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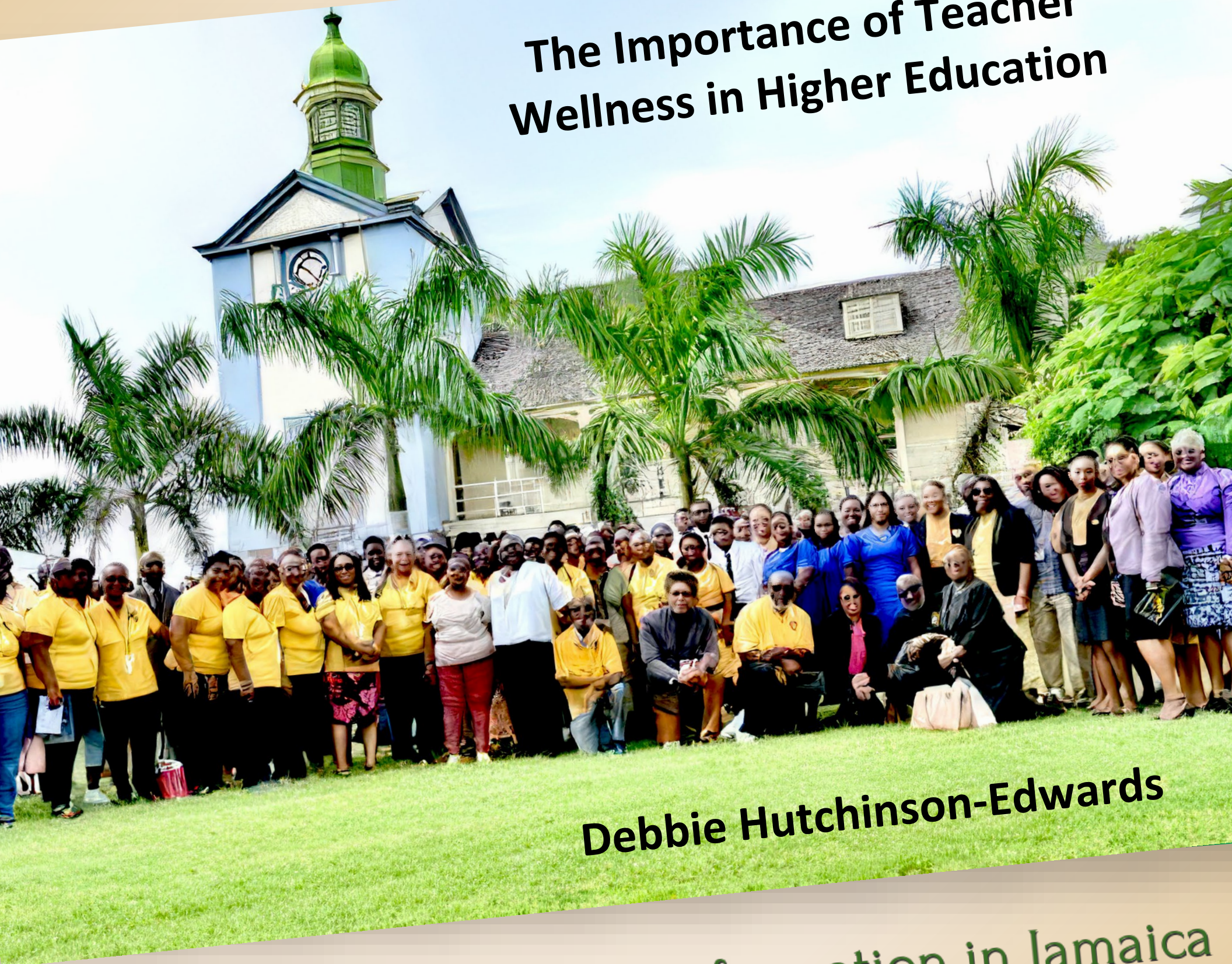
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**The Importance of Teacher
Wellness in Higher Education**



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Advancing Educational Transformation in Jamaica



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The Importance of Teacher Wellness in Higher Education

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Since the COVID-19 pandemic, teacher wellness has become an increasingly important topic within education. Although teaching at the tertiary level is often perceived as having fewer barriers to wellness than other educational settings, higher education lecturers face numerous challenges that can affect their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. This growing concern reflects a broader recognition that the success of education depends not only on what is taught but also on the well-being of those who teach. Education has long been regarded as the cornerstone of national development, social mobility, and economic prosperity.

While educational success has traditionally been measured by students' academic performance, examination results, and graduation rates, there is increasing recognition that meaningful teaching and learning cannot occur unless equal attention is given to the overall wellness of teachers. Teacher well-being is now widely recognized as a critical factor influencing teaching quality, learning environments, and student outcomes. Wellness is therefore not merely an outcome of education but a fundamental prerequisite for quality teaching, effective learning, and sustainable educational development (OECD, 2020).

Understanding Lecturer Wellness

To fully appreciate the importance of lecturer wellness in higher education, it is first necessary to understand what wellness encompasses. Wellness extends beyond the absence of illness and is widely recognized as a multidimensional concept that includes physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being (McMullin, 2024). Physical wellness includes proper nutrition, regular physical activity, adequate sleep, and access to healthcare. Mental wellness refers to one's ability to cope with stress, think clearly, and maintain psychological resilience. Emotional wellness involves understanding and managing emotions while maintaining healthy self-esteem and positive relationships. Social wellness focuses on developing meaningful connections with colleagues, families, and communities, while spiritual wellness reflects one's sense of purpose, values, integrity, hope, and moral responsibility.

When these dimensions are nurtured, individuals are better equipped to cope with life's challenges and perform at their fullest potential. For lecturers, maintaining these dimensions of wellness is particularly important, as the demands of teaching, research, student supervision, academic advising, and institutional service require sustained physical energy, emotional resilience, and mental clarity. When lecturers are well, they are better positioned to contribute positively to the academic community.



The Reality of Lecturer Wellness in Higher Education

Despite the importance of these dimensions of wellness, they are often overlooked within higher education. Lecturers and other academic staff are expected to balance teaching, research, student supervision, administrative responsibilities, and community engagement, yet the demands associated with these multiple roles can place considerable strain on their well-being.

Unfortunately, the health and wellness of teachers have often taken a back seat within educational systems. Oftentimes, as lecturers, we are told that our 18 contact hours are what we are employed to do. However, these hours do not include research, student consultations, marking, supervising students, professional development, course reviews, or the many meetings and staff development sessions we must attend. Policies frequently prioritize curriculum reform, standardized assessments, and accountability measures while giving insufficient attention to the people responsible for delivering education. As a result, many educators have silently endured chronic stress, emotional exhaustion, and overwhelming workloads. The consequences of lecturer wellness extend far beyond individual health; they directly influence the quality of teaching, learning, and student outcomes in higher education.



Reflecting on my own experience, after serving more than eighteen (18) years in education without taking a vacation from teaching, I came to the realization that I needed to prioritize my own well-being. As a result, I made the decision to take my vacation leave in 2025. While I often joke that taking this leave was one of the best decisions I have ever made, there is a great deal of truth in that statement. The time away provided the rest and renewal that I desperately needed, allowing me to return with renewed energy, fresh perspectives, and the inspiration to write this article. My experience reinforced the importance of lecturer wellness and demonstrated that investing in one's own well-being is not a luxury but a necessity for sustaining excellence in teaching and scholarship.

Research has consistently shown that teacher wellness directly influences instructional quality, student engagement, classroom management, and student achievement. Teachers who are mentally and emotionally healthy are more enthusiastic, patient, creative, and capable of building positive relationships with their students they are more likely to design engaging lessons, differentiate instruction to meet diverse learning needs, and foster classroom environments where students feel safe and valued. In higher education, these qualities enable lecturers to facilitate critical thinking, encourage independent learning, promote collaboration, and support the professional growth of adult learners.

In contrast, teachers experiencing burnout often struggle with emotional exhaustion, reduced professional accomplishment, and depersonalization. Burnout can also diminish lecturers' capacity to supervise research, provide constructive feedback, engage in scholarly activities, and maintain productive relationships with students and colleagues. It also contributes to increased absenteeism, high turnover, and the growing migration of Caribbean teachers to countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States in search of improved working conditions and better work-life balance. These challenges not only affect individual lecturers but also place significant pressure on higher education institutions, which may experience disruptions in programme delivery, reduced institutional capacity, and difficulties in retaining experienced academic staff.



The growing emphasis on lecturer wellness is also supported by international research. The 2024 OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) found that teacher well-being is closely associated with job satisfaction and teaching quality. Excessive administrative responsibilities, increasing classroom demands, inadequate support systems, and heavy workloads were identified as significant contributors to declining teacher well-being. These findings mirror the realities experienced by many educators across the Caribbean. Although TALIS focuses primarily on school educators, the findings are equally relevant to higher education, where lecturers face comparable challenges. Similar pressures arise from increasing student enrolment, research productivity expectations, accreditation requirements, grant writing, and service commitments, all of which place considerable demands on lecturers' time, energy, and overall well-being.

These competing responsibilities reinforce the importance of prioritising lecturer wellness as a key component of institutional effectiveness and teaching excellence. Beyond its impact on lecturers themselves, wellness has significant implications for student learning. Teacher wellness does not only affect teachers themselves; it profoundly influences student outcomes. Research indicates that students taught by highly stressed or burned-out teachers often demonstrate lower academic achievement, reduced motivation, and increased behavioural challenges. A classroom reflects the emotional climate established by the teacher. When educators are supported, students are more likely to flourish academically and socially.

Supporting Lecturer Wellness

Looking back on the many days when I have left work feeling mentally and physically exhausted, I have often wondered whether this is simply part of being a lecturer or whether it reflects a much deeper issue within higher education. The demands of teaching, preparing lectures, supervising students, responding to emails, attending meetings, and meeting institutional deadlines can easily become overwhelming. These experiences have led me to reflect on the importance of lecturer wellness—not simply as a personal concern but as an essential component of effective teaching and learning.

Having reflected on these experiences, I believe the conversation must now shift from recognising the problem to identifying how higher education institutions can better support wellness among lecturers

Equally important, leadership plays a significant role in promoting lecturer wellness. Supportive leaders who encourage collaboration, recognize staff achievements, communicate openly, and prioritise employee well-being contribute significantly to lecturer morale and job satisfaction. As lecturers, we are more likely to remain motivated, engaged, and committed to our profession when our contributions are recognised and when we feel trusted and supported by institutional leaders. Conversely, authoritarian leadership, excessive monitoring, unrealistic expectations, and poor communication can accelerate stress and burnout.

Higher education institutions should therefore move beyond isolated wellness initiatives and establish comprehensive wellness programmes that include employee assistance services, counselling, peer mentoring, stress management workshops, wellness committees, and opportunities for professional collaboration. Embedding these initiatives into institutional policies and everyday practice would provide meaningful support systems that promote the physical, mental, emotional, and professional well-being of academic staff.

Another strategy that would make a difference is reducing unnecessary administrative burdens while strengthening professional support structures. Many lecturers find themselves balancing teaching, research, publishing, curriculum development, student advising, committee work, accreditation requirements, and community service. When these responsibilities become overwhelming, they reduce the time and energy available for high-quality teaching, positive interactions with students, and scholarly productivity.

Policy reform remains essential if wellness is to become embedded within higher education systems. Universities and colleges should develop comprehensive wellness policies that prioritise lecturer well-being. These policies should include increased investment in employee assistance programmes, counselling services, wellness training, annual wellness assessments, and opportunities for professional development. Bearing in mind what works well in our jurisdiction as not a one size fits all.



I also believe that opportunities for professional collaboration should be intentionally fostered. Working alongside supportive colleagues through peer mentoring, collaborative teaching, and communities of practice can strengthen professional confidence, reduce feelings of isolation, and create a stronger sense of belonging within the institution.

Investment in wellness should not be viewed as an additional educational expense but rather as a strategic investment in educational quality. Poor lecturer health contributes to increased absenteeism, reduced productivity, staff turnover, and declining educational outcomes.

Conclusion

Looking back on those exhausting days, I no longer believe these roles and responsibilities should simply be accepted as part of academic life. Rather, they have reminded me that lecturer wellness is not solely an individual responsibility but a shared institutional commitment. Educational excellence depends on creating environments where lecturers are respected, supported, and empowered to thrive.

I believe higher education institutions must be intentional in developing policies and support systems that promote lecturer wellness. These policies should not remain on paper but should be embedded in everyday practice, creating conditions where lecturers can truly benefit and maintain healthy, balanced, and productive professional lives.

Ultimately, investing in lecturer wellness is an investment in better teaching, richer learning experiences, stronger institutions, and, most importantly, the success of the students we serve. My hope is that this article encourages meaningful conversations and practical action, reminding us that as we invest in the well-being of those who educate others, we strengthen the future of higher education itself.



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Debbie Hutchinson-Edwards is a Lecturer at The Mico University College for over 18 years, contributing significantly to teacher education and institutional development. Throughout her tenure, she has held leadership roles including Acting Head of the Department of Physical Education, Programme Coordinator for the Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching Programme, Acting Second Vice President of the Mico Academic Staff Association, and Chair of the Mico Academic Staff Association Welfare Committee. Debbie holds a Diploma in Teaching from The Mico University College, a Master's degree in Physical Education and Sports from the International School of Physical Education and Sports, Cuba, and an Executive Master's in Educational Management from The Mico University College. She remains committed to advancing teacher education, educational leadership, and student development through excellence in teaching, service, and professional practice. 

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