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## **STRATEGIC IMBALANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ADDRESSING THE MISSING FOCUS ON STUDENT WELL-BEING**

*The document explores how Polish universities address Sustainable Development Goals, with a focus on SDG 3 (Health) and SDG 4 (Education). It reveals a strong emphasis on education while health-related goals remain underdeveloped in strategic documents. The research highlights gaps in mental health support, lack of measurable well-being targets, and minimal integration of trauma-informed practices. The article calls for more balanced, data-driven strategies that recognize student well-being as essential to academic success. It also presents examples of institutional efforts to connect education and health within inclusive university models.*

**Key words:** Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), SDG 3, SDG 4, Polish universities, Mental health, Higher education strategy, Student well-being, Strategic planning, Trauma support, Inclusive development

### **Problem Statement**

Polish universities are encouraged to align their strategies with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education). While education goals are clearly emphasized in vision and mission statements, health-related goals are often vague or missing. Most strategies focus on digital access, inclusion, and academic outcomes, but

overlook mental health and well-being. This creates an imbalance and a gap in research on how both goals are integrated. Universities need to ask whether giving equal focus to health and education can improve their impact. A more balanced strategy may lead to stronger student support and better community outcomes.

### **Analysis of the latest research and publications**

The issue of imbalanced strategic focus in Polish universities remains a challenge, especially when comparing the attention given to SDG 4 (Quality Education) versus SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being). Universities often showcase their commitment to education goals through digital tools, modern curricula, and access to inclusive learning. However, mental health, trauma recovery, and well-being still receive limited space in institutional strategies. This results in uneven development that does not fully support students, especially those facing complex life conditions.

The article by Budzanowska-Drzewiecka et al. (2023) [1] analyzed Polish universities' mission and vision statements to assess the integration of SDGs. Their findings revealed a strong imbalance between education and health. SDG 4 was clearly presented and often tied to digital innovation and inclusive education. In contrast, SDG 3 was either missing or mentioned without detailed plans. The study emphasized that health goals tend to be treated as secondary, not as essential components of the academic mission.

Gałat (2024) [2] reinforced these findings by showing how universities emphasize access to education but overlook long-term health support. His analysis found that education initiatives such as digital learning and inclusive teaching models receive far more attention and investment than health programs. The gap exists because education indicators are easier to promote and measure, while health goals—especially mental health—require sustained funding and specialized infrastructure.

Pietrzak (2022) [3] explored how universities present their institutional achievements to the public. His study concluded that higher education institutions promote academic success, rankings, and research visibility while ignoring well-being indicators. This communication strategy shapes the public's perception of university values and further sidelines the importance of health. Pietrzak called for a shift in public messaging that would include mental health services, student care programs, and wellness projects as

core outcomes.

To address this, Malinowska et al. (2024) [4] proposed a planning framework for SDG integration across 103 universities. Their model promotes specific and measurable goals related to both education and health. They emphasized leadership ethics, cross-department cooperation, and clear KPIs to support SDG 3 implementation. The study also highlighted the value of interdisciplinary teaching, trauma care, and academic resilience as ways to balance the focus between SDG 3 and SDG 4.

The Ministry of Science and Higher Education (2025) [5] addressed the growing mental health crisis in Polish universities. Their national report identified high levels of stress, anxiety, and lack of consistent support for students and staff, especially after COVID-19. Recommendations included reducing waiting times for counseling, hiring trained professionals, and embedding mental health into university strategies. Despite this, most institutions still have limited support structures and minimal follow-up.

A similar concern was raised by the Ombudsman for Patients' Rights (2021) [6], who documented long waiting times, low access to mental health care, and lack of follow-up for university students. The report stressed that without formal cooperation between universities and public health systems, many students will continue to go unsupported. The Ombudsman called for the development of national standards and budget allocations to ensure consistent care and psychological safety in academic spaces.

### **Purpose of the article**

This article explores how Polish universities include SDG 3 (Health) and SDG 4 (Education) in their mission and vision statements. It identifies gaps in health-related goals and highlights the need for a more balanced approach. The aim is to propose practical ways for universities to strengthen mental health support and align strategies with both educational and well-being priorities.

### **Presentation of the research material**

The concept of inclusive development under SDGs highlights the need to address both educational and health inequalities, especially among vulnerable groups such as refugees, students with disabilities, and those affected by trauma. In Poland, the impact of large-scale migration, the COVID-19 pandemic, and limited access to mental health

services has created new demands on the higher education sector. These issues require universities to move beyond traditional teaching roles and adopt strategies that include psychosocial support, mental health care, and trauma-informed education.

Universities must apply multi-level strategies that connect daily academic operations (micro), internal institutional planning (meso), and broader public policy (macro). Without this integration, student services remain fragmented. For example, delays in mental health services and the lack of accessible support systems mirror problems seen in other European contexts, like the UK. This weakens student retention and long-term academic performance.

The article is based on qualitative analysis of mission and vision statements from Polish public universities. It shows that SDG 4 is frequently cited—often linked to digital learning, equal access, and innovation. SDG 3 is either vague or absent, typically framed in terms like “safe environment” without measurable goals. Urban universities reference the SDGs more often than smaller or regional ones, creating inequality in how social needs are addressed across institutions.

The University of Warsaw’s strategy (2023) demonstrates progress. It integrates mental health services, inclusive teaching, and digital support into a comprehensive framework. Stakeholder input and survey data informed the new approach, which supports both academic success and student well-being. However, the strategy still lacks timelines and clear evaluation methods, limiting its long-term impact. Despite this, it stands as a positive example for other institutions in Poland and the EU.

A recent academic conference confirmed these concerns and highlighted practical solutions. Experts emphasized that universities should support displaced and trauma-affected populations by building inclusive environments that go beyond teaching. Discussions included the need for teacher resilience, trauma-sensitive methods, and mental health training. Although funding remains a challenge, partnerships between academic institutions, NGOs, and public agencies were shown to improve outcomes.

This section shows that student success depends not only on quality education but also on well-being. Universities must reframe their missions to reflect this dual responsibility. Strengthening health and education together is essential for long-term

recovery and social stability.

### **Conclusions and perspectives for further research**

Polish universities show strong commitment to SDG 4, but SDG 3 remains underdeveloped in most strategies. Health and well-being are often mentioned without concrete plans or measurable outcomes. A more balanced approach is needed to improve student success and institutional responsibility. Future research should explore how universities can integrate mental health programs into their core strategies, monitor progress through data, and involve students in designing support systems. Long-term studies could also examine how strategic changes affect student outcomes and community well-being.

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