

Teenagers' well-being seems to have little effect on GCSE performance

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Pupils who feel particularly joyful do not do any better in their GCSEs than peers who do not feel as happy, according to UCL research led by Professor John Jerrim.

The peer-reviewed study, published in *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice* analyzed data from 4,000 [pupils](#) aged 15 and 16 in England from PISA (Program of International Assessment) 2018. In the sample, Year 11 pupils were asked how often they usually felt happy, lively, joyful, cheerful, or proud using a four-point scale of never to always.

Their responses were divided into three groups: low levels of well-being (the least happy 20%), high levels of well-being (the happiest 20%) and those who were in-between. Professor Jerrim then compared the GCSE results of these three groups to investigate the link between well-being and exam performance.

Professor Jerrim (UCL Social Research Institute based at IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society) said: "This [academic year](#) we are due to see the return of GCSE examinations after a COVID-enforced two-year hiatus. Before the pandemic hit, there was much concern about how these high-stakes examinations may be affecting young people's mental health.

"At the same time, it was recognized that those Year 11s who were struggling with their well-being may see their GCSE grades suffer as a result. The paper finds that the link between the well-being of Year 11 pupils and the GCSE grades they achieve is not actually as strong as you might think."

The results show that the probability of achieving at least a grade 4 (grade C) in mathematics by level of well-being in Year 11 are 75% for the "low well-being" group, 78% for the "average well-being" group, and 76% for the "high well-being" group.

Professor Jerrim explained: "The findings show that differences in GCSE grades when compared with well-being scores, are, on the whole,

pretty small. And having low levels of well-being in Year 11 is associated with only a modest decrease in the probability of achieving at least a grade 4 in mathematics.

"The findings suggest that any claims of a link between negative emotion, fear of failure and educational outcomes are somewhat exaggerated and in reality, these emotions seem to be largely unrelated to young people's performance in high-stakes examinations.

"Policy and practice should focus upon such emotions as being of importance and concern in their own right, rather than due to any potential link with future educational outcomes."

Professor Jerrim highlights limitations to the findings including the fact that data was only collected at one [single point](#) in time and capturing variation in young people's emotions throughout their time at [secondary school](#), would help facilitate a more detailed analysis of the link between well-being and academic achievement.

The study also points out that [data](#) used in this research was collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had profound impact upon young people's well-being and school experiences.

More information: John Jerrim, The power of positive emotions? The link between young people's positive and negative affect and performance in high-stakes examinations, *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/0969594X.2022.2054941](https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594X.2022.2054941). www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0969594X.2022.2054941

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