



Building Our Community's Understanding of Wellbeing in Higher Education

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Djøf

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Wellbeing in Higher Education

Purpose: Share your personal and professional perspectives on what wellbeing means in the context of higher education.

Thinking Points:

- How do you define wellbeing, both for staff and students?
- What factors do you think influence wellbeing in the academic environment?
- Are there specific practices or strategies that have worked well to promote wellbeing in your institution or department?



Sharing: Share your key insights on [Padlet](https://warwick.padlet.org/eriva6/dd0tw2ne0r0k3zl5) (<https://warwick.padlet.org/eriva6/dd0tw2ne0r0k3zl5>)

Final goal: The aim is to gather diverse perspectives on wellbeing and of its importance in higher education.

Wellbeing in Higher Education

- The higher education sector in Europe (and internationally) has become increasingly aware of and concerned about the **declining mental health and wellbeing of its staff and students.**
 - Universities are more aware than ever that **wellbeing needs to be at the forefront of policy and strategy and high on academic research agendas.**
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- More **strategic, organic and effective approach;**
 - Guidance on how to achieve this.



Wellbeing in Higher Education

The mental health and wellbeing of students and staff is key to the success of universities, underpinning performance, productivity, learning, teaching, retention and reputation.

Example:

- Research has shown that students with wellbeing and mental health difficulties are:
 - Less likely to complete a course or module (Richardson, 2015)
 - Less likely to attain higher grades (Eisenberg *et al*, 2009)
 - More likely to drop out of university (Baker, 2017)
 - More likely to experience long term consequences in terms of future employment, earning potential and overall health (Eisenberg *et al*, 2007)

Progression

Completion

Attainment

Employment

Additionally, while learning has been shown to help mental wellbeing, *university learning environments and culture* has been shown to *trigger mental health and wellbeing issues* (Tinklin *et al*, 2005; Markoulakis and Kirsh, 2013; Ribeiro *et al*, 2018).

Wellbeing in Higher Education – Key Barriers

Literature shows that higher education staff and students experience a high prevalence of **problems and barriers** related to mental health and wellbeing.

These include issues related to:

Culture and common practices of *teaching and research* within higher education, which prioritise individualism and competition rather than community and wellbeing;

Inequalities, discrimination and marginalisation within higher education, which affect high numbers of staff and students;

The impacts on staff and student wellbeing of wider global challenges and crises, when combined with stressful work or study environments.

Little acknowledgement of the **interlinked relationship between staff and student wellbeing** within HE.



Wellbeing in Higher Education – Key Barriers

Current Challenges	Implications
Student vs Staff Wellbeing Culture	Institutional focus on policies and approaches that explicitly or implicitly prioritise student wellbeing , leaving staff wellbeing disjointed and undervalued.
Structural and Cultural Pressures	<p>Neo-liberal environments impose cognitive, emotional, and practical demands on staff, associated with rising cases of stress and anxiety (Loveday, 2018; Lee et al., 2022), and the onus being placed on the individual to take personal responsibility for this.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excessive workload (Pace et al., 2021) that often result in ‘overwork’ (Erickson <i>et al.</i>, 2021), defined as ‘working 50 or more hours per week’ (Kelly <i>et al.</i>, 2014; Cha, 2013). • Work-life imbalance or ‘work-work balance’ (Griffin, 2022; Caretta, <i>et al.</i> 2018). • Culture of performativity - marketised higher education promotes competitiveness and carelessness, devaluing self-care and caring responsibilities (Lynch, 2010; Noddings, 2003, Jayman <i>et al.</i>, 2022). • Unrecognised pastoral support to students (often gendered) (Heijstra <i>et al.</i>, 2017). <p><i>Impact on teaching and support - stressed, burnt-out staff are less able to fully engage and support students. "You cannot pour from an empty cup."</i></p>
Competitive Metrics and Contracts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outcomes-based performance metrics (Berg, et al., 2016; Morrish, 2019); • Precarious and unfavourable contracts are widespread in the European academic arena (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017); • Financial pressures.

Wellbeing in Higher Education – Key Barriers

Shared Forms of Discrimination

Staff and students often face **similar forms of discrimination:**

- Gender
- Sexual orientation
- Religious beliefs
- Disability

- These forms of discrimination may manifest differently, but they share root causes.
- Staff on precarious contracts - often junior positions (Ates and Brechelmacher, 2013) - are particularly vulnerable to harassment, abuse of power, discrimination, and exploitation (Bahr *et al.*, 2021).

Global Context

Recent **global events** have exacerbated challenges for *both* students and staff:

- Climate Change
- COVID-19 pandemic
- Economic uncertainty
- Ongoing wars in Europe and beyond

These crises have intensified stress, uncertainty, and emotional burdens for both staff and students, impacting learning and working experiences.



Staff and student wellbeing are not separate issues, but need to be considered as mutually dependent parts of the same ecosystem. Working towards an integrated, holistic approach to staff and student wellbeing would be beneficial for all.

Wellbeing in Higher Education – A Way Forward

Universities can be places that are good for the wellbeing and mental health of our communities.

The evidence clearly shows that our environment is a key determinant of physical, mental, cultural, social health.

All universities already have a whole university impact on mental health and wellbeing of staff and students – we must do this consciously.

Call to universities to adopt a ***whole-university approach to mental health and wellbeing*** and become places that promote the mental health and wellbeing of all members of the university community.



Wellbeing in Higher Education – A Way Forward

“A whole university approach must include both adequately resourced, effective and accessible mental health and wellbeing services and proactive interventions across all its remits.

It must provide an environment and culture that reduces poor mental health, as well as supporting good mental health and wellbeing, facilitating staff and students to develop insight, understanding and skills to manage and maintain their own wellbeing.”

Hughes, G. & Spanner, L. (2019)



Wellbeing in Higher Education – A Way Forward

Core Components of a Whole-University Approach

1. Institutional Culture

- Reflect mental wellbeing in **values** and **mission statements**.
- Work to eliminate **toxic cultures** that harm wellbeing.
- Promote **compassionate leadership**, inspired by successful health and social care models.
- Foster a culture of **compassion, community, connection, and belonging**, promoting mental wellbeing for all members of the institution.

2. Inclusive Student Support

- Design services that provide **ongoing, accessible support** for students throughout their academic journey.
- Ensure support is inclusive and responsive to diverse needs.
- Offer **culturally competent counselling services** to meet the diverse needs of the university community.



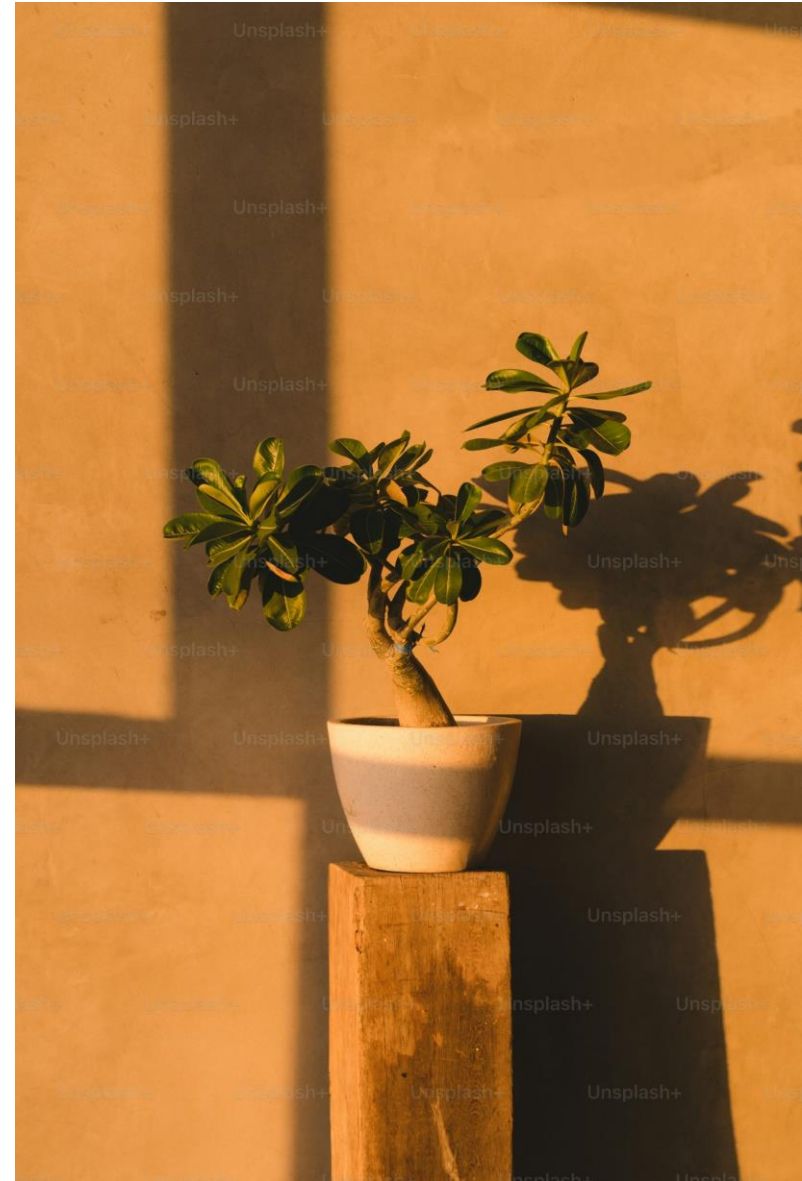
Wellbeing in Higher Education – A Way Forward

3. Curricula, Pedagogy, and Assessment

- Develop inclusive curricula and assessment practices that consider mental wellbeing.
- Commit to **staff development** for wellbeing positive and inclusive teaching practices.
- Enhance **mental health and wellbeing literacy** for both staff and students to build awareness and understanding.

4. Processes and Administration

- Integrate **quality assurance processes** to monitor and improve mental wellbeing support across all remits of the institution.
- Create inclusive administrative policies, such as:
 - ✓ **Equality Impact Assessments** to embed accountability for mental wellbeing.



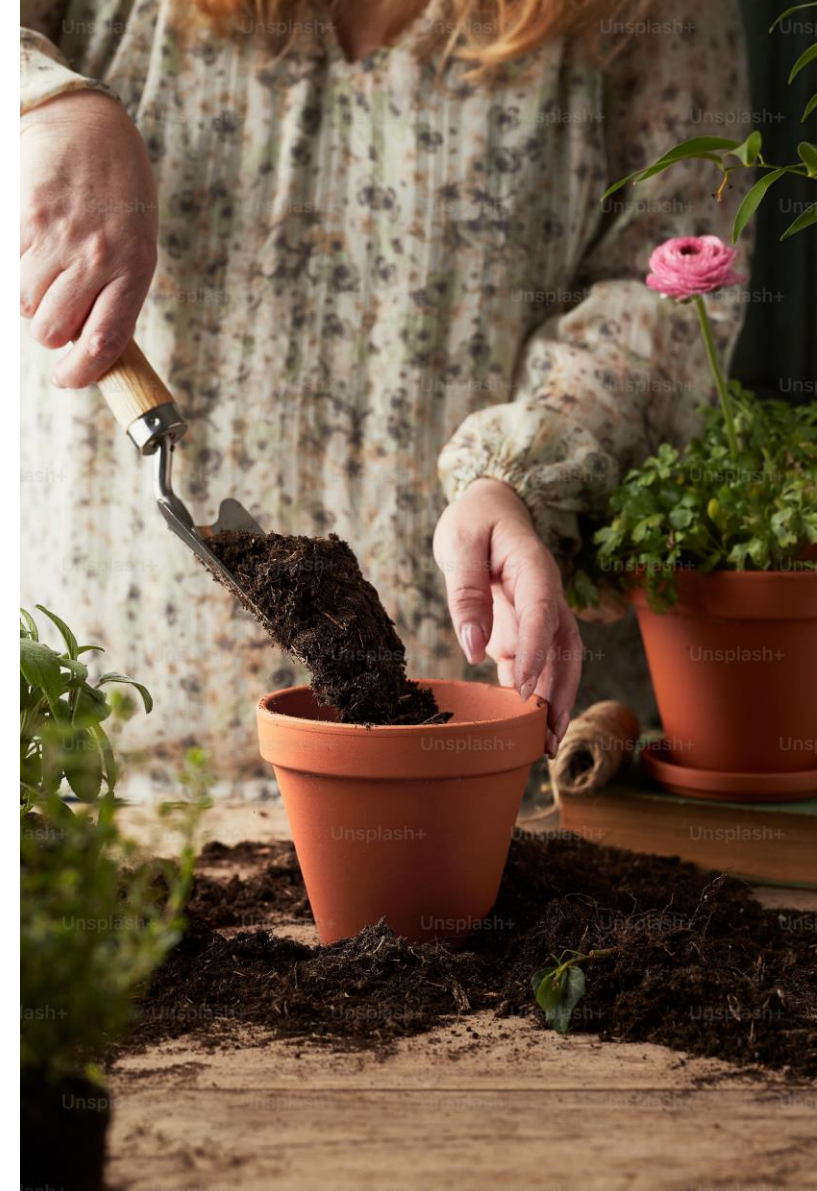
Wellbeing in Higher Education – A Way Forward

4. Processes and Administration

- Support staff and students affected by external circumstances through **flexible and compassionate policies**, such as inclusive leave and adjustment options:
 - ✓ Study deferrals.
 - ✓ Assignment extensions.
 - ✓ Contingency leave or leaves of absence without judgement or career/study impact.

5. Staffing Practices

- Ensure **supportive working conditions**, training, and inclusive recruitment and promotion practices.
- Eliminate bias or discrimination in staff policies.



Wellbeing in Higher Education – A Way Forward

Key Recommendations

- University leaders must take **ownership** and **accountability**, ensuring mental health is integrated across **cultures, systems, and practices** in higher education.
- **Staff and students** play a critical role in developing integrated approaches, which should prioritize **participatory practices** that involve the entire university community (Piper, R., Emmanuel, T. 2019; Slates, S., Cook-Sather, A., Riva, E., *et al.*, 2023, Wavehill, 2022, Wilson S., L., Riva E., Lister K. 2024; Riva, E., Gracia, L., Limb, R., 2022).



Wellbeing in the Curriculum

Curriculum and academics are the only guaranteed contact points between students and their university.



PROFESSIONAL JOBS EVENTS RANKINGS STUDENT S

Are universities encouraging students to believe hard study is bad for their mental health?

It is widely acknowledged that universities need to do more to support student mental health. Yet many academics and service staff are worried that well-intentioned initiatives pathologise ordinary anxieties and can do harm as well as good. Kathryn Ecclestone listens to their concerns

April 2, 2020

[Kathryn Ecclestone](#)

Twitter: [@EcclestoneK](#)



Wellbeing in the Curriculum



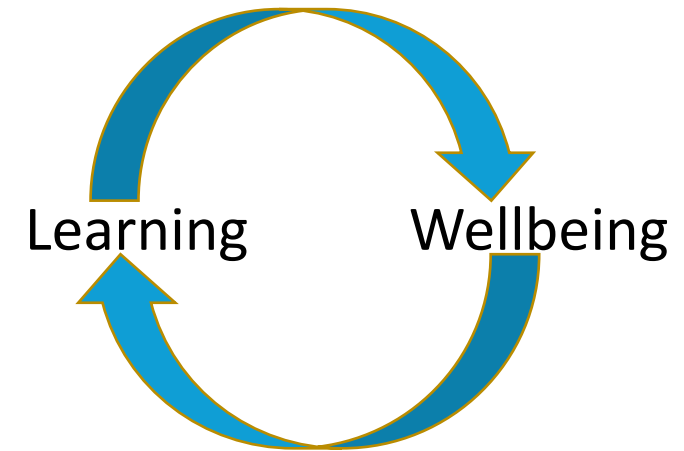
Student wellbeing is integral to learning



Poor student wellbeing can impact academic achievement with consequences for continuation and attainment.



Student wellbeing experience is impacted by T&L environments



Progression

Completion

Attainment

Employment

By 'curriculum' we include 'all the learning which is planned or guided' (Kerr, 1968) including attitudes, values and skills as well as content. This includes Careers, the Library, the VLE, Student Support, etc.

Wellbeing in the Curriculum

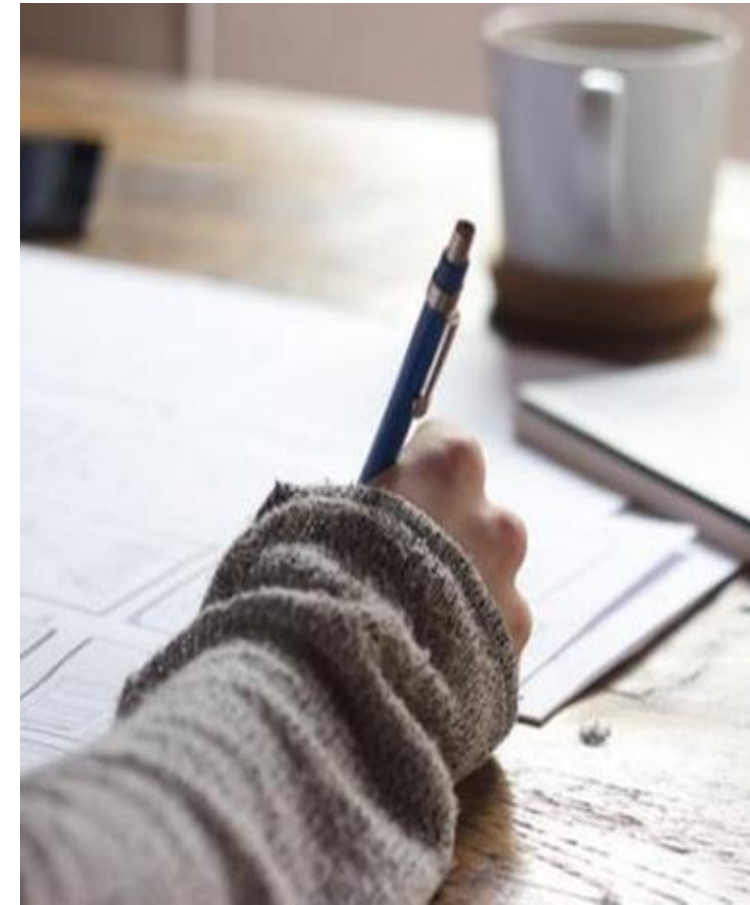
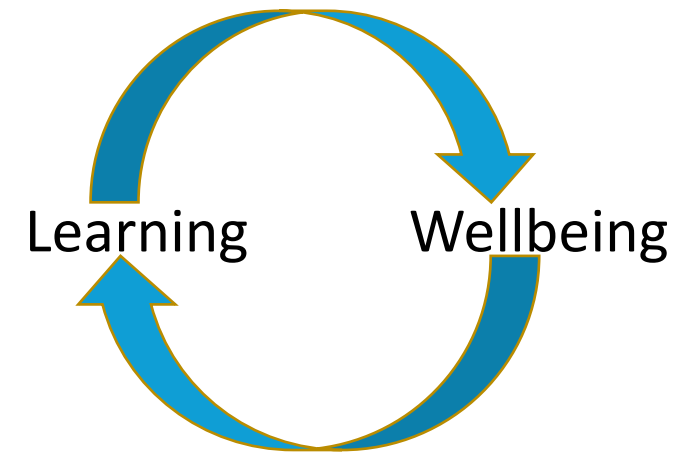
Teaching and learning practices contribute to experiences of wellbeing.

The experiences involved in learning (classroom culture, physical learning spaces, course design, curriculum, assessment, mode of delivery, etc.) can have either a positive or a negative impact on health and wellbeing.

The learning experience can impact:

- the level of **stress** that students feel,
- the degree to which they feel **connected** to others,
- the extent to which they feel meaningfully **engaged** in their university experience.

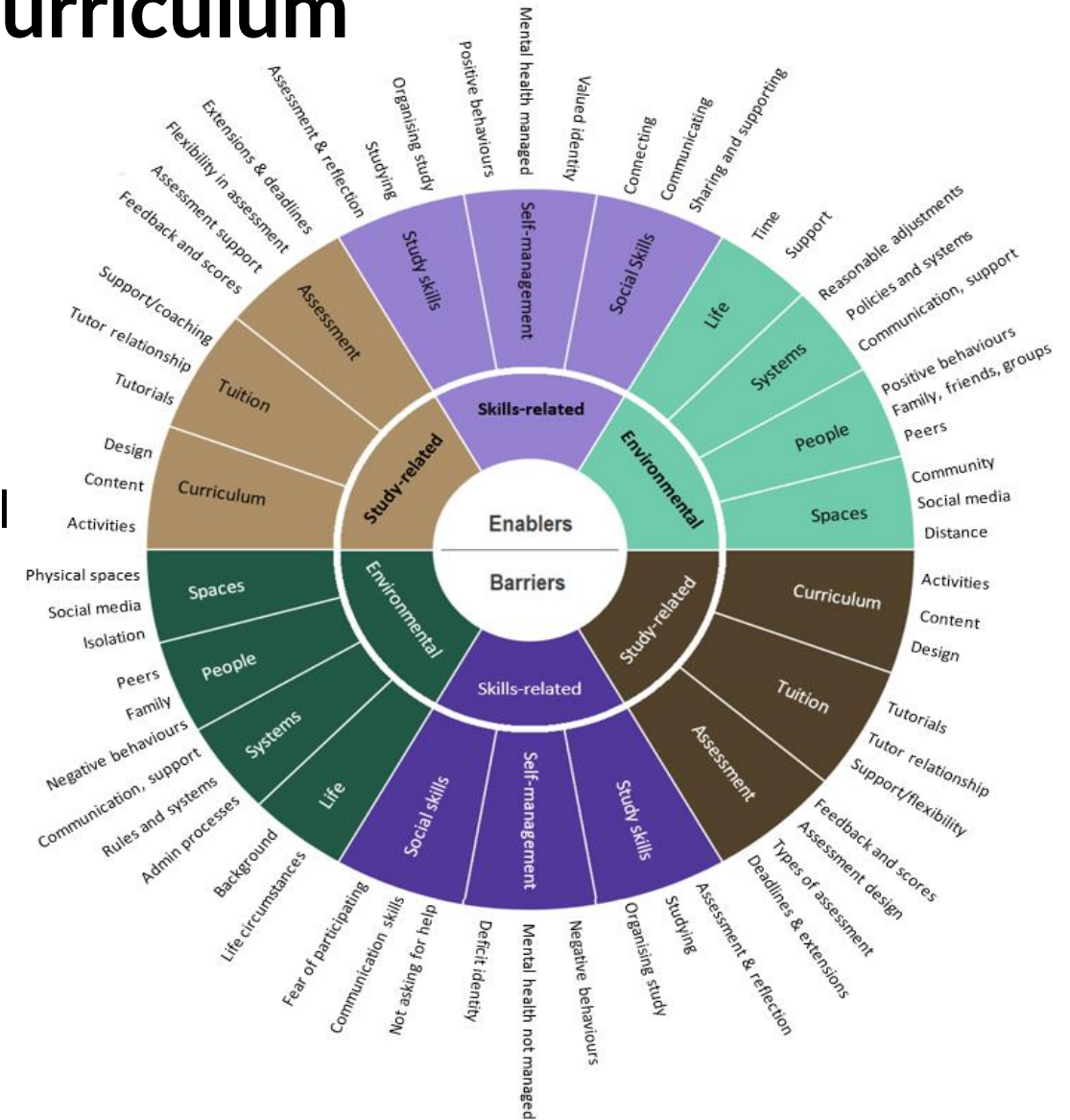
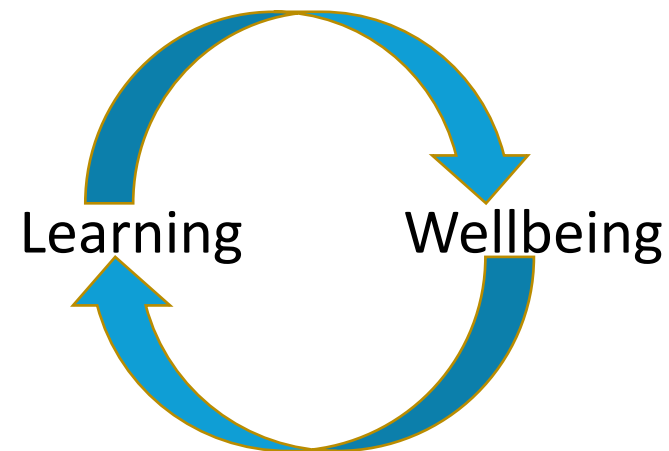
The challenges linked to students' wellbeing need to be addressed also by ensuring that classroom and learning environments support health and wellbeing, within the classroom's walls, as part of the curriculum.



Wellbeing in the Curriculum

Barriers and Enablers to wellbeing

- Study related: Assessment, Curriculum and Tuition
- Skills Related: Study skills, Self-management, Social skills
- Environmental: Spaces, People, Systems, Life



Kate Lister, Jane Seale & Chris Douce (2021): Mental health in distance learning: a taxonomy of barriers and enablers to student mental wellbeing, Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning, DOI: 10.1080/02680513.2021.1899907

Wellbeing in the Curriculum

Study Related: Taught Curriculum and Assessment

The Purpose of...

assessment
is to
INCREASE
quality.



evaluation
is to **JUDGE**
quality.



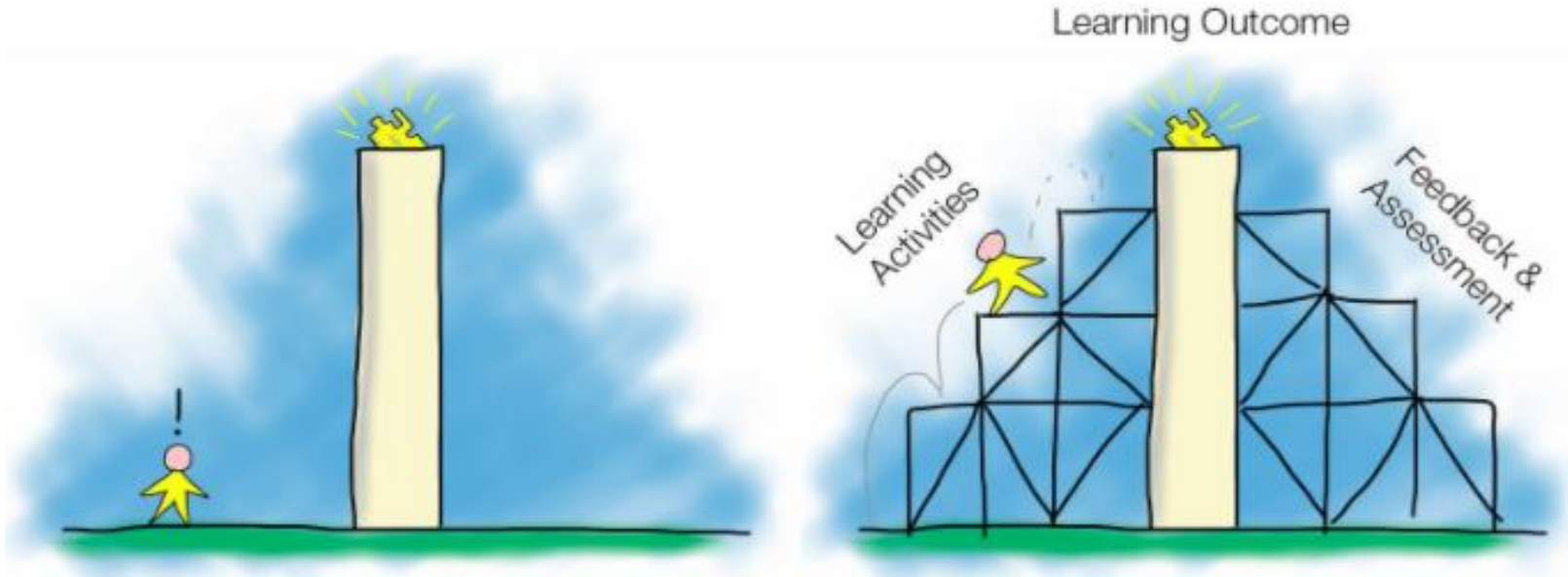
- **Understanding Challenges:** Focus on **what is hard** and **why it is hard** to create meaningful academic challenges. *Learning-focused Curriculum*
- **Supportive Tasks vs Stress-Inducing Tasks:** to ensure tasks are clear and achievable by helping students:
 - ❖ Understand **what is required** and how to approach the work **vs** Ambiguity about requirements or skills needed.
 - ❖ Have opportunities to **practice** and develop necessary skills **vs** Assumptions about students' existing skills or knowledge

Outcomes of a Thoughtful Curriculum

- Promotes a **deep learning approach**.
- Enhances the **meaningfulness** of the curriculum.
- Provides **sustainable challenges** that support both learning and wellbeing.

Wellbeing in the Curriculum

Skills Related: Study Skills, Self-management...



Traditional Approaches and Challenges

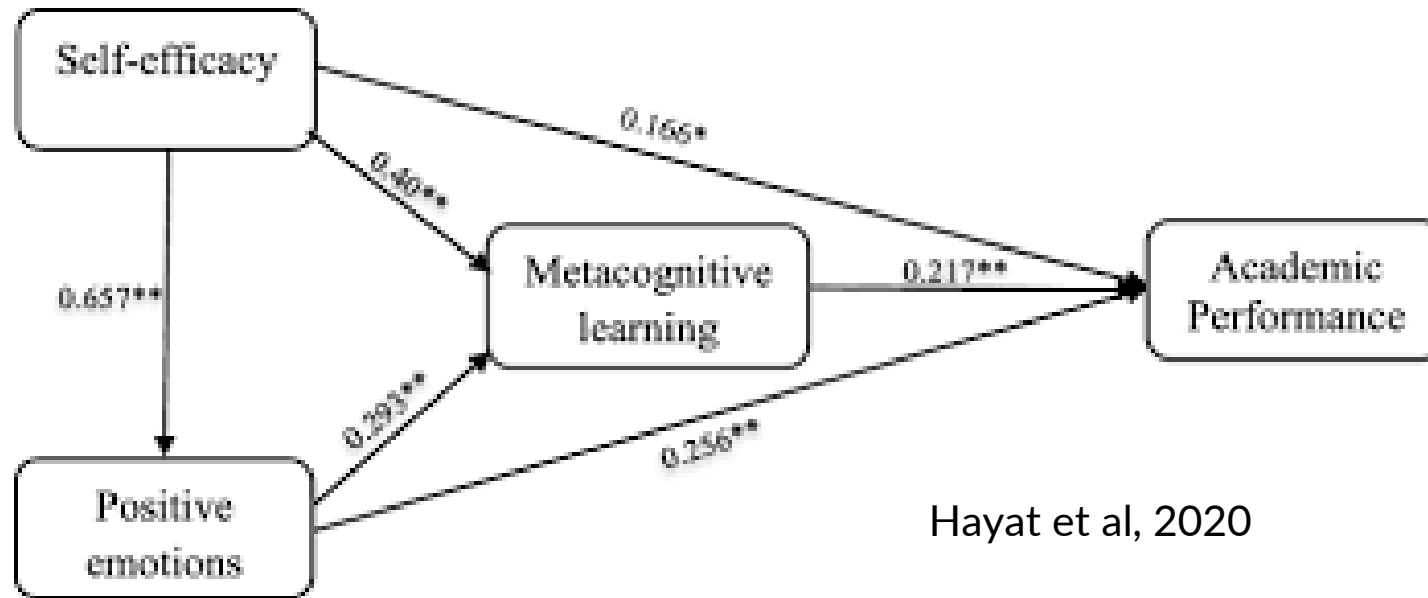
- **Intervention Focus:** Often targets underprepared students in the first weeks of term.
- **Barriers to Access:** Those who need support most may face challenges like:
 - Caring responsibilities or part-time work.
 - Commuting to campus.
- **Avoidance Behaviour:** Students aware of their struggles may instinctively avoid areas of difficulty.

Effective Preparation Strategies

- **Embed Support in the Curriculum!:** Remove barriers by integrating necessary skills directly into coursework.
- **Subject-Specific Skills:** Teaching through the subject is more effective than generic study skills.
- **Teach How to Be a Student:** Ensure students develop the skills and confidence to engage fully in academic life.

Wellbeing in the Curriculum

Skills Related: Study Skills, Self-management...



Hayat et al, 2020

Learner development is not just about delivering good content—learning isn't as simple as inputting information into students' minds. Many factors, such as emotions, interact with learning. Exam anxiety can lead to avoidance behaviour, poor revision techniques, surface-level learning, and underperformance, creating a vicious cycle.

Intervening at the **study skills level**, such as teaching students how to revise effectively, can break this cycle. Increased confidence and reduced anxiety lead to better performance and a **healthier, more positive learning experience**.

Wellbeing in the Curriculum

Environmental: Social Belonging



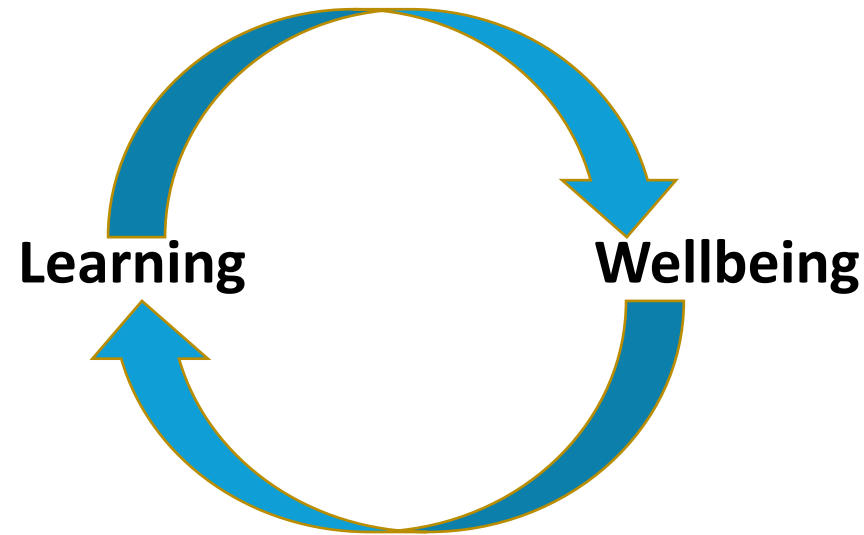
Key Insights from Students

- Fear of **embarrassment** can be a significant barrier to learning, sometimes leading to students dropping out of classes.
- Social belonging creates a sense of **psychological safety**, enabling students to feel comfortable:
 - Making mistakes.
 - Asking questions without fear of judgement.

Essential Components for a Supportive Classroom

- **Psychological Safety:** A safe environment that promotes confidence in participation.
- **Social Community:** Foster collaboration and mutual respect among students.
- **Inclusivity:** Ensure all students feel valued and included.
- **Clearly Defined Roles and Relationships:** Establish expectations and respectful interactions for a cohesive learning experience.

Wellbeing in the Curriculum




A **helpful academic challenge** is essential for good wellbeing and learning. This can be supported ***within the curriculum*** by fostering social belonging, using scaffolded design, and promoting learner development.




Wellbeing in the Curriculum

- The Warwick Wellbeing Library is a practical response that aims to address the issues presented (Lister, Riva et al., 2022).
- Create an online space for Warwick community to discover helpful teaching approaches, offering support to students and staff who aim to sustain/create wellbeing mindful T&L environments.
- Celebrate existing Warwick excellence in this pedagogic field through capturing case studies and experiences - **co-created, community-rooted** response (Riva, 2021).
- To explore it:
https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/academy/funding/2016-17fundedprojects/wellbeingpedagogieslibrary/

Warwick Wellbeing Pedagogies Library




[Before you start](#)




0:00 / 6:50

[Library Introduction](#)



[Rationale for the Project](#)



[Categories](#)

[Student-Centred Environment](#)

[Intercultural and International Integration](#)

[Emotional Intelligence](#)

[Staff and Student Wellbeing](#)

[Be well, learn well](#)

[Student library](#)

[To explore and filter all pedagogies](#)

[For an overview of all the pedagogies and to filter them according to a variety of useful criteria \(i.e. class size, class type, conditions to wellbeing, etc. please click here.](#)

[Feedback](#)

Please share with us your experience of using the library

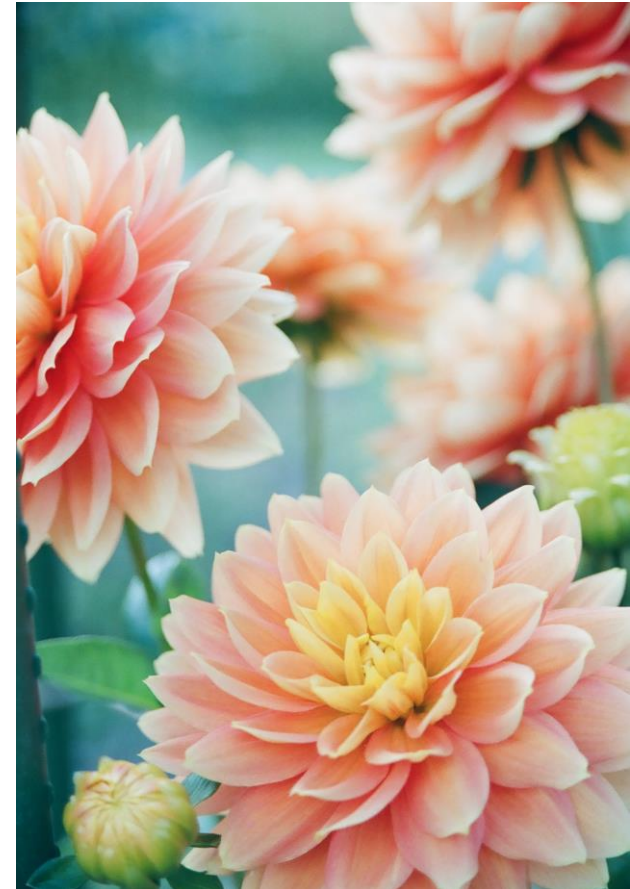
Wellbeing in the Curriculum

The learning experience significantly impacts student mental health and wellbeing; however, this is not the sole way to conceptualize wellbeing within the curriculum.

Embedding wellbeing as a topic of study enhances students' literacy in these areas, promoting a deeper understanding and awareness of their own wellbeing (Houghton & Anderson, 2017).

Why Increasing Wellbeing Literacy?

- Health literacy and Mental Health literacy not only impact on knowledge, but it is also a main predictor of health (World Health Organization, 2013) and mental health (Kotera et al., 2019) – emerging data in Wellbeing Literacy (Oades et al., 2021; Hobbs et al., 2022)
- In-classroom IATL Module '[Understanding WB – Theory and Practice](#)' – Students who participated in the module reported increased Wellbeing Literacy (Riva et al., forthcoming). Similar results in other Universities (Hood et al., 2021)



Wellbeing Literacy

- ♥ Co-created module (Riva & Jeglinska, 2022; Slates et al., 2023). Podcast-based (Serini et al., 2024).
- ♦ More than 7000 Warwick students have taken the module with over 1000 students gaining accreditation – adopted by several UK Universities
- ♣ University of Copenhagen created and launched a ‘sister’ module in the Danish context in the academic year 2023/2024.
- ♥ Module dedicated to PhD students and Postdoctoral Researchers in development, funded by Research England.



Understanding Wellbeing

Online Module

For more information and enquiries please email us at:
understandingwb@warwick.ac.uk
or email Dr Elena Riva, module leader and co-creator, at:
e.riva@warwick.ac.uk.



What is it?

- Understanding Wellbeing is our new **non-CATTED, Open Access, HEAR Accredited** module.
- The module will guide students to discover and better understand the crucial concept of wellbeing.
- The module is for all Warwick students and can be taken and completed in your own time.

Why did we create this module?

- University can be a stressful time and therefore looking after wellbeing is crucial. We created this module to allow students to learn about the theory and practice behind wellbeing in an engaging and accessible way.
- The module content is presented through podcasts which students can access in their own time. The reflective activities mean that students can engage with the content in a meaningful way which we hope will make a positive contribution to their wellbeing.

What will students gain?

- An **interdisciplinary understanding of wellbeing**: ranging from scientific, economic, psychological, and philosophical perspectives.
- An opportunity to engage with **activities and strategies** that can improve our wellbeing, from exercise and art to mindfulness and many others.
- An understanding of what factors might be affecting our wellbeing, from social media, emotions, to dealing with failure.
- Completing the different sections of the module (Bronze, Silver and Gold levels) will provide students HEAR Accreditations.



Wellbeing in Higher Education – Summary

Universities should work to implement **holistic, institution-wide approaches** to well-being and mental health.

These should be planned and implemented in partnership with staff and students.

Policies and strategies on well-being and mental health should be developed at both institutional and wider (e.g. national) levels, which can inform **effective and continually monitored practice**.

Institutional culture change should be promoted, with **university leaders taking responsibility and accountability** for ensuring that mental well-being is mainstreamed throughout higher education systems and practices, and for providing a strategic vision that supports a culture of compassion, belonging and equality for staff and students.

Support services (e.g. counselling) and practices (e.g. deferral or leave) should be **inclusive and culturally competent**, so that students and staff are adequately supported from the outset and throughout their studies and/or contract.

Well-being should be embedded throughout the curriculum, assessment, pedagogy and practice, with **inclusive design** becoming the norm.

Institutional processes, systems and administration should actively consider well-being, both in terms of inclusive design of processes (e.g. extenuating circumstances requests, etc.) and in terms of **embedding accountability for well-being in processes** such as through Equality Impact Assessments.

Well-being should be actively considered throughout **staff recruitment, working conditions and promotion practices**, including accommodation, appropriate training, provision of relevant support, inclusive practices and a commitment to eliminating bias and discrimination.

Support for mental well-being should be **proactive**, promoting mental health literacy among staff and students towards a culture of well-being for all.

Wellbeing in Higher Education – Summary

- **Collaborative** - bringing together university communities to identify and share practice as part of a respectful, supportive and inclusive community university (e.g. wellbeing teams, equity and inclusion, teaching staff, students)
- **Courageous** - creating spaces where everyone feels able to speak openly and honestly about strengths and weaknesses in order to challenge practice and push boundaries
- **Empowering** - universities to improve and listen to student and staff voices - getting leadership to provide the time and resources for people to commit to this work
- **Innovative** - using evidence and expertise to facilitate collective learning, exploration and sharing good practice across the sector - having evidence that our work is helping and not causing harm and is relevant to the needs of our specific population



Wellbeing in Higher Education – Summary

In small groups, discuss the following questions (pick and choose!) and share insights based on your university's experiences. Take notes.

Adoption & Implementation:

1. To what extent has your university adopted a whole-university approach?
2. What initiatives or policies reflect this approach?

Challenges & Barriers:

1. What challenges has your university faced in adopting a whole-university approach?
2. If this approach has not been implemented, what are the key barriers preventing its adoption?

Alternative Approaches:

1. Is your university using a different approach?
2. How does it compare to a whole-university approach in terms of effectiveness and inclusivity?

Successes & Best Practices:

1. What aspects of your university's approach have worked well?
2. Are there any strategies or initiatives that could be expanded or improved?

Share on this Padlet:

<https://warwick.padlet.org/eriva6/4v38f9iuh6932a4y>



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