Let them flourish
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1

Introduction
A focus on well-being was already gradually gaining ground in higher education, but the Covid-19 pandemic brought attention for the extent to which students feel good to a wider audience (e.g. Adrighem et al., 2021; RIVM et al., 2021). Well-being is seen as an important factor for studying successfully (e.g. Chattu et al., 2020; Meens, 2018), but the relationship between well-being and successful studying has not yet been sufficiently researched. Some previous Dutch dissertations provided insights into aspects of the role of well-being and mental health within higher education, for example students’ psychosocial problems (Dopmeijer, 2021), successful studying (Van der Zanden, 2019), and motivation in relation to study success (Meens, 2018). Studies of effective student well-being support, for example, often focus on students with potential well-being problems, such as minority groups and students with mental health problems (Deunk & Korpershoek, 2021). How to help all students promote their well-being, what factors play a role in this and how education can be designed to stimulate students’ well-being, appears to be largely unknown. One potential way to promote student well-being is by enhancing their personal resources (Feldman et al., 2015). Personal resources are developable aspects of a person (Van den Heuvel et al., 2010), like optimism, hope, and self-efficacy. Therefore, this dissertation focuses primarily on identifying which personal resources are relevant in the context of higher education and to translate these insights into design guidelines with which higher education can develop interventions to enhance students’ well-being.

This dissertation attempts to gain more insight into student well-being within higher education by answering the following question: What personal resources promote higher education students’ well-being and how can these personal resources be enhanced by education?

Defining well-being

From about 2000 the American Psychologist Association, under the leadership of Martin Seligman, wanted to shift the focus from ‘mental illness’ to a more positive psychology (Linley et al., 2006). Positive psychology focuses on helping people to be happier and more satisfied with their lives (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009), and thus experiencing well-being and being able to function optimally (Linley et al., 2006). This focus on what goes well is also increasingly finding its way into higher education. Whereas different definitions can be chosen for well-being, an accurate definition is still a topic of discussion (Cooke et al., 2016; Soutter, 2011). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2004) has formulated a universal, not culture-specific, definition of well-being: A state [...] in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community’ (p. 12). A valuable addition to this definition in the context of higher education, seems to be the mental health continuum, as it
Introduction

distinguishes three aspects of mental health: emotional, psychological and social well-being (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). Emotional well-being concerns having positive feelings. Psychological well-being emphasises, among other things, the feeling of having a goal and going through development. Social well-being concerns the relationship with the social context in which a person finds himself (Bohlmeijer et al., 2013; Ryff, 1989). Following the WHO definition with additions from the mental health continuum, in this dissertation well-being is considered to be a state in which persons feel comfortable, can develop themselves and can make a contribution to their environment.

The Job Demands-Resources model

One model to analyse factors that influence student well-being and performance is the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model. The JD-R model was introduced about 20 years ago, around the same time as the emergence of positive psychology, and initially focused on describing and analysing organisational contexts (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). The model was intended to provide more insight into burnout, a state of psychological stress (Schaufeli, 2017). Job demands and job resources were found to be important factors that correlated with burnout. In the years that followed, the model was further expanded and specified, for example by integrating other, related models. Consequently, the counterpart of burnout -engagement- was included in the JD-R model, as a positive psychological state (Schaufeli, 2017). The model then reflected two processes: a motivational process and a burnout process. Later, another important new insight was the fact that personal factors also played a role in influencing well-being, similar to the role of job resources (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). Therefore, personal resources, and later also personal demands, were added to the model. Starting from this extended model, in various contexts the roles of both environmental factors (job demands and job resources) and personal factors (personal demands and personal resources) have been explored, but their interdependence and influence on engagement and burnout are not yet fully understood (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Although the JD-R model has been developed in the context of organisations, it is also useful to consider similar factors and processes in education, because of the similarity between work activities in professional organisations and study activities in higher education (Ouweneel et al., 2011).

While the JD-R model reflects several factors influencing engagement and stress, this dissertation focuses specifically on personal resources, as they can contribute to study engagement (Ouweneel et al., 2011) which is in line with positive psychology, and to better study performance (Feldman et al., 2015). The definition of personal resources used in this dissertation is based on previous definitions from Hobfoll et al. (2003) and Van den Heuvel et al. (2010): developable, positive beliefs of aspects of
one's own personality concerning the ability to control and impact the environment, which motivates and facilitates goal-attainment. Some examples of personal resources are optimism, self-efficacy (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007), reflective behaviour, and assertiveness (Mastenbroek et al., 2014). Personal resources are -following the definition- developable, so the more developed the personal resources of students are, the better students can use their resources to increase their study engagement (Ouweneel et al., 2011).

**Personal resources in higher education**

As the previously described definition of personal resources is broad and many possible personal resources have not yet been sufficiently explored, there is no comprehensive list of all important personal resources. However, from previous studies in the context of higher education or among recently graduated students, a number of personal resources are known to be positively related to student performance. The personal resources optimism, hope, self-efficacy, and resilience, combined into the concept of Psychological Capital, were positively related to student performance (Luthans et al., 2012) and adjustment (Hazan Liran & Miller, 2017). Self-efficacy, hope, and optimism were positively related to study engagement (Ouweneel et al., 2011) and grades (Feldman et al., 2015). In addition, research among recently graduated professionals showed the mediating role of the personal resources self-efficacy, proactive behaviour, and reflective behaviour in the relationship between job resources and engagement (Mastenbroek et al., 2014).

A number of other personal resources have not, to our knowledge, been studied as personal resources in the context of higher education. However, these personal resources have been frequently studied in the context of organisations, which makes their potential added value in higher education plausible. These include, among others, intrinsic motivation (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014), meaning-making (Van den Heuvel et al., 2009), and self-esteem (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). Understanding which personal resources contribute most to fostering engagement and reducing stress, especially in situations where students face high demands, can help better enhance students in developing and deploying their personal resources and thus contribute to successful studying.

**Aim and research questions**

The main purpose of this dissertation is to gain a better understanding of personal resources that positively influence student well-being within higher education and to provide insights into how to enhance these personal resources. These insights can be used to further support the well-being of students within education. The main question answered by this dissertation is:
What personal resources promote higher education students’ well-being and how can these personal resources be enhanced by education?

Four studies were conducted, each focussing on a part of the research question. The following research questions will be answered in the different chapters of this dissertation.

Chapter 2:
- Which personal resources do honours students perceive as contributing to their self-defined success?

Chapter 3:
- Which personal resources of students affect students’ levels of engagement and stress the most?

Chapter 4:
- Which interventions have been used to stimulate the well-being of students within higher education?
- What are the effects of these interventions on students’ well-being?
- What is the theoretical basis underlying these interventions?
- Which factors potentially influence the effectiveness of these interventions?

Chapter 5:
- What are design principles for interventions to enhance honours students’ personal resources self-efficacy, optimism, inquiry mindedness, and self-regulation?

**Methods**

For answering the main research question, a mixed method approach was applied. Qualitative data were collected in semi-structured interviews, a systematic literature review, and focus group sessions (Chapters 2, 4, 5). Quantitative data were collected through an online questionnaire, as described in Chapter 3.

**The context of honours education**

Developing personal resources is important for all students (Ouweneel et al., 2011; Stelnicki et al., 2015). However, because relatively little is known about the specific role of personal resources within higher education, the choice was made to investigate this first with a specific group of students, namely Dutch honours students, who potentially experience a high level of pressure. These students follow an honours programme, in addition to their regular education. Honours education aims to
provide space for students who want and can do more than their regular programme offers them. In this way, these students are enabled to develop optimally and to make a major contribution to society after their studies. Although in recent years some Dutch dissertations have been published that focus on the characteristics of students in these honours programmes (Banis-den Hertog, 2016; Kool, 2016) and on the didactics that fit within these programmes (Lappia, 2015; Scager, 2013; Wolfensberger, 2012), there is also still much unknown about optimal designs of honours education. In any case, honours education can be seen as an environment in which insights can be attained and experimented with, which can then be translated into the rest of higher education. This offers opportunities to use this context to try out which personal resources are important for students’ well-being and how these can be developed. At the same time, following an additional programme means that these students may experience additional demands. After all, these students follow an additional programme, in addition to their regular bachelor’s programme, and generally set high demands for themselves. This makes them potentially vulnerable to experiencing high pressure. Therefore, it was chosen to focus on honours students in Chapters 2 and 5, while Chapters 3 and 4 have a more comprehensive scope on all students within higher education.

**The spread of honours programmes in higher education**

Honours education has its origins in the United States, where about a century ago the first programmes were developed to offer adequate education to above-average talented and motivated students (Coppoolse et al., 2013). Although America has a long history of honours education, it is only in the last 20 years that honours education has become increasingly widespread in other countries, although the number of honours programmes in other European countries still lags far behind the Netherlands (Wolfensberger, 2015). The development of honours education in the Netherlands was partly stimulated by the Sirius Programme, a government fund set up in 2008 to develop honours programmes in higher education (Huijts & Kolster, 2020). In this way, the Dutch government also hoped to draw more attention to developing talent within the Dutch education system, which traditionally focused on students with extra support needs and "average" students. Partly due to this funding opportunity, almost all Dutch institutions of higher education now have honours programmes (Wolfensberger, 2015). In other countries, talent development has been higher on the agenda in educational institutions since 2000, and more and more honours programmes are slowly being developed (Wolfensberger, 2015).

In various countries, different choices are made in the design of honours programmes, partly because of the different education systems. In general, these programmes are aimed at students who want
more and who are able to do more than what is offered in their regular curriculum. Generally, students within honours programmes are, for example, more creative, have more drive to excel, have a bigger desire to learn (Scager et al., 2012), have a more proactive personality, and are more conscientious (Banis- den Hertog, 2016). Students are often selected on the basis of, among other things, motivation and previous performance. A demanding environment makes students sensitive to mental health problems (Dopmeijer, 2021), but at the same time, the study by Kool et al. (2016) showed that honours students achieved a higher grade point average at the end of their regular studies. So apparently, the potentially demanding environment does not decrease student performance. This makes it valuable to investigate how, in the context of honours education, students can achieve good performance.

Outline of the dissertation

Although all chapters contribute to answering the main question of this dissertation, each chapter has a specific focus. In Chapters 2 and 3 we explore which personal resources are relevant in the context of higher education, Chapters 4 and 5 elaborate on how these resources can be further developed within education.

Chapter 2 concentrates on the personal resources that honours students used to achieve self-defined success. In semi-structured interviews, students described successes and what self-reported personal resources helped them to be successful. This study was explorative in nature.

Subsequently, in Chapter 3, the value of a couple of these personal resources is tested more broadly among all students. Chapter 3 describes a large-scale quantitative study among all students at a university of applied sciences. This study examines how personal resources are associated with students’ levels of engagement and stress. The eight personal resources examined in this study are hope, self-efficacy, resilience, optimism, perseverance, inquiry mindedness, self-regulation, and motivation. This chapter contributes to an understanding of the role that personal resources play in the context of higher education, related to students’ well-being.

Chapter 4 describes a systematic review of literature that examined the effectiveness of interventions that can be used to promote student well-being. On the basis of a broad definition of well-being and other inclusion criteria, a large number of studies has been screened. The aim of this study is to give an overview of interventions to stimulate students’ well-being. The study gives an overview of interventions that have previously been studied in the context of higher education, based on 123
included studies, and shows both effective and non-effective interventions. However, due to the moderate quality and large diversity of the included studies, we were not able to describe a comprehensive list of effective interventions.

*Chapter 5* elaborates on how to enhance personal resources, by exploring what interventions to develop personal resources could look like, more specifically interventions that fit in honours programmes. Four personal resources -optimism, self-efficacy, hope, and inquiry mindedness- were subjects of focus groups, with the contributions of honours students, teachers, and other stakeholders. Based on these results, design principles were formulated for interventions to -further- develop these four personal resources of students in honours programmes, and thus hopefully contribute to promoting well-being.

*Chapter 6* is a concluding chapter, in which implications for practice and suggestions for further research are given. In addition, this chapter discusses the possible generalisation of insights from honours education to the broader field of higher education.
REFERENCES


Chapter 1


