Taking wellbeing forward in higher education

reflections on theory and practice

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University of Brighton

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Foreword

PROFESSOR GINA WISKER

Universities strive to enable a diversity of students to develop their potential as learners, and gain the skills and qualifications that they need to develop and move into a full life on graduation. It is vital to recognise the diversity of student learning needs and skills and the need to realise potential. A university that focuses on mechanistically turning out large numbers of graduate 'bricks in the wall' as the Pink Floyd hit would have it, is missing the intention of higher education, and failing students in that very diversity and development which our society needs. Placing wellbeing at the heart of the mission and the practices of the university, replaces the human and the social in the university learning system. Caring about wellbeing recognises the whole person, the student not just as a number or a thinker, but a human being with needs, issues, creative and emotional potential.

Academic wellbeing encompasses challenge and the ability to take risks, strengthened by security, confidence and emotional resilience. Wellbeing is essential for learners, enabling them to achieve their potential and act as qualified people in the world of work and social relations. In the current economic climate and ever changing world of work, it is imperative that students are equipped with the skills, and develop the confidence and resilience to be effective, flexible and balanced individuals able to manage uncertainty and change. We are therefore committed to wellbeing in its widest sense of equipping people with the resources and skills to make a meaningful contribution to society, a 'state of wellbeing in which every individual realises 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' (World Health Organisation).

The University of Brighton corporate plan underpins the insight, care and attention to the link between a well balanced person and a learner. The university is intent on: 'delivering socially purposeful higher education that serves and strengthens society and underpins the economy; contributes critically to the public good; enriches those who participate; and equips our graduates to contribute effectively as citizens to their chosen professions and communities, locally, nationally and internationally' (University of Brighton corporate plan 2007-12). By recognising the links between the wellbeing of students and their learning capacity development and achievement, we can strive to care about the whole person as they grow and further their contribution to society, social justice, global citizenship and sustainable development. For all those concerned with student engagement, the provision of a quality learning experience and a sustainable learning community, this collection will provide a rich background with research and experience informed good practice suggestions.

Editorial introduction

CHARLOTTE MORRIS

This publication has been brought about by the Open Minds project, run from the Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT) and supported by Higher Education Funding Council of England funds for Widening Participation. It builds on a symposium which involved in-depth discussions on ways to continue taking wellbeing forward at this university. Discussions emphasised the importance of a whole-university approach and embedding wellbeing enhancement in university strategies, systems, policies and procedures, alongside harnessing the energy, enthusiasm and focus of committed colleagues. The project is part of an ongoing, innovative programme of research at CLT, which explores the links between wellbeing, sustainability and effective learning and teaching environments and practices. Research feeds into practice, contributing to an active, engaged, developmental higher education experience for all our learners. Embracing the notion of the learner as a whole person, our approach is underpinned by the learning and teaching strategy with its ongoing commitment to social and economic engagement.

This collection is diverse, incorporating scholarly articles, case studies of practical interventions and personal reflections. It is designed to be an accessible and thought provoking resource, with reflections on theory and practice from a range of perspectives from the University of Brighton and beyond. The first section provides contrasting perspectives on wellbeing in higher education (HE) settings. **The Open Minds project** reports on findings from a student mental health and wellbeing survey, which identified a range of inclusive teaching practices with the potential to contribute to student wellbeing enhancement, and considers factors which contribute to a 'mentally well' university. **Professor Gaynor Sadlo** reflects on the links between learning and wellbeing in HE from an occupational science perspective, and identifies a range of activities learners (including academics) can engage in to enhance their wellbeing, including creativity, meditation, mindfulness and developing emotional intelligence. Student equality and diversity adviser **Annie Carroll** reflects on how attending to wellbeing can enhance the quality of the learning experiences of a diverse student body.

Colleagues at the University of Brighton are engaged in a range of diverse activities aimed at embedding wellbeing. Leading this next section is an article from **Caroline Hall**, research fellow, **Josephine Ramm** and **Amanda Jeffery**, former research officers, in the Centre for International Health Development which leads the development of the University of Brighton as a Health Promoting University. This article provides an overview of the health promoting university and reports on developments so far. **Susan Burnett** discusses the innovative role of curriculum development worker in counselling and wellbeing, and reports on a variety of curriculum developments and wellbeing enhancement activities, including Wellbeing Week, an unprecedented university wide wellbeing awareness raising event. A contrasting perspective on wellbeing related activities is provided by **Jenny King**, acting team leader of the Student Experience Team at the University of Worcester. **Kate Sweetapple**, now wellbeing research coordinator at the University of Brighton Student Union, reports on her experience of leading UNISEX, which has promoted health and wellbeing across the universities of Brighton and Sussex, and shares hopes for the future of wellbeing development at this university. **Mahess Jeeawock**, representing the Carer and Service User group in the School of Nursing and Midwifery, provides an example of wellbeing informed curriculum development for undergraduate nursing students.

The final section attends to the vital area of wellbeing in academic culture, alongside research student learning and development. It begins with a paper from special guest contributors **Dr Olav Muurlink** and **Dr Cristina Poyatos Matas**, who have pioneered a 'whole person' approach to research learning and supervision. The paper considers the importance of wellbeing in academia, and reports on innovative developments to support research student learning and wellbeing at Griffith University, Australia. This is followed by an article from **Charlotte Morris**, identifying factors which impact on the wellbeing of research students and potential strategies for safeguarding their wellbeing, as found in the Higher Education Academy funded Doctoral Learning Journeys project run from CLT. A case study is provided through reflections on the personal learning journey of **Curtis Tappenden**, journalist, artist, teacher and research student, who emphasises the centrality of emotions and personal experience in learning.

The editorial team, Lynda Marshall, Editor, CLT Publications and Charlotte Morris who led Open Minds, would like to thank all the contributors to this publication. Special thanks are due to guest contributors Dr Olav Muurlink and Dr Cristina Poyatos Matas from Griffith University, and to Jenny King and the Student Experience Team at the University of Worcester. We would like to thank the Widening Participation Team for their support, and all those Student Services personnel and other colleagues who collaborated on the project, many of whom have contributed to this publication and have an ongoing commitment to wellbeing enhancement in our university. In particular we would like to thank our CLT colleagues who have provided invaluable administrative support on the project and **Professor Gina Wisker**, Head of CLT, who has made this work possible.

Perspectives on wellbeing in higher education

This section provides contrasting perspectives on the value of wellbeing in higher education settings. The papers focus on wellbeing enhancement strategies for learners, educators and institutions, stressing ways in which supporting wellbeing can enhance the quality of the learning experiences of a diverse student body.
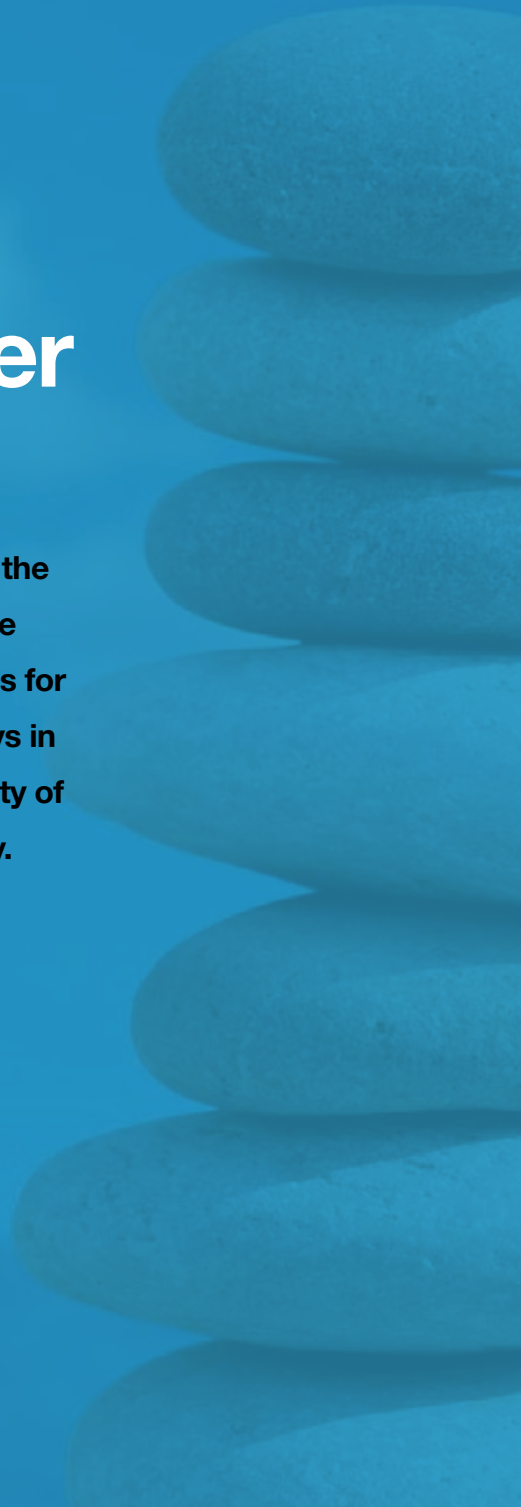
Open Minds: towards a 'mentally well' university

CHARLOTTE MORRIS

Abstract

This paper responds to current concerns about the mental health and wellbeing of students in higher education in the UK. It outlines the activities of Open Minds, a project run over two years from the Centre for Learning and Teaching, and reports on the findings of a survey of over 200 students. It acknowledges that for some students, university can be a stressful experience and even detrimental to mental health. Through investigating student perceptions of wellbeing and its relationship to effective learning, the project identifies inclusive strategies which have the potential to enhance wellbeing and learning for all students, as well as enabling students who may be experiencing mental health difficulties. This paper therefore, argues for the mainstreaming of inclusive teaching and learning strategies, alongside equipping students with skills to manage their wellbeing, in order to enjoy a positive learning experience and optimal success. It envisions a mentally healthy university experience which supports student mental wellbeing through fostering positive relationships, a sense of community, and an environment and culture conducive to wellbeing.

Open Minds: a widening participation project

Open Minds, run from the Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT) (2008-10), was designed to work collaboratively with colleagues from across the University of Brighton to identify ways to enhance the learning experiences of students with identified mental health difficulties and the wellbeing and success of all students. The project sought to establish effective ways of creating an inclusive, stigma free learning culture which supports wellbeing. Guided by the social model of disability, it asked what factors contribute to a 'mentally

well' university which empowers all learners to participate fully in the university experience and achieve their personal and academic potential. This paper will report on the findings of a student wellbeing survey which formed part of the University of Brighton's Wellbeing Week (2009) activities.

The research aimed to identify barriers to learning that students with experience of mental health difficulties face; ways in which universities can best enable and empower students with experience of mental health difficulties; and ways to enhance student mental wellbeing generally. It was designed to capture and build on positive practices in the institution; identify staff development and resource needs; gain an insight into the experiences of students with mental health difficulties and to explore the connections between learning and teaching and student mental health and wellbeing. Further activities included awareness raising, anti-discrimination campaigning, and the promotion of mental health and wellbeing linked to pedagogic practices.

Student mental health difficulties

The term 'mental health difficulties' refers to a wide spectrum of conditions, including for example, depression, anxiety, phobia and bipolar disorder. These can range from mild to severe, can be short or long-term and can have a profoundly debilitating effect. However, mental health tends to fluctuate over time, and those who experience periods or episodes of being mentally unwell may also manage their mental health to lead active, fulfilling lives. According to the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), students who have mental health difficulties which have an ongoing debilitating effect on daily life for a year or more are classed as disabled. However, with low disclosure rates, it is impossible to gauge the full extent of mental health difficulties among students. Students may also experience temporary mental distress which can be triggered by stressful events such as bereavement, and this may have a debilitating impact on their studies.

The prevalence of students with experience of diagnosable mental health difficulties is likely to be at least as high as the general population, which in Britain is one in four in the course of a year (World Mental Health Foundation 2006), and 18–25 is the age during which issues are most likely to surface. In addition, university life contains many complex stress factors and characteristics, which may trigger and exacerbate these problems (Royal College of Psychiatrists 2003) including transition, financial pressures and lifestyle factors such as exposure to drugs and alcohol. It is highly likely that academic staff will frequently come into contact with students with mental health difficulties, although these may not be immediately apparent. It is important to recognise that even though students may not have formally disclosed their mental health difficulties as a disability, difficulties may arise or develop during the course of their studies, and the university has a Duty of Care to all its students.

One major barrier to participation for people with mental health difficulties is the experience or expectation of stigma, which can exacerbate the symptoms and in fact, be even harder to deal with than the difficulties themselves (Thornicroft 2006). Stigma can prevent students from accessing the support they need if they feel embarrassed or ashamed, and it has been found that there is a stigma attached to seeking help from support services (Morris and Lilly 2005; Stanley 2007). Activities designed to counter stigma on the Open Minds project included mental health promotion and awareness raising events. These have enabled easy and direct access to student services and relevant information, providing opportunities for students to develop strategies to manage their wellbeing. Academic staff development sessions were piloted in conjunction with Student Services. These were designed to deepen understanding about experiences of mental health difficulties; to share experiences and concerns and to capture positive teaching practices identified by academic staff.

Wellbeing initiatives

Following a preventative approach to mental health, the project has worked to promote a holistic conception of wellbeing among staff and students, utilising an integrated model of mental, physical, social, emotional, spiritual and academic wellbeing. Key to this has been close collaboration with Student Services and other departments, especially the curriculum development worker for Counselling and Wellbeing. A Wellbeing Development Group brought together staff from the CLT, Student Services, Sport Brighton, Occupational Health, Health and Safety, Equality and Diversity, the Student Union, School of Health Professions, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Social Sciences and the International Health Development Centre for Research to reflect on current practices around student and staff wellbeing, plan for and build on initiatives, and identify sustainable ways to continue to promote and embed wellbeing across the university. This group provided steering for the University of Brighton Wellbeing Week, convened a wellbeing themed symposium and helped to inform the 'University of Brighton as a Health Promoting University' initiative. The work has been guided by the insight that improved wellbeing benefits all members of the university community:

'Effective mental health promotion involves not only attending to the needs of those with mental health difficulties, but also promoting the general mental wellbeing of all staff and students, which will in itself bring significant benefits to the HE institution. Improved general mental wellbeing will impact on institutional reputation, staff and student recruitment and retention, performance in general and on community relations'. (Universities UK/Guild HE Committee for the Promotion of Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education 2009).

The university is highly engaged in wellbeing development, for example through employing a curriculum development worker for counselling and wellbeing and through its

commitment to becoming established as a Health Promoting University. The Open Minds project contributed to this process by underlining the links between student wellbeing and learning and teaching; highlighting the role of academic staff and ensuring that the CLT plays an active role in ongoing wellbeing research and development. It supports a holistic, whole-university approach to enhancing student wellbeing in the long-term, working collaboratively with colleagues and in the wider community, towards a shared vision and coordinated effort to develop positive practices in relation to mental health and wellbeing at this university and beyond.

Context and literature

Educational institutions are legally required to make adjustments for, and in anticipation of, the needs of students' mental health difficulties. Relevant legislation includes the Disability Discrimination Act (1995); The Special Educational Needs amendment to the Disability Act (SENDA)(2005); the Disability Equality Duty, which came into force in 2006 and Duty of Care legislation. These all underpin the importance of universities attending to the wellbeing needs of their students. Prompted by the introduction of SENDA, a wide range of research and development in this area has been undertaken in universities across the UK in the past decade.

Studies have tended to focus on the prevalence of mental health difficulties and risk factors. In a University of Hull study (Stanley et al 2000), 35 per cent of academic supervisors reported recent experiences of student mental health problems, 28 per cent of the problems were described as 'severe' or 'life threatening'. A UK Universities/SCOP paper 'Reducing the Risk of Student Suicide: Issues and Responses for Higher Education Institutions' (2002) concludes that 'there may be significant risk of suicide and deliberate self-harm amongst a small proportion of the student population in any higher education institution' and HEIs therefore, have a responsibility to minimise that risk as far as possible. However, despite reported rising levels of mental health issues among young people, a study carried out at the University of Lancaster (2003) found that 'Many students will not have declared any mental health needs at application or prior to entry. Particularly because of the continuing problems over stigma and mental health in society, this is very commonly the case'. The 2007 UCLAN/PAPYRUS study of student suicide suggests that there is a need for a focus on early intervention when problems emerge, and that HEIs should therefore adopt a preventative approach to students developing severe problems through early interventions and mental health promotion (Stanley 2007).

The University of Leicester 2001 study raised concerns about the extent of mental health problems in student populations, and identified factors in the learning environment which may have a detrimental effect on mental health, with implications for student progression, retention and achievement. In a survey of over 1,000 students, a high proportion (50-60 per cent) reported concerns regarding academic progress, particularly in terms of their

ability to manage coursework and assessment (60 per cent), the ability to set priorities, make decisions and manage time (59 per cent), concentration (58 per cent) and the ability to meet academic/career goals (63 per cent). In terms of seeking help, it was found that students are most likely to turn to those they know best, such as friends and family (65 per cent) or personal tutors (54 per cent) as opposed to the counselling service (7 per cent). The study concludes that widening participation brings a particular set of responsibilities to ensure that 'the learning environment in each institution is as responsive as possible to the needs of the full range of students' (Grant 2002:100). Such studies highlight the importance of taking a whole-university approach to student mental health. They suggest the need to target awareness raising to university populations as a whole, to improve knowledge around mental health and challenge the stigma which surrounds it, so that students are more likely to seek help and receive adequate responses. The Open Minds project acts and builds on this body of research, but has aimed to develop a fuller consideration of the role of learning and teaching in developing an inclusive, 'mentally well' university.

The social model of disability

The notion of a mentally well university draws on the social model of disability, which sees the barriers in society that prevent full participation of disabled people as 'the disability', as opposed to the perceived difference or impairment of the individual. This model is particularly useful in higher education as it enables an emphasis on identifying and addressing barriers to accessing the curriculum, learning, and achievement of potential and full participation in the student experience.

'Under the social model, disability is caused by the society in which we live and is not the 'fault' of an individual disabled person or an inevitable consequence of their limitations. Disability is the product of the physical, organisational and attitudinal barriers present within society which can lead to discrimination' (OU 2006).

For those with mental health difficulties, socially created and disabling barriers such as fear, ignorance, negative media images, stereotypes and discriminatory language may be extremely difficult to overcome, and can lead to anticipated stigma (whereby they expect to be devalued) and self-stigmatisation (where they devalue themselves) (Thornicroft 2007). While some students with mental health difficulties may find that their learning is affected through their condition or the side effects of medication, stigma is potentially a major barrier to full participation in higher education, as it can exacerbate the problems, lead to social isolation, low academic expectations and prevent students from accessing advice, information and support (Morris and Lilly 2006). Low expectations of academic ability and the assumption that additional support will be required, tends to homogenise students with mental health difficulties, ignoring strategies for self-management that students may have developed, as well as external support networks. Rather than focusing exclusively on

'treatment' of the condition or the importance of specialist support services in relation to mental health, it is vital to take into consideration ways in which the learning environment and learning, teaching and assessment practices may impact on student mental health. It then becomes possible to envision a mentally healthy learning community which provides positive learning experiences and supports the mental wellbeing of all its members.

Research

The Open Minds project has followed an action research model of cycles of planning, implementation, reflection and further planning in response to ongoing evaluation and consultation. Mixed methods have been employed to obtain quantitative and qualitative data from staff and students. A student survey on mental health and wellbeing was designed to capture perceptions of wellbeing; the stress factors at university generally and in learning and teaching activities in particular; it also aims to gain a sense of students' own coping strategies and ways in which they feel the university could improve in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of students.

Out of a survey of 202 respondents, 70 (35 per cent) reported experience of a recognised mental health difficulty; 50 per cent of these formally disclosed/received some form of formal support within the university. Reasons for non-disclosure included instances where the student had recovered or was in recovery; the condition was being managed through self-management strategies, medication or other treatment; the student, while having a history of mental health difficulties is currently well; the student is unsure how to access support; mental health difficulties are not perceived as a disability (other disabilities such as dyslexia may be disclosed); the student already has external support in place; there has been experience or expectation of stigma; the student does not want to be labelled; their mental health difficulties are emergent, not yet diagnosed or may not be defined as a disability under the current DDA definition.

Findings indicate that students feel it is very important to care for their wellbeing while at university and that they employ a range of coping strategies including physical activity, good nutrition, talking to someone, socialising, managing their studies, taking time out and managing their lifestyles. Not all students however, find wellbeing maintenance easy. The term 'wellbeing' has a variety of meanings for students and when students were asked what wellbeing means to them, responses highlight the connection with their learning and ability to study effectively:

- Holistic (physical/mental/spiritual)
- Comfortable with self, happy with life
- Able to achieve potential
- Having goals, sense of purpose
- Resilience – ability to adapt and cope with studies

- Work-life balance
- Not having mental health problems
- Physical health

'University can be incredibly stressful and affect wellbeing. Also, wellbeing is vital in attaining good results, attendance and the high level of work that is needed'

'Wellbeing is important when at uni because the stresses of uni life including all the academic responsibilities students are faced with, which we would not be able to deal with if we are suffering with problems that we cannot effectively deal with due to low self-esteem, lack of confidence and other emotional wellbeing issues ....'

'... uni for most people is the first taste of complete independence, and if we are not in a good state of mind the responsibilities we have to ourselves and others are neglected'.

'Being physically and mentally 'healthy' for example, being able to cope with the levels of university work whilst also balancing some leisure time, exercise and healthy diet and maintaining relationships with friends and family outside of university ....'

When asked why it is important (or not) to manage their wellbeing at university, 35 per cent of students indicated it was coping with academic demands, followed by coping with the stress of university life generally (20 per cent). Other reasons included the importance of staying well (12 per cent); achieving academic potential (8 per cent); enjoying the university experience (7 per cent); coping with the transition to university (5 per cent); preparing for graduation (5 per cent) and general quality of life (8 per cent).

As with previous surveys (Grant 2002), students identified that they tend to seek support from those they are already close to rather than specialist services, and that apart from family and friends, this tends to be members of academic staff, whether personal tutors or lecturers. The most important sources of support were friends (29 per cent); family members (21 per cent); academic staff (16 per cent); partner (5 per cent); self-management (5 per cent); peers (4 per cent) and student services (4 per cent). Other examples included spiritual guidance, faith and the Student Union.

The aspects of university life students reported as impacting most on their wellbeing involved factors related to academic work (60 per cent); poor work-life balance (10 per cent); financial issues (9 per cent) and administration issues (6 per cent) such as correspondence, timetabling and rooming. Other issues included adjusting to independent living; social integration – problems with peers; coping away from family/friends; peer pressure; the university environment; accommodation; personal lives and worries about the future. Specific aspects of academic work students struggled to cope with included:

- Deadlines too close together (26 per cent)

- Workload (20 per cent)
- Exams (12 per cent)
- Coursework (13 per cent)
- Academic staff (unavailable/unsupportive) (6 per cent)
- Not enough information on what is required in academic work

'I don't feel as though I'm given enough information for me to feel confident and assured in what I'm doing'.

'Clearer assignment tasks – currently vague and open to interpretation meaning that one tutor says one thing, while another will mark you down for it – very stressful as you have to try and find a 'happy medium'

- Feedback (not clear)
- Pressure (internal/external)
- Teaching styles (eg pace)
- Level of work
- Lack of structure
- Need to develop skills gradually

'Introduce skills earlier to make people familiar with them (like presentations, essays, critical thinking)'.

Students identified a range of inclusive teaching strategies which when incorporated into mainstream teaching practice, have the potential to support the wellbeing of all students, as well as those with recognised mental health difficulties:

- Clear expectations, learning objectives
- Clear, accessible course information (available online)
- Staggered deadlines
- Approachable/available academic staff
- More study skills development (especially group work, presentations, essay writing, coping with exams)
- Allowing for different learning styles
- Regular, clear feedback
- More opportunities for interaction with other students

'Asking for more feedback from students to check they feel confident to work independently'.

'Assessments and exams - could be spread more over the year. Currently they are all in the same two to three week period'.

Furthermore, students highlighted the importance of visible, accessible support; opportunities for social integration and peer support; awareness of mental health and a wider academic culture and environment conducive to wellbeing. For students with mental health difficulties, awareness of their issues was seen as crucial to support their wellbeing, and their comments emphasise the importance of developing an inclusive culture where all students feel accepted:

- *'Better awareness so tutors treat mental stress and illness as an illness rather than a 'lazy' student'.*
- *I've experienced severe depression, and have not sought help at uni, tried, but felt uneasy about [support services] being at uni campus!!!!! Don't want it to be labelled.*
- *'Understanding of problems/mental health issues which may occur – may reduce stress'.*

Conclusion

Academic staff and learning and teaching practices play a vital role in student wellbeing. Inclusive teaching strategies are shown to potentially benefit a wide range of students, supporting their wellbeing and success and so should be mainstreamed and considered at course design stage. Teaching strategies which are characterised by good communication, clear information and positive interactions, along with opportunities for students to develop confidence and effective learning skills, contribute to a positive learning culture. Inclusive practices, coupled with the inclusion of mental health and wellbeing in the curriculum content can contribute to improved wellbeing and student success, and so are an essential component of a 'mentally well' university. Positive relationships with academic staff and peers, with opportunities for integration in the academic community, also contribute to good learning experiences and heightened wellbeing.

Working towards a mentally well, inclusive, stigma free learning culture which empowers students with mental health difficulties is a complex, ongoing task which should be appropriately resourced. Stigma in our society is highly pervasive and there is much misinformation (Thornicroft 2007). It is essential therefore, that all staff are equipped with knowledge and understanding about mental health difficulties and effective ways to respond when a student is in crisis. Adopting a preventative approach contributes to de-stigmatising mental health, highlighting the fact that everyone has mental health, and we all need to adopt strategies to manage wellbeing while learning and working in challenging academic settings. Ongoing mental health and wellbeing promotion have an important part to play, alongside continuing staff development and provision of resources and activities to engage both staff and students. Providing students with strategies to maintain their wellbeing equips them with essential life skills, which engender long-term learning and health benefits, optimising academic achievement and building resilience for future lives and careers with benefits for the whole of society.

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Charlotte Morris is a research officer at the Centre for Learning and Teaching and has been researching in the area of student mental health and wellbeing for five years. She worked as a project development officer on a successful two year Aim Higher funded project based at Anglia Ruskin University, 'Mind-the-Gap' which investigated supporting successful transitions into higher education for students with metal health difficulties. At the University of Brighton she led a two year Widening Participation project, Open Minds, exploring inclusive practices to support student mental health and wellbeing. Alongside this, she was part of the HEA Doctoral Learning Journeys project team, overseeing and conducting

qualitative research into doctoral learning. Charlotte is currently conducting research for an ESCalate funded project which seeks to identify strategies to manage the wellbeing of research students in education. A member of the Carer and Service User group in Nursing and Midwifery, Charlotte has been involved in developing and delivering CLUEE mental health awareness training to students Charlotte is completing a DPhil in Gender Studies at the University of Sussex.

For further information on these projects please see the links below:

'Open Minds' at: http://staffcentral.brighton.ac.uk/clt/research/openminds.htm (please contact Charlotte Morris for a hard copy of the final report at: cm147@brighton.ac.uk)
'Doctoral Learning Journeys' at: www.brighton.ac.uk/clt/clt-research-projects/doctoral-learning-journeys.html
'Troublesome Encounters' at: www.brighton.ac.uk/clt/troublesome-encounters.html

Student wellbeing from an occupational science perspective

PROFESSOR GAYNOR SADLO

Introduction

It can be informative to consider student wellbeing from several different perspectives to see what we can learn about enhancing students' experience of their higher education and indeed, their life. Occupational science is a relatively new field. It is the study of the health effects of our various 'occupations', which in this case is defined as all activities that 'occupy' a human being. It is a synthesis of many subjects, including anatomy, physiology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, environmental studies (and is thus closely associated with human geography) and the arts. Occupational science underpins the practice of occupational therapy, one of the rehabilitation professions, but it is also becoming a branch of public health in its own right. One way of conceptualising this is to consider a proposition:

> Due to effective health education campaigns, we all realise nowadays that exercise is related to health, and we all know that nutrition is intimately related to health, but as yet the general public is not fully conscious of the close association between engagement in meaningful, enjoyable activities and our state of health and wellbeing, to the extent that we would deliberately set out to take part in say, creative activities, as part of our efforts to stay well.

As this article focuses on being a student; we need to turn the spotlight on to the activity of learning, and analyse its characteristics and components. This paper applies current knowledge from occupational science to student life, with the intention of increasing awareness of recent research findings into the effects of different aspects of lifestyle on wellbeing. It first defines wellbeing, which is often used rather vaguely. The chapter then

considers how emotional and social intelligence play such a vital role in our perceptions of feeling well. We look at recommendations for reducing the potential stress of student life, for stress is not only the killer of fun; it also literally kills our immune system. Meditation and mindfulness are suggested as powerful tools to enhance wellbeing, since they offer the means to gain some control over some of our emotional states.

There is also evidence that we are a species 'born' to be creative, and that when we engage in complex activities that take all our attention and energy (such as learning, and/or activities involving skilled hand use, such as playing a musical instrument), we tend to feel great afterwards. This seems to stem from the production of our brain's own natural biochemical substances which reward hard work/creative pursuits with feelings of pleasure, via the body's special reward systems. It could even be hypothesised that the high rate of drug use in our society may stem from a reduction in participation of 'real' activities in this age of technology, and subsequent lack of production of our own natural opiods. (Truly, this is not a lecture on trying to trick students into working hard or to stay off drugs!). And not least, the paper ends on the positive relationship between learning and wellbeing, which is good news since the occupation of a student is learning – so 'the job' brings its own inherent rewards.

Defining wellbeing

It is interesting to observe that the hyphen in 'well-being' has all but disappeared, two concepts forming into one. Dictionaries say wellbeing means a good and satisfactory condition of existence, a state of being characterised by health, happiness and prosperity. Student 'welfare' relates to how we (universities) can influence their wellbeing. 'Being' refers to a special quality – existing, being alive, becoming manifest, a living creature … it has spiritual connotations. The derivation of *be* means I become, to bring forth, cause to grow. We need to conceptualise wellbeing from all its aspects – physical, emotional, social and spiritual. To have all these aspects 'being' satisfied at one time is quite a tall order, so we can see how easy it is for our wellbeing to be reduced. We might be physically well, but if we feel lonely, our wellbeing is compromised. Within rehabilitation settings, we often see people who have become very physically disabled, and yet because their sense of spirituality seems to have become strong, perhaps because they have been forced to re-appraise the meaning of what is important in their life, they report higher levels of wellbeing than before. So we can see that wellbeing is a complex idea.

There is now a more scientific definition of wellbeing available to us. It is seen as the state of 'psychophysiological coherence', defined by the relatively new Institute of Heartmath (www.heartmath.org/research/e-books). In essence, it has been discovered that when people report their highest sense of wellbeing, their electrocardiograms are in synchrony with their electro-encephalograms (basically, brain waves). This state of wellbeing has also been termed *heart-brain coherence*. It seems we should now perceive the heart as a very

intelligent system in its own right, so much more than a blood pump. Neurocardiologists have discovered thick complex neural networks within the chest; of such magnitude that it is as if we have a little brain inside the heart. This has been pictured with electron microscopes. In particular, the heart has been reclassified as a major sense organ in itself; it is extremely sensitive to our emotional reactions, which of course, has been known by human beings since the beginning of time. It has recently been more fully realised that the heart sends a lot of messages to the brain to help it regulate bodily needs.

Although we technically perceive emotions in the brain, through the senses eyes, ears, nose, as stimulated by environmental factors, we 'feel' them in the heart. We all know the intense pain of heartache, and we know that people can die of a 'broken heart'. Painful emotions are linked to stress, which can be the opposite of wellbeing.

Our range of emotions

One of the profound aspects of being human is that we have such an extensive range of emotions that give our life a wonderful texture and variation. It is tempting to think of 'positive' emotions, such as joy, love, happiness, peace, contentment, and 'negative' emotions such as anger, sadness, resentment and hate (actually these are a mixture of emotions and 'states'). We, of course, have a tendency to want to remain always in the positive realm of feelings; we go out of our way in our search for happiness. However, it seems that we have kept these emotions through the eons of time, and so we can suppose that they must all have some evolutionary purpose. Can we also appreciate the so called negative states of being? Live through the experience of them, being aware of the feelings, and know that this is part of what it is to be human.

The only caveat to this suggestion, is that there is scientific evidence that emotional states, especially frustration, anger and rage, change our heart beats as more of the stress hormone, cortisol, is sent into the system.
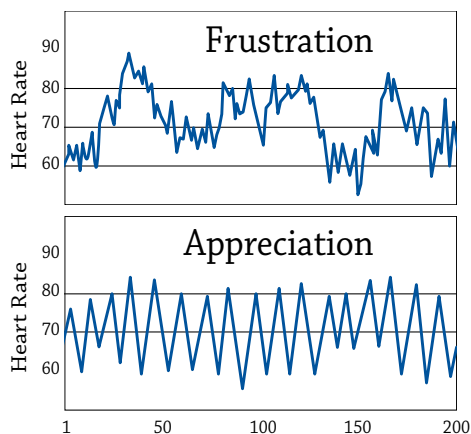
In turn this damages our health through its effect on reducing our immune response. If we can work on modifying our reactions towards more appreciation and care for our world, our sense of wellbeing is enhanced and our whole physical system goes into a more coherent state, according to the heart research.

It has been well established that we are finely tuned to sense when we are in danger from a threat in the environment. This is a fabulous facility for our safety and protection. We have a very highly evolved, especially adapted 'extra' nervous system, designed to keep us safe – called the autonomic nervous system. Its mission is to very quickly get our bodies into a state to flee from the threat, the well known flight or fight response, when more blood flows to the muscles, turning down the supply to the digestive system and brain – who needs to *think* at a time when running away or attacking an enemy is the key to survival!

In one sense we should be delighted that we have such a sensitive, automatic system that easily picks up stressful situations, for it has enabled us to thrive as a species. As they say, stress is actually a very healthy response system. However, in our contemporary urban world, there are not many roaming bears of which to be afraid. With our strong system for perceiving threats, we tend to translate social threats into physical ones in modern life. We have such complex social structures, that aspects of life like social embarrassment, loss of status, rejection by friends or loss of face can become as dangerous to our health as a hungry predator was in our hunter-gatherer days. Thus, before a presentation to peers our hearts will race and our palms sweat, and we cannot 'think straight'. Our physiological responses are exactly the same as if we were running from danger, but the problem is we don't flee, and we don't (usually) fight in our urban context, and so our reactions are inappropriate and eventually damaging. These situations can be so common that we end up encountering chronic stress. High levels of the stress hormone cortisol damage the immune system, making us more susceptible to disease.

Assessments are the major source of stress, and one of the biggest threats of student life, for (as all academics are aware), the potential is there to make us look incapable if we do not do well, which will be felt as social embarrassment, which can itself trigger the stress response. First year students especially, can feel this strongly because they have been more used to being seen as the more capable students at school. Thus, the main threats to health in contemporary 'western' human life are diseases caused not by infections and viruses but by how we live, including how we react to our daily experiences, especially if we perceive many aspects of life as stressful. Can we try to break this reactive pattern?

When students come to university, they tend to think that it is their cognitive intelligence, knowledge and understanding that will be developing most, but we also need to develop what has now been named our 'emotional intelligence'. This refers to increasing our conscious awareness of our emotions at the time that we feel them, identifying what we are feeling, being more aware of the range of emotions that we have, and learning to regulate our reactions to them. The best-selling author Daniel Goleman (1996; 2008), suggests that our

emotional awareness and control often has more effect on human 'success' than cognitive intelligence. Howard Martin one of the leads within the heart intelligence research, goes so far as to say that regulating our emotions, for example by consciously changing frustration when we feel it, into appreciation, is the next phase of human evolution!

Towards a more blissful student life?

Obviously we need to try, at least sometimes, to change our response to the events that we would usually get upset about. We need to realise first of all, that we might not be able to change our immediate emotional experience to what we perceive as a threatening situation, but we can change the way we choose to respond. Yes, humans can break the automatic chain of stimulus to response, through choosing more 'positive' ways of reacting. There is now a proven way to learn control over our emotional reactions, and to do this successfully most of the time – learn to meditate. There are many organisations where we can learn this, and there are also effective CDs taking you through a guided meditation. Like most things that are worth doing, it has to be learned, and it can take quite a long time to get to the point where we can 'just sit' peacefully for half an hour, observing thoughts as they pass through our minds, but day by day, meditation can be learned through practice. Perhaps you could form support groups and practice together. When we meditate, we alter our brain waves, towards waves that are more like the relaxation state.

Mindfulness and mindful occupations

A related activity is *mindfulness*, which is the act of becoming more conscious and aware of our lived experiences moment by moment. It means appreciating what we are doing in the present, and not focusing as we usually do, on the past and the future. As the saying goes, the past only exists in our memory, and the future only exists in our imagination. They are not 'real' in that sense. The present moment is all we really ever have. Indeed, there is now a strong research base which reveals that mindfulness practice profoundly enhances everyday life experience, and is linked to better health and moods. Research from University of Brighton occupational therapy masters students has revealed that mindfulness profoundly enhances quality of life. Try it! You can take a raisin, and slowly eat it being mindful of its taste, texture and shape, the sound of chewing, of swallowing, etc. See how much more fully you appreciate the immediate experience. Again there are classes and books on mindfulness, and it is becoming more and more popular within modern society. It is now becoming a central aspect within cognitive behaviour therapy, which has been validated so powerfully that it has become an NHS recommendation. Mindful occupations refer to the act of mindfulness applied to everything that we do during our days – so we can wash up mindfully, go for walks mindfully, and be in the moment when we are with loving friends. Get prepared to believe that doing things mindfully and savouring every moment is worth much more than material riches!

'Whatever the tasks, do them slowly and with ease, in mindfulness.
Resolve to do each job in a relaxed way, with all your attention.
Enjoy and be one with your work' (Thich Nat Hanh).

Becoming our creative selves

For over three million years we have been evolving into the highly creative species we are now, with each part of our bodies designed to enable us to do very highly specialised tasks, compared with other animals. We can observe the special features that give us the capacity for higher order occupations – our bipedal stance and gait, giant inquisitive brains, binocular vision, language, exquisite hands, extreme self-awareness, and sense of spirituality with its search for meaning in everything that we do. It seems that our brains grew ever bigger as we needed a more complex computer to solve the problems presented by living in all regions of earth – apparently our evolving hand dexterity, literally forced the growth of the brain. As we became more intelligent we began to use tools to accentuate our hand skills, and this eventually spiralled until our hands have almost been superseded by machines for many activities.

About 60,000 years ago, it seems that our species first became 'creative' in an artistic sense. We began decorating our bodies with shells and carved beads, and started to have sacred ceremonies, such as burials. We began painting representations of our environment on cave and rock walls, and our need for aesthetic and transcendental expression began the development of the arts, science, and technology. We can recognise the capacities that make these creative expressions possible. In occupational science we have named them our physical, motivational, intellectual, socio-cultural, symbolic and transcendental sub-systems. As we have evolved these qualities, which are part of the essence of being human – what we were born to do, there is evidence that if we do not participate in these higher-level activities, we suffer forms of deprivation and imbalance, which are also stressors.

Thus, another way to enhance our wellbeing is to enact our creativity by bringing something into being that has not previously existed, such as making a loaf of bread. It does not have to mean creating high level inventions – in this context we need to see it as all occupations that bring something into being, such as singing a song, getting dressed, drawing a boat, arranging some flowers. You will be very surprised at the seemingly disproportionately positive effect that baking a cake has on your friends/family in comparison to buying a cake. So why not join a university choir to enhance your creative self? There is evidence that these activities make us feel well. When we are expressing our inborn creative natures our reward system kicks in, and we stimulate the production of the pleasure chemicals, such as opiods and serotonin, our natural happy-making brain chemicals.

It's in our hands!

Within occupational science we make a special study of the human hand as a very wonderful organ of self-expression that is linked to health and wellbeing. Our hands are so much part of us that we take them very much for granted. The fine control we have of our hands, compared with other species, has enabled us to create our culture. Our hands have become like agents that enable us to enact the life we choose. Compare human lives with that of, say a cow, and we quickly see that our hands are largely responsible for our special trait, each human life is quite different from the next, depending on the influences brought to bear by family, country, resources, values, opportunities, education and so on. In that way we become what we do and the person we are today.

It seems that our hands have evolved over three million years into the finest manipulative tool in the animal kingdom. We can study the human hand to really appreciate its enabling features, but there is not space here to go into detail. Spend a day studying hand anatomy and you will become fascinated by its qualities (which in itself will improve your heart health). Just focus on our sense of touch, and how finely we can learn about the objects we handle through touch, which is concentrated in the fingertips in the form of our finger 'prints'. These specialised ridges of skin form a little 'hill' which houses and protects the network of sense organs that detect heat, cold, light touch, pressure, sharp pressure and pain. If that were not enough, each little ridge has special sweat cells to aid grip, which is why people spit on their hands before doing a tough manual activity involving tight grip. The hand could also be viewed as a secondary sex organ, so useful are they in expressing our sexual selves through our touch.

One vital factor in consideration of the hand and its relation to wellbeing is that using the hands, especially in skilful activity, is very stimulating for the brain. Each finger takes as much space in the brain as the whole forearm. Our hands need out of proportion brain space and thus, hand skills are a natural way to keep our brain active without being very conscious of it. Hand activities are so automatic that we do not need to think of the movements needed say, to make a clay pot, they come 'naturally'. Of course they have been learned over a lifetime. As we get older, keeping up our hand skills is as stimulating as doing those newly invented brain teasers, and so may have the power to delay dementia. Here is an illustration of how we would look if our body parts were in proportion to the brain space that they need. The parts of the body that have the finest movements, that is the hands and the lips/tongue, need the most brain area. For very fine and precise movement, many small muscles are needed to make minute movements such as those needed for sounds.
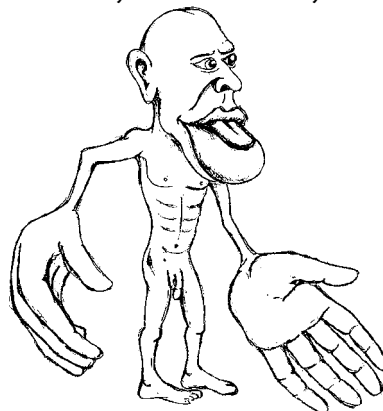

ILLUSTRATION BY BEN ROGERSON

There is a very direct relationship between hand use and language, as expressed through gestures. Apparently gestures help us to think and find the right words. Studies show that if we are stopped from using our hands when we speak, it is easier to be lost for words. It is thought that as our hands evolved millions of years ago and we started being able to make more and more complicated tools, we needed more people to cooperate in their manufacture. For this, we needed much more diverse and precise sounds, and so tool development led to the development of language. As a student or academic, it is good to keep writing in the old-fashioned way, which is after all a highly practiced hand skill, because our thought developments are stimulated through writing and drawing. So take up drawing to enhance your life!

Flow states

Now we can look at another special aspect of human wellbeing which relates to hand use and self expression through the arts. We are starting to understand that one of the most vital pathways to improved wellbeing has been named and framed as 'flow', and it is also quite a paradox. It's good to read the best-seller book on this optimal human experience, *Flow,* by Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi (1990). Flow has been described as the most wonderful feeling it is possible for a human being to experience, and we now know through brain studies, that it can be classified as an altered state of human consciousness which often has elements of the transcendental. When we are in flow, time stands still, we become totally focused and transfixed on the activity before us.

Flow seems to be a different, almost opposite mental state to mindfulness, in that during mindfulness we totally focus all our attention onto the activity of the moment, whatever it may be, such as a walk in the park, whereas in flow we absolutely must be focusing on the complex skill. While we are totally focused in the moment while playing say, Chopin on the piano, the part of the brain that controls the fine and complex movement skill is highly active, while the part of the brain that is self-referential, or to do with our self awareness or self consciousness, has to be repressed to allow the rest of the brain to get on with its quite mind-blowing activity. For example a pianist might strike 18,000 notes per minute precisely, but without really thinking about it consciously, although it would have involved a lot of practise to get to that level of skill. If the person *does* think about the notes too self-consciously, or worry about if s/he can do it, mistakes will happen. Flow seems to feel good because when our self-awareness switches off, it feels like a 'mental holiday' from our worries and concerns. Can we all relate to experiencing such rewarding mental states at some time? When we 'lost' ourselves in the activity, and lost track of time? That was a flow state.

The benefits of learning

To end this discussion let's look at how learning also directly benefits student wellbeing. Of course it leads to activation of many parts of the brain, especially the frontal lobe and in particular the pre-frontal lobe, which is just behind the eyes and forehead. This is the problem-solving, decision making, thinking, rational area, but learning naturally involves many other brain areas. When we learn, it is sometimes hard and one has to struggle to 'get' the new concept. At these moments your deep desire to understand something new pushes your neurones to connect with others, and in this way you have to literally reconstruct your brain to incorporate the new idea. This is a wonderful gift from nature. We have around 100 billion neurones in the brain and some of these have more than 1,000 connections. As a comparison, the human brain has more neurones than there are stars in the universe. We are built for learning. During our student days our brains literally grow and change, and this is possible because it has quite recently been discovered that around 10,000 new neurones come into the brain every day. Scientists used to believe that once the human brain was fully formed, that was it. They could not imagine how new cells could be integrated into such a complex system that seemed to become 'hard wired' in adulthood. It now seems that the daily birth of new cells are provided in case we need them – that is, if we really do need this extra power to learn new concepts or new skills. If people do not need them, they die in a few weeks (neuroscientists think), which is why deprived, unstimulating environments are so bad for our wellbeing. We know that when we slob out and don't galvanise ourselves to work on our material we feel lousy afterwards. However, during student life the brain really needs the extra cells in its effort to read, understand, remember and so on, and by the end of your course your brain will be a bit heavier!

In the higher education research literature on how students learn, there is the idea that when you get to understand the important concepts of your chosen subject it is as if you go through a 'threshold' – these are known as 'threshold concepts' (Meyer and Land 2003). It is like a rite of passage, once you have passed through that beautiful door you are transformed forever, and have entered a new world, seeing and understanding it in a different way. This is the real joy of learning that we have all experienced. There is also the finding that when we have one of those 'aha' moments, when at last, after the struggle, focus, deep concentration and lots of hard effort we 'get' a new understanding, there is a surge of electrical activity in the brain, recorded with brain-wave apparatus! And finally, the more complex the ideas we seek to grapple with, the deeper into the brain the activity has to go, bringing together many different areas, cognitive, emotional, language, visual perception... and these deeper areas are endowed with many more opiod receptors than the 'shallow' areas (this is very crudely described here) which seems to explain that we literally do get a 'high' when we eventually grasp complex ideas, and when we create/construct new concepts! Thus we can become literally addicted to more and more learning. And this is great for our wellbeing.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined a few ways in which we can try to enrich our experience as learners. The big one is to try all the tricks in the book to reduce our stress. In particular, we need to become more knowledgeable about our range of emotions, and how we can regulate them towards the 'higher' end of the spectrum. Acknowledge emotions, such as jealousy, for what they are and turn away from such states to more acceptance of what is. It would be good for our health if we did all occupations in a mindful manner. It might be helpful to our wellbeing if we learned to meditate, and practiced being mindful throughout the day. When necessary, realise the level of tension you are feeling and try to alter that to appreciation. We need to re-value our hearts as the centre of our emotional lives, and read some of the easily downloadable ebooks on this fascinating science.

We should get involved in doing something creative – to express our inborn nature. Preferably something that develops new hand skills, things that will get us into flow states and which literally transform us. Knitting is becoming popular again and even funky – there are some fun knitting circles around and in some societies men do the knitting. Playing music is another big world barely touched on here. We all know that physical exercise also promotes masses of happy chemicals in the brain, so 30 minutes exercise a day is a must for wellbeing. Also not mentioned here, is the research into volunteering and wellbeing; caring and giving are sure roads to enhanced feelings – that's official. Finally we need to know that the real reason we engage in learning a new subject – is in itself, a pathway to rewarding and pleasurable feelings, through our neural mechanisms. What more could we want?

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Professor Gaynor Sadlo qualified as an occupational therapist in 1968 after studying at the University of Queensland. She practised in work rehabilitation in Australia, and in physical rehabilitation and social services in the UK. In 1983, after 14 years in the field she became a teacher at the London School of Occupational Therapy. Gaynor helped initiate the UK's first problem-based learning (PBL) healthcare curriculum, and later

developed the first PBL masters occupational therapy programme, at Brunel University; her doctoral research compared occupational therapy students' experiences of traditional and PBL curricula. Gaynor sees PBL as the enactment of occupational therapy principles in the classroom (for example, all learning has meaning and purpose). As head of the division of occupational therapy at the University of Brighton since 1999, Gaynor is keen to foster the development of a centre of excellence in occupational therapy education, practice, and research within the region. Gaynor has a strong interest in occupational science, and believes that advances in that area will deepen understanding of the potential of occupation within health promotion and as a therapeutic medium. In the spring of 2010, Professor Sadlo presented her inaugural lecture at the university 'Promoting health through occupation: creative hands, flow and mindfulness.'

Exploring the link between equality, diversity and wellbeing

ANNIE CARROLL

The promotion of the principles of equality and diversity are essential for a true understanding of wellbeing. In the context of higher education communities, wellbeing can be viewed as the promotion of the physical, social and psychological health of students and staff. It may also incorporate understanding of citizenship and respect and of personal, social and spiritual development or fulfilment.

In contrast, work around equality and diversity may focus on the creation of an inclusive environment and culture, the celebration of difference, sharing of ideas and comparison of references. Particularly, within higher education, this may demonstrate itself through the academic freedom of community members, and the open debate of principles and ideas. Through the creation of such a culture, it is hoped that both staff and students will be enabled to fulfil their potential, and ultimately the objectives of the university and society at large.

Contrasting these definitions reveals an implicit link between the two areas. Equality, diversity and wellbeing share mutual aims: to promote successful learning and achievement outcomes for students and staff, and to encourage self-awareness, citizenship, confidence and curiosity amongst community members. Both areas also link with Aim 4 of the University of Brighton corporate plan (2007-12) 'to provide an *experience* of higher education that is challenging and *enjoyable* for its students and staff; that embodies equality of treatment; and that equips its students to be socially purposeful *professionals* and *citizens*'.

Links between student achievement in higher education and equality and diversity factors such as ethnicity, gender or disability, are well documented. National trends showing greater levels of academic achievement amongst students from 'white' backgrounds or by

'female' students are also repeated at an institutional level.[1] However, less documented are the societal causes behind these trends, as well as the practical steps that may be taken by institutions to minimise adverse impact. This area continues to attract further research,[2] and notions of student wellbeing in particular, may offer some explanation. In this context, the wellbeing of individuals may incorporate ideas of academic self-esteem, peer support, identification with the university and feelings of working within a 'comfort zone'. More directly, this may include feelings of safety on campus, and academic and social confidence within the classroom environment and university community.

Indeed, these concepts are not limited to those who fall within different diversity strands, but across all student groups with the idea of embedding more holistic approaches to student learning and self-understanding. Particularly at our institution, students often fall outside the 'typical' demographic of school leavers and may balance multiple identities. They are full-time or part-time students who juggle work commitments; roles in the family (mother, boyfriend, son) or in friendship groups (local student or new starter). Each role places increased demands upon the student's time and work-life balance, and affects their perceptions of study and their learning styles or methods. It may also affect how they are perceived and treated by their peers. No student studies in a vacuum. It is therefore the aim of wellbeing strategies to foster confidence within individuals to explore these roles, to challenge expectations where required, and to promote confidence in their approach to academic learning. For many, the university experience provides a unique opportunity to explore their personal identity and to learn about others.

It is therefore essential that wellbeing strategies and equality and diversity work within the university acknowledge their interdependence and exploit opportunities for collaboration. By looking beyond legal requirements and working more proactively to promote equality of opportunity and challenging negative cultures, equality and diversity work will not only result in greater wellbeing for the university community, but also greater achievement and fulfilment for all its members.

Annie Caroll is the student equality and diversity adviser in Student Services. Annie helps to develop university policies to ensure inclusive practice for students and staff across the institution. Her work draws on research which suggests that student achievement amongst different ethnic groups is directly linked with how comfortable they feel in their surroundings. This is highly relevant to the equality and diversity agenda which aims to ensure fair access to facilities for all student groups and to eliminate discrimination in favour of a more inclusive learning environment.

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1 Monitoring data for University of Brighton student admission, progression and achievement by gender, disability and ethnicity is published annually and may be viewed at: www.brighton.ac.uk/equality.
2 Some examples of current research projects may be found on the Equality Challenge Unit website at: www.ecu.ac.uk/our-projects/ethnicity-and-degree-attainment.

Wellbeing enhancement in higher education

The University of Brighton is engaged in embedding wellbeing through a range of practices. These papers consider the university as a health promoting university and provide examples of good practice within this university and beyond.

Developing the University of Brighton as a Health Promoting University – the story so far

CAROLINE HALL, JOSEPHINE RAMM AND AMANDA JEFFERY

Abstract

There is growing interest and increased activity at national, European, and international levels in using the Health Promoting University (HPU) approach (sometimes known as Healthy Universities). The HPU concept is built on the settings-based approach to health promotion, which suggests that a holistic and whole-organisation approach to health and wellbeing is both effective and sustainable. This article introduces HPUs; explores links between HPUs and sustainability; and reports on a qualitative study which explores the potential for developing the University of Brighton as an HPU. The study used interviews and a workshop with a wide range of individuals from across the university, to map out the university's existing capacity to develop as an HPU, as well as the potential challenges that it may encounter, and to make recommendations for an appropriate and supportive strategy and the ongoing management of such an initiative. Prior to the interviews, a literature review was conducted to scope out relevant grey and academic literature, both to set the context for the study, and to facilitate the development of the interview schedules. Reference is made to the national, European and international context of HPUs, in order to demonstrate the potential for the work currently underway at the University of Brighton.

Background

The Health Promoting University (HPU) concept is a whole-organisation approach in which health and wellbeing are embedded into the ethos, culture, policies and daily practices of

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a university (Davies and Newton 2010). Based on the 'settings approach', which reflects an appreciation that the contexts and places in which people live are essential in determining health and wellbeing (Dooris et al 2007), HPUs are built on a belief rooted in the Ottawa Charter (WHO 1986) that health and wellbeing are integral resources for life, and that health promoting environments must be created in order for individuals and groups to realise aspirations, satisfy needs, and cope with their daily lives. Thus, the HPU approach relies on defining, accessing and utilising existing resources within a university's corporate structures and daily activities. Enabling processes should be structured and organised in such a way that individuals are empowered to facilitate decision making processes within the university setting.

Universities that promote themselves as HPUs recognise that supporting health is an important investment in a successful institution, since linking health to the socio-ecological environments in which staff and students work, enables a sense of personal and corporate responsibility. As such, an HPU enables individuals to experience health and wellbeing in their academic or professional environments through the creation of sustainable conditions for improving health.

In essence, an HPU aims to:

- create healthy and sustainable working, learning and living environments for students, staff, and visitors
- increase the profile of health and sustainable development in teaching, research and knowledge exchange
- contribute to the health and sustainability of the wider community
- evaluate work to build evidence of effectiveness, and to share learning
- demonstrate a commitment to health, wellbeing and sustainability in its mission, policies, and practice
- offer health-conducive physical environments and sustainable practices that minimise the negative impact of university life at local, regional, national and global levels
- provide high quality health and welfare related support services that are sensitive to the needs of the diverse university population
- provide support for personal and social development through information, education and opportunities to develop health enhancing personal and life skills, including responsible global citizenship
- make available social, leisure, sports and cultural facilities that reflect diversity and facilitate healthier choices

The approach is underpinned by the core principles reflecting the values that characterise higher education and public health. These include: equality and diversity; participation and

empowerment; partnership; sustainability; holistic and whole system health; evidence-informed and innovative practice; and evaluation, learning and knowledge exchange.

The healthy university approach also accounts for both the drivers of higher education and public health. It therefore aims to reflect and respond to the distinctive culture of universities, and show how it can help to deliver key priorities (eg student recruitment, retention, experience and achievement; widening participation; and employee performance and organisational productivity), whilst also identifying and responding to relevant public health challenges (eg alcohol and substance misuse, mental wellbeing, obesity, diet and physical activity; sexual health; climate change; reduction of inequalities).

Advantages of an HPU approach

The HPU approach is not just about delivering interventions in a range of contexts – it aims to make the actual settings in which people live, work, learn and play intrinsically conducive to health and wellbeing. This opposes the historical approach that is still followed by many institutions, where health was primarily supported through the delivery of specific projects and isolated initiatives.

Instead, the HPU approach has adopted the more recent shift towards holistic and integrated health promoting resources, whereby health promoting strategies and structures are created on a whole-university level. This approach has built on the settings-based health promotion philosophy, which suggests that health promotion is most effective when it is intrinsically linked to the places within which individuals live, work, learn and play.

More specifically, the HPU approach has built on the success of similar settings-based initiatives such as the Healthy Schools or the Healthy Cities initiatives. Evidence from these and similar initiatives suggests that effective programmes are likely to be complex, multi-faceted, integrated, and intersectoral (Stewart-Brown 2006; Butland et al 2007).

Health and sustainability

The University of Brighton HPU project is an example of, and contributes towards, a growing body of research which highlights strong links between the health and wellbeing agenda and the sustainability agenda (Barlett and Chase 2004; Griffiths and Stewart 2008). Recent research identifies higher education settings as offering great potential to impact positively on students, staff and wider communities and underlines an increasing necessity to demonstrate how HPUs can help achieve core business objectives and contribute to related agendas, including sustainability (Dooris and Doherty 2010). Health promotion and the sustainability agenda share the theoretical underpinnings of a holistic and ecological perspective, whereby a 'whole systems' approach can be used, and interdependence of stakeholders from different domains is emphasised. This facilitates coordinated efforts to connect agendas and to enable effective interventions, for example to increase health and productivity of staff.

National, European and international scope

In recognition of the potential for education institutions to positively influence health, networks have been established at national, European and international levels in order to support research and practice in this area (www.schoolsforhealth.eu; www.healthyschools.gov.uk). International Health Development Research Centres (IHDRC) are active participants in each of these networks, a commonality between them is that they each relate to the sustainability agenda. A major benefit of being part of the networks is that they each aim to facilitate and advocate an integrated approach to addressing sustainable development and health through both institutional policy and practice, and curriculum and research. Additional benefits include initiatives: to increase potential for research collaboration; to share good practices; to show strength politically and develop an advocacy role; to share country-specific criteria with the objective of establishing shared criteria for the establishment of HPUs. IHDRC are keen to integrate learning from the partners involved into our work at the University of Brighton, as well as sharing knowledge as appropriate, and to feed into the broader health and sustainability agenda at the university.

In the UK an English National Healthy Universities Network was established in 2006 (www.healthyuniversities.ac.uk) to offer a facilitative environment for the development of a whole-university approach to health and wellbeing. In recognition of the challenge involved in building a common understanding of what a health promoting university means, the network's framework for action includes sustainability within three out of four of its key aims:

- to create a healthy and sustainable working, learning and living environment for all students, staff and visitors
- to increase the profile of health and sustainable development in teaching, research and knowledge exchange
- to contribute to the health and sustainability of the wider community
- to monitor and evaluate progress and build evidence of effectiveness through evaluation and dissemination

The 'European Network on Healthy and Sustainable Universities', coordinated from the University of Aalborg, Denmark, outlines its vision 'to contribute to the shaping of health and sustainability of future generations through university strategies'. The network is currently applying for European funding to develop a tool for assessment of health and sustainability promoting activities at universities.

An international special interest group for health promoting universities is currently under development, aiming to combine the knowledge and expertise of parties interested and engaged in the HPU approach from around the world. In the absence of funding for

this network, working in partnership requires opportunism and resilience. As such, there are plans to develop an electronic hub in which HPU-related resources are pooled.

Developing the University of Brighton as an HPU

The IHDRC at the University of Brighton is carrying out a two year research project (2009-11) to determine the feasibility of developing the University of Brighton as an HPU with the overall goal of contributing to the improved health and wellbeing of all university students, staff and the wider community. It will also promote the corporate identity of the university to potential students, staff and the external world. As such, this two-year project explores whether positive health and wellbeing can become sustainably embedded into university life, and how health promoting activities can become intrinsic components of the university's structures and policies. The main project objectives are in line with those outlined by the IHDEC above.

The project has research and practical delivery elements (phase 1 and phase 2). The first phase of the project (2009-10) consisted of two main components:

- A review of the academic literature on health promoting universities, alongside a review of internal grey literature related to the University of Brighton itself
- A series of in-depth interviews and a workshop with stakeholders from across the university

The first project activity contextualises the University of Brighton's existing infrastructures against the theories, influences, and principles which underpin the global HPU approach. The second activity gives insight into how well the university, as a broader institution, is currently able to support the holistic health and wellbeing needs of its various members and departments. By asking diverse stakeholders to direct attention to existing strengths and deficits with regards the University of Brighton's capacity as an HPU, this project will be able to suggest future areas for action to enhance capacity and ensure sustainability.

The practical delivery element consists of producing marketing and dissemination strategies and a work plan, to include a dedicated project website (www.brighton.ac.uk/hpu), testing out a series of high profile interventions and producing a support infrastructure to deliver the HPU approach. At the end of the two-year project, recommendations on how to further develop the HPU approach will be submitted by the steering group to the university's Senior Management Team.

Summary of findings: Phase one

In March 2010, an interim report was published which summarised the results of the interviews and workshop.

Existing HPU infrastructure

Insight gained from across the staff and students spectrum has led to the identification of many existing strengths which the University of Brighton could build on to become an HPU. For example, there is strong training for staff and students regarding mental health awareness, and an excellent curriculum that is being developed for counselling and wellbeing. Numerous wellness-centred initiatives such as Wellbeing Week and the 'Look After Yourself' campaign were frequently noted as conducive to health and wellbeing. Furthermore, concepts of both empowerment and collaboration were demonstrated, enabled through various Community University Partnership Project (CUPP) initiatives; the Environmental Action Network (EAN) and the Sustainable Development Research Forum (SDRF) were also identified as supporting a holistic and whole-university approach to fostering sustainable health promoting environments. With regards to healthy living, the healthy food initiatives/choices and opportunities for affordable physical activities were repeatedly noted as positive movements towards establishing Brighton as an HPU.

Stakeholder interviews and grey literature research generated a series of university policies and strategies which support the HPU approach. These include the University of Brighton's drug and alcohol policy, commitment to diversity and equity, support for mature students and students with families, student mental health policy, student support mandates, transportation schemes, and recycling strategy.

Potential challenges

With regard to barriers to success, potential challenges include building synergy between health related behaviour and the socio-ecological context in which people live and work on a daily basis, since current 'healthy initiatives' focused on specific topic-based issues, such as drugs and alcohol or sexual health.

Recommendations

One of the core outcomes from this project thus far, is the recognition that existing initiatives and policies have potential and should be built on and extended to maximise efficiency, to avoid duplication of effort and to reduce costs. Efforts should be made to progress a comprehensive and whole-institution approach, and to gain support for building sustainable health promoting environments across all levels and departments within the university. A 'whole system' focus on health promotion could lead to significant benefits in terms of effectiveness and efficiency, by capitalising on the added-value of embedding health and wellbeing into the daily activities of the university.

Reflection on strengths and challenges is necessary, with processes of 'joined up' thinking and activity in place, which should help to create healthy working and living environments for university staff, and to integrate health development into the daily activities of the university in a holistic and sustainable way. This should be achieved through building

an ethos and vision of health in all plans and policies, creating a health promoting and physically sustainable environment, enabling a supportive and empowering workplace, and facilitating the healthy personal development of students, staff, and the wider university community.

Next steps

Phase two of the project is focusing on the practical implementation of some of the recommendations. Global recession has forced institutions, including universities to re-examine existing structures for service delivery. Therefore, embedding recommendations into existing structures is an effective strategy for maximising resources. In particular, discussions are underway to integrate learning into the sustainability agenda at the University of Brighton in conjunction with the Sustainability Management Group, and as an example, using the site based environmental action networks to implement some practical projects linking health and sustainability. Other ideas for phase two include linking with the Students Union, and addressing broader aspects of students' health including sexual, mental and physical health. A monitoring and evaluation framework is currently being developed including the production of a set of HPU indicators which will be used to monitor and evaluate (input, process and outcome) the effectiveness and efficiency of the HPU initiative.

'Developing the University of Brighton as a Health Promoting University: an interim review', was published in March (Davies and Newton 2010). For more information or to receive a copy of this review, please contact Caroline Hall at: caroline.hall@brighton.ac.uk).

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Josephine Ramm and **Amanda Jefferey** (former research officers) worked in the IHDRC and contributed to the HPU project at the University of Brighton.

Caroline Hall is a research fellow in the IHDRC, University of Brighton. Prior to working at the university, and with a background in psychology, Caroline worked as a practitioner in the field of mental health (promotion and prevention) both within the NHS and in the charity sector, before pursuing a career in health promotion. After completing a masters degree in European Health Promotion at the University of Brighton, Caroline took up a research post within IHDRC. Since 2003, Caroline has worked on varied research and development projects in the field of health promotion and public health at local, national, and international levels. Her research interests include postgraduate training and education in health promotion: strategy and curriculum development, settings for health promotion: policy and practice; health promotion indicator development and health inequalities. Caroline is an elected member of the International Union for Health Promotion and Education European Regional Committee (IUHPE) (2007-13) and has made a significant contribution to the development of the European/international masters in health promotion courses at the University of Brighton, where she is module leader for the European and International Dimensions in Health Promotion modules.

The role of the curriculum development worker in counselling and wellbeing

SUSAN BURNETT

Through widening participation, the profile of students in higher education is dramatically changing. The University of Brighton is attracting a more diverse range of student than ever, and their transition to university life can be challenging in many ways. The pressures of attaining good academic standards, whilst students cope with ever more complex and competing demands upon their time inside and outside the university, means that student support systems must also become more diverse and wide ranging. The University of Brighton Student Services has developed a role that aims to address some of these issues and help to support the student experience during transition and beyond.

The Counselling and Wellbeing department within Student Services has a unique perspective on the various issues for which students seek support. They may develop mental health issues when under stress of exams or placements; face challenges adjusting to life away from home or integrating into a new culture; struggle to balance the demands of a family and studying; develop academic confidence issues around their specialist subjects or have difficulty developing new friends and relationships. Together with this insight, and drawing on the paper 'Learning Reconsidered: A Campus Wide Focus on the Student Experience' (2004), which advocates a transformative education through a holistic process of learning that places the student at the centre of the learning experience, Student Services created the post of Curriculum Development Worker.

'Learning Reconsidered' emphasises the work of Student Services as a partner in the broader campus curriculum and describes the ways in which Student Services affects student outcomes. It defines learning as a comprehensive, holistic, transformative activity that integrates academic learning and student development - processes that have often

been considered separate, and even independent of each other. This paper positions support services as central to, or embedded within the student experience. Thus by developing relationships with key members of the academic community and other support services within the university, it is possible to identify trends and themes that occur in specific subject areas. Working alongside the academics, bespoke learning experiences are developed to empower the students. This can be used as a proactive measure, for example, raising students' awareness of their own support systems before going out on a work placement.

According to 'Learning Reconsidered', in a climate of ever increasing pressure and demands on academic staff, the development of embedded personal development learning experiences for students could 'contribute effectively and purposefully to achieving students' holistic learning outcomes'. This could also be said of students who, challenged by workload and deadlines, perceive personal development delivery as irrelevant to their courses and so do not benefit from the experience. There is therefore, a place for integrated, embedded and discrete learning opportunities which can be identified within the curriculum, to support this holistic experience without putting undue pressure on both academic staff and students alike.

Aims and objectives of the role of curriculum development in wellbeing

- to provide a range of psycho-educational initiatives
- to identify relevant groups within academic areas and produce bespoke training and group work
- to develop and further enhance student wellbeing initiatives
- to identify themes common to individual groups of students in relation to health and wellbeing

As a result of working closely with key members of the university community, several developmental workshops and events have been delivered:

Workshops

- **Being perfect** – promoting self esteem and wellbeing to create awareness in students who experience issues around feeling that their work is not 'good enough'.
- **Stress management 1 –** developing wellbeing strategies in stressful environments eg placements, exams, interviews etc.
- **Stress management 2** – developing wellbeing strategies in clinical practice.

Developments in the disciplines

- **Positive pharmacy project –** a collaboration to promote wellbeing, self esteem and resilience in the workplace.

- **Health and Social care** – reflecting on personal wellbeing and how institutions can contribute to the wellbeing of 'service users'.
- **Environment and Technology** – developing wellbeing strategies for students' placements and for their year out.
- **Nursing and Midwifery** – developing wellbeing strategies in the work place.
- **Health Professions** – physiotherapy - wellbeing strategies in the work place and developing communication awareness.
- **Business Studies** – 'Wellbeing in Human Resources' – reflecting on personal wellbeing while studying the role of health and safety and wellbeing in business management.

Close liaison with key members of the university community has also led to the coordination of a number of events:

Wellbeing Week

Wellbeing week (2009), celebrated the holistic student experience and our university community. It aimed to raise student and staff awareness of how we can manage our wellbeing and of the services available to support this. Funded by the University of Brighton Student Union and developed in partnership with the Centre for Learning and Teaching, with colleagues and students from across the university in the form of a wellbeing development group. A varied programme of events included a core line up of stands offering advice on various aspects of health and wellbeing, from for example, Student Services, the Open Minds mental health and wellbeing project, Sport Brighton, UNISEX, ASK Study Skills, Sustainable Development and the Chaplaincy.

Various external organisations were invited including Infinity Foods, local health and businesses, NHS Chlamydia Awareness, food Intolerance testing and Dr Bike (bike repairs). Other activities included: talks by university staff and guest lecturers on a range of subjects, such as 'Fun not stress in learning', 'Joy in everyday activities – mindfulness' and 'Stress in relation to the individual'. There were workshops on complementary therapies, belly dancing, guided meditation, working with clay, the Labyrinth, 'Cook your own lunch', the Smoothie bike machine, an activity awareness programme from the university Sports Centre, an international students social hour, charity film screenings and fancy dress football organised by the students.

Further wellbeing events included:

- **World Mental Health Day** – providing support by promoting healthy eating at university and its relationship to stress management
- **Student Union Wellbeing Road shows**
- **Environmental Action Network Group event** – wellbeing in the workplace.
- **Fresher's events**

The continued development of embedding health and wellbeing into the curriculum of courses at the university is varied and diverse. Through the Wellbeing Week evaluation and interviews with participants, it was possible to identify areas of development to promote wellbeing in a more sustainable way. By working towards a university wellbeing strategy and promoting the rich resources of staff and students already at the university, we can encourage activities that complement the style and culture of the individual schools. Curriculum development seeks to lower the barriers for those who would not ordinarily want to be involved in organised events, by offering alternative ways of engaging in and reflecting on, their own wellbeing and therefore widening the participation of all. Through discussion with academics it is possible to embed reflective information, which can address the specific needs of students and fulfil module requirements. Further areas of development within the role of curriculum development worker include:

- the continued collaboration with schools and departments within the university to identify opportunities to embed wellbeing within the curriculum
- further research into embedding health and wellbeing through the Career Planning Agreement which could be expanded to included personal development skills
- the development of wider reaching projects, which enable staff to be more aware of student wellbeing issues and embed activities into their courses at design stage
- further development of website information to include nutrition related to health and wellbeing at the university for example 'Healthy eating on a budget'
- research into the use of more interactive media with regards to health and wellbeing for example 'Facebook'.

Sustainability of wellbeing enhancement is dependent not only on individuals, but also on a supportive philosophy and culture within the university. By supporting and maintaining the wellbeing of our students we are maximising their learning potential and therefore increasing the likelihood of their academic success. Personal wellbeing strategies that are transferable from education to the workplace and beyond, are highly desirable assets which should be considered when working to provide a more holistic life experience.

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Susan Burnett is the curriculum development worker in counselling and wellbeing, in Student Services at the University of Brighton – a role shared with Camilla Hartley. She works alongside faculties and schools to identify opportunities to embed health and wellbeing into the curriculum.

Wellbeing and students at the University of Worcester

JENNY KING

Abstract

This paper, originally delivered at the University of Brighton symposium 'Taking wellbeing forward in higher education' (2009), covers the role of a student wellbeing assistant in the Student Experience Team at the University of Worcester. It will provide the background for the creation of the team; give an overview of the roles within it; share the team objectives and comment on feedback from students who took part in wellbeing initiatives. It will also give an overview of the campaigns and events that the team delivered during 2008-09, and will share thoughts around wellbeing for students and the role of Student Services in taking this forward.

Student Experience Team

The Student Experience Team, comprising a student experience officer; student wellbeing assistant and university community development workers (UCDWs), was set up within Students Services at the University of Worcester in 2007, with the objective of promoting student wellbeing and offering guidance and support to help students have a positive experience throughout their time at university. The core aims of the team are:

- to engage with students and identify their needs
- to enable students to fulfil their potential
- to promote student wellbeing
- to help students adapt to student life
- to offer support and guidance

Team structure

The team is led by the student experience officer, who oversees initiatives and deals with student disciplinary issues in halls of residences and off campus accommodation. S/he also represents Student Services when liaising with external agencies such as the local police, councillors and members of the public.

The student wellbeing assistant has a remit to proactively reach all full-time, part-time, mature and international students to deliver wellbeing advice and events throughout the year. The role was created to offer emotional and practical support to students and to promote healthy initiatives, such as smoking cessation, healthy eating on a budget and managing exam and revision stress. An integral part of this role is working in partnership with internal and external groups to promote health and wellbeing. These agencies provide expertise and guidance on the best way to approach particular topics with students, to ensure that the students' best interests are always at the forefront of every wellbeing initiative.

Support for students comes in many forms and often involves referral to appropriate members of staff. This ranges from academic support (for example, providing information on who to contact regarding mitigating circumstances); practical support (who to contact for issues with halls of residence or private landlords) and emotional support (in the form of signposting students to counselling or mental health advice). Although the main aspect of this role is to deliver events and campaigns on health and wellbeing, a lot of time is also spent assisting the student experience officer in following up disciplinary issues, and offering a range of advice on how to access support networks.

Before the role was created, the university had an (untrained) medical nurse whose role was to be there if students needed a place to rest and a person to act as 'mother'. When the nurse retired, Student Services wanted to create a more appropriate and proactive role that would be better suited to meeting the needs of individual students.

The role of the UCDWs originated in the student warden scheme. Student Services wanted to develop this role however, by replacing wardens living on-site with a more supportive role, to help students living in halls deal with difficulties that arose among students. Our UCDWs work with groups of students, or meet with individuals who may be experiencing a range of wellbeing issues such as struggling with transition into university life, feeling homesick or managing disputes among their flatmates, but most importantly they are there to promote a positive student community. Ways in which they implement this include holding friendly inter-hall activities and competitions to bring students together to get to know people within their own and neighbouring halls. UCDWs also support the delivery of events.

Throughout the year we are involved in a wide spectrum of events across the university, which reflect the diversity of health and wellbeing issues that we aim to support in all aspects of university life.

Events and campaigns 2008-09

Within a year we delivered the following to our students:

- **Induction weekend** – this is key to the start of the year as we are already identifying the needs of new students and their wellbeing, and hope to introduce initiatives that they will find useful throughout their academic life.
- **Student Union help yourself fair** – to promote all areas of Student Services and the services on offer to Freshers.
- **Go green week** – Green Peace and other local and national agencies were invited to promote environmental issues and advise students on how to get involved in green issues. This was also a springboard for promoting recycling initiatives in halls of residences.
- **Pee in the pot** – part of our sexual health awareness campaign, encouraging students under the age of 25 to take a chlamydia test.
- **Be safe at Christmas** – promoting sensible drinking and advising on drink driving and the dangers of drink spiking.
- **Chill to skill** – de-stress techniques for revision and exams.
- **Wellbeing week** – a joint collaboration for students and staff.
- **Housing week** – launching 'Student pad', giving advice for students moving out of halls into private landlord accommodation.
- **Ministry of chill** – an end of year event for first year students moving off campus. This proved to be a great way of keeping in touch, and reminding students that the Student Experience Team are here to support them throughout their time at university.
- **Personal safety** – over 356 students attended this event in three hours, which demonstrates that personal safety is a key concern for students.
- **Smoke free advice** – we are in the process of arranging 'drop in' clinics with Worcestershire Primary Care Trust to enable students to access free Nicotine Replacement Therapy to assist in quitting.
- **Eating healthily on a budget** – working with our nutrition department to promote healthy eating among our students and providing resources.

Conclusion

Evaluation showed that all the above events benefited our students and highlighted the importance of wellbeing awareness among them. We always evaluate our events, since it's essential to hear from the students themselves what they want or need. Over the last year we've gained further insight into student needs by talking to groups of students at lectures. This has helped us to plan the delivery of wellbeing events, and to find the best way to communicate with students (through posters, Facebook, email etc.) It has also helped

in finding creative approaches for wellbeing promotion. Students sometimes approach staff in the Student Experience Team to ask how they can get involved. This has especially been the case with health and social care students, who would like first-hand experience of working with the external agencies that they might one day work for, such as the health service. This face-to-face work has been invaluable to staff, since it enables us to reach out to students directly.

We are aware that we have only scratched the surface in terms of health and wellbeing among our students, but the last two years have been exciting and challenging as well as frustrating, as there is so much more that we, as an institution, could be doing. While progress to date shows that we are on the right track, there are key areas for development, especially in the area of embedding wellbeing into students' academic curriculum and in bringing academic and support departments closer together.

Jenny King (acting team leader at the time of writing,) is the student wellbeing assistant at the Student Experience Team, University of Worcester, where she has been in post for nearly three years.

UNISEX–making 'safer' sexy at the University of Brighton

A retrospective of the ways UNISEX has engaged with students

KATE SWEETAPPLE

Introduction

For almost 20 years UNISEX worked to make 'safer' sexy for Brighton and Sussex students. By being in the right place at the right time we have probably prevented countless unintended pregnancies and STIs (sexually transmitted infections). We reached out to the student community as well as offering a facility for students to come to us. We helped students find specialist support for their problematic drug or alcohol use, thereby helping to prevent them from leaving university without a degree. We have listened and held the hands of hundreds of students with worries about their sexuality, contraception, friends, relationships and much more. We have often been the first place a student has come and disclosed being sexually assaulted or abused.

UNISEX has provided the only service of its kind in the UK. No other HEI has anything similar. Our peer-led proactive approach ensured that we engaged with our students in a meaningful way and in the context of student life. This paper provides an overview of the ways we have worked at the University of Brighton over the years, and highlights its invaluable contribution to the student experience. Whilst UNISEX currently operates as an online facility only, due to recent funding cuts, the work of wellbeing promotion continues with the newly created Wellbeing Zone in the Student Union. It is essential that we draw on the experiences and successes of the service as part of preparing for the future of student wellbeing at the university.

Reaching out

A split-site campus presents a challenge for any service and UNISEX constantly explored new ways to overcome this. Our mobile unit, the Love Bus (part-funded by University of Brighton Student Union), enabled wider coverage and higher visibility for our outreach programme, while our 24/7 message service provided access to advice and information for all students regardless of whether they were studying at Plumpton College (a University of Brighton partner college) or Falmer.

For the past five years UNISEX organised Santa's grotto at the Eastbourne Holly Ball. UNISEX elves helped to make sure students had a good time and kept a watchful eye on any that appeared vulnerable. Providing condoms at events such as these ensured that nothing more than Christmas cheer was shared that night. For two consecutive years a Hastings Health Fest was held at UCH. UNISEX arranged for local services to be present and students took part in our interactive road show and quiz to win prizes. Relaxing massage treatments and a mediation workshop were popular features of the event. A regular chlamydia screening campaign – 'Pee for pizza' – proved popular in student residences over the past two years. Particularly at Varley Halls, where students often feel isolated, the chance to win a pizza in return for screening for chlamydia was well received by residents.

Involving students

Our volunteer programme gave over 100 Brighton students the opportunity to develop knowledge and skills, which often contributed to successful careers in health and social care. Our peer-led approach ensured a lively and proactive way of working, which enhanced the student experience for both volunteers and their peers. On numerous occasions volunteers reported comments such as *'my friend's at X university and there's nothing like UNISEX there. We are so lucky'*.

Placement opportunities

We hosted over 20 placement students who all found their-out-of-the-ordinary placement experience rewarding and useful. Our first placement student created our website back in the mid-90s. The original content for the site was the product of a SSHAG guide (Student Sexual Health Awareness Guide) written by volunteers with illustrations by a fine art student. The most recent placement student assisted with the planning, delivery and evaluation of a safer drinking campaign – 'Bamboozled?', which played a key role in Wellbeing Week 2009.

Curriculum development

Every year we contributed to the curriculum by responding to requests from tutors to provide input into lectures where our work was relevant to the subject (for example for

Brighton and Sussex Medical School, Health and Social Care, Public Health, Contraception and Sexual Health etc). We also worked on more structured projects with course leaders. For two consecutive years we worked with Fashion and Textiles on a year one project which created a range of garments inspired by the theme of HIV and AIDS, culminating in a fundraising fashion show for World AIDS Day. More recently we worked with Pharmacy to provide sexual health awareness training for second year students, which helped them to explore their knowledge and attitudes and prepare them for work in a community setting.

Student clubs and societies

UNISEX responded to requests from student clubs and societies for workshops, talks, quizzes and safer sex resources for events and trips away. Supporting the LGBT Society (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) has always been a priority, and projects have included the production of a 'Fresh fruit guide' and welcome events for new students. For three years we organised 'Away with the Fairies', a residential community-building weekend in the Isle of Wight. On each of these trips there was at least one student considering dropping out of university because they felt isolated. One of them was in his first year at the time and his comment to us on graduating was *if it hadn't been for 'Away with the Fairies' I wouldn't have got my degree. That trip was a turning point for me'*.

For the past five years our Chlamydia Club Challenge has resulted in 1,309 students from sports teams screening for chlamydia in response to the chance to win a £ 200.00 prize for their team. Many of these students would not have made the effort to seek out a screening service and as chlamydia often shows no symptoms, this proactive approach helps to reduce the prevalence of undiagnosed chlamydia in the student population.

UNISEX and the student experience

The work of UNISEX and the services delivered, enriched the student experience in many different ways as the above examples highlight. At this point it's worth remembering how UNISEX came into existence. In short, it was in response to the HIV epidemic and the fact that Brighton was so heavily affected by this new disease due to its large gay population. The presence of UNISEX represented a clear commitment by the universities to look after their students with a visible and active form of pastoral care. It is true that there are many agencies within the city that offer some of the services which UNISEX delivered, but they are not placed in the context of student life and they do not utilise social marketing strategies. Students have to seek them out and many might not make this effort. However, with the recent cut in funding, it is not just onsite and proactive services that students have lost. The ethos of UNISEX and its character added colour, detail and value to student life at the universities, and provided a unique selling point that other universities do not have. Our mission statement 'making 'safer' sexy', took the message of risk reduction and made it attractive.

Future development

With the University of Sussex cessation of its funding of UNISEX operations, UNISEX has now relocated its operational base to the University of Brighton. It will focus on developing work within the context of a newly created Wellbeing Zone, which will better serve this institution and contribute to the Health Promoting University strategy. Working to add value to the curriculum has proved to be extremely effective in the past, and this could be one way of ensuring that the Eastbourne and Hastings campuses are better served. The team and volunteers are fully committed to embracing change and meeting the needs of University of Brighton students over the next decade and beyond. We are looking forward to this challenge and can be reached at the University of Brighton Student Union Wellbeing Zone: www.ubsu.net/wellbeing and UNISEX at: www.unisex.org.uk.

After almost 20 years of developing and running UNISEX, the sexual health promotion and drug/alcohol awareness service for the universities of Brighton and Sussex, **Kate Sweetapple** has now moved to a new role with Brighton Students Union. This role, well-being research co-ordinator, is to oversee the development of the union's new Wellbeing Zone, which forms part of the new governance structure. She works closely with the elected wellbeing officer and 'Peer 2 Pier Facilitator' who facilitates the involvement of students in the Wellbeing Zone through a wide range of campaigns and projects.

Mental health awareness

Promoting mental health and wellbeing using CLUEE
(Connecting, Listening, Understanding, Educating and Encouraging)

MAHESS JEEAWOCK WITH CHARLOTTE MORRIS

Within the pre-registration nursing curriculum, understanding mental health is a small but core part of the course. A number of teaching and learning strategies are used to enable nurses on pre-registration courses to gain a basic knowledge and understanding of mental health. While these inputs were generally well evaluated, an opportunity arose when the BSc (Hons) Nursing course was being revalidated, to include an innovative approach to raising mental health awareness and enable nurses to develop some basic skills to deal with initial emotional distress. The Carer and Service User group within the School of Nursing and Midwifery (CUSER group) took the lead in the development of this programme.

The philosophical basis of the programme is to enable students to recognise that mental health is an important part of wellbeing, to identify initial mental distress and to provide support for people experiencing mental distress through active listening. This key principle forms the basis of the teaching and learning strategies; encouraging and enabling students to reflect upon and share their own experience of mental health and mental health problems in a safe and supportive environment. This experiential strategy enables students to develop and practice key listening skills, the basis for promoting good mental health and good nursing practice.

In addition to acquiring basic knowledge of mental health, students are encouraged to engage in self care activities after each session as a way of supporting their own mental health and wellbeing. This underlines the differentiation between positive mental health and mental health difficulties which is a key learning point for students. Having explored ways of caring for personal wellbeing in groups during class and given guidance on helpful

resources (such as the World Mental Health Foundation website), they are invited to keep a learning log to record and reflect on strategies for safeguarding and enhancing their mental health and wellbeing. The ability to care for personal wellbeing is seen as an essential tool, enabling students to cope with the demands of their course and placements, and providing a foundation for coping with the everyday stresses of their future profession. This focus on students' personal wellbeing also helps to break down barriers, stressing that we all have mental health which requires ongoing maintenance.

Students are provided with 'CLUEE' (Connecting, Listening, Understanding, Educating and Encouraging) as a model for understanding and dealing with the emotional distress of others. Students are introduced to the model, and further learning activities enable them to practise it throughout the course. These activities enable them to practice respect, care and understanding through non judgemental listening. Attitudes, labelling and stigma about mental health are thus brought into the open and the impact this may have on a person with mental health problems. Students are invited to discuss ways of connecting with others, active listening, understanding in terms of empathy, educating by becoming familiar with sources of mental health support, and encouraging those experiencing mental distress to seek support. The opportunity to practise listening skills in a safe and supportive environment will be invaluable for future careers in all aspects of nursing.

The course is taught by service user lecturers who are part of the CUSER group. Lecturers are open about their own experiences of mental health problems, which further helps to break down barriers and stimulates students to consider some of the discrimination and negative stereotypes prevalent in society, which often impact negatively on mental health service users. It allows a deeper understanding of the experience of mental health difficulties and distress, and encourages students to share thoughts and experiences in relation to mental health, whilst helping them to develop confidence in talking about sensitive issues.

Initial evaluation of the first sets of workshops suggests that students gain a greater awareness of mental health and mental health difficulties; how to help in the initial stages of mental distress and to encourage the use of other services if required. Students particularly enjoyed the opportunity to hear the experiences of mental health service users at first hand. The module was successful in enabling students to challenge preconceived ideas and stereotypes about mental health, and to gain a greater awareness of their own mental health and wellbeing. This model also enables students to interact with each other at a deeper level early in the course, and to build lasting support networks.

Feedback from students

'Listening to [the service user lecturer's] story made it real for me how mental illness can affect someone's life – very helpful'

'Enjoyed learning first-hand how it feels to suffer from a mental illness'

'Being given the opportunity to put CLUEE into practice in small groups'

'I have really enjoyed the open discussion format of the sessions and the opportunity to ask questions freely and get feedback as a group'

'Open discussion encouraged by staff, enabled us to realise our prejudices and stereotypes are false together'

'Learning a bit more about the whole idea of mental health and that it is not all negative'

'I have really enjoyed these sessions as not only has it been educational and made me aware of patient's mental health, but to also reflect on my own mental health'

'I won't pre-judge people and will think twice before calling someone a 'nutter', I really don't like it when someone uses that word now'

'That time is extremely important and taking time to hear how someone feels is invaluable and can make all the difference'

*'A greater awareness to recognise mental health issues within myself'*

'That one in four can suffer from mental health issues in their life'

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Wellbeing in academic culture and research student learning

This section attends to the vital area of wellbeing in academic culture and research student learning. It includes a paper from special guest contributors Dr Olav Muurlink and Dr Cristina Poyatos Matas, which considers ways of approaching wellbeing in academia, and reports on innovative developments at Griffith University, Australia. Following on from reflections on factors which impact on research student wellbeing, a personal reflective piece provides a research student's perspective.
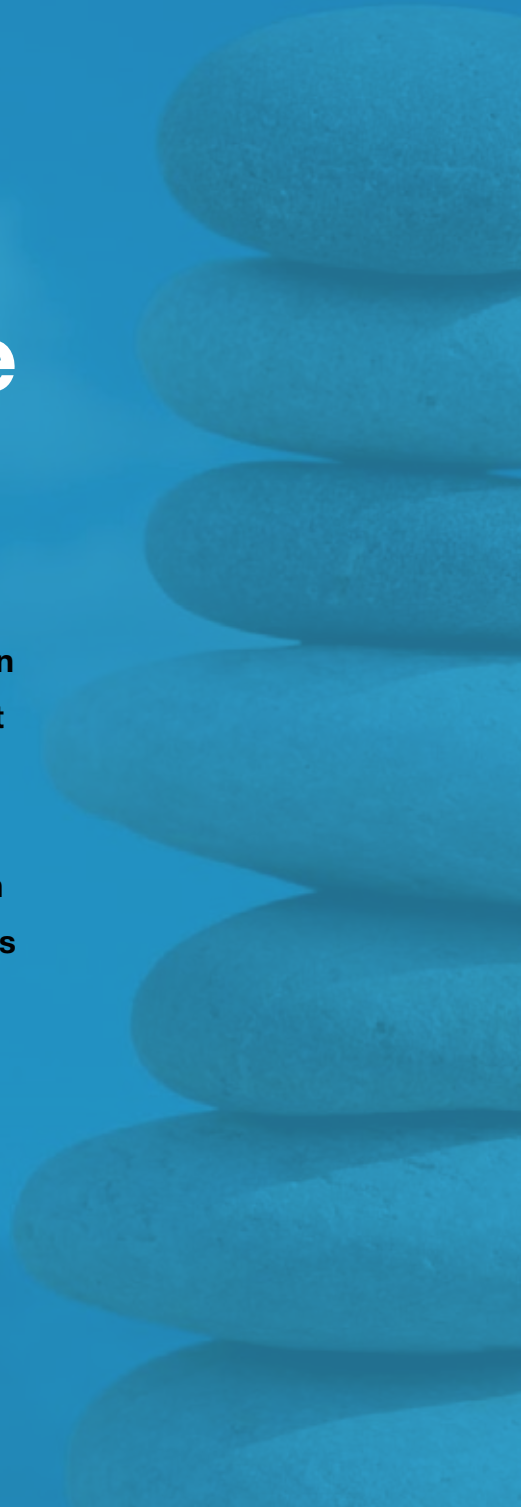
A higher degree of stress: academic wellbeing

DR OLAV MUURLINK AND DR CRISTINA POYATOS MATAS

Abstract

Postgraduates and professional academics are unique in that they are more or less 'free' to engage in research that is not tightly constrained by an employer. This freedom comes at a price. This article provides evidence that the high levels of stress observed in academia is related to the lack of clarity in academic roles and chronic overwork caused by changing university structures and expectations. The article reviews evidence of stress and a broad definition of wellbeing, focusing on the postgraduate student and university teachers, and concludes with evidence that universities are beginning to embrace the challenge of wellbeing.

Introduction

In 2007, the *Harvard Crimson*, America's oldest continuously published daily college newspaper, published an article that had its strongest impact across the Atlantic. The article, written by two Oxford DPhil graduates, gave a scathing overview of the Oxford graduate student experience. Both Rhodes scholars, the pair claimed the ancient university's doctoral supervisors 'spent more time avoiding emails than supervising students'. The British daily newspaper *The Guardian* followed up on the Harvard piece, revealing that Oxford, according to a high-ranking university source, had long since passed the 'maximum students [it] can take'. At Lincoln College, for example, a survey last year found that 24 per cent of the postgraduate students reported they do not see their college adviser at all, and another 24 per cent reported meeting their college adviser only once a year (Shultziner 2008). If Oxford dons are avoiding emails, they are hardly alone. Email overload is now a recognised stressor

in the academy (Ariel 2008), with academics coming to regard an unanswered email as the 21st century equivalent of a phone ringing out.

The '*Crimson-Guardian*' story offered a rare window for the public to peer into the obscure world of academic wellbeing. The elephant-in-the-room status of the topic goes beyond the mass media: even academic examinations of academic wellbeing are relatively few and far between. Psychological wellbeing is itself a less well explored concept than psychological dysfunction, with an individual viewed as 'well' when they simply lack symptomology of mental ill health (Ryff 1995). Intuitively, most of us feel there is more to wellbeing than that.

A factor analytic study by Ryff and Keyes (1995), found six dimensions of psychological wellbeing alone, including autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Clearly there is more to wellbeing than mental health alone. Ryff and Keyes' psychological dimensions clearly encompass a social ('positive relations with others'), physical ('environmental mastery') and emotional element, but Poyatos Matas (2008; 2009) has underlined the role of nutrition and spiritual dimensions in attaining a sense of wellbeing. Her broader understanding of wellbeing leans heavily on the *American Journal of Health Promotion*'s five dimensions of health promotion (social, emotional, intellectual, physical and spiritual) (O'Donnell 1986). Each of these dimensions has been individually explored in the psychological and medical literature, and each has been linked to dimensions of psychological or physical health. For example, spiritual wellbeing, both religious and existential, was found to be positively related to self-esteem (Ellison 1983).

However, as Ryff (1989) has pointed out, despite being widely deployed in the literature, psychological wellbeing has a poor theoretical grounding. Considering that wellbeing is probably the closest psychological construct to happiness, perhaps the most fundamental of human goals, this is surprising. Ryan and Deci (2001), in their extensive review of the concept, suggest there are however, two general perspectives on wellbeing. One can broadly be termed 'happiness'. They refer to this as the 'hedonic approach', focusing on the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. A second, less common form of wellbeing, they argue, is the 'eudaimonic approach', where the goals are harder to measure: self-realisation, and degrees of optimal functioning.

Not all forms of wellbeing are equal in the eyes of the literature or indeed the lay public, with a distinct preference for measuring hedonic factors. Self-reporting of stressors often fail to tap intellectual and spiritual factors and even physical factors such as nutrition are often overlooked. An extensive survey into teacher workloads and stress undertaken by the Independent Education Union in Victoria and New South Wales, Australia (IEU 2009) found that teachers reported experiences of stress in a range of areas due to workload pressure, difficulties with management, and poor staff-student relationships – all relatively 'surface' factors related to the workplace. The stress does not stay on the surface however; the study indicated it manifests itself in terms of irritability at home (59 per cent) even more

so than in class (55 per cent), as well as anxiety (64 per cent) and feelings of powerlessness (45 per cent). Psychosomatic complaints (eg chronic fatigue, headaches, shingles, and heart palpitations) were reported by 18 per cent of respondents (Howard and Johnson 2004).

Stress in academia then, eventually permeates the individual's life. The chronic fatigue that Howard and Johnson (2004) refer to, whether medically defined or otherwise, even impacts on recreational functioning (Solomon et al 2003). Writing of the Spanish academic context, Cano Vindel (2009) breaks the symptoms down into four types: cognitive-subjective (including fear of losing control, and difficulties in concentrating), physiological (sweating, tiredness, nausea amongst others), behavioural (writer's block, smoking, over-eating or even the development of tics) and emotional (depression and anger being common responses). Eventually, failure to ensure wellbeing in academia has significant economic costs as well. Work stress can lead to low productivity, work conflict, absenteeism and ultimately, departure from the workplace (Garcia Sapera 2009; Riart Vendrell 2009). Burnout can be a slow burn, with Riart Vendrell (2009) noting that the fuse can take up to a decade to reach an explosive point.

The problem for managers of university personnel and mentors of students, as well as researchers of stress and wellbeing, is that responses to single stressors are highly variable. Response 'depends largely on background experiences, temperament and environmental conditions' (IEU 2009). Individual differences also act as mediators in the relationship between stress and illness (Antoniou et al 2000). Adding to the complexity, certain levels of stress in the workplace undoubtedly can lead to improve job performance; however after a certain point, performance is impaired, and is often associated with deterioration in worker health (Leonard, Bourke and Schofield 2000; Pelletier 1984).

In the corporate world, Google has famously recognised the interconnectivity of the different domains of wellbeing to encourage productivity, providing staff with everything from healthily cooked meals and ping pong tables, to options allowing workers to bring their dogs to work. The understanding of the link between dimensions of wellbeing and productivity has however, yet to gain wide currency in the academic world.

The challenge to wellbeing in academia

Teaching has been identified as one of the most stressful jobs (Sutherland and Cooper 1988), perhaps not surprisingly, considering that the world of teaching, particularly at a tertiary level, is changing rapidly. Change brings stress, and with it a wave of workplace-related impacts on health (Antoniou et al 2000; Borg and Arpa 2000; Perez Muñoz 2006). Student burnout in universities is also on the rise. Liwsze (2004) notes that two out of every ten Canadian students will experience severe symptoms of stress during their tenure at university, as students increasingly experience pressure to perform not only on an educational platform, but also in part-time employment and social situations. The problem of student burnout is very much an international phenomenon (Yang 2004), and comes with serious

health correlates. In a recent study with 370 American medical students who met criteria for burnout, 11.2 per cent reported suicidal thoughts. In multivariable analysis, the authors found that burnout was an independent predictor of suicidal thoughts, while recovery from burnout reduced the risk of suicide.

The fact that job satisfaction in the higher education sector is below that of the workforce in general is well established (Oshagbemi 1996; Clark 2001; Ward and Sloane 2000). Low job satisfaction does not equate however, to a less than satisfactory job. As Stevens (2005:4) puts it, 'high levels of reported job satisfaction do not necessarily mean that most jobs are inherently satisfactory, but rather that most people's expectations are fulfilled'. However, the cause is probably as much a misfit between expectations and realisation, as it is something inherently unpleasant about the academic workplace. In an environment where academic staff are increasingly being asked to take on new administrative roles, and the priorities of institutions are shifting to accommodate the changing demands of funding agencies, setting 'expectations' that can or cannot be fulfilled is no easy task. As we shall see, one key problem common to postgraduates and professional academics is a lack of clarity in 'job description' that can lead to a fuzziness in expectations.

With a research student's 'work life' almost defined by being ill-defined, the challenge for the postgraduate is particularly acute. Producing a postgraduate thesis is typically fraught with anxiety (Haksever and Manisali 2000; Nightingale 2005), with evidence emerging that this anxiety is related to the absence of clearly defined goals and milestones. A thorough study of postgraduates at one university, found that those students who were required by their supervisors to submit written work earlier in their candidature, expressed to a highly significant degree, greater satisfaction. The study also found that the frequency of meetings with the supervisor was positively associated with satisfaction (Heath 2002).

A further hint that stress may stem from course structure, or rather, the lack of it, is in the frequent finding that attrition rates are relatively high in the humanities, where less laboratory work often equates to less contact time between supervisors and students (Heath 2002). In Australia, for example, a large-scale study showed that completion rates were significantly higher for the 'hard' sciences and lower for arts, social science and legal studies (Martin et al 2001:6). That this attrition differential is not related to characteristics of the subjects themselves is indicated by a very different pattern at undergraduate level, where structure is relatively uniformly present due to the nature of coursework. A study of 485,983 undergraduate students of 32 Australian universities in 2006, found that students in health, engineering, management/commerce, architecture and education were *more* likely to literally 'stay the course' than students in science, IT, creative arts, society/culture and agriculture/environment (Olsen 2008), the opposite pattern to that observed at postgraduate level.

Regardless of the discipline, attrition rates are high. In a field of activity where completion is the ultimate gauge of success, failure to complete is the ultimate symptom of stress.

Studies have shown that in Australia, as in Canada, Britain and the USA, attrition rates among doctoral students are between 30 per cent and 50 per cent (McAlpine and Norton 2006:3). In other countries, like Spain, attrition rates may reach 90 per cent (Becerra 2007). A long-term Australian study (Martin et al 2001) showed that just 53 per cent of students who had commenced research doctoral degrees in 1992, had gained the qualification seven years later, although the same study predicted that by 2003, the figure would have risen to 60.3 per cent amongst the same cohort, by which time the duration of the program would have passed the decade mark.

In the US, the duration of a doctoral candidature has been singled out as a major cause of attrition. As Berger (2007) explains, referring to National Science Foundation figures 'The average student takes 8.2 years to get a PhD; in education, that figure surpasses 13 years. Fifty per cent of students drop out along the way, with dissertations the major stumbling block'. He adds that typical candidates commence their doctoral studies at 33, an age at which many academics are establishing families and households, and the financial pressure of doctoral studies can end up significantly impinging on their ability to do so: 12 per cent of graduates have over $ 50,000.00 in debt on completion. Not surprisingly, an Australian study (Martin et al 2001) reports that completion rates decline as doctoral candidates grow older. When it comes to work-life balance, mature-age students, with greater role complexity, presumably have more 'life' capable of conflicting with their work.

The life of the academic in the years after completion of the doctorate is not entirely dissimilar to that of the harried postgraduate student. Kinman and Jones' (2006) study of British academics and review of the international literature suggests that academic work, even after completion of doctoral studies, is becoming more stressful. Less sense of control over work and poor work-life ratios are leading to work-home conflict for academics. A recent study of over a thousand Australian academics found that academics were less satisfied with their work-life balance, and indeed their work, than general staff, with the effect found to be more pronounced amongst women in general, and those with children in particular (Nesic, Masser and Terry 2006). This finding has been confirmed by a study by the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC) of postgraduate students in Spain, which identified young women completing doctoral studies as the most stressed sector of the Spanish workforce (EFE 2007). A Chilean study of higher degree students reflects much the same pattern (Dides, Benavente and Morán 2008). That women find it more difficult to maintain a work-life balance is well established in the literature (for example Higgins, Duxbury and Lee 1994).

Amongst academic staff, ambiguity of roles has again been identified as a stressor at college (Dey 1982) and university level (Hart and Cress 2009) for administrators as well as teachers. We referred earlier to job satisfaction being linked to a fit between expectation and reality. Lack of clarity in an academic's job description may well be linked to stress in academia. Significantly, teaching, often relatively more structured and controlled by

management, was rated as an academic's least stressful role, while research, the most ill-defined, was rated the most stressful in an Ontario study (Thorsen 1996). As one academic blogger put it, 'This is a really weird job, where you have seemingly disconnected and vague job responsibilities, you're expected to be promising and excellent at all of them, and there are not really any metrics to gauge your success' *(Average Professor 2006)*.

Conversely, there is evidence that adding structure to the academic experience increases a sense of wellbeing and reduces attrition. It has been reported that the presence of a research culture or collegiality, as well as institutional support, improves completion rates and reduces completion time for doctoral students (Borthwick and Wissler 2003; Latona and Browne 2001; Manathunga 2005) and improving job satisfaction in teachers (Jarzabkowski 2003).

The ill-defined nature of the work, as the *Average Professor* (2006) points out, also means that academic workers, like postgraduates, are more likely than most to overwork. Early psychologists in the behaviourist tradition observed that variable reward ratios (where the respondent was incapable of connecting a reward directly with a behaviour), lead to the greatest 'efficiency' in the effort-reward ratio (eg Zeiler 1968). In layman's terms, in a workplace where rewards such as promotion and praise are significant, but are not clearly linked with behaviour, overwork is a likely consequence for both students and academics. Amongst university staff, as well, overwork has been identified as a prime cause of stress (Winefield and Jarrett 2001).

Whether it is the ambiguity of the workplace that leads to overwork or not, overwork is undoubtedly commonplace in academia. 'The Faculty Survey of Student Engagement' for example, reports an average working week of between 55 and 63 hours a week, depending on the faculty (Cote and Allahar 2009), while a large-scale Australian study showed that 49 per cent of Australian PhD students were working more than 40 hours a week on their theses (Harman 2003). Overwork appears to be on the increase. Boyd and Wylie (1994) found that 80 per cent of New Zealand university staff surveyed believed their workload had increased in recent years. Their sample anticipated an increased workload in future. The *Times Higher Education* supplement recently reported that one US university is asking its faculty to be on campus and available to students at least four days a week, and to be available for rostering on Saturdays (Marcus 2008). The pattern has been observed in Australia as well: university management is expecting staff accustomed to highly flexible work hours, to commit to more time on campus. An element of monitoring by management is a significant new stressor for academics. An 'audit culture' is beginning to invade university professional life (McWilliam et al 2002).

Overwork is one of the more easily measurable indicators of a work-life balance that has become skewed, and at its most basic level, leads to physical exhaustion. As the president of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, observed of doctoral students 'particularly towards the end of their candidature, PhDs are close to exhaustion' (Lane 2007). For academics as well as students, overwork may not only result in stress, but may

equally be a *response* to stress placed on academics to perform on a playing field where the game seems to be continually changing and becoming more competitive (Bradmore and Kosmas 2009; Smith 2009).

Where to with wellbeing? the challenge for change in academia

As noted at the outset, wellbeing is not always easily measurable and perhaps as a result, is not always measured by institutions such as universities and colleges. What Ryan and Deci (2001) call the eudaimonic aspects of wellbeing, which can be paraphrased as 'becoming all we can be', is particularly opaque from a research perspective, even though intuitively, most of us realise that self-realisation is a goal one is capable of striving for. However, not all wellbeing outcomes are difficult to measure. There has been an international shift towards addressing teacher burnout at a primary and secondary level (Kyriacou 1987), with the impetus appearing to be at least partially economic: sick leave and attrition is now a major cost in educational systems.

The response may have been slow in coming, but it is coming. In Spain there is heavy investment in preventive programmes to help teachers to develop resilience, reduce stress and maintain their overall wellbeing, while in Australia, at least in the non-tertiary education sector, diet and exercise are now entrenched in the curriculum. At the tertiary level, a broader understanding of the underpinnings of wellbeing are permeating practice, although mainly at an undergraduate level, with universities in the UK and USA leading in providing support services ranging from counselling to gymnasiums. Ironically, undergraduates are already fortunate, relative to their postgraduate colleagues as well as academic professionals, since their academic role has several of the defined ingredients that lead to academic wellbeing: a single role, a finite goal, structure, and relatively high levels of institutionalised mentoring and support.

Postgraduates in particular, appear to be ignored in the trend to address wellbeing issues. The wellbeing needs of the postgraduate students are high, partly due to the unstructured nature of research, few programmes however, specifically address their needs, Poyatos Matas (2009) has ventured a new approach to research learning and supervision, creating a program for squarely tackling what she calls the five dimensions of wellbeing, which include both hedonic and eudaimonic factors. The Academic Life-Balancing Skills Program (ALBS), developed with Tannoch-Bland, has been piloted in Australia, with positive results (Poyatos Matas and Tannoch-Bland *under review*), as well as in the UK. For example, at Griffith University, Australia, it was found that research students follow a pattern well worn by postgraduates world-wide. They commence their research programmes showing general wellbeing levels of 8.5 out of 10, but rapidly drop to an average of 4.5. A seven-week part-time ALBS program lifted 'sense of wellbeing' up to an average of 7.0, after the students focused on learning and applying strategies, that contributed to increased general wellbeing in the five different dimensions.

The approach illuminates a path to tackling academic wellbeing at a university-wide level. ALBS starts by tackling a domain of wellbeing prominent in a postgraduate's list of priorities: The intellectual. Issues such as procrastination are brought into the open, and participants are introduced to management tools such as a time management matrix. The physical dimension is approached, initially through a session of laughter yoga, and moves into issues such as sleep disorders and nutrition, with students completing fitness self-audits and learning new techniques for handling their work day from a physical perspective. The emotional dimension is introduced to students through the concept of emotional intelligence in the academic context. A session on the supervisory relationship and techniques to enhance communication with peers, and an appreciation of the importance of networking in academia, addresses some of the social challenges faced by the postgraduate. Finally, the course gives students tools to enhance their spiritual experience, such as meditation. To help them glue the five dimensions together and ensure ongoing engagement, the students are encouraged to form a Community of Practice (Wenger 1998).

The success already achieved by the ALBS sends a message of both hope and caution into academe. Hope, because despite the complexity of the construct of 'wellbeing', relatively simple interventions can make a powerful impact. Caution, because whereas the research student, as we have indicated, may find themselves wallowing in an excess of freedom, the professional academic's world is becoming increasingly constrained. An intervention of the nature of the ALBS, is likely to meet institutional resistance when applied to the increasingly corporate framework surrounding the full-time academic professional.

However, there are signs that national and university leaders are recognising that the 'importance placed on the economic benefits of higher education, both for and by individual learners, must be matched by consideration of a much wider range of factors essential for human flourishing' (Steur and Marks 2008:11). In the UK, a report to the House of Commons in 2007, delivered some refreshing recommendations to MPs including a call for universities to 'really [get to] know their students', take a more positive approach to retention, and embrace the 'emotional dimension' of education (Hands et al 2007:10-11). In the same vein, one prominent Australian academic, Macquarie University vice chancellor Steven Schwarz, has issued a call for the creation of a 'curriculum that looks at the whole person, not just the person who works for a living, and that develops an educational philosophy and educational approach that nurtures not just the mind but also the soul' (Rowbotham 2009).

Universities are beginning to develop wellbeing policies. One Australian university states on its website that it 'recognises that many staff members have family and community responsibilities and is committed to providing supportive and flexible work options for all staff' (Griffith University 2009). Oxford University provides staff, through an employee wellbeing website, with tips on everything from eating a healthy diet to enjoying one's social life (Oxford 2009). On a broader and more ambitious level, the 'Bologna process' to develop unified compatible criteria and methods for quality assurance across the European

Union, could well push a wellbeing dimension on to an international scale (Steur and Marks 2008). The future for wellbeing looks surprisingly healthy.

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Wellbeing and the research student

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Abstract

This article reports on wellbeing related findings from longitudinal qualitative research conducted as part of a Higher Education Academy funded 'Doctoral Learning Journeys' project run from the University of Brighton. Wellbeing was a major theme to emerge from the mapping of research student learning journeys over two years. The research highlighted ways in which learning at this level (in non-science related disciplines) involves emotional and ontological as well as cognitive and technical dimensions. Wellbeing challenges identified in the study include issues around identity, status, academic and social isolation, confidence and self-esteem in an academic context, conceptual stuckness and achieving a work-life-study balance. Providing an overview of these myriad challenges, the article outlines strategies students themselves employ to safeguard and maintain their wellbeing. It also highlights the role of supervisory teams and institutions in wellbeing enhancement, to underpin academic achievement and contribute to a sustainable academic culture.

Introduction

The Higher Education Academy National Teaching Fellowship project, 'Doctoral Learning Journeys' (2007- 10) was based at the Centre for Learning and Teaching at the University of Brighton, working in collaboration with Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge. We set out to capture the learning journeys of doctoral students, primarily exploring how they recognise and articulate their transitions to working more conceptually, critically and creatively. Longitudinal qualitative research mapped the learning journeys of (non-science) research

students at a range of UK universities over a two-year period. The research identified a number of interrelated dimensions of the learning journey, including cognitive, ontological, technical and emotional dimensions. Students tended to speak about their learning experiences in affective terms, underlining the significance of the emotional dimension of their journeys as they pushed their own intellectual boundaries, discovered new personal potentials and limitations, and developed new ways of seeing the world and themselves. The intensive nature of this learning experience, along with personal, practical and structural challenges meant that at times, wellbeing was threatened with some students experiencing significant difficulties with their mental wellbeing. This was exacerbated in the current context, with research students uncertain about their futures amidst economic instability. This article explores some of the factors which students reported as impacting on their wellbeing, and concludes that it is vital universities respond to these issues, ensuring that research students have the best chances of a successful, quality learning experience, building their emotional resilience and preparing for future careers in a context of uncertainty and change.

Previous studies have identified a range of issues which could potentially affect research students' wellbeing: supervisors have observed moments of 'stuckness' or developmental blockages which can impact negatively on self-esteem and confidence, and lead to attrition (Kiley 2009; Wisker et al 2010). Related factors include academic isolation in postgraduate students (Poyatos Matas 2009); role confusion in academic identity development (Jazvac-Martek 2009); the complexity of the doctoral experience (Beauchamp, Jazvac-Martek and McAlpine 2009) and the need for emotional support during their studies (Shacham and Od-Cohen 2009). However, to date, the links between wellbeing and learning have not been fully developed (Poyatos-Matos 2009) or sufficiently focused on student perspectives. In mapping and exploring students' learning experiences over time, the research recognised the centrality of emotions as a crucial part of the learning process, and identified positive wellbeing enhancement strategies based on students' experiences.

Methodology

Learning trajectories and key learning moments in the students' journeys were captured longitudinally through narrative and semi-structured interviews and journaling, designed to produce rich qualitative descriptions of student experiences of learning. 33 students were originally recruited to participate in the project from a cross-section of HEIs. These students were working in the disciplines of Health, Education, Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. 22 students remained with the project for over two years. Students self-selected from a range of participating universities and constituted a cross-section of students from the relevant disciplinary areas. A variety of students were recruited, including part-time students and international students. A diversity of backgrounds, contexts and programmes made the data collection and analysis complex although, interestingly, many similar issues

and comparable learning experiences emerged. The students who stayed with the project were interviewed at least three times over two years during the project. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, by telephone and email. Some students chose to share their experiences through blogs and email correspondence with the researcher. As well as enabling the identification of a range of issues which affected students' learning experiences and personal wellbeing, the longitudinal nature of the project meant that strategies which students, supervisors and programmes employed to enhance the learning experience were captured from students' perspectives.

Findings relating to wellbeing

For many research students the choice to undertake doctoral level study is a momentous life decision. Students are aware that it will be a major time commitment which may impact on their personal, family and working lives. Doctoral study can continue for some years and so requires sustained motivation and momentum. It can also be costly, impacting on work availability and requiring ongoing financial sacrifice. It may also take up students' emotional resources and with all these challenges, participants reported that it is very important to enjoy the topic and to feel highly motivated in order to stay on course:

> '...if you're not happy doing this, if you're not getting the fun out of it, if it becomes a drain on you, your emotions, your feelings, and your family time and everything else, then it doesn't do you any favours'.

For some students, issues of personal identity come into play when taking the decision to commence doctoral studies, and several reported an awareness that their decision might not be supported by family and peers. This was more pronounced when students came from non-academic backgrounds, where the expectation was for them to earn a living rather than staying on at university for a prolonged period of time. There was a general sense, however, of the doctorate being of an uncertain value in society, and of academia not being seen as a solid profession, like for example, law and accountancy. For some senior professionals studying towards a professional doctorate, it was difficult to align their professional and student identities. This was also an issue for those studying full-time and supplementing their income with teaching and other paid work, who often became involved in mentoring and tutoring undergraduates and sometimes in departmental research projects. Students were often juggling multiple roles and identities. Overall, the status of the doctoral 'student' was seen as problematic, with for example, uncertainty over whether they should be termed students or researchers:

'…it's quite hard to make the transition from student to researcher because it's just dead easy to fall back into the student lifestyle. I think I see myself primarily as a researcher now, just to make myself feel better because I have all these friends who are like barristers and teachers and accountants and all sorts. I sit there thinking I really should get a proper job …'

The label 'student' was seen at times as derogatory due to the negative connotations of it meaning being out of real work and at worst as a layabout. For one student, this meant trying not to see themselves through others' eyes and remaining determined and focused to continue with her studies:

'It means having the single mindedness, often the bloody mindedness in the face of all difficulties - and they come from all sides … I mean you still have to live a life while earning no money and still being 'at school'. It means putting up with an awful lot of disrespect from a lot of people because of what you do. It means being sort of discriminated against by people you never thought would discriminate against you, because they just see you as a layabout, still a student… when are you going to get a proper job? if I could have a quid for evey time I've heard that …'

The isolation doctoral students can experience has been previously documented; see for example Poyatos Matas (2009). Not only must a new doctoral student become accustomed to academia and find their place within that community, but this sense of isolation and 'not belonging' may be exacerbated where there is a lack of support from families and peers. The intense nature of doctoral studies can sometimes mean that students feel detached from 'normal' life, academic culture being perceived here as separate, with its own modes of communication and language(s) which set it apart from 'everyday' discourse:

'One really negative side of it, and this isn't just me, I have found this with other people as well when I've spoken to them about it, is when you do a PhD because … you are in an academic community all the time and because you find yourself just you, it's very lonely. But because it is just you and this is all you think about, when I go home or if I go and visit people who are no longer at university I find for a very short period of time, but it is a significant period of time, that it's quite difficult to communicate with people in the real world, it really is, and it sounds horrendous and it does nothing for the image of academics but it's true. You find it so difficult to communicate with people … and you just go, oh hang on a minute, no, sorry I'll switch out of academic mode and back into normal mode, but that becomes more and more difficult the more you do it …You can also tell what disciplines people are doing. If you meet other academics you don't really have to ask them what they're doing because they'll start using specialist terminology in everyday discourse'.

Becoming part of an academic community with its culture and language is a process, which for many students takes time. Students can at first feel like outsiders, lacking confidence in their disciplinary language and their academic abilities. However, as students move through the process and begin to achieve and appreciate the value of their research, their confidence can grow as this quote illustrates:

'Early on I still felt as if I was a fraud; I still wasn't an academic that I was still just someone trying to fit into this world and this culture, that I was peering through the window looking in at, but wasn't really part of. I did feel like that at first but I think actually doing the EdD is helping me to get over that. I don't even worry about that anymore to be honest with you, because I do feel that I'm doing research and I do feel the fact that I've got this far with the EdD does confirm that I'm doing important and rigorous research, and that's really helped my confidence I suppose as well'.

For some students going into the doctorate, it can seem like a big leap from taught post-graduate or M-level research and the very idea of doing a PhD can seem overwhelming. One student when asked what studying doctoral level meant to her stated that '*it means being clever if you see what I mean. It's like the ultimate definition of being clever, having a PhD'*. When doing a PhD is perceived as being the ultimate test of intelligence, the pressure students feel they are under or put on themselves, can be intense. This can exacerbate underlying insecurities about academic ability:

'I don't think I've been at the point where I wanted to give up but you do feel like you're useless and you're way too stupid to do this'.

As one student puts it, the transition to doctoral level means that responsibility for accomplishing the necessary level is entirely down to the learner. This student was previously used to external validation, being praised as a 'good student', and suddenly found themselves having to justify and defend their work and academic abilities:

'...definitely a confidence thing. It becomes very enlarged when you do a PhD I think, because it's all down to you and I think I'm probably the sort of person who needed a bit of external validation and you're always used to being a good student. I still am but I really had to convince some people that I was and I wasn't used to that...'

For some more vulnerable students, these feelings of insecurity can lead to feelings of anxiety, emotional distress or depression. They might exacerbate pre-existing conditions and they may well need to be referred to support services to help manage this. As this quote indicates, there can be a fine line between these academic insecurities and mental distress:

'I think emotionally as well, I think yeah, I think I do feel, I mean I have been quite low at times just feeling quite – not depressed I would say – but certainly, yeah feeling kind of anxious feeling as I said insecure'.

Some students respond to insecurities or fear of failure by overworking. One student reported working up to 16 hours a day. However, as this PhD student discovered, this proved to be counter-productive, affecting physical wellbeing through lack of sleep, exercise daylight and poor nutrition. She became ill and is now careful to manage physical wellbeing. Taking breaks, doing something else and having time out to reflect were reported as helping to stimulate learning as well as safeguarding wellbeing.

Becoming used to work being challenged and critiqued by colleagues, and the need to justify and defend their work can be unexpected at first. For some this can be an ongoing problem, especially in cases where the student identifies closely with the work and therefore may tend to take the criticism personally:

'They are making judgements about you and I think that's quite … even though I say yea that's fine, it's ok … I do feel upset by it as well … because … other people are looking at my work and dissecting it … there's another bit of me that's saying but you wanted to do this, you have learnt a lot and it is valuable, don't be defensive around feedback … but actually no, it's sometimes hard. I do get anxious even when, you know, I'm going to send them a piece of data. I get really anxious about it'.

For many students, supervisors play a vital role in boosting confidence and helping students to develop the skills they need both to defend their work and critique others'. Students found that encouragement, positive feedback and praise, alongside criticism and suggestions for improvement in the early stages, helped to build their confidence. A particularly positive strategy was providing a lot of structure, seting targets, support and academic guidance at the beginning, and then encouraging students to gradually become more independent. This can involve encouraging students to begin to develop their own networks, interact with peers, present at conferences, submit articles for review and develop their critical thinking skills so they can critique their own work, and that of others with confidence.

'A big learning experience for me has been that doing a doctorate is not a search for the truth, but is really just taking part in a conversation. I suppose that is also a learning experience in that when I sit with the 'learned' in a conference I feel confident in challenging them as I now see myself as a peer'.

As students begin to develop this confidence as independent researchers playing an active role in academic life, it is vital that they still feel they can turn to their supervisor(s) at any

point for support, feedback and advice – a 'safety net' which is there even when students are setting their own agenda:

> 'In terms of what I want from them ... I still want sort of the cotton wool wrapped round me, but at other times I want them to sort of cut the apron strings and say just go, go away and just do it, but then you also know that the ... holes in the safety net are getting bigger and bigger because you're being cut loose to go off and do your research."

'Stuckness' – conceptual challenges

Many participants experienced intellectual or conceptual challenges as part of their journey, including periods of feeling stuck and unable to move forwards. However, this 'stuckness' can be a vital part of the learning process and can lead to breakthroughs and transformational learning, described in the research as 'conceptual threshold crossing' (Wisker et al 2010). The emotional dimension of this is evident in the following quote, which describes this experience in affective terms as 'pain' and demonstrates that this can be seen as a phase which, once students have gone through it, can enable them to move forwards in their learning and work and grow in confidence as researchers:

> '...you go through this mental churning and turmoil, well I certainly do, and it does hurt sometimes as well, you just sit there and suddenly your eyes fold over and you think ah this is really painful. I think that once you come out the other side of it you know that you're there, like this transition. Going back to my research purposes, in the last few weeks I've felt a lot more confident in that I can actually see something that I can put together, research, analyse and write up ...'

Supervisors can assist this process and support wellbeing by giving their time to talk the problem through, and enable the student to articulate what the problem is in a safe space, providing a steer and different perspective on how the student might resolve the issue. Successful learning is also more likely to take place when the student is open to learning, taking risks and allowing their thinking and work to be challenged, described here as a 'leap of faith':

> 'Part of it is very much a leap of faith ... you are jumping in at the deep end and you don't know how deep the bottom is because until you've talked to your supervisors and they've begun to give you a steer on your writing and the depth and the analysis, then you don't know what you're heading for...'

For this EdD student, the process of learning and becoming an independent researcher, though difficult, has meant that their own academic standards have risen and they are now aiming higher. From being motivated simply to pass assignments in the taught

component of the course to producing publishable writing, the student has become fully engaged and committed to in-depth learning, independently applying scholarliness and rigour to their work:

> 'Part of it has been horrible because there have been times when I've had to completely rip apart something that I thought was fantastic, turn it upside down, because certainly when I started this EdD I was looking at this as being, do the assignments, get the marks, get to the final stage … Whereas I've now had to start thinking in terms of … if I write something is it publishable, if it's not publishable why not'.

While this student had adequate support and encouragement from their supervisors in the form of regular contact and feedback, others reported that contact was minimal or had been lost, and this delayed their learning development and impacted negatively on their emotional wellbeing. There are instances when the supervisory relationship may become strained or breakdown, and it is vital that the students know who to turn to find a solution. For one student in particular, the absence of support or contact from her supervisory team was a contributing factor to an episode of mental distress, but luckily this was resolved when she was allocated a new supervisor.

For many students, a key learning curve is being able to take ownership of both their work and the supervision process; ensuring that they make contact, call meetings and set the agenda, it can empower them to take charge of their learning journey in this way. This process is elaborated here, where the student describes an ideal balance between a student's proactive approach and an underlying sense of safety and security from their supervisor:

> 'I'm getting to the point where slowly drawing away … so I know that the support is there if I need to go back, but not so much that I'm actually having to keep saying how do I do this … part of me feels that I need to pull back from that now and I need to start making my own independence known to my supervisor, so support, knowing there's still a safety net there I suppose, but at the same time knowing that it's being taken away so I've got to focus and I've got to be making sure I'm still proactive'.

Along with supportive supervisory teams, feeling part of a community and experiencing peer support, helped students to develop academic confidence. For this student, going through the process of completing work, writing, achieving success in funding applications and engaging with their academic community was extremely confidence boosting. This process was helped by a positive supervision team, a structured part-taught programme and a supportive academic community:

'Actually accomplishing, actually passing each assignment has been really, at first a bit surprising I suppose, and now just making me very 'you can do this, you can really do this'. It doesn't need to be a 'is this really me doing this?' It's a no, this is me, this is what I do, I'm a researcher, a lecturer. Which I know sounds quite weird but before that I was waiting for someone to point a finger and go 'you're a fraud, you're not really doing this job, you're a fake' … I think that helps me feel more confident about taking on new projects, applying for money and funding to help with my research and I've offered to do some work with a colleague … and we're trying to think of what we can actually do, and last night I suddenly thought why don't we write a book about it, which once upon a time I'd never have even … and it might be a ridiculous idea, but just the thought that [it] entered my head and it didn't then get pushed out by an inner critic or a little voice saying don't be ridiculous you could never do that, was quite nice really. So yeah it's just made me feel more three dimensional and secure and confident in my ability and my skills, and also help me draw on the resources and the people at the university, which has made me feel more embedded in the community and the culture here too'.

The journey

The journey of doing a doctorate is evidently an emotional one for many students, encompassing the spectrum of emotions from pain, crises and feelings of inadequacy through to confidence, fulfilment and exhilaration when they achieve breakthroughs and successfully complete work at each stage. Several students used the metaphor of a roller coaster to describe their learning journey and the following extracts exemplify these experiences of extreme highs and lows:

'I think it's the best decision I ever made through all the highs and the lows. I'm aware that, reasonably positive at the moment, that the way the process has gone I'm expecting there to be a terrible dip and another high, and then another dip and that's the way it is really and if I can survive it will be well worth it, and I intend to try'.

'… I'm wrapping up the end of my fieldwork now and it's been all those things that fieldwork is, you know, great, horrible, all those things … there have been moments where I've been hearing responses and I'm thinking 'gosh that's really good'. I can actually remember how that's going to feed back into my framework, and then there have been plenty, perhaps way more times, that I'm just lost myself. I don't know what they're saying, I have no confidence any longer that that is going to go back into the framework or then I'm into the idea of scrapping the entire framework….'

As this is an emotionally intense and challenging experience for many students, it is essential that they retain their motivation to keep going and complete the doctorate. Students suggested a wide range of strategies such as maintaining a good work/life/

study balance and allowing flexibility to deal with life issues as they arise; working and writing at a steady pace throughout to avoid last minute panics; realistic goal setting; careful planning; keeping in regular contact with supervisors and peers; remembering the huge investments of time, money and energy that have been made; focusing positively on achievements to date; remembering the original reasons for wanting to undertake a doctorate; visualising success, and imagining future possibilities and opportunities once the doctorate is completed. The first student quoted here describes this in positive terms, taking ownership of the process and focusing on the goal of success or completion, described as 'journeying to the top of a mountain'. The subsequent quote relates a sense of personal investment in fulfilling a lifelong ambition, also indicating the vital role of peer support in keeping her on task:

> 'It's just to try and think, this is what I'm aiming for, but to have some flexibility just to realise that whether you're having a baby or whatever life throws at you, it's good to be flexible. But just to keep enjoying what I'm doing and to keep badgering my supervisor and to keep it ticking I suppose as well, because I think that would scare me if ever I let it slip and then had to go back to it a month later. I think that would panic me. Even if I just do one interview in a fortnight or even if I just read a book in a week, just to keep it ticking over so that I don't feel that it's just this tidal wave coming towards me at the end. So that's the challenge but I don't see it as a negative challenge I see it as a positive, empowering, affirming challenge. I know they always use the metaphor of a journey but I suppose it is a bit like climbing a mountain and you just think the feeling of when I get to the top is going to be so good that I've just got to stay focused for now'.

> 'For me it's important that I build in the time to work on my project, because that's very difficult at the moment. Especially with work commitments and everything else … For me, going back to meet my cohort is very important because I know that they are going to be saying, 'well, where are you at, what are you doing'? The thing that's really motivating me at the moment, is that I have to remember why I did the course and it's because I've always wanted to do a doctorate. And to me it was a natural progression. And I didn't have the opportunity to do it when I was younger because I had children very young, and I had four children. So it wasn't until they had grown up that I really had the ability and the time to go back to my studies. So it's to fulfil a personal ambition. But also because I'm so far – I'm three quarters of the way through it now – I would feel it would be such a waste, not only of time but of money, to not complete it. So they are the two main drivers'.

The journey of studying towards a doctorate is challenging on many levels, requiring a huge investment and commitment on personal, emotional, intellectual, time and financial levels. The transition in becoming a doctoral student, expected to work independently,

to take charge of their learning with a minimal of support and to manage a research project, often for the first time, can be overwhelming and affect students' confidence and wellbeing. However, good supervision which is responsive to individual students' needs, enabling them to build confidence and participate in academia; peer support; becoming part of an academic community; the development of personal coping strategies and additional support where appropriate, can all contribute to positive wellbeing, a fulfilling learning experience and successful completion. A responsibility lies with institutions and the sector to respond to the wellbeing issues highlighted here, in order to enhance the retention, progression and achievement of doctoral learners, and to ensure they are fulfilling their duty of care towards this diverse group of learners. In the current context of economic uncertainty, doctoral study has the potential to encompass personal as well as professional development. Resources could be targeted effectively to help students develop wellbeing strategies, build their emotional resilience and prepare for future careers. It is essential to recognise the interrelatedness of intellect and emotion in the learning process. Doctoral students should be aware of what to expect, what is required of them in terms of time and personal commitment and what supervisors are able to offer. They should be helped to recognise that it is entirely normal to experience intellectual and emotional highs and lows as they progress, that there are positive wellbeing strategies they can employ and support available. While some students feel unable to continue with their journey, usually due to a combination of factors, it is worth underlining that for the majority of students interviewed here, the positive effects of the learning they achieve during their journey makes the experience worth it, despite any difficulties they may face:

'You know it's hard, it's quite sad in some ways that you look … a lot of students these days who are, you know, turned off learning but I suppose at the same time, for anybody else who can dedicate their time, and it does take time, give it a try, purely for the mental exercise of going through a journey, because it is a journey and it will turn you upside down and it does screw you up sometimes … But I'd encourage anybody, doesn't matter where just go for it'.

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For further information on these projects please see the links below:

'Open Minds' at: http://staffcentral.brighton.ac.uk/clt/research/openminds.htm (please contact Charlotte Morris for a hard copy of the final report at: cm147@brighton.ac.uk)
'Doctoral Learning Journeys' at: www.brighton.ac.uk/clt/clt-research-projects/doctoral-learning-journeys.html
'Troublesome Encounters' at: www.brighton.ac.uk/clt/troublesome-encounters.html

Wobbling: personal reflections on self-doubt, identity and emotional resilience

CURTIS TAPPENDEN

End of year (2009) journal reflection

Quoting films isn't me. Nerdy friends, who quote every line of every film verbatim and have seemingly endless amounts of time to do so, have switched me off watching most films, especially Hollywood. But Vinnie Jones's classic line from *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* has entered the vernacular and furthermore it seems an apt phrase to add gravitas to the following considerations. 'It's emotional', encapsulates a range of personal feelings and prompts deeper thought, as contextualised in my specific current position. Take this past year, culminating in a frantic four month struggle for academic, professional recognition and funding, the pathway forward; it's emotional. The untimely death of my sister. It's emotional. The demands of outworking a portfolio of different linked vocations – illustrator, painter, author, performer and teacher. Exhilarating, but at times like juggling precariously while being balanced on a large rolling ball. It's emotional. The acquisition of new research skills through reading and then having a go – feeling isolated with little help or support from colleagues, then the panic of trying to satisfactorily write up findings that will bite with toothy rigour. It's emotional. Demands of one's own children's school transitions into higher years and new schools. It's emotional.

On the day the unconditional offer to take up PhD study at the University of Brighton arrived I felt part dread and part elation. But why? Being welcomed aboard was fantastic, the huge pack of rules and regulations was less enamouring. But I pass such packs to younger students every year. Why not me? What is the problem here? I recall being flummoxed by the piles of paper growing in pastel shades on my desk in the classroom at Mayfield House at the start of my PGCE. Waste of paper, for sure, waste of time too? As it happened,

no was my final concluding word. The meaning of the paper piles was not explained, did not link up and seemed full of strange unattainable tasks. All that nine busy professional teachers did not need for the sake of the piece of paper at the end of the year! Within a few months, and as the words were practically and theoretically contextualised, the mist cleared and the lush educational landscape revealed its beauty–well, to me anyway, but then I've always been a willing receptor! But the creation of new knowledge, the journey into the unknown, the fear of not being able to connect deeper lines of research bother me, because for the first time in many years I feel inadequate in my ability to construct robust methodological frameworks; wondering how the relationship with supervisors and guidance into and around them will develop. Will I be supplied the necessary tools for the job, or will it just be a hacking through the academic jungle. If so, I'd like to meet the explorer who did just that and lived. I wanted those answers from an academic advisor at my previous university, but received answers like, 'mmm, the dark, murky waters of the social sciences, eh? …' No further explanation to support this comment was offered and as such, it was not affirming, not helpful.

Everyone at our institution talks about research, but few seem to talk within it, around it, into it and out of it. So bothered was I, that I immediately set up a practical workshop focused around the definition of the word in relation to making connections for our FE learners, so that their journeys would be curious, meaningful and fruitful in harvesting a new crop of knowledge. I needed to prove a point, and where I could not grasp it for my own life I was determined to strategise it in the lives of others, at a manageable level, a level I could cope being manager at. With good supervision and applying this sense of purpose and urgency to my own pursuits, I believe that my doubts will be dispelled.

Counting the cost has caused a huge wobble too. I have always been sensible enough to count the cost. With age and increase in responsibility the cost has got higher. I have sought wisdom and guidance for anything that stands to purposefully and powerfully affect personal change or change in others, reap greater benefit, or reward by way of singular or mutual outcome. My critics are friends, colleagues, observers and students. They are positives and negatives. The students have been positive, possibly accounted for by their ignorance of what it all entails. Friends were quick to ask 'why? ', and replied with negatives such as, 'That's a lot of work, why do you want to do that?', 'It will wreck your marriage and family'. Colleagues were less than congratulatory. One replied, 'well if anyone here is going to waste that kind of money then it ought to be on someone like you'. I am usually unbothered by these types of comments, but each was a giddying blow. I sought my justification in a rational response. The perception of the indulgence of research with no regard for the umbrella of positive influence that could be raised over our profession, especially where this research might be outworked in action with creativity of thought and deed through the sharing of ideas and outcomes, was clear. As for the wrecking of family and marriage: my marriage is strong; my family devoted. I value them highly and would deal with the

situation sensibly if the doom they monger, and its threat ever loomed. Because the cost is so high and because it matters so much, the wobbling has a reason. Negativity has hit the emotional core at its most vulnerable, where residual effect of such a huge undertaking is personally enormous. My personal is no longer easily detached from my professional, especially in the academy. It led me to think about HE professionals and their emotional stability.

Cursory glances through journals to find a breadth of papers studying this aspect were sparse. Much is written on the support of NQTs and starter teachers but little on those with experience. An internal mail envelope delivered to my pigeonhole containing an article on a research paper which addresses the conflicts experienced by academics who are also heads of department – 'A fine balance – but not all can manage it' (Newman 2010), was timely and most welcome. Heads of Departments' struggles between professional and personal identities has been studied by Dr Floyd at Oxford Brookes University, from a range of heads who manage a variety of different disciplines at a selection of post 1992 universities. Respondents were put into three categories. Jugglers were comfortable balancing multiple identities, copers just about managed and strugglers had real difficulty with the balancing and managing of identities to the point that they were on the verge of leaving their jobs. It would seem that there exists a disparity between their perception and expectation of their own career trajectories and their employers' expectations of performance in the role of head. My case is different on the one hand but bears similarities. My own role has been challenged by this potential undertaking where with unknown expectations I have been trying to forecast the potential cost and realise that something in my multiple identity must give. Maybe the pervading attitudes discussed in Floyd's paper have added to the wobble, and the affirmation that I am working in difficult times.

My new role at University of Creative Arts this year, primarily as an artist, whose job it is to promote writing, thinking and study skills in relation to the visual arts (which I have taught for 18 years) caused an early crisis of identity. Especially knowing that young art and design learners' preconceptions of a literacy tutor as dull and trying to teach a subject that they do not want to study, I had to reassert my identity as artist through my use of words and pictures. In a recent email conversation with a supervisor, I learned that part of my identity in the context of the educational research department I will shortly be joining, has been identified as that of a 'creative' who is embarking on the PhD journey. My questioning response has been to ask what of others? Are they not creative or perceived as such in that they are piecing together disparate strands of research, shaping them and framing them within argument and drawing conclusion, creative surely? If all are creative is it then that the expectation of my role as a creative suggests that responses and approaches ought to be in some way different from the norm approached from a different premise or delivered 'outside of the box' in some way. This in no way fazes me - taking risks to enable new discoveries serves as a major part of my practice as artist and teacher, and is undertaken on a daily basis. The major part of my wobbling draws parallels with Floyd's

research, in that it is in part due to the conflict and balance of personal and professional identities, albeit not within the role of departmental head, although a change in perceived identities will bring about a change. In deciding to undertake the PhD study commitment I have already realised that something will almost certainly have to give. I have evaluated each part of my life and the most vulnerable facet is that of visual artist. It has been interesting to note the natural change in my working pattern from illustrator to writer. For the first time in 19 years of teaching I was this year offered a new teaching position as creative writing and writing skills tutor to FE. It severely challenged an identity rooted in the 2-D practical visual arts, and the possibility that students might dismiss the 'literacy tutor' as uninteresting and irrelevant to their study. My love for the visual arts is in no way diminished so will the dedication to new practices – socially scientific, keenly methodological and mostly written – rob me of a much loved part of my identity? The rational mind says no. Extended projects do not remove skills, they are merely latent until the next time they are taken up. But it is part of my identity, perceived by the public at large, in my own home city as a practising, exhibiting artist, that is at stake, and once again it is the perception of others who lie at the root of the problem. Eisner (2002) seems clear about the creative's multi-faceted role, regardless of artistic specialism. Considering the attitudes of Herbert Read, he concurs that

'...by the term artist ... we mean individuals who have developed the ideas, the sensibilities, the skills and the imagination to create work that is well proportioned, skilfully executed, and imaginative, regardless of the domain in which the individual works ... the distinctive forms of thinking needed to create artistically crafted work are relevant to virtually all aspects of what we do, from the design of curricula, to the practice of teaching, to the features of the environment in which students and teachers live'.

The science of education can be crushing. Attitudes to testing and the creation of manufactured education serving the business model to the detriment of all else, is tiring. I feel tired of it in the small way it affects my practice. How it has driven the ethos of creative education to believe that we primarily exist to enhance the economy and not the person. Paperwork overload and the accountability of absolutely everything have taken their toll. Education is more than a measured means to an end. Ethically, for those to whom it is a life force, they must stand their ground. In this challenge I wobble less. Having a challenge, a reason and a goal to explain and proclaim, is encouraging, re-assertive and purposeful. A personal life history contextualised within the perceived attitudes to rational thinking, theory as outlined in this reflection, and the reward of positive outcomes resulting from the ongoing practices of the artist as practitioner and educator have offered a greater hope and thereby readdresses the balance. The result, an emotional resilience which sort of ironed me out, for now anyway. We tell our stories and they become meaningful when spoken back. I teach this to my students, tell them that it is do-able, work-able, yet until now I have not dared to even try it out on myself. I shall continue to think as an artist, be informed as an

artist, inform as an artist, and take risks on the journey. In the light of what has gone before I press on, having thought and tested the ground on which I currently stand.

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