

Chapter # 24

PARTICIPATORY DESIGN OF A HEALTH-PROMOTING UNIVERSITY – THE PROJECT MINDFUL CAMPUS AT LEIBNIZ UNIVERSITY HANNOVER

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the project “Mindful Campus – Strengthening Mental Health Literacy among Students” (MinCa), which aims to establish a student health management system (SHM) at Leibniz University Hannover (LUH). The overarching objective of MinCa is to develop a participatory concept and strategy for establishing SHM through measures at the curricular and structural level. Participation is understood as the individual or collective involvement of individuals in health-related decisions. This is considered as a central principle of health promotion at universities. The project is being funded by Techniker Krankenkasse, a German health insurance, for the period from January 2025 to December 2026. MinCa examines how the organizational structures of the LUH can contribute to supporting students in their individual learning of Mental Health Literacy (MHL). This question will be investigated in a qualitative accompanying study. The article explains the conceptual approach of the project and the design of the study. In addition, initial findings and conclusions will be presented and opened up for discussion.

Keywords: mental health literacy, micro degree, setting approach, student health management, university development.

1. INTRODUCTION

The general health of students has deteriorated significantly between 2015 and 2023 (Techniker Krankenkasse [TK], 2023, p. 8). This is reflected, for example, in a significant increase in mental health disorders. A key problem is the increased emotional stress experienced by students, which can be seen as a warning sign for burnout (cf. *ibid.*, p. 9-17). Due to the extensive changes in the German higher education system, e.g., the Bologna reform, but also internationalization and digitization processes, the perception of complexity and stress as well as emotional exhaustion among university members has increased significantly. This includes students as the largest status group. In addition to direct study-related factors such as exam pressure, competition, and student financing, social and political phenomena such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the global climate crisis, and the Middle East conflict are also having an increasing impact on the psychosocial stress experienced by students (cf. Brock et al., 2024). Brock et al. (2024) point out that the perceived psychosocial stress increases due to the constant presence of these topics.

In addition, many students experience intersectional health inequalities or injustices in the higher education context, as various socio-structural characteristics such as disabilities, chronic illnesses, immigrant background, sexual orientation, or care responsibilities, e.g., childcare or caring for relatives, influence the development and maintenance of mental health (cf. *ibid.*). In this way, a conglomerate of challenges can arise for affected students

that is usually invisible to the outside world and can have a negative impact on their ability to study (Banek, Gillen, Michele, & Steuber, 2025a). This initial situation results in a growing need for individual mental health literacy (MHL) and for a structurally anchored, university-wide student health management (SHM) similar to the existing occupational health management at Leibniz University Hannover (LUH) (Banek, Michele, & Steuber, 2025b). A sustainably anchored SHM aims to systematically promote the health of students and strengthen their health-related resources (Brock et al., 2024; Kompetenzzentrum Gesundheitsfördernde Hochschulen, 2024).

This is where the project “Mindful Campus – Strengthening Mental Health Literacy among Students” (MinCa) comes in. MinCa aims to strengthen the mental health literacy of students (and partly also for academic staff) as an important skill or literacy for the future. The development and strengthening of health literacy as a fundamental life and future literacy is, in our view, of particular importance in university teacher training, as teachers later act as multipliers in schools. The project embeds MHL into university structures and curricula and uses a participatory, student-centred approach.

MinCa initially focuses on vocational education and training (VET) students. In the course of the project, it is planned to extend this focus to students from other departments. VET students are a diverse, often under-represented population group, e.g., in terms of categories such as age, caring responsibilities and part-time employment. They are often ‘first generation students’ and at higher risk of academic dropout due to prior occupational qualification (Gillen et al., 2021). Furthermore, the teaching profession ranks among the most mentally taxing careers: Schools are high-demand psychosocial environments requiring emotional labour and resilience.

The training of VET students at LUH is based on the principle of reflective action. According to this model, teacher training students should be enabled to deal with the open and highly complex situations of everyday professional life, to shape these situations, and to critically question their own role and decisions in terms of underlying systemic and structural conditions, their significance, and their appropriateness (cf. Dannemann et al., 2019). Essential factors for this include the competent handling of health information, reflection on organizational health literacy in vocational training institutions, and the ability to maintain one's own health.

For these reasons, the promotion of MHL among future teachers can be seen as both: preventative and transformative for the culture of health in educational institutions such as universities and schools. Teachers are multipliers for the development and maintenance of mental health and health literacy in later professional life.

2. BACKGROUND

MinCa is an internal university and structure-building cooperation project. The project objective is to develop participatory strategies to promote MHL and establish a SHM.

The basic idea behind the project is a salutogenetic understanding of health, which is detached from the normative concept of being healthy, in which health is understood as a continuum. Analogous to this understanding of health, physical, psychological and social factors are included as conditions of origin and development factors for the individual state of health (Antonovsky, 1991). In this way, the promotion of MHL can develop constructive mechanisms for coping with stress as well as the cognitive, social and motivational abilities and skills of an individual that help them to independently access health-related information that contributes to coping with illness, disease prevention and/or health promotion (Sørensen et al., 2012).

The MinCa project focuses on curricular integration and structural university changes. The theoretical approach is based on two central principles: The first principle is the *setting approach*. This means that the university can be understood as a socio-spatial system in which health-promoting measures and processes can be implemented in both: working and learning contexts. The second principle is *participation*, which is understood in the narrower sense as the individual or collective involvement of individuals in health-related decisions affecting their lives (cf. Wihofszky, Hartung, & Narimani, 2020). Both principles are briefly explained below.

2.1. The Setting Approach

More recently, universities have increasingly seen themselves as actors in health promotion (cf. Okanagan Charter, 2015) and are anchoring the associated values in their self-image, e.g., in the form of an SHM (cf. Brock et al., 2024). Its goal is to “create a health-promoting university environment for all students and strengthen the individual health resources of students. It is recommended that SHM be implemented systematically and integrated into university structures in a sustainable manner” (Kompetenzzentrum Gesundheitsfördernde Hochschulen 2024, n.p.). According to the Techniker Krankenkasse, a German health insurance fund, “the setting approach [...] can be the core strategy for health promotion and networking is its most important development tool” (TK 2020, p. 43) at universities.

The setting approach refers to two levels: The structural level and the behavioural level. At the *structural level*, the project aims to establishing a SHM to contribute to the long-term improvement of health-promoting university structures. A steering group (cf. 3.2) was set up for this purpose, which is responsible for the coordination, consolidation and further development of (mental) health expertise.

At the *behavioural level*, the project aims to promote individual MHL prevention and intervention programmes and the theoretical qualification of students. For this purpose, health-related topics are integrated into the curriculum of vocational teacher training programmes. From a more long-term perspective, health-related training programmes are being implemented, targeting all hierarchical levels involving students as well as lecturers, professors and administrative staff.

2.2. Participation

In addition, the project MinCa follows Wright's (2020) stages of participation in health promotion. Participation is considered the ideal way to successfully implement health-promoting measures and structures at universities. According to Wright, it is crucial to involve all individuals whose living and/or working conditions are affected by such measures in the research process from the outset and on an equal footing.

Wright defined nine levels of participation. The levels of the ‘ladder of participation’ range from ‘non-participation’ to ‘beyond participation’ (ibid.). The project is at one of the higher levels, as it grants decision-making powers to the members of the target group: MinCa provides for the involvement of students in the needs analysis and the facilitation of co-determination. Moreover, students are involved in all stages of data collection and evaluation. Students also acted as co-researchers in a pilot course in the summer semester of 2025 on participatory knowledge transfer focussing on mental health in higher education.

During the course of the project, the program coordinators involved in the vocational teaching degree program will be also included in the needs assessment in the form of a problem-centred survey in order to gain the perspective of those actors who are primarily involved in advising students.

The aim of the participatory approach is to identify content-related and structural factors that influence students' subjective mental health in the university environment.

3. OBJECTIVES, DESIGN AND METHODS

MinCa's core goals and actions can be categorized into medium- and long-term. These include both the promotion of individual MHL and the anchoring of health-related content in the curriculum, as well as the development of an SHM and networking within and outside the university and, finally, the consolidation of the offerings as part of a micro degree in MHL. On this basis, a curricular and structural plan of actions was developed that enables the promotion of MHL at LUH on an individual and organizational level (Banek et al., 2025a).

3.1. Curricular Level

MinCa currently investigates how the organizational structures of the LUH can facilitate students' development of individual MHL. To this end, various content-related offerings to promote MHL among vocational teacher training students were designed at curricular level with the help of the university didactic approach of innovative forms of teaching and learning.

The courses on MHL were piloted in the 2024/25 winter semester as preliminary work based on an initial participatory needs analysis, i.e. the seminar concepts were developed based on the results of a workshop with students. This corresponds to the participatory research approach of the project. Two regular courses were planned for this purpose in the program of courses for master's students at the Institute for Vocational Education and Adult Education. Since the 2025 summer semester, the courses have been implemented in the institute's regular program of courses.

In order to enable a sustainable continuation of the pedagogical content to promote students' MHL, MinCa is aiming to expand the curricular modules in the long term. In order to make these modules certifiable, a general LUH-wide micro degree system is currently being developed (cf. 3.3). This will enable the introduction of a micro degree not only in the vocational teaching profession for MHL, but also in other subject areas such as natural sciences for other content. The corresponding preparatory work, e.g., the necessary LUH-wide structural and organizational changes, is currently being carried out.

3.2. Structural Level

In addition to the individual promotion of students' MHL at a curricular level, MinCa has set itself the long-term goal of recognizing the effects of crises and disadvantages within its organizational structures and taking them into account by designing its university culture in a correspondingly responsive manner. As a result, LUH increasingly sees itself as an actor in health promotion, which leads to the associated values being anchored in its self-image and becoming visible in the form of a newly established SHM analogous to the existing occupational health management at LUH. The aim of the SHM, analogous to the setting approach, is to create a health-promoting university environment for everyone by expanding the existing internal structures beyond the institutes and central university health promotion facilities. This includes systematic implementation and sustainable integration of the services into the university structures. As a further measure at a structural level, a steering committee was formed to coordinate and strategically develop the various activities to promote health literacy at LUH under the leadership of the Centre for University Sports. The steering committee, which consists of representatives of LUH's internal health stakeholders, two

student assistants and the responsible university advisors from TK, will continue to work on the development of the SHM throughout the duration of the project and – in cooperation with the occupational health management – on the development of a university health management in the long term. In this way, it enables the use of synergies of existing measures and initiatives of university facilities and institutions.

Further project measures include cross-institutional, internal networking as well as cross-university, external networking, e.g. since August 2024 as part of the membership of the Healthy Universities North network, as well as accompanying research and evaluation on the topic of MHL (Banek et al., 2025b).

3.3. Micro Degree System

In a long-term perspective, the project also aims to expand the current internal structures beyond the institutes and central university facilities involved in health promotion (Banek et al., 2025a). In order to achieve this goal, a micro degree system is being developed, consisting of micro credentials. Micro credentials refer to certificates of learning outcomes that students have acquired after completing a smaller volume of learning. These learning outcomes are assessed using transparent and clearly defined criteria. Learning experiences that lead to micro credentials are designed to impart specific knowledge, skills, and competencies that meet current social, personal, cultural, or labour market needs. Micro credentials can be standalone or combined into larger qualifications, such as micro degrees. They are substantiated by quality assurance based on agreed standards in the relevant sector or field of activity (EU Council, 2022).

A key advantage of micro credentials is their high degree of flexibility. This applies to the type of event, the scope of the self-contained learning units, their inclusiveness, and, where applicable, their polyvalence. All micro credentials are designed to be competency-based, i.e., the learning outcomes are at the forefront. Micro credentials can be used in various learning environments, both online and in physical presence or in a mixed format; they can also take place in virtual or digital spaces and encompass formal, non-formal, and informal learning (Wittich & Gruber, 2024).

A micro degree is made up of several micro credentials, i.e., smaller course units with 5 credit points (CP) each, which are designed to be competence-oriented and can be taken flexibly by students from all subject areas. The long-term goal is a permanently embedded additional certificate in form of a micro degree in MHL with 30 CP, which can be taken across all degree programs at LUH (Banek et al., 2025b).

3.4. Design and Methods

The realisation of these goals is flanked by accompanying research and the publication of interim results. In a first step, ten qualitative, semi-structured and problem-centred interviews were conducted with students according to Witzel (2000) for the needs analysis. In addition to advertising via a news tile on the LUH homepage and via social media, in particular the LUH Instagram channel, advertising flyers were developed to select interview partners via the snowball system, providing information about the project and calling for participation in the interviews. The flyers were distributed on campus in the current *Zeit Campus Mental Health* 2024 and 2025 magazines. Furthermore, ten interviews were conducted with doctoral students in order to supplement the resulting needs analysis with the needs of doctoral students (Banek et al., 2025b).

The core objective of the interviews with the students was to identify content-related and structural factors that influence the subjective mental health perception of students in their living environment and thus in the university setting at LUH. The interviews conducted

were then transcribed and analysed using the theoretical coding method according to Flick (2017). The results of the ongoing data analysis will be presented using individual case descriptions and in the form of a cross-case category system.

In a next step, the course coordinators involved in the vocational teaching degree program were also included in the needs assessment in the form of a problem-centred survey in order to gain the perspective of those actors who are primarily involved in advising students.

An essential factor in this process is the close involvement of students as co-researchers in all research-related theoretical and operational decision-making processes. The involvement of students as co-researchers is accompanied by systematic ethical reflection that foregrounds equitable participation, clearly defined procedures for informed consent, and rigorous data protection measures governing all stages of the research process.

4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

At the end of the project, a symposium will be held to make the results available to a wider audience. In addition, the project results will be published in an anthology. The MinCa anthology examines the topic of participatory design of health promotion measures at LUH. The focus is on promoting mental health literacy. The different perspectives of the participating status groups and actors are included in order to highlight commonalities in content, but also differences and areas of tension in the university development process.

In the long term, there are plans to expand the university's internal structures – in the sense of an approach to university health management that promotes health literacy – beyond the institutes and central institutions of LUH that have been involved to date.

5. CONCLUSION/DISCUSSION

Initial findings from the needs analysis interviews include requirements and needs, such as the need for individual, curricular and organizational support and structural integration of students, as well as perceived study-related stress factors. The initial insights gained from this needs analysis were incorporated into the curricular development of the MHL offerings so that they can be continuously developed and adapted to the current needs of students. As a result of the need for low-threshold counselling services frequently expressed in the interviews, for example, training was organized for mental health first aiders, in which various LUH employees and student assistants are trained to support students as the first point of contact in mental and psychological crisis situations (Banek et al., 2025b).

Furthermore, the initial results of the needs analysis indicate that adapting study and examination conditions plays a key role. MinCa's primary target group are VET students who attend various faculties at LUH, e.g., engineering sciences and vocational education. These are faculties with very different subject cultures and their own examination boards. It is therefore necessary to critically discuss the results against the backdrop of different subject cultures at the university.

In order to ensure sustainability beyond the end of project funding by TK, the results, particularly those concerning SHM, will be institutionally embedded within LUH's existing health management structures and further advanced through long-term strategic partnerships and targeted capacity-building measures.

The high complexity of implementation, which requires good coordination of all LUH stakeholders, is addressed by the established steering committee (cf. 2.1). The changing student body and the constantly changing conditions at the university are challenges for long-term impact measurement, just as scalability and transferability to other international universities is still open (Banek et al., 2025b).

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