Institute of Educational Technology

The Open University

Designing for student mental wellbeing

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Mental health in higher education

Mental health has been a critical issue in higher education for several years; Sir Anthony Seldon termed it a 'crisis' in 2015, as he laid out his '10 steps' to address it (Seldon, 2015), and sector bodies such as Student Minds, UUK, AMOSSHE, Office for Students and Advance HE have published a raft of white papers on the issue (AMOSSHE and UHI, 2017; Houghton and Anderson, 2017; Hughes et al., 2018; Hughes and Spanner, 2019; Office for Students, 2019; Thorley, 2017; Universities UK, 2018). We know that more students are disclosing mental health issues than ever before, and that 'full-time students who reported a mental health condition have lower continuation, attainment and progression rates than full-time students overall' (Office for Students, 2019).

Universities have been working on support interventions to help students, but many of these operate on a deficit model which does not recognise that university environments and academic culture can trigger or even cause mental health issues for students (Markoulakis and Kirsh, 2013; Ribeiro et al., 2018; Tinklin et al., 2005). Deficit model approaches put the onus on requiring the student to 'build resilience' (Galante et al., 2018), improve their 'mental health literacy' (Kern et al., 2017), support each other as peers (Byrom, 2018), work on their capabilities (Donohue et al., 2018), improve their self-care skills (White et al., 2019), manage their stress levels (Bettis et al., 2017) or learn to meditate (Crowley and Munk, 2017). It is increasingly recognised that a proactive, whole-university approach is needed in order to support student mental wellbeing and enable them to succeed (Hughes and Spanner, 2019).

Student mental health in the OU

The OU has a higher percentage of students disclosing mental health issues than is usual for higher education; in 2018-19, 4.3% of students disclosed a mental health issue across the sector, while at the OU 9.6% disclosed. It is also growing fast; from Oct 2016 to Oct 2019 the number of disclosures of mental health issues grew by 79.5%, a higher growth than any other disability disclosure, as shown in figure 1, below.

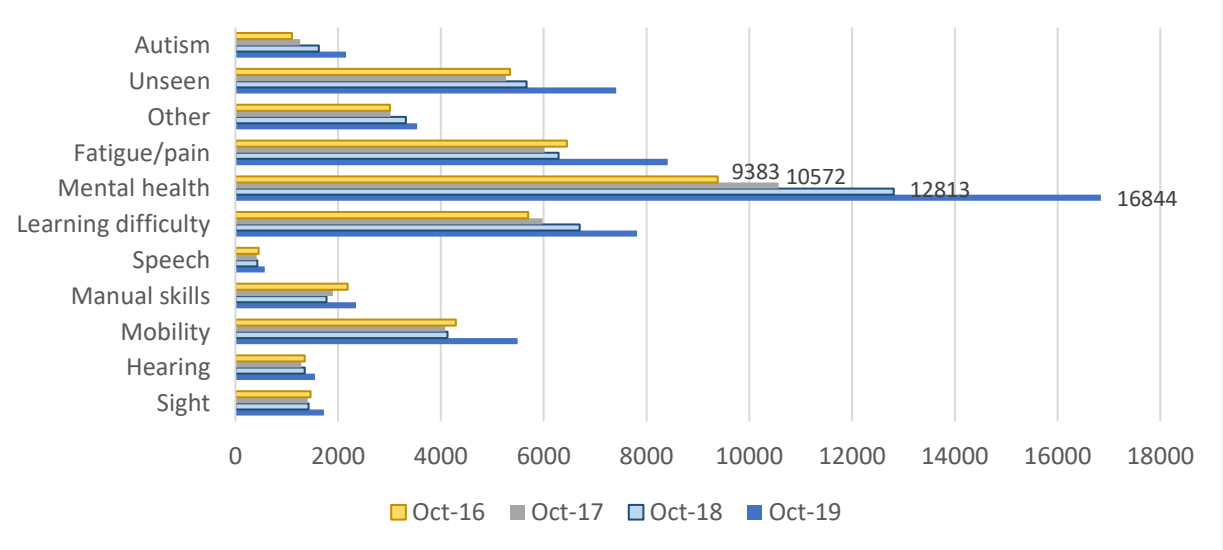


Figure 1, Data from WASS quarterly disabled student reports, 2016-2019

Attainment and progression gaps are also a concern for the OU. According to the OU's Access and Participation Plan, students disclosing mental health difficulties exhibit gaps of -11 percentage points

in non-continuation, -16 percentage points in module pass rates, -17 percentage points in progression to a new module, and -1.3 percentage points in attainment ('good' passes.) To provide some comparison, the module pass rate gap for students declaring MH conditions is consistently larger than is found for other characteristics, including physical disabilities (-9.3), specific learning difficulties (-4.4) low socioeconomic status (-4.8), low previous qualifications (-9.4) or black students (-7.6).

There is a clear argument that steps to support mental wellbeing need to be taken within the learning environment (i.e. in curriculum, tuition and assessment), and that these steps should be both proactive and designed in at an early stage.

A note on language

Language, definitions and terminology when discussing mental health are controversial. For this study, we adopt the WHO definition of mental health:

> 'a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community' community.' (WHO, 2014).'

In this report, we use the terms mental health and mental wellbeing with slightly different connotations; we use mental health as a broad term that can signify positive mental health, mental health as a societal issue, or can prefix a difficulty, issue, problem or condition. We use mental wellbeing to describe the positive state described in the WHO definition. Finally, we include both 'common' mental health issues, such as depression or anxiety, and also more 'severe' issues, such as schizophrenia or psychosis, in our definition of mental health conditions (Davies, 2013).

Methodology

Interviews were carried out with 16 students and 5 ALs to identify barriers and enablers to mental wellbeing in distance learning. Students were recruited via a sample; all students had a diagnosed mental health condition, but only 15 had disclosed this to the OU. Students represented all four faculties; 14 of them were undergraduate and 2 were postgraduate. Ten students were female, 6 were male. The tutors were recruited via word of mouth and internal communications; they represented STEM, WELS and FASS. Four tutors were female and 1 male; all had over 10 years' experience and had supported multiple students with mental health issues.

Narratives were transcribed and thematic analysis was carried out using NVivo. Coded references were grouped into themes and into four overarching categories:

- Assessment and feedback
- People and learning environment
- Self and identity
- Study and curriculum

The next section explores these four categories and identifies lessons can be applied to designing learning, in production, presentation, tuition and student support, in order to support student wellbeing. Quotes are provided to give examples of student viewpoints related to the themes.

Designing for student wellbeing

Assessment and feedback

Assessments can be a serious cause of anxiety or other mental health issues for students. The research conducted for this report shows this can be particularly problematic areas included exams, clarity, deadlines, scores and feedback.

Exams

All the students interviewed found exams to be a serious barrier to wellbeing. Educators should try to avoid exams as far as possible. If an exam is necessary, consider an alternative task as a reasonable adjustment for certain students. Also consider practice exams, or other ways to support students to develop the skills they need in an unpressured environment.

Clarity

Ensure assessment tasks and marking criteria are clear and well explained. Consider sharing examples or exemplar answers for sections of previous assessments, if possible, to aid understanding.

> ‘I look at a question, and I just go into a complete panic because it doesn't make sense to me. And I end up sending hysterical emails to my tutor and posting things on the forum in a complete state’ *Student 14*

Deadlines

Break down deadlines with a series of activities over certain weeks, so the full weight of an assignment does not hinge on a single date. Also, as far as possible, try to ensure module deadlines are scheduled to avoid conflict with deadlines on other modules students are likely to be studying concurrently (this will be easier on some programmes than others!)

Scores

Low scores can be devastating, and it can be very hard to get straight back into studying. Consider planning optional catch-up, confidence-boosting or supportive activities that students can take part in, if they’re feeling particularly vulnerable after a low score.

> “I got distinctions on [module] and [module], and then I did [module], and my first TMA was 52. I thought 52! That's it! I've lost it! I can't study anymore!” *Student 2*

Feedback

Feedback should be both positive and constructive. Some students may struggle to accept the positive feedback, so make it as specific as possible, highlighting particular things they did well and saying why these were good. Constructive feedback should be gentle but to the point, offering practical examples of how students can improve, and never including judgement (i.e. ‘you haven’t understood…’) or emotion (i.e. ‘this was disappointing’). Consider a dialogue approach to feedback, with two-way discussion as opposed to one-way communication.

> “If I were going through particularly difficult week and there was something there that had the potential to perhaps derail me, always having to be really careful with myself, I might not open it because what am I going to do if I discover that is really, really critical? What do I do after that? It's a terrifying idea” *AL 5*

People and learning environments

According to the participants interviewed, certain aspects of learning environments and the people students encountered in their studies could have a positive or negative impact on mental wellbeing. Themes included isolation, peers, tutors and social media.

Distance vs isolation

When studying at the OU, students must study at a distance, but the isolation that can come with this is a barrier for many. Students valued supportive distance environments, where they feel that the university cares about them. Try to offer opportunities for conversation with module teams, tutors and peers, both synchronous and asynchronous. Tutors might offer regular check ins on an opt-in basis, with a general conversation focus rather than a specific aspect of learning.

> 'It just sort of increased a sort of sense that I was alone, couldn't have friends because I didn't know how to interact with people' *Student 10*

Peers

Peers can have a substantial positive or negative affect on mental health. Good practice includes embedding guidance for students on how to be a supportive peer learner to other students, such as netiquette, making student-created content accessible, and compassion (see examples of practice). Encourage students to create study groups and other student-led social spaces using communication channels of their choice, and actively promote OUSA as a support network for students in study materials and communications to students.

> 'One of the things that makes you feel very anxious and very low about myself is worrying that people either think that I'm just making it all up or that I'm incredibly weak' *Student 10*

Tutors

Tutors can also have a strong positive or negative effect on wellbeing. Attributes such as kindness, enthusiasm, caring and support were the key themes that emerged as enabling student mental wellbeing, with behaviours such as one-to-one phone calls, being 'understanding about extension requests, and expressing belief in students' abilities and capabilities seen as embodying these attributes.

Forums and social media

Social media was flagged as a valuable way to connect with other students and find resources. Facebook, Whatsapp and OU forums were frequently a source of support to students, Facebook albums and groups could be something to 'treasure' or take pride in, and Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn were mentioned as places where resources such as study worksheets and additional reading could be found. Other people's behaviour in social media could have a negative effect, however, particularly in Facebook groups and OU forums.

> 'I'm currently producing a Facebook page, and it's being rolled out. Which makes me feel whole again, because I feel like I'm helping people' *Student 11*

Self

Students' sense of self is deeply personal, but the interaction between their sense of self and their studies can impact positively or negatively on their wellbeing. This interaction between self and learning is a key area where support from educators can make a long-term difference to a student's wellbeing.

Identity as a student

Identity is deeply entwined with sense of self. Being able to identify as, and call themselves, a university student can have a strong positive impact on students' wellbeing. However, as they develop in their studies, students can start to attach value labels to this; they may start to believe they are a poor student, a disorganised student, a needy student, etc. Using growth mindset principles, educators can help students to understand that circumstances do not dictate identity, and to attach healthier labels, such as 'hard working student', 'busy student', or 'dedicated student.'

'it actually makes you say, I'm a student! I'm loving this!' *Student 3*

Belonging

The need to belong, to be an accepted and acceptable member of a community in some way, is considered a fundamental human need. In face-to-face contexts, a sense of belonging often hinges on social interactions; in distance learning it becomes more related to curricula and study capabilities. Educators can help students feel they belong by ensuring students with diverse backgrounds, needs and circumstances are represented in the curriculum, and by helping students recognise and value their skills and capabilities.

Confidence

Ideally, students should start their degrees with hope, and as they progress, hope should gradually turn to confidence. However, this may not happen if students don't realise how far they have progressed and recognise their achievements. Educators can help students to celebrate their achievements, either informally, through assessment feedback, or through ongoing reflective activity such as a learning journal or log.

'It has increased my confidence, studying. And it's given me so much self-respect. It's been tough, the last module was really tough, but I got through it. That was me, someone who can't, I can't face people in the street sometimes. Getting through it!' *Student 14*

'you've got to celebrate achievements, every distinction, you've got to take that minute to go, oh my God, look at me, I did that!' *Student 14*

Expectations

The balance between students' expectations of themselves and their perception of their achievements is a key barrier or enabler for mental wellbeing. A high-scoring student may be devastated by a grade that other students would dream of; it isn't the grade that's important, it's the student's perception of how well they have done, and how this affects their sense of identity, belonging and confidence. Educators can help by managing student expectations, especially perfectionism, and helping students put their achievements in context; to support students to build emotional awareness and to recognise their achievements for what they are.

Study

The 'Study' category covers the learning and teaching aspects of study mentioned in the interviews. These include curriculum content, threshold concepts, collaboration, study skills and strategies, technology and flexibility.

Curriculum content

There is enormous potential in curriculum content for mental wellbeing. Learning can help students with mental health issues escape negative thought cycles, can teach them about themselves and teach them ways to manage their mental health. Educators can help by ensuring curriculum content is dynamic, lively and interesting, and by ensuring any distressing content has trigger warnings, and ideally is designed in a way that supports students to study it without distress.

> 'it completely takes me away from how I feel. I feel like a different person while I'm studying' *Student 10*

Threshold concepts

Threshold concepts (topics which are difficult to grasp but are transformative once learned) can cause frustration, inadequacy, even anxiety or despair, which can trigger mental health issues. Educators should ensure there are enjoyable activities to break up hard reading and break down difficult concepts, that threshold concepts are approached flexibly, from different angles, to aid understanding, and most importantly, that students understand that the topic is problematic for many, that struggling to grasp it is normal and it is not a reflection on their ability as students.

Collaboration

Learners with mental health issues can find group work challenging, and this can be exacerbated in distance learning. Educators should allow student groups choice in their modes of communication, and should design tasks such that one person isn't waiting for someone else to produce their output, and that the group isn't disadvantaged if one person can no longer take part. Educators may want to ensure different there are a range of tasks available, and give the students choice about how they participate. Finally, where group work is assessed, ensure learners are graded on their own activity only, preferably on a reflection or separate task relating to the group work, rather than on the group work itself, meaning learners can still achieve full marks if their group work isn't successful.

> 'I love working as a team, but over the internet, I found it quite hard to manage my anxieties and my confidence.' *Student 4*

Technology

Although technology could be a source of frustration, many students find learning to use technology effectively, including multimedia and being creative, benefited their mental wellbeing. Educators can support this by ensuring technology is well explained, easily adopted, accessible and enjoyable.

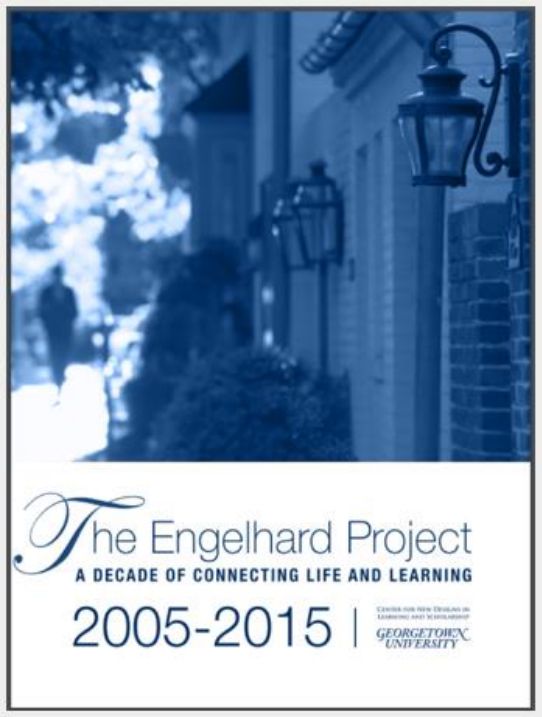
> 'It's allowed me to open up a world and understand things better. Put some ghosts to rest. You know, you reach a lot of the theories and you kind of go, that makes that make more sense now. I don't feel as embarrassed or ashamed about that as I used to, because I understand why.' *Student 15*

Study skills and strategies

There is a surprising amount of transferability between study skills and mental health skills; skills such as critical thinking, time management, pacing themselves, using music, structing learning, prioritising and knowing 'when to detach' helped them both in their studies and with their mental health. Educators can support this by making the mental health benefits of study skills explicit in their teaching.

Examples in practice

Curriculum infusion



One approach to embed mental health and wellbeing in the curriculum is to integrate, or 'infuse' content about mental health into the standard curriculum and assessment. An example of an institution that has adopted this widely is Georgetown University in the USA. Called Engelhard project, Georgetown has, since 2005, adopted an institution-wide, mental health-related curriculum-infusion approach using a variety of methods. These include presentations, readings, reflective writing assignments, outreach work in the community and guest discussions led by health professionals. The interventions cover courses in subjects such as anthropology, biology, English, mathematics, nursing, philosophy, psychology, business, foreign service, human science, and theology. Different methods are adopted for different courses. For example, in one philosophy course, students engaged with philosophical works dealing with themes of loneliness, alienation, stress, anxiety, depression, and suicide. After this, they wrote anonymous letters to their peers describing challenges to their wellbeing they had experienced and how they dealt with them. This was followed up by a guest lecture on some of the themes, such as anxiety, stress, alcohol abuse, depression, and suicide. More examples of course-specific curriculum infusion can be found at the Engelhard Project website and the project publications.

Compassion in the curriculum

University culture places high value on individualistic competitiveness, both for staff and students. This can undermine wellbeing and achievement, can cause division in learning communities, and can normalise competitive behaviours that can have a long-term impact on students. The Compassion in the Curriculum project, led by Theo Gilbert, aims to address this by actively working to embed micro skills of compassion into university group work, including planned activities and assessment.

According to Gilbert, compassion is not an emotion, but a psycho-biologically mediated motivation or intention to 'notice, not normalise, one's own distress or disadvantaging, or that of others, and take action to reduce or prevent it.' Gilbert posits that universities are an ideal place to teach the micro skills that enable students to proactively notice distress or disadvantaging of others, and seek ways to intervene effectively, to enhance all group members' social and learning experiences of their work together. For videos, publications and resources on the methods used, visit the Compassion in the Curriculum project website.

Distressing content

Certain topics can be distressing for learners, or can trigger unwelcome emotions, memories or mental health issues. It is common good practice to include 'trigger warnings' when teaching or speaking about anything that could be distressing, such as:

- Physical or sexual violence
- Abuse (including emotional abuse)
- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Eating disorders
- Suicide and self-harm

Trigger warnings can help learners make an informed decision about whether to carry on reading, but they rely on the learner having well-developed self-awareness of their triggers, and being assertive enough to refuse to engage with something they know will trigger them. This is not always the case with university students, especially in potentially distressing subjects such as criminology. OU tutor Ruth Wall, with help from fellow tutor Anne Alvaer and Lecturer Julia Downes, have created guidance that goes beyond trigger warnings and aims to help learners study emotive topics. This guidance focuses on the first year of distance learning in the social sciences, and gives practical tips on how learners can engage with distressing topics, as well as advice on when and how to seek further help. It is planned to adapt the guidance to suit other disciplines; contact Ruth, Anne or Julia for more information.

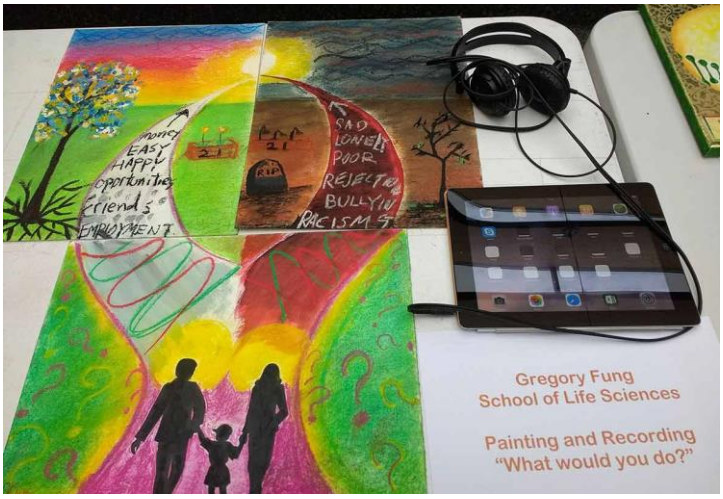
Reflection and emotional awareness

Reflection can be a valuable tool to help students log and celebrate achievements, while learning from difficulties they have overcome and gaining skills to aid resilience and emotional awareness. However, reflection in higher education often takes the form of written or verbal accounts, and it can be difficult to motivate students to participate.

Various OU modules are trialling using an online tool to support student reflection. Co-designed with OU students, the Our Journey platform has a game-like aesthetic that aims to make reflection and representation of student journeys more enjoyable. The tool is online, meaning educators can host a group of students, and support them with prompts and dialogue. Student journeys can also be used as vignettes to inform learning design or wider university policy or strategy. For more information, visit the Our Journey website or email ourjourney@open.ac.uk.

Student devised assessment

Assessment is a key trigger for mental health issues, and one reason for this may be the lack of student agency, power and choice in typical university assessment. A project at Warwick is exploring the impact of student-devised assessment on mental wellbeing. Student-devised assessment (SDA) aims to offer students choice, asking them to choose how they display their critical engagement with the themes and theories of the module via a medium of their choosing. In Warwick's example, students are given a list of the learning outcomes they need to demonstrate, and are supported by their lecturer to consider what issues and theories they want to address, and what form they feel best expresses them. The output is chosen by the student; examples include creative writing, workshop, presentations, blogs, comics, paintings, videos, essays, dance, websites, poems, songs, learning resource, collages or a diary. Students mental wellbeing on the module was evaluated; participants displayed improved levels of wellbeing on the Warwick-Edinburgh mental wellbeing scale. For more information, visit Warwick's SDA project website.



Further information and resources

For more information about mental wellbeing in the higher education sector, the Student Minds website has frequent relevant publications and updates. To get started, their mental health charter offers a holistic approach to embedding mental wellbeing in university environments, and their report on co-production of wellbeing strategies offers useful tips for participatory approach to strategy setting. They also run a research network, SMARTEN, which has a community group, funding calls and offers email updates and blog posts.

For more information about mental wellbeing in the Open University, the Scholarship Exchange has a number of relevant resources, and the Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Yammer group is a good way to connect with the wider community working in this area. Projects, initiatives and strategies change too rapidly to list, but the OU Students Association is a good source of information about innovative ways to support student wellbeing, and the OU teams in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also have their own approaches, initiatives and strategies to support students.

For more information about this project, or other related projects, contact Kate Lister (email: kate.lister@open.ac.uk; Twitter: @KateMarburg) or visit the SeGA projects website.

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