# Student and staff wellbeing

**From fixes to foresight: Jisc and Emerge Education insights for universities and startups**

Report 6

# From fixes to foresight: Jisc and Emerge Education insights for universities and startups

At Jisc and Emerge Education, we believe that education technology (edtech) has rich potential to help UK universities solve their biggest challenges. We see edtech startups as key to the innovation and agility that higher education needs to navigate the rapidly changing present and future. This is a critical part of building a sector that is resilient to unforeseen changes and that can further transform using advanced technologies, as part of our vision for an Education 4.0.

We have worked as close partners for several years and our collaboration brings together Jisc's 30+ years of experience in providing digital solutions for UK education and research, and Emerge's in-depth knowledge of the edtech ecosystem based on investments in 55 startups in five years. Together, we've developed unique insights into the potential of edtech in higher education.

To unlock that potential, we're undertaking a programme of research. It's focused on exploring the most urgent priorities that university senior leaders will face over the next three years, which we investigated and set out in our initial joint report, The start of something big? Can edtech startups solve the biggest challenges faced by UK universities?

**Priority one**
Delivering the best, most equitable student experience.

**Priority two**
Adapting to students evolving expectations about employability and career outcomes.

**Priority three**
Expanding the university's reach by attracting more (and more diverse) students.

**Priority four**
Transforming digital and physical infrastructure.

**Priority five**
Recruiting, retaining and developing world-class staff.

Each report in this series explores aspects of each priority in more detail, mapping current approaches and challenges, and highlighting specific edtech solutions and startups. The reports draw on the expertise of leaders from HE, employers and startups, through Jisc – Emerge Education advisory groups on specific topics, including the future of assessment, the employability journey of students from underrepresented backgrounds, student recruitment in challenging times, employer-university collaboration and the student mental health and wellbeing challenge.

We find that there are plenty of opportunities for startups to hear from each other but very few for them to hear from real customers – universities – and understand, in depth, the priorities they have and the problems they are facing. This report series does that, providing startups with the information they need to shape their products so as to ensure they meet university needs. For universities, the series offers insights into how the sector is managing change as well the possibilities for the future.

The work on the reports was well underway when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, and we have seen the university sector adapt more rapidly than many thought possible to the challenges of digital delivery. But in the midst of crisis, it is important to draw a clear line between our immediate response and what it tells us about the future. This work is part of Learning and teaching reimagined, a sector-wide initiative focused on providing university leaders with inspiration on what the future might hold for higher education, and guidance on how to respond and thrive in those environments.

Ultimately, we want to build a vibrant, highly effective edtech ecosystem, with seamless collaboration between universities and leading startups, to ensure students get the educational experience they deserve.

**Paul Feldman**
CEO, Jisc

**Nic Newman**
Partner,
Emerge Education

## CONTENTS

# Foreword

## The pandemic places not just our physical but also our mental health centre stage.

It has normalised conversations in mainstream media and in politics about mental health and wellbeing within our homes, our workplaces, our communities and our schools, colleges and universities.

Stepchange: mentally healthy universities (2019) provided a call to action for universities to see mental health as foundational to all aspects of university life, for all students and all staff. The pandemic has accelerated the currency of this paradigm, a rapid shift towards understanding the importance of good mental health for everyone, as well support for those in need.

Universities cannot do this alone. It must be a priority across government, with the NHS, public health bodies, the third and private sectors working with us as key partners. At stake is the mental health of a generation of young adults, essential to post-Covid recovery.

Technology is a key enabler of the whole university approach to mental health, providing new opportunities to identify those in difficulty, to connect, to influence behaviours and to deliver

support. Since the beginning of the pandemic, university staff have been working at pace to transform support services, moving counselling and advice online, building digital communities, developing new services to meet new needs. Throughout they have worked in close partnership with digital providers who have brought commitment and expertise to the shared objective that UK universities emerge from the pandemic as healthy settings, enabling all students and all staff to thrive and succeed to their best potential.

**John de Pury**
Assistant director of policy, Universities UK

# Introduction

The topic of mental wellbeing and a widening perception of declining mental health among students and staff has been moving up the higher education agenda in recent years. The pandemic, together with its unsettling transformation of the university experience, has exacerbated the issue but worsening trends, and the need to act, have been visible for some time.

In this report we reflect the broadly accepted need for a fundamental realignment of the way mental health and wellbeing are seen and approached, and we examine how innovation and technology, brought to the fore in the era of the lockdown, can bring that realignment into being.

In part one, we see how student and staff mental wellbeing is undergoing reassessment, particularly in the wake of Covid, and we look at the need for a fundamentally different approach, delivering the mentally healthy university by moving from a deficit model that is reactive and dependent on crisis management to one of positive support for all, embedding preventative and positive wellbeing initiatives across the whole institution.

Part two examines how technology is being used in implementing new approaches. As universities moved swiftly online last year so did their wellbeing services, often revealing that digital might promise effective long-term as well as immediate answers, not least for the whole university approach, with a capability to embed mental wellbeing and mental fitness development into the curriculum and the ability to reach students and staff who might be isolated not only by lockdown but by geography, disability and other barriers that digital could address.

We have case studies from 2020/21 to show how specific apps, tools and platforms are being used in universities as diverse as Middlesex, UCEM, Exeter, Manchester and Nottingham Trent to build mental fitness, provide information, resources and conversation spaces, together with therapy and intervention where needed, and deal with determinants of wellbeing such as finance and personal safety. Most of these platforms pre-date 2020 but they came to the fore in the shift to online and point the way ahead for more innovation and opportunities for founders and startups.

The potential for the use of data and analytics in learning is now being extended to wellbeing. We highlight projects from Northumbria, Bangor and the Open University, and consider the practical issues impeding progress. We also highlight Jisc's code of practice for wellbeing and mental health analytics.

In part three we move to practical recommendations. We set out four principles for mental wellbeing in higher education, provide a wellbeing technology checklist for universities and, finally, offer advice for founders.

# Introduction

## The mental wellbeing of university students and staff has long been a concern.

The mental wellbeing of university students and staff has long been a concern. In 2017 the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) reported that there had been a fivefold increase in the number of students who had disclosed a mental health condition to their college or university over the past decade. In the 2015/16 academic year, 15,395 UK first-year university students in Britain reported a mental health condition.

The effects of the pandemic and lockdown have only exacerbated the issue.

A survey of 2,000 students by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), found that 57% of those who participated reported a worsening in their mental health and wellbeing during the 2020 autumn term. More than one in five (22%) said their mental health was much worse, while 63% felt COVID-19 posed either a big or significant risk to their mental or physical health.

A National Union of Students survey of 4,000 students mirrored the ONS findings with 52% reporting that their mental health had deteriorated or been affected negatively by COVID-19.

However, only 29% of those had looked for help. Of those that did seek help, 57% said they were satisfied with the support they got.

The impact can be profound, from distress for students affected to an increased risk of withdrawing from university. Universities face pressure on institutional counselling services and a need to place more resources into mental health support. IPPR research found that over the past five years 94% of universities have experienced a sharp increase in the number of people trying to access support services, with some institutions noticing a threefold increase. At some universities one in four students were using, or waiting to use, counselling services. In addition to the need to fund more support services, there are also financial and reputational implications for institutions if support services are criticised as inadequate and increasing numbers of students drop out of courses.

# Staff wellbeing

The mental health of university staff is also coming under the spotlight due to increased workload, particularly related to the pressures of the pandemic.

In April 2020 Hepi updated its Pressure Vessels project looking at mental health among higher education staff in the UK and found a continued and consistent rise in staff referrals to counselling services – up 155% across 17 universities in the period 2010 to 2018. Given that the data only covers up to 2018, it warns of further impact as a result of the pandemic.

The extent of workplace bullying, harassment and intimidation at universities is also emerging, especially in science research groups and institutes. A 2018 investigation by the Guardian revealed that nearly 300 academics across the UK, including senior professors and laboratory directors, had been reported for bullying in the last few years. More recent cases of bullying at very senior levels at certain universities have also hit the media headlines.

# A fundamentally different approach to mental health and wellbeing

As a sector, mental health is firmly on the agenda and is marked by a fundamental change in the way mental health and wellbeing is viewed and approached.

Universities UK (UUK), in Stepchange: mentally healthy universities framework, has called on all universities to adopt mental health as a strategic priority and implement a whole university approach. This is an integrated approach recommending that all aspects of university life promote and support student and staff mental health. Co-developed with Student Minds, Stepchange promotes a 'mentally healthy university' model formed of four domains: learn, support, work and live. It also suggests five cross-cutting themes to embed a whole university approach:

- **Leadership:** strong and visible leadership that commits to mental health as a strategic imperative
- **Co-production:** students and staff working together on a shared vision and collaborative, shared decision making
- **Information:** effective information sharing within institutions and with the NHS (within carefully governed agreements)
- **Inclusivity:** recognising that people face unequal challenges to their mental health and those may be HE-specific and be personal, cultural or structural
- **Research and innovation:** researching evidence of need, effectiveness of interventions and emerging good practice in innovative services, approaches and use of technology

It is this final theme – how innovation and technology can support staff and student wellbeing – that we are exploring in this report.

The UUK work comes as part of a wider shift in perspective around mental health and wellbeing from a deficit model and culture of reaction and crisis management to one of positive support for all, focusing on the benefits of skills development and preventative work.

## What do we mean by wellbeing?
### Mental health and wellbeing: a dual continuum

- **Mental health** refers to a spectrum of experience, from flourishing to good mental health to mental illness and distress.

- **Wellbeing** includes wider physical, social and economic experience.

**PART 2: Emerging solutions: how is technology being used to help?**

# Summary

In this section we look at different approaches to both the short-term challenge of moving wellbeing support services online during lockdown and the wider challenge of supporting both staff and student wellbeing.

We explore how technology is being used in various ways to support wellbeing. Firstly, by taking a brief look at the experience of moving the majority of wellbeing support services online when the pandemic began, then a closer look at some of the apps, tools and platforms available for staff and students. Finally, we consider the emerging role of wellbeing analytics and the opportunities and challenges it offers.

# Digital responses to an emergency

*"We've seen real positives from doing online financial capability sessions because students can have a degree of anonymity. They don't have to put their video on. They can type their questions in the chat rather than sitting in a room and putting their hand up and admitting they're in a really challenging financial situation."*

Helen Rylands, student services manager, Nottingham Trent University

In March 2020, university student wellbeing services moved swiftly online, along with almost every other aspect of university life. In general, the shift to Zoom or Microsoft Teams for appointments and counselling was found to have been remarkably smooth. The profile of mental health and wellbeing within universities rose, leading some universities to take the opportunity to review their mental health provision and take a whole university approach, bringing forward initiatives such as embedding wellbeing into the curriculum, as described in UUK's Mental health and Covid-19: #WeAreTogether webinar.

Such changes came against a backdrop of increasing concerns around mental health and wellbeing in society more generally. According to the ONS,

*"At the beginning of lockdown we saw a deterioration in all measures of personal wellbeing: life satisfaction, feelings that things done in life are worthwhile, happiness and anxiety…*

*Over a third (37.4%) of adults in Great Britain said that the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has affected their wellbeing between 3 April and 10 May 2020…There was also a marked increase in anxiety at the beginning of lockdown. Between 20 and 30 March 2020 almost half (49.6%) of people reported high anxiety and average anxiety scores were 5.2 out of 10, a marked increase from 3.0 in the last quarter of 2019."*

This rise in anxiety in wider society was reflected in universities as students faced multiple challenges, from concerns about their learning and exams, worries about their own health or that of family and friends and anxiety about the future as internships and even jobs were cancelled. The loss of income from part-time jobs was significant, with an April 2020 NUS survey finding that 80% of students were worried about how they would cope financially, especially relating to accommodation rent payments.

A January 2021 online survey by a Sheffield University undergraduate of more than 300 students, exploring their feelings about the pandemic, has emphasised the impact of lockdown measures and online learning on students' mental health, with responses describing the experience ranging from *"cripplingly lonely"* and *"isolating and overwhelming"* to *"so much uncertainty alongside increased isolation".*

## Middlesex University: building community with Fika

*"Fika [see p15] very quickly released content specific to Covid, which offered support with feelings of isolation and loneliness. Having a sense of community and sense of belonging can make a huge difference. Fika ran a daily community feed with a different question or idea related to self-care and wellbeing, and then everybody would contribute and cheer other's posts. It was really reassuring to hear other people's ways of coping and finding routine, motivation, focus and all those sorts of things we all struggle with. We are also planning to run a different mental fitness skill theme each month, starting with connection, which will run with courses which academics, and in particular, personal tutors, can assign their students to. We think that's going to have a huge impact on engagement because it will be embedded."*

Vanessa White, student wellbeing coordinator, Middlesex University

For staff, there were specific stressors around increased workloads, difficulties working from home (especially those with school age children) and health concerns.

The Jisc 2020 Digital Experience Insights survey of more than 3,200 professional services staff in HE showed that there was a 23% rise in staff agreeing that they were well informed around their health and wellbeing as a technology user. However, this still only accounts for 44% of those surveyed, suggesting that there is still a lot more work for universities to do around improving the information and resources they have for their staff around mental health and wellbeing when using technology.

## UCEM: mental health first aid for staff

*"There's been a cultural shift in thinking about wellbeing since Covid that we will definitely carry on in terms of how we think about our stuff and our students."*

Jane Fawkes, deputy principal at University College of Estate Management (UCEM)

The University College for Estate Management embedded its mental health awareness approach for all staff during the pandemic. To help staff retain a sense of community it placed a strong focus on communication, making sure there were extra opportunities to check in with staff: weekly all-staff meetings, weekly video updates from the principal, fortnightly line manager meetings via Zoom to see everyone's faces and build a community. Slides used in all messaging reinforced a message of *"we're all in this together"* and *"be kind"*, and a confidential monthly wellbeing survey was introduced.  UCEM gave an extra half day's 'wellbeing leave' in the first lockdown, and at the end of the year an additional 'You day' to support wellbeing for all staff. Line managers are also encouraged  to include a focus on wellbeing as part of the regular catch ups with their teams, and  maintain the social aspect of work through regular remote events such as Monday coffee or Friday social drinks.

UCEM didn't introduce any specific wellbeing tools or apps due to already having in place as an online higher education provider a comprehensive VLE as a platform to provide information to students.

At Middlesex, wellbeing staff found that some students with disabilities, who may not find face to face interaction easy, were thriving where in the past they might have struggled. Given the benefits, the university is considering continuing the majority of services digitally with face to face only in exceptional circumstances. And at the University of Bristol, the 'no-show rate' with the disability service has improved. It also found that group sessions are 'less anxiety provoking' for students when online rather than face to face. All the universities we spoke to emphasised the benefits of being able to support overseas students using digital provision.

**But there are challenges:**

- The digital inequalities that have been highlighted in relation to online learning and teaching also have an impact on student access to online support services

- Students may suffer from a lack of a quiet space to talk privately online, perhaps because they have returned to a family home, are a commuter student or because halls of residence walls can be thin

- Students choosing not to engage through video, resulting in security issues (is the person who they

say they are?) and more difficulty assessing their state of mind and their needs

- Some disabilities, such as hearing difficulties, may make digital provision more challenging

- Staff and student anxiety levels are generally high - but vary. With staff there are differing levels of ease or unease with working at home depending on individual circumstances, particularly childcare

- Staff are under huge pressure due to the pace of change and additional workload

- It is harder to achieve a sense of community and connectedness when physically separated – for both staff and students

- There is a heightened need for engagement and follow through from the whole institution on prioritising wellbeing

## University of Exeter: increased access through digital

*"It was quite a natural progression for us to move from face to face to digital services. There's very little we have found we cannot do digitally. We've learned that you can do so much with the new technologies these days to make mental health support and interventions just as relevant, and just as accessible and successful, as face to face. We've now flexibly changed the service so that at least 85% is a digital offering. If it needs to be face to face, it tends to be students for whom digital just doesn't work, perhaps because they are unable to engage or their circumstances are more chaotic. But, for the majority of students who are familiar with technology, they've moved very easily to this kind of way of working.*

*We can see [digital] working well for the year ahead. For one thing, we can access students that we wouldn't usually access, so we've been able to talk to students in the UK and external to the UK, and still offer support. In the future, for students on placements, it'll mean that we can be more flexible in the way that we consider our support structures."*

Mark Sawyer, head of student wellbeing and welfare, University of Exeter

# Apps, tools and platforms

One of the ways in which universities responded to the crisis was to make greater use of wellbeing apps, tools and platforms that could be used remotely by both domestic and international students and by staff and students alike.

While they had existed – and been used by many universities – before the pandemic, they have come into their own in recent months.

Aside from mental distress text messaging support lines such as the Samaritans and Shout (from digital mental health charity Mental Health Innovations), which are not exclusively focused on students, the apps, tools and platforms in the mental health and wellbeing space can be loosely grouped into five categories:

- **Skills development platforms** eg Fika
- **Therapy and intervention platforms** eg UNIHEADS, SilverCloud
- **Health information** eg Student Health App
- **Conversation-convening platforms** eg Togetherall
- **Resource-gathering platforms** eg Student Space
- **Platforms that deal with determinants of wellbeing** such as finance or personal safety eg Blackbullion, Safezone

| Skills development and prevention of health decline | Health information and intervention platforms | Conversation-convening platforms |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Fika | Student Health App — Reliable health advice for students / UNIHEADS / SilverCloud | togetherall |

| | Resource-gathering platforms | Platforms addressing wellbeing determinants |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | STUDENT SPACE | blackbullion / SafeZone |
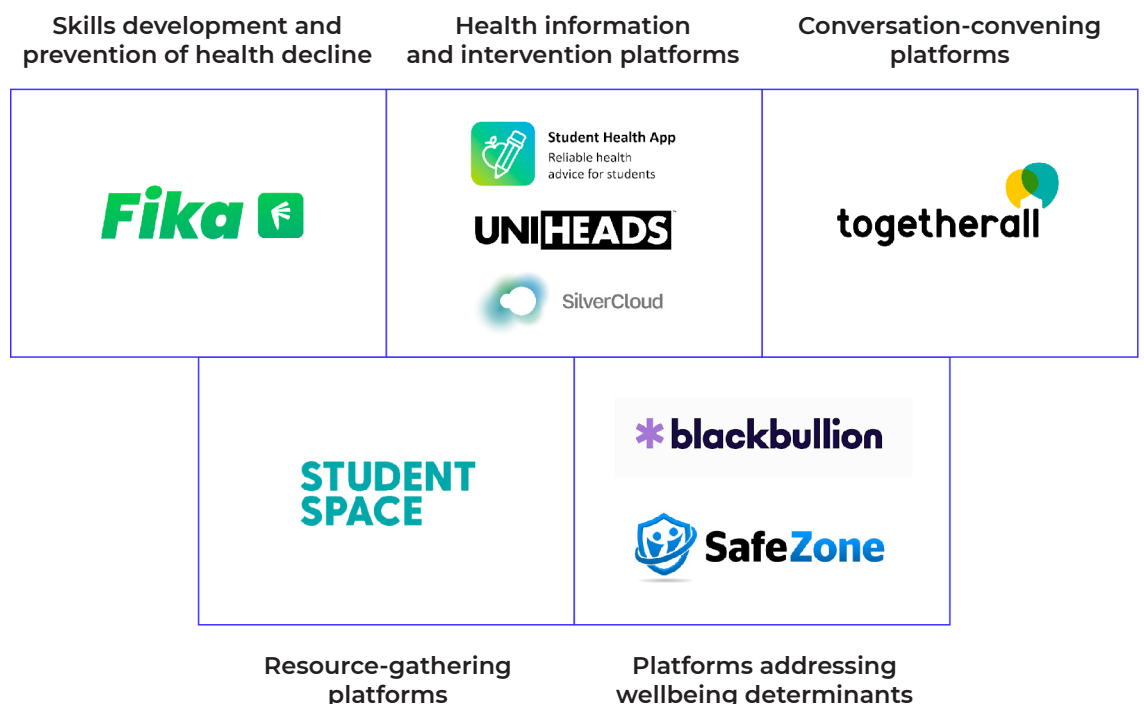
# Skills development platforms

### Fika

Fika provides, through its online and app-based platform, mental fitness courses to exercise key drivers of mental health such as confidence, positivity, focus, connection, meaning, motivation and stress management – the mental equivalent of taking regular physical exercise. Its courses draw on approaches from sports psychology to cognitive behavioural therapy and other therapies, offering a positive impact on wellbeing and performance, not least student retention, attainment and employability, as well as staff productivity, satisfaction, retention and more. Fika has been evidenced to prevent the decline of mental health, through skills development that supports student progression and employability. It partners with 55+ organisations, mostly education institutions, is endorsed by NCFE, is part of the Jisc Step Up Programme and is listed in the 2020 EdTech Hotlist, a top 20 assessed by Jisc and Emerge Education.

# Therapy and intervention platforms

### UNIHEADS

UNIHEADS offers online mental health training specifically for university students and staff, with unlimited free access for students on any device. Its content is designed to optimise wellbeing and build mental fitness as well as offering users mutual support, signposts to further support and a Covid-19 toolkit. Developed by world-leading health academics, mental health professionals, GPs, tech experts and students, it is accessed by more than 100,000 students and is mobile, laptop and tablet friendly.

### SilverCloud

SilverCloud offers online cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), with more than 30 different programmes tackling conditions across the spectrum of mental health, as diverse as depression, phobia, money worries, bipolarity, OCD, sleep and much more, with programme adaptations specific to higher education covering depression, anxiety, stress, resilience and positive body image. It lists four customer sectors – the NHS, private healthcare, third sector and higher education – and emphasises its evidence-based services
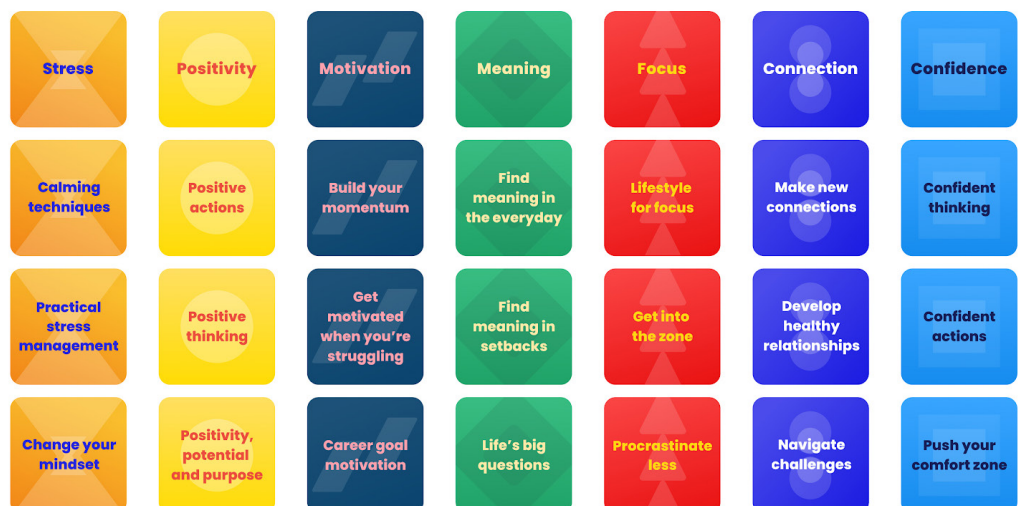
## Middlesex University: embedding mental fitness into the curriculum

Fika and Middlesex University have worked together throughout 2020 to formally embed Fika's Mental Fitness courses and 7 Skills of Mental Fitness Curriculum Framework into curriculum, via a major new personal tutoring pilot project. Academic staff at Middlesex University have also been assigning Fika's 7 Skills of Mental Fitness courses to select cohorts of students - achieving a 1 in 3 course completion rate in month 1 alone.

*"We love Fika's 7 Skills of Mental Fitness courses. They are both accessible and specific – topics covered include positivity, connection and confidence through to motivation, stress management and meaning. Academic staff and personal tutors don't always feel equipped or comfortable to have conversations with students about mental health and wellbeing. Fika supports them with specialist, easily accessible digital courses created by experts. It also allows us to streamline our approach - with one uniform system to guide students' mental fitness journey, measure their mental health literacy levels and track their progress. Fika has played an integral role in our approach to learning, teaching, student experience and student engagement during a very challenging year of disrupted, remote and blended learning. We've seen high success rates and strong indicators of impact - and our journey together is only just beginning."*

Emily McIntosh, director of learning, teaching and student experience, Middlesex University

| Stress | Positivity | Motivation | Meaning | Focus | Connection | Confidence |
|--------|-----------|-----------|---------|-------|-----------|-----------|
| Calming techniques | Positive actions | Build your momentum | Find meaning in the everyday | Lifestyle for focus | Make new connections | Confident thinking |
| Practical stress management | Positive thinking | Get motivated when you're struggling | Find meaning in setbacks | Get into the zone | Develop healthy relationships | Confident actions |
| Change your mindset | Positivity, potential and purpose | Career goal motivation | Life's big questions | Procrastinate less | Navigate challenges | Push your comfort zone |

## Conversation-convening platforms

### Togetherall

Togetherall (formerly Big White Wall) is a clinically managed online community where members anonymously support each others' mental health, with trained practitioners available 24/7 to keep the community safe. It also offers resources from self-assessments to creative tools to help members express how they're feeling and a wide range of self-guided courses. It is designed to support those with mild to moderate need, with the infrastructure to case manage individuals at risk. 250 organisations and more than 50m people in the UK, North America and New Zealand have access, and one of its four areas of focus is 16+ education in universities and colleges.

## University of Manchester: technology that connects to real people

Who can a student talk to when they're awake at 4am feeling anxious and overwhelmed by their studies, or filled with loneliness at being in a strange place with family a long way away? University counselling services are rarely open 24/7 and by the time a student has made an appointment and waited a couple of weeks or more to see someone, the feelings might have subsided. But, in that moment of panic or loneliness, they need to reach out to another human being.

That was the starting point for Janine Rigby's exploration of wellbeing products and services. Then innovation manager at the University of Manchester, she'd been asked by senior leaders to investigate what innovative products were available in the wellbeing space – a high priority for the university – and had been tried and tested by other universities. Janine's first step was a series of focus groups with students.

*"Two issues came up every time: mental health and safety on campus," says Janine. "They wanted help to be immediate and they wanted it to be from a real person. What also came across strongly from the students was that they liked technology. But they didn't like technology that was automated. They liked technology that assisted them to reach real people."*

Two products fitted the bill: Togetherall (formerly called Big White Wall) for mental health support and SafeZone for campus safety (more on SafeZone on page 20).

Togetherall is an online anonymous community for mental health support, available 24/7 and moderated by trained clinicians – which was a critical point for Janine. Students can access the community wherever they are, including international students who may have gone home to a different country in the holidays, which was also seen as a benefit. It's available to staff as well as students, too.

*"I think the key takeaway point for me was that [the products] they*

*connected them to real people. It wasn't using technology for the sake of it."*

Togetherall was introduced in September 2019 and came into its own when Covid-19 struck, the campus closed and there was immediate concern over the mental health of those who were left behind.

*"To have Togetherall at that time was really important to us. It meant that students had a direct line without having to go and physically see someone, they could still communicate with other people and get support.*

*We thanked our lucky stars that we put it in place. Both those students on campus and those who did manage*

*to get home still had support from the university via Togetherall."*

Simon Merrywest, UoM's director of student experience, also highlights the benefits.

*"The addition of both Togetherall and Safezone to the university's existing support provision are brilliant examples of how an innovation approach can be used to meet an identified demand, at low cost and at low risk. The introduction of both of these services arose following student consultation, although their benefits are equally applicable to university staff. In part, their success has relied on their ease of adaptability to our own institution and the ease of connectivity, around the clock, with specific support and advice, not merely flat pages of information."*

## Resource-gathering platforms

### Student Space
Student Space is a new £3m online platform run by Student Minds and funded by the Office for Students to provide high-quality mental health support to students struggling during the pandemic. A national resource designed to complement existing university services, it offers text support, phone counselling and guided cognitive behavioural therapy. But official OfS data showed that from its launch in August 2020 to 6 December 2020, only 398 students – around 100 a month – used the one-to-one service

## Health information platforms

### Student Health App
Featured in the NHS Apps Library, the Student Health App is a free resource of 900 pages of reliable health information in one place. It offers reassurance, information and advice on more than 125 topics relevant to students in areas ranging from first aid and mental health to staying safe at university and accessing health services. The app can be used offline, so the content is always available. It can also be customised for specific universities by adding links to local support services.

## Platforms that deal with determinants of wellbeing such as finance or personal safety

### Blackbullion

*"Financial stress has a huge impact on students' mental health, and anything we can do to minimise that, or make sure students are aware of what support they can get, is really important. Having a dedicated financial capability project officer in post helps us achieve this."*

Helen Rylands, student services manager, Nottingham Trent University

Blackbullion provides digital financial education. Its financial wellbeing platform helps students develop financial confidence, knowledge and skills so as to empower better decision making. Its service impacts on university experience and student outcomes, supporting retention and widening participation strategies. It has 40+ university partners in the UK, Australia and New Zealand, and more than 700,000 students worldwide have access to the platform.

## Nottingham Trent University: integrating financial capability in a proactive way

Nottingham Trent University signed up to Blackbullion at the start of the 2019/20 academic year. One of the ways the university is using it is by integrating it into the application process for their student hardship fund. Students must take one of the budgeting pathways in Blackbullion before their hardship application will be assessed.

*"We want to make sure that we're providing funds in a responsible way and that we're empowering students to have a better understanding of what they need to do to help themselves with their money and budgeting. It's easy to use, it's user-friendly and it's a good, quick way to get students thinking about their finances. To date we've had more than 2,000 students sign up, which exceeded our original expectations. Within the first five monthsour students had taken more than 13,000 lessons – far beyond the mandatory pathway we set – and 87% of the students interviewed said they felt more confident about their finances after visiting Blackbullion.*

*It's a good way to get students thinking about their money in a very non-judgemental way. For us, it's all about seeing where we can embed financial capability in a more proactive way, raising awareness in as many different places as we can, from developing financial capability content for accommodation induction pages to creating in-house money management videos to put up on the students' online learning platform."*

Helen Rylands, student services manager, Nottingham Trent University

### Safezone

Safezone is an app that enables registered users (students and staff) to trigger one of three alerts from their iOS or Android phone – emergency, first aid or help. This will share their location and connect them 24/7 to a real person on their university's security team or, where appropriate, the emergency services. It will also enable the user to receive real-time information in the event of an emergency. Additionally, users working alone, outside normal hours or in high-risk areas can check in and share their location – manually, automatically or using a timer – where failure to check out or cancel within a certain time will raise an alert. Used by 80 universities worldwide, it also provides user analytics to help organisations analyse and optimise their operations.

## University of Manchester: safety on campus

To tackle the priority issue for students of campus safety, the University of Manchester  launched the SafeZone app in September 2020. Once the app is downloaded a student can trigger one of three alerts – emergency, first aid or help – from their phone and is put directly through to a real person on the university's security team. Again, it's a 24/7 service available to staff as well as students.

An additional benefit is how it can be used to support Covid-19 measures. The app now features a Covid-19 button on the home page with a helpline and resources and the 'check-in' feature can be used as a track and trace system.

The student and staff reaction has been overwhelmingly positive. According to a third year student interviewed about the arrival of the app:

*"Personally, I've had my phone snatched out of my hand on Oxford Road, on campus, around 6pm. It also happened to my friend two weeks ago. When my phone got taken off me, neither I nor my friends knew which number to call to get in touch with campus security. It took us a while to figure out how to find them and track down the number on the website. This app would've helped us so much."*

# What's the evidence?

An evidence base is building up for the use of these wellbeing apps and platforms.

Fika, for example, conducted a randomised control trial with the University of Lincoln in September 2019 investigating Fika's effectiveness in supporting students with the transition into university. Students using Fika during the six-week transition into university saw uplifts in: self-efficacy, positive emotion, life satisfaction along with reductions in negative emotion. Students in the control group saw declines in all 'mental fitness' metrics - testament to how challenging the transition into university can be and signalling the importance of prevention of this decline to support student retention, progression and success..

Apps that are selected to appear on the NHS Digital Apps Library, such as Togetherall and SilverCloud, have been assessed against a range of NHS standards and *"adhere to key principles of privacy, security, interoperability, clinical safety, accessibility and inclusion"*.

Wider studies have shown some promising findings around the effectiveness of app-based interventions for depression and anxiety in student populations. Tayla McCloud, a researcher in the psychiatry department at UCL, points to a 2014 review that suggests that internet- and computer-based interventions could be beneficial in improving depression and anxiety, particularly as an adjunct to university support services.

McCloud's own UCL study looking at the Feel Stress Free mobile app and its effectiveness as an intervention for anxiety and depression symptoms in university students in particular has shown promising results with a reduction in symptoms of depression in students who used the app over a six week period. She also notes a 2019 systematic review on digital health interventions for improving depression and anxiety among students that found that mobile-based interventions such as apps appear to be as promising as computer-, web-, and virtual reality–based interventions. However, very few mobile apps were included (8 out of the 72 studies) and low engagement and completion rates were highlighted as a general issue in these studies.

Indeed, the Mental Elf section of the National Elf Service, which specialises in evaluation of the latest evidence-based research, has reviewed drop-out rates in trials of apps for depression and notes that, *"High participant drop-out in depression app trials adds to the evidence that engagement with smartphones apps is tricky … If effective support is the key to high engagement and subsequently the positive impact of smartphone apps, we need to make sure users are supported effectively and that tools are fully implemented within healthcare settings. Perhaps we need a rethink about whether the USP of apps being accessible interventions suitable for low resource settings, is ultimately realistic."*

# Analytics for wellbeing

The use of learning analytics, which uses data to inform decisions – from individual to curriculum level – on how to support students' learning has become increasingly embedded in universities.

However, data – which may come from the use of apps and tools, as well as from university systems – may also be used to inform decisions on how to support their wellbeing and mental health. Possible applications cover a very wide range: from screen-break reminders to alerts when a student appears to be at risk of suicide. Clearly such uses of data can involve both significant benefits and high risks.

A £2m project supported by the Office for Students is underway at Northumbria University to identify how big data, technology, educational analytics and student facing interventions can be used to recognise and support students with mental health issues. Led by Professor Peter Francis, deputy vice-chancellor of the university, and in collaboration with nine partners from the HE, charity and technology sectors and students' unions, the project will  use innovative integration of technology, advanced educational data analytics, student relationship management and student support to provide an understanding of the opportunities to predict whether a student is already experiencing or will have a mental health crisis. The aim to identify actionable insights to deliver holistic approaches to student health, wellbeing and education.

"We will build an understanding of how a student gets into a state of crisis and whether joined up collected data can generate the targeted personalised support that they require." – Professor Peter Francis, deputy vice chancellor and project lead

An insight into how this project might develop is provided by the work Northumbria undertook at the start of the pandemic looking at how data can enable it to connect students with services, seeing increased use of online self-help materials and identifying some particular student issues coming to the fore - health, wellbeing, relationships, academic progression and graduations.

Jisc continues to explore using learning analytics data to support the wellbeing agenda for the benefit of students, and the institutions they attend. For example, a curriculum analytics project at Bangor University is looking at different types of student behaviour in response to assignments and the impact it has on their expected effort and work pressure levels. As we all know, some students leave their work to the last minute whereas others complete it early. This information is collected and then used to produce an expected effort and work pressure metric which factors in the number of assignments at any given time and the type of behaviour that student tends to exhibit. These tools can be used to help support students more effectively based on their own circumstances. Understanding when a student is likely to be at their most stressed based upon their

behaviour and workload would allow support to be tailored for them.

At the Open University, Our Journey is a project looking at student emotional awareness and mapping their university experiences which can often be hidden or go unnoticed. This involves logging their study journey and using emojis to note how they were feeling along the way. This data can then be used to understand student mental health, help build resilience and put better support in place.

## Code of practice for wellbeing and mental health analytics

The use of data and analytics for wellbeing purposes raises significant issues around privacy, transparency and consent, as well as other concerns. Jisc has developed a code of practice for wellbeing and mental health analytics, suggesting how education providers can ensure that their use of data to support wellbeing does not create risks for students or staff. It requires universities to take responsibility and demonstrate accountability for their actions in selecting, developing, implementing, operating and reviewing data-informed wellbeing processes. It covers responsibility; transparency and consent; privacy; validity; access; positive interventions; and stewardship, and calls for these to be developed with students, staff, data owners, IT services and university governance, as well as student support services and data protection officers using a 'whole university' approach.

On the strategic side, a lack of data integration – bringing together disparate sets of information – is currently impeding progress.

The great challenge for HE is that IT has evolved in an organic way. As systems for managing finances or student results, for example, have become needed, they have been introduced in a piecemeal way. However, wellbeing is inherently holistic and calls for a picture to be drawn of a person across all the information silos.

*"At the moment we have this quite fragmented landscape where we talk about learning analytics, curriculum analytics, wellbeing analytics, health, data, and all of those things. But, actually, you can't separate learning analytics from wellbeing analytics.*

*We need to reach the point where we're integrating analytics to get more comprehensive sets of information – analytics 4.0."*
Martin Hall, professor emeritus at the University of Cape Town, formerly vice-chancellor of the University of Salford and analytics specialist

The difficulty of data integration is reaching the point of limiting business in a critical way and the answer lies in strategic leadership; it is no longer a purely technical issue. There are ways to move forward technically, such as building one system for all the data (as the Open University has done) or focusing on interoperability so that information can flow easily between systems. Whichever option is chosen, it needs leadership from the top and an organisational culture that recognises its importance.

In this section we set out four principles for mental wellbeing in higher education to work towards embedding by 2030:

- Wellbeing is for everybody

- Wellbeing is a lifelong project

- Wellbeing is embedded in all activities

- Wellbeing is a collective endeavour

*"I hope we wouldn't be talking about it as a separate entity by 2030. I would hope that actually it is just part and parcel of what we do so that it's so highly integrated that we don't need to be thinking about it."*

Julie Crabb, head of student support and wellbeing, Middlesex University

### Wellbeing is for everybody: a whole population approach

We all have mental health and we should look after it and maintain it as we do our physical health. We are all affected by our mental wellbeing and that of others.

### Wellbeing is a lifelong project: a whole life approach

Wellbeing doesn't start when someone becomes an undergraduate and stop when they graduate. In education terms it extends from early years through to working life, lifelong learning and lifelong skills development. Transitions are particularly important points to build and support wellbeing.

### Wellbeing is embedded in all activities: a whole curriculum approach

As we have seen most clearly during the pandemic, universities are health organisations as well as learning organisations. For individuals to thrive and learn, health gain cannot be separated learning gain – we cannot do one without the other. Wellbeing is not extracurricular or co-curricular, it is inherent in who each of us is as a learner on our lifelong learning journey.

*"I'd want wellbeing to be connected so intimately with learning and teaching that people don't see it as wrap around or separate from other curricular activities."*
Emily McIntosh, director of learning, teaching and student experience, Middlesex University

### Wellbeing is a collective endeavour: a whole university approach

The whole-university approach values the contribution of all. It moves mental wellbeing away from being the sole concern of student health and mental health support services and involves the entire community. This takes sustained effort and leadership.

## The University of Bristol's approach

*"Our whole institution approach has been very much driven by the senior management team and we had leadership from the very top with the vice-chancellor's involvement. We've taken a broad approach to mental health and wellbeing and looked outside to develop a strategic approach that encapsulates the best practice out there. We've invested heavily in two key areas: a student wellbeing service linked to the faculties and schools and a 24/7 resident life team who work around the clock to provide support in our residences. It's a joined-up, proactive approach to wellbeing. We are also researching the impact of these interventions through a PhD funded by the university."*
Alison Golden, director of student health and inclusion, University of Bristol

# Wellbeing technology checklist for universities

### 1. Consult and co-produce with students

*"Universities are missing a beat because students actually want to help and get insulted because they're not taken seriously. Student consultation is crucial and it is not being sufficiently engaged in or acted on."*

Martin Hall, professor emeritus at the University of Cape Town, formerly vice-chancellor of the University of Salford and analytics specialist

The mental health principle of 'no decision about me without me' should apply equally to introduction and evaluation of digital support and services, whether apps or analytics.

*"I meet regularly with the vice president of our student guild for welfare,  which I really value because the student view on our provision has changed the way we deliver in many different parts of our service."*

Mark Sawyer, head of student wellbeing and welfare, University of Exeter

For Janine Rigby, innovation manager at the University of Manchester, involving students early on and finding out what their expectations are has been a crucial element in the success of the apps she has introduced and something she would recommend to all other universities who are exploring this space. As part of that, universities need to have a better, and deeper, understanding of the world in which their students live. Janine says:

*"They don't work 9 to 5. They're in the library at 4 o'clock in the morning. So do our support services need to be 24/7? Look at what new technologies are coming through, and don't just say, 'Oh, it's new tech. It's really fancy, and it's really good, and it's sparkly, and it does all these things,' but actually check with students, 'Is this what you would use?' Just because it's 'technology' doesn't mean they'll use it. Ask them first."*

### 2. Curate and review apps and resources

It's a crowded market and students and staff need support to navigate their way around. Overwhelmingly long lists of motivational Ted talks and mindfulness apps are less useful than a shorter, carefully considered and targeted selection of proven products and resources.

*"We have done a full audit of all of the online resources because we found that lots of different departments were publicising different links to different things.  We've tried to restrict the number to avoid great long lists of self-help resources. The digital space is quite crowded and it can be really hard to work out what's useful and what's not. We've tried to take some of that stress out for staff and for students to try and say these are the best ones. Our aim is to review at least once a year to make sure the suggestions are still fit for purpose."*

Claire Slater, director of student life and wellbeing, University of Bristol

### 3. Embed digital resources in the curriculum

A curriculum infusion approach aims to use the discipline to develop students'understanding of mental wellbeing and related issues, integrating and embedding mental health and wellbeing resources into the curriculum that are relevant to the discipline – for example, links between mental wellbeing and biology, geography or the built environment. More directly, wellbeing apps and programmes can be embedded into the curriculum, as in Middlesex University's Fika 'mental fitness' project.

### 4. Consider the value of using the same digital resources for staff and students

*"It's so useful for staff and students alike to use the same platform because if they've used it for themselves, it promotes that holistic wellbeing mentality or culture, and colleagues are then better equipped to recommend content to the students."*
Emily McIntosh, director of learning, teaching and student experience, Middlesex University

As part of the whole university approach, making the same apps and resources available to staff as students emphasises that the institution is one community when it comes to wellbeing. It also enables teaching staff to talk personally and with more knowledge about any resources they may be suggesting to a student.

The more that academics are aware of and are using platforms themselves, the more naturally and easily those conversations about wellbeing and self-care will emerge.

### 5. Support engagement with apps

We know that mobile wellbeing engagement and retention rates can be low and people engage more and persevere more when there is also a human element. When introducing a wellbeing app to students, consider how to offer effective guidance and support around it rather than 'app and go'.

### 6. Look at the bigger data picture – and invest now but invest strategically

Wellbeing analytics are going to be increasingly valuable and the use of wellbeing apps and platforms needs to be seen in the wider context of data integration, standards and policy. Now is the time for focused leadership in universities to invest strategically in building the foundations that allow data to flow, whether that's a central platform or data systems that pass information easily. Think ahead, not simply solving the current data problem but creating the digital structure that avoids future problems.

### 7. Use the Jisc wellbeing analytics code

Privacy, transparency and consent are significant issues with wellbeing analytics, with ethical and legal ramifications for universities. The Jisc analytics code offers an excellent guide to navigating these waters and practical tools to ensure that a university's activities are safe and compliant.

# Insights for startups

## Understand the sector

Recognise the differences within the sector: every student population is different. Really understand the demographics of each institution and their unique challenges.

*"In the past, we've had potential suppliers visit UCEM who have not understood our model of providing online vocational education, where the average age of our students is 31. Suppliers have often assumed that we've got 18 to 21 year olds on campus and not recognised that actually our student demographic is completely different, with all our students studying remotely, and the majority of them already in employment. If somebody came to us and really understood what we're about and how they could help us, we would be supportive of seeing what benefit it could bring to our students."*

Jane Fawkes, deputy principal at University College of Estate Management

## Stay agile

Some startups moved fast at the start of the pandemic to introduce new features, open up their products and take quick note of what universities and students most needed at that time – a flexible response that is always appreciated, crisis or not. Make the most of that advantage startups enjoy over their larger competitors.

*"Keep the lines of communication really open. Things change quickly. A month ago a certain plan may have been working great but now we may be noticing a new trend or see a gap where our students would benefit from something specific from a product. In which case, it's really important to be able to respond flexibly, be on the ball and offer something appropriate."*

Vanessa White, student wellbeing coordinator, Middlesex University

## Evidence is everything

Evidence and impact have to be at the top of the agenda when selling to universities, and it has to be the right sort of evidence to convince a university buyer. Smaller institutions may be less risk averse and open to working with a startup than larger ones.

## Understand the sales cycle

Never underestimate how long the procurement process will take.

*"The Information Governance Office, which both services [Togetherall and SafeZone] had to go through is a 40 page form before it even expands. All the documentation has to be in place: Where is the data held? How secure is it? What procedure is in place in case of a data breach? Who takes responsibility for that data? Having the right documentation in place is really important. If it is not perfect, there is no chance that your product or service will get into the university."*

Janine Rigby, innovation manager, University of Manchester

## The personal touch

The more personal relationship and bespoke service offered by startups, that a global company cannot provide due to sheer size, is a significant benefit highlighted by the universities we spoke to.

*"If I was to phone CriticalArc [which runs SafeZone] this morning, they would be on campus this afternoon. If we've got a problem, they are immediately there to solve it. They don't have a ticketing system like a global company where you have to wait until they get round to you. We get that personal touch, and they go over and above to provide that extra support and make sure we are really happy."*

Janine Rigby, innovation manager, University of Manchester

# Q+A with Nick Bennett, co-founder and co-CEO, Fika

Nick Bennett co-founded Fika to help solve the global problem of poor emotional health. Fika is a remotely accessible mental fitness platform, empowering organisations, education institutions and individuals with guided mental skills development courses with proven benefits on mental wellbeing and performance.



**What do you see as the biggest challenge in improving mental wellbeing?**

We need to look at mental health in a different way, we need a change in mindset. Stop talking only about mental health and also talk about mental fitness as an area for skills development and training that is so important to progression, success and employability. We understand physical fitness is about taking control of our own levels of fitness and understanding the literacy of fitness. We need the same for mental fitness but at the moment it's hidden by our poor understanding of mental health literacy, our poor language in the area and our deficit culture.

**How should the sector be tackling the challenge?**

We need to create a formalised curriculum framework for mental fitness and mental education, which is about putting a national structure in place to recognise the value of this skills development and implement it in the general curriculum. We see them as lifelong learning skills. They're very transferable and they're important to chances of employment as well as for individual performance and academic performance.

**So where does Fika fit into this?**

Gareth Fryer and I founded the business through very personal reasons. My best friend Ben died by suicide in 2014 and that was my pivot point, in my career towards founding Fika. Gareth's founding motives are due to the fact that he has had cancer twice and has struggled to reconcile his physical and mental health. Coming from very personal mental health motives, we've spent the last three years investing in the technology and data science and understanding the skills gap, the mental education gap. It has led us to create a mental fitness curriculum which runs for the full academic year in 40 UK universities and some further education colleges.

We focus on seven skills, which – to use the physical fitness analogy – we think about as muscle groups. We recognise

that we can work on those skills and get better. For example, in our society we have a cultural deficit around confidence. We think you either have confidence or you don't. But, actually, you can be taught: you can get better at it with practice.

We have a software platform that allows institutions to follow the seven skills curriculum. We have three courses in each of the seven skills and they can be assigned through our assignment dashboard to any cohort of students or staff.

The smallest unit is a five-minute exercise. If physical fitness is really about one part physical education and one part forming habit, it's the same with mental fitness. There's a level of literacy that's gained in each of the exercises and then there is reflection and action. The exercises are solution focused, they can be completed in five minutes, and that also means that they are very easy to implement into timetable structures, perhaps at the beginning of a tutorial, lecture or staff meeting.

A lot of our investment has been in understanding the impact, including a randomised control trial last year, with more coming. We're also using data science and diagnostics to understand mental fitness scoring and profiling.

We have a mental fitness diagnostic tool which allows the understanding of an individual's mental fitness score across the seven skills and, very importantly, allows, at an institution level, cohort scoring. Each of the courses has an end-point assessment, with certification. There will also be a formal qualification, endorsed by NCFE a leading UK educational and awards provider.

**Is there a risk that you're being certified on your mental health?**

No, the assessment is on health literacy. You're not being measured on how you feel but on how well you've understood the literacy behind a skill – such as confidence: have you understood the experiential learning and the health literacy of confidence and can you apply it to the right situation? Our mental fitness isn't just a state we're in where we can only wait for it to either go well or bad, and potentially put our hand up – or not – when it becomes a problem. It's about demonstrating essential skills development and your ability to maintain mental fitness. The certificates are really important move for Fika and the education sector as these previously named 'soft skills' are now being recognised as they should be, as vital for progression and employability.

**What is the wider mental wellbeing picture for universities?**

The change in mindset we need is for universities not to think about mental health as reactive care but whole university performance. I know that our more progressive university partners are thinking about wellbeing for everybody rather than for the few who ask for it. That's very important when you start to think about the value equation for student fees, particularly the importance of the performance side for an individual and how it affects their academic work. Wellbeing services need to be thought of in a very different way. And for the value of retaining students on course, for the value of perception of the students, I think there needs to be some serious re-evaluation of budget and providing a level of service to all students.

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## About Emerge

Emerge Education is a European edtech seed fund investing in world-class founders who are solving the $8.5tn skills gap. Emerge is backed by strategics such as Cambridge University Press, Cambridge Assessment and Jisc, as well as the founders of globally renowned Edtech companies. Together, we are building the future of learning

## About Jisc

Jisc is a not-for-profit providing the UK's national research and education network (NREN) Janet, and technology solutions for its members – colleges, universities and research organisations. It is funded by the UK higher and further education and research funding bodies and member institutions.