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Reconceptualising assessment to promote student learning, resilience and wellbeing

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AdvanceHE

Context – student wellbeing challenges

- Number of students disclosing a mental health condition has tripled since 2007/08 (Equality Challenge Unit, 2015)

- Students report significantly lower levels of mental wellbeing than the general population - more so with respect to minority groups (Ferguson, 2017)

- HE sector is experiencing a 'mental health crisis' (The Guardian, August 2018)

- 20% Australian students experiencing a mental health issue (Carter *et al.* 2017) and a fifth of Canadian post-secondary students identifying as depressed, anxious or battling other mental health issues (Pang, 2017)

Why?

What is wellbeing?

'A sustainable positive mood and attitude, health, resilience, and satisfaction with self, relationships and experiences' in their educational environment'

(DEECD, 2010: 1)

Break out activity

What concerns / challenges do you see with respect to enhancing wellbeing through teaching, learning and assessment?

5 Minutes

Wellbeing, the learning experience & student performance

- To enhance student wellbeing in HE, we need to work more closely with the emotional realm of learning and the wider student experience

- Consider how we can support students and their emotions in learning

- We offer an example of success in working towards this at UWE, based in assessment practice (full paper – Hill & West, 2019 – Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education)
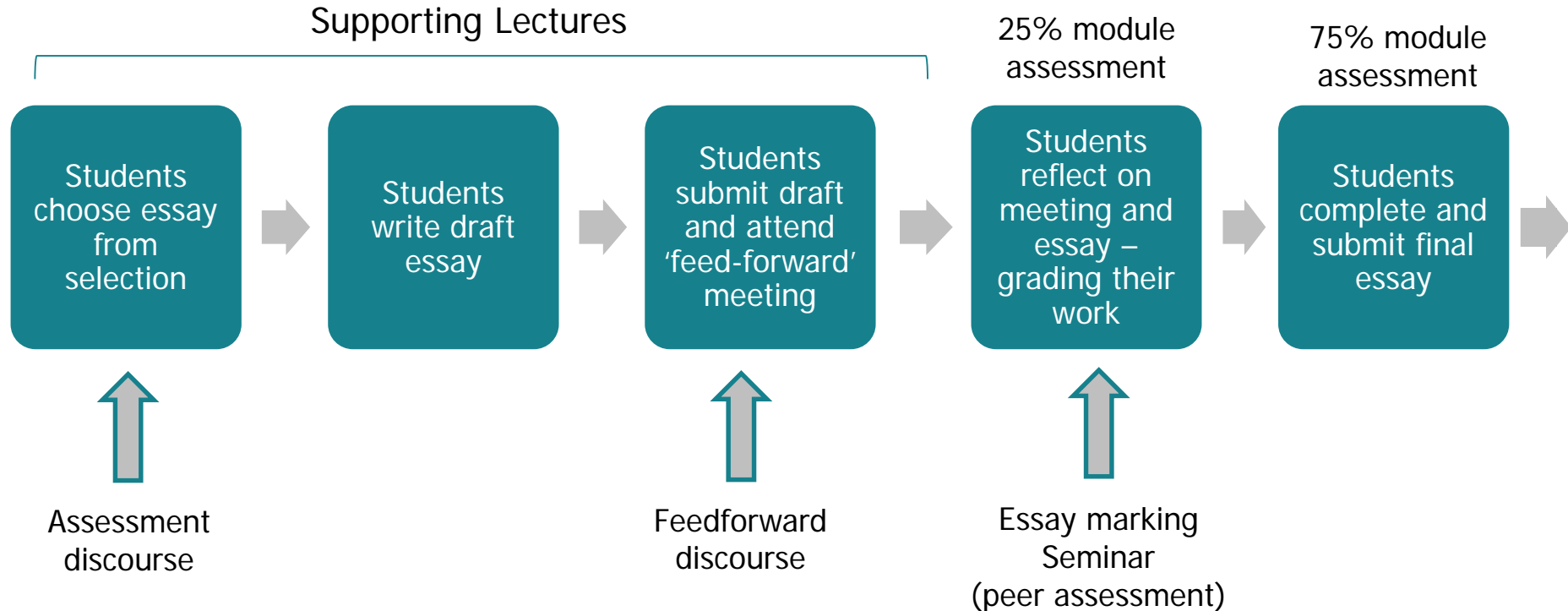
Assessment and wellbeing – discovering positive links

- AY 2015-2016 - new assessment approach implemented on a second year geography module

- Aimed to improve student learning experience through dialogic feed-forward assessment

- Focus was cognitive:
  - Did the approach assert a **positive influence on the student learning experience**?
  - Did it **enhance student performance** and **raise NSS**
  - **scores** related to feedback?

Module teaching and assessment structure

Supporting Lectures

25% module assessment

75% module assessment

Students choose essay from selection → Students write draft essay → Students submit draft and attend 'feed-forward' meeting → Students reflect on meeting and essay – grading their work → Students complete and submit final essay →

Assessment discourse

Feedforward discourse

Essay marking Seminar (peer assessment)

Qualitative case study approach

- Individual semi-structured interviews ... two consecutive year 2 cohorts at end of module (2015-16 and 2016-17) ... analysed thematically via grounded theory

- 44 interviews (x 30 mins), 61% response rate: male = 45%   female = 55%

- Group semi-structured interviews with level 3 students elucidating post-assignment behaviour

- Essay performance data pre- and post-assessment intervention (inferential stats)

- Answers to NSS feedback questions

Results - Enhanced learning experience

- **Conversation** compelled students to **engage critically** with their work:

*'when I have had drafts handed back to me and it's just written over, either **I don't understand what they are trying to say**, or it's not clear enough. I can ask you questions if we're talking to each other about it, it's easier to see things … It's definitely better to talk about it'*

*'I've had it before where you get electronic feedback and **you might not be sure what some of the comments mean** … being able to discuss it is important. You get that progress and can **discuss how you can change it as opposed to just saying this is wrong'***

Results - Enhanced student performance

Band (%)	2011-2012 (%)	2012-2013 (%)	2015-2016 (%)	2016-2017 (%)
0-39 (inc. NS)	16	5	0	5.5*
40-49	9	14	3*	5.5*
50-59	34	38	28	17
60-69	41	38	58	58
70-100	0	5	11	14
Number (n)	32	37	36	36

Average Ecology mark 4.5% higher than average mark for other second year optional modules (p = 0.01)

Significantly higher marks 2015-17 v 2011-13 (p = <0.0001)

Dialogic assessment

* Did not have a meeting

Then we delved deeper ...

- The approach uncovered the inherently emotional experience for students of receiving assessment feedback

- Clear evolution in emotions over the feed-forward process:

apprehensive, scared, disappointed, upset, ashamed

⬇

enjoyment, satisfaction, motivation

- For some, the meetings were cathartic, reducing their anxiety as they 'came clean' with their level of progress

- consciously encountering and talking through emotions in a collaborative manner supported a personalised and inclusive learning experience

- students noted that the individualised nature of the meeting made them feel cared about:

'Generic comments can be good … but you never know whether they are applicable to you or not. So getting personalised feedback is really useful'

'I definitely felt like you cared about what [grade] I was getting'

- students reported altered behaviour post-meeting, within-task and with respect to post-assignment self-regulation

- they self-avowed to increased self-efficacy, believing more strongly in their capabilities to accomplish assignments in future:

'I definitely feel more confident … being able to prepare, structure and write in the future. Not only will I now be able to repeat these steps … but I will also be able to self-critique and identify mistakes or weak areas that I may not necessarily have done before'
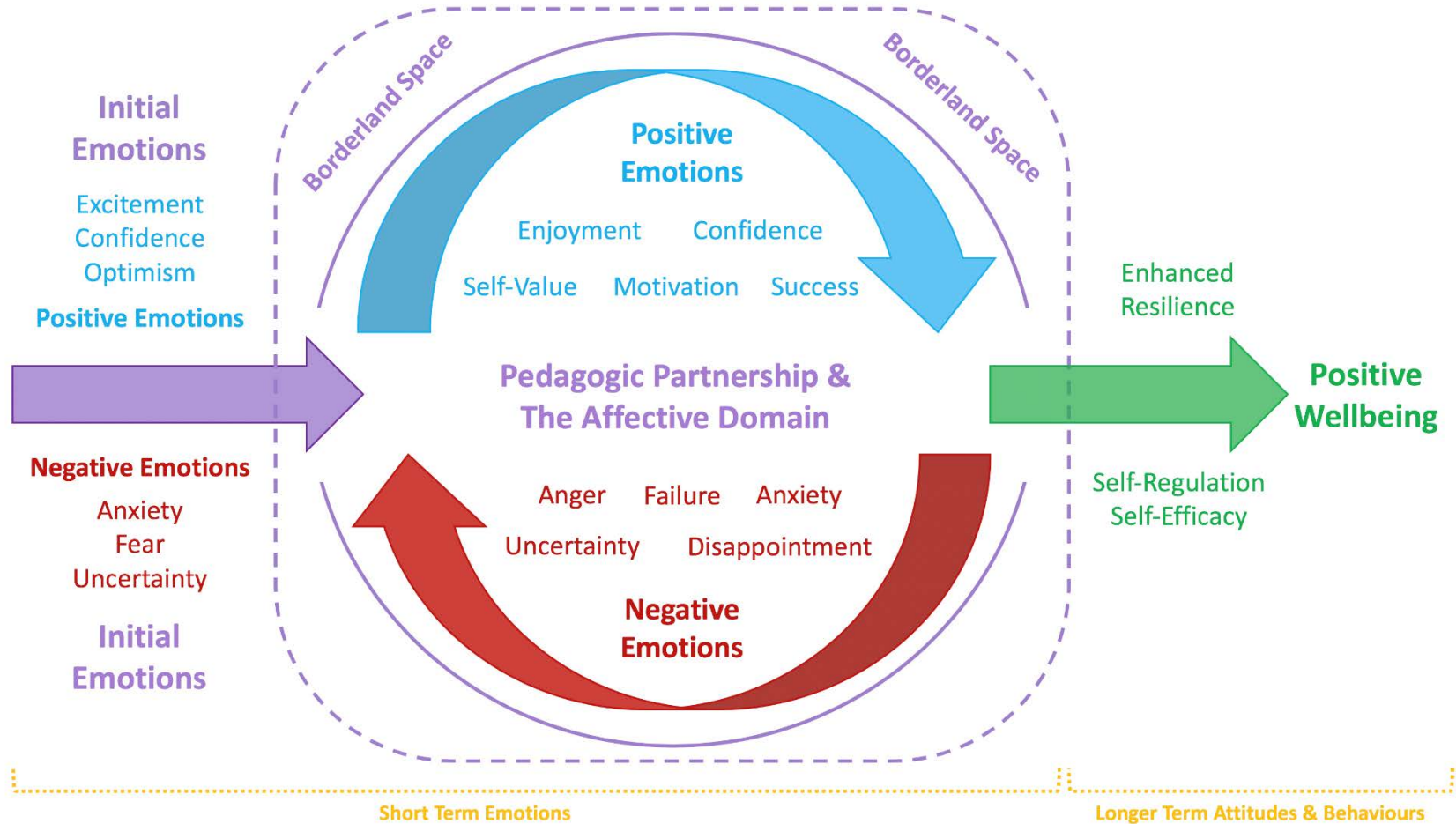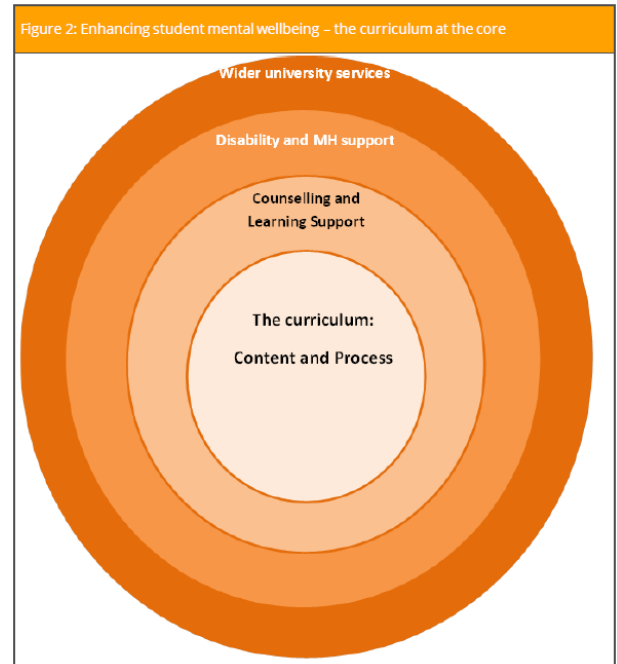
Wellbeing audit in your context

Key message from this workshop:

- Wellbeing is core to the curriculum in the way we teach (process / approach) and what we teach (content)

- Effective learning, teaching and assessment, mainstreaming wellbeing, can complement the role of student support services

(HEA, 2017)

Figure 2: Enhancing student mental wellbeing – the curriculum at the core

Wider university services

Disability and MH support

Counselling and Learning Support

The curriculum:

Content and Process

Wellbeing audit in your context

- Consider a contribution you make to TLA

15 Minutes

- Ask yourself the following questions:

  o Are there specific learning environments that can be stressful – first time in labs, field, groups, crits/simulations, presentations, internships / placements?

  o What approaches to teaching create or work to dissipate stress?

  o How can I dissipate the stresses associated with assessment?

  o How do I guide my students through transitions (across semesters / years?)

  o How do I communicate with my students to build a sense of belonging?

  o Could I make better use of technology to support wellbeing?

Wellbeing audit in your context

- On your table, try to identify one stress mitigation action you believe would impact on student stress and enhance performance in your context

  15 Minutes

- Groups to share with the room

  10 Minutes

Wellbeing audit in your context - debreif

- Effective TLA approaches that promote wellbeing embrace relational partnership working and acknowledge the whole student:
  - **Active**, experiential learning: group work, inquiry- / research-based learning, service learning, practice-based learning
  - **Compassionate** T&L: relate to students in ways that are welcoming, and sensitive to them as individuals (Gilbert compassion video)
  - **Inclusive** and **contemplative** (contemplative pedagogy network blog)
  - **Dialogic** teaching and assessment (see later case study)

- Create a sense of identity and safety for students – fellow students viewed as resources for learning not competitors

Conclusions

Implications for practice:

- Relate to students in ways that are hospitable and attuned to them as individuals

- Adopt active student-centred and social pedagogic approaches such as group work, inquiry-based learning and authentic assessment

- Seek training from Educational Developers who might support you to work positively with the emotional aspects of learning

- Learn from one another through co-teaching or simply sharing the emotional labour of teaching

- Consider how to adapt different teaching, learning and assessment practices across different FHEQ Levels which consider wellbeing and emotion

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