: a practical guide. *QMiP Bulletin* 1, 46–50. doi: 10.53841/bpsqmp.2022.1.33.46
- Brinkworth, R., McCann, B., Matthews, C., and Nordström, K. (2009). First year expectations and experiences: student and teacher perspectives. *High. Educ.* 58, 157–173. doi: 10.1007/s10734-008-9188-3
- Cage, E., Jones, E., Ryan, G., Hughes, G., and Spanner, L. (2021). Student mental health and transitions into, through and out of university: student and staff perspectives. *J. Furth. High. Educ.* 45, 1076–1089. doi: 10.1080/0309877X.2021.1875203
- Christie, H., Munro, M., and Fisher, T. (2004). Leaving university early: exploring the differences between continuing and non-continuing students. *Stud. High. Educ.* 29, 617–636. doi: 10.1080/0307507042000261580
- Conley, C. S., Shapiro, J. B., Huguenel, B. M., and Kirsch, A. C. (2020). Navigating the college years: developmental trajectories and gender differences in psychological functioning, cognitive-affective strategies, and social well-being. *Emerg. Adulthood* 8, 103–117. doi: 10.1177/2167696818791603
- Elander, J., Foster, E., Norton, L., and Foxcroft, A. (2010). “What changes in the transition to learning at university?” in Improving student learning for the 21st century learner: Proceedings of the 2009 17th international symposium. ed. C. Rust (Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development), 141–156.
- Gale, T., and Parker, S. (2014). Navigating change: a typology of student transition in higher education. *Stud. High. Educ.* 39, 734–753. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2012.721351
- Guzzardo, M. T., Khosla, N., Adams, A. L., Bussmann, J. D., Engelman, A., Ingraham, N., et al. (2021). “The ones that care make all the difference”: perspectives on student-faculty relationships. *Innov. High. Educ.* 46, 41–58. doi: 10.1007/s10755-020-09522-w
- Hagenauer, G., and Volet, S. (2014). ‘I don’t think I could, you know, just teach without any emotion’: exploring the nature and origin of university teachers’ emotions. *Res. Pap. Educ.* 29, 240–262. doi: 10.1080/02671522.2012.754929
- Lackner, E. J., and Stensaker, B. (2022). Skiftende politiske perspektiver på universitetet? En analyse av sentrale stortingsmeldinger på 2000-tallet. *Norsk Pedagog. Tidsskr.* 106, 291–303. doi: 10.18261/npt.106.4.2
- Larcombe, W., Baik, C., and Finch, S. (2022). Exploring course experiences that predict psychological distress and mental wellbeing in Australian undergraduate and graduate coursework students. *High. Educ. Res. Dev.* 41, 420–435. doi: 10.1080/07294360.2020.1865284
- Larcombe, W., Finch, S., Sore, R., Murray, C. M., Kentish, S., Mulder, R. A., et al. (2016). Prevalence and socio-demographic correlates of psychological distress among students at an Australian university. *Stud. High. Educ.* 41, 1074–1091. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2014.966072
- Leese, M. (2010). Bridging the gap: supporting student transitions into higher education. *J. Further High. Educ.* 34, 239–251. doi: 10.1080/03098771003695494
- Macdonald, I. (2000). What do we mean by transition, and what is the problem. *Australas. J. Eng. Educ.* 9, 7–20.
- Malterud, K. (2017). Kvalitative forskningsmetoder for medisin og helsefag. 4th Edn. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Pinto, A. F., Mjølén, O. M., and Reed, N. P. (2024b). Beyond the first week: sustaining the feeling of social inclusion and sense of belonging for students. *Int. J. Qual. Stud. Health Well Being* 19:2421032. doi: 10.1080/17482631.2024.2421032
- Pinto, A. F., Pinto, D. N. F., Mjølén, O. M., and Reed, N. P. (2024a). Positive interactions and supportive learning environments: Keys to enhanced student engagement. Conference proceedings. The future of education 2024. Florence.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The authors declare that Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. Microsoft Copilot (GPT-4, 2024), accessed via NTNU’s licensed platform, was used for language editing during the preparation of this manuscript. All content and interpretations are the author’s own.

Any alternative text (alt text) provided alongside figures in this article has been generated by Frontiers with the support of artificial intelligence and reasonable efforts have been made to ensure accuracy, including review by the authors wherever possible. If you identify any issues, please contact us.

Publisher’s note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

- Postareff, L., and Lindblom-Ylänne, S. (2011). Emotions and confidence within teaching in higher education. *Stud. High. Educ.* 36, 799–813. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2010.483279
- Postareff, L., Parpala, A., and Lindblom-Ylänne, S. (2015). Factors contributing to changes in a deep approach to learning in different learning environments. *Learn. Environ. Res.* 18, 315–333. doi: 10.1007/s10984-015-9186-1
- Prilleltensky, I., Scarpa, M. P., Ness, O., and Di Martino, S. (2023). Mattering, wellness, and fairness: psychosocial goods for the common good. *Am. J. Orthopsychiatry* 93, 198–210. doi: 10.1037/ort0000668
- Read, B., Archer, L., and Leathwood, C. (2003). Challenging cultures? Student conceptions of 'belonging' and 'isolation' at a post-1992 university. *Stud. High. Educ.* 28, 261–277. doi: 10.1080/03075070309290
- Sander, P., Stevenson, K., King, M., and Coates, D. (2000). University students' expectations of teaching. *Stud. High. Educ.* 25, 309–323. doi: 10.1080/03075070050193433
- Scanlon, L., Rowling, L., and Weber, Z. (2007). 'You don't have like an identity... you are just lost in a crowd': forming a student identity in the first-year transition to university. *J. Youth Stud.* 10, 223–241. doi: 10.1080/13676260600983684
- Schaeper, H. (2020). The first year in higher education: the role of individual factors and the learning environment for academic integration. *High. Educ.* 79, 95–110. doi: 10.1007/s10734-019-00398-0
- Stallman, H. M. (2010). Psychological distress in university students: a comparison with general population data. *Aust. Psychol.* 45, 249–257. doi: 10.1080/00050067.2010.482109
- Thomas, L. (2002). Student retention in higher education: the role of institutional habitus. *J. Educ. Policy* 17, 423–442. doi: 10.1080/02680930210140257
- Thompson, M., Pawson, C., and Evans, B. (2021). Navigating entry into higher education: the transition to independent learning and living. *J. Furth. High. Educ.* 45, 1398–1410. doi: 10.1080/0309877X.2021.1933400
- Tlalajoe-Mokhatla, N. (2024). Towards a conceptual framework in higher education anchored on social learning and social integration: transition, retention and graduation. *Cogent Educ.* 11:2409474. doi: 10.1080/2331186X.2024.2409474
- Waghorne, J. (2023). "The 'student experience' in the history of English-speaking universities" in Research handbook on the student experience in higher education (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing), 13–24.
- Wilcox, P., Winn, S., and Fyvie-Gauld, M. (2005). 'It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people': the role of social support in the first-year experience of higher education. *Stud. High. Educ.* 30, 707–722. doi: 10.1080/03075070500340036
- Young, E., Thompson, R., Sharp, J., and Bosmans, D. (2020). Emotional transitions? Exploring the student experience of entering higher education in a widening-participation HE-in-FE setting. *J. Furth. High. Educ.* 44, 1349–1363. doi: 10.1080/0309877X.2019.1688264