Does ‘feeling you belong’ matter?
Integration and health in first year university students

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The relationship between student engagement and student health and psychological well-being has not been explored. Our large-scale survey of first year students in a metropolitan University included measures of social and academic integration, as well as measures of psychological distress and general physical health.

A sample of 922 first year university students responded to an on-line questionnaire which included questions about financial circumstances, health and a range of demographic characteristics. Psychological distress and physical health were measured using the GHQ-12 and domains of the SF-36 respectively. Student integration was measured using the Institution Integration Scale (ISS).

Data were analysed using structural equation modelling and the sample was deemed to be representative of all first year students within the University using a Heckman approach. Higher levels of integration were reported for full-time than for part-time students and for females than for males. Findings showed that both debt and increased hours working had detrimental effects on psychological health. Poor mental health had a harmful effect on integration even when controlling for age, childcare responsibilities, living arrangements, gender, mode of study, debt and hours worked.

These data suggest the importance of considering academic and social integration in relation to student health and psychological wellbeing, in addition to other previously documented factors such as debt, hours worked and family circumstances. Future research may determine whether strategies for ‘engaging students’ may have potential for promoting student psychological health and wellbeing, in addition to any impact they may have on student satisfaction and levels of achievement.