

Wir sind UP - An Interview with Julia Seiffert (Coordinator of the Feel Good Campus)

Introduction: Welcome, dear listeners. In our podcast, we introduce you to students, educators, as well as administrative staff from the University of Potsdam. We feature individuals with and without disabilities. We want to learn from them how inclusive the University of Potsdam is as a place of study and as an employer.

Erika: Hello and a warm welcome to everyone to our latest episode of "We Are UP." I'm Erika, and today I'm in conversation with Julia Seiffert, who is the Coordinator of the Feel Good Campus, the student health management at the University of Potsdam. As part of this role, she is currently overseeing the training of some students as so-called Feel-Good Coaches. She will tell us more about what that entails, but here's a brief preview: The Feel Good Campus aims to establish health as a value in learning and teaching, thereby promoting student well-being and strengthening individual resources. This includes enhancing the health conditions for studying and on campus, as well as making health-promoting changes to university structures. Yes, that sounds like quite an ambitious, but certainly very important endeavor, I would say. And now, over to you, Jule, please introduce yourself briefly.

Julia: Yes, hello Erika, and thank you for inviting me to your podcast. I'm thrilled to be here and to bring more attention to the crucial topic of student health. Indeed, I am Jule Seiffert, the Coordinator of the Feel Good Campus. I'm also somewhat of a product of the university myself, as I studied here at the University. Specifically, I completed my Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Political Science at the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences. While my academic background might not directly relate to the subject of health and student well-being, it certainly is advantageous for leading this project. As you mentioned, it's a significant and important undertaking, a massive topic, and we're still very much at the beginning. I'm definitely excited to have taken on this responsibility. After completing my studies, I worked on various projects at the university and have now been the Coordinator of the Campus for about a year and a half. We've recently secured an extension for the project, as we're still in the project phase. This project is financially supported by the Techniker Krankenkasse (Techniker Health Insurance) and was initiated by the University Sports Center, where I'm based. This alignment makes sense since the University Sports Center is also heavily involved in health-related matters, especially in the realm of physical activity.

Erika: Wonderful, okay, thank you so much, Jule. I'll kick off our little question round now, focusing mainly on your project, the Feel Good Campus, and everything associated with it. My first question directly pertains to the challenges you see in promoting student well-being and how these challenges are being addressed.

Julia: Yes, the biggest challenge is initially identifying the issues that students are facing. We naturally have the challenge that students change every year. So, we essentially have a target group that renews itself each year. This is due to new students arriving and others finishing their studies. Exactly, and that's one of the significant challenges - getting in touch with the students. The project started during the time of COVID, which made it even more difficult. Since last year, we've been able to work together in person again and engage directly. We engage in conversations with students through various events or by training multipliers, as you briefly mentioned in the introduction. We'll come back to that, the Feel-Good Coaches. Exactly, how do we approach this? At the Feel Good Campus, we strive to work closely with the students' needs. For us, this means providing offerings like workshops or events that align with what the students require. When we look at the topic of student

well-being, we're operating within the realm of health, where psychological, physiological, and social health all play significant roles. Our offerings fall within the domains of psychological and social health, which we address through our programs. These cover topics like sleep, stress, coping with uncertain situations, or life changes, as studying is a major life change for many students and comes with a lot of challenges. In the future, we'll also address topics like nutrition and mindfulness through our offerings. On the other hand, a major challenge is making ourselves heard within the university and its various committees. Therefore, our second target group, besides the students, are the educators whom we clearly see as multipliers. They are, in a way, the supervisors of the students at the university, if you will. But at the same time, we also engage with the university committees. We're in close contact with the president. He's part of our steering committee, where we continually assess whether we're on the right track or still working on the points we aim to achieve. And the overarching goal is promoting student well-being. So, these are the challenges we face, and we try to collaborate as much as possible with existing university resources, such as counseling institutions like the Central Student Advisory Service, Psychological Counseling, as well as the Coordination Office for Equal Opportunities and University Sports. We're working to create a cohesive structure and shine a greater spotlight on student health, particularly mental health.

Erika: Sorry, just now... Did you hear that sound? It popped up here. What do you think are the most common problems and challenges that students themselves face regarding their well-being? And once these problems are identified, the ones that are most commonly occurring, how are these problems specifically addressed?

Julia: Stress! Very, very high up on the list is stress. This is not just from our own investigations, as we've conducted focus group interviews and the topic of health is also part of the university's student surveys. However, many large-scale studies also point to this. Currently, there are two studies, which are relevant even with the inclusion of the COVID-19 context, conducted by the German Centre for Higher Education Research and Science Studies (DZHW) and the Techniker Krankenkasse (Techniker Health Insurance). Stress is clearly identified as the top concern. Beneath that, you have issues that contribute to stress, such as finances, alcohol consumption, and unequal treatment, among others. And how is this tackled? The Feel Good Campus, the student health management, operates based on a prevention guideline. We can provide a link to that when the podcast goes live. This guideline is the basis for our dual approach: environmental prevention and behavioral prevention. Regarding stress, we focus on behavioral prevention by offering stress management programs, addressing study-life balance, discussing sleep—good sleep leads to overall well-being—and providing guidance on how to access the right institution for specific challenges in studies. On the other hand, there's environmental prevention, where we need to say that having five exams in a week is too much, it leads to immense pressure and stress. How can we, and we're still in the early stages of this as it requires data from Potsdam's students, change the environment to ensure students' well-being? How can they transition smoothly to university life? This is where the Central Student Advisory Service and each faculty, starting with creating timetables, come into play. It varies a lot. We conducted a small survey, which isn't representative but provides insight, about the Health Day that took place for the first time this year at the University of Potsdam. It showed that differences among faculties are substantial. So, we're aiming to look into these distinct challenges. I mean, we probably all know that Law students face different challenges compared to those in the field of Education, and these challenges occur at different stages in their studies. But it's clear that the exam period, the time for taking exams, is a challenge for every student each semester.

Erika: Yes, absolutely. In fact, that was noted as one of the main objectives of the Feel Good Campus: to somehow make the university structures more health-promoting, to change them, and so on. I can imagine that this is especially one of the most challenging tasks.

Julia: Yes, exactly. It's also about addressing the fact that we all sit way too much throughout the day. There's a recent study about this, highlighting how excessive sitting affects us. If you consider the lecture halls at the university, they're designed for sitting. Everywhere you look, people are seated, and if students have back-to-back classes, they're sitting for up to nine hours a day on average. The Feel Good Campus has a solution for this too: the active and relaxing break, the Study Break Express, can be used. But of course, we may also need structural changes, introducing standing workspaces in libraries and study areas, to allow for more movement. It would be wonderful if students could stand in seminar rooms and lecture halls from time to time.

Erika: That would be so cool, really. I used to have a day from 8 am to 6 pm of continuous classes on Tuesdays.

Julia: Oh my, yes. Exactly, and then the question becomes, okay, we can't provide a standing workstation for every student, but we can talk to educators and suggest a different layout for their classes. Encourage a bit more standing, especially when presentations are being given. Perhaps incorporate walk-and-talk as group activities, so students are in motion and don't have such prolonged sitting periods. Because prolonged sitting really impacts the back and ergonomics, which can lead to headaches, and pain contributes to stress and so on. It's a long chain of events. There's this saying, I think: "Sitting is the new smoking" or something like that.

Erika: There's this... well, not a rule, but I believe it's indeed scientifically supported, where they suggest that for every eight hours of sitting, you should engage in an hour of exercise or active movement.

Julia: Yes, exactly, and we can achieve that by integrating it into everyday life, as exercise is often a concern. Can I do it? Do I want to? Do I have time for it? But if we can integrate movement more into our daily routines, I believe we're on a good path.

Erika: There's also an initiative by the Feel Good Campus, right, with a stationary bike in some co-working spaces, like at the Neues Palais?

Julia: Exactly, yes. That's a small pilot project of ours, and we've received very positive feedback so far. We placed a stationary bike with a table attached, so while you're sitting at your laptop or reading, you can pedal a bit. We invite people to participate in the survey if they try it out, and we're also considering trying it out in other parts of the university. Currently, it's being tested here at the Neues Palais, and I think by the winter semester, we'll also have it in Golm. I can imagine it working well in libraries too. I mean, it might make a beeping sound, but there are other modules where it would be wonderful to have something like under-desk cycle machines, where movement becomes integrated and part of normality again.

Erika: Yes, that's very nice. Okay, let me continue with my next question. Are there any initiatives or efforts to promote a supportive environment and foster interactions among students? Are there events or initiatives that help students connect and support each other?

Julia: Yes, we had something in the Nil Student Cellar, which has been wonderfully expanded and serves as a study zone during the day. We offered a program there that facilitated student interactions, provided a platform to ask questions, and access information. Apart from that, we don't have something like that currently, but we're now on the path of the Multiplier Program, which

involves training Feel-Good Coaches. This is where we intend to revive this aspect. Throughout the year, we participate in numerous events, including those organized by the university, such as the Campus Festival. Additionally, there are events orchestrated by the University Sports Center, like the 'Klitschnass Festival' and the 'Tour de Wohnheim', where we, alongside the Studentenwerk (Student Services) and the University Sports Center, visit dormitories to provide some variety during the afternoon study routine. The Feel Good Week, which has taken place twice already, involves us being at different campuses each day, offering a diverse program that encourages students to come together. Similarly, we have the Campus Cruiser, which is an e-bike equipped with various sports and gaming modules. It moves between campuses during the semester, often stationed near the cafeterias, allowing students to play a round of table tennis together. Students can gather there. We also had the Forum Studis, where we invited students to talk and explore areas for collaboration, as well as identify where certain issues hadn't been addressed yet. Here too, the participation was lower than we hoped for, so we need to rethink and perhaps engage with student bodies and faculties, because the issue is pressing, but it's always challenging to reach students.

Erika: Earlier, you mentioned the Feel-Good Coaches, who serve as multipliers, essentially creating and utilizing these multipliers. How exactly are students trained to become Feel-Good Coaches, and what role do they play in the Feel Good Campus project? Could you provide specific examples of how Feel-Good Coaches are meant to help other students?

Julia: Certainly, I'd be happy to. Yes, this is also a pilot project that we currently have running. The training is ending soon, and students could apply to become Feel-Good Coaches. We mainly looked for students from fields like Psychology, Sports, and related programs, but in general, any student could apply. They underwent training in four different modules, led by trainers or presenters we sought out or who are part of the university, covering topics related to student health management. This included what it actually means, communication and conversation skills, and aspects of mental health and physical activity. The role of Feel-Good Coaches, in collaboration with the Feel Good Campus and the project, is to disseminate this knowledge within the student body. The Feel-Good Coaches are themselves students and are meant to offer various activities, such as leading the Study Break Express that I mentioned earlier, conducting sessions during events, engaging with their own educators to bring student health into the conversation, as well as offering workshops and acting as initial advisors, guiding others and serving as a resource. Often, students are overwhelmed by the extensive offerings at the University of Potsdam and don't know where to turn when facing a challenge. Feel-Good Coaches are meant to bridge that gap, leading the way to students and supporting us in promoting student health.

Erika: Alright, and the Feel-Good Coaches are expected to begin their activities in the winter semester?

Julia: Exactly, yes. They underwent training during the summer, and they're set to start in the winter semester. They were already involved during the Feel Good Week, having conversations with students, understanding their needs and challenges. It became evident that these challenges vary from campus to campus. Now, they're starting with various offerings in the winter semester. I won't reveal too much yet, as we're still deep in the planning process. However, it will definitely focus on mental health. Nutrition is also being addressed; that was crucial for us. One of our goals was to focus more on healthy eating. The Studentenwerk (Student Services) already offers quite a bit, but despite that, the issue of affordable cafeteria meals for some students remains, which is really sad. We often find ourselves in this gap: "I can't afford to eat healthily." Therefore, we will provide offerings in this area, as good, healthy nutrition is also important for mental health.

Erika: Yes, everything is interconnected – nutrition, physical activity, stress, physical health. It's all intertwined. Okay, I'd like to move on to my very last question, which is a bit of a glimpse into the future. What are the future plans and goals for the Feel Good Campus? Are there specific areas or aspects that you want to focus on to further improve well-being, aside from what you've already mentioned?

Julia: Yes, for the extension of the project, we've developed a set of goals that we want to delve into more intensively and align. But yes, as we mentioned, we want to expand and integrate the aspect of physical activity into academic courses, working in collaboration with educators. Utilizing educators as multipliers, not just for their own mental well-being but also for that of students. We aim to further develop the concept of Feel-Good Coaches. This phase is the pilot; we will review it and assess what worked well, what didn't, where we need to go, what's needed. We want to expand the survey aspect. We're already in contact with various institutions at the University of Potsdam because we possess the knowledge and research expertise. How can we collaborate with students to truly understand how Potsdam students are doing and what they need? We also want to advance networking within the university to further promote student health. This includes addressing student well-being as well as occupational health management for employees – which has long existed at the university – and really pushing forward on student health. We're also looking at creating an advisory committee consisting of stakeholders from the structural sectors I mentioned earlier, including academia, to ensure the best possible outcomes. We're taking on the challenge that student well-being is highly subjective, and each individual faces their own unique challenges, in order to work deeply on this issue. And if you ask me personally, my ideal vision would be that during student orientation weeks at faculties, well-being and mindfulness become as relevant as certain academic topics, such as research skills. I want there to always be an alternative and the understanding that health is a part of my timetable – whether it's physical activity, a well-deserved break, or spending an evening with friends. These often get overlooked in our planning.

Erika: That's true. There are already some initial offerings that start during the student orientation weeks with workshops on mindfulness and such. A very, very good point. In fact, I also work for the central student advisory service and I'll be conducting orientation events in September. Three of them are very theoretical, focusing on study planning and creating timetables. But I think based on your insight, I'll include a 10-minute segment on well-being and how to incorporate it into your schedule. That's a great idea and I'm definitely going to do that.

Julia: That's fantastic, and if you need any support, please don't hesitate to reach out. Because I believe this can help normalize the topic a bit. Take it out of the stigma realm. Both the notion that "I can't talk about it when I'm not feeling well" and "wow, I'm not feeling well right now, what do I need?" And also on the side of educators, the realization that "okay, we need to pay more attention to this. It should also factor into my course planning." That would be a significant milestone, without a doubt.

Erika: Yes, I also notice that in smaller groups, especially in seminars or in my program. I'm in my master's and we started the first semester with just five people. I've noticed that the smaller the group, the easier it is for instructors to simply ask. Many of them do that frequently. I've really seen that in my first semester, and it's great. They come in and ask, "how are you? Everything okay? How was your week? Do you need anything?" Of course, not all of them, but many do. I wondered whether this is due to my new program with completely different instructors. I'm studying integrative sports, movement, and health sciences, so it makes sense that educators in this field are more attuned to the topic of health, movement, and so on. Is it related to the field of study or is it because

our group is so small and hence we're easier to approach? But I can see that something is happening, and that's a good start.

Julia: That's fantastic! But yes, in large lecture halls with 300 students, it's more challenging to ask, "how are you?" But my guiding principle is to genuinely mean "how are you," to ask the question sincerely, take the answer seriously, and also ask oneself more often. I believe that if this approach becomes more common, it could work even with 300 students. "I hope you're doing well. Today, we have this and that planned, I know it's a lot, but take it to heart. You can read more about it here and there." Just fostering a bit more connection could be a way forward. I know that some educators do it, while others do not. Student surveys indicate this as well. It's a nice example you bring up. I hope you also provide this feedback to the educators. They need it too.

Erika: Yes, yes, we've done that. We've had many evaluation rounds, both in direct conversation and online through PEP evaluations and such. So, of course, we do that.

Julia: Great.

Erika: Yes, wonderful. Well then, thank you, dear Jule, for this informative and especially interesting insight into your work. Also, thank you for giving us the opportunity to interview you for our format. And I'd like to thank all our listeners for their attention. We're saying goodbye now. Thank you very much and goodbye.

Julia: Thank you, Erika, and goodbye. See you soon.