



What Psychosocial Support Do First Year University Students Need? A Mixed Creative Methods Study

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Higher education students need help and support to enable them to cope with the challenges of their studies. The aim of this study was to investigate the perspectives of first-year undergraduate students on predictors of psychosocial support in challenging situations. A creative art-based descriptive research design was employed utilising an individual One-Page Profile form to gather data from 240 first-year students from two different universities in Slovakia. Data was collected and analysed using a content-thematic and visual approach. Four significant individual predictors of psychosocial support were identified: emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal. Emotional support consists of desirable mental health, defined by the students as experiencing happiness, self-satisfaction, self-development, relationships which are satisfying, loving and safe, trust, empathic acceptance, and care from others. Instrumental support varies from personnel up to material resources e.g., people, animals, and assistance such as financial services. The preferred informational support is peer-to-peer counselling, followed by professional counselling. When students describe appraisal support their needs are primarily in the areas of well-being and self-efficacy. The study makes various suggestions on how University staff can provide first-year students with support and counselling in their everyday challenges.

Keywords: psychosocial support, university student, first-year students, creative art-based design, One-Page Profile, Slovakia.

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Introduction

Mental health problems among students in higher education are a global public health concern (Catling et al., 2022). Higher education can put students at risk of developing mental health difficulties such as depression, anxiety, social isolation, and loneliness (Deasy et al., 2016; Loades et al., 2020). The call for psychosocial support to help people facing life challenges to cope with was clearly highlighted by the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Duan & Zhu, 2020; Xiang et al., 2020; Kunzler et al., 2021). Psychosocial support -also known as social support - refers to those aspects of an interpersonal relationship that enhance the receiver's competence, identity, self-worth, and effectiveness (Russell, 2004). Researchers often describe social support as available social resources perceived by people, or that are provided to them by non-professionals, in the framework of both formal support groups and natural helping relationships (Gottlieb & Bergen, 2010). It is highly contingent on numerous personal, environmental, and cultural factors. In this study social support is defined as receiving emotional, instrumental, informational, or appraisal support from others (House, 1981; Langford, 1997; Malecki & Demaray, 2003). Emotional support can be defined as expressions of empathy, love, trust and caring. Instrumental support is represented by resources such as spending time with someone or providing them with materials or money, which is explained as tangible aid and services. Informational support consists of providing someone with information, suggestions, or advice. Appraisal support refers to providing evaluative feedback to others, defined as information that is useful for self-evaluation (Glanz, Rimer, Viswanath, 2015).

Recent literature from social psychology has underlined the significance of personal perception and cognition in understanding the variations in perceived social support related to challenging life events. The potentiality of helpful relationships and reciprocity as a source for perceiving support is also emphasised in such studies (Taylor, 2011; Lakey et al., 2015). Social support benefits the well-being, relationships, and health of both the supporter and the receiver (Langford et al., 1997; Schiefloe 2015; Taylor 2011). More recently research pays particular attention to the role of psychosocial support in protecting against harmful consequences of negative events, promoting well-being, and improve quality of life, and managing life situations (Kohrt & Song, 2018; Purgato et al., 2018). Langford et al. (1997) emphasised that the benefits of social support in promoting positive health and wellbeing through “personal competence, health maintenance behaviours, effective coping behaviours, perceived control, sense of stability, recognition of self-worth, positive affect, psychological well-being, and decreased anxiety and depression” (Langford et al., 1997, p. 97).

Theoretical framework

Person-centred thinking (PCT) tools are methodical ways to ensure that education is meeting the needs of each young student, recognising that all students have a unique style of learning, communicating, building relationships, and making decisions. PCT and person centred planing (PCP) incorporates values of the humanist approach, positive psychology and solution focused approaches. It aims to identify individual

strengths and not the deficiencies, while encouraging co-constructed and realistic solutions, rather than solutions being service led (Gray & Woods, 2022; Holburn, 2002; Rogers, 1951).

One-Page Profile (OPP) is a PCT tools that entails listing all the student's positive features, talents, and capabilities by understanding what other people admire, like and appreciate about them. OPP informs the lecturers on how they could help the students use their talents in the everyday challenges, with a focus on psychosocial support and benefitting others in the university or community (Sanderson et al. 2018). 'One-Page Profiles are a summary of: (i) what people like and admire about the student (using the 'Appreciation' tool); (ii) what is important to students (using several tools); (iii) how best to support students (using several tools)' (Sanderson et al., 2018, p. 7-8). Sanderson et al. (2018) further explained that OPP are a means of starting with a person-centred approach by collecting specific facts about one's personality.

There are several benefits of using a One-Page Profile in higher education, such as helping lecturers to understand the student's particular personality, enabling a quick understanding as to what is essential to the individual in the profile. It is possible to ensure that any decisions are made in the light of what matters to the student together with supporting them to remain safe, feel appreciated and have opportunities to learn. One-Page Profiles help lecturers to recognise any changes that could be helpful to the student to have a 'better day', which is especially important for students with special educational needs. They also provide the accurate support required at the right time in the appropriate way for students to make the best improvement. Creating actions and support plans for positive change such as career plans also provides students with the benefit of being listened to.

OPPs provide an opportunity for the verbal and visual expression of each student. Students have the opportunity to express themselves through colours, drawing and the use of different materials, a fun and pleasant way of informally providing information, while their only task is to answer three specific questions. Students can complete the OPP in the form of various computer programs or by hand using various creative techniques (Erwin & Sanderson, 2016).

Thus, the aim of this study is to investigate the perspectives of first-year undergraduate students as a particularly vulnerable group on predictors of psychosocial support making use of OPP. This study was guided by the following main question: *What do first-year undergraduate students describe as desirable predictors of psychosocial support in their challenging life situations?*

Methodology

We used a creative art-based descriptive research design. The area of creativity-based research methods is continually expanding and developing and is applicable for quantitative, qualitative, and multi-modal research in education and in various scientific fields of study (Kara, 2020; Kara et al., 2021). There are different ways to work with creative art-based research design; we used painting, collage, writing and photography. These offer powerful ways to ignite and illuminate voice, participation, and engagement across various stages of research design and dissemination (Kara et al., 2021).

Setting and sample

The participants in this study were recruited through face-to-face instructions provided by two of the researchers in the academic year 2021/2022 and 2022/2023. Participants were students at the Faculty of Arts at two universities in Slovakia. Purposive sampling was employed. The purpose and goals of the research were explained to all students in their first year of university studies; it was highlighted that their participation was fully voluntary. The overall sample from the two academic years at the two universities consisted of 240 first-year students from various fields of bachelor studies (Psychology; Ethnology; Philosophy; History; Russian Language and Culture in Professional Communication; German language and Culture in Professional Communication; English language and Culture in Professional Communication; Education; and Social Work).

Data collection

Data was collected by creating a One-Page Profile form. Instructions were clearly delivered in visual and written form by means of a PowerPoint presentation by two of the researchers (TSZ & JS). Participants were instructed that the One-Page Profile can contain words, images and graphics, with a minimum of 500 characters for each part of the One-Page Profile. The content of the document was to be comprised of three parts: *What is important to me? What do people like (appreciate/admire) about me? How can others support me in what I do/I want to achieve?'*

All data was collected at the two Slovak universities in the period between January 2022 and February 2023. The One-Page Profiles were collected in electronic versions of documents into the MS Teams folder of one of the researchers (TSZ). Ten of the OPPs were written in English (at the participants' own request) and the rest of the OPPs were written in Slovak. All researchers speak Slovak, and during the analysis process all the OPPs written in Slovak were translated into English.

The Institutional Ethics Committees of the two respective universities approved the research (ref no. UCM-FF-EK 1/2022 in January 2022). Informed consent was obtained from all the participants involved in the study, and anonymity was ensured to safeguard privacy.

Data analysis

Creative art-based methods in combination with a content-thematic and visual analysis were used to achieve a deeper understanding of the predictors of psychosocial support as perceived by first-year undergraduate students. One widely used conventional method of analysing visual data is content analysis (Pauwels & Mannay, 2019). Content analysis is deductive and used typically for analysing messages. This study performed content analysis by coding of the message content. Thematic analysis involves an emergent and interactive process of the interpretation of a set of messages, with some thematic structure as the typical outcome (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These two methods of analyses may be viewed as complementary (Neuendorf, 2018). The themes were analysed according to the social support model outlined by House (1981); Langford (1997) and

Malecki and Demaray (2003), while a theoretical deductive approach (Boyatzis, 1998) to thematic analysis was used.

Qualitative content analysis was carried out on the collected One-Page Profiles. It consists of descriptions of the manifest content, close to the text, as well as interpretations of the latent content, distant from the text but still close to the participants' lived experiences (Graneheim et al., 2017). Thematic analysis involved repeated reading of selected One-Page Profiles and marking the sections relevant to predictions of psychosocial support; constructing and coding of the data frame to comprise main categories and subcategories; segmenting data into units of coding, piloting, and redefining the coding; and completing the main themes and interpreting the themes as results (Schreier, 2012). According to Culshaw (2019), visual analysis consists of three parts: i) descriptive - focussing on how the image is produced, what it contains and how it conveys meaning; ii) analytic, focussing on visual syntax; and iii) interpretative - beginning with the most obvious reading of the image, then generating alternative readings.

Results

The analysis of the participants' statements showed that all four areas of psychosocial support (emotional, instrumental, informational, appraisal support) were identified as their preferred types of support. The students used various creative ways to express and illustrate their One-Page Profile.

The range of desired emotional support that they prefer in their lives was divided into two main categories, namely mental health, and relationships (Table I). However, it is important to note that these categories overlap, as within emotional support several participants describe experiences from both identified categories.

The mental health category was divided into three subcategories defined by the participants themselves: experiencing happiness; self-satisfaction; and self-development. The relationship category contains subcategories that are linked to the student's existing relationships and comprises four subcategories: feeling safe and loved; the expression of trust from others; empathic acceptance; and care from others. The subcategories describe the emotional experience of challenging life situations and the impact on emotional support.

The identification of instrumental support for students in emergency situations is broad-spectrum (involving personnel and material resources), as shown in Table II. We have identified three categories of instrumental supports in managing challenging situations: people; animals; and tangible assistance. Within subcategory people, the following subcategories were identified: friends, boyfriends /girlfriend and family were identified, while with regards to animals, participants described the importance of animals in assisting them in venting their feelings and cope with challenging situations. Tangible assistance consists of two subcategories, namely financial assistance, and tangible help and services.

Table I

Illustrative quotes from students regarding emotional support

Mental health	Experiencing happiness	<i>“Probably the most important thing for me is to stay happy.”</i> <i>“When I feel happy, I manage things better. It's actually my emotional set-up.”</i> <i>“Happiness clearly plays a significant role in my life - it's a state of mind, an attitude we take towards life as such.”</i>
	Self-satisfaction	<i>“Feel satisfied with yourself.”</i>
	Own self-development	<i>“The most important thing for me is self-development. To progress and improve in all directions.”</i>
Relationships	Feeling safe and loved	<i>“The feeling of security and love that a relationship with a friend gives me is my support.”</i> <i>“The feeling of my family's love for me is enough for me, I always remember that and it's easier for me.”</i>
	Expression of trust from others	<i>“For me, it is trust that is the basis of all relationships and for overcoming difficult situations, when I feel they (family) trust me.”</i> <i>“...when someone shows me that they believe in me and that I can do it, it's usually someone with whom I have already built up a relationship.”</i>
	Empathic acceptance	<i>“Sometimes I just need someone close to me to ask how I'm feeling and try to understand my emotional experience of the situation.”</i>
	Care from others	<i>“...when I feel and see that people care for me. They (parents) sacrificed their lives and did everything they could for me, they took care of me and still take care of me.”</i>

Table II

Illustrative quotes from students regarding instrumental support

People	Friends	<i>“My best friend – soulmate”</i> <i>“My friends supported me and helped me in the most difficult moments, and I know that even if I sometimes feel alone and lost I have someone to turn to.”</i>
	Boyfriend	<i>“My boyfriend is my biggest rock, I can’t imagine, what I would do and where I would be without him in my life.”</i>
	Family	<i>“Support from the family.”</i> <i>“It’s really important to know that you can count on someone. I really appreciate my parents for that, they are a beacon that won’t go out.”</i> <i>“For me, family is the most important. Without family my life would be like a raft in the middle of a stormy ocean. They always gave me a reason to be happy, they always held me.”</i>
Animals	Animals as a way of venting feelings and facilitation	<i>“A big part of my heart is occupied by my animals. My best friend is my horse Joey, who is a support and a way of venting my feelings.”</i> <i>“I like to spend time with animals, everything is easier with them.”</i>
Tangible assistance	Financial help	<i>“...sometimes the solution to the situation is financial resources that can be invested in a paid service”</i>
	Tangible help and services	<i>“...from whom I receive constant support. Whether it’s help or everyday little things, I know they’re there and I can count on them.”</i>

The participants described peer to peer counselling and professional counselling as constituting informational support (Table III). Peer-to-peer counselling, advice and suggestions were identified as the type of informational support desired by students, as well as professional counselling, including social and psychological counselling; academic study counselling; and crisis counselling.

When the participants identified appraisal support, their needs were described in the categories of well-being, and self-efficacy (Table IV). Self-efficacy involves time to think about oneself and to process one's own emotions, while wellbeing support included the need for appraisal by others; receiving evaluation feedback; the need not to be judged by others; and the need to be accepted by those who matter.

Table III

Illustrative quotes from students regarding informational support

Peer-to-peer counselling	Advice and suggestions	<i>"...to have people around me who genuinely like me and give me advice."</i>
Professional counselling	Social and psychological counselling	<i>"I know that there is a support and counselling centre for students here at the school. My classmate also used social and psychological counselling."</i> <i>"Our youth pastoral centre has created the possibility of meeting in a self-help group."</i>
	Academic study counselling	<i>"So, we already have a study advisor available for us all academic year."</i>
	Crisis counselling	<i>"IP-internet consulting has such a chat, and it always helps me very well. They help to solve various crisis situations; they save young people's lives."</i>

Table IV

Illustrative quotes from students regarding appraisal support

Well-being	The need for appreciation by others	<i>"I never pay attention to negative comments directed at me, I appreciate the support of colleagues, friends, and lecturers, but the main support for me is the appreciation of my work."</i> <i>"I keep coming across positive feedback that focusses on my enthusiasm, humility, altruism, and custom of listening to others. This appreciation helps me cope with difficult situations."</i>
	Receiving evaluative feedback	<i>"...people spend time with me because they say my positivity makes them feel better."</i>
	The need not to be judged by others	<i>"...to be with people where I can be myself and they don't judge me."</i>
	The need to be accepted by those who matter	<i>"...to feel that I am perceived and accepted by those I care about."</i>
Self-efficacy	Time to think about oneself and process emotions	<i>"...my space (thinking on my own and spending time with myself, thinking about myself)."</i> <i>"...having a moment to myself, processing my emotions..."</i>

Discussion

The current study investigated the need to understand what kind of areas of psychosocial support first-year university students prefer in addressing their daily challenges. As confirmed by the study, all types of support - emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support as described by Glanz, Rimer, and Viswanath (2015) - are present among the support needs of the participants in the study. A more detailed analysis shows that mental health, in terms of experiencing happiness, self-satisfaction and self-development, and relationships as in feeling safe and loved, expressions of trust from others, and empathetic acceptance and care from others, are the most valued priorities cited by the respondents in connection to emotional support. Emotional support, resulting from friends, families, and the academic community, can directly impact student experiences during their studies, with positive impact on their well-being and academic attainment (Maymon et al., 2019; McLean et al., 2022; Scanlon et al., 2020).

The participants identified various modes of instrumental support, ranging from friends, life partners, family members and pets to tangible aids and services such as financial support. Peer to peer counselling, followed by professional counselling (social and psychological counselling, academic counselling, and crisis counselling) are the most desired and used areas of students' informational support. Similarly, other studies show that peer support and peer-to-peer counselling are important sources of social support for higher education students (Mantzios, 2020; Yingping et al., 2021). Peer support in terms of relational networks among age-matched people, determined by common activities and mutual cooperation, has also been found to be a significant basis of social support for university students (Burns et al., 2020; Lamis et al., 2016; Yingping et al., 2021). Understanding the perceived and desired social support needs of students can help to build a more targeted and personalised support and counselling system to assist students in their studies.

The findings on professional services confirms that students primarily use academic counselling, followed by other types of counselling not necessarily related to their studies, such as legal, personal, social, psychological, career and spiritual counselling. The identified appraisal support needs namely well-being needs and self-efficacy, may also addressed through counselling and other forms of psychosocial support at university. One of the issues of professional counselling is that very often the professional personnel capacity is limited. One of the possibilities for improvement is the introduction of lay counselling, with interventions provided by trained, nonprofessional, community associates. In 2018, the *Lancet* Commission on Global Mental Health and Sustainable Development stated that there had been a change from dependence on a single group of specialists in providing psychological health services to the usage of non-specialists like teachers and educators, community health workers, law administration officers and other persons with lived experience (Patel et al., 2018). As defined by Connolly et al. (2021) a lay counsellor is a specially educated community member with no previous specific psychological health lessons before being trained in the field of mental health interventions. The authors also show such interventions by lay counsellors have led to mental health improvements across a number of situations (Connolly et al., 2021).

Support and counselling services are regulated by the valid current legislation in higher education, but each university adapts its services to its internal financial, personnel and other specific conditions. Therefore,

it is important to customise the support and counselling services of the faculties to the actual needs of the university students and their desirable forms of support, as well as investigating their experiences, opinions, and attitudes. One of the tools for such investigation could be the creative art-based descriptive research using individual 'One-Page Profiles', as described by Sanderson et al. (2018). The personalisation approach in psychosocial support is a strengths-based model of practice and the student is seen as a master in their life and in planning their desired support. Another potential use of OPP usage in education is to teach students how to exchange personal information about themselves with others through personal profiles.

Interest in the professional growth of university staff is a prerequisite for their career development and it is also a way of adapting to the students' needs. According to McLean et al. (2022), greater understanding of the experience of first-year students provides the opportunity to educate staff and students on the issues associated with the transition to university. The transition from secondary to tertiary education can be facilitated by various support tools, such as handbooks for students, open access to information on web pages of the higher education institutions, mentors, as well as the introduction of special courses on studying at university level.

Various identified types of social support may be provided at different levels by academic staff, peers, friends, family, and trained professionals. Another crucial factor in students' study performance and their mental health and well-being is their own personality and the fulfilment of their basic social needs, as identified in the appraisal support sought by the students. Our results are similar to Awang et al 's (2014), who underlined the powerful influence of parents and the importance of relationships for student well-being. They suggest that the concept of social support ought to go further than just focusing on support at the university, and they highlighted the significance of the role of the community of students, older students and family-networks in providing first year university students with the adequate support to cope with and adapt to their new learning environment.

Strengths and limitations

The present study shows that higher education institutions can use creative art-based ways to explore and understand what kind of support students need, particularly first year students, and how academic and support staff may provide such support. The findings of the study can be potentially beneficial for academic staff in seeking to engage and support students in their classes; mental health professionals working in higher education institutions who are providing support to students, especially first year undergraduate students, as well as considering the application of university-wide interventions and/or the professional growth of the academic staff to improve the academic involvement of their students; and researchers who are interesting in further examining the relationship between student academic engagement, social support, and sense of belonging in a university environment among university students.

The main strength of the present study is that it used a creative art-based descriptive research design, with data collected at two universities. The outcomes are also in line with earlier literature, which increases the trustworthiness of the study. There are, however, several limitations to the study. The qualitative data are

based on the written reflections of the students and not on in-depth qualitative data (as in individual or focus group interviews). It is also uncertain how the outcomes of the study would transfer to other countries and higher education institutions. Finally, the participation of both part-time and full-time students in the research study made it difficult to generate the specific results that would apply to a single population of either part-time or full-time students.

Further research could investigate the experiences of part-time and full-time university students separately and examine the differences and similarities in the need for psychosocial support between these two populations. An emphasis on caregiving responsibilities in university students (e.g., those with parent roles), together with the studies focusing on understanding students' experiences with transitions into and out of study, has the potential to extend the knowledge about students' experiences with psychosocial support at various stages of their study.

Conflicts of interest

The authors clearly express that there are no conflicts of interest in connection with the present study.

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