

**Sustaining Student Motivation and Well-Being: Academic and Non-Academic Pressures,
Supports, and Coping**

By

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We acknowledge and respect the Lək'wəḡən (Songhees and Xwsep̓səm/Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Lək'wəḡən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

The purpose of this report is to gain a better understanding of how academic and non-academic pressures affect student well-being and how these pressures influence their academic performance. A literature review was conducted to explore the meanings of stress and student well-being, the effects of stress and stress management, and university wellness supports available to students. From the literature review, a conceptual framework was created to capture academic and non-academic pressures, motivations and demotivations, and faculty and peer support. This framework was applied to the interview guide. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with current and former university students to gather insight into their academic and non-academic needs. Interview data were analyzed to identify key themes from participant responses. Participants described several challenges and supports they encountered during their time in university, including heavy workloads, financial pressures, and the value of peer and personal relationships. The study highlights the importance of understanding the diverse stressors students face and offers recommendations to improve institutional support and promote student well-being.

Key words: student well-being, stress, academic engagement, academic pressures, university resources

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Dedication

To my yiayia and pappou, σε αγαπώ πολύ.

Table of Contents

TABLE OF CONTENTS	VI
LIST OF TABLES	VIII
INTRODUCTION	1
BACKGROUND	1
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	3
POSITIONALITY STATEMENT	4
THESIS OUTLINE	4
LITERATURE REVIEW	5
SEARCH STRATEGIES	5
MAJOR THEMES IN THE LITERATURE.....	6
<i>Defining Stress Generally</i>	6
<i>Consequences of Stress in Work & School</i>	7
<i>The Complexity of Student Well-being: Evolving Definitions and Influences</i>	8
<i>University Wellness and Well-being Resource Supports</i>	10
LITERATURE REVIEW SUMMARY.....	11
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR GUIDING INTERVIEWS	12
METHODOLOGY AND METHODS	16
METHODOLOGY.....	16
METHODS	17
<i>Interviews</i>	17
<i>Selection of Participants</i>	17
<i>Recruitment Process</i>	18
<i>Timing of Study</i>	19
DATA ANALYSIS	20
ETHICAL REVIEW.....	21
LIMITATIONS	21
FINDINGS: KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS	23
MOTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT	23
SATISFACTION AND DISSATISFACTION	26
SUPPORT FROM FACULTY AND UNIVERSITY STAFF.....	30
SUPPORT OF FELLOW PEERS.....	32
HOME AND LIFE (NON-ACADEMIC) PRESSURES	35
HOW TO IMPROVE ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT	38
HOW TO IMPROVE PEER SUPPORT AND STUDENT WELL-BEING	41
FINDINGS SUMMARY	43
DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS	45
LINKING THE INTERVIEW FINDINGS TO THE LITERATURE	45
ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS	47
UNEXPECTED FINDINGS	49

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS	51
RECOMMENDATIONS	52
FUTURE RESEARCH	53
REFERENCES	55
APPENDICES	62
APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT EMAIL	62
APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM	63
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE.....	67
APPENDIX D: FINDINGS TABLES	69

List of Tables

Tables

Table 1: Conceptual Framework

Table 2: Motivation and Engagement in University Studies

Table 3: Factors of Satisfaction & Dissatisfaction in the University Experience

Table 4: Support from Faculty and University Staff

Table 5: Peer Relationships and Support in University Life

Table 6: Life and Non-Academic Pressures Affecting University Students

Table 7: How to Improve Academic Engagement

Table 8: How to Improve Peer Support & Student Well-Being

Introduction

This thesis examines how undergraduate and graduate students in Canada experience academic and non-academic demands and how these experiences shape their overall well-being in a post-pandemic context.

This chapter provides a background section to better understand the context and rationale for the chosen topic, presents the research objectives and research questions, describes my positionality statement, and then provides information on how the rest of the thesis is structured.

Background

Stress is one of the most common challenges reported by university students, which can shape how they perform both on and off-campus and related, how it can affect their overall well-being. In the recent Canadian Campus Wellbeing Survey, Derkach et al. (2025, p. 4) found that “now more than ever, we are facing a mental health challenge on Canadian campuses.” The authors (p. 8) define mental well-being as the “presence of positive feelings and the ability to function effectively in life” and in the survey findings, found that only 10% of students surveyed expressed a high level of mental wellbeing whereas 61% expressed average and 29% of students stated they experienced a low level of mental wellbeing.

For example, in Canada, reports of stress among post-secondary students increased between 2013 and 2019 (Linden et al., 2021, p. 1), with many students describing “psychological distress, mental illness diagnoses, and help seeking for mental health related [concerns].” With university students self-reporting feelings of stress, anxiety, and mental health challenges, they are “considered an at-risk population for chronic stress and poor mental health” (Moghimi et al., 2023, p. 12). Further, Moghimi et al. (2023) found that nearly half of post-secondary students (45%) “experience higher than average stress levels, and up to 35% meet diagnostic criteria for at least one mental health disorder” (p. 2).

Specific to the University of Victoria (UVic), a UVic survey mirrored these national trends. In the *Student Health and Wellness Survey*, almost half of students (45%) reported “more than average levels of stress”, and a smaller group (12%) reported experiencing tremendous stress (UVic, 2014, p. 5). Female students reported higher stress levels than their male counterparts,

while different age groups identified varying sources of stress: students aged 18 to 24 most often cited academics as their primary source of stress, whereas older students cited career-related concerns. These findings demonstrate that stress is experienced in diverse ways depending on age, gender, and stage of study.

Numerous authors have found that university students face a mix of academic and non-academic needs that directly influence the stresses they feel and their overall well-being and university experience (CCWSBECC, 2025; CACUSS, 2017). Fraillon (2004) notes that academic needs have been identified as meaningful course experiences and manageable workloads, support from instructors and professors, and access to university resources. On the other hand, non-academic needs refer to pressures outside of the classroom, such as financial pressures, time management, balancing family, personal and social responsibilities, and trying to maintain healthy habits. Collectively, Fraillon (2004) further states that these pressures shape how students navigate their studies and school community, as well as how they navigate through their personal lives during their time in university.

As the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted universities worldwide in early 2020, researchers began to study its effects on student well-being, mental health, and academic performance. The Covid-19 pandemic magnified the mental health pressures by shifting students to remote and online learning, blurring the boundaries between school and home spaces, and reducing awareness and accessibility to university supports and services (Wagner et al., 2023, p. 7). During Covid-19, many students reported increased stress, feelings of social isolation, and difficulties in maintaining boundaries between academic and personal life resulting in disrupted routines (Son et al., 2020, p. 2).

Furthermore, in a survey (2022) conducted by the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) and the Colleges and University Student Services (CACUSS), the authors found that “anxiety was endorsed as a top concern over time. Compared to depression, campuses report a 16% increase of anxiety as a pressing student mental health concern since 2018” (p. 5).

Additional studies found increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among post-secondary students during and after this period (Gómez-García et al., 2022; Moy & Ng, 2021; Babicka-Wirkus et al., 2021; Hernández-Yépez et al., 2022; Farfán-Latorre et al., 2023). These pandemic-induced conditions revealed new pressures and stresses that students faced and how

academic and non-academic needs are interconnected and how the ability, or lack thereof, to manage these pressures can significantly affect student well-being, performance, and motivation.

While much of the existing literature on student well-being and stress in post-secondary education has provided a general understanding of the pressures faced by undergraduate students, less is known about how both undergraduate and graduate students describe their academic and non-academic needs, and how these needs shape their overall well-being. Many previous studies have largely relied on quantitative survey data, which highlight the prevalence of stress, anxiety or anxiety-mood disorders, and psychological distress (Stallman, 2010; Bewick et al., 2010; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). Although these studies identify common stressors such as workload, finances, and social pressures or isolation, they offer limited insight on the lived or more granular experiences of undergraduate and graduate students; for instance, how students balance coursework with personal responsibilities or cope with burnout and feelings of disconnection.

This thesis contributes to learning more about both undergraduate and graduate students by using qualitative interviews with current and former undergraduate and graduate students from Canadian universities to provide an in-depth understanding of the student experience and examine how academic and non-academic needs shape well-being in a post-pandemic context. While this study offers valuable insight into student well-being, it is limited in the scope to students from Canadian universities and may not reflect the experiences of students elsewhere.

Research Objectives and Research Questions

The objective of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how students experience the academic and non-academic pressures that affect their well-being while completing their studies at Canadian universities. The research also aims to explore the strategies students find most useful for managing stress, maintaining motivation, and achieving balance in a post-pandemic context.

The research questions that this thesis seeks to address are:

- What are the academic and non-academic needs of students that influence students' well-being and academic experience?
- What are the most significant stressors for students during their studies?

- What strategies do students find most helpful in overcoming stress and maintaining motivation?
- What recommendations or solutions do students propose for improving well-being and support within the university environment?

Positionality Statement

My positionality as a researcher identifies me as a White, cis-gender woman pursuing graduate studies in the Master of Public Administration program at the University of Victoria. A potential bias in this research stemmed from the shared context between myself and participants since I was both a student and an interviewer of other students, some of which were also enrolled at UVic. I remained mindful of this dynamic and recognized that my perspective could shape how I interpreted participants' experiences. I strived to ensure that participants' voices remained central throughout the research analysis process.

My perspective on organizational and academic contexts was also shaped by my experiences as a woman and by my education within Eurocentric Canadian institutions. During the thesis process, I acknowledged my privilege, racial identity, and positionality, and remained committed to ongoing learning and dialogue surrounding diversity and inclusion. It was important to me that the research did not contribute to the 'othering' of marginalized and vulnerable groups.

Thesis Outline

The following section is a literature review that focuses on existing research and theoretical perspectives related to student well-being, stress, and coping strategies within post-secondary education. The literature review chapter also examines both academic and non-academic factors that influence the student experience. The next chapter explores the research methodology, methods, and data analysis procedures used to investigate the research questions. The analysis and discussion section presents the findings from these interviews and links them to the literature and the conceptual framework. The final section offers concluding thoughts, suggests considerations for future research, and highlights recommendations for supporting student well-being by addressing both academic and non-academic needs within Canadian post-secondary institutions.

Literature Review

This literature review examines research on university student well-being and how students experience both academic and non-academic feelings of stress. The review first examines the concept of stress and how it has been defined in the literature, its relationship to overall well-being, and its influence on academic performance. The review also examines key physiological, social, and institutional factors that affect student well-being and contribute to stress. In addition, it highlights the role of university supports and resources, including counselling services and wellness programs, and examines their accessibility and effectiveness in promoting resilience. It draws on both pre- and post-pandemic studies, with particular attention to research published after Covid-19, as the pandemic significantly reshaped the academic and personal experiences of students.

Through this review, key themes and challenges are identified that align with the study's main areas of focus: motivation and engagement, satisfaction and dissatisfaction, institutional and peer support, and non-academic pressures. These areas also collectively reveal the gaps in the literature that warrant further research in the post-pandemic context.

Search Strategies

The search terms used to find resources for this literature review were:

- Post-pandemic + students + Canada + stress + university resources and services + well-being + university pressures + academic engagement + mental health (combination of word searches were used)

The literature review was informed by peer-reviewed and grey literature research on student well-being, stress, and coping strategies in post-secondary education. Relevant studies were identified through searches in databases such as Google Scholar, the University of Victoria's Library search engine (Summons), and PsychInfo.

The literature review addressed the following themes:

- Defining stress generally
- Consequences of stress in work and school
- The complexity of student well-being: evolving definitions and influences

- University wellness and well-being resource supports

Major Themes in the Literature

Defining Stress Generally

The literature on stress presents it as a multifaceted concept encompassing physiological, psychological, and environmental dimensions. Hans Selye first popularized the term ‘stress’, defining it as “the nonspecific response of the body to any demand, whether caused by, or resulting in, pleasant or unpleasant conditions” (1978, p. 74). Selye emphasized that stress represents an adaptive process through which the body attempts to maintain stability when faced with environmental demands, yet cautioned that “no living organism can be maintained continuously in a state of alarm. If the body is confronted with an agent so damaging that continuous exposure to it is incompatible with life, then death ensues during the alarm reaction within the first hours or days” (Selye, 1978, p. 37). In this context, organism refers to the individual, or human system, continually interacting with and adapting to its environment, a relationship that laid the foundation for later conceptualizations of stress as a dynamic person and their environment.

Selye explained that “the totality of these changes, the stress syndrome, is called the general adaptation syndrome (G.A.S.). It develops in three stages: (1) the alarm reaction; (2) the stage of resistance; (3) the stage of exhaustion” (Selye, 1956, p. 3). The first stage, the alarm reaction, is defined as “the first stage of the adaptation syndrome” (Selye, 1956, p. 307) and is the body’s initial defense mechanism in response to a threat. Second, the stage of resistance, “may be general or local, depending upon whether the whole body or only a region has been exposed to stress” (Selye, 1956, p. 311). Finally, if the stressor persists, the body enters the stage of exhaustion, “the breakdown in the organism, with complete loss of resistance”, wherein adaptive energy is depleted (Selye, 1956, p. 36).

Similarly, Walter Cannon, an American physiologist and early pioneer in stress research, was the first to describe the body’s coordinated physiological reaction to threat. In *The Wisdom of the Body*, Cannon (1932) observed that emotions such as fear or anger prepare the organism for “life-or-death struggle,” with the sympathetic-adrenal system releasing adrenin, increasing heart rate, and redistributing blood to vital organs to support immediate physical action (p. 288).

Although his studies primarily involved animals, these physiological reactions were later applied to humans, illustrating how emotional experiences trigger the same biological systems that respond to physical danger (Cannon, 1932, pp. 288–289). Cannon’s *fight-or-flight* concept provided an early foundation for understanding stress as an adaptive survival mechanism that, when chronically activated, can contribute to strain and fatigue (Selye, 1956).

Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1984) introduced the ‘Transactional Model of Stress and Coping,’ which describes stress as a “mutually reciprocal, directional relationship” between the person and the environment (p.326). This process involves two phases: (1) cognitive appraisal, and (2) coping. Lazarus & Folkman (1984) defined cognitive appraisal as “the process of categorizing an encounter, and its various facets, with respect to its significance for well-being” (p. 31). Coping was defined as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). This model positioned stress as a dynamic transaction shaped by individual evaluation and coping efforts, a foundation that informed later psychological and behavioral studies of adaptation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, pp. 325–326; Berjot & Gillet, 2011, p. 2).

The contributions from Selye, Cannon, Lazarus, and others have had a lasting influence on the field of stress research. Their models have been adapted over time to reflect challenges and to address mental, physical, and psychological effects of stress, which can lead to both short- and long-term consequences. Building on these foundational theories, broader institutional perspectives, such as the *World Health Organization* (2023) defined stress as “a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation...a natural human response that prompts us to address challenges and threats in our lives.” At a general level, stress is therefore understood as a complex cognitive and physiological response that arises from an individual's perceived ability to cope with external demands.

Consequences of Stress in Work & School

Short-term or acute stress is “stress that lasts for a period of minutes to hours”, whereas chronic stress, “persists for days to months” (Dhabhar, 2000, p. 877). While acute stress may provide short-term physiological benefits, prolonged exposure to chronic stress is associated with immune suppression and increased vulnerability to health (Dhabhar, 2000, p. 877). Exposure to

stress, whether short-or long-term, has been linked to adverse health and functioning outcomes in organizational contexts (Ganster & Rosen, 2013, p. 1087).

Research indicates that stress occurs in both workplace and academic environments (Ganster & Rosen, 2013; Mark & Smith, 2012). Common stressors among employees and students include excessive workloads, tight deadlines/time pressure, limited support (e.g., peers, colleagues, supervisory, friends, family), and conflicting role demands (Cooper et al., 2001, p. 11; Wray & Kinman, 2023, p. 155). The *American Psychological Association* (APA, 2004) notes that “a stressful work environment can contribute to problems such as headache, stomach ache, sleep disturbances, short temper, and difficulty concentrating.” Beyond physical health symptoms, stress affects an individual’s organizational behaviours and mental health. Some initial effects include low self-esteem, feeling of being overwhelmed, lack of interest or commitment, absenteeism, and productivity issues (Cunningham, 2016, p. 220).

If short-term problems of stress are not recognized and addressed, they may develop into burnout or more chronic outcomes; prolonged stress exposure is associated with “anxiety, insomnia, high blood pressure, weakened immune system” (APA, 2004), as well as “depression [and] heart disease” (Cunningham, 2016, p. 220). Such chronic health impacts may be accompanied by maladaptive coping behaviors, including “smoking, drinking, and substance abuse” (Cunningham, 2016, p. 220), which can spill into both the workplace and home environments, interfering with professional responsibilities, straining personal relationships, and contributing to declining health (Ganster & Rosen, 2013, p. 1091). These consequences of stress highlight the importance of examining stress and well-being, particularly among university populations (Mark & Smith, 2012, p. 66).

The Complexity of Student Well-being: Evolving Definitions and Influences

Gilmore et al. (2025) note that ‘well-being’ is a “complex concept with no unifying academic consensus regarding its definition” (p. 2). To make the concept measurable, *Subjective Well-being* (SWB) is used as a measurement approach based on self-report surveys that capture and conceptualize lived experiences through three facets: life satisfaction, experienced states (positive and negative), and life purpose (Dolan et al., 2017, pp. 2-4). SWB describes “well-being in terms of the feelings, experiences and sentiments arising from what people do and how

they think” (Dolan et al., 2017, p. 3). Studies employ SWB because it is a tool which focuses on mental states, and may be measuring health and illness.

Similarly, there is no consensus definition of ‘student well-being’. Fraillon (2004) defines student well-being in the context of an operational measurement model, as “the degree to which a student is functioning effectively in the student community” (p. 24). Noble (2008) offers another definition, describing student well-being as “a sustainable state of positive mood and attitude, resilience, and satisfaction with self, relationships and experiences at school” (p. 7).

In recent years, concerns for student well-being have increased as mental health issues among students have become more prevalent. For example, in 2019, the Penn States’ Center for Collegiate Mental Health reported that colleges and universities in the United States have seen rising levels of “anxiety and depression over the last 8 years among students receiving mental health treatment” (Seidel et al., 2020, p. 1259). Additionally, the American College Health College Association surveyed post-secondary students in Canada and found that nearly two-thirds have felt anxiety, almost one-third have been diagnosed with anxiety, and nearly two-thirds reported that anxiety had negatively impacted their class performance (2022, p. 101). The increases in mental health issues and students’ disclosures to health professionals may reflect the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, “and its consequences, such as social distancing, lockdowns, and online education” (Douwes et al., 2023, p. 2), as well as a broader “reduced stigma surrounding mental health” (Bladek, 2021, p. 3).

The unique demands and pressures that university students face place them at risk of psychological and physical distresses. For instance, students often undergo dramatic changes when in university to their “lifestyles and relationships... as can their eating and sleeping habits.” (Bladek, 2021, p. 3) Additional factors that affect student well-being include growing class sizes, social media use, and “financial difficulty resulting from increased tuition fees” (Brown, 2018, p. 1). Feelings of loneliness and a low sense of belonging are associated with greater performance pressure and lower well-being, which relate to “the underlying dimensions of burnout” (Dopmeijer, 2021, p. 110).

Furthermore, the campus environment and culture shape how students experience university and, in turn, their well-being. For example, Hunt and Eisenberg (2010) argue that “within the college population, certain subgroups have a significantly higher prevalence of mental health problems,

which is constant with studies of the general population” (p. 4). Their findings point to students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who face higher risks of depressive and anxiety symptoms, as well as those “with relationship stressors, low social support, or victimisation by sexual violence.” (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010, p. 4)

There remains a significant gap in the literature on student well-being, as “the focus is often on mental health in particular and, to a lesser extent, on other aspects of well-being or general wellbeing” (Douwes et al., 2023, p. 3). Consequently, there is limited understanding of how university students themselves describe or conceptualize well-being, or which factors they perceive as influencing it positively or negatively. In one study, Douwes (2023) found that students view well-being as a balancing act in which “students distinguish between their well-being as a student and well-being as a person beyond their studies; however, they consider both equally important for their well-being as a student” (p. 11). In addition, Douwes (2023) also identified that student well-being is influenced by the interrelated factors such as, “support from and relations with peers, family, tutors, teachers, and support facilities within the educational context” (p. 11). These findings suggest that limited social contact during the Covid-19 pandemic heightened students’ awareness on how important others are to their sense of well-being (Douwes, 2023, p. 12).

University Wellness and Well-being Resource Supports

While individual factors influence student well-being, the literature also indicates that institutional supports contribute to health and academic success (Canadian Mental Health Association & Canadian Association of College and University Student Services, 2021; Canadian Association of College and University Student Services, 2013). The literature further finds that on- and off-campus wellness and well-being supports play a significant role in students’ mental, physical, emotional, and social health, as well as their overall well-being in both their academic and personal contexts (CACUSS & CMHA, 2013, p. 4, 9). These university resources commonly included mental health services and counseling, academic/learning support and accommodations, health services with mental-health expertise, peer programs, and triage/intake and referral pathways, and links to community care (CACUSS & CMHA, 2013, p. 20). Several “Canadian mental health agencies have stressed the importance of promoting mental health and well-being in post-secondary institutions to reduce the stigma of mental illness and to

inform students of available mental health services” (Chang et al., 2020, p. 11). At the same time, limited awareness/navigation, long wait times/capacity restraints, and misalignment with student needs continue to hinder the effectiveness, accessibility, and overall impact of these supports (CACUSS & CMHA, 2013, p. 14–15, 20; MHCC, 2021, p. 2–3.)

Alongside what institutions offer, the literature also looks at where students actually turn for help and what that means for their academic outcomes. Lipson et al. (2019) examined the utilization of mental health services by post-secondary students in the United States and found that “the most common location for receiving services was on campus” (p. 61). They suggested that “to better meet the mental health care demand from students and reduce strain on existing services, campuses may wish to expand capacity [and] increase the use of preventative services” (p. 63). When wellness services are utilized, they have been shown to support institutional goals related to student success and retention. For example, a report from Penn State’s Center for Collegiate Mental Health (2023) found that 51% of students were “less likely to withdraw from school during treatment [of on-campus mental health services] if they experienced significant improvement in academic distress and were simultaneously involved in an extracurricular activity” (p. 1).

Despite these benefits, awareness gaps of services remain a concern. For example, Mowreader (2023) reported that “60% of students [are] unaware of the full scope of services offered to them at their college or university,” which creates “gaps in student-facing offices that [can] negatively impact student retention and success” (p. 1). These findings indicate a need for improved communication and greater integration of wellness supports within the campus learning environment to enhance visibility, accessibility, and student engagement.

Literature Review Summary

The literature shows that stress and student well-being are complex, multidimensional constructs shaped by physiological, psychological, and environmental factors. Foundational models define stress as both a biological and cognitive response, while recent studies emphasize its effects in academic and workplace settings, linking it to burnout, anxiety, and reduced performance. Similarly, well-being lacks a unified definition and is often viewed through subjective and contextual definitions.

Research from Canadian and international contexts highlights rising mental health concerns among university students, particularly following the Covid-19 pandemic. While universities provide counselling and wellness resources, barriers such as limited awareness and accessibility persist. Overall, the literature reveals growing attention to student stress and well-being but limited understanding of how students themselves define and experience well-being

Conceptual Framework for Guiding Interviews

This conceptual framework builds on the literature review themes and provides a structure for examining how academic and non-academic factors influence student well-being. The framework builds on the major concepts discussed in the literature (i.e., stress, well-being, and institutional support) and organizes them into five key areas that guided the development of interview questions and subsequent analysis:

- Motivation and Engagement
- Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction
- Support from Faculty and University Staff
- Support of Fellow Peers
- Home and Life (Non-Academic) Pressures

These areas collectively reflect the dynamic relationship between students' academic experiences, personal circumstances, and access to support systems, helping to explain how these factors shape overall well-being in the university context.

The framework is guided by Herzberg's (1959) Motivation-Hygiene theory, which suggests that there are two separate categories with their own set of independent factors contributing to job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction. The theory distinguishes between 'motivation' factors which lead to job satisfaction and engagement, and 'hygiene' factors that help prevent or "lead to job dissatisfaction" (Herzberg, 1968, p. 5)

In Herzberg's theory, motivators (e.g., achievement, recognition, responsibility, growth, and the work itself) are factors associated with increased satisfaction and engagement, whereas hygiene factors (e.g., policies, supervision, communication, working conditions, and administrative processes) are more likely to generate dissatisfaction when they are inadequate. Accordingly,

reducing dissatisfiers may ease negative experience, but sustained motivation is more likely when motivators are intentionally strengthened (Herzberg, 1968, p. 11)

Adapting this framework to the university context allows for analysis on how intrinsic and extrinsic factors influence student motivation, engagement, and overall well-being. These concepts reflect the structure of university life, where students balance expectations, roles, and responsibilities. It also guided the interview guide by addressing both positive and negative experiences that shape students' university experience.

The concepts used in defining the conceptual framework are outlined below:

Table 1: Conceptual Framework

Literature Review Themes	Conceptual Definitions & Interview Questions
Motivation and Engagement	<p>Engagement involves internal motivation from learning, the work itself, possible impact, and relevance (Kahn, 1990). Engagement is also linked to Herzberg's definition of motivation which separates motivators from satisfiers. Herzberg's motivators (or satisfiers) are factors intrinsic to the job (or university learning experience) itself, such as achievement, recognition, and responsibility, that lead to job satisfaction and motivation. Questions which focus on motivation and engagement include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What are examples of ways that you have felt overall engaged and felt high levels of involvement in your schoolwork? ● What are examples of times when you felt disengaged with learning and university work?
Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction	<p>Satisfaction relates to Herzberg's hygiene factors which he calls dissatisfiers and includes factors external to the university learning experience (the job) and refer to: salary and working conditions, that prevent job dissatisfaction but do not necessarily cause satisfaction. In organization theory, they are "maintenance factors" relating to job (learning environment) environment, such as company university and class policies, supervision, working conditions, interpersonal relations, and job security. Questions focused on dissatisfiers include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What are the key ways to respond to dissatisfaction in the university experience? ● What are the key dissatisfiers in the university experience?
Support from Faculty and University Staff	<p>Supervisors and leaders in the university and courses are important sources of support and can be helpful in creating a climate where people trust each other and where their contributions are valued. Questions focused on support from faculty and staff include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How faculty and university staff can provide support in reducing pressures. ● How faculty and university staff can be unsupportive in adding pressures.
Support of Fellow Peers	<p>The peer group holds importance in a work culture in providing an environment where people feel respected and valued, where they have positive relationships with others. These relationships are an important aspect of culture and are the glue that binds people together, while poor relationships can tear the group apart. Questions focused on support from peer relationships include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How peer relationships can provide support in reducing pressures. ● How peer relationships can be unsupportive in adding pressures.
Home and Life (Non-Academic) Pressures	<p>Home and life pressures can create extra stresses. These pressures can arise from several sources in life and home and can cause short-term to long-term distress and discomfort.</p>

Questions focused on home and life pressures include:

- Non-academic and life experiences which add pressures in the university relationship.
- Non-academic and life experience which can help reduce the pressures in the university relationship.

Methodology and Methods

This chapter outlines the methodology and methods used to conduct the research, the ethics process, and examines the limitations of the approach.

Methodology

The methodological approach for this study was qualitative and exploratory. A qualitative approach was used to gain insight into the lived experiences of university students and to understand how they balanced academic and non-academic pressures in their studies. Qualitative research begins with assumptions and uses interpretive frameworks to explore “the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to a human or social problem.” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 35).

The study followed an exploratory design, which is used when researchers aim to develop understanding and generate insight in areas that have not been exclusively studied. Exploratory research is “a broad, purposive, and systematic undertaking intended to maximize discovery” and description (Stebbins, 2001, p. 3) This flexible and open-ended design allowed participants’ reflections, feelings, and experiences to guide the study. While the prevalence of stress and university challenges has been examined in previous research, this study provided deeper context by directly engaging participants and identifying social and institutional barriers, both visible and hidden, in Canadian post-secondary environments.

This study was also participant-centered, incorporating the perspectives of individuals who were enrolled in or had completed their studies at a Canadian university. Participants were invited to share reflections about their academic experiences and broader well-being. Their insights contributed to a deeper understanding of how universities can strengthen student wellness and support systems.

This methodological approach aligned with the study’s conceptual framework and main research questions, which examined how students experience academic and non-academic pressures, what strategies they find useful, and how institutions can better support student well-being.

As a student researcher, I engaged in reflexivity. Reflexivity involved examining how my own experiences as a student shaped my interpretations and perspectives. This self-reflection motivated the study and guided my approach to data collection and analysis. Reflexivity

supported accountability, ethical practice, and personal growth, helping to maintain the integrity of the research. My positionality and subjectivity were recognized as lenses that enhanced transparency and minimized bias.

Methods

Interviews

With the purpose of seeking to better understand the academic and non-academic pressures of current and former students, the study conducted semi-structured, open-ended interviews, a qualitative method that follows a prepared set of guiding questions while allowing flexibility to explore participants' perspectives and experiences in depth. This approach is used when researchers aim to capture detailed, reflective responses and allow participants to describe their experiences in their own words (O'Leary, 2021, p. 251).

The approach was selected because it aligned with the study's goal of examining complex academic and non-academic experiences through participants' reflections. In gathering data with the concepts outlined in the conceptual framework, the questions sought responses on student demands, motivators, satisfiers, supports, and potential clashes between academic and non-academic pressures.

Selection of Participants

Initially, the researcher contacted the University of Victoria's Social Media and Communications office to request assistance in promoting the study through the university's official social media channels, such as Instagram or Facebook. The intent was to design and distribute a digital recruitment poster to reach current and former UVic students; however, the communications office responded that this type of request could not be accommodated, as it did not align with their standard promotional activities. As a result, the researcher adjusted the recruitment approach and developed alternative methods to identify and contact potential participants.

Participants were selected in two different ways:

- Random sampling – UVic PA Mailing List – The School of Public Administration agreed to send out recruitment message
 - Exact number of people who participated – 15, but the goal was 20

- Purposive sampling
 - Given that the 20-target goal was not met using the sampling method above, I sent an email to friends who had graduated (15) and 5 responded to participate

Criteria for participation:

- Current or former university students
- Undergrad or graduate students
- Any university in Canada
- No demographic information was sought (i.e., age, gender, location)

The characteristics of those who responded to the survey were:

- 20 people responded to the survey
- Demographic info came out through interviews (not formally asked)
- Canadian students

Recruitment Process

Participants were recruited using two methods. First, the University of Victoria's Public Administration Mailing List (Pa-1) was used to distribute a recruitment email to potential participants. The mailing list includes current and alumni from the Public Administration program. While the total number of the recipients on the list was not confirmed, 15 individuals responded with interest and participated in the study. Second, the researcher used purposive sampling by contacting colleagues and peers via email who had previously completed university studies at various Canadian institutions. This approach resulted in five additional participants and helped include perspectives from students outside of UVic.

The criteria for inclusion was broad to capture diverse student perspectives. Participants were required to be current or former students who had completed or were completing an undergraduate or graduate degree at a Canadian university. No demographic information (i.e., age, gender, geographic location) was formally collected, although some personal context naturally emerged during interviews. This inclusive approach allowed for a range of experiences and insights regarding academic and non-academic pressures.

In total, 20 participants were recruited, consisting of three former undergraduate students, twelve current master's students, four who had completed master's degrees, and one participant who had completed a PhD. Most participants (n=15) were affiliated with the University of Victoria, while the remaining five represented other Canadian universities, allowing for comparative reflections across institutions.

While the participant group included both undergraduate and graduate students, the study did not explicitly seek to compare their experiences. Instead, responses were analyzed collectively to capture shared patterns and themes across the student population.

Once potential participants expressed interest, they received a recruitment email (Appendix A) and a consent form (Appendix B), which outlined the purpose of the study and invited them to select a preferred interview time. After signed consent forms were returned, interview dates and times were scheduled and confirmed.

Timing of Study

The study was conducted during the post-pandemic period, when universities continued to operate under remote and hybrid learning arrangements. All interviews took place in March 2025 and were conducted virtually via Zoom. Audio recordings were made with participants' consent, and each interview was transcribed verbatim for analysis. Conducting the study during this period presented both opportunities and challenges: virtual interviews increased accessibility and scheduling flexibility but limited in-person interaction and the ability to observe non-verbal cues.

An interview guide was developed in alignment with the study's conceptual framework to explore five central areas of focus: motivation and engagement, satisfaction and dissatisfaction, support from faculty and university staff, support from fellow peers, and home and life (non-academic) pressures. Moreover, the guide was designed to understand the challenges, stresses, and strategies that students found useful during their university experience. These strategies included both academic and non-academic aspects that contributed to overall well-being. The guide provided a structured yet flexible tool to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing participants the freedom to shape the conversation and share their experiences in their own way.

Questions in the guide encouraged participants to reflect on both positive and negative experiences during their studies. Initial questions were open and exploratory, while subsequent questions focused on themes such as motivations, peer relationships, campus culture, and daily pressures. For each set of questions, participants were asked to provide examples and ideas (Appendix C). Example of interview questions included:

- What are examples of ways that you have felt overall engaged and felt high levels of involvement in your schoolwork?
- What kind of campus culture do you think increases the sense of motivation and drive among students?
- What responsibilities do you believe professors and/or academic advisors should have in supporting students?
- What are examples of ways your peers and colleagues have contributed to your sense of well-being and support during your time at university?
- What is an example of a non-school pressure that had experienced while at university?

Data Analysis

All interviews were conducted on Zoom, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and then recordings were transcribed. Transcripts were manually coded and thematized to capture both supportive and challenging experiences. Coding was guided by the conceptual framework, but additional themes also emerged during the analysis process. Responses were tallied to highlight commonly mentioned reflections, and themes were summarized in tables with supporting participant quotes.

Each interview transcript was reviewed and coded into an area and then into a theme. For example, one participant noted that university resource advertisements were “*excessive*” and “*not actually helpful to students*”, which was coded under the area Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction and the theme ‘Access to University Resources and Structured Support’. This process was repeated across all interviews to ensure consistency and to capture a range of perspectives.

A thematic analysis was used because it allowed flexibility for identifying both expected and emerging themes from the interviews. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative method for “identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data...[and] interprets various aspects of the research topic” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Responses were tallied to highlight

commonly mentioned reflections, and themes were summarized in tables with supporting participant quotes, which were presented in the appendices.

Ethical Review

As the research study involved human participants, ethics approval was obtained from the University of Victoria's Human Research Ethics Board. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Covid-19 protocols were followed. Throughout the thesis process, I was supervised by my supervisor from the University of Victoria.

Limitations

There were several limitations in this study. First, the research did not incorporate an intersectional lens in the interview guide or analysis because the study's primary aim was to explore general student experiences rather than focus on identity-based differences. As a result, the study did not account for a broad range of identity markers such as sex, gender, or race, and participants were not required to self-identify.

The recruitment and sampling approach presents several challenges that affect the validity, generalizability, and interpretability of the findings. Key concerns include sampling bias and representativeness: self-selection bias is likely since only those who chose to respond to the mailing list or to purposive outreach participated, which tends to over-represent individuals with stronger opinions or particular experiences.

The concentration of UVic-affiliated participants (15 of 20) may also skew findings toward UVic-specific contexts, even though the study aims to capture cross-institutional perspectives. Purposive recruitment through colleagues who had completed university studies may further reduce diversity if networks share similar backgrounds or disciplines, limiting the range of viewpoints. Recruitment via an uncertain-sized mailing list complicates the calculation of response rates, raising nonresponse concerns, while the reliance on colleague networks for purposive sampling can introduce gatekeeper effects and social desirability biases.

Additionally, the study's small sample size ($n=20$) restricts generalizability to Canadian university students or even all graduate students, and the broad inclusion criteria, while inclusive, hinder the ability to perform in-depth subgroup analyses. The lack of formal demographic data,

no systematic collection of age, gender, location, program, or degree level, limits description of the sample, assessment of representativeness, and exploration of whether themes vary across subgroups, introducing potential demographic confounds.

A further limitation related to post-analysis verification. While interviews were coded and organized into themes through the researcher's analytic process, the study did not include follow-up verification with participants after themes were developed. Specifically, participants were not asked to review the thematic interpretation to confirm whether the final themes accurately reflected their experiences. As a result, findings reflect the researcher's synthesis of participant accounts but were not participant-verified, which may affect the credibility of the thematic conclusions (Rigaux & Cunningham, 2020, p. 10).

Ethical and privacy considerations also arise, as recruitment through institutional channels and colleagues may engender perceptions of coercion or confidentiality risks within close-knit cohorts.

Another limitation is that the researcher's positionality and personal experiences as a student may have influenced aspects of interpretation despite efforts to maintain reflexivity through the research process. Continuous self-reflection, transparent documentation, and adherence to ethical research practices were applied to minimize subjectivity and strengthen the credibility of the findings.

Despite these limitations, the study has several methodological strengths. Semi-structured interviews generated rich, detailed accounts of students' experiences, which supported exploration of stress, well-being, and coping in participants' own words. In addition, interviews were coded and organized into themes through the researcher's analytic process, providing a structured basis for interpretation. Finally, reflexive attention to positionality and efforts to minimize subjectivity were used to strengthen the credibility of the findings within the study's scope.

Findings: Key Informant Interviews

The purpose of this chapter is to present and analyze the key findings from qualitative interviews conducted with current and former university students. The findings illustrate how participants experienced and managed academic and non-academic pressures, organized into the five main areas of the conceptual framework: 1) Motivation and Engagement, 2) Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction, 3) Support from Faculty and University Staff, 4) Support from Fellow Peers, and 5) Home and Life (Non-Academic Pressures).

A brief summary of general student experiences is presented first to provide context for the findings that follow. The interviews were guided by Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene theory and structured around the key concepts identified in the conceptual framework and interview guide.

Tables have been condensed for the purpose of this section, detailed tables of coded themes and comments can be found in the Appendix (Appendix D).

Although participants often led with challenges and frustrations, each findings table also includes a brief motivator highlight to capture what students described as sustaining or supportive of persistence.

In each of the tables, the numbers underneath each theme mean the total number of individual mentions in an interview. Note: an interviewee can mention a topic numerous times in an interview. Interviewees are anonymous in the interview description and analysis and are generally referred to as the participant.

Motivation and Engagement

This first area examines intrinsic factors that foster students' satisfaction and involvement in their academic work. The questions asked related to this theme were: *What are examples of things that have really empowered you that you have experienced or observed?*

In alignment with Herzberg's framework, motivation emerged when students experienced autonomy and responsibility, interest alignment, and recognition through meaningful learning and supportive relationships. Participants described how their engagement increased when coursework reflected their personal interests, when they collaborated with peers, and when

professors and instructors showed enthusiasm and offered support. These findings highlight the conditions that supported student’s motivation, engagement, and commitment in their studies, as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Motivation and Engagement in University Studies

Themes & # of mentions	Example of Comments
Peer Collaboration (14)	-Being part of a small team for a research paper, where I was responsible for a section and had to report back to the group, kept me engaged. -During our critiques, that’s usually when people are more involved with each other. -... those discussion forums, really helped me feel part of a larger group... I felt seen.
Autonomy (13)	-...when I can focus on open-ended material that interests me. -It’s on myself, it’s an individual task. -Even when I felt like giving up, I reminded myself why I started, and that internal drive helped me push through.
Supportive & Enthusiastic Professors (10)	-When professors are really enthusiastic and invested in what they’re teaching. -Having a professor who’s willing to hop on a call and help me work through my ideas...it creates a bridge between what I’m interested in and what they expect. -It was very motivating being in their classes, because they are so interested in their work, and that was quite inspiring for me, and I wanted to do really well in their classes.
Sense of Belonging & Community (10)	-Even in a limited on-campus experience, discussion boards helped foster a sense of community. -...where everyone feels like they belong, are respected, trusted, and have a role. That kind of environment makes a big difference and should be the standard everywhere. -A shared experience and cohort model made it easier to build relationships and stay engaged.
Real World Application & Relevance (7)	-I felt more interested in the course when the concepts and the work is applied in real life. -When things were more hands-on, especially during my fourth-year placement abroad...working in a classroom.
Interest Alignment (7)	-When I could align my coursework with my PhD topic, like in directed studies, where I developed my dissertation proposal while completing a class. -Motivation comes from being in a program that aligns with your personal goals. For me, my MPA helps me create change in communities... -I’m driven by self-growth and meaningful connections – things that transform me and align with who I am.

Motivator highlight: Peer collaboration was the most commonly described motivator, increasing accountability, shared accountability, shared learning, and belonging that helped sustain engagement during demanding academic periods.

Peer collaboration was the most commonly mentioned motivator. Participants described accountability, shared learning, and a sense of belonging when working with others. For example, one participant reflected, “being part of a small team for a research paper, when I was responsible for a section and had to report back to the group, kept me engaged.” Participants also reported that collaboration supported focus during demanding periods such as midterms and final exams.

Autonomy was another key motivator that contributed to student engagement. Participants described feeling more invested when they could take ownership of their learning and make independent decisions about coursework. Flexibility in assignments and the ability to explore personal interests fostered a stronger sense of responsibility. One participant explained, “It’s on myself, it’s an individual task.” Participants described increased self-discipline and pride when they had control over their work.

Supportive and enthusiastic professors were frequently described as an important influence on motivation. Participants valued instructors who demonstrated passion for their subjects and genuine interest in their student’s progress. One participant shared, “having a professor who’s willing to hop on a call and help me work through my ideas... it creates a bridge between what I’m interested in and what they expect.” Professors who were approachable, encouraging, and invested in teaching helped students remain engaged and confident in their abilities.

Sense of belonging and community also emerged as a recurring motivator that strengthened engagement. Participants expressed that feeling included, respected, and supported by peers and faculty, enhanced their overall learning experience. One participant described, “[a campus culture] where everyone feels like they belong, are respected, trusted, and have a role. That kind of environment makes a big difference and should be the standard everywhere.” A positive sense of community encouraged motivation and persistence throughout their studies.

Real-world application and relevance was another motivator that increased engagement when students saw clear connections between coursework and practical/hands-on experiences.

Participants noted that learning felt more meaningful when they could apply theories to professional or day-to-day contexts. One participant stated, “I felt more interested in the course when the concepts and the work is applied in real life.” Participants described hands-on experiences, placements, and concrete projects as motivating.

Interest alignment motivated students when coursework related to their personal goals, values, or passions. Participants explained that they were more engaged when they could explore subjects that felt relevant or meaningful to them. One participant [VG1] shared, “motivation comes from being in a program that aligns with your personal goals. For me, my MPA helps me create change in communities...” Having coursework that reflected individual interests was reported as motivating.

Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction

The second area examines extrinsic factors that influence students’ satisfaction and dissatisfaction within their academic environment. The questions asked related to this theme were: *What are examples of things that have really disempowered you that you have experienced or observed? What kind of campus culture do you think increases the sense of motivation and drive among students?*

In alignment with Herzberg’s theory, this area reflects the hygiene factors; external conditions that, when managed well, contribute to satisfaction and when not, lead to dissatisfaction. Participants discussed how satisfaction was influenced by clear communication from instructors and professors, effective course design, manageable workloads, and access to academic and institutional support. Conversely, dissatisfaction emerged when feedback was unclear, expectations were inconsistent, or support was difficult to access. Financial pressures and the broader university environment were also mentioned as influencing overall satisfaction. These findings were summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Factors of Satisfaction & Dissatisfaction in the University Experience

Themes & # of mentions	Example of Comments
Instructor Communication	-When professors are unclear with their instructions...and when you ask questions, you can’t get a clear answer.

<p>& Responsiveness (10)</p>	<p>-It felt like some professors were just academics, not really teachers – more focused on collecting a paycheck than engaging with students. -Profs that don't get back to you, lack engagement, untimely responses to your questions, don't return assignments within a reasonable amount of time...</p>
<p>Program/Course Design & Delivery (10)</p>	<p>-Sometimes the online course syllabus is clearly outdated with the prof linking videos from 2021. -It's frustrating when there's not enough guidance on how to engage with the coursework, especially when you don't know how to do something, and your classmates are in the same position. -Homework or projects don't feel meaningful or relevant... hard to even get started.</p>
<p>Evaluation Fairness & Feedback Clarity (6)</p>	<p>-When you don't understand how grades are determined... You start to wonder what the point is if trying harder doesn't change the outcome... -Sometimes I receive a lower grade than expected with little to no explanation. The feedback doesn't seem to justify the deductions, which feels unfair and frustrating, like grading is subjective or inconsistent. -Professors who don't give very much feedback or very personal feedback.</p>
<p>Workload & Academic Demands (5)</p>	<p>-...when there were hundreds of pages per week that is discouraging and doesn't make an overachieving student feel very good about not getting through all of it. -Getting too much on my plate at once...big amounts of readings, deadlines, they pile-up. -I keep questioning how much my master's degree will really help me and if it's worth completing.</p>
<p>Financial Accountability (4)</p>	<p>-Money was a huge factor, because post-secondary is so expensive, and you don't want it to go to waste. -Knowing that doing well could impact scholarship or sponsorship support... -It helps and it hurts when you have a scholarship attached.</p>
<p>Availability of Academic Resources & Support (3)</p>	<p>-We're told to pick a topic, find a supervisor, and figure it out on our own while drowning in readings and assignments...wasn't enough structured support... -Some long-distance students couldn't attend in person, and there were no flexible or online alternatives offered to accommodate them. -...when you're not grasping the content the way you think you should, and there's not enough support to help you work through it.</p>
<p>University Environment (3)</p>	<p>-There needs to be more events that bring students together across majors. In my experience, it felt very closed off... -If there were more social events and better communication about them, it would help students feel like they belong... -The university could help by organizing activities like marathons, gym competitions, or other events once a term. Things that give students a break from academics...</p>

Motivator highlight: Even when describing dissatisfiers, participants pointed to clear expectations and constructive feedback as motivating because these supports strengthened confidence, progress, and a sense of achievement.

Instructor communication and responsiveness was one of the most commonly mentioned factors influencing satisfaction. Participants described how vague instructions, delayed responses, and limited interaction from professors created confusion and frustration. One participant shared that they felt frustrated in moments “when professors are unclear with their instructions... and when you ask questions, you can’t get a clear answer.” Another participant noted, that some professors “just give you the syllabus, marked the assignments, and that was it... you didn’t know what they looked like.” Students who received timely and timely communication felt more supported and experienced greater stability with their coursework.

Program and course design also shaped how students experienced satisfaction within their studies. Courses that felt repetitive, overly theoretical, or outdated made it challenging to stay engaged, while relevant and well-structured content enhanced their learning experience. One participant reflected, “when courses felt repetitive and professors [were not] working together, it [made] the academic experience feel disconnected.” Other participants appreciated courses that encouraged discussion or applied learning, describing them as “more meaningful and easier to follow.”

Participants frequently raised concerns about unclear grading expectations and inconsistent feedback. Many described feeling uncertain about how marks were determined or how to improve. One participant explained that “when you do not understand how grades are determined...you start to wonder what the point is if trying harder does not change the outcome.” Another participant said that “getting poor marks without clear, constructive feedback feels like a dead end.” Participants who received transparent grading criteria and constructive comments felt more confident in their academic performance and progress with their studies.

Workload intensity also affected how students experienced satisfaction. Participants often described being overwhelmed by extensive readings, simultaneous deadlines, and competing demands across courses. One participant said, “getting too much on my plate at once...deadlines pile up”, while another participant added that “it feels overwhelming when there is a lot of readings.” Heavy workloads without flexibility led to frustration, while students were more

satisfied when instructors distributed assignments evenly and acknowledge the challenges of managing multiple responsibilities.

Financial accountability played a significant role in shaping satisfaction among students. Participants who relied on scholarships or family support described the constant pressure to succeed because of the financial investment involved. One participant shared that “it helps and it hurts when you have a scholarship attached.” Another noted, “money was a huge factor, because post-secondary is so expensive... you do not want it to go to waste.” For many, financial considerations heightened responsibility and tension, directly affecting how satisfied they felt with their academic performance.

Access to university resources and structured support affected students’ confidence and satisfaction throughout their programs. Several participants described difficulty finding supervisors or academic assistance when struggling with coursework. One participant explained, “we are told to pick a topic, find a supervisor, and figure it out on our own while drowning in readings.” Another participant reflected that “when you are not grasping the content the way you think you should, and there is not enough support to help you work through it, it becomes discouraging.” When support was available, students reported a stronger sense of reassurance and stability in managing academic demands.

The broader university environment also shaped how students experienced satisfaction. Participants said that limited campus engagement opportunities made it difficult to feel connected beyond academics. One participant commented, “there needs to be more events that bring students together across majors.” Another suggested that “the university could help by organizing activities like marathons or gym competitions...things that give students a break from academics.” Students who participated in social or community-based events described feeling more comfortable and connected to their university experience. These external conditions collectively shaped how students experienced satisfaction within their programs, linking closely to the interpersonal supports explored in the next area.

Support from Faculty and University Staff

The third area examined the support students receive from faculty and university staff. The questions asked related to this theme were:

- What responsibilities do you believe professors and/or academic advisors should have in supporting students?
- What are examples of ways you approach professors and/or university staff for support and guidance?

Participants discussed how professors, advisors, and university staff influence their academic experience through accessibility, guidance, and engagement. Supportive and responsive faculty helped reduce academic pressures, while limited accessibility or unclear guidance often created challenges or contributed to stress. Examples of these experiences are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Support from Faculty and University Staff

Themes & # of mentions	Example of Comments
Faculty Accessibility & Approachability (8)	<p>-Professors need an open-door policy so students can ask questions, get and give feedback.</p> <p>-...a supervisor who provides structure, regular check-ins, and a sense of accountability is essential to helping students cross the finish line.</p> <p>-Profs should organize their digital classrooms clearly and make it easy for students to contact them</p>
Adaptive Engagement (7)	<p>-Advisors & staff need to understand that each student group is different – not just by generation, but in real, nuanced ways. It’s not enough to have an open door; they need to be visible, involved, and genuinely care about students.</p> <p>-Professors should hold students up, not push them forward. Adapt to each student’s pace, offer resources, and extend learning without making them feel behind.</p> <p>-Recognize that everyone learns differently...incorporate more practical, hands-on activities...</p>
Faculty Academic Guidance (6)	<p>-Profs need to meet with struggling students and help them learn how to succeed.</p> <p>-Professors and advisors should be conduits, able to direct students to the right resources when needed.</p> <p>-...help students refine overly broad ideas when it comes to research. When a topic is too expansive, it’s helpful to have a professor guide you in narrowing it down and identifying a clear direction.</p> <p>Streamlining a topic early on can prevent confusion later.</p>

Course Advising Knowledge (3)	-In undergrad, some advisors helped me plan my courses and prerequisites... -Academic advisors should understand students' goals...and tailor plans accordingly. -...understanding policy and course enrollment across campuses...
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Motivator highlight: Faculty accessibility and academic guidance were described as motivating because they helped students feel recognized, more capable, and better able to move forward with through academic demands.

Participants most frequently sought support through direct communication methods, particularly through email and office hours. Email (11) was viewed as the most accessible and efficient way to contact professors and advisors, especially for remote or online students. Office hours (5) provided more personal opportunities to clarify expectations or request feedback. Tutorials, course-based meetings, and informal conversations also allowed participants to seek support in a less formal setting.

Faculty accessibility and approachability from faculty and university staff were discussed as forms of support that met students, need for clear communication and availability. Participants described how professors who were responsive and willing to meet helped reduce stress and uncertainty. One participant said, “professors need an open-door policy so students can ask questions, get feedback.” Another participant said that “a supervisor who provides structure, regular check-ins, and a sense of accountability is essential to helping students cross the finish line.” Participants highlighted that consistent communication and approachability from faculty and staff made it easier to manage coursework and stay organized.

Adaptive engagement from professors and university staff was described as a form of support that addressed students; need for flexibility when managing academic and personal responsibilities. Participants discussed how professors and advisors who were understanding and adaptable made expectations more manageable. One participant stated that “advisors and staff need to understand that each student group is different – not just by generation, but in real, nuanced ways. It is not enough to have an open-door; they need to be visible, involved, and genuinely care about students.” Another noted that “professors should hold students up, not push them forward. Adapt to each student’s pace, offer resources, and extend learning without making

them feel behind.” Participants noted that flexibility from faculty and staff was an effective way to reduce pressure and support students’ progress.

Faculty academic guidance was reported as a common form of support mentioned by students. Participants shared that professors and advisors who provided direction or connected them to useful resources supported their academic success and helped reduce academic pressure. One participant explained that “professors and advisors should be conduits, able to direct students to the right resources when needed.” Participants described guidance from faculty and staff as valuable in helping them complete academic tasks.

Course advising knowledge from university staff was identified as a form of support that addressed students’ need for accurate information and program guidance. Participants described how knowledgeable advisors offered relevant advice and reduced uncertainty in course planning. One participant said, “academic advisors should understand students’ goals...and tailor plans accordingly.” Another shared that “understanding policy and course enrollment across campuses” made it easier to meet program requirements. Participants explained that reliable advising and informed staff helped them make appropriate course decisions.

Support of Fellow Peers

The fourth area focuses on how peers influenced students’ experiences throughout their studies. The questions asked related to this theme were: *What are examples of ways in which relationships and support from peers have been supportive of academic life for yourself as a student? What are examples of ways that relationships and support from peers which you have experienced or observed that have not been positive? What are examples of ways your peers and colleagues have contributed to your sense of well-being and support during your time at university?*

Participants discussed how relationships with classmates and cohort members provided academic help, emotional encouragement, and a sense of connection. While many described peers as a valuable source of support, others noted that competition or limited communication could also add pressure. As shown in Table 5, participants shared a range of experiences that highlight the role of peer relationships in university life.

Table 5: Peer Relationships and Support in University Life

Themes & # of mentions	Example of Comments
Peer Assistance & Encouragement (11 out of 31)	<p>-Having my best friend in the program was everything. We edited each other's work, talked through confusing readings, and just got each other through</p> <p>-I have been the most successful when relying on my peers for support, through study groups, through being able to collectively approach a professor or a department with an issue or for clarification.</p> <p>-With classmates, it's a lot of helping each other understand assignments, sharing info, and staying motivated.</p>
Shared Peer Experiences (6)	<p>-Many of my international friends and I draw motivation from each other – we relate through shared experiences and support one another.</p> <p>-Seeing others in my cohort also juggling full-time work, families, and demanding jobs, all trying to finish their courses together.</p> <p>-Knowing we're all in the same boat, stressed and overwhelmed, helps me feel less alone. That mutual understanding.</p>
Peer Communication (6)	<p>-We have a group chat in my program that helps organize due dates and clarify stuff. Sometimes someone's already contacted the professor or understands things better.</p> <p>-The WhatsApp group that our cohort started has been amazing... people are super engaged and supportive... such a huge resource for me, especially because we're all remote.</p> <p>-I like hearing honesty and candidness from peers, where they're succeeding, struggling, and how they're getting through it. Getting to know them personally builds connection, camaraderie, and resilience in our cohort.</p>
Informal Peer Connection (5)	<p>-...just being invited out even when I couldn't go was a huge form of support.</p> <p>-We'd hang out after the grad exhibition every day and go out to eat, debrief, just be together, it helped build real relationships.</p> <p>-...the extracurricular meetups we've had outside of class... It made class feel more relaxed, I felt like I was with acquaintances and not strangers just talking about schoolwork.</p> <p>-There were invites in the Instagram Cohort chat, making sure everyone knows what's happening and feels included.</p>
Peer Comparison & Competition (3)	<p>-There was always this kind of underlying tension between students... you were going to be competing with these people for jobs too. So that kind of made it difficult... you were sort of happy for people when they did well, then also, kind of not.</p> <p>-...people can be really competitive, especially around exams. The way students talk before and after tests can add stress to an already stressful situation.</p>

	-I witnessed a lot of competition where there was a false sense of support, but it was very backhanded...people would leave out pieces of information that gives them that edge.
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Motivator highlight: Peer encouragement and shared experiences acted as motivators by reducing isolation and reinforcing persistence through mutual support and reassurance.

Peer assistance and encouragement was the most commonly described form of support among students. Participants discussed how peers helped one another understand assignments, share notes, and stay motivated throughout their studies. One participant explained, “with classmates, it is a lot of helping each other understand assignments, sharing information, and stay motivated.” Others noted study groups and regular check-ins as helpful for staying on track and managing academic pressures.

Shared peer experiences were described as a meaningful part of students’ time in their programs. Participants discussed how peers who related to similar academic or personal challenges helped them feel less isolated and more understood. One participant shared, “many of my international friends and I draw motivation from each other – we relate through shared experiences and support one another.” Many participants also reflected that seeing peers balancing work, family, and studies offered reassurance that their struggles were shared and manageable.

Peer communication was identified as a central part of maintaining support within academic programs. Participants shared how online chats and group discussions helped them stay informed and connected while studying remotely. One participant shared, “the WhatsApp group that our cohort started has been amazing...people are super engaged and supportive.... such a huge resource for me, especially because we are all remote.” Some participants also described that communication through messages or group chats helped clarify assignments when facing uncertainty.

Informal peer connection was described as an important way students balanced academic demands with social interaction. Participants discussed how casual meetups and shared activities outside of the classroom helped build communities and reduce stress. One participant said, “we would hang out after the Grad exhibition every day and go out to eat, debrief, just be

together...it helped build relationships.” Participants described these moments of social connection as opportunities to relax and strengthen friendships outside the learning environment.

Peer comparison and competition were reported as sources of pressure that affected students’ confidence and focus. Participants discussed how competitive attitudes among classmates could create tensions and stress during exams or group work. One participant explained, “people can be really competitive, especially around exams. The way students talk before and after tests can add stress to an already stressful situation.” Some participants notes that competition sometimes limited collaboration and made it difficult to maintain supportive relationships.

Home and Life (Non-Academic) Pressures

The fifth area explores how responsibilities and pressures outside academics influenced students’ well-being and ability to manage their studies. The questions asked related to this theme were: *What are some non-school related pressures that you experience that effect your well-being? What is an example of a non-school pressure that you have learned to handle while at university? What are ideas for managing non-academic pressures or stressors?*

Participants described how family expectations, financial strain, work demands, and personal health affected their focus and energy throughout their programs. Many shared that these external pressures often competed with academic priorities, creating challenges in maintaining balance. As outlined in Table 6, students reflected on how home, work, and personal life factors contributed to stress and shaped their overall university experience.

Table 6: Life and Non-Academic Pressures Affecting University Students

Themes & # of mentions	Example of Comments
Family/Home-Life (10 out of 43)	-I had a big falling out with my mom, and ongoing family pressure has added a lot of stress. -Parenting from afar with kids back home in a different time zone, waking up at 2 a.m. to connect. -...while studying, I barely saw my kids.
Financial Pressure (9)	-Trying to afford school is tough.... paying for stuff like a new laptop to keep up, it all adds up. -I had to have a part time job... keeping on top of bursaries and scholarships is exhausting.

	-Managing finances and part-time work while OSAP doesn't cover the whole year adds major stress.
Health & Time Management (9)	-After a 20-hour week of class, I'm not going to the gym or cooking a proper meal...I'm exhausted. -It's difficult to get medical appointments, I relied on teas or over-the-counter remedies when I got sick. -There's pressure from school saying you can't have a social life, but also pressure from friends and family asking why you don't have time for them.
Relational Strain (8)	-... I went through a really significant relationship breakdown. -Conflicts with others make it hard to focus on school; relationship challenges affect my concentration. -Social pressures also add to the mental load, pulling focus away from school.
Work Responsibilities (5)	-Balancing work with everything else was difficult. -I was at a tough job, and I was looking for a new job and going to school...and interviewing. -...juggling work and school responsibilities simultaneously...
Housing & Living Arrangements (2)	-...moving was a huge pressure.

Motivator highlight: Coping strategies and supportive relationships were framed as motivating because they helped protect well-being and maintain follow-through on academic goals despite competing responsibilities.

Family and home-life pressures were described as significant facts influencing students' ability to focus on their studies. Participants explained that family expectations, parenting responsibilities, and relationship dynamics often created added stress while pursuing academic goals. One participant explained, "I was trying to write papers and take care of things at home...sometimes it felt like I had two full-time jobs." Others described childcare or managing family commitments while studying, which limited their availability for coursework and created emotional strain.

Financial pressure was one of the most commonly reported challenges among students. Participants described difficulty affording tuition, technology, and living expenses while trying to balance work and maintain scholarships. One participant noted, "trying to afford school is tough...paying for stuff like a new laptop to keep up, it adds up." Others expressed that part-time jobs and inconsistent funding added to their stress, leaving little time for rest or engagement outside of academics.

Health and time management pressures were closely connected for many students. Participants discussed how long academic hours, limited energy, and personal health concerns made it difficult to maintain balance. One participant explained, “after a 20-hour week of class, I am not going to the gym or cooking a proper meal...I am exhausted.” Others described challenges scheduling appointments or setting aside time for self-care, often feeling behind or fatigued as a result.

Relational strain affected students’ concentration and motivation during their time in school. Participants shared that personal relationships, social pressures, or conflicts with others made it difficult to stay focused. One participant shared, “I was having issues in my relationship and it really affected my headspace, I couldn’t concentrate on anything.” Some participants also reflected that navigating friendships and social expectations added an emotional burden and distracted them from their academic priorities.

Work responsibilities added to the stress of managing academic workloads. Participants described working part-time or full-time while studying, often feeling fatigued or stretched between obligations. One participant shared, “I had to work almost full-time to afford school and living costs, it left me drained for anything else.” Others mentioned that demanding jobs and unpredictable hours limited their focus on coursework and contributed to burnout over time.

Housing and living arrangements were mentioned as additional pressures for students balancing school and personal life. Participants explained that moving or adjusting to new living situations created financial and emotional strain. One participant stated, “my housing situation kept changing, and I never felt settled...it made it hard to focus on school.” Participants shared that managing rent, relocation, and household responsibilities added stress to already demanding academic schedules.

Managing Non-Academic Pressures. Alongside the challenges of balancing home, work, personal responsibilities, participants also described strategies that helped them manage these non-academic pressures. Several participants discussed relying on social support networks, engaging in self-care activities, and reframing their priorities to stay focused and grounded. One participant shared, “having a strong support network; someone I can call and say, ‘Hey, I am not getting this, walk me through it.’” These coping strategies provided students with ways to sustain well-being while navigating multiple demands (see Appendix D).

While the earlier sections of this chapter explored participants’ lived experiences, reflections on the factors influencing their motivation, satisfaction, and support systems, the final part of the findings shifts focus toward forward-looking solutions. Participants were invited to share their ideas for improvement, offering insight into how universities could better foster academic engagement, peer connection, and overall student well-being. The following sections summarize these recommendations and illustrate the practical and institutional changes students believe would enhance their university experience.

How to Improve Academic Engagement

The questions asked related to this theme were: *What are some ideas you might have for assisting universities and their faculty in addressing the issue of a lack of academic engagement?*

Participants reflected practical and systemic themes focusing on promoting social connection, increasing the relevance of coursework and course design, and improving institutional resource accessibility. Table 7 presents key suggestions provided by participants.

Table 7: How to Improve Academic Engagement

Themes & # of mentions	Example of Comments
Institutional Support for Social Integration (7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -We had our own systems, like a Facebook group, but not everyone wanted to use social media. I'd love to see the university offer more built-in ways to connect. -As a new international student, I was just expected to integrate on my own. The school didn't offer extra support or a proper orientation to help with the transition. It felt like once you were admitted, the rest was up to you. -It makes a big difference when professors know your name and check in personally – it helps students feel seen, not just like a number. -Informal student-professor social events...hearing from alumni about job experiences and career networking events would help students connect their degrees to real careers. -More events and support should be targeted toward online students and those working full-time since daytime activities are hard to attend. -More social activities or events could help bring students together and connect. -Setting up more informal, casual interactions between professors and students, such as coffee chats, to build personal connections.
Experiential Learning Practices (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Co-ops and experiential learning are a good start, but we need more real-world engagement across the board. Right now, academics lean heavily theoretical, with little connection to what we'll use in the workforce. I found that hands-on experiences...made the material meaningful because I had something concrete to show for it. -In remote programs like mine... having real-time discussions, when possible, really enhances the learning experience -Faculty should embrace technology like gamified tools, like Kahoot, to boost engagement and empower student voices rather than relying on fixed lesson plans.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -We should engage students beyond PowerPoint lectures, bring back more physical, hands-on, or experiential learning opportunities like we had when we were younger. -It's not enough to just assign readings and talk at us; varied and engaging teaching methods make a big difference.
<p style="text-align: center;">Support Services Improvement (5)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -There's an assumption that students already have skills like writing and analysis. Offering optional beginner or refresher courses, especially for those out of academics for years, could help ease the transition into university, ideally available before the program starts. -Relying solely on the Student Learning Center creates barriers... Students must self-identify, take extra steps, and get accommodations. Instead, support should be embedded in each course and accessible to all students, not just those who know how to navigate the system. -Given the many external pressures students face (like working during a cost-of-living crisis), universities should provide direct support and advocate for government interventions so students can focus more on their education. -Universities have resources like office hours or writing centers, but students often don't know about them. Even when you do, it's like, 'Where is that, and how do I get there?' They need to spread more awareness. -The way universities are currently run is highly inaccessible, especially for students dealing with mental health challenges. It's one of the hardest times in life, and support is hard to find.
<p style="text-align: center;">Student Consultation (3)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Even though we gave detailed feedback on improving academic engagement...the same issues are repeating this year...we felt unheard. -Allow students to have a say in narrowing course scope, relating content to their values, exploring their interests, and receiving ongoing feedback to support their learning and engagement. -Students should be actively involved in designing academic engagement activities, program structures, and courses, not just giving surface-level feedback like course evaluations or professor reviews.
<p style="text-align: center;">Assessment Variety & Flexibility (2)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -I think universities should move away from traditional assessments. In schools, we now use more engaging methods, but once you reach university, it's mostly essays and tests again. That shift can be hard for students, so offering more varied and flexible assessment options would help. -Create targeted and concise assignments.

Motivator highlight: Experiential and relevant learning opportunities were discussed as motivating because they increased meaning, interest, and a sense of purpose in coursework.

The theme of institutional support for social integration captured participants' need for university efforts that assist in building social connections for students. Participants pointed to the fact that it is the responsibility of students to socially integrate and that there is a lack of structured social opportunities offered and facilitated by universities. This can be a challenge, especially for those balancing full-time employment, as well as remote and/or international students, who are already feeling isolated or disconnected from their peers and their program's cohort. Participants described how social connection, when left to students to organize, created unequal access to peer support since some experienced personal (physical and/or emotional) barriers. Participants linked this theme to campus cultures of belonging and to faculty as community leaders, and

suggested university-led social initiatives and informal professor/student events. Whereas some participants desired university-led social initiatives (helps relieve the burden of social pressures of putting themselves out there, stress of planning on their free time), professors facilitating informal events, and professors who knew their name; made students feel valued and recognized. Also, participants expressed the need for more inclusive and informal gatherings so that each student is given the chance to participate and join their peers in comfortable settings.

Experiential learning practices highlight participants placing value on hands-on and practical learning experiences and requesting more of these opportunities to improve academic engagement. Participants noted that traditional teaching systems and methods (i.e.: lectures and PowerPoints) were overly theoretical and disconnected from real-world applications. However, guest lectures, Co-Ops, real-time discussions, or interactive teaching tools, were diverse in conveying course content, which in turn boosted motivation and overall engagement. By understanding what students find useful regarding how they meaningfully engage and interact with their coursework, the gap between theoretical teachings and practical delivery is addressed.

Support services improvement encompassed how barriers to university support negatively impacted academic engagement and that these resources are required for academic success. Participants expressed concerns regarding self-navigating, as well as external/non-academic pressures that their universities neglected, for instance, mental health issues and financial stress. Suggestions for improving these barriers were offered by participants like requesting clearer communication from institutions regarding available services offered to students, targeted services (i.e. refresher courses, financial literacy), and embed support in courses. Participants suggested universities take the necessary actions to remove structural barriers to resources and ensure equitable access for all their students.

Other small themes appeared, such as student consultation, and assessment variety and flexibility. Student consultation referred to participants' frustration with their lack of opportunity to contribute to program structure and course design. Participants felt their feedback went unheard and thus impacted their academic engagement as they felt engagement was tied to their own interests and values. Therefore, universities need to acknowledge student voices to enable a student body that is committed and invested in their studies.

Assessment variety and flexibility encompassed a few participants' challenges with traditional assessments such as exams and essays. Participants expressed that these forms of assessment did not reflect their knowledge nor engage their interest with course content. Additionally, participants offered suggestions like targeted and concise assignments, and incorporating flexible assessment methods, to improve student motivation and accommodate different learning styles.

How to Improve Peer Support and Student Well-Being

The questions asked related to this theme were: *What are some ideas that might improve peer support and well-being for students at university?*

Many of the ideas overlapped with those presented in Table 7 (*How to Improve Academic Engagement*), as participants again emphasized the importance of social connection, flexibility in academics, and awareness of available supports. Participants' responses focused on fostering more inclusive, accessible, and socially connected environments that strengthen both academic engagement and overall student well-being. Table 8 summarizes these suggestions.

Table 8: How to Improve Peer Support & Student Well-Being

Ideas & # of mentions	Comments
Peer Connection & Integration (10 out of 21)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -...encourage on-campus students to connect in different ways, having social events, or like ways that students can end up talking to each other outside of class. -People who have a hard time making connections might benefit from structured chances to meet others. -...more opportunities to casually socialize with peers... -...having a communication network...socials with students. -...barbecues or informal gatherings.... smaller, more relaxed settings. -Creating student activities that mix genders would help and allow us to learn from each other's strengths. -...things like movie nights, going to the Grad House, and events at the International Center. -...group meetings in smaller, more controlled environments based on interest. -Encouraging peer group chats with a structured format and designated peer leaders...students who have completed the program and are willing to support newcomers. -... a more structured approach to connecting online and remote students with the rest of the cohort.
Academic Support & Flexibility (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -...make the workload more manageable in a way where it doesn't affect not having to sleep or eat... -...tutoring, especially when it's with another UVic student who's taken the class before. -...mentorship from upper-year students or even faculty. -...seminars...could be valuable to include topics like the role of friendships and relationships in academic success.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Having flexible windows for deadlines instead of hard deadlines could reduce stress, considering students' other commitments like work or family. -Encouraging students to engage in one-on-one conversations with professors to increase personalized support.
<p>Accessible & Visible Student Supports (3)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Having free, accessible therapy or mental health services at university... since many students can't afford to pay... -...being able to get appointments quickly, having access to free services... virtual appointments. -...ensuring students are immediately aware of the resources available within their program and school to succeed.
<p>Campus Safety (2)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -...it's important to keep emphasizing safety, especially so women and girls can feel safe and comfortable on campus, even on relaxed nights out. -Universities need to recognize that while women are often victims, they're not the only ones. Support systems should reflect the different needs of all students not just one gender.

Motivator highlight: Structured opportunities for peer connection were framed as motivating because they build belonging and encourage continued engagement, especially for remote or time-constrained students.

Peer connection and integration was predominantly mentioned by participants to improve peer support and student well-being. Numerous participants mentioned the need for structured and casual social events and opportunities to informally gather and build connections with fellow peers, such as small group gatherings, movie nights, and barbeques, etc. Moreover, participants who were completing or had completed their studies online or remotely would have liked to be more connected with their cohort and suggested that virtual engagement opportunities or formalized online networks could satisfy the need for accessible peer communities.

Academic support and flexibility is the next theme which focuses on student well-being. Participants reflected on what could have eased their academic experiences on-campus and suggested: having mentorship from upper-year students and faculty, peer tutoring, flexibility in deadlines, and seminars that touch on the value of relationships. A participant noted that one-on-one meetings with professors could also bring value to their studies and ease academic stress. Collectively, these insights offer strategies of support which reduce academic pressure and promote student well-being.

Other smaller themes were mentioned as questions, such as accessible and visible student supports, and campus safety. Both themes point to addressing how the university ought to improve on-campus resources for students. Accessible and visible student supports referred to the barriers that participants were confronted with when accessing student services, in particular mental health support. Participants suggested timely, free, and the use of virtual appointments to

accommodate students' financial limitations and/or remote students. In addition, awareness and visibility of these supports was emphasized as a key concern, as it is just as critical as their availability.

Campus safety, although less frequently mentioned, is an important concern for a few participants. Participants discussed that safety should be proactive and present across all of campus, as well as recognize the experiences of all students, regardless of gender. These comments illustrate that safe environments influence student well-being and encourage participation with on-campus events and enable peer community building.

Findings Summary

The findings of this study highlighted the interconnected nature of academic and non-academic factors that shape students' well-being and success. Participants described how motivation, engagement, and satisfaction were influenced by both internal and external circumstances, such as interest in coursework, instructor enthusiasm, peer relationships, workload, and personal responsibilities. Across interviews, students expressed that their academic involvement was not only influenced by grades or assignments, but also by their environments and the level of supports available to them.

Students often linked their well-being to the people around them. Encouragement and understanding from peers, professors, and family members were described as helping participants stay motivated and manage their stress. In contrast, limited guidance, unclear communication, and institutional barriers sometimes led to feelings of frustration or discouragement. Non-academic pressures, such as financial strain, work commitments, and family expectations, were also common and often made it difficult for students to balance school and personal life.

Participants also shared ideas for how universities could improve academic engagement and student well-being. Their suggestions focused on increasing opportunities or social connection, offering more practical learning experiences, improving awareness of support services, and creating flexible, inclusive learning environments. Overall, the findings suggest that students view academic and personal factors as strongly connected and that both play a role in shaping

their experiences during their time at university.

Discussion and Analysis

This section discusses and analyzes the key findings found in the interviews. The main themes that emerged in relation to the conceptual framework are also examined in connection to student wellness and well-being.

This section also discusses links to the literature and highlights insights for improving overall student well-being. These findings collectively help answer the central research question: *What are the pressures and stresses, and possible strategies students find useful while completing their studies at university?*

Linking the Interview Findings to the Literature

Drawing from the conceptual framework that integrated Herzberg's (1959) motivation-hygiene theory and Kahn's (1990) model of engagement, several responses from the interviews align closely with themes discussed in the literature review. Participants shared experiences that reflected motivation and engagement, supporting earlier research highlighting how meaningful and relevant learning contributed to satisfaction and well-being. Students explained that they felt most motivated when coursework connected to their goals and offered some level of flexibility or creativity. These findings reflected the literature's emphasis on intrinsic motivators (i.e. recognition, autonomy, and interest) that sustain engagement, and extrinsic conditions (such as communication, workload, and access to support) that influence satisfaction. Conversely, when workloads were excessive, expectations were unclear, or courses felt rigid, participants described feeling disengaged or stressed, aligning with literature that links limited autonomy and high pressure to academic dissatisfaction reduced well-being.

Interpreting these findings through Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory helps clarify why many participant responses emphasized dissatisfiers. In Herzberg's terms, hygiene conditions are often most visible when they fail, and improving them typically reduces dissatisfaction rather than producing motivation on its own. Motivators, in contrast, reflect the conditions that build satisfaction and sustained engagement. Accordingly, recommendations should address dissatisfiers while also intentionally strengthening motivators (Herzberg, 2003, p.2).

This distinction matters in this study. Motivation matters because it shapes whether students remain engaged, persist through strain, and sustain well-being while balancing academic and

non-academic demands. Across interviews, students often used irritants as the entry point to describe their day-to-day realities. As a result, motivators were often identifiable only after barriers were first articulated. In a post-pandemic context, reduced connection and disrupted routines may have further amplified these irritants, making it especially important to re-establish conditions that support motivation and engagement.

All participants experienced some form of stress in both their academic and non-academic lives, which ultimately affected their well-being. Fraillon's (2004) operational measurement model, which evaluates student well-being and determines how well a student is functioning in their student community, is reflected in participant experiences. This was evident in themes such as motivation and engagement, faculty and university staff support, and sense of belonging and community; all of which demonstrate how instructor relationships, peer networks, and campus culture influence students' ability to function effectively. Similarly, Noble (2008) defines sustainable student well-being as dependent on positive relationships and experiences occurring on-campus, which were echoed in participant responses about meaningful coursework, social belonging, and institutional support.

Findings by Douwes et al. (2023) shed light on how students understand their well-being based on their academic and non-academic identities. Participants described this dynamic when discussing the need to balance academic workload with home and life responsibilities, employment, and relationship commitments. Douwes et al. (2023) also argued that the lingering effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are still relevant and continue to shape student well-being, particularly through social distancing and the rise of remote and online learning. Participants reinforced this by emphasizing the need for stronger connection and support from both faculty and peers, as well as for a more welcoming and inclusive campus. When supports were lacking, participants reported disengagement and demotivation. Additionally, Dopmeijer's (2021) claims of low feelings of belonging and loneliness leading to academic stress and burnout, were reflected in participants' experiences of isolation, stress, and limited access to emotional support systems.

Themes regarding faculty engagement, communication, and institutional accessibility, correspond with Chang et. al's (2020) research, which links general student wellness with the availability of institutional resources. Participants echoed this by noting that they felt most

supported when professors were adaptive, approachable, and flexible (e.g., remembered students' names, offered meetings, and provided clear feedback). However, when such supports were absent, students described feelings of frustration and disengagement, often developing a negative outlook towards their academic environments.

Participants also described peer relationships as an important part of their academic experience and overall well-being. These relationships provided both academic and emotional support through study groups, online chats, and informal gatherings, helping students manage stress, stay motivated, and feeling less isolated. This was consistent with the literature noting that social connection and belonging contribute to well-being and engagement. Douwes (2023) found that relationships with peers and tutors are central to students' balance between academic and personal well-being, while the American Psychological Association (2024) and Cunningham (2016) emphasized that limited social support can increase stress and reduce motivation. Participants' reflections reinforced these findings but also extended them, as many noted barriers that restricted connection, such as learning formats, competing commitments, and limited institutional opportunities or peer engagement.

This connection between belonging and well-being also extends to mental health, which was a recurring theme across both the interviews and the literature. Lipson et al. (2019) suggested that universities need an improvement on capacity for mental health services and an increase on preventative services, which was also suggested by participants. Participants called for timely, free, virtual, and accessible counselling. Participants also identified visibility gaps in on-campus resources, noting that students often lacked awareness of existing services, were unaware that they exist, an issue also discussed by Mowreader (2023).

Overall, participant reflections aligned with literature connecting existing academic engagement and well-being. Students emphasized that flexibility, social belonging, and access to both formal and informal supports shaped how they managed academic pressures and stayed motivated during their studies.

Answering the Research Questions

Building on the previous section, this analysis examines to what extent the main and secondary research questions were answered given the research that has been done.

Question 1: What are the academic and non-academic needs of students that influence students' well-being and academic experience?

The findings revealed that students' well-being was shaped by both academic and non-academic factors that often overlapped. Academic needs such as meaningful coursework, clear communication, and accessible feedback contributed to motivation and engagement. Non-academic needs included time management, flexibility, and emotional and financial stability. Participants emphasized that when these needs were met, they experienced a greater sense of balance and belonging, reinforcing the link between academic design, institutional support, and personal well-being.

Question 2: What are pressures and stresses that are most significant to students during their studies?

Students identified several pressures affecting their well-being and performance. Academic stressors included heavy workloads, rigid deadlines, unclear expectations, and inconsistent instructor engagement. Non-academic stressors often stemmed from work, caregiving, and household responsibilities, which created competing demands and limited time for rest or self-care. These findings demonstrate that well-being challenges arise from the interaction of academic expectations and external life pressures, both of which influence students' ability to remain engaged.

Question 3: What strategies do students find most helpful in overcoming stress and maintaining motivation?

Participants described a range of strategies that supported their ability to manage stress and maintain motivation through their studies. These included seeking support from peers, maintaining regular self-care routines, and reframing academic challenges with a long-term perspective. Students also highlighted the value of flexible learning structures, accessible professors, and informal peer connections as sources of motivation. Collectively, these findings suggest that coping strategies were most effective when supported by strong interpersonal relationships and adaptable academic environments.

Question 4: What recommendations or solutions do students propose for improving well-being and support within the university environment?

Participants recommended more structured opportunities for peer connection, flexible and relevant course design (e.g., experiential activities, varied assessments, and some deadline flexibility), and improving the clarity and early visibility of student supports, with certain skills supports embedded within courses. They also called for ongoing student input in program and course design and attention to campus safety. Collectively, interviewees emphasized that visibility, accessibility, and inclusivity in university practices help sustain student well-being.

Unexpected Findings

There were some findings that were unexpected to the researcher:

Limited visibility and uneven access to institutional supports emerged as one of the most unexpected findings. While universities offered a range of academic and wellness resources, participants described limited awareness and accessibility, particularly among remote, working, and international students. Many were unaware of available services or unable to access them due to scheduling, location, or program design. This highlighted a surprising gap between the university's intent to provide support and students' practical ability to engage with those services, suggesting that institutional resources may not reach the students who need them most.

Professional narratives from professors and guest speakers who shared real-world experiences were highly motivating, helping students connect coursework to future careers and understand the relevance of their programs. These stories provided direction and purpose, strengthening commitment to academic goals. Equally important, encouragement from instructors, feelings of belonging, and shared peer challenges were repeatedly described as sources of persistence and motivation. This showed that motivation was not purely cognitive but also shaped by relationships and shared experience.

Many participants described self-care as a deliberate survival strategy rather than a leisure activity. They intentionally planned routines such as exercising or journaling to maintain productivity and emotional balance, often blurring the line between rest and work. Several students also developed their own perspective-based coping strategies such as reframing challenges and reminding themselves that "this too shall pass." These findings indicate that resilience was self-developed and cultivated through necessity and personal experience, rather than through formal institutional guidance.

Several participants expressed frustration that despite offering detailed feedback through course evaluations or surveys, the same issues persisted across courses and terms. Students felt their input was not acknowledged or acted upon, leading to frustration and diminished trust in the university's willingness to adapt. This lack of visible responsiveness revealed a disconnect between student voices and institutional practices and responsiveness.

Finally, participants described how family expectations, caregiving duties, and relationship stress competed with coursework and depleted time and energy. These roles and responsibilities were often invisible to instructors and peers, highlighting how personal demands quietly shaped academic focus, stress, and overall well-being. This overlap between academic and personal spheres revealed that non-academic factors can be equally influential in determining students' ability to succeed.

Conclusion & Recommendations

This thesis explored the well-being of current and former university students guided by a pre-conceptualized framework. The study seeks to answer the main research question: What are the pressures and stresses and possible strategies students find useful while completing their studies at university?

This thesis provided preliminary qualitative research on the academic and non-academic needs of current and former university students in Canada. Using semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share detailed accounts for their experiences, producing a rich dataset on student stress, well-being, and coping strategies. These findings contributed to the existing literature and offered insights for universities seeking to improve student supports and foster healthier campus environments. Although generalizability was limited, some of the study's findings may be applicable to other universities facing similar student well-being challenges or aiming to enhance their campus environment.

The need of this research was to develop a better understanding of pressures and stresses, and possible strategies students find useful to do well during their time at university. Gaining insights of students' academic and non-academic needs can help improve institutional environments and promote student well-being. This thesis intended to contribute to the literature on student well-being by examining how students navigate academic and non-academic pressures, and which supports they found most beneficial to their success.

The study consisted of a literature review, conceptual framework, and qualitative interviews with current and former post-secondary students. The literature review examined key themes related to student well-being and factors that influence stress, motivation, and engagement both inside and outside of the classroom. It provided current research and foundational definitions of stress, its consequences for well-being and academic performance, and the role of university services and resources. The interviews captured both positive and negative experiences, the supports students accessed or wished they had, and how these experiences influenced their overall well-

being and academic progress. The interviews and the literature review highlighted the importance of understanding both academic and non-academic dimensions of student well-being.

An implication of the study is how closely students tie their well-being to their levels of academic motivation and engagement. Findings revealed that when students felt socially and emotionally supported, especially from their fellow peers, their motivation and perseverance increased. Informal supports such as peer networks and friendships, contributed to feelings of belonging, camaraderie, and academic collaboration. Beyond structured support, participants also described the influence of faculty on their engagement and motivation. Professors who were approachable, responsive, and enthusiastic, had a direct positive impact on students' satisfaction and drive.

Another implication of the research is how academic motivation and success was considerably affected by non-academic pressures and stressors. Participants described how caregiving, work demands, and household roles and responsibilities, often competed with academic priorities, increasing stress and reducing focus. These findings suggest that universities may need to embed greater flexibility within course designs and program structures to accommodate students' varied responsibilities and promote more balanced approaches to learning and well-being.

Recommendations

The main recommendations from the research findings to promote student well-being are as follows. Interpreted through Herzberg's framework, several recommendations address hygiene conditions that reduce dissatisfaction, while others strengthen motivators that support sustained engagement.

Recommendation 1: Build Flexible Academic Structures

Implement clearly stated flexible deadline policies (e.g., a brief grace window or token extensions) in every syllabus; record or live-capture lectures and post them within 24–48 hours with slides or brief summaries; offer assessment variety within each course (e.g., paper/presentation/brief options); and coordinate at the program-level to stagger major due dates across required courses to reduce clustering during peak weeks.

Herzberg lens: Primarily hygiene (reduces stress/dissatisfaction) with a motivator element (choice/autonomy).

Recommendation 2: Make Supports Visible and Easy to Use

Create a single “Start Here” support hub (one URL/QR) linked in every syllabus and Brightspace course site/webpage ; send timed reminders at key points in the term (early weeks, midterm, finals) about writing, advising, and mental-health services; embed short skill supports inside courses (e.g., mini writing/study modules and referral blurbs on assignments); and ensure remote access via virtual appointments and some after-hours availability, labeled clearly for online and working students.

Herzberg lens: Hygienic (removes access/communication barriers).

Recommendation 3: Facilitate Structured Peer Connection

Schedule low-stakes, small-group meetups, both in person and virtual, in the first couple weeks of the semester and before peak deadlines; establish moderated cohort channels (e.g., Brightspace discussion forums/WhatsApp) with peer leaders; create interest-based small communities (study groups, alumni/career mixers); and fund simple, recurring socials (coffee chats, movie nights) at accessible times and spaces to reduce isolation and strengthen belonging.

Herzberg lens: Mostly motivator (belonging/meaning), with some hygiene (reduces isolation).

Recommendation 4: Strengthen Motivators to Sustain Engagement

Create program-level practices that actively build motivators, such as structured recognition for progress (timely, constructive feedback loops, and milestone check-ins), meaningful and relevant learning opportunities (applied projects tied to student goals and real-world application), and student choice where feasible (options in topics or formats). These strategies are intended to increase sustained engagement and satisfaction, rather than only reducing dissatisfaction.

Herzberg lens: Motivators (recognition, achievement/growth, meaningful work, autonomy).

Future Research

Findings from this study could not be widely generalized due to the limited sample size and the characteristics of the participant group. While the study does provide valuable insight on the

experiences of current and former university students navigating academic and non-academic pressures, further research is needed to determine if this study's findings apply to broader student populations, locally or internationally. Future studies could explore diverse student populations and identity markers such as age, geographics, and level of study to better understand how these factors shape the university experience. For example, future research on international students or mature students, may reveal whether these populations encounter unique supports, motivators, demotivators, and comparable academic and non-academic pressures with this study.

Additionally, institutions may benefit from research which investigates the effectiveness of their available resources, particularly in terms of how well their services are supporting student success and well-being.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Email

Hello,

My name is Victoria Garavellos and I am a Master's student in the School of Public Administration at the University of Victoria. I am working on research for my thesis under the supervision of Prof. Cunningham as part of my master's degree in Public Administration on the topic of:

Sustaining Student Motivation and Well-Being: Academic and Non-Academic Pressures, Supports, and Coping

I am writing to you today to invite you to participate in my study that aims to develop a better understanding of challenges, possible stresses, and possible strategies students find useful to doing well in their university experience with the goal of identifying ways to respond to their academic and non-academic needs by supporting overall well-being. There is no “one size fits all” approach to improving common wellness issues such as student satisfaction and burnout, as well as individual coping mechanisms when feeling overwhelmed inside and/or outside of their academic environment; however, this study invites to contribute to long-term solutions informed by current and former university students. This study is unique, as much of the research that currently exists does not explore qualitative insights of both current and former students reflecting on their overall time spent at university regarding wellness. Thus, your perspectives and time will be particularly valuable.

This study involves one short interview that will take place virtually over Zoom (approximately 30 minutes, but could be longer if you wish). Participation is voluntary, it is not mandatory.

If you would like to participate in this research, or have questions before making your decision, please contact me at (416) 371-1125 or victoriagaravellos@uvic.ca.

If you would like to speak directly to the academic supervisor for this thesis, please contact Dr. Barton Cunningham at bcunning@uvic.ca. Please be advised that your interest to participate in the study ought to remain confidential.

Sincerely,

Victoria Garavellos



Sustaining Student Motivation and Well-Being: Academic and Non-Academic Pressures, Supports, and Coping

You are invited to participate in a study entitled Sustaining Student Motivation and Well-Being: Academic and Non-Academic Pressures, Supports, and Coping that is being conducted by Victoria Garavellos.

Victoria Garavellos is a Graduate Student in the department of Human and Social Development at the University of Victoria and you may contact her if you have further questions by email at victoriagaravellos@uvic.ca.

As a Graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Public Administration. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Barton Cunningham. You may contact my supervisor at bcunning@uvic.ca.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this thesis is to develop a better understanding of challenges, possible stresses, and possible strategies students find useful to doing well-during their time at university.

Objectives of this thesis include:

- Seeking to interview students in identifying the pressures they face in their academic and non-academic lives
- Reflecting on interview transcripts which captures the students' unique experiences and comparing their perspectives
- Compiling coping mechanisms and support strategies that individuals use to manage stress and feeling overwhelmed
- Acting as a resource for universities and institutions to consider in improving their learning environments and practices
- Contributing to the discussion of student stress, well-being, and wellness, with a focus on university students, academic pressures, and mechanisms of support

Importance of this Research

Research of this type is important because efforts towards understanding the academic and non-academic needs of students, as well as alleviating their daily school pressures, benefit both the institution and its students by fostering a supportive learning environment and promoting student well-being. Understanding these pressures can lead to improved student retention rates, enhanced academic performance, a positive

campus atmosphere, and overall student success. Additionally, involving students in this process encourages open dialogue and creates a culture of care and well-being.

This thesis contributes to this current issue and pressing need to understand university student wellness, highlighting the distinct pressures faced by students, especially those juggling rigorous academic workloads. Also, attention is given to the challenges both male and female students face in balancing academic, social, and personal responsibilities. Ultimately, this thesis aims to raise a deeper awareness of these challenges, advocating for a more holistic academic environment that benefits the entire campus community and enhances the overall student experience.

Additionally, there is a gap in the literature which interprets qualitative data from former and current university students, which is then utilized to highlight key areas for further exploration and improvement. My research will allow the duality of contributing to the body of work being studied on student well-being and functioning as a guide for stress management strategies and potential support systems.

Participants Selection

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are the target population that fits the research's purpose and objectives of current and former university students.

What is involved

If you consent to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include a 1-on-1 30-minute virtual semi-structured interview via Zoom. *Zoom servers are located outside of Canada, and Zoom stores users' names and usage data outside of Canada. No other information is stored outside of Canada, and recordings of Zoom meetings are not stored on Zoom servers.*

Audio recordings will be taken, and a transcription will be made. An iPhone will be used to record and store the audio recordings. *Please be advised that this research study includes data storage in U.S.A. As such, there is a possibility that information about you that is gathered for this research study may be accessed without your knowledge or consent by the U.S. government, in compliance with the U.S. Freedom Act.*

Inconvenience

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, such as your time.

There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research.

Incentive

There will be an incentive being offered for participation in the research. Those who choose to participate in the study, will be offered a \$10 Starbucks gift-card in exchange for their time participating in the study. The gift-card is intended as a 'thank you' gesture for the interviewees. If participants withdraw during data collection or at any time thereafter, they will still be able to keep the incentive.

Benefits

There are several potential and known benefits associated with participation relating to the participants, society, and to the state of knowing. First, this thesis aims to improve and understand the academic and

non-academic needs of current and former university students. Second, the interview data will capture their experiences, in turn contributing to the current literature. Third, the university will have access to this study (once published on the UVic site) and may use the thesis findings which can lead to an increased in overall well-being of students, as well as assist universities and institutions to cultivate a more positive and healthier campus environment.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be destroyed and not be used.

Anonymity

In terms of protecting your anonymity, no personally identifying information will be collected or shared. All participants names and information will be kept anonymous.

Confidentiality

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by the researcher and encryption. All research data, including audiotapes and transcribed notes, will be password-protected. Any hard copies of data including any handwritten notes and/or USB keys, will be kept in a locket cabinet at my personal office. Research data will only be accessible by the researcher (and the research supervisor).

To ensure the anonymity of participants and the preserving the confidentiality of their data, participants names will be anonymous. The audio recording transcripts and analysis will refer to interviewees as participants or if referring to individual experiences, participants will be referred to as Participant (P) 1, P2, P3, etc. Gender markers will be included in the analysis when generalizing. The true identities of participants will remain completely anonymous and cannot be traced in any way.

There are limits to confidentiality because potential participants will be given the contact information of myself for the purpose of providing additional information or expressing interest in participation. To address the limit, the script and consent form will clearly state to contact me directly if they would like to participate and if they have any questions.

Dissemination of Results

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways. The thesis is a requirement of the Master of Public Administration program thus data will be shared and presented to the University of Victoria as a master's thesis, this includes being uploaded to the 'UVic Space' where most UVic theses are posted on. Also, there is a possibility that the research from this study will be published in an academic or professional article.

Disposal of Data

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected because there will be no means of connecting the data you provide with your individual identity. Data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet or in password-protected electronic form. Data from this study will be disposed of after publication, normally 5-7 years, when electronic files will be erased and paper records shredded. It is

Appendix C: Interview Guide

The thesis focuses on the challenges that current and former university students face and what they find stressful. Our purpose is to develop a better understanding of challenges, possible stresses, and possible strategies students find useful to doing well during their overall university experience.

In the interview questions, we are asking for examples of features of academic and non-academic life which students found helpful. That is, if we were to gain a deeper understanding of student well-being and wellness, we might explore aspects such as how students balance academic demands, how they seek and receive guidance, and how support is given and received. However, these factors are not pre-set, and our goal is to have you identify what might be most impactful for shaping your well-being and wellness during university.

The focus is on examples of what you experienced or observed. We will ask you for examples which you have experienced or viewed as positive as well as not so positive. We also ask for your comments on ideas for encouraging a healthy student environment.

Generally, the questions will follow this format...

Questions

Our first set of questions is very open ended.

1. What are examples of some challenges encountered at university?
2. What are examples of times when things went extremely well for you as a student?

Now, we will be asking for examples of experiences in various areas.

Questions

1. Academic Workload and Pressures
 - a. What are examples of ways that you have felt overall engaged and felt high levels of involvement in your schoolwork?
 - b. What are examples of ways that you have felt frustrated or disengaged from your studies and academic responsibilities?
 - c. Who or what encourages you to stay engaged with your academic responsibilities?
 - i. Are those individuals peers, mentors, or part of the university faculty or staff?
2. Motivations and Demotivations for Academic Engagement
 - a. Overall motivations. Thinking back about school generally and what has motivated you and empowered you (very positive emotive feelings), what are examples of things that have really empowered you that you have experienced or observed?

- i. Probes: Are there examples which are unique at different stages of your degree or program?
 - ii. Are these unique to students?
 - iii. Other examples?
 - b. Thinking back about school generally and what has discouraged you or not motivated you nor empowered you (for example, when you might have been really discouraged and felt like discontinuing your studies). What are examples of things that have really disempowered you that you have experienced or observed?
 - i. Probes: Are there examples which are unique at different stages of your degree or program?
 - ii. Other examples?
 - c. What are some ideas you might have for assisting universities and their faculty in addressing the issue of a lack of academic engagement?
 - i. Probes: What are things which might not assist universities and their staff?
3. Support from Faculty and University Staff
- a. What kind of campus culture do you think increases the sense of motivation and drive among students?
 - i. Probes: What kind of campus culture demotivates students and lessens their drive?
 - b. What responsibilities do you believe professors and/or academic advisors should have in supporting students?
 - c. What are examples of ways you approach professors and/or university staff for support and guidance?
 - i. Probes: Which have you found to be the most successful?
4. Support of Fellow Peers
- a. What are examples of ways in which relationships and support from peers have been supportive of academic life for yourself as a student?
 - i. Other examples?
 - b. What are examples of ways that relationships and support from peers which you have experienced or observed that have not been positive?
 - i. Other examples?
 - c. What are examples of ways your peers and colleagues have contributed to your sense of well-being and support during your time at university?
 - d. What are some ideas that might improve peer support and well-being for students at university?
 - i. Probes: What are things which might not improve their well-being?
5. Non-Academic Pressures
- a) What are some non-school related pressures that you experience that effect your well-being?
 - b) What is an example of a non-school pressure that you have learned to handle while at university?
 - c) What are ideas for managing non-academic pressures or stressors?

Appendix D: Findings Tables

Table 2: *Motivation and Engagement in University Studies*

Themes & # of mentions	Comments
Peer Collaboration (14)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Being part of a small team for a research paper, where I was responsible for a section and had to report back to the group, kept me engaged. -In small groups, everyone can learn through specific examples and engage in meaningful conversation. -During our critiques, that's usually when people are more involved with each other. -... those discussion forums, really helped me feel part of a larger group... I felt seen. -In group work... I feel accountable because everyone is paying a lot to be here, balancing work and school, and wants to do well. -I can trust that my cohort, my colleagues, will... point out if I have a misunderstanding or, bring their own experience to the table and contribute. -Hearing encouragement from my peers keeps me doing what I'm doing -...peers doing well in their research and writing. -Seeing others in my cohort also juggling full-time work, families, and demanding jobs, all trying to finish their courses together. -Many of my international friends and I draw motivation from each other – we relate through shared experiences and support one another. -Having friends in class who were engaged and working together... -... econ was my biggest struggle, but my group members were so supportive and helped me get through it. They understood where I struggled and never made me feel inferior. That peer support is what got me through the hard parts. -...seeing my peers' confidence and expertise motivated me...pushed me to grow professionally and bring my best ideas forward. -When you're in a smaller group project, you're encouraging each other to sort of work and have that dynamic.
Autonomy (13)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -...when I can focus on open-ended material that interests me. -My professor let me tailor my research to my interests... -In liberal arts, especially in Disability Studies, we were driven by passion and a desire to make a difference, not just by job prospects. -When I was more interested... I was willing to do my assignments... do more work. -A sense of obligation and a massive desire to not stray. -It's on myself, it's an individual task. -It feels good to succeed and to know that you put your best effort forward -Self-motivating...to get a job from my degree and my own passion. -Myself, I'm a very driven person. -My own interest. -Having good grades -My passion for my thesis keeps me engaged and motivates me to succeed, as I strive to align my skills with my life goals. -Even when I felt like giving up, I reminded myself why I started, and that internal drive helped me push through.

<p>Supportive & Enthusiastic Professors (10)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -When professors are really enthusiastic and invested in what they're teaching. -...having support and connection with the professor... -When the professor is really passionate about their work and are able to be engaging with students, through video conferencing, or more face to face stuff. -When the prof hosted optional Zoom sessions as a chance to connect with them and the cohort throughout an online asynchronous program. -Having a professor who's willing to hop on a call and help me work through my ideas...it creates a bridge between what I'm interested in and what they expect. -...in classes where the professor was passionate and approachable – you want to impress them, and it makes you more invested in what you're learning. -I've had a very positive experience with my supervisor – he's kind, helpful, and makes the thesis process much easier. -It was very motivating being in their classes, because they are so interested in their work, and that was quite inspiring for me, and I wanted to do really well in their classes. -...Profs that I had a connection with. -A good supervisor really keeps you going at the graduate level. They help you stay on track and motivated.
<p>Sense of Belonging & Community (10)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Even in a limited on-campus experience, discussion boards helped foster a sense of community. -...student government is appealing as a way to foster engagement... -...where everyone feels like they belong, are respected, trusted, and have a role. That kind of environment makes a big difference and should be the standard everywhere. -For students not to feel like they're just a number, to feel a sense of being included, that inclusiveness in the group. -...relational – where we build trust, bring our whole selves, and learning feels like a shared, valued process. Let people have fun; learning doesn't have to be so serious. -A shared experience and cohort model made it easier to build relationships and stay engaged. -I think Ontario universities like Western do a better job of fostering school spirit and a sense of unification. That helps you feel more comfortable socially and academically. -...being a part of a community. -I think faculty events would really help... events to promote student research or build community. -Students should feel supported by everyone: admin staff, profs, all people.
<p>Real World Application & Relevance (7)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -When things were more hands-on, especially during my fourth-year placement abroad...working in a classroom. -I liked hands-on stuff because being told to read something and then write about it wasn't engaging. -Hearing professors and guest speakers share their experiences in the field motivates me to keep going – it helps me see a future and how my academic work connects the real-world. -I felt more interested in the course when the concepts and the work is applied in real life. -Seminars were engaging when I could connect what we were learning to things outside the classroom and bring those examples into discussions. -Projects in courses that relate to real world examples with tangible outcomes. -When schoolwork applied to real-world scenarios.
<p>Interest Alignment (7)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -When I could align my coursework with my PhD topic, like in directed studies, where I developed my dissertation proposal while completing a class. -...times when there's been enough flexibility in the assignment to choose something that I am quite interested in.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-When the coursework had flexibility to choose topics that were relevant to me, while still applying what we learned in class.-I took harder classes because I was interested in the subject, which made it easier to motivate myself and study.-When I really enjoyed the texts, it was easier to write essays and complete other assignments.-Motivation comes from being in a program that aligns with your personal goals. For me, my MPA helps me create change in communities, while my friend just needed it to work in government. Both of us got what we wanted, but it shows how important it is that programs meet different student needs.-I'm driven by self-growth and meaningful connections – things that transform me and align with who I am.
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Table 3: Factors of Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction in the University Experience

Themes & # of mentions	Comments
<p>Instructor Communication & Responsiveness (10)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -When the instructions aren't clear, and neither are expectations. -When professors are unclear with their instructions...and when you ask questions, you can't get a clear answer. -...when a prof made everything feel vague... it was hard to grasp the subject and know if I was on the right track with assignments. -Profs that don't get back to you, lack engagement, untimely responses to your questions, don't return assignments within a reasonable amount of time... -It felt like some professors were just academics, not really teachers – more focused on collecting a paycheck than engaging with students. -I had one professor who just gave you the syllabus, marked the assignments, and that was it – you didn't know what he looked like. It felt so impersonal. -Sometimes professors assume students are only focused on grades rather than learning, which can feel discouraging. -A professor that wasn't very empathetic or sensitive to what a student might not have learned in previous courses... I went to him for help, he treated me like an idiot, and I ended up dropping the class. -Profs who attend events or run workshops outside of class time show they care and are human. -Professors not listening to student feedback...those who marked harshly made it worse.
<p>Program/Course Design & Delivery (10)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -During exams, having to memorize specific details like the date, artist, and materials of a painting felt unnecessary – it made me feel disconnected and question why I needed to know it. -Any class that's longer than, like, 2 hours, I'm not paying attention anymore. -Sometimes the online course syllabus is clearly outdated with the prof linking videos from 2021. -It's frustrating when there's not enough guidance on how to engage with the coursework, especially when you don't know how to do something, and your classmates are in the same position. -...the classes I struggled with the most, especially because they were heavily focused on tests and exams. -I did not like my courses that shied away from contemporary issues. -When courses feel repetitive and professors aren't working together, it makes the academic experience feel disconnected. -... when teaching is too theoretical or monotone. -Homework or projects don't feel meaningful or relevant... hard to even get started. -Faculty who understood that students need both academic structure and room for personal growth created a more balanced and relatable learning environment.
<p>Evaluation Fairness & Feedback Clarity (6)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -When you don't understand how grades are determined... You start to wonder what the point is if trying harder doesn't change the outcome. It feels like there's a lack of transparency and fairness in how success is measured. -When you're getting poor marks without clear, constructive feedback, it feels like a dead end... -Sometimes I receive a lower grade than expected with little to no explanation. The feedback doesn't seem to justify the deductions, which feels unfair and frustrating, like grading is subjective or inconsistent. -...too many presentations without timely feedback can be overwhelming, triggering imposter syndrome and anxiety about whether I'm presenting correctly.

	<p>-Getting that first A or that first assignment back and finding out where you stand with the professor, or in a course... And if I do get a lower grade on a first assignment, I tend to try and figure out what went wrong and up it for the next one.</p> <p>-Professors who don't give very much feedback or very personal feedback.</p>
<p>Workload & Academic Demands (5)</p>	<p>-...times when there were hundreds of pages per week that is discouraging and doesn't make an overachieving student feel very good about not getting through all of it.</p> <p>-Getting too much on my plate at once...big amounts of readings, deadlines, they pile-up.</p> <p>-It feels very overwhelming when there's a lot of readings.</p> <p>-I keep questioning how much my master's degree will really help me and if it's worth completing.</p> <p>-In remote programs like mine... having real-time discussions, when possible, really enhances the learning experience.</p>
<p>Financial Accountability (4)</p>	<p>-It helps and it hurts when you have a scholarship attached.</p> <p>-Money was a huge factor, because post-secondary is so expensive, and you don't want it to go to waste.</p> <p>-Having a family motivates me to do better in my studies to advance my career.</p> <p>-Knowing that doing well could impact scholarship or sponsorship support...</p>
<p>Availability of Academic Resources & Support (3)</p>	<p>-...when you're not grasping the content the way you think you should, and there's not enough support to help you work through it.</p> <p>-Some long-distance students couldn't attend in person, and there were no flexible or online alternatives offered to accommodate them.</p> <p>-We're told to pick a topic, find a supervisor, and figure it out on our own while drowning in readings and assignments...wasn't enough structured support...most of us didn't finish on the suggested timeline.</p>
<p>University Environment (3)</p>	<p>-The university could help by organizing activities like marathons, gym competitions, or other events once a term. Things that give students a break from academics...</p> <p>-There needs to be more events that bring students together across majors. In my experience, it felt very closed off...</p> <p>-If there were more social events and better communication about them, it would help students feel like they belong...</p>

Table 4: Support from Faculty and University Staff

Themes & # of mentions	Comments
<p>Faculty Accessibility & Approachability (8)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -...flexible – offering meetings, replying to emails quickly, and being responsive around exam time. -Profs should organize their digital classrooms clearly and make it easy for students to contact them -...should be available and responding to emails and questions in a reasonable timeframe. -Profs should attend tutorials at least once or twice to support students in smaller groups and make it easier to ask questions. -Professors need an open-door policy so students can ask questions, get and give feedback. -...when there's uncertainty, it can feel isolating or concerning, like there's no one to turn to for help. -...a supervisor who provides structure, regular check-ins, and a sense of accountability is essential to helping students cross the finish line. -...flexible...offering meetings, replying to emails quickly, responsive around exam time.
<p>Adaptive Engagement (7)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Advisors & staff need to understand that each student group is different – not just by generation, but in real, nuanced ways. It's not enough to have an open door; they need to be visible, involved, and genuinely care about students. -Professors should hold students up, not push them forward. Adapt to each student's pace, offer resources, and extend learning without making them feel behind. -It's important for professors and advisors to understand what students are looking for: research opportunities, social connection, or other kinds of support. -...educators to meet students where they're at. Not everyone is at the same academic level or moving at the same pace... -Recognize that everyone learns differently...incorporate more practical, hands-on activities... -...should be realistic with deadlines and demands, considering students' work-life balance, especially during busy weeks. - We were encouraged to explore our own ideas but then were restricted by grading guidelines. It felt contradictory... I would've preferred more support in developing and refining my ideas, instead of being pushed to change them.
<p>Faculty Academic Guidance (6)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Profs need to meet with struggling students and help them learn how to succeed. -Professors and advisors should be conduits, able to direct students to the right resources when needed. -...help students refine overly broad ideas when it comes to research. When a topic is too expansive, it's helpful to have a professor guide you in narrowing it down and identifying a clear direction. Streamlining a topic early on can prevent confusion later. -...helping students succeed in the class...guide students toward appropriate resources... -Receiving feedback on assignments before the due date – it helped with learning, not just grades. - ...accommodating...recognizing the mental health and socioeconomic challenges students face
<p>Course Advising Knowledge (3)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Profs should make sure their content is current and that assignments have a real purpose. -Advisors should be connected to Co-Op programs, job boards, employers... -...they should bring personal examples or connections to the material.

Table 5: Peer Relationships and Support in University Life

Themes & # of mentions	Comments
Peer Assistance & Encouragement (11)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Having my best friend in the program was everything. We edited each other's work, talked through confusing readings, and just got each other through -...group projects...kind of created that environment, that connection with someone else. -Being able to freely exchange ideas, like saying 'maybe that doesn't work well' or 'maybe you can do this,' was natural and helpful. -I have been the most successful when relying on my peers for support, through study groups, through being able to collectively approach a professor or a department with an issue or for clarification. -...working on big assignments, dividing tasks or compiling lecture notes into a master document; helps set everyone up for success. -With classmates, it's a lot of helping each other understand assignments, sharing info, and staying motivated. -Getting together to work on assignments and offering each other notes. -My cohort was big on having study sessions where we'd just sit, ask each other questions, and have that camaraderie as a group -...study groups or going through academic challenges together...not feeling alone through the ups and downs. -After group work, it's nice to keep in touch and continue supporting each other. We have WhatsApp groups for assignments, but I also value staying connected 1-1 with classmates I enjoy working with. -...leaning on each other emotionally, reminding ourselves we'll be fine and it'll be over soon.
Shared Peer Experiences (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Seeing others in my cohort also juggling full-time work, families, and demanding jobs, all trying to finish their courses together. -Many of my international friends and I draw motivation from each other – we relate through shared experiences and support one another. -Having friends in class who were engaged and working together... -We had a WhatsApp group chat with the PhD cohort... we'd occasionally message on there... and we do individual check-ins with each other... be there to listen and validate one another. -Knowing we're all in the same boat, stressed and overwhelmed, helps me feel less alone. That mutual understanding. -When people collectively said, 'This isn't reasonable, we're overworked,' and we wrote a letter to the School of Public Admin... It made me feel like, 'yes, we have needs 'and we're allowed to speak up about them together.
Peer Communication (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -We have a group chat in my program that helps organize due dates and clarify stuff. Sometimes someone's already contacted the professor or understands things better. -The WhatsApp group that our cohort started has been amazing... people are super engaged and supportive... such a huge resource for me, especially because we're all remote. -I like hearing honesty and candidness from peers, where they're succeeding, struggling, and how they're getting through it. Getting to know them personally builds connection, camaraderie, and resilience in our cohort. -Feeling safe enough to say, 'I'm lost on this assignment' matters. -I wouldn't have ended up in my master's program if I hadn't talked to friends... Friends from more privileged backgrounds helped me see public administration as a better fit than law school.

<p>Informal Peer Connection (5)</p>	<p>-...just being invited out even when I couldn't go was a huge form of support. -We'd hang out after the grad exhibition every day and go out to eat, debrief, just be together, it helped build real relationships. -...the extracurricular meetups we've had outside of class... It made class feel more relaxed, I felt like I was with acquaintances and not strangers just talking about schoolwork. -There were invites in the Instagram Cohort chat, making sure everyone knows what's happening and feels included. -Having a community outside academics like figure skating was great, because it connected us through shared interests beyond school.</p>
<p>Peer Comparison & Competition (3)</p>	<p>-There was always this kind of underlying tension between students... you were going to be competing with these people for jobs too. So that kind of made it difficult... you were sort of happy for people when they did well, then also, kind of not. -...people can be really competitive, especially around exams. The way students talk before and after tests can add stress to an already stressful situation. -I witnessed a lot of competition where there was a false sense of support, but it was very backhanded...people would leave out pieces of information that gives them that edge.</p>

Table 6: Life and Non-Academic Pressures Affecting University Students

Themes & # of mentions	Comments
Family/Home-Life (10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -How do I manage their upset when I'm not going the direction my parents want me to? -I had a big falling out with my mom, and ongoing family pressure has added a lot of stress. -...getting married, having kids... -...while studying, I barely saw my kids. -Parenting from afar with kids back home in a different time zone, waking up at 2 a.m. to connect. -Being a dad... -Being a mom to a 7-month-old and an 8-year-old...
Financial Pressure (9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -...financial pressures were also in relation to moving. -I had to have a part time job... keeping on top of bursaries and scholarships is exhausting. -Trying to afford school is tough.... paying for stuff like a new laptop to keep up, it all adds up. -The financial strain of being a student... -Financial challenges were one of the main pressures I faced... -Financial stress was a big factor during my time in school. -I had to find scholarships and jobs to stay afloat in a tough economy. -Managing finances and part-time work while OSAP doesn't cover the whole year adds major stress.
Health & Time Management (9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -After a 20-hour week of class, I'm not going to the gym or cooking a proper meal...I'm exhausted. -...I haven't had time for my health either...I've gained weight and haven't been able to work out. -It's difficult to get medical appointments, I relied on teas or over-the-counter remedies when I got sick. -Family health crises and my own illnesses, like my bronchitis, created intense outside pressures. -How are you going to find time to do laundry... buy fast food all the time because it's easier? -Commuting...I was always thinking like, 'Oh, am I going to be late?' or 'Is the bus going to come on time'? -There's pressure from school saying you can't have a social life, but also pressure from friends and family asking why you don't have time for them. -It was frustrating how so many things on campus were closed on weekends.
Relational Strain (8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -...school... can, at times, turn you into a shell of a person who's not very fun to be around... -... I went through a really significant relationship breakdown. -...familial and relationship challenges taking away from school. -I didn't feel physically at my best, and I wanted to avoid judgment from peers and staff. -There's friendship pressure, or groupthink...when you're young and impressionable, you do things just to fit in that you might not otherwise do. -Managing relationships and friendships...

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Conflicts with others make it hard to focus on school; relationship challenges affect my concentration. -Social pressures also add to the mental load, pulling focus away from school.
<p style="text-align: center;">Work Responsibilities (5)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -I was at a tough job, and I was looking for a new job and going to school...and interviewing. -Work is a big one. -Balancing work with everything else was difficult. -...juggling work and school responsibilities simultaneously...
<p style="text-align: center;">Housing & Living Arrangements (2)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -...moving was a huge pressure.

Ideas for Managing Non-Academic Pressures/Stressors

Ideas & # of mentions	Comments
Social Support (9)	<p>-I had to get comfortable reaching out, even just to say I was struggling.</p> <p>-For me, it's really about having a strong support network; someone I can call and say, 'Hey, I'm not getting this, walk me through it.'</p> <p>-...hanging out with a friend, even for a short time, makes things feel lighter.</p> <p>-...I rely on friends and family for support.</p> <p>-...friends, a network...takes you away from the academic world...</p> <p>-I've learned to ask friends or others for guidance when I don't know how to do something.</p> <p>-I've found socializing and rekindling friendships really helps....by providing an outlet to talk or just forget about stress.</p> <p>-Having a big family and social support system helps me...</p>
Self-Care (7)	<p>-Sleep, eating, setting boundaries...even just knowing when to stop working and drink some water.</p> <p>-...taking a bath...going for a walk...being around animals.</p> <p>-Exercising...journaling, taking a bath...</p> <p>-Taking care of my mental health, sleeping well, and eating properly...</p> <p>-I do yoga weekly, enjoy wine...</p> <p>-I also try to stick to a fitness routine because it helps...</p> <p>-I'm trying to stay physically active by going for walks and hikes...I realized I need to get out and do something</p>
Reframing & Prioritization Practices (5)	<p>-Thinking about how small we are... helps put things into perspective. If you were dying tomorrow, would your assignment matter, or would it be not spending time with loved ones? That kind of perspective really helps manage stress.</p> <p>-When I'm overwhelmed, I remind myself this will pass. Another challenge will come, but I'll get through it.</p> <p>-I keep a list of my yearly accomplishments to remind myself I'm persevering despite stress.</p> <p>-...knowing what truly matters and not sweating the small stuff. I was clear with my director that I'd do my master's on evenings and weekends.</p> <p>-I realized I couldn't do everything...so I chose to quit my job to focus on my family and studies.</p>
Therapy (4)	<p>-Therapy, therapy, therapy!</p> <p>- Therapy is amazing. If I had done it during school maybe I could have avoided some academic issues, but I didn't</p>
Flexible Work Arrangements (1)	<p>-I switched to a more flexible job that fits better with parenting and school.</p>
Community Engagement (1)	<p>-It would be helpful to have something that pushes or encourages students to go outside of campus and do things, and to be more aware of those opportunities.</p>