Advance HE

Education for Mental Health

Enhancing Student Mental Health through Curriculum and Pedagogy

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Contents

1 Introduction

Human functioning and wellbeing are intrinsically related to our surroundings, our activity and behaviour, the quality and quantity of our social connections and our understanding of ourselves and our relationship to the world (1-8). As a consequence, every aspect of university life will have a potential impact on the wellbeing of students – whether considered and planned for or not. The curriculum is important to mental health and wellbeing because it is one of the few guaranteed points of contact between students and the university (9). The curriculum is central to the student experience (10) providing focus, structure, engagement, connection and purpose. If universities are to take mental health and wellbeing seriously, the role of the curriculum must be core to their response.

For this reason, the University Mental Health Charter (11) clearly places teaching, learning and assessment as central to any whole university approach to mental health and wellbeing. While some have raised concerns that such a focus distorts the purpose of the curriculum, evidence in the literature clearly demonstrates a link between student mental health and wellbeing and student learning, persistence, creativity, problem solving, satisfaction and achievement (12). Students who experience poor mental health are more likely to withdraw, underperform and be dissatisfied with their learning and experience. On the other hand, positive wellbeing has been associated with better and deeper learning, higher levels of creativity and problem solving, higher achievement and better levels of student satisfaction.

Research has also shown that how students are taught and assessed, and how they engage with learning, can have an impact on their wellbeing (11). For universities, there are then practical, financial and moral reasons to ensure that the curriculum is supporting good wellbeing and learning.

This toolkit has been created to provide evidence informed guidance on the ways in which curriculum can support both wellbeing and learning. It has been developed for academic staff, academic managers, university leaders and all of those involved in the development and delivery of curriculum, within Higher Education. It is grounded in the research literature and has been created through research and co-creation with students, academics, Quality staff, Learning and Teaching staff and Principal Fellows of the HEA.

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1.1 Definitions – Mental Health and Wellbeing

As the University Mental Health Charter notes:

> "The language of mental health can often be shifting, nebulous and confusing. Terms such as 'mental illness,' 'mental health problems' and 'mental health difficulties' can be used as if they have different meanings or as if they mean the same thing. 'Mental health' and 'wellbeing' are often used synonymously but, within different theoretical frameworks, may represent completely separate concepts (1)."

Not only can this confusion result in lack of clarity, it can also lead to faulty assumptions. For example, a perception that wellbeing derives only from pleasure and the avoidance of pain or difficult emotions, could lead to the assumption that students should not be placed under academic pressure in order to avoid any stress. This toolkit does not adhere to this view. For the purposes of clarity and consistency, we will follow the definitions provided within the University Mental Health Charter.

Mental health refers to a full spectrum of experience ranging from good mental health to mental illness.

Good mental health means more than the absence of illness (3). It will refer to a dynamic state of internal equilibrium (4) in which an individual experiences regular enduring positive feelings, thoughts and behaviours, can respond appropriately to normal negative emotions and situations and is able to make a positive contribution to their community.

Mental illness will be taken to mean a condition and experience involving thoughts, feelings, symptoms and/or behaviours, that causes distress and reduces functioning, impacting negatively on an individual's day to day experience and which may receive, or be eligible to receive, a clinical diagnosis.

Mental health problems or poor mental health will refer to a broader range of individuals experiencing levels of emotional and/or psychological distress beyond normal experience and beyond their current ability to effectively manage. It will include those who are experiencing mental illness and those whose experiences fall below this threshold, but whose mental health is not good.

Wellbeing will encompass a wider framework of which mental health is an integral part, but which also includes physical and social wellbeing. This uses a model provided by Richard Kraut (2), in which optimum wellbeing is defined by the ability of an individual to fully exercise their cognitive, emotional, physical and social powers, leading to flourishing.

Student Wellbeing will adopt the general definition of wellbeing above, but we recognise that, in addition, students' engagement with academic learning is a key component part of their experience and makes a significant contribution to their wellbeing.

The focus of this resource will look beyond the elimination of poor mental health and wellbeing and explore ways that curriculum can positively enhance the wellbeing of students on the holistic model described above.

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1.2 Definitions – Curriculum

The idea of 'curriculum' can be understood at multiple levels. A number of commentators have described three elements to the curriculum - formal learning, informal learning and the hidden curriculum.

Formal learning develops as a result of intentional design and activities – through lesson plans, classes, learning exercises, assessments and the chosen disciplinary content etc.

Informal learning occurs through co-curricular elements such as peer mentoring, study groups and subject based societies, etc.

The hidden curriculum describes aspects of the curriculum that are implicit within design and delivery that often communicate values, desired behaviours, beliefs and expectations and are often culturally normative (1). This hidden curriculum can act to draw a cohort together or may act as a barrier to some students who fall outside these normative expectations, not through any lack of ability or deficit on their part but rather due to cultural, social and structural inequalities of experience and the perceptions of others.

This resource considers the curriculum in its widest scope including what is designed, taught and assessed, how this is delivered, by whom and for what purpose and within what context and support structure.

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1.3 Wellbeing and Learning

There is an extensive literature demonstrating the transactional relationship between student learning and student wellbeing. Taking a holistic model of wellbeing that considers physical, social and psychological wellbeing, we can see that relationship with learning in the research evidence.

Physical Wellbeing and Learning

Numerous studies have demonstrated the impact of physical wellbeing on student learning and performance. Sleep (1-2), hydration (3), exercise (4) and diet (5) have all been shown to have clear effects on how students feel, learn and perform. Having reserves of energy, concentration and stamina can help to ensure students are able to learn at their optimum level and perform in stretching academic assessments. Regular physical rest and breaks have been shown to positively impact on cognitive function making learning, problem solving and creative activity more possible (6).

Social Wellbeing and Learning

Researchers in social neuroscience (7) have demonstrated that social isolation and loneliness reduces cognitive function. This has been shown to reduce students' ability to focus attention, concentrate, remember and problem solve. Some research has shown a direct impact on overall academic ability and grades (8-9).

On the opposite side of this axis, social belonging, interaction and connection have been shown to be beneficial for student learning. Authors such as Vincent Tinto (10), have long argued that student sense of belonging to their university plays a significant role in determining student persistence and success. Researchers, including Bandura, have shown that learning is often socially situated (11). Students are more likely to learn well in classrooms in which they have a sense of connection, support and psychological safety – ie, the social learning environment is a safe place in which to experiment, make mistakes and correct misconceptions. This has implications for inclusion, as students who are marginalised by in lesson experiences or by curriculum content, are likely to feel a reduced sense of belonging and lower levels of psychological safety.

Psychological Wellbeing and Learning

UK Government data indicates that students who experience mental illness are more likely to drop out of university and underperform academically. Research in neurology proposes some potential explanations for some of this. In particular, it appears that high levels of negative emotional arousal (anxiety, fear, low mood etc.) can reduce cognitive functioning, making it more difficult to learn, concentrate and problem solve. A low level of mental wellbeing can negatively impact concentration, motivation, self-confidence and the ability to engage with attendance and assessment, therefore significantly impeding learning overall (12-13).

On the other hand, good wellbeing has been associated with enhanced creativity (14) and the ability to enter into a 'flow' state of learning, described as a state of complete concentration or absorption that benefits learning and academic performance (15). In other words, good psychological wellbeing can support good learning.

Impact of Learning on Wellbeing

The influence of wellbeing on learning is then well established. However, research also suggests that how students engage with learning, how they are taught and how they are assessed can influence their wellbeing. In effect, wellbeing and learning exist in a transactional relationship constantly impacting on each other.

Research suggests that for many students, how they engage with their learning appears to have a relationship with their wellbeing (16). Students who engage in deep learning, driven by intrinsic motivation and who gain meaning from their learning are more likely to have better wellbeing than those who engage in surface learning, driven by extrinsic motivation (17).

Studies of teaching and assessment indicate that changes to how students are taught and assessed can have both positive and negative impacts on their wellbeing. This, therefore, places curriculum design and delivery as a central factor in both student learning and student wellbeing, with the power to influence both.

Curriculum that is well designed, taught and assessed can support a positive spiral of good wellbeing and good learning.

Curriculum that is poorly designed, taught and assessed can create a negative spiral heightening poor wellbeing and leading to poor quality learning and academic performance.

Key Lessons

+ student learning and student wellbeing exist in a transactional relationship, constantly impacting on each other
+ this relationship can be positive and/or negative
+ student wellbeing can be supported through curriculum design, delivery and the classroom environment (in person or online).

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1.4 Anxiety and Learning

The qualitative literature (1) highlights concern among some academics about what constitutes anxiety, what is a tolerable amount of anxiety or stress, what students should be able to 'push through' and what should be treated with concern.

Much of this discussion reflects the general difficulty in understanding mental and emotional states and confusion in language. The word 'stress,' for example, can be used in a variety of ways, to mean anything from mild nerves or anticipatory excitement through to high levels of anxiety and fear. This spectrum can potentially be broken up into discrete experiences in theory but, in real life situations, it is difficult to identify absolute dividing lines between what may be helpful, tolerable, intolerable and harmful.

In this resource we use the word 'stretch' for the experience of being challenged in ways that can be positive for learning, wellbeing and achievement. This experience is sometimes referred to as Eustress in the literature and has been shown to be helpful in motivating someone to engage in helpful behaviours (such as studying and academic performance) (2-4). As the students in our co-creation project highlighted, challenge can be good for wellbeing. Being challenged pushes us to grow and develop. Meeting and overcoming challenges by mastering new skills and knowledge has powerful, positive payoffs for wellbeing.

It should also be borne in mind that boredom can have a negative effect on wellbeing (5-6). A lack of challenge in our lives can lead to low motivation and a lack of meaning and purpose. The students in our co-creation group reported that when they found modules boring, they became disengaged, lost motivation and began to doubt their future, which in turn reduced their mood.

On the other side of this, high levels of stress and anxiety can reduce cognitive functioning at a neurological level. (7) (Our use of the words 'stress' and 'anxiety' in this resource reflects this experience). This reduces students' ability to engage in complex thinking, to access old memories or make new, complex memories, to problem solve and to maintain concentration. In other words, anxiety reduces the capacity for learning and academic performance at a biological level.

Anxiety is a fear response to a perceived threat. Students become anxious about education when they view it or the environment as a threat to them (8). This fear may be stimulated by social and cultural experiences, which, for instance, leave students feeling marginalised, ostracised or humiliated. Alternatively, it may arise from a fear of failure or the perceived consequences of failure. These consequences can be emotional and practical. Students can be scared of the emotional pain they will feel if they fail. They can also fear the practical outcomes of failure, which may not be realistic eg, they may fear that failing an assignment might lead to them having to drop out of university.

The failures some students fear can be more than the technical failure of an assignment. Some students may view a mark of 75% as a failure to achieve against their pre-conceived expectations, as articulated by our co-creation project group. Some may feel that getting an answer wrong in class is an example of failure. All of these types of failure will present risks to them – humiliation, ostracism from their peer group, etc.

The key to understanding the relationship between boredom, anxiety, stretch and learning is finding productive balance. Vygotsky's (9) concept of scaffolded learning provides a pedagogic framework in which the aim of the curriculum should be to stretch students to their zone of proximal development – just outside their current comfort zone. This is likely to engage students in stretch, avoiding both boredom and anxiety. It may help to explain this explicitly to students and to help them recognise their strengths and successes within this framework.

When students are appropriately stretched, risk is contained and feels within the student's control. To achieve this, when faced with a learning or assessment task, students will:

+ be appropriately prepared and will understand what they have to do and how to do it
+ recognise their own skills and resources
+ have the necessary skills to undertake the task or will be able to develop them as a result of completing the task
+ have the necessary and appropriate support
+ have the resources they need – including time
+ be intrinsically motivated and focussed on the aspects of the task that are meaningful to them
+ be in an environment that feels psychologically safe.

Key Lessons

+ being stretched can be good for wellbeing and learning
+ being pushed into anxiety can reduce cognitive functioning, impacting on students' ability to learn and perform

+ balance is key – keep students in their proximal zone of development
+ to do this, students need to be prepared for tasks, have the necessary resources and skills, know and understand what they need to do and have the appropriate support and environment in which to learn.

Top Tips

+ a useful guiding maxim is that if students need to know, understand or be able to do something, it must be taught to them first. If students have previous experience of a task and know how to tackle it, they will be less anxious
+ normalising mistakes in the classroom (online or face to face) can create a learning environment that lowers anxiety and increases learning
+ use classroom activities to identify students' current level of knowledge and understanding, so teaching and learning activities can be calibrated to the group's zone of proximal development.

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1.5 Wellbeing and the Curriculum

The curriculum is one of the few guaranteed points of contact between student and university (1). Curriculum therefore plays a central role in the student experience and any whole university approach to mental health and wellbeing. Students may not join societies, live in halls of residence or access student services but they must interact with their curriculum if they are to progress and remain a student.

There is also a transactional relationship between student learning and student wellbeing. While learning and academic achievement are the primary foci of the curriculum, it is clear that it can only succeed in maximising both outcomes if curriculum is also conducive to wellbeing (2-3).

Recent work in this area has suggested that the design and delivery of curriculum can have both positive and negative impacts on student wellbeing and on student learning (4). Research has shown that changes to the structure of the curriculum, to curriculum content, to modes and methods of assessment, to grading and to the social environment within the classroom (online and in person) and in group learning activities, have the potential to improve both student wellbeing and learning (2-3, 5-10). There is also a good theoretical and research base to suggest that elements of curriculum that support learning also support wellbeing. In other words, one of the most effective things universities can do to support student wellbeing is to ensure good teaching and assessment based on sound pedagogy (11).

In qualitative research conducted for this project, students identified social connection, meaningful content, and easy access to resources and support as important in facilitating positive wellbeing.

However, the corollary to this is that poorly designed and delivered curriculum can undermine wellbeing. Baik et al. (11) drew on Self-determination Theory (12-13) to outline a series of ways in which curriculum could undermine wellbeing. These include the ways in which:

+ curricula can exclude students, through hidden curricula, undermining sense of identity and belonging
+ curricula can undermine students' sense of autonomy if it is overly prescriptive or if students do not have clarity on why they are being asked to engage in particular learning and assessment tasks

- curricula can undermine students' sense of competence and achievement if it is not appropriately stretching, if feedback is overly critical or absent, if students are not supported to develop their ability to self-reflect on their own growth and develop self-efficacy
- curricula can undermine autonomous motivation if learning is confused, improperly sequenced, lacks personal meaning and assumes the existence of pre-knowledge which students do not have.

To this model we can also add that it can potentially have negative impacts if:

- deadline bunching results in students having to complete significant amounts of work at the same time, potentially competing with other responsibilities leading to exhaustion and the adoption of surface leaning strategies
- the learning environment feels hostile or potentially threatening – eg, if it lacks psychological safety or peers are characterised as the competition rather than collaborative learners
- the learning environment encourages students to adopt unhealthy study behaviours – going without sleep, working long hours without breaks, etc.

Reversing this view, curricula can also have positive impacts if

- learning provides meaning, purpose and a sense of fulfilment
- the learning environment is inclusive, supportive, health promoting and psychologically safe
- the curriculum supports sustainable personal growth in knowledge, understanding, skills and confidence
- the curriculum engages student voice and teaching, learning and assessment are modified in response to student learning, experience and insight.

There is then an overwhelming case for universities to prioritise the factors that can impact on wellbeing within curriculum design and delivery.

Key Lessons

- curriculum design and delivery can have both positive and negative impacts on student learning and wellbeing
- good teaching and sound pedagogy are two of the most effective things universities can do to improve student wellbeing
- curriculum design should actively consider embedding those elements and approaches that support learning and wellbeing.

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1.6 Key Principles of Curriculum that Supports Wellbeing and Learning

The purpose of this toolkit is to support the development and delivery of curriculum that supports wellbeing and effective learning. There are a number of reasonable ways in which curriculum that supports wellbeing can be conceptualised (see 1 for an alternative). For that reason, we have chosen to structure this resource around key, well-evidenced pedagogic principles that are capable of addressing both wellbeing and learning.

Drawing on our own research and extensive reviews of the literature, this toolkit, therefore, focusses on:

+ the importance of scaffolded curriculum design and delivery
+ the social nature of learning
+ the need for curriculum to have a learning focus
+ the need for curriculum to explicitly address holistic learner development
+ support for students who have encountered problems that undermine learning and wellbeing.

We also recognise that curriculum is a product of the processes and culture that govern its creation. We therefore also place a focus on the infrastructure required to produce curriculum that can effectively support wellbeing and learning.

Education for Mental Health is structured across these six principles. Each of these principles have been broken down into component parts, based on well-evidenced educational and psychological concepts. However, it should be noted that all of these concepts, across all six principles, relate to each other. For example, learner development is underpinned by a supportive social environment and a well scaffolded curriculum design. The concepts covered by this site are structured for ease of explanation, rather than to suggest they are separate or unconnected.

Within each of the concepts covered we have provided a summary explanation, drawing on appropriate evidence, key lessons, top tips, links to relevant resources and example case studies, where they exist. The toolkit draws on the excellent work that has already taken place on this topic by colleagues across the higher education sector. Without their work, this toolkit could not exist.

How tools on this site are operationalised will depend on institutional, disciplinary and local contexts. However, drawing on the evidence, we believe that if all HE curriculum conformed to these principles, it would ensure better support for student learning and wellbeing and thereby better outcomes for all.

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2 Underpinning Infrastructure

2.1 Introduction

How curriculum is designed will inevitably impact on its form, structure, content and outputs. An individual member of staff, designing a curriculum under pressure and short of time, will inevitably produce something that draws on their own experiences and which is, therefore, likely to replicate what has gone before, which may include unrepresentative approaches with unintentional negative consequences.

A group designing curriculum, with time, resources and support will be more able to take a critical approach, informed by evidence, be openly creative and focussed on the needs of the wider student population. Designing curriculum in this way is a more complex approach and is more likely to result in teaching, learning and assessment that benefits all students.

This project has interviewed Quality, Curriculum Development and Academic Teaching staff in universities across the UK. This section draws on their evidence and the literature to explore how universities can support curriculum development that benefits student learning and wellbeing. It is clear, from the evidence we have gathered, that the support provided for curriculum development, the processes and structures through which new curriculum must pass and the culture in which they are developed, offer universities an opportunity to ensure that curriculum supports learning and wellbeing. This infrastructure, in effect, provides universities with the means to ensure an inclusive, whole university approach to learning and teaching and to ensure they have a positive impact on all students.

This section will consider the underlying circumstances in which high quality curriculum is likely to be delivered. This encompasses the processes that support curriculum development and validation, institutional understandings of key issues and the wellbeing of the staff developing curricula.

2.2 Staff Development

Despite advances in technology, teaching and learning remains a social endeavour, whether delivered online or in person (1-2). Curriculum is designed and delivered by people to people. If curriculum is genuinely to consider wellbeing, then all staff involved in designing and delivering the curriculum must understand the relationship between wellbeing and learning and how curriculum can support both. If the development of this understanding is not to be left to chance, then it must become a focus of proactive staff development.

Taking the widest view of curriculum into account, benefit can be gained from focussing staff development on relationships between wellbeing and the design of curriculum, how curriculum is delivered and the appropriate role(s) of academic colleagues. Evidence suggests it may also be wise to consider equipping staff to respond, within their role, to students who experience poor wellbeing and/or mental illness (3-4). Work in this area suggests that interventions of this kind must be embedded in longer term programmes of ongoing development that are specifically tailored to staff roles. Research shows that academic staff find generic mental health or wellbeing training to be less helpful and that one-off training can sometime lead to greater confusion and potential blurring of boundaries (3, 5).

For staff development of this type to be truly effective it needs to be embedded into the learning culture of the institution. As the University Mental Health Charter (6) frames it – it must take a 'whole university approach.' Cowan et al (7) argue that curriculum development and staff development should be viewed as one process. In other words, that the development of a new curriculum should be viewed as an opportunity to develop all of the staff involved. This can include, not only academic staff but also relevant academic managers, those involved in supporting curriculum development and those involved in validation processes.

If a genuine whole university approach to curriculum is being employed, thought must also be given to the development needs of staff who may have valuable expertise to provide, but who may not have previously been included in curriculum design or in teaching and learning activity (8). This may include, for example, student services staff, experts in inclusivity or study skills teams.

Within the UK, significantly more attention has been paid in recent years to the development of high quality teaching and learning. Most universities now provide new academic staff with training through Post-graduate Certificates in Higher Education. Many also provide continuous professional development, to support more experienced staff to enhance their teaching. These programmes provide ideal vehicles for increasing understanding of the relationship between wellbeing and learning and how curriculum can support both.

As part of this project, we have developed a package of resources that can be utilised within PG Cert HE courses and in academic staff development. Aligned with Level 6/7 of the UK Quality Code (QAA, 2018), activities and resources are presented for application and use in university teacher development programmes and related postgraduate learning and teaching qualifications. Structured around a series of themes and incorporating defined aims, learning activities, and outcomes, material is designed acknowledging the diversity of teaching practices and that many staff are new to UK higher education, new to teaching, and in many cases new to delivering and supporting related staff development activities. Linked to evidence, case studies, and relevant secondary literature and further reading, details are included outlining possible approaches to integration within existing programmes or use as elements for new programmes or CPD activities.

Key Lessons

+ if curriculum is to genuinely consider wellbeing, those staff who are designing and delivering wellbeing must understand the relationship between wellbeing and learning and how curriculum can support both
+ if the development of this understanding is not to be left to chance, then it must become a focus of proactive staff development for all teaching staff
+ this staff development will be most effective if embedded in an ongoing culture and is delivered to a broad staff group including academics, academic managers, those involved in validation processes and staff with valuable expertise not previously involved in developing curriculum, such as student services staff

+ linked to this toolkit is a package of resources that can be used to support staff development in this area.

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2.3 Staff Wellbeing

The relationship between academic staff wellbeing and student wellbeing is currently under-researched, however work in other educational settings has clearly established a link between the teacher and the taught. In primary, secondary and College settings the mental health and wellbeing of teachers has an evidenced impact on student wellbeing (1-2). Qualitative research in Higher Education suggests that this holds true in universities, with students and staff indicating that they recognise the potential for the wellbeing of lecturers to impact on the wellbeing and learning of students (3).

This means that staff wellbeing is not only important in and of itself (because staff are entitled to be able to maintain good wellbeing) but also carries extra importance because of its potential impact on students. If staff are overworked, highly stressed and/or experiencing burn out, this is likely to have a negative impact on student wellbeing and learning. If staff are well rested, feel psychologically safe, motivated and engaged this is likely to have a positive impact.

There are a number of mechanisms that may explain this phenomenon.

+ There is clear evidence that the relationship between academics and students is a key factor in student learning, achievement and wellbeing (4-5). Research suggests that when students perceive lecturers to be available, engaged and interested in them as people, it increases their sense of belonging, confidence and wellbeing. However, the ability to create and maintain relationships is a higher order function that requires energy, spare cognitive capacity and the availability of positive emotions. However willing they are, staff who are exhausted or highly stressed will have fewer of these resources and will therefore be less engaged and available than they would be if rested and psychologically well.
+ Research with students (and the beliefs of the students in our co-creation panel) also demonstrates that the quality of teaching they receive has an influence on their wellbeing and learning (6). Teaching (particularly to large groups) requires high levels of energy, stamina, concentration and performance. When done well, teaching is constantly responding and adapting to the students in the room. It is simply less possible to do this well if high levels of emotional arousal and low levels of energy are reducing a lecturer's cognitive and emotional capacity.
+ High levels of emotional arousal can lower our ability to be aware of our environment (7). As a consequence, academic staff will be less likely to notice students who may be struggling academically or personally – not because they are not interested and do not care but simply because they currently do not have the capacity to notice and absorb that information. This reduces the possibility that students will receive timely interventions.
+ Among human beings, emotions and behaviours are contagious (8). Mental health is often not the experience of an individual – when one person begins to experience mental health problems it can quickly impact on those around them. When students see staff working long hours and constantly exhausted and stressed, they become more likely to adopt those behaviours and experiences. This is a form of unconscious modelling.
+ There are logical reasons to believe that there may be links between wellbeing and the quality of curriculum design. Research has shown links between wellbeing and levels of creativity – it is easier to be creative and seek new solutions when an individual has good wellbeing (9-10). Alternatively, exhausted and anxious individual academics and teams are more likely reach for previous solutions and familiar practices, rather than expending energy they do not have seeking new and better approaches.

It should be clearly understood, that in these circumstances no blame can be attached to staff whose ability to perform has been eroded by poor wellbeing. There is clear evidence that many university staff have higher levels of stress and burnout than the general population and low levels of wellbeing. Human brains have a maximum cognitive load – when overworked and overstressed, they cannot function to the same level (11-12).

When considering how to support student wellbeing through the curriculum, the wellbeing of academic staff then becomes central. Those delivering the curriculum will play a key role in how it affects students. However well designed or intentioned a curriculum might be, if it is delivered by exhausted, highly stressed or ill staff it has the potential to have a negative impact. The reverse of this is also true, skilled academic staff who are well rested and have spare cognitive and emotional capacity can overcome flaws in curriculum design, to ensure a positive impact on student wellbeing and learning.

Maintaining good staff wellbeing requires a whole university response – as set out in the University Mental Health Charter (13). Research in workplace settings clearly shows that staff wellbeing benefits from feelings of control, engagement in work they find meaningful, a supportive culture, work life balance, regular rest and psychological safety. This has clear implications for university processes, the training of managers, the development of healthy cultures and reactive support services.

Key Lessons

+ the wellbeing of university staff is important in and of itself
+ there is a clear and explainable relationship between staff wellbeing and student wellbeing
+ universities must take a whole university approach to staff wellbeing if they wish to impact positively on student wellbeing.

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2.4 The Design Process – Who and How

Evidence gathered for this project from academics, curriculum development teams and quality staff, suggests that there is a spectrum of approaches to curriculum development across the sector. Central to curriculum development is the question of who designs (or redesigns)?

This can generally be broken into three approaches.

1 An individual academic (often a programme leader) is tasked with developing curriculum. In these circumstances, academics identified that their main support comes from colleagues, but the bulk of the task is often completed by them alone.

2 A teaching team work together to develop the curriculum, sharing the load between them and co-ordinating their thoughts, ideas and content.

3 A wider cross university team is brought together to collaborate on the development of the curriculum. This team can include the programme team, curriculum design staff, study skills staff, librarians, Teaching Fellows and current or former students drawn from across the cohort, to ensure adequate representation of all voices (1-2).

Staff reports indicate that the higher the level of teamwork and collaboration, the better the quality of the curriculum. Considering the wider needs of the whole student body, within a curriculum, is a complex task made easier by employing a wider range of expertise (2).

The presence of a broader team can support wider consideration and the development of a more robust curriculum that has been developed critically. This can ensure proper consideration of the

needs of all students as they transition into university, which is therefore, likely to benefit wellbeing (3). A collaborative approach is also likely to be better for staff wellbeing by spreading the creative load and providing staff with a sense of community and team purpose. The finished curriculum is also more likely to be embraced by the whole teaching team, as they are more likely to feel a greater sense of control, ownership and meaning and to have a collective understanding of the course narrative.

In research for this project, these collaborative approaches also appeared to exist on a spectrum. In some cases, academic staff reported tokenistic activity of "ticking off that you'd spoken to people." In other cases, staff from across the university were brought together, in design sessions, to take part in structured development activity. This allows for expertise to be shared between colleagues, which in turn leads to the development of all of the staff involved. This approach also meets Cowan, et al's (4) call for curriculum development and staff development to be seen as the same process.

Kift's Curriculum Design Table (5) provides a broad example of who could be involved in curriculum design. Alongside academic teams, learning experts and librarians, it also proposes the inclusion of student services staff and disability and inclusion experts. This would ensure that informed voices can ensure that mental health, wellbeing and the needs of all students are considered at the earliest stage of conception.

There are clearly implications for such a move. Academic staff may at first feel that the presence of staff in non-academic roles is intrusive. Student services staff may not initially have good knowledge of teaching, learning and assessment (6). For this collaboration to work, the process needs to be properly facilitated to ensure all voices can genuinely contribute to co-creation. However, involving student services staff in curriculum design would also allow the process to inform their own development, create better relationships with academic staff and eliminate gaps in understanding, culture and practice between academics and student services.

This more collaborative and comprehensive approach to curriculum design would make it more likely that curriculum is able to consider students as they are and deliver teaching and assessment that supports student learning and wellbeing.

Key Lessons

+ collaborative approaches can benefit the development of curriculum that genuinely meets the needs of students
+ they can also support staff wellbeing by spreading the load and creating a broader sense of ownership
+ a genuine whole university approach can bring together a range of expertise, including student services experts in mental health, disability and inclusion that can benefit the quality of curriculum design, alongside the voices of students, as experts by experience
+ however, this process may need careful facilitation and staff development.

Top Tips

+ Cowan suggested that universities should reconceptualise curriculum development to see it as an opportunity to develop staff knowledge and understanding of teaching, learning and assessment
+ some universities have seen benefits from creating half or whole day sessions to bring together staff from across the university to work on curriculum design
+ whole university approaches may be enabled if staff in professional roles are provided with staff development on teaching, learning and assessment.

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2.5 Validation and Curriculum Development

Research for this project (conducted via interviews with Quality staff, Curriculum Development teams* and teaching academics) has revealed a spectrum of approaches to validation and curriculum approval processes. In some universities, validation appears to have a purely compliance role, ensuring curriculum meets internal and external standards and regulations. In these circumstances, academics report a potential disconnect between the meaningful aspects of curriculum and the validation process (1). This leads them to see curriculum development and validation as two separate and barely connected activities. Academics report that completing validation documents and processes then becomes a ‘tick boxing exercise’ that bears no relation to the curriculum or the design process (1-2). This can have a negative impact on staff wellbeing as this bureaucratic exercise is

perceived to be largely meaningless, adding unhelpful extra workload and being divorced from an academic's key roles of teaching and research (3).

Alternatively, interviews with Quality and Curriculum Development Teams revealed an ongoing shift, across the sector, in which these areas work more closely together and focus is moving from compliance to quality enhancement (eg 4-5). In these approaches, validation has been rethought to fit alongside curriculum development support, with a clearer focus on the meat of the curriculum – what is taught, how is it taught and how is it assessed? In some universities, this now means that academic teams must engage with a process of supported development as part of the validation process. This ensures a co-constructed approach as standard and brings a range of expertise to curriculum design.

This then provides the university with an opportunity to ensure whole university approaches to curriculum design. Some universities have now adopted a standard approach to curriculum design, such as the ABC model (5), to ensure consistency and to provide academic staff with appropriate resources and support.

Those interviewed for this project agreed that validation and curriculum development processes could play an important role in ensuring that curriculum supported wellbeing and learning, but that this needed to be explicitly designed into the process. Some staff were able to provide examples of how validation panels currently had a positive impact on wellbeing, such as reviewing the curriculum to guard against deadline bunching across modules and including students, who had been prepared for the role, in design and validation processes, to provide expertise by experience.

In more cohesive approaches, which bring curriculum development support and validation together, there are opportunities to embed consideration of student wellbeing into every stage of the design process. This could include:

+ using the curriculum development process to increase staff knowledge and understanding of the relationships between learning and wellbeing and the curriculum and wellbeing
+ using design models that consider the holistic experiences of the whole student population and ensure aspects such as scaffolding, sequencing, deep learning and social integration are properly considered and embedded from conception
+ providing resources to support curriculum design that considers wellbeing – this may include expertise from colleagues across the university in professional services or academic colleagues who have experience of this approach
+ final checks in validation paperwork and committees that explicitly address the need to consider how the curriculum has considered student wellbeing and learning.

In effect, this proposes that university processes should be constructively aligned in purpose, support, resources and approval mechanisms. As with students, the final question in any assessment shapes the learning and the focus of the individual going through that assessment. Embedding questions about student wellbeing into validation can ensure that it remains a focus throughout curriculum design and is therefore an embedded part of the student experience, rather than being seen as an add on.

Key Lessons

+ while validation remains as a separate process focussed on compliance in some universities, in others there is a clear move to align curriculum development and validation in one process with more of a focus on quality enhancement
+ this shift can support academic staff to develop curriculum that supports learning and wellbeing
+ validation processes can assist by providing explicit focus on wellbeing as part of curriculum approval. This can provide a sense of constructive alignment from curriculum conception to approval
+ these approaches can ensure curriculum has properly considered those aspects that can support wellbeing and learning such as scaffolding, deep learning, social integration, internal cohesion, producing meaning and the development of student mastery and self-efficacy.

Top Tips

+ use validation question sets to focus on key issues relating to wellbeing such as workload bunching, transition, internal cohesion, etc
+ align the work of curriculum development teams, quality teams, professional services and teaching teams to focus on quality enhancement that includes consideration of student wellbeing
+ use the Education for Mental Health tool kit to provide academic staff with insight into the relationship between curriculum and wellbeing.

*Universities tend to use different titles for teams involved in the development of teaching and curriculum. The title Curriculum Development teams here, refers to those teams who have a specific role in supporting the enhancement of curriculum design and delivery.

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3 Social Belonging

3.1 Introduction

Decades of research across disciplines has demonstrated that being socially connected is a basic human need and vital for wellbeing (1-4). Close personal relationships and a sense of belonging to a community can both benefit wellbeing and protect against poor mental health (5, 6). Social status, acceptance and attention have also been shown to have positive influence, while social environments that are perceived as hostile, in which individuals may experience harassment, discrimination, abuse, ostracism or social isolation, can have severe negative impacts (7, 8).

Social belonging has also been recognised as vital for student persistence, learning and academic performance (9, 10). Loneliness, and an absence of belonging, for example, has been shown to negatively impact performance, while a lack of psychological safety and learning environment that is problematic in other ways can also reduce learning (10, 11).

Given the centrality of the curriculum to student experience, this is an important context in which students can find a sense of community, connection and belonging. Many students may not have the opportunity to take up social offers within a university – eg, commuting students or those with caring responsibilities. A sense of belonging to institution and discipline for students must therefore be created within the curriculum (12), whilst also recognising that students from minoritized backgrounds may not see themselves reflected in their discipline, with negative consequences. The social learning environment must also support all students to feel safe to learn, make mistakes and grow.
The learning environment must be inclusive and place value on all of the students within.

This section explores the ways in which psycho-social and cultural factors impact on student learning and wellbeing and offers some ways of positively influencing social belonging via curriculum design and delivery.

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3.2 Psychologically Safe Learning Environments

In a psychologically safe environment, individuals feel safe to take risks to further their learning and thinking, to make mistakes, and ask for help and support when needed (1). If a learning environment feels psychologically safe, students will be able to publicly seek clarification or help and to answer questions, without fear of judgement or humiliation. Within such a culture, mistakes or incorrect answers will be viewed as a normal part of learning rather than as a sign of failure or lack of capability (1, 2). Undergraduate students we spoke to for this project highlighted that they appreciated a non-judgemental, safe and comfortable classroom environment to enable positive wellbeing.

Without psychological safety, students will be less willing to speak or ask for help (3, 4). Because of the powerful effects of humiliation, students in these classrooms may prefer underperforming academically to being embarrassed (1). Students in our co-creation panel report that many will actually stop attending classes if they fear being publicly asked a question in situations where they do not feel psychologically safe. Anecdotal reports from academic staff suggest this may also be true of online classes where the different, mediated environment could make it harder to judge the safety of the social space (5). This can potentially strip students of the opportunity to receive feedback and have misunderstandings corrected. Being in a classroom (either in person or online) that feels unsafe can also raise anxiety which, as discussed in Anxiety and Learning, can reduce cognitive function and a student's ability to learn (6).

Psychological safety does not mean that classes cannot be academically demanding. Rather, it provides an environment in which students can more confidently tackle academic challenge. This is important for learning and wellbeing, as evidence shows that students who actively participate in group discussions and activities, learn more and perform better (7-8). Taking an active role in discussions helps students to learn more deeply, improves understanding of the subject and increases ability to remember the content of the class (9). Psychologically safe classrooms also support the creation of learning communities and social connections between students and peers and students and academics. This helps meet underlying social needs, benefitting wellbeing and supporting cognitive function.

There is also an inclusivity aspect to psychological safety. Some students who feel a sense of difference, or increased risk in raising their profile publicly, are less likely to feel psychologically safe (10). Research indicates that this may be true for Black students and those from other Minority Ethnic backgrounds (11), LGBTQ+ students (12), mature students (13) and students who are first in their family to attend university (14). Without explicitly addressing the social and cultural aspects of the learning environment, there is also a risk that these students may feel excluded by the normative culture that otherwise may develop. Creating an environment that is safe for all students requires all students to feel, and to receive, a sense of value and respect (15) – an understanding that they have much to contribute of value to the class.

Addressing and creating psychological safety requires space in the curriculum and staff who understand its importance (4). Psychological safety must be created at the beginning of each module and actively maintained. Some students will only trust classroom culture and gain a sense of psychological safety when they have seen it consistently evidenced in practice eg, that a student can get a question wrong without being made to feel humiliated or embarrassed.

Time must therefore be created to directly address and establish healthy classroom culture and establish psychological safety (4). This can be supported with materials sent to students before the course begins, setting the tone and expectation. These messages can then be reiterated and actively explored at the beginning of the module. Students may be used to performance-focussed learning which puts a premium on not making mistakes. Undoing these expectations may take time, conversation, debate and demonstration from the beginning of each module. It is then crucially important that any expectation outlined in these explorations is consistently delivered. Informal feedback should focus on learning, normalising mistakes, supportively encouraging student ambition and self-belief and setting an expectation that students can develop from their current knowledge and understanding (16). Classroom behaviour that is unhelpfully critical or problematic in other ways should be challenged and corrected.

Where possible, these steps can be reinforced by activities that can increase students' sense of belonging, such as the use of student names and public recognition of their strengths and the benefits they bring to the classroom.

Key Lessons

+ in a psychologically safe learning environment, students feel safe to make mistakes, take risks to further their learning and thinking and ask for help and support when needed
+ psychological safety makes it more likely that students will engage in classroom activities and debates – this supports learning and helps develop a sense of community and belonging
+ an unsafe environment can raise anxiety and lead to class avoidance and/or disengagement
+ psychological safety must be planned for and time must be devoted to establishing and maintaining a healthy classroom culture
+ students will need to witness a safe environment being maintained consistently before they will trust it.

Top Tips

+ use induction/orientation and/or the first class of term to focus on creating cohort identity, a safe social environment and social rules
+ provide positive feedback to students who contribute early, encourage debate and be willing to show your own learning
+ discuss your own mistakes and highlight them in class to show that they are a normal part of the learning process.

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3.3 Social Community, Identity and Status

Research has shown that social connection is a basic human need, necessary for wellbeing and health (1, 4). Social environments can have profound effects on wellbeing and cognitive functioning, with 'toxic' environments having the potential to reduce an individual's capacity for thought, decision making and good health (5). It is, therefore, no surprise that the social and cultural environment of the classroom has a key role in learning and wellbeing (whether the classroom is virtual or in person). There are a number of aspects of the social learning environment that are worthy of consideration.

Shared identity

Having a shared identity can improve learning within a cohort and provide a sense of social connection. Shared identity and social integration have been shown to be important for student persistence and sense of belonging is beneficial for wellbeing (6). Even small markers of shared identity can make a difference. One study showed that when students were told they shared a birthday, it enhanced levels of motivation and persistence (7).

Creating a shared identity focussed on academic discipline and the shared learning environment can provide a sense of community that is beneficial for learning and wellbeing. Within a cohort, the academic discipline is the one element everyone has in common. Building community through the discipline therefore avoids marginalising students who may not share other common experiences and helps individuals build academic identity and a sense of belonging to their discipline. Particular care, however, should be taken to include minoritized students in this process, given that they may not always see themselves reflected in those who teach or are associated with the discipline's history (8).

Social rules

Social groups inevitably develop their own normative social rules – explicitly and implicitly (9). These rules can help the group to bind together, providing for group growth or they can generate stasis and group behaviour that, in effect, undermines cohesion and development. This is true of the learning environment. Research has identified in-classroom behaviours that can be disruptive to learning, social integration and wellbeing but can nevertheless become normative (10, 11). For example, phone use, not engaging in learning activities, irrelevant conversation etc can all become part of a pattern. This highlights the need for explicit focus on the development of shared social rules for the classroom, to ensure the environment supports group learning and wellbeing. Again, consideration should be given to the different ways in which these rules operate in online or hybrid teaching sessions.

Inclusivity

Without explicitly addressing the social and cultural aspects of the classroom, there is also a risk that some students may feel excluded by the normative culture that otherwise may develop. Some students who feel a sense of difference, or increased risk in raising their profile publicly, are less likely to ask questions or contribute to the classroom if they are not supported by helpful social norms, rules and an environment of psychological safety (12, 13). Creating an environment that is safe for all students requires all students to feel and be given a sense of value and respect – an understanding that they have much to contribute of value to the class. A lack of status in a social environment can have significant negative impacts on wellbeing and cognitive function. Ensuring that students have a sense of status and value can therefore help them to thrive and learn effectively. In this context simple acts, such as a lecturer remembering a student's name, can have powerful effects.

Addressing and creating a healthy classroom culture requires space in the curriculum and staff who understand its importance. Teaching sessions during induction and the early weeks of term should be a key focus within curriculum design to establish this culture. Students can be involved in co-creating social rules as an early group activity. These rules and norms must then be reiterated across the academic year – some students will only trust them and gain a sense of psychological safety when they have seen them work in practice eg, that a student can get a question wrong without being made to feel humiliated or embarrassed (14). An explicit focus on classroom and cohort culture throughout the curriculum, can do much to improve student sense of belonging, persistence, learning and wellbeing.

Key Lessons

+ classroom culture (online and in person) is crucial to student learning, persistence and wellbeing
+ students can benefit from a shared social identity, a sense of community and helpful and health social norms and rule – an environment that facilitates peer-learning, collaboration rather than a competitive environment. Creating a healthy classroom culture requires explicit attention and should be a feature of curriculum design.

Top Tips

+ sse induction/orientation and/or the first class of term to focus on creating cohort identity, a safe social environment and social rules
+ use opportunities to identify how a range of prior experiences enriches the learning environment
+ use the academic discipline to co-create a shared sense of community.

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3.4 Inclusivity

Inclusivity is the process of intentionally encouraging a positive, engaging, robust and socially cohesive environment (1-2). An inclusive learning environment is one in which all students feel a sense of value and belonging. Crucially, this is enabled by teaching and assessment practice that does not create barriers to learning due to prior experience, disability, identity, gender or age (3). Inclusive learning environments benefit all students by creating sense of community, belonging and psychological safety in which to explore and learn.

The literature clearly demonstrates that a sense of belonging is crucial to learning and student wellbeing (4-6). Sense of belonging has been defined as the extent to which students perceive being personally accepted, respected, included, and supported within the academic environment (7-8). When students feel a genuine sense of belonging, they tend to experience increased motivation, improved learning, more positive learning experiences, positive emotions and better academic performance (8-9). An appreciation of the importance of a sense of community also includes the recognition of the importance of social identity, group membership, and shared connections which can differ significantly for specific groups of students (see, for example, Black Students Talk). Inclusive educational initiatives in the long-term can foster academic aspirations in students who are likely to feel a poor sense of belonging where they are traditionally underrepresented (10).

Conversely, a lack of belonging has been found to be related to depression, anxiety, alienation, interpersonal conflicts and physical health for university students (11-12). A lack of belonging can also impact negatively on cognitive functioning, thereby reducing learning and academic performance (13). A key factor in this is that in environments in which individuals feel the need to adapt or hide their identity, this adaptation process uses up cognitive load, reducing capacity for learning, as well as negatively eroding wellbeing.

Inclusivity recognises, accepts and values diversity and difference; it does not require students to fit in or be the same. Inclusive learning environments will therefore support learning and wellbeing, while a lack of inclusivity will undermine learning and wellbeing.

There are a number of ways in which curriculum design and delivery can enhance inclusivity. In design, space can be deliberately created for activity that builds shared community through the academic discipline and recognises the value of diverse experiences, opinions and identities. Where appropriate for the discipline, assessment can create space for students to draw upon and see the value in their own experiences and value.

Pedagogic approaches can also heighten inclusivity through the ways in which curriculum is taught and assessed. For example, Universal Design for Learning is an evidence based pedagogic approach which has been shown to enhance learning, inclusivity, reflection skills, confidence in technology skills, application of learning strategies, participation in discussion and knowledge acquisition (14). Based on principles designed to maximise accessibility within the physical environment, UDL is based on seven principles: equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, and size and space for approach and use (14). UDL has also

been found to lead to an improvement of learners' perceptions, increased positive attitudes towards learning and increased engagement. Importantly, the effect of this is seen in all students (15). It also reduces the need for adjustments for individual students or intervention from Disability Services. Evidence based inclusive approaches improve outcomes for all.

Key Lessons

+ an inclusive learning environment is one in which all students feel a sense of value and belonging and in which teaching, and assessment practice does not create barriers to learning
+ inclusive learning environments benefit all students by creating sense of community, belonging and psychological safety to explore and learn
+ particular attention should be paid to the experience of students from under-represented or minoritized backgrounds
+ belonging benefits both learning and wellbeing. A lack of belonging and active exclusion are harmful for wellbeing and reduce learning and academic performance
+ the design and delivery of curriculum can support inclusivity by deliberately seeking to create inclusive learning environments and by employing evidence inform, inclusive pedagogies such as Universal Design for Learning.

Top Tips

+ provide lecture notes before class and use accessible slides and materials to support better learning for all students
+ take time to agree social rules in learning spaces, to establish agreed upon guidelines for discussion of potentially contentious topics that allow for genuine academic debate without creating a sense of exclusion for some
+ link where possible to institutional strategies and plans around decolonisation/inclusive education practice to enable consideration of the sense of belonging amongst diverse groups of students.
+ take opportunities to recognise and value prior student experiences
+ explore the principles of Universal Design for Learning.

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3.4.1 Inclusivity – ASC

Students with Autism Spectrum Conditions are significantly less likely to complete their degree than matched peers who are neuro-typical (1). There are a number of interacting academic, social and wellbeing factors that lead to this rate of withdrawal, including finding university environments overwhelming at a sensory level, social isolation and lack of belonging, self-efficacy and self-esteem, difficulties with executive functions, a need to develop social and self-management skills, exclusion, bullying and difficulties understanding context (2-7). However, with appropriate support, students with ASC can succeed both academically and socially (8).

For many students with ASC, the interaction between their wellbeing, social environment and academic learning plays a key role in either their persistence and success or underperformance and withdrawal. Research has shown that loneliness, isolation and a lack of a sense of belonging can reduce academic learning and performance, particularly for students with ASC (7, 9, 10). Given that students with ASC can find social situations and interactions more difficult to navigate, this creates a higher barrier for them (3).

These social challenges are made more complicated at university, where the environment is less structured than in secondary education, requiring additional ability to manage time and structure activity (11). If students feel unable to manage these challenges, it can create additional practical problems to manage and undermine students' sense of competence, self-belief and identity as a student. In turn this can lead to lowered mood and increased anxiety (7).

Each individual's ASC is experienced and expressed differently. There are no absolute rules of support that will apply in the case of every student with ASC. An inclusive curriculum can generally help all students to learn more and benefit their wellbeing. However, there are some common factors that are worth considering in relation to students with ASC.

Sensory processing

Many students with ASC have difficulty processing lots of sensory stimuli at the same time and can become overwhelmed and anxious if they encounter excessive noise, large crowds or high levels of visual stimuli (17, 2). Maintaining a calm learning space and allowing students to take time out from group learning activities can help students maintain a sense of control, focus on learning and feel safe.

Cooperative learning (eg, small group projects and group discussions).

Problems navigating social interactions and situations can make group work an anxiety-provoking task (12). Students with ASC may struggle to perceive social cues (eg, personal spaces, lack of understanding of changes in subject of discussion, lack of understanding of classroom social norms) and their lack of social understanding can have a negative impact upon their learning and sense of belonging (13). Students with ASC may also be more likely to find it difficult to understand their appropriate role within group work. Providing specific operating rules for group work and training all students to understand how to use co-operative learning, is beneficial for all students, but has particular benefits for students with ASC.

Executive function

Executive function determines an individual's ability to set goals, manage practical tasks, respond to multiple sets of incoming data and achieve aims. For students with ASC, difficulties with executive function can make it more difficult to manage time, plan study habits, create and maintain learning and revision strategies, evaluate progress, manage multiple tasks and maintain concentration (4, 7, 12, 13). Problems with cognitive functioning can exhibit with lapses in concentration and inability to perform instructions (14). A lack of regular structure can undermine wellbeing and academic performance in all students, but many students with ASC particularly benefit from being able to maintain regular routines. Helping students with ASC to set and maintain healthy routines, which benefit their learning in a structured way, can support both their wellbeing and learning (12, 15).

Ambiguity

Some students with ASC can find it more difficult to interpret ambiguity and to move between concrete and abstract thinking. Some students report difficulties with following a text when it is assumed that the reader will automatically fill in the context or when they are required to adopt a different point of view (6). Some students with ASC can also find it more difficult to apply learning from one example to another or to learn via metaphorical examples (13). Benefit can be gained from ensuring tasks and assignment questions are not ambiguous, that instruction uses a range of approaches and providing stepped guidance for more complex tasks. Providing individually tailored academic accommodations (such as receiving more time for completion of assignments, more structured teaching) are of paramount importance to support the learning experience and wellbeing of autistic students (7). Many recommendations that benefit students with ASC overlap with the best approaches to complex tasks for all: making education more inclusive to students with ASC can result in better education for all students.

Key Lessons

+ students with ASC can face additional barriers to their learning and wellbeing such as difficulties with social interactions and sensory sensitivity, understanding explicit context, responding to ambiguity, managing practical demands and lack of belonging

- in HE, where learning is less structured than in secondary education, issues with time-management, organisation and scheduling can arise, which can exacerbate mental health issues by increasing levels of anxiety and depression. These issues, in turn, have negative effect on academic achievement and students' feelings of inclusivity and belonging
- it is important to understand the specific issues that each individual with ASC experiences
- providing individually tailored academic accommodations is of paramount importance to support the learning experience, academic attainment, and wellbeing of students with ASC
- many recommendations overlap with the best approaches to complex tasks: making education more inclusive to autistic students will result in better education as a whole.

Top Tips

Academic accommodations can significantly benefit the learning experience of students with ASC and can support feelings of inclusivity within the classroom.

- receiving more time for completion of assignments and more structured teaching are of paramount importance to support the learning experience and wellbeing for students with ASC. Benefit can be gained from providing students with digitalised learning material in advance and in alternative formats (6, 8). It can also help if learning materials avoid the use of idioms and figurative language (16).
- accommodations for issues with cooperative learning: educators could make group work less anxiety-provoking by carefully forming learning groups, and it might be necessary to provide students with individually tailored tasks (12, 16).
- accommodations to facilitate critical thinking: learning tasks could be broken down into smaller components, which could reduce stress for both neurotypical and students with ASC (13). Additionally, educators could provide students with a balanced presentation of abstract ideas and concrete concepts (12). When possible, role plays could be implemented in order to encourage students to explore the perspectives of others (12).
- accommodations for issues with explicit context and guidelines: provide students with clear explanations of what is expected in assignments/examinations (eg, be very specific, sometimes specify about lack of strict rules, explain general approach in tackling a problem). When specific guidelines are provided to perform a task, these should be followed by examples and they should make clear what the student is supposed to learn from the example (6)
- accommodations for issues with sensory processing: students can be supported by reducing the amount of sensory stimulation (eg, dimming bright lights, reducing loud noises, reducing the volume of videos and sound effects, provide subtitles where needed). Additionally, academics could allow students to wear appliances that reduce sensory stimulation (eg, sunglasses, noise cancelling headphones) (7).

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3.4.2 Inclusivity – ADHD

Students with ADHD can experience difficulties with inattentiveness, distractibility and with executive functioning, restlessness and motivation (1). They may often experience difficulties with study skills, study strategies, problem solving skills, and social integration (1). Students with ADHD are also more likely to experience feelings of loneliness, poor sleep quality, difficulties in self-management, low self-efficacy and feeling overwhelmed, stressed, and anxious (2). Consequently, academic demands as well as the conditions imposed in Higher Education (HE) can exacerbate their difficulties, leading to poor performance and an increased possibility of drop out (2-5). However, literature also shows that academic outcomes tend to ameliorate when students are supported with individually tailored accommodations that meet their specific needs (2).

Students with ADHD require a more structured approach to learning and may benefit from accommodations targeted at improving executive functioning, such as learning how to organise tasks and properly manage time (6-9). Additionally, strength-based approaches addressing self-determination and regulation skills can help empower students when dealing with academic demands (2). Individualised teaching activities as well as the presence of support can help students thrive in the learning environment (5). Close working relationships between academics and student services can often help to provide these accommodations and support.

Alternatively, if teaching academics discourage the use of accommodations and additional support, this can make students with ADHD feel excluded (10). In fact, some of the main barriers to inclusivity highlighted in research entail academics' negative attitudes, lack of understanding of specific needs, lack of knowledge on how to make content accessible, and lack of willingness and/or time to provide reasonable adjustments (5). In turn, this can lead to students not disclosing their disability (11). Recognising ADHD simply as a type of student diversity can help foster inclusivity (12) and improve the classroom and learning experience for all. However, to achieve this academic staff may require additional staff development.

Research highlighted the importance of training opportunities for educators to increase awareness and support for students dealing with different types of disabilities, as training positively influenced instructors' attitudes (13, 14). Training in inclusive practice and learning aids the development of a clear and coherent educational programme for all students (15). Academics educated in the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) reported being more understanding, open-minded and flexible in their instructions (16, 17). UDL is particularly helpful for students and lecturers as the strategies are simple

to implement, can have a positive impact on the learning experience of all students and could help against labelling and segregation of differently abled neurodiverse students (2).

Key Lessons

+ students with ADHD can experience difficulties with inattentiveness, distractibility and executive functioning (eg, emotion regulation, working memory deficits), restlessness and lack of motivation. Consequently, they often display issues with study skills, study strategies, problems solving skills, social functioning, and social behaviours
+ they may also experience feeling overwhelmed, stressed, and anxious, and academic demands, as well as the conditions imposed in higher education, can exacerbate mental health comorbidities
+ academic outcomes tend to improve when students are supported with individually tailored accommodations that meet their specific needs
+ the attitudes, knowledge and understanding of academic staff are key in whether or not students with ADHD can access the support they need, feel a sense of belonging and achieve academically. Considering ADHD simply as a type of student diversity can help foster inclusivity
+ adoption of UDL strategies is particularly well suited for this population as students with ADHD often struggle to disclose their diagnosis and to discuss their disability and accommodations needed; these strategies can significantly benefit all students independently of them being neurotypical or not.

Top Tips

+ convert course material in multi-sensory and accessible formats (eg, audio recordings, adoption of different colours) in an easy to navigate setup. Provide reading lists and course material as early as possible as well as lecture notes before class
+ teach organisational and study skills (eg, how to break down tasks into parts, estimating time needed for completion of tasks) and outlining skills (eg, words needed for note-taking) as part of the curriculum
+ use active learning and group work help to improve learning, and design assignments and tasks to be broken up into smaller parts. Remember to highlight, emphasise and repeat important information
+ encourage students to sit away from noise and in front of the class to minimise distractions and allow for periodical short breaks
+ close working relationships between academics and student services can ensure students receive the adjustments and support that they need and that work well with the nature of the course.

(2, 6, 10, 18)

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3.4.3 Inclusivity – Sensory Impairments

Sensory disabilities are classified as 'low-incidence' (occurring in low numbers) and 'high-needs" (requiring specialised support in accessing the general education curriculum) disabilities. Students with sensory disabilities can face unique challenges in relation to inclusion (1-3). In particular, the design and delivery of the curriculum can have an important role, potentially making it more difficult to engage in learning, increasing social isolation and creating self-doubt, anxiety and loss of motivation (4). Alternatively, appropriate adjustments and an inclusive curriculum can enhance students' sense of connection and belonging and enable better learning (5). Literature suggests that an inclusive curriculum incorporates a combination of teaching methods/strategies with a social model approach, which can be supported by the adoption of a universal design throughout the curriculum (4, 6, 7).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a model of inclusive curriculum that can improve learning for all students (5). Simple considerations that enable students with sensory disabilities to engage with curriculum content and learning activities, can have significant positive impact (8), such as using accessible slides with subtitles, providing transcripts, ensuring students receive information in appropriate formats and using audio technology when it is available. Benefit can also be gained by including students in ongoing curriculum design and delivery, to properly understand their experience and adjust learning, teaching and assessment strategies accordingly (8).

Previous research found that teachers' attitudes towards meaningful inclusion are of significant importance when creating an inclusive learning environment to support a positive learning experience and they are a prerequisite for successful inclusion (2, 9, 10). The role of the individual teaching academic is therefore vital in creating learning environments in which students with sensory disabilities can flourish (9). Student wellbeing can benefit when academic staff are perceived to care about and believe in students as individuals (11). However, it is important to note the systemic aspect of this – academic staff cannot be expected to develop the knowledge, skills and strategies necessary alone. They must be supported with the necessary time, resource and development input from within their university (2).

Blindness and Visual Impairment

It is important to remember that each student is different, and their experience of their disability will also be different. What has worked for one visually impaired student in the past may not work for another visually impaired student in the future (12). Collaboration between Student Services and academic staff can help to ensure that students receive appropriate adjustments for them, and that the curriculum does not unintentionally exclude a student from learning or their cohort. However, it should be noted that the process of arranging and managing a support package can create extra workload for disabled students, leading to fatigue, a sense of being overwhelmed and disengagement. Supporting students with an inclusive curriculum and easing the process of implementing adjustments can help ameliorate this (13)

Assistive technologies can be extremely helpful for some students with a visual impairment, particularly if learning materials are designed with this in mind. Others may benefit from simple adjustments, such as reserving seats at the front of class and consulting with them in relation to the design of learning activities (12).

Hearing Impairments

Students who are deaf or who experience hearing loss can experience difficulties accessing and engaging with learning and with feeling that they belong to the academic environment, due to issues with social interaction and dissatisfaction with social life (14). As with other types of sensory impairments, students with hearing impairments differ significantly, in part depending on the type and degree of their hearing loss or deafness. There are four clinically recognised degrees of hearing loss: 1) mild, 2) moderate, 3) severe, and 4) profound (15). Additionally, there are individuals who have lost hearing before acquiring language and others who have lost it after having acquired language, which can have a significant impact on levels of adjustment as well as on the degree of hearing impairment. Some people utilise lip reading, some sign language, others hearing aids or cochlear implants, and many rely on a combination of these (16).

Students with hearing loss might be best supported by reasonable adjustments, assistive devices and technology. These accommodations can be diverse and range from including a sign language interpreter to wireless assistive listening devices or even just being provided with preferential seating places in the classroom (17).

Deaf and hearing-impaired students often prefer visual learning strategies, but this can be challenging in environments that mostly rely on talking and on learning delivered through sounds and word of mouth. The provision of notes, slides and transcripts can support students to ensure they have not missed important learning (16, 17).

Students with hearing impairments can become isolated from the learning environment as issues related to social contact and interaction with other students can arise, which can have a negative impact on learning (18). Participation in tutorials can become an anxiety-provoking task as not being able to hear the nuances of verbal exchanges can put them in a disadvantaged position (16, 19). Establishing self-supporting learning communities that recognise and respond positively to diversity in the classroom, can help to ease these concerns and help students develop belonging in the community.

Key Lessons

+ sensory impairments are 'low-incidence' (occurring in low numbers) and 'high-needs" (requiring specialised support in accessing the general education curriculum) disabilities and students dealing with these conditions undergo unique challenges in relation to inclusion
+ factors such as teacher attitude, co-operation between Student Services and academic staff, the use of inclusive curriculum design and assistive technology can all play a significant role in developing inclusive practice and supporting learning and wellbeing of students with sensory impairments
+ the use of multimodal instructions is of fundamental importance to give students the possibility to see and hear at the same time (eg, subtitled PowerPoint presentations)
+ benefit can be gained from including students in the planning and evaluation of curriculum to ensure that their needs are met; it is good practice to talk directly to the students to understand their specific needs and to develop effective ways to support them, their learning, and their wellbeing
+ the types of accommodations needed may vary depending on the student and their disability.

Top Tips

+ make materials multi-sensory, use interactive and tactile e-learning aids to allow for different kinds of learning. Give access to class notes and/or taping of lectures
+ minimise noise and distractions and pay attention to the physical organisation of the classroom, to the presence/position of objects, and adjust the lightning in the teaching environment. Avoid talking in different directions and use assistive listening devices. Remember to be aware that facemasks, moustaches, beards, hands, books, or microphones in front of the face can impair lip-reading. When teaching online be mindful of the position of the lights and avoid being overshadowed because students might not be able to lip-read
+ provide students with learning materials in advance, as students might need to have materials transcribed and accommodated to their needs, which could take a significant amount of time. Provide lists of subject-specific jargon and technical terms early in the course
+ remember that it is not helpful for individuals with hearing impairment if you talk louder and/or more slowly, it is better to talk normally. Remember to gain the attention of your students before speaking, repeat clearly any questions asked by students before providing a response, use descriptive, explanatory language and verbal information to describe visual information
+ meet with the student to talk about essential accommodations and to understand how to facilitate them.

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3.4.4 Inclusivity – Transgender

Terms

Transgender (or trans) is an umbrella term that encompasses all individuals whose gender identity does not match the gender they were assigned at birth based on their sexual characteristics (1). Individuals who do not identify within the binary system of gender identification also fall under this umbrella. In this toolkit, we use the terms transgender to refer to gender non-conforming people, those who are non-binary, genderqueer and so on. However, the transgender and gender non-conforming community is extremely varied and there is also a relative invisibility where many trans people exist, so we acknowledge that the terminology adopted does not fully capture the diversity that the gender non-conforming population comprises (2, 3).

Experience

Research indicates that transgender people are more likely to experience poor mental health, especially depression, anxiety, and panic attacks (2, 4), with rates higher than the general population norms (2). Quality of life (both mental and physical) also appears to be lower for this population compared to the general cisgender (non-transgender) population (5). This is likely to be at least partly caused by the fact that transgender people are more likely to face a series of difficulties, which may

include the experience of dysphoria towards their bodies, physical and social transitions, transphobia, discrimination, prejudice, and bullying (2, 4, 6-11). Undergoing these experiences can have a significant negative impact upon trans students' wellbeing, which can negatively affect academic achievement and can lead to academic dropout (12).

These issues can, in turn, also undermine sense of belonging to the classroom environment (13), leading to alienation and isolation. As a consequence, this can affect wellbeing through negative impacts on both learning and psychological distress (14-16). Social interactions play a significant role in the mental health and wellbeing of trans people, and this is particularly important for the classroom environment and interactions between students and lecturers and students and peers. Facing difficulties, in relation to gender and identity, in the academic environment impairs trans students' sense of belonging and inclusion as part of their class (17). Research shows that adoption and correct utilisation of the chosen name and pronouns (and thus reduction in misgendering) are linked to reduced depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation and behaviours amongst trans youth (18). Alternatively, being misgendered, misnamed or deadnamed is often a negative and painful experience (18, 19). Creating inclusive classrooms, in which trans students can be themselves, feel psychologically safe and be communicated with by their chosen names, can therefore enhance wellbeing and learning.

This is particularly important as trans people are more likely to experience difficulty with interpersonal interactions (20). This is generally due to negative past experiences such as instances of discrimination, prejudice, violence, harassment, bullying, and transphobia, which negatively impacted their social skills.

Research conducted for this project showed that both trans students and academics perceived a number of barriers to inclusivity. These barriers are mainly related to the correct utilisation of pronouns and trans-related terminology, and to a lack of education on transgender issues among the whole university community. However, participants also talked about social issues (eg, related to discrimination, prejudice, and bullying), problems around societal, institutional, and personal bias, as well as negative attitudes perpetrated against trans students. Students also identified barriers to inclusivity in curriculum content. For instance, the lack of trans-specific examples (eg, use of transgender cases in medicine) and theories (eg, queer theory – 21) taught as part of the curriculum. Students also highlighted that the use of gendered language in teaching can create an environment that lacks inclusivity and that prevents students from developing a sense of belonging to the class and university settings.

This calls for a more open approach to teaching, where academics can openly talk about transgender people and create inclusive learning environments by utilising a gender-neutral language, adopting more trans-related examples within the curriculum, using students' preferred names and pronouns and being more confident in acknowledging and discussing trans related content and issues. In turn, staff require support from universities to develop their knowledge, understanding, comfort and confidence in supporting trans students to develop a sense of cohort and disciplinary belonging, improve their learning and achievement and through this enhance their wellbeing.

Key Lessons

+ transgender students face many challenges, which negatively affect their interpersonal interactions, social skills, physical and mental health. Issues with social interactions are often the result of having undergone negative social experiences (such as discrimination, bullying and transphobia)
+ negative experiences in academic environments have negative repercussions upon academic attainment and can lead to dropout
+ there is a strong need to make both curriculum and practice more inclusive in order to improve students' sense of belonging and reduce feelings of alienation. An increased sense of belonging and psychological safety can have a positive impact upon learning and academic achievement
+ critical barriers to inclusivity are related to the use of gender-neutral language in teaching and to inclusion of trans-related examples, materials and theories as part of the curriculum.

Top Tips

+ when introducing yourself at the beginning of the course, also introduce your pronouns. Add your own pronouns to your email signature and on Zoom/Teams (online software)
+ do not assume students' names, pronouns and/or gender identity. Use gender-neutral terminology and language where possible
+ tell students that if you make mistakes, you are not doing it on purpose, you are open to being corrected – this can help establish a classroom environment in which mistakes are seen as opportunities to learn and develop more generally
+ talk about trans-related issues in class and add well-evidenced and up-to-date cases of transgender people to curriculum and teaching when possible and appropriate. This is particularly important in subjects such as medicine and law, where transgender people are often excluded or negatively portrayed.

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3.4.5 Inclusivity – LGBQ+

The acronym LGBQ+ refers to a range of sexual minorities that includes, but is not limited to those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning, pansexual, asexual and demi sexual. The acronym usually includes a T for those who are transgender, non-binary etc. for ease and space purposes and because research shows that personal experiences and needs can differ significantly (1), we have created a separate section on supporting transgender students through the curriculum.

Research shows that individuals who are LGBQ+ are more likely to experience poor mental health compared to heterosexual individuals (2-4). This is especially true for younger cohorts (5). Additionally, the literature shows that individuals from sexual minority groups experience poorer physical health than their heterosexual counterparts (6) and they are more likely to engage in risky behaviours (7). A UK-based systematic review and meta-analysis of 94,818 people showed that LGBQ+ individuals (particularly youth and older people) reported poorer wellbeing and mental health than non-LGB individuals (10) Many of these outcomes are the result of experiencing micro-aggression, harassment and discrimination (8, 9). Reports from Queer Futures (11) and The Mental Health of Young LGBandT People (3) identified homophobia and biphobia, sexual norms, managing sexual orientation, being unable to talk to someone and experiencing life difficulties (such as bullying, abuse and shame) as predictors of enhanced levels of stress for this population.

Many people identifying as LGBQ+ experience discriminatory acts, and are victims of hate crimes (12, 13). Research found that harassment and discrimination undermine the wellbeing of LGBQ+ students (14). The National Union for Students (15) reported that 1 in 5 LGBQ+ students experienced bullying or harassment on their university campus because of their sexual orientation; these students are also 2 to 3 times more likely to consider dropping out from their course. However, many instances of discrimination and victimisation go underreported and can lead to social marginalisation and isolation (16).

An environment supports the integration of sexual minority students when peers are accepting, as it fosters a greater sense of belonging to such community (17). Universities are environments that rely on acceptance, mutual trust, and inclusivity to promote learning and to make students feel safe to explore academic resources and navigate social networks (18). However, universities are often not

considered to be ‘safe spaces’ as homophobia on campus is a critical issue despite the implementation of the Equality Act (16, 19). In fact, a report from Stonewall (20) highlighted that homophobia is still a significant problem in educational environments and especially in universities, which are environments where students learn how to define their sexual identities, where they feel vulnerable, and where being treated negatively can lead to experiencing stress, loss of confidence, self-exclusion, and isolation (21).

Literature showed that hearing micro-aggressions and derogatory terminology are linked to worsening of academic outcomes and to lower grades (14). Furthermore, being the victim of discriminatory experiences has been found to interfere with academic development and educational outcomes, which can lead to academic drop-out (14, 22).

However, literature suggests that increasing students’ sense of belonging through academic and social integration can facilitate academic development and it is positively associated with persistence in the academic environment (14, 22). In fact, Garvey and colleagues (23) suggested that perception of a comfortable and warm campus climate is associated with higher academic success. When students experience positive interactions with faculty and academics, they are more likely to thrive within the academic environment, to perceive higher academic satisfaction and more social acceptance (24, 25). Conversely, poor academic performance and outcomes, absenteeism, disengagement, drop-out and poor academic engagement are linked with experiencing negative social interactions, poor social acceptance, and harassment (14, 25, 26).

Students’ sense of belonging and engagement through learning are paramount for academic success and for retention, and supporting these processes requires an inclusive approach to learning, teaching and assessment, which can be achieved with an inclusive student-centred learning approach (27). This approach needs to take into consideration curriculum design and content, delivery and pedagogy, assessment, and feedback, as well as an institutional commitment to inclusive learning and teaching (27, 29). See Inclusivity.

In terms of academic engagement, LGBQ+ students often do not see their experiences and history reflected in the curriculum (15, 16). However, a range of factors can help build and develop resilience, such as adopting an ‘out and proud’ identity to tackle stigma and shame, being accepted, having a partner and/or familial support, being a part of the LGBTQ+ community and having hope for the future (3, 30). When academics create safe learning environments in which discriminatory behaviour is challenged in relation to sexual orientation this can support LGBQ+ students to feel a greater sense of belonging, have psychological safety, learn more and perform better academically (16).

Key Lessons

+ the National Union for Students reported that 1 in 5 LGBQ+ students experienced bullying or harassment in their university campus because of their sexual orientation; these students are also two to three times more likely to consider dropping out from their course
+ many people identifying as LGBQ+ undergo discriminatory acts, are victims of hate crimes and research found that heterosexist harassment and discrimination undermine the wellbeing of these students. Microaggressions contribute to stress by undermining students' sense of belonging to the university community, which can have negative impacts upon students' academic life as well as on their mental health and wellbeing
+ increasing students' sense of belonging through academic and social integration can facilitate academic development and it is positively associated with persistence in the academic environment. In fact, the perception of a comfortable and warm campus climate is associated with higher academic success
+ when students experience positive interactions with faculty and academics, they are more likely to thrive within the academic environment, to perceive higher academic satisfaction and more social acceptance
+ there is a strong need to promote development, sense of belonging and respectability on college campus and teaching environments through educational practices in order to reach all students and support inclusivity for LBGQ+ students.

Top Tips

+ being able to talk to a caring instructor may have a substantial positive impact on the academic experiences of marginalised students (31); thus, academics could try to be open to start a dialogue with these students in order to create a climate where they can feel supported and accepted
+ include LGBQ+ examples within curriculum content
+ attitudinal changes on the side of the educators and awareness raising are of vital importance to address prejudice and contribute towards a more positive climate (16)
+ avoid making assumptions about students and try to avoid using language which can unintentionally exclude eg, assuming someone's partner is of the opposite gender.

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3.4.6 Race Equity

There are many factors which create a sense of belonging within the higher education sector both within the curriculum and beyond. As a result, a whole institution approach is required to embed race equity. Nevertheless, the construction of the curriculum and the way that it is taught has a critical role in ensuring an environment where all students are able to thrive whilst being their authentic selves.

The attainment of students of colour across the sector is stratified. Even when prior attainment is accounted for, students in protected characteristic groups, and particularly Black students, are less likely than their white peers to be awarded a 'good honours' degree (1). The experiences of students encountering structural racism across the sector must be acknowledged as a key contributing factor in this outcome. This is important for the wellbeing of both academics and students of colour (see Barker and Shakir, 2021 (2); it recognises that the problem is within the system and not something that is individually attributable. This is of fundamental importance to students' self-concept and self-efficacy.

Institutional Racism can be understood as a 'recognition that to thrive, racism does not require overtly racist individuals, and conceives of it rather as arising through social and cultural processes' (3). Students who responded to our survey indicated the positive benefits of academics' ability to show an understanding of institutional racism and an awareness of their own biases. When academics can speak sensitively with students about ethnicity/race concerns, this is critical in removing barriers to students feeling that they belong.

Ensuring an inclusive environment relies on the collective actions of individuals, but this requires care. As Nova Reid argues (4), it is often ill-informed and well-meaning people who can cause great harm if they don't actively engage in reflecting on their own prejudices. Creating an environment where students of colour can thrive starts with self-work, followed by thinking through the curriculum and pedagogic approaches. Starting with the very basic questions 'where am I on this journey?' followed by and 'why am I teaching this?' are good places to begin.

The choice of curriculum content is critical in ensuring inclusivity. When students are unrepresented within curriculum content, feel their culture, language and experiences carry less value and their history is invisible, this can exclude them from learning and a sense of belonging to their cohort and discipline (5). For example, students in our research expressed concern about the lack of critical engagement in some areas of the disciplinary discoveries which had been founded on the exploitation of Black people, such as experimentation on enslaved people.

There are significant issues to be addressed in particular subjects – the predominance of whiteness as the norm in the medical profession for example means that manikins (the anatomical models used in educational healthcare practice) are predominantly white. Case studies which include reference to a range of cultural experiences or look at issues from different traditions or perspectives are important to all students in terms of their critical engagement and wider cultural learning. However, such learning has particular importance to students who may otherwise be disengaged by experiences which never make reference to contexts which directly reference their experiences.

At the launch of the Universities UK and NUS report on closing the Awarding Gap in higher education (6), a student keynote address focused on student experiences of learning about the Awarding Gap in higher education. One Black student explained that when they understood the awarding gap and its causes it felt as if the 'ghost in the room had revealed itself.' It explained why she felt she had to work harder than her white peers to relate to the subject content and to achieve as highly them. The simple acknowledgement of the issue resting with the sectoral structural issues of inequity supported the re-evaluation of her understanding of herself- she could stop holding herself accountable for perceived deficiencies which were institutionally created. Challenging the deficit model is something that we can all do; here are some resources that can support you in understanding how we can think about learning, achievement and success through a non-deficit lens:

Key Lessons

+ a whole institution approach is required to embed race equity. Nevertheless, the construction of the curriculum and the way that it is taught has a critical role in ensuring an environment where all students are able to thrive whilst being their authentic selves
+ the experiences of students encountering structural racism across the sector must be acknowledged as a key contributing factor in the awarding gap
+ when academics can speak sensitively with students about ethnicity /race concerns, this is critical in removing barriers to students feeling that they belong
+ the choice of curriculum content is critical in ensuring inclusivity. When students are unrepresented within curriculum content, feel their culture, language and experiences carry less value and their history is invisible, this can exclude them from learning and a sense of belonging to their cohort and discipline.

Top Tips

+ creating an environment where students of colour can thrive starts with self-work, followed by thinking through the curriculum and pedagogic approaches. Starting with the very basic questions 'where am I on this journey?' followed by and 'why am I teaching this?' are good places to begin
+ engaging a wide range of students in co-creating curriculum can bring additional richness to learning and a more inclusive curriculum
+ provide opportunities for students to reflect on their own experience and value diversity of student focus, ideas, language and culture.

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3.5 Clearly Defined Roles and Relationships

Within university discourse, it is often claimed that academics have 'pastoral' roles in relation to students. However, academics and students express confusion at exactly what the word 'pastoral' means in this context (1): it has no fixed meaning and can be interpreted in widely different ways. Research has shown that academic staff are often unsure of the boundaries of their role and, as a result, are unable to clearly communicate them to students (1, 2). This creates potential risk for staff, students and their university.

The students in our co-creation panel highlighted their own uncertainty about the relationships they could expect to have with academic staff and a need to understand the boundaries of the relationship. Prior to university, students have never experienced a relationship that mirrors that of students to lecturer or tutor. Without clear explanation, there is no reason why students would understand how this relationship could or should work. In addition, variations in boundaries and relationships with different academics can create confusion and uncertainty. This uncertainty led some students, in our research, to feel uncomfortable and anxious and, as a result, less likely to approach academics for support. Academic staff also report the converse effect of this uncertainty: some students also assume academics can provide them with skilled support beyond their actual capacities, for example with mental health problems (3).

At the most extreme end, when students are uncertain about the nature of the relationship and the boundaries of the role, it can lead to increased risk to students, staff and universities, either because students do not approach staff when they require support or because they seek inappropriate support for mental illness or crisis responses from academics (1). This can have negative consequences for staff and student wellbeing (4). For the safety and wellbeing of staff and students (4), it is important to ensure academics do not find themselves in ill-defined quasi-counselling roles for which they are not equipped, and which would be inappropriate even for those who are qualified (5, 6).

Students reported a desire for clear guidance on the nature of the relationship between students and academics. This desire called for specific information on questions such as:

+ How can I contact my lecturers?
+ How often can I contact them?
+ When should I contact them?
+ What can I talk to them about?

This confusion on both sides exists across the sector at a structural level. It must, therefore, be dealt with systematically (7). Universities can help at an institutional level by providing clearer definitions of these roles and communicating this to academic colleagues via staff development and to students.

There may be a need for adaptation within disciplines, but key principles can be established around the nature of the relationship and what staff can and cannot do. These principles should help individuals and teams to understand their roles and responsibilities and manage expectations on both staff and student sides. This should be accompanied by information and training in the available appropriate support for students and guidance on effective signposting.

Academics will then be better prepared and empowered to communicate and maintain the boundaries of their role. Good practice suggests that academic staff then communicate these boundaries at the beginning of the academic year and reiterate them during the year, so students have multiple opportunities to absorb and understand them.

Key Lessons

+ there is a lack of clarity about the relationship between academic staff and students, where the boundaries lie and how they can be communicated and maintained
+ students cannot be expected to accurately work out and understand these relationships without explicit, clear guidance
+ these relationships would benefit from being defined at a university level and communicated to staff via development and training
+ academic staff can then communicate these boundaries at the beginning of each year and throughout the year.

Top Tips

+ the definition of these relationships may benefit from co-creation between academics, students, learning and teaching staff, student services staff and university leaders
+ for the definition of relationships to work, they need to move beyond abstract language and deal in specifics
+ to maintain boundaries, academic staff must be empowered with the resources and skills to signpost students supportively and effectively.

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4 Learning Focused

4.1 Introduction

Research shows that learners and educational environments can adopt one of two types of goal orientation – learning focus (sometimes called mastery focus) or performance focus (1-3). Which orientation is adopted can have profound effects not only for academic learning, persistence and success but also for psychological wellbeing (1, 3).

Students who adopt a learning focus will seek to master their discipline and concentrate on their own learning and development. They will engage in deep learning, seek meaning in their learning, be intrinsically motivated, respond positively to academic challenge and generally have better wellbeing (1, 3-4). A learning focus is highly adaptive, preparing the learner for future challenges as they build a stable foundation of knowledge, understanding and skill on which further learning can be built (1, 5).

Students who adopt a performance focus will regard performance on assessment as the point of education (3, 5). They will focus on performing well relative to others and be conscious of their apparent ranking (1, 6). These students will be more likely to focus only on what they need to perform well in the next assessment, be extrinsically motivated and regard academic challenge as a potential threat to their status. Performance goals tend to be associated with higher levels of anxiety and dissatisfaction (4). Their learning can also be quickly forgotten, leaving them vulnerable to future academic challenges (3).

Evidence suggests that the curriculum can play an important role in shaping students' goal orientation. How curriculum is designed and delivered can create a cultural focus and practice that moves students into more of a learning focus. There is some evidence that once students have moved into this orientation, it can be maintained even if they re-enter a performance focus culture (2).

Curriculum that moves students into a learning focus will place a focus on deep learning, supporting students to find meaning in learning, providing an internally coherent curriculum that links concepts, engages them in sustainable challenge and creates a collaborative learning culture that de-emphasises competition. This section will focus on exploring these concepts and identifying practice which can help. It should be noted, that the concepts in this section are supported by and linked to other themes in the tool kit – particularly those aspects addressed in Social Belonging and Scaffolded Design.

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4.2 Deep and Surface Learning

One of the ways in which student approaches to learning can be conceptualised is in terms of Deep and Surface learning (1).

In deep learning, as the name suggests, students engage deeply with their subject. They study for understanding and meaning, reading and thinking more widely and deeply. They engage critically with subject content, have a positive emotional connection to their discipline and be motivated by a desire to know and understand more. Deep learning can lead students to develop their own insights, arguments and creative ideas (1-2).

In surface learning, students tend to move over the surface of the subject, focussing on what they need to know for extrinsic purposes. Their focus is much narrower, focussed on regurgitating important knowledge without necessarily understanding its context or application. Each area of study is learned separately and they are less likely to make connections between concepts and ideas. Surface learning can lead students to rote memorisation that does not necessarily remain in their memory beyond the relevant assessment point.

Deep Learning	Surface Learning
Reads and studies widely and deeply	Reads and studies narrowly
Aims to understand the meaning behind the material	Aims to regurgitate the material
Connects new material to previous knowledge and beliefs	Learns subjects in isolation
Seeks to create new arguments and ideas from what they have learned	Seeks to repeat arguments of others accurately
Motivated internally by desire to learn or love of subject	Externally motivated by the need to pass assessments or gain grades
Thinks critically about what they have learned	Focuses on memorising necessary material without examining it

Most students will combine these approaches across their time at university. However, research suggests that those who predominantly take a deep learning approach are more likely to learn more and perform better academically. More recent work has also suggested that there can be a causal relationship between the learning approach a student adopts and their wellbeing (3-5). While this is not true for all students, in general, students who adopt a deep learning approach are more likely to have good wellbeing than those with a surface learning approach. (There are some students who adopt a surface learning approach who maintain good wellbeing – this is discussed more below).

There are some plausible mechanisms which can explain this general finding. For students who engage in deep learning, learning itself can become a source of positive wellbeing. Research has clearly shown that engaging in activity that is personally meaningful is beneficial for mental health and wellbeing (6-7). Deep learning can also provide students with positive, emotional experiences such as pleasure and a sense of fulfilment (8-9), which in turn increases cognitive capacity for further learning. By engaging the student's ongoing interest, it can also lead to personal growth and development. Deep learning builds understanding and disciplinary mastery, providing a more stable platform for future learning across the degree. As a result, students can develop greater self-efficacy and approach future challenges with greater confidence. Deep learning emerges from intrinsic motivation – as the work of Deci and Ryan has shown (7), individuals who have more intrinsic motivation have better wellbeing.

Alternatively, surface learning is void of these potential benefits, although there may be some sense of satisfaction of meeting a deadline or completing an assessment. In surface learning focus tends to gravitate to completion of the assessment. Focus on doing what needs to be done, for an assessment, can also carry with it a greater focus on the possibility of not passing the assessment. As a result, students perceive a greater level of threat from engagement with their course of study, leading to greater burn out (5). Surface learning does not develop students' knowledge, skill and understanding in ways that prepare them for future learning and academic challenge. As a

consequence, students are vulnerable to finding their future study outside of their zone of development. Surface learning tends to be extrinsically motivated, which has been shown to be negatively correlated with good wellbeing (7). (Students who are surface learners and maintain good wellbeing, are potentially getting meaning and intrinsic motivation from life outside their studies. For these students, competently completing work in a strategic fashion may be enough to avoid a negative impact on their wellbeing. They may also derive some satisfaction from simply completing work by a deadline and feeling in control of their workload).

Importantly, students' approaches to learning are often more a matter of acculturation than active choice. For many students surface learning may be the only approach which they have previously been taught and developed. Others may adopt a surface approach due to time pressure and competing demands, such as paid work or caring responsibilities. Deep learning requires the development of skills and practice, which are less likely to grow without explicit support and direction. Given this is becomes important to consider the active role curriculum can play in influencing and actively encouraging students approaches to learning.

Curriculum design can help to move students towards deep learning, providing a structure and culture to support this move. Meta-learning components can raise students' awareness of the benefits of deep learning and encourage deeper learning approaches. An internally coherent curriculum, which focusses on developing students' conceptual understanding, can deepen their learning and engage them more meaningfully. Assessment design and focus can also push students towards deeper learning by focussing more on the assessment of Know How knowledge rather than Know That (10). Finally, curriculum can make space to support students to find meaning in their discipline through content sequencing, learning exercises and assessment choice.

Key Lessons

+ deep and surface learning are two important concepts in understanding how students approach learning
+ deep learning can provide students with a source of positive wellbeing, while surface learning can increase anxiety and erode students' ability and confidence to engage with future learning
+ the curriculum can support students to move towards deep learning via content, exercise and assessment strategy.

Top Tips

+ create space in the curriculum to develop students' understanding of learning approaches and how deep learning can be beneficial
+ use assessments to push students towards deeper learning, focussing on assessing Know How eg, by using vivas to explore student understanding of concepts, the connections between them and how they can be applied in other contexts

+ use retrieval practice in the classroom (online or in person) to guide students towards studying for deeper understanding
+ consider using the first sessions of a module to help students connect to concepts that are meaningful or may have practical application for them and build clear meaningful connections between modules.

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4.3 Finding Meaning in Learning

One of the ways in which students can derive positive wellbeing from the curriculum is through the production of meaning. Research, conducted for this project, has demonstrated a positive relationship between how meaningful students find their curriculum and their overall levels of wellbeing (1). When students find curriculum content and activities meaningful, it can enhance psychological and behavioural engagement and learning and lead to positive emotions and experiences such as fulfilment, passion, pride, hope, and confidence. By contrast, a lack of meaning is linked with negative emotions and experiences such as anger, boredom, frustration, demotivation and disengagement (2-3).

The production of positive emotions through learning can aid self-regulation (4), suggesting a long-term, positive impact on mental wellbeing. Meaningful work is linked to greater psychological wellbeing (5) and there is an indication that students who perceive their studies to be meaningful have greater life satisfaction (6). When students find learning meaningful, it also helps to place them within their academic discipline, integrating their values, interests and experiences with their field of study. This can increase their sense of belonging and strengthen their self-concept, providing focus for their ongoing growth and development (7).

Meaningful learning has been defined in a number of ways (1). These include personal significance (8), the connection between curriculum content and students' own lives, interests and values (9), impacts on personal growth (10), or with concepts such as engagement, motivation and satisfaction (11). Research for this project suggests that personal meaningfulness is more important for mental wellbeing than relevance to future potential jobs or careers (1).

Despite this, many students do not see their academic studies as meaningful (12). This may be due to a secondary school system that has trained students to focus on surface level, extrinsic performance as the purpose of education ie, that the point of education is not learning per se, but rather to pass end of school assessments. Being able to find meaning in academic content and activities can sometimes be a happy accident but is better thought of as a skill that must be developed (13). Students in our research suggested that academics rarely pointed out to students why content was meaningful or worked with students, to help them find meaning in what was being learned.

However, students in our co-creation panels were able to provide examples of ways in which academics had helped them make meaningful connections. These often involved demonstrating how content was relevant to other individuals, groups, or the wider environment, or involved reflection on the connection between the subject and a wider sense of meaning in life (14). Students suggested that drier, more difficult material could be rendered more engaging and accessible, if they were first helped to find a meaningful connection to the subject.

Academics who are familiar with the entire landscape of their discipline can find it easy to identify why a particular subject has meaning and importance, However, for novice students this meaning is not always obvious or easy to grasp. Creating space in the curriculum to explore why subject content is meaningful, to connect it to wider issues and support students to find ways to link it to their own interests, values and experiences can deepen their engagement and thereby improve learning and

wellbeing. Over time, this activity can help students to develop the skill of finding meaning within subjects or tasks for themselves, which can also be a protective factor for future wellbeing and performance.

Key Lessons

+ students can derive positive wellbeing from the curriculum when they find content and activities meaningful
+ students find learning meaningful when it has personal significance, creates connections between curriculum content and students' own lives, interests and values and impacts on personal growth
+ many students report that they do not find their learning meaningful
+ deliberate practice within the curriculum can help students develop the ability to find meaning in learning and tasks, which can help protect their wellbeing in future, whether as a student or in the workplace.

Top Tips

+ begin new subjects by exploring connections between the topic and wider agendas and by helping students find a personal connection to some element of what will be covered
+ encourage deep learning and the construction of meaning, rather than rote memorisation
+ scaffold assessment to allow students to pursue questions and aspects of each subject that they find meaningful to their value, interests and experiences – eg, by providing a range of questions, allowing students to shape their own questions or providing questions that allow students to follow their interests.

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4.4 Curriculum Coherence

There is good evidence that whether or not a curriculum is internally coherent can influence aspects of student learning that are important for wellbeing (1). These aspects include the development of mastery and self-efficacy, the development of a student's own self-narrative, within their discipline and the quality of meaning gained from their learning (2).

Internal coherence refers to coherence in curriculum content – what is taught, in what order and how this content is explicitly linked together. An internally coherent curriculum deliberately organises and

sequences content. This enables students to develop a growing understanding of their discipline and systematically ensures that students understand how different aspects and concepts, from across the curriculum, are related to each other (3-5). A coherent curriculum supports deep learning, which is beneficial for academic outcomes and wellbeing (2) (see Deep and Surface Learning).

In an incoherent curriculum, the sequencing of information has no clear pattern of development or narrative, which students can easily follow (6). Knowledge or skill training may appear randomly and students are left to make connections between concepts and subject matter themselves. This is a risk as being able to connect and integrate disparate concepts and facts is a high order skill, unlikely to be possessed by students, particularly in the first year. An incoherent curriculum can push students towards surface learning and rote memorisation, which may be short term and lacking in context (6). In these circumstances, students may be able to remember and perform a technique or skill but not understand why, how the skill works or in which circumstances it should or should not be applied (2). This surface learning is vulnerable to forgetting and, stripped of context, does not provide a secure platform for future learning which can, in turn, lead to greater anxiety, a reduced sense of belonging and disengagement.

While many academics will take great care to ensure their individual modules are sequenced logically, the modular system can result in incoherence between modules (7). For example, two closely related concepts, taught in two separate modules may never be connected in students' minds.

How and why things are sequenced in the way that they are, may also make a difference to the quality of learning and wellbeing. Rata (8) argues for sequencing to be guided by the interrelationship of important concepts. This is based on Ryle's (9) conceptions of different types of knowledge – Know That and Know How. A curriculum sequenced around concepts can aid the development of Know How knowledge that provides deeper learning and a greater sense of mastery over the student's discipline. When students understand their subject conceptually, they can approach new learning with more confidence and can more easily integrate new learning into pre-existing mental structures.

The deeper learning provided by a coherent curriculum can lead to a growth in student self-efficacy and a better understanding of their discipline. This in turn allows students to place themselves more confidently in their discipline, helping to develop their own self-narrative and professional identity. Being able to link concepts together allows students to form a coherent narrative account of their subject and a more stable hold on their discipline. This also allows them to more easily find and extract meaning from their studies. All of this is beneficial for their wellbeing across the duration of their programme.

To achieve a coherent curriculum, content must be sequenced and connected across the entire programme – between and across modules and years of study. Consideration must also be given to elective modules, to ensure they are meaningful connected to core modules and student development and to ensure that choice is extended appropriately in a scaffolded fashion. This demands a level of team planning, rather than the development of modules in isolation.

Key Lessons

+ an internally coherent curriculum is one in which content is sequenced and connections between facts and concepts are made explicitly for students. It develops logically, providing a narrative path for students to follow
+ an internally coherent curriculum benefits student wellbeing by supporting the development of mastery, self-efficacy, self-narrative within discipline, deep learning and meaning
+ an incoherent curriculum can leave students disengaged and lead to surface learning of apparently unconnected subjects
+ curriculum must be coherent between and across modules and years of study, this requires co-ordination in design and delivery across the teaching team.

Top Tips

+ in design, map the expected development of students' understanding of key concepts and ensure that this is carried out across modules
+ provide students with additional material that supports their ability to link content
+ use formative summative assessment to build students' ability to connect concepts and focus assessment on Know How knowledge.

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4.5 Sustainable Challenge

Encountering a degree of challenge and difficulty can help develop skills, self-belief and ability to manage future challenges (1). A level of difficulty in education is also necessary for learning to take place – without some degree of stretch, new information will not be encoded into a student's memory. Academic challenge can therefore help to build learning and contribute to student self-efficacy.

However, the level of challenge is important as it sits on a spectrum in which balance brings rewards and extremes can cause harm. Those who face the greatest challenges in life have poorer wellbeing than those who experience fewer challenges – even if the individuals facing challenge have greater 'resilience skills.' (2) It is also true that those who face high levels of challenge tend to have lower levels of resilience, than those who face less challenge (2).

In an academic context, too high a level of challenge can drive students into avoidance or surface learning, survival behaviours. This can reduce potential learning, eliminate the possibility of positive wellbeing benefits accruing and cause anxiety, loss of self-belief and reduced motivation.

In this context, we refer to the ideal level of challenge as "Sustainable Challenge." When challenge is sustainable for a student, it can also be beneficial for wellbeing and learning.

Challenge is most likely to be sustainable and beneficial when:

+ it is within the scope of a student's ability (in their proximal zone of development)
+ they have access to necessary internal and external resources
+ it is experienced within a supportive social environment
+ they receive necessary practical support
+ the challenge allows time for the student to maintain behaviours which are good for their wellbeing, such as resting, sleeping, exercising etc
+ learning is sequenced appropriately, allowing time for students to absorb new information and develop their understanding
+ the student believes success is possible for them.

In this section we address two components of sustainable challenge. The academic content of the challenge (desirable difficulty) and the organisational nature of the challenge (workload).

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4.5.1 Desirable Difficulty

For learning to take place it is necessary for students to expend a degree of effort (1). It is a truism to say that the human memory is not like computer memory – but it is nevertheless worth pointing out and remembering this fact. New learning cannot be simply loaded into a human memory. It is not enough to expose or re-expose students to information or content. For information to be remembered, it must be adequately processed, connected to existing knowledge and registered as important (2-4). Encountering difficulty can help to encode new learning into a student's long-term memory, creating a foundation for future learning. On the other hand, if a task requires no effort, students are unlikely to remember or engage with what they have learned.

Research has also shown that challenging academic work can be more effective in improving motivation than easier tasks (1). More difficult work and learning can feel more meaningful and can contribute to a student's sense of growth and mastery, thereby increasing self-efficacy. Students in our co-creation panel recounted instances in which engaging with particularly challenging academic work had led to benefits to their self-concept and positive emotions, such as excitement, interest and joy.

However, this does not mean that any level of difficulty is helpful (1). If a new subject or activity is too difficult – if it is too far away from a student's existing level of knowledge, understanding and/or skill – then students are likely to become overwhelmed and to disengage. When a subject is too hard, students are more likely to avoid it, rather than work harder to master it (2). This can lead to a reduction in self-efficacy and an increase in student self-doubt and imposter syndrome.

Given this impact on learning and wellbeing, positioning the difficulty of academic learning is therefore a key task for curriculum design and delivery. Bjork and Bjork (1) suggest that this can be conceptualised as 'desirable difficulty.' As they emphasise

> "... difficulties are desirable because they trigger encoding and retrieval processes that support learning, comprehension, and remembering. If, however, the learner does not have the background knowledge or skills to respond to them successfully, they become undesirable difficulties."

There is, therefore, a link between creating desirable difficulty, scaffolding the curriculum to students' current ability and Vygotsky's concept of the curriculum, guiding students to their zone of proximal development (5). Challenge can be good for wellbeing, providing it is within reach of a student's current competency. To be able to gauge this properly requires ongoing informal assessment of a cohort's current level of competency (6).

There are a number of techniques that have been shown to improve learning through desirable difficulty. These include using different types of tasks and assessments; so students have to engage deeply with learning through more than one method. Interleaving subject matter, by building connections between different content, rather than teaching content in separate blocks. Using low and no stakes retrieval practice through tests, quizzes and questions in class to build knowledge and understanding (1, 4).

Encouraging students to engage with desirable difficulty can also be supported by normalising confusion and uncertainty when encountering new material and concepts and by creating a psychologically safe culture, in which uncertainty is recognised as a step in the learning process (7). Meta-learning can help students to understand that a period of not knowing, prior to passing through a threshold concept, can deepen learning, anchoring it more securely in their memory and making it more accessible for future retrieval (8).

Key Lessons

+ academic challenge and difficulty can support learning, motivation and wellbeing
+ the level of difficulty must be calibrated to students' current levels of knowledge, understanding or skill, or students may become overwhelmed, disengage and experience negative impacts on wellbeing
+ this desirable difficulty can be supported by curriculum design and delivery through techniques such as interleaving subject matter, using different learning methods and retrieval practice
+ the curriculum can also create a culture in which students feel safe to find new learning difficult at first.

Top Tips

+ use a variety of tasks to explore each subject – even teaching the same material in a different room can strengthen memory and retrieval
+ use retrieval exercises in the classroom to enhance students' memory and retrieval and to help you identify students' current learning and any gaps in understanding
+ use regular retrieval exercises to establish and maintain a culture in which students can acknowledge gaps in knowledge and misunderstandings, safe in the knowledge that the response will be to support their learning rather than criticise or chastise
+ interleave subjects and help students find the connections between them to enhance understanding and curriculum coherence.

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4.5.2 Workload

Consistent with the research literature, students in our co-creation panels identified workload as having a potential impact on wellbeing (1-3). Students were clear that they do not see hard work as problematic. The issue they described was around their ability to control their workload, particularly when a number of deadlines came together, and they did not have the necessary information to begin work on them until they were close to those deadlines.

These negative consequences of deadline bunching are an in-built risk within the modular structure, in which subjects are taught discretely and learning is assessed at the end of each module. Unless explicitly addressed in design, it is almost inevitable that students will be asked to submit work for every module on dates that are close together (4). Alternative approaches to the modular structure, such as Victoria University's block teaching system offer ways of avoiding these inherent weaknesses (5).

Students also identified that these negative impacts could be particularly problematic for students who had less flexibility in terms of time due to other commitments outside of university – such as caring, paid work or being an elite athlete (6). This means they must either fit the workload into the reduced hours they have available or begin sacrificing their health eg, by reducing the number of hours they sleep.

Modules in which students are only assessed at the end of term, can also create a see-saw effect between under-demand early in term, in which students can be under occupied, bored and lethargic, followed by over-demand. Moving between these two behaviours can be problematic and students may struggle to find the motivation to engage, even while cognitively recognising how important it is that they do so. Shifting emotional and motivational states is not easy and can lead to students feeling that they are falling behind, further eroding self-belief and motivation.

There are a number of ways in which high workload can have a negative impact on wellbeing.

1. Research has shown that the perception of workload and an individual's belief in whether they can meet the demand can impact wellbeing (1, 7-8). This closely feeds into feelings of control – whether the individual perceives their workload to be within their control. How work is framed and explained to students is therefore important, as is their ability to understand how they can best approach the work they have been set.
2. Research has shown that fatigue in students is an important part of the process of producing their state of wellbeing and that this is linked to workload (9). This is particularly problematic if students sacrifice sleep as this can have consequences for physical wellbeing, mental health and cognitive capacity, reducing learning and academic performance (10).
3. Research has demonstrated that human beings have limited capacity to manage cognitive load. If there is a gap between the capacity available and the capacity required for a task, this can lead to unhelpful levels of stress, anxiety and burn out (11).
4. Individual motivation is linked to this capacity. When the gap between the capacity available and the capacity needed is large, it can undermine a student's motivation and self-belief.
5. Students who are facing high workloads often respond by making quality sacrifices. Rather than engaging deeply with their assignments, they adopt surface level survival strategies to simply get the work completed to a reasonably successful standard. This strips them of the potential positive wellbeing benefits of engaging in academic work – such as deeper and more meaningful learning. Surface engagement in this way is also likely to lead to lower learning overall, thus undermining future learning, self-efficacy and motivation.

All of which does not mean that hard work is bad for wellbeing. Research has also shown that sustainable challenge can be beneficial for wellbeing, especially in the medium to long term. A sustainable workload can provide stretching challenge and structure for ongoing development, leading to greater academic learning and achievement (1). It can also support students to build a sustainable knowledge base for future learning.

Workload design is therefore a key consideration within curriculum design. Workload must be structured across the curriculum and between modules, to provide sustainable challenge that benefits learning and wellbeing. This can avoid the see-saw effect of under-demand followed by over-demand and students becoming overwhelmed by deadline bunching.

Key Lessons

+ while hard work can be good for wellbeing, the structure of a student's workload can have negative consequences for wellbeing and the depth of their learning
+ deadline bunching can cause students to become overwhelmed and to adopt surface level strategies. Bunching can also undermine motivation and self-belief
+ negative impacts can be greater for students with other commitments who have less flexibility in their time
+ workload structures need to be planned into curriculum design and across modules to produce sustainable challenge

Top Tips

+ consider the structure and spread of student workload across the curriculum in design
+ ensure students understand how to approach assessments, to create greater confidence that they can complete it competently and reduce perceptions that workload is too great
+ ensure students have stretching academic activity across the whole of term, to build sustainable challenge.

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4.6 Assessment for Learning

In much of the debate around the relationship between curriculum and wellbeing, assessment is regarded as a potential risk point which can create unhelpful stress, anxiety, self-doubt and fatigue (1). This is particularly the case when students and assessment design have a performance focus – when reaching a specific set of predetermined standards is the reason assessment exists and is the centre of student focus (2-3). In this scenario, assessments will carry high stakes – there is a significant price to pay for failure - and students will be focussed mainly or solely on what they need to do to succeed. Little attention will be paid to the opportunity to learn through the assessment. As a consequence, assessments can appear as a threat, which can create a fear response that impedes learning and is negative for wellbeing (4-5).

However, assessment does not have to be conceptualised or operationalised in this way. Completing assessment tasks can, in fact, increase and deepen learning, heightening a sense of meaningful connection between student and subject and building confidence and self-efficacy (6-7). Engaging in assessment activity can be good for learning and wellbeing.

A key element of a learning focussed curriculum is an assessment strategy that focusses on how assessment can support learning. Assessment for learning was defined by Black et al. (6) as

> "…any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting students' learning. It thus differs from assessment designed primarily to serve the purposes of accountability, or of ranking, or of certifying competence."

Assessment for learning is often associated with formative learning but it can describe any form of assessment, as long as the primary purpose and effect is to deepen and enhance student learning. These assessments will be specifically designed to:

+ increase disciplinary knowledge (eg, by requiring students to engage in further reading or research)
+ build understanding (eg, by having students work with complex concepts and applying them to new situations)
+ and/or develop key skills and competencies (eg, by requiring practice and refinement).

In this model, assessment is not seen as an activity that occurs after teaching and learning, but rather is viewed as a component part of teaching and learning. Students deepen their learning through engaging with the assessment task and by receiving and responding to feedback on their work (8-9). Discussing this approach with students can also help to establish a culture that has a learning focus, taking attention away from performance, competition and fear of potential failure (2, 4, 10).

In curriculum design, therefore, constructive alignment between learning outcomes, teaching and assessment should focus on how the assessment will support students to develop to meet the learning focussed outcomes. Assignment briefs can highlight the learning and development students can expect by completing the task. Assessments may also be accompanied by meta-cognitive activities, asking students to evaluate their own work, discuss their own learning and development and respond to feedback.

Additional gain may also be found if assessments are designed to encourage deep learning and to support students to engage with relevant material that they find meaningful (or to find meaning in key material) (11). In this way assessment activity can support students to embed and develop the knowledge, understanding and skill that will be required for future stages of learning. In turn, through reflection, students can increase their sense of self-efficacy and engaging in assessment can produce positive emotional and psychological experiences such as a sense of fulfilment, excitement, pleasure and meaning.

Key Lessons

+ while assessment is often associated with risks to wellbeing, if well designed it can support learning and wellbeing
+ assessment for learning places a priority on promoting student learning, rather than on measuring ability to meet predetermined criteria
+ assessment for learning is seen as a component part of teaching and learning. Learning can be supported through the design of the task, through feedback and through accompanying meta-cognitive exercises
+ an assessment for learning strategy can support a performance focussed culture, that is beneficial for learning and wellbeing.

Top Tips

+ identify key knowledge, understanding and skills that students should develop and ensure the assessment task is designed to stretch and develop these
+ use assessment briefs to highlight the learning and development students can expect by completing the task
+ provide accompanying meta-cognitive tasks, such as requiring students to reflect on their own work or provide responses to feedback detailing how they will apply it in future learning
+ use feedback to highlight the learning and development students have gained from completing the task.

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5 Scaffolded Design

5.1 Introduction

A key pedagogic principle, supported by decades of research, is the concept of scaffolded instruction and learning (1-2). Scaffolding in curriculum design guides students to move from novice through to independent learner, providing support, appropriate stretch and sustainable challenge at every stage of learning.

Scaffolding, in a higher education curriculum, accepts that many students will begin without key knowledge and skills and that they may be used to a more passive, performance focussed approach to learning (2). The curriculum is specifically designed to begin learning where students are and to provide the additional instruction and support they need at this early stage. Learning is appropriately paced, with manageable amounts of information explored in chunks that are logically sequenced to build a coherent picture using core concepts (3-4).

Through this approach, the curriculum ensures that students are explicitly prepared for each task and stage of learning. This ensures that learning remains within the student's proximal zone of development (1). As the student develops knowledge, understanding and skills, support and instruction can be reduced to allow them to continue to develop independence. In this way, the structure of the curriculum provides students with feelings of safety and control and supports the development of genuine competence and self-efficacy. Academic challenge remains within reach of the student's ability and connects to pre-existing learning and experiences, helping students to find meaning within their subject and to build a sense of disciplinary belonging.

Scaffolding also supports students to navigate elements of the hidden curriculum, that may otherwise act as barriers to learning, particularly for those students from non-traditional backgrounds (5). A curriculum that employs scaffolding will not assume the existence of knowledge or of social or navigational capital.

Curriculum that does not provide this scaffolding and which assumes pre-developed ability, can create distance between students and their subject. This can lead students to doubt their ability to succeed, increase imposter syndrome, adopt surface level, survival approaches and increase anxiety. Feelings of incompetence can also severely undermine motivation and increase the risk of withdrawal.

This section will explore elements of scaffolding, within a higher education curriculum, and specific ways in which it can be utilised to support learning and wellbeing.

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5.2 Transition

Several decades worth of research has now established that the transition into university is key for student learning, persistence, success and wellbeing (1-3). The quality of transition can predict student success over the course of a degree. During transition, students are on a journey that can result in integration to their new university and course or disengagement that can lead to withdrawal. As the field has developed, transition has come to be regarded as a socio-psychological process of becoming, in which emotion, social connection, efficacy and wellbeing are key elements (4-5).

Our own qualitative research found that students can experience stress and pressure transitioning to university:

> "Obviously uni is hard anyway, don't get me wrong, but maybe it wasn't what I was expecting from A-level and college. It was quite a big step up. So that's what I found most stressful really."
>
> *(Nursing student, first year undergraduate)*

Tinto's work over many years identified the need for students to integrate socially and academically into their new university (1). Finding new social networks and meaningful connection to their subject discipline can ameliorate the potential emotional disruption many students experience at the beginning of their university career. Kift's model of transition pedagogy argues that the curriculum should be explicitly designed for commencing students, based around their prior experiences and existing knowledge and skills (6). This form of scaffolding can support students into their new academic career, ensuring they acquire the skills and understanding they need to be successful.

There are a number of key principles that flow from this into any possible curriculum design.

1. Curriculum should be designed with an awareness of the possible emotional and psychological disruption experienced by many students during transition (5, 7). Allowances should be made for the fact that this may disrupt their initial ability to remember new information.
2. Curriculum should provide students with opportunities to socially integrate with their peers, particularly in the early weeks of term (8). Not all students will be able to engage with extra-curricular social activities, so informal curricular activity to enhance cohort identity and belonging is key.
3. Curriculum should be designed for the knowledge and skills that students do have, rather than the ones we wish they have (6). The acquisition of knowledge requires pre-knowledge – if the curriculum begins too far in advance of students' current knowledge they will not be able to engage or integrate academically.
4. Curriculum should provide early opportunities to assess students' skills, knowledge and understanding and respond with appropriate support and guidance (9).
5. Curriculum should engage students with meaningful aspects of the curriculum at the earliest stage possible – ideally in induction/orientation week rather than waiting until the beginning of 'formal' teaching (10).
6. Curriculum should include aspects of meta-learning that explicitly supports students to understand how to be successful on their course – this may include psycho-education to support students to develop insight, strategies and behaviours in relation to their own self-management, wellbeing and learning (11).
7. Curriculum should support students to recognise their own strengths, the benefits they bring to the classroom and their own self belief that they can be successful and do belong at university.
8. As Kift has argued (6), transition must be 'integrated and implemented through an intentionally designed curriculum by seamless partnerships of academic and professional staff in a whole-of-institution transformation'. As the glue that binds student experience together, the curriculum must be the central vehicle through which all crucial interventions, guidance and information is delivered. This requires whole university collaboration in curriculum design and delivery.

Key Lessons

+ transition is a crucial element for student success, persistence and wellbeing
+ curriculum should be designed with a specific focus on the process through which students must travel during transition
+ the curriculum must be appropriately scaffolded and must explicitly prepare all students for success, no matter their previous experience or learning

+ during transition students need support, via the curriculum, to socially integrate, academically integrate, develop self-belief and manage their wellbeing
+ it is easier to achieve all of this within curriculum design if the design process is genuinely collaborative, involving colleagues from across the university.

Top Tips

+ begin meaningful engagement with the curriculum as soon as possible – preferably during induction/orientation eg, with no stakes tasks that engage students with aspects of their discipline that are interesting, exciting, fun etc.
+ group tasks centred on disciplinary content can provide a focus for conversations and social connections
+ acknowledge the normality of transition experiences and provide reassurance – if possible, by giving concrete examples of steps students can take to feel more connected and settled in
+ academics and colleagues in Student Services can work together to provide psycho-education and guidance to support students to navigate transition successfully

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5.3 Explicitly Prepare Students for Learning and Assessment Tasks

A basic adage of scaffolded education is that if students are required to know, understand or be able to do something, then this must be explicitly taught, and space and support provided through which students can learn (1-2). It cannot be assumed that all students possess the knowledge or skills required by a programme of study unless they have explicitly had the opportunity to acquire those skills. As school systems, both in the UK and internationally, move towards more performance focussed approaches, it is inevitable that some students will arrive at university without some key skills in place - such as the ability to research or filter knowledge claims (3-4).

There are significant equality implications in this arena (5). Any assumption of knowledge or skills rewards those who have been lucky enough to have received previous preparation and punishes those who have not had the same luck. We therefore need to ensure that the teaching and learning experiences we provide for students incorporate active opportunities to learn, and resolve any uncertainty, about the tasks they are engaged with.

In addition, some students may also lack the underlying skills and understanding necessary to engage productively with unfamiliar tasks or the process of acquiring new knowledge and skills independently (6-7). Academics have assimilated such a level of expertise that it can become invisible to them Ie, tacit knowledge. This is a common psychological phenomenon – people normalise their own experiences. As a result, academics can regard high levels of skill and conceptual knowledge as simply being common sense (such as the ability to investigate, problem solve and integrate new learning into existing understandings). Learning processes can appear to be obvious to academics, requiring no explanation. While for novice students those same processes can be opaque and impossible to discern (7). It is therefore important that disciplinary knowledge and skills in learning are unpacked with students and account taken of the diversity of prior learner experiences.

When students encounter a gap between their knowledge or skills and a particular task in learning and cannot clearly see a way to span that gap, it can impact negatively on their wellbeing. Students may experience self-doubt, imposter syndrome, worry, dissatisfaction and low mood, which can in turn lead to avoidance behaviours, loss of motivation and academic disengagement. They are also likely to take a survival approach to the relevant tasks, reducing potential learning and the meaning they gain from the activity.

Some programmes and universities have attempted to address this inequality of preparation by providing additional classes to help students catch up. However, work for this project, with practitioners and lecturers, has identified that the students who seem to need these interventions can also be the least likely to attend. While this may seem counter-intuitive it does align with research. The least prepared students are also those who are most likely to work longer hours in paid work or to have caring responsibilities (8). Equally, being aware of a gap in current knowledge can lead to feelings of anxiety, which in turn can lead students to avoid engaging with any practice that reminds them of this gap (9). We have long known that study anxious students tend to avoid practices that would address gaps in their skills (10). Some students may also not recognise that a gap exists because they lack the meta-cognitive ability to identify it.

This, therefore, means that students must be explicitly prepared for assessments and tasks within their taught curriculum. Focussing on the development of core skills and knowledge, can draw students' attention to their importance, demonstrate a path to acquiring them and highlight a student's increasing ability overtime. In this way, students can build self-confidence, genuine competence and create a platform for future deep learning.

Examples of how this can be addressed might be in providing clear guidance in the difference between an essay and report; training in referencing and the importance and value of academic integrity; teaching students to present well for public speaking assessments; and preparing students to work in groups. Research clearly shows that simply asking students to take on these tasks, on the assumption that they will work them out by doing, often results in widening inequality gaps and students mis-learning and adopting unhelpful habits.

Key Lessons

+ if we want students to know, understand or be able to do something, we must teach it and provide structured opportunities for students to learn. We cannot assume that all students possess the knowledge or skills required by a programme of study unless they have explicitly had the opportunity to acquire those skills
+ some students may also lack the underlying skills and understanding necessary to acquire new knowledge and skills for themselves
+ any assumption of knowledge or skills rewards those who have been lucky enough to have received previous preparation and punishes those who have not had the same luck

+ additional classes tend not to attract those students who most need the intervention, because of other commitments, lack of awareness or anxiety, necessary knowledge, understanding or skill must therefore be taught and embedded in the curriculum.

Top Tips

+ provide students with a glossary of common terms – both disciplinary terms and terms related to the language of learning and assessment
+ use learning outcomes to identify the key knowledge, understanding and skills students will require to achieve these outcomes, then ensure these are explicitly taught within the curriculum
+ use worked examples in the classroom to demonstrate how students can complete academic work successfully
+ embed meta-learning into the taught curriculum.

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5.4 Provide Clarity in Design and Delivery

Research has shown that clarity of instruction and assessment has a large, statistically significant, impact on student learning and motivation (1-2). Students in our co-creation panel also identified a relationship between clarity in teaching and assessment and their wellbeing. In particular, they highlighted that a lack of clarity can lead to feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, disconnection from their subject and being overwhelmed. Alternatively, when teaching was delivered with clarity and employed a range of techniques to ensure student understanding, this was seen to positively impact on wellbeing, increasing sense of commitment, self-efficacy and enjoyment.

Clarity requires attention both in the design and delivery of curriculum. Within curriculum design, clarity can be gained by ensuring that learning outcomes are learning or mastery focussed and that taught content and learning activities are specifically designed to deliver to these outcomes (3-4). In other words – there is clarity in design about what students must learn, what must they know, understand and be able to do by the end of the module or programme, and clear connection between intended learning outcomes, criteria, and the learning these reflect. Learning must then be sequenced logically, building student knowledge, understanding and skill, over time, focusing on assessment as learning, towards summative assessment.

Clarity is also provided by a coherent curriculum, that provides a narrative framework and fits facts into disciplinary concepts that are explicitly explained and connected to each other (5). Together, this can provide students with an understanding of the entire programme of learning, the process they can expect to follow to reach the required level of mastery, and a sense of momentum in learning. In turn, this will increase students' sense of control of their learning, enhance self-efficacy (6), and foster proactive rather than reactive of approaches to challenges such as summative assessment.

However, a well-designed curriculum still requires clarity and quality of delivery (2, 7). Students in our research highlighted the negative impact of confusing and dull teaching delivery on learning and wellbeing. This can be compounded if academics misunderstand students' current levels of subject knowledge and expertise. Novices and experts approach learning and problem solving differently (8). If academics assume novice students will approach learning with an academic's expert approach, it can result in confusion, disconnection and disengagement.

Ensuring clarity also matters for curriculum delivery, at classroom level (online or in person). Clarity in delivery requires pacing that is appropriate to the cohort, variation in voice and gestures and the use of a variety of techniques to explore concepts such as stories, illustrations and worked examples (3, 9-10). This can be supported by questions to check for student understanding, activities to consolidate learning and breaks to allow students to refresh.

Finally, clarity has significant importance in assessment design (task, condition, timing) and framing. Students should be clear on what they are required to do, how to go about tackling the assessment (the process), have the requisite skills (that have been developed by the programme) and understand how the assessment will support their learning. The challenge of the assessment should not be in working out what they are being asked to do but in the intentional stretch on their disciplinary learning. Ambiguously worded assessments, unclear requirements or a lack of preparation can force students into surface learning strategies and increase anxiety. The guiding question in relation to students' tasks may be "What is hard and why?

Helpful Challenge	Stress Inducing Difficulty
Know what to do	Don't know what is required
Understand how to do it	Don't understand process
Have, or can develop, necessary skills	Lack necessary skills
Understand how to use strengths	Weaknesses are highlighted
But the task remains challenging to complete	Actual task may not be difficult when understood

Key Lessons

+ clarity in curriculum design and delivery has a significant impact on student learning and wellbeing
+ students do not have the disciplinary knowledge of academics so curriculum must, therefore, be designed and delivered so that novice students can understand the process of learning and negotiate the programme at a reasonable pace
+ clarity in design can be delivered by learning focussed outcomes, logically sequenced lessons building from students' current knowledge and a coherent curriculum that explicitly explains and connects concepts to each other
+ clarity in delivery can be ensured by appropriate pacing, use of voice and gestures, exploring concepts through multiple techniques and exercises and checking for student understanding as an ongoing practice
+ clarity in assessment will ensure students know what to do and how to do it, that they will have the required skills and understand how the assessment supports learning. Academic stretch will come from the disciplinary learning required by the assessment.

Top Tips

+ be clear about what students must learn and ensure these are mastery rather than performance focussed goals
+ provide clear and carefully planned explanations for abstract ideas and theories, using a variety of techniques eg, stories, worked examples etc
+ ask questions throughout to ensure students have understood and adjust and recover material if necessary
+ check students have understood assessment briefs, how they should approach them and how the assessment will support their learning.

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5.5 Provide Scaffolded Control of Assessment

Providing students with choice, in relation to assessments, can lead to increased motivation, students finding more meaning in their discipline and purpose in their learning activities (1-2). However, there is a balance to be struck within this approach, as research also shows that too great a level of choice can decrease motivation and cause unhelpful anxiety (3-4).

Research into psychological responses to choice highlights that, while no or very limited choice can be bad for our wellbeing, too great a level of choice can leave us feeling overwhelmed, anxious and fatigued (4-5). Key to finding the ideal balance is an individual's level of control in making a choice, the resources available to call upon in choice making, the number of choices involved, their self-perceived competence to make a particular choice, and the perceived consequences related to the choice (4).

For students, this means that choice will be beneficial if they properly understand the options before them, feel and are properly prepared to make a choice, have the necessary insight to understand the implications of the choices they are making and do not overly fear the consequences of their choice (1-2, 6-7). This then suggests that students must be supported to develop the ability to make good choices that can support their ongoing learning.

Without this preparation, students may not know how to make good choices and may evaluate choices in ways that are unhelpful. For instance, rather than seeking the option that is most meaningful or will most support their learning they may instead look for the choice that will most please their academic, is easiest, is most likely to provide a good grade, be familiar to them or they may become paralysed in trying to identify the 'right' or 'perfect' choice (8).

Choosing what to learn, what to make the focus of an assessment, or what type of assessment task to pursue, involves insight and skill. Consistent with the principles of scaffolded learning, this insight and skill can be explicitly taught and learnt (9). This preparation can assist students to take a learning focussed approach to assessment choice. It can introduce them to processes and questions that can assist them to evaluate choice and select options most likely to support their ongoing learning. This preparation can form part of meta-learning elements of the curriculum and be reinforced by feedback and feedforward on the wisdom of the choices they have made to challenge them to demonstrate their learning through different assessment tasks.

Building on this, students can be offered controlled choice over assessments that is gradually extended as they move through each level of study. This may move from a narrow choice of topic in response to one question, to a choice of questions, to a choice over assessment task selected, through to the student's final year independent study or research project, in which they have maximum control. Building students' ability in this way, will mean that by their final year, they are more likely to be equipped as autonomous, independent learners, capable of shaping their own enquiry, and managing challenge that helps them to move out of their comfort zone.

In this way, choice can also play a positive role in supporting students' learning and wellbeing. Students will be positioned to enhance the level of meaning they derive from their work, making it more likely that they will adopt deeper learning approaches and develop higher levels skills and a greater level of fulfilment. Being equipped to successfully take control of their learning, can also increase their sense of self-efficacy and the enjoyment they gain from their learning.

Key Lessons

+ providing students with choice in relation to assessment tasks, conditions, or timings, can lead to increased motivation and students finding more meaning in their discipline
+ however, research also shows that too great a level of choice can decrease motivation and cause unhelpful anxiety
+ for choice to be beneficial for learning, students must be prepared over time to make choices that support their learning
+ developing students' ability to make good choices can be scaffolded across the curriculum, with the range of choices be gradually extended until students are able to take control as skilled independent learners.

Top Tips

+ use meta-learning to help students develop insights into how to make choices that support their learning and wellbeing
+ support this learning through feedback on the choices students have made
+ provide little choice to begin with and then gradually extend choice over the course of a degree as students' ability to make good choices develops
+ remind students in assignment briefs about the importance of taking a learning focussed approach to assessment and finding meaning in their choice of assessment.

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5.6 Prepare Students for Progression

Research indicates that successful progression between levels of academic study is important for future success and wellbeing (1-2). Transitions have the potential to be disruptive to wellbeing and learning, and the student journey through university is one of multiple, ongoing transitions that continue from induction through to graduation and beyond (3). Successful progression requires a sense of continuity and increasing academic challenge that is within students' reach.

If students are inadequately prepared for the next stage of learning, they can experience a gap between the knowledge and skills they have and the knowledge and skills they require (4). This can lead to anxiety, disillusion, self-doubt and lowered motivation. Research into the experiences of second year students indicates that many experience a reduction in motivation, engagement and enjoyment of their course in the second year (5-6). Some students appear to experience increased academic anxiety and less self-efficacy.

As students progress through levels of study, they are generally expected to undertake increasing amounts of independent study and to require less direction. However, students can only undertake more independent study if they have developed the underlying skills and knowledge required for this task. There is also a need for students to have clarity about what will be required of them for academic success. If students know and understand in advance what will be required in terms of workload, degree of academic challenge and how to self-manage in order to achieve, they will be more likely to take an engaged approach which allows them a sense of control and self-efficacy (2, 7).

Alternatively, if there is a lack of clarity, students may develop unhelpful beliefs or imbibe myths about what is required of them at each level. This can result in students becoming overwhelmed and anxious about challenges that do not, in fact, exist and narratives that are untrue. This can also lead students to adopt behaviours that are unhelpful for both their learning and wellbeing eg, working through the night and sacrificing sleep regularly, which in turn undermines quality of learning and wellbeing (8-9).

In addition to these pressures, final year students face the prospect of progression out of university. There are two inter-acting elements to this. First is the exit from university itself and the loss of the structure and community it provided. The second is the uncertainty of seeking a new life and career. These pressures can compete for cognitive capacity, reducing focus, concentration and creativity, just as many students are completing their most important pieces of work (2-3).

To address these challenges, the curriculum must be designed to provide scaffolding across all levels of study and effective and transparent communication, ensuring that each level properly prepares students for the next level. Ensuring internal coherence can provide students with a sense of accumulating continuity and certainty. This can be augmented by progression and re-induction events and by work to prepare students for the end of the final year, the exit from university and the entrance into the world beyond graduation (out-duction) (2, 10). These events can be developed and delivered collaboratively with colleagues from Student Services, Study Skills teams and Careers teams. Benefit may also be gained via peer mentoring schemes, in which students in one level provide preparation for students in the level below – tackling myths and establishing what healthy and helpful practice looks like.

Key Lessons

+ progression between levels of academic study is important for future success and wellbeing
+ the curriculum must explicitly prepare students for the transition to the next level of study and for the transition out of university
+ if students are not adequately prepared, they can encounter gaps between the knowledge and skills they have and that they require. This can impact negatively on wellbeing creating doubt, anxiety and loss of motivation
+ to prepare students for progression, the curriculum must be scaffolded across all levels, providing internal coherence and ensuring each level prepares students for the next level.

Top Tips

+ design the curriculum to ensure it is scaffolded across all levels and that learning outcomes build sequentially over the programme
+ work collaboratively with professional colleagues to create progression and re-induction events, to provide additional support and preparation
+ use peer mentoring to tackle myths and provide good behavioural models to students in the year below
+ develop out-duction practice, within the curriculum, to support students to prepare for their exit from university.

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5.7 Assessment – How, not What

In discussing the relationship between curriculum and wellbeing, a lot of the attention tends to be drawn to the impact of assessment. In particular, conversation and debate centres on the ways in which assessments, such as time-constrained unseen assessment tasks can lead to students experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety. Academic anxiety is undoubtedly a real phenomenon in the student population and can cause sleeplessness, avoidance behaviours, the adoption of poor health behaviours (poor diet, abandoning exercise) and academic underperformance (1). The focus on assessment, as an apparent contributory factor in poor wellbeing and mental health, therefore, has some validity.

This focus has led some to suggest that certain types of assessment tasks and/or conditions should be abandoned altogether. In particular, these debates have highlighted exams and public speaking as assessment tasks that appear to create most anxiety (2). However, it should be noted that students can also become anxious about other assessment tasks such as group work, observed practice, and even completing essays by a set deadline (3-4). Psychological studies have shown that it is not the assessment itself that causes the anxiety – rather it is the associations and expectations that students have of the assessment (5). Rather than fearing an exam, students fear the consequences of failing the exam and the expected emotional experiences they believe they will go through during and after exams. In other words, they become anxious for two reasons:

1 They fear the practical consequences of failing.

2 They fear the emotional pain they expect to experience –anxiety during the exam; sadness and despair on failing the exam.

Research with students for this project suggests that it is not the type of assessment that matters but rather:

1 How well students are, and feel, prepared for the assessment.

2 The meaning and purpose they do or do not gain from the assessment.

Assessment can support good wellbeing when it is consistent with the principles set out within this toolkit. As Dewey highlighted (6), fulfilment is only possible as a result of challenge. An academic assessment can stretch and challenge students, developing their ability to make choices, leading to growth and fulfilment, which in turn can increase student confidence and future wellbeing. However, to deliver this, the following principles must be fulfilled.

+ Students must have clarity about what they have been asked to do (7). They must understand the nature of the assessment, the process for completing it successfully and what success looks like for this particular type of assessment. For example, they must know how a good essay is structured in your discipline or subject area if there are different expectations according to disciplinary nuances; what type of questions will feature on an exam and what types of answers are required; how to speak well in public and make an academic presentation, etc. Worked classroom examples and formative assessment can play a crucial role in this preparation.
+ Students must have the skills to complete the assessment successfully and must recognise that they possess these skills. Motivation is underpinned by previous success – students will be more likely to approach an assessment with confidence if they have previously demonstrated their ability to themselves and others (8). However, it is important that the opportunity to acquire and develop these skills is explicitly part of the curriculum. Students cannot be presumed to possess or develop them by themselves.
+ Students must possess the necessary foundational knowledge – both factual and conceptual. Assessments must be constructively aligned with the material taught and explored through the curriculum. Attempting to address complex academic tasks without possessing the foundational knowledge in advance is highly taxing on working memory, reduces the chances of success and will undermine student belief and the possibility of deep learning (9).
+ The assessment must be based within a learning focussed culture and be designed to support deep and meaningful learning, rather than evaluating performance against a pre-agreed goal. If the content of the assessment is meaningful to the student, they will find it easier to engage, will be more likely to engage at a deeper level, will learn more and will be more likely to experience positive emotions as a result, such as fulfilment, excitement, passion and interest (10).
+ Having a learning focus can reduce the sense of risk associated with an assignment. Within a psychologically safe environment, students will be able to regard mistakes as opportunities for learning, rather than an episode of failure with dire personal consequences (11).

To summarise, assessment can be positive for wellbeing if it has clarity, students legitimately believe they can be successful, the outcomes have potential benefits and the task is meaningful to them.

Assessment can be negative for wellbeing if it lacks clarity, is not understood and students are poorly prepared, students doubt their ability to be successful, they fear the consequences and the content lacks meaning, leading them to engage in surface level, survival strategies.

NB Some students who experience academic anxiety will require additional support. Academic anxiety can often be overcome with the right intervention – in these instances, students should be signposted to colleagues in Student Services.

Key Lessons

+ students can experience unhelpful levels of anxiety as a result of assessment, but assessment can also support good wellbeing and learning
+ the type of assessment matters less for wellbeing than how well students have been prepared for it, their self-belief in relation to the task and the meaning it contains for them
+ well-structured assessment can be positive for wellbeing if it has clarity, students legitimately believe they can be successful, the outcomes have potential benefits and the task is meaningful to them
+ assessment can have significant, negative impact on wellbeing. If it lacks clarity, meaning, is not understood, or students are poorly prepared, doubt their ability to be successful and fear the consequences leading to a surface level approach in learning.

Top Tips

+ identify the skills and knowledge (factual and conceptual) students will need to begin work on an assessment and ensure they can learn them explicitly within the curriculum
+ used worked examples of assessment in the classroom to build student clarity and confidence about the task, the criteria, and the required knowledge
+ use formative assessment to build student familiarity, develop skills and knowledge and increase their self-efficacy
+ design assessment to engage students in deep, meaningful learning, where this aligns with the related learning outcomes and assessment criteria.

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5.8 Prepare and Support Students in Non-classroom Learning Spaces

An increasing number of university students are now required to engage in learning outside of virtual or in person classrooms, and this can occupy a significant proportion of their time (1). Placements and field trips provide students with a variety of opportunities for learning, growth, increased social connection and sense of identity but also raise considerable academic, practical, organisational and emotional demands. As a consequence, placement design, management, preparation or experience can impact on student mental health, with potential negative outcomes for wellbeing, learning and performance (2, 3). In this section we will explore the relationship between student wellbeing and non-classroom learning spaces, with a specific focus on the following:

Professional placements (Healthcare and Teaching Education)

Students on professional courses, particularly in healthcare, can spend around 50% of their time on placement, making it a significant part of their learning experience (4). There can be large variations between types of placements, meaning students must re-orientate to a new workplace setting, culture and role with each move (5). A number of researchers have highlighted placement as a key

factor in the concerning levels of student attrition from undergraduate healthcare courses (6-9). It has been suggested that placement can create a number of stressors that can negatively impact on wellbeing, including isolation from cohort, emotionally troubling workplace incidents, such as patient death and financial strain (10, 11). Similar challenges have also been found among students on teacher education programs (12). Addressing the challenge of placement can be additionally complicated for academic teams, as placement requirements and curriculum are often set externally by regulatory bodies.

Non-professional placements

A drive to link university to the world of work has seen an increase in placements across Faculties and Colleges (13, 14) These placements have been noted by students as a significant stressor largely due to the heavy workload and emotional demands of working with people whose behaviour is challenging (14). Some research highlights students' perceptions that they require more support when on placement in order to foster their wellbeing (15). This work calls for the incorporation of effective and appropriate strategies into pedagogical and institutional practice to support students and to positively contribute to their wellbeing during placement.

Field Trips

Field trips are an important aspect of many university courses and are part of the identity, culture and history of some academic disciplines (1), particularly those who require engagement with field work, such as Geography. Geology, Archaeology and Environmental Science. Research has suggested that field trips enhance students' understanding of the subject area and have a positive impact on the social interaction between the cohort (16). However, there is also evidence that field trips can be a 'profoundly challenging ordeal' and may not support positive student wellbeing (17). Research by Tucker and Horton (17) found that many participants reported that field trips had a negative impact on their wellbeing, particularly residential field trips. These reports recounted instances of students experiencing panic attacks, episodes of self-harm, suicidal ideation and overwhelming distress (17, 18). There are also inclusivity concerns in relations to field trips, specifically around cultural differences, menstruation, gender disparities, socioeconomic differences (ie, not affording the right equipment), and students with physical disabilities (18-20).

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5.8.1 Field Trips

Field trips are an important aspect of many academic disciplines (1) and have been shown to be positive for learning (2). Evidence indicates that generally, field trips enhance students' understanding of the subject area, improve their connection to peers and build disciplinary identity (3). However, research has suggested that field trips do not always support positive student mental wellbeing and can be challenging for some students (4). Staff in academic and Student Services roles have raised concerns about student mental health on field trips – particularly residential field trips. These reports recounted instances of students experiencing panic attacks, episodes of self-harm, suicidal ideation, and overwhelming distress (5) (Please also see case study). Concerns have also been raised that some students experience additional barriers to inclusion on field trips (6).

To better understand the experiences of students on field trips, we conducted some research for this project. Focus groups with held with academic staff and Student Support Services, to better understand the relationship between field trips and mental health – particularly to gain narrative understanding of times when students have experienced poor mental health on field trips. In addition, two observational studies were conducted of Geology residential field trips to further explore students' experiences. The following reflections are drawn from this research.

Environment and equipment

Access to equipment can be an equality issue and have significant bearing a student's experience. Many of the items required require significant investment in relation to a student's available finance. For those students who can afford the equipment, there can also be inequality in terms of the quality purchased. Those with the least expensive equipment can be more susceptible to getting wet, overheating, etc. This can have negative physical consequences but can also impact on a student's sense of status, belonging and identity, in ways which undermine their wellbeing more generally.

Staff focus groups and observational studies highlighted the importance of facilities on field trips, particularly access to toilet facilities. Often, in the field there may be little access to toilets, or they may be very different from those with which students are familiar (eg, they may be a hole in the floor). It was apparent that this impacts differently across genders – of particular note were problems for

students who were menstruating and transgender students.

Academic staff and students highlighted the impact of weather on wellbeing. At either extreme, hot weather or cold, wet weather were seen to have potentially negative impacts on student emotions, thinking, learning and behaviour. Students' ability to manage their own bodies in these conditions, can then become important in their overall experience.

Location

Academics in focus groups highlighted differing impacts between UK based field trips and those in foreign locations. Field trips outside of the UK appear to carry greater levels of complexity, in terms of different cultural norms, laws and weather factors. Students' prior experiences seemed to have a significant bearing in this regard. Those students who had never flown before or been in a location outside the UK, had an additional level of acculturation and learning to absorb alongside the demands of the field trip itself. For some this increased challenge created a level of anxiety and sense of being overwhelmed.

Dietary issues were also highlighted as potentially problematic, particularly on field trips where choice of food was limited and diet was markedly different to UK norms. If students with additional dietary requirements find it difficult to meet their dietary needs, this can have both a physical impact and create an additional factor to manage, which increases the cognitive and emotional toll for them.

Preparation

Overall, our research highlighted the need for students to be prepared for a range of aspects of field trips, including practicalities, self-management and their own emotions, thoughts and behaviours. Helping students to visualise the experience in advance can support better preparation; this may be enhanced through peer mentors who have previously undertaken the same field trip. Creating an environment in which practical difficulties (such as access to toilets) can be discussed as simply part of the discipline, may also help to alleviate difficulties on location.

Boundaries

The literature and our research found that there was uncertainty about the boundaries of the academic staff role (7), which can become more problematic in the field, at a significant distance from other university services. Specific staff training may help to more clearly identify where these boundaries should lie and how they can best be maintained, in real situations. This may be supported by the development of field trip protocols, shared between academics and support staff.

Please also see Maintaining Boundaries.

Academic staff wellbeing

Academics are normally the first line of contact for the students when they are on field trips and

sometimes face distressing situations. Given that this is a common and predictable event, it is necessary for universities to devote reasonable time and resource in preparing and supporting staff for field trips and after their return, when required.

Student feedback

Students suggested that the following may be beneficial to their wellbeing on field trips.

1. Allow time for breaks, to rest, acclimatise and absorb disciplinary learning and the culture in which they find themselves.
2. Allow more social time, to build a sense of cohort identity and a team approach to the trip, enhancing psychological safety and creating a safe, learning community.
3. Ensure detailed preparation, in relation to location, environment, required equipment, tasks, practical challenges, accommodation and food and emotional management.
4. Encourage group work and use assessment criteria to encourage a supportive culture.

Key Lessons

+ field trips can enhance students' understanding of the subject area, improve their connection to peers and builds disciplinary identity
+ a range of issues may impact on student's experiences, which may undermine wellbeing. These include environment, location, preparation and previous experiences, practical arrangements and access to adequate equipment
+ academics identify difficulties in maintaining boundaries on field trips and potential negative impacts on their wellbeing
+ students identified detailed preparation, adequate time on field trips to rest and acclimatise and social interaction and support to be important for maintaining wellbeing.

Top Tips

+ allow time for rest breaks, downtime and social time built into the field trip schedule. Building community or planned days off may help students feel less isolated and help to reduce stress
+ prepare students for all aspects of the field trip in advance, including developing skills to manage their emotions, respond to environmental challenges and support each other
+ consider the wellbeing of academic staff on field trips in planning and management.

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5.8.2 Placements

As noted in Prepare and Support Students in Non-classroom Learning Spaces, placements offer significant learning opportunities to students but can also increase the level of challenge, beyond a point which is sustainable (1, 2). When placements go well, they can enhance student learning and preparation for the future, when they go badly, they can undermine student persistence, self-belief and wellbeing. A survey of 3,527 UK students, in 2008, found that 39% considered dropping out due to experiences on clinical placements (3). The research literature suggests that work-integrated learning in workplaces needs better preparation and support to positively contribute to student wellbeing and learning outcomes (4). This suggests that there is a need to incorporate effective and appropriate strategies into pedagogical and institutional practice to support students and to positively contribute to their wellbeing during placements.

Placements create a range of challenges for students, which individually may be helpfully stretching for some, but which can be overwhelming in combination or if students have not been adequately prepared (3, 5). For students on professional programmes, a constant stream of new placements, in new workplaces, with new colleagues can create a constant sense of transition (6). Many students report imposter syndrome and a lack of confidence in their own skills in the workplace, which can significantly undermine wellbeing and achievement (7-9).

The environment of the placement itself can also be a factor in determining wellbeing – workplace culture, personalities and expectations can have both positive and negative impacts on wellbeing (2, 3). Alongside these challenges, many students will also be managing other commitments and responsibilities which can push them beyond a point of healthy sustainability. A study conducted by Mills, Ryden and Knight (10) found nursing students' wellbeing was negatively influenced by juggling multiple demands, such as demands on their physical capabilities, personal resources, income, and time, and constantly finding a way to balance these things and develop their own coping strategies.

According to research there are several things that could support students on placements:

1. Well trained and available peer mentors while on placement can help to increase wellbeing. Oates and colleagues (11) suggest that students value chances for individual support and opportunities to connect with their peers.
2. Studies also suggest that universities should ensure that support services are accessible and relevant to students on placement (11)
3. Providing workshops, within curriculum, specifically designed to help students prepare for and manage placement may help to improve students' performance, learning and wellbeing on placement:
    a. A study by Sweeney (12) found that providing students a 1-day workshop on imposter syndrome improved their wellbeing and participating students reported feelings of liberation and empowerment.

b. Oates et al. (11) highlight the importance of explicitly developing students' skills and appropriate levels of confidence prior to going on placement.

c. Research has shown that developing a professional identity and career path can be a protective factor in work-based learning. Explicitly focussing curriculum on the development of professional identity may help students feel equipped to manage the challenges of placement. (14, 15)

d. Benefit may also be gained from providing workshops to help students' development of self-management skills, including managing emotions, thoughts and behaviours, in advance of placement. Provision of post-placement learning workshops to help students understand their experiences, extract learning and build self-belief will consolidate what they have learned.

4 Scammell (15) suggests a formal wellbeing 'check in' two weeks into any placement.

Key Lessons

+ placements offer significant learning opportunities to students but can also increase their level of challenge, beyond a point which is sustainable
+ research has shown that experiences on placements are one of the main factors linked to attrition
+ student wellbeing can be impacted by having to manage a range of challenges alongside placement, the environment of the placement itself, lack of preparation and doubts about ability
+ students can be supported to be successful on placement through curriculum content that specifically prepares them for placement, addressing the challenges of self-management, imposter syndrome, building self-efficacy and developing professional identity.

Top Tips

+ use peer mentors to helps students prepare for the reality of placement and to provide ongoing informal support
+ establish wellbeing check-ins with students two weeks into placement
+ embed workshops into the curriculum to specifically prepare students for the practicalities of their placement and to learn from their experience post placement.

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6 Learner Development

6.1 Introduction

Curriculum can support learning and wellbeing by placing a specific focus on the development of students as learners. Through developing as learners, students can build their academic competence and their own sense of self-efficacy, disciplinary belonging, positive self-concept and confidence in approaching future challenges. Importantly, research has shown that the development of skills and ability must be sited within disciplinary knowledge. Generic skills training is less effective than training based within the discipline and can often seem less relevant and meaningful to students (1).

Within a well-designed curriculum, there is no tension between skills and knowledge. Both are recognised as being inter-related parts of learning focussed outcomes. Developing core skills allows students to take more control of their learning and heightens their ability to acquire further knowledge. Possessing core knowledge reduces cognitive load, freeing up more capacity to engage in complex learning and problem solving (2).

This can be augmented by taking a broad, holistic view of learning that considers the role of wellbeing. Building students' understanding of the relationship between wellbeing and learning and developing their ability to self-manage, can enhance their learning and wellbeing (3, 4).

However, an important aspect of this is the student's ability to recognise their own development and take credit for their own achievements (5). This ability to correctly identify strengths and attribute success is key to ongoing motivation and wellbeing. Without this, students may develop skills and knowledge but continue to doubt their own ability, undermining their self-belief, leading to academic disengagement and poorer wellbeing (6,7).

This section will explore ways in which the curriculum can support students to develop as learners, through meta-learning strategies and effective feedback, with a specific focus on building self-efficacy, self-attribution and self-management.

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6.2 Self-Attribution and Self-Awareness

Linked to self-efficacy are the ways in which students evaluate their own performance and to what they attribute relative success or failure (1). For long term success and wellbeing, how students think about their performance can be more important than the performance itself. Whether successful or not, if students attribute performance to aspects that are outside of their control, they are unlikely to be motivated to take action which improves or maintains their performance (2). How students attribute their performance can also have emotional and psychological impacts on their ongoing wellbeing (3, 4).

If a student underperforms and attributes this to stable factors beyond their control, such as their innate ability in a subject, they have no reason to be motivated to do anything to improve future performance (5, 6). For example, if they think, “I’m just bad at statistics and there is nothing I can do about that,” why would they expend extra effort or try different strategies?

Equally, if students attribute success to unstable factors outside their control such as luck or an overgenerous marker of their work, then they are left without clarity about why their work was good and how they can use their strengths in future. This can lead to doubt about their true ability and anxiety about future performance (7).

It is important to recognise that in attributing causes, our thoughts are often not logically connected to reality. A student can dismiss good performance on the basis that the assessment was just easy – even though no one else came close to their result (8). Or can believe that they underperformed due to lack of innate ability, even though more effort or a better strategy may have led to a significantly better outcome.

Realistic awareness and self-attribution, which gives a sense of control over the future, is necessary for successful self-regulation (9). Students need to be able to assess their own strengths and weaknesses and recognise how they can improve in the future, if they are to improve their learning and performance. Otherwise, they may take steps that undermine learning and wellbeing, such as avoiding work (which can elevate anxiety) or persisting with strategies that are ineffective (working longer hours using ineffective study approaches, leading to exhaustion, disappointment and poor self-concept) (10).

Research has shown students' first responses to academic performance are emotional. Emotions tend to precede cognitive thought and can shape the beliefs that follow (11-13). If students respond with disappointment, anger and upset they are then more likely to develop a narrative that establishes a pattern of unhelpful future behaviour. This creates a cyclical response of negative emotions, leading to negative attributions leading to further negative emotions.

Developing students' ability to assess their own learning and performance in ways that are helpful, therefore becomes an important part of the curriculum. Feedback and classroom demonstration should focus on identifying aspects of performance that are within students' control (14). This may include:

+ disciplinary and process knowledge. Students may simply underperform because they do not know the most successful strategies and approaches. For example, they may believe that reading notes is an effective revision strategy, when research has clearly shown it to be ineffective.
+ utilising available resources; both internal and external. For example, students may not recognise the positive impact of taking breaks, studying in short chunks and maintaining sleep for academic performance. Or they may benefit from using online tools to improve their referencing.
+ appropriate effort. Students may benefit from beginning work on an assignment at an earlier point, to allow for incubation and the development of their ideas. Or they may benefit from not working so many hours, late at night, that they end up exhausted and not able to think clearly.

Self-assessment is a skill that can be improved through teaching, modelling feedback and practice activities such as feedforward or peer assessment exercises (15, 16). Encouraging students to take a strengths-based and future-focussed approach to their learning can help them to focus on factors that are within their locus of control. This, in turn, can raise motivation, self-belief, hope and wellbeing.

Key Lessons

+ how students think about their learning and performance can have a more influential impact on future behaviour and performance than their actual level of performance
+ if students attribute their performance to aspects they cannot control, they will not be motivated to improve and this can impact negatively on their learning and wellbeing
+ if students are guided to develop their ability to recognise those aspects they can control, they can more effectively self-regulate future behaviour and have greater hope and belief in their ability to succeed
+ a greater sense of control over their learning and achievement can improve self-efficacy, sense of competence and motivation, thereby improving wellbeing.

Top Tips

+ use feedback and feedforward processes to focus students' attention to those aspects over which they have control – provide specific steps they can take to learn more effectively
+ use students' work in the classroom to model effective practice – reflect holistically on the process through which students produce successful work and emphasise this over innate ability
+ ensure the curriculum includes specific guidance on how to complete tasks effectively.

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6.3 Developing Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to someone's belief in their ability to perform a specific task (1). Self-efficacy tends to be domain specific; someone can have belief in their ability to perform to a high level on one type of task but no belief in their ability to perform a different task. Academic self-efficacy refers to a student's belief in their ability to learn and engage in academic tasks and perform successfully (2).

Research has established that there are relationships between academic self-efficacy and both student mental health and academic engagement, persistence and performance (3, 4). When students don't believe they can engage in a task successfully, they are more likely to spend less time working on the task or may avoid it altogether. They are also more likely to give up when the task becomes difficult. Students with low academic self-efficacy may experience higher levels of imposter syndrome and be at greater risk of withdrawal (5). Lack of self-belief and lack of skills can exist in a cyclical relationship – low belief results in low levels of engagement and practice, leading to under-developed skills, which results in further low belief.

By contrast, students with high self-efficacy have been found to spend more time on learning and assessment tasks, persist when they become difficult, achieve better academic outcomes and be more satisfied by their own learning and performance (2). This link between academic self-efficacy and these outcomes has important implications for both learning and wellbeing (6). Kirschner and Hendrick (7) quote Shakespeare to encapsulate this concept.

> "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

Self-efficacy, as a concept in education, was first suggested by Bandura (8), who highlighted four areas that impact on a student's self-efficacy.

Performance Accomplishment

Students' confidence in their ability increases if they recognise that they have previously performed well in a similar task. Through accomplishment, students develop a sense of mastery and are therefore more likely to derive pleasure and fulfilment from the performance of a task (9). As a result, a significant proportion of motivation arises from successful performance. A well-structured curriculum and appropriate feedback can support the growth of academic self-efficacy. There are a number of key concepts that relate to this, which include:

+ training students to be successful as students through appropriate scaffolding – providing explicit instruction to begin with, then reducing instruction and support as students become more confident and proficient
+ having a learning focus as opposed to a performance focus. Students who are guided to process (learning) goals, tend to have higher self-efficacy than those who have performance goals (10)
+ providing feedback that focusses on the development of the student's learning and skill, rather than on performance
+ developing students' ability to self-reflect and self-regulate, so they can recognise their own growth and take steps to improve their learning, so gaining a greater sense of control.

Vicarious Experience

Seeing peers being able to perform challenging academic tasks, can help an individual student improve their belief in their own capability (7, 11). This can be done by using previous students' work, to analyse what they did that made the work of good quality. Academics can also model processes and behaviour that will improve learning and performance and relate stories of previous students who managed to travel the same journey. For this to be successful, it is important that this includes clear steps students can follow.

Bandura (8, 12, 13) also highlighted the importance of creating collaborative learning cultures and discouraging unnecessary competition, as this can act as a barrier to students learning from each other. Creating a culture of 'we all can', is more likely to lead to the development of self-efficacy, good wellbeing and good performance across the cohort.

Verbal Persuasion

Positive feedback grounded in reality that includes specific instructions and encourages students to believe they can succeed, can have a positive effect on self-efficacy (14). Believing that their lecturer believes in them, can enhance student self-belief and motivation. However, it is important that this persuasion is not nebulous or vague. Praise that has not been earned, or is unrealistic, can actually have a demotivating effect (15). It is also the case that any positive impact of verbal persuasion can be undone if the student then performs poorly. This can also reduce the future credibility of the academic, in the student's eyes.

Therefore, it may not enough to simply say "I believe you can do this." Students are more likely to develop self-efficacy if expressions of belief, on the part of a lecturer, are accompanied by evidence of their ability to succeed and an outline of the steps they can take to ensure success.

Emotional Arousal

Emotions provide us with evidence about our current experiences. If a student experiences high levels of anxiety while performing an academic task, they are likely to interpret those sensations as evidence that they are likely to fail. By contrast, if they experience a sense of mastery, confidence and flow, they are likely to interpret this as a sign that they can be successful (7).

The curriculum can support students to develop the skills of managing negative emotions and utilising positive emotions, through partnerships with professional staff to provide embedded psycho-education. Managing emotions productively can enhance a student's ability to respond to future challenge and increase self-efficacy (7).

Students can also be supported in this domain if the curriculum focusses on learning, rather than the risk of failure, and if students are supported to find meaning in their learning and assessment tasks.

Key Lessons

+ academic self-efficacy refers to a student's belief in their ability to learn and engage in academic tasks and perform successfully
+ there are clear relationships between self-efficacy and student wellbeing and self-efficacy and student learning and performance
+ the curriculum can support the development of academic self-efficacy through scaffolding learning, providing a learning focus, creating a collaborative learning environment, modelling success, supporting students to explicitly develop skills and self-reflection and using evidence and feedback to build self-belief.

Top Tips

+ focus feedback on learning and development, rather than performance
+ work with professional staff to embed psycho-education into the curriculum
+ use evidence to demonstrate your justified belief in students' ability
+ build reflection on growth and learning into learning activities and assessments.

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6.4 Holistic Self-Management

There are no reasons to assume that new students automatically know how to be successful as university students or that they can effectively work this out for themselves. Research shows that the behaviours students adopt in the first weeks of their university career, can persist through to the end of their programme (1, 2). In other words, it cannot be assumed that student self-management will inevitably improve as students move through their academic career. This is important as evidence shows that student self-regulation, self-management and wellbeing all influence learning and achievement (3, 4).

Self-management in this context can be thought of as a student's ability to manage all aspects of student life, including their learning, their wellbeing and self-care, competing priorities (such as paid work), their social life and finances. Self-management requires a combination of knowledge, understanding and skill, which can grow and improve through education, cultural influence and practice. Given the relationship between wellbeing and learning, there is a strong argument for embedding education within the curriculum, that can empower students to take a holistic approach to their own self-management (5). Indeed, there is evidence in the literature that psychoeducation of this type can have a positive impact and can comfortably sit alongside disciplinary based meta-learning (6).

The four-axis model set out in Wellbeing and Learning can be used as a structure to build student knowledge and understanding of the links between learning and wellbeing and how attending to one can have a positive impact on the other (5).

Academic: Alongside disciplinary meta-learning, students can be taught about evidence informed, effective learning techniques such as retrieval practice and spacing. Myths can also be dispelled, such as the idea that studying is only worth it if done in long blocks of time; evidence actually shows that studying in short blocks can be more effective.

Physical: Students can be shown the evidence of the positive impact on learning and academic performance of taking breaks, sleeping well, eating healthily, staying hydrated and exercising. These steps can support self-regulation and be framed as steps students can take to support their learning and academic performance.

Social: As part of creating a collaborative learning environment, students can be helped to understand the relationships between social connection and cognitive function, leading to academic performance (7, 8). Curriculum can also explore the importance of maintaining social balance – not focussing solely on social activities at the beginning of term and not ignoring social needs during assessment periods.

Psychological: Students can be supported to understand ways of managing emotional arousal and negative feelings about academic work and engaging with learning in ways that can produce positive emotional experiences such as a sense of fulfilment, pleasure and achievement.

There are, however, two key principles to consider when contemplating embedding self-management material and activities into the curriculum.

The first is that evidence from work on meta-learning suggests that the development of this type of knowledge and skill is more effective when delivered in ways that are subject specific, rather than through generic training (9). Education on self-management may be more effective if it is more focussed within disciplinary norms, explored through disciplinary concepts and linked to specific subject content.

The second principle is that it is important to consider who designs and delivers this material. Subject academics, by themselves, may not be best placed or have the relevant expertise to effectively address this issue. Developing student self-management, therefore offers opportunities for collaborative partnerships between subject academics, Learning and Teaching Teams and Student Services (5).

Key Lessons

+ student self-regulation, self-management and wellbeing all influence learning and achievement
+ students often do not know how to self-manage effectively or understand how lifestyle and self-management can influence learning and achievement
+ self-management can be developed via education embedded into the curriculum
+ this offers opportunities for collaborative partnerships on curriculum design and delivery between subject academics, Learning and Teaching Teams and Student Services.

Top Tips

+ embed self-management into curriculum as a way of building students' understanding of the ways in which learning, and performance happen and can be supported
+ co-facilitate material on self-management with colleagues in Student Services
+ provide referenced evidence of the links between wellbeing and learning to build student understanding and confidence in what they are being told.

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6.5 Meta-Learning

If students are able to learn effectively and can see their own growth and development, they are more likely to build their competence and self-efficacy and to be able to gain positive experiences from their learning, such as a sense of fulfilment, achievement and confidence (1-3). Being able to learn effectively in higher education requires a mix of skill, knowledge, insight and understanding (3-5). If students lack these qualities, then they are more likely to struggle academically and to adopt surface approaches to learning, with consequent negative impacts on their wellbeing (6). Research shows that it is possible to develop these skills in students through curriculum-based interventions (eg, 4). Unfortunately, many schools and school systems are taking an increasingly performance focussed approach, in which students are less likely to develop these abilities (7). For this reason, decades worth of research now indicates that students must be supported to learn how to learn as university students.

Biggs (3) identified that effective learning involves the student in metacognitive processes such as planning, monitoring and reflecting. To be able to study and learn effectively students need: (8)

+ an awareness of themselves – understanding the factors that influence their learning, their own strengths and areas for development and their current capacity for learning
+ a knowledge of a range of genuinely effective learning strategies and resources
+ an ability to access and select appropriate strategies and resources for a given task, review their effectiveness through the process and adjust their approach to improve learning.

In addition to these meta-cognitive tasks, meta-learning also involves aspects of motivation, focus and self-management. Effective learners tend to have learning focussed goals as opposed to those which are performance focussed. Watkins (7) describes them as having 'thick' conceptions of learning (building understanding etc.) as opposed to 'thin' conceptions (rote memorisation).

Effective learners are able to effectively manage their own feelings and the impact of emotions on learning – such as regulating doubts or anxiety and mobilising positive feelings to underpin motivation. They have a greater awareness of wellbeing factors that can positively or negatively impact on learning and can take proactive steps to regulate these impacts (such as ensuring healthy sleep, taking breaks etc.) Effective learners can also manage the social aspects of learning, such as engaging in group tasks, classroom discussion, communicating with peers and seeking help from tutors.

Developing students' meta-learning ability is most effective when done within the context of the subject discipline (9-10). Generic study skills training tends to be significantly less beneficial. Meta-learning abilities tend to be domain specific and students are less likely to meaningfully engage with lessons that are not connected to their chosen academic discipline. Rather than learning how to be successful as university students, they instead must learn to be successful physics students, American studies students, creative writing students etc.

Crucially, when considering how to develop these abilities, it must be borne in mind that knowledge of effective learning strategies and attitudes is not enough. Students must actually employ these skills and approaches in their work to derive benefit. For this reason, meta-learning must be an embedded part of the curriculum and classroom culture, reflected in learning activities, classroom discussion and formal and informal feedback. Students may require space and time to develop these skills, which may require a scaffolded approach across the curriculum. Benefit can also be gained from guiding students to reflect on the impact on their own learning of employing these strategies. This acculturation can guide students to develop effective learning as habit.

Key Lessons

+ if students are able to learn effectively and can see their own growth and development, they are more likely to build their competence and self-efficacy and to be able to gain positive experiences from their learning
+ being able to learn effectively in higher education requires a mix of skill, knowledge, insight and understanding, these abilities can be developed through the curriculum
+ to learn effectively students need to be able to utilise a range of effective learning strategies, identify appropriate strategies for each task, self-monitor their own learning and take steps to adjust their approaches in response to their progress
+ meta-learning is most effective when delivered through the subject discipline and is a core part of the learning environment and culture.

Top Tips

+ encourage students to have a learning focussed approach to their studies and use assessments to support learning
+ use discipline specific assessment briefs in the classroom to explore and development students learning practices and understanding of effective strategies
+ focus formal feedback on ways students can improve learning as opposed to performance – highlight meta-learning approaches that can help.

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6.6 Feedback

Quality feedback is clearly recognised as one of the most powerful tools in education for the improvement of learning (1, 2). There is also a relationship between feedback and aspects of student wellbeing. Students often have an emotional response to feedback, which can be positive and enhancing or negative and disruptive (3) and can influence students' willingness to engage with and learn from the feedback received (4). Feedback can enhance positive psychological states such as motivation, self-efficacy and determination or reduce self-belief, create anxiety and potentially lead to a state of 'learned helplessness,' (5-8).

As Molloy and Boud (7) identify, a key element in conceptualising the role of feedback is the fact that it is received by a thinking, feeling, acting and reacting person (a student). How feedback is framed, directed and received will have an impact on a students' thoughts and feelings, which will, in turn, leading to actions that may or may not be helpful (3, 9). Therefore, feedback needs to be designed with this in mind and to incorporate the learner in a process of self-evaluation. This is more likely to be achieved within a learning focussed curriculum, in which students clearly understand the learning outcomes (goals) they are expected to achieve (10). Within a learning focussed curriculum, students are less likely to see feedback as a judgement on them and rather to focus upon its role in the ongoing process of learning (11). If feedback is to lead to improvements in student learning, the relationship between feedback, wellbeing and future learning behaviours must be understood.

Specific feedback that provides students with a clear route to improvement, that they can then visualise and act upon, is beneficial for both learning and wellbeing. Hattie and Timperley's (2007) key work on feedback identifies three key questions on which feedback should focus.

1. Where am I going? (What knowledge, understanding or skills is the student trying to develop?)
2. How am I going? (What progress has the student made towards this?)
3. Where to next? (What specifically and practically can the student do now to increase this knowledge, understanding or skill?) (12)

By providing students with clear steps, that they can take to improve, they are more likely to act on feedback and to believe it will lead to further growth and better future learning, thus bolstering self-efficacy. By contrast, feedback that is either simply critical or provides nebulous praise can undermine both motivation and helpful future action (5-7, 13).

For feedback to successfully lead to improvements in learning, students must recognise feedback when it is received, understand its importance, value it for their development and know how to both interpret and apply it in future learning (14). This last requirement can be particularly challenging in a modular structure, where feedback is received on a final piece of work, if the student does not know how to apply it to learning in a completely different module. Feedback must therefore form part of curriculum design, supporting students to link content and learning across modules, rather than existing a separate, episodic acts (7).

Some work has, therefore, focussed on training students to understand, recognise, value, and work with feedback productively. This includes helping students recognise, accept and regulate their own emotional responses to feedback and to work with meta-cognitive elements of their learning (15, 16). If this has occurred successfully, students will then have been prepared for feedback that encourages them to reflect and follows Hattie and Timperley's recommendations by focussing on:

1. Task level (how well it has been performed).
2. Process level (the process the student has undertaken and what a more effective process might be).
3. Self-regulation level (how students have self-managed and regulated their own learning behaviours and how this can be improved).
4. Self-level (how students can draw on their learning to build self-concept and self-efficacy).

This can be deepened with metacognitive tasks that accompany feedback, such as requiring students to respond to feedback with action plans, before receiving their grade or providing feedback on their own work and progress.

This scaffolded approach to learning, can then help students develop both their competence and their sense of their own ability and growth, leading to increased self-efficacy and ability. Feedback can provide reassurance and a clear path for progress, supporting learning and wellbeing (6).

Key Lessons

+ feedback is a powerful tool for supporting learning and wellbeing
+ feedback can have negative impacts if it is vague, overly critical, is perceived by the student as an attack or judgement of them and/or doesn't provide a clear way forward towards further improvement
+ students may need support to be able to understand, recognise, value, and work with feedback productively. This includes helping students recognise, accept and regulate their own emotional responses to feedback
+ feedback is most effective if it focusses on the why of the task and the process the student has utilised.

Top Tips

+ place a focus on learning throughout each module and the overall programme, to create a better platform for feedback
+ provide specific training within the curriculum to support students to utilise feedback – eg, by providing worked examples of feedback or using tutorials focussed on interpreting feedback students have received and using it to build an action plan
+ focus feedback on specific steps students can take to improve future learning
+ set accompanying meta-cognitive tasks, such as asking students to respond to your feedback with analysis and their own action plan.

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7 Getting Students Back on Track

7.1 Introduction

Over the course of a degree, there can be many reasons why students may experience disruption in their academic journey. Alongside study, other life experiences may impact negatively on their engagement with learning for example, poor health, relationship difficulties, or unhelpful habits. In turn, disengagement and underperformance can cause students to doubt their own ability, leading to rumination, low mood and anxiety. On these occasions they may require additional interventions and support to persist with their studies and get back on track.

Given that it is inevitable that some students will experience such disruptions, curriculum design and delivery must take this into account. Curriculum that can only accommodate perfectly smooth student experiences and learning is not calibrated to reality. Scaffolding must be available to assist students to reconnect with their subject when they experience internal and external barriers to learning.

Each student will experience disruption and disengagement differently. How students fall off track cannot be predicted in advance and this, therefore requires a degree of flexibility within curriculum design and places a focus on curriculum delivery and the role of academics as individuals, teams and collaborative partners with other professional colleagues.

The role of the academic is clearly crucial and research has shown that students often turn to their academic staff first – before approaching other services. However, this does not mean that academics should become quasi-counsellors or advisors. For the safety of students, academics and universities, it is important that academic staff maintain the boundaries of their role. Delivery at this point must therefore be a collaborative endeavour, with colleagues from across the university.

This section explores ways in which design and delivery can support students to get back on track. It examines steps that can be taken:

+ in advance of student need, building relationships between academics and Student Services and clarifying the role of the academic
+ during curriculum delivery through ongoing signposting and co-facilitation to support self-management
+ when students present in crisis, supporting them to access the appropriate support and ensuring academics can maintain their boundaries.

As ever, there is overlap between these themes and the other sections of the toolkit. For instance, students will find it easier to re-engage with academic programmes in which they feel they have social belonging. It will be easier for students to catch up with a curriculum that has good, scaffolded design and internal coherence. Students will be less likely to avoid re-engagement if they find learning meaningful and have a learning focus.

7.2 Re-engaging the Disengaged

Research shows that student disengagement can actually be due to a range of overlapping factors that create barriers to engagement. Some of these are internal to the student and some are external. Given this, it is important not to make assumptions about the causes of student behaviour without evidence. Among the factors which can lead to disengagement are:

+ An apparent lack of motivation may actually be a sign of anxiety leading to avoidance. If students fear an academic assignment (because they fear the outcome) they may avoid beginning or completing work (1). Anxiety is a form of emotional pain and by avoiding the associated trigger (the assignment) the student can avoid the painful feeling – for now. Students who experience perfectionism may even complete academic work to a good standard but fail to submit because they fear the possibility of failure, in their perfectionist terms (2).
+ Students may also fear the classroom environment if they feel they do not belong, or it seems overly hostile, or they believe being there risks humiliation or embarrassment (3). Students in our research for this project reported that some students stopped going to class because the lecturer called on students for answers and this made them anxious. Students from non-traditional backgrounds describe finding the classroom environment difficult if it requires them to adopt a different persona or hide their identity (4).
+ At the beginning of the first year, some students do make errors of judgement in balancing their social and academic lives. New students do not yet know how to be successful students and in a new environment, people are generally driven to create social connections first (5). This does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest in academic work, rather it is a process of developing self-management and skill development. However, once students have made this error, they can find it difficult to re-engage because it is difficult to shift habits or because they fear being chastised or punished or because they fear finding out just how far behind they now are (6). Alternatively, if they feel they have been unable to make social connections, learning environments may become sources of social anxiety, leading students to avoid them.
+ There are now more students in the HE sector, who would previously have been considered ‘non-traditional’ than there are students who would have been considered traditional students. Many students cannot devote as much time to their studies as they or we might wish, because of other commitments such as paid work or caring responsibilities (7).
+ Illness or life events which impact on wellbeing can draw a student’s attention away from their academic studies or reduce their ability to engage. Physical or mental illness, the impact of medication, bereavement, financial difficulties and social isolation have all been shown to reduce cognitive capacity, stamina, concentration and, thereby, academic performance.

The path back to engagement is likely to be different for each student. However, a student is more likely to re-engage if they can clearly see a path back to engagement, that they believe will work and they do not fear being chastised or punished for their disengagement. Early identification of potential problems and effective communication can help return students to better levels of engagement – there is some evidence that learning technology platforms and dashboards can help in identifying student behaviour which may indicate disengagement. The following guidance for academics may support them to re-engage students.

1. Be clear about why their behaviour is causing concern and what the potential consequences will be – it is better to be honest about this so the student can properly understand the situation.
2. Provide reassurance that all is not lost and that there is a workable route back. Demonstrate your own desire to see them re-engage and your belief that they can still be successful.
3. Explain that you understand there are many reasons students fall behind or disengage, that it can happen to any student and other students who have disengaged in the past have been able to return to successful study.
4. Describe a clear pathway back to being engaged – break this down into steps if possible, so the student can visualise what they need to do and when they need to take each step.
5. Provide the student with an easy first step – this may simply be contacting you or an advisor for a conversation.
6. Signpost the student to other relevant support (student services, study skills teams, etc.) and encourage them to use it to get back on track. Students may not want to tell you what the real problem is, so it is important to provide other options.

Key Lessons

+ there are many reasons why students disengage – these reasons may be internal or external to the student. It is important not to make assumptions about the causes of student behaviour without evidence
+ students can be encouraged to re-engage by providing a clear route back that they can visualise and believe will work
+ students will avoid re-engaging if they believe they will be chastised, punished or humiliated
+ some students will need additional support from colleagues in Student Services and should be signposted effectively.

Top Tips

+ use appropriate Learning Technology to identify when students begin to disengage and send early communications that are supportive and understanding, encouraging them to take steps to re-engage
+ provide students with a clear path back to re-engagement, setting out achievable steps they can visualise and take
+ tell students that you believe that they can re-engage and be successful (within the limits of what is possible)
+ be clear about the potential consequences if they do not re-engage
+ signpost students to Student Services (they may not want to tell you the real reason they have dis-engaged).

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7.3 Effective Signposting

Effective signposting makes it easier to safely maintain boundaries and support students. Signposting protects academic staff from being pushed beyond their role and ensures that students are more likely to access the support that is most likely to help them.

However, it is clear from research that signposting is a more complex task than it may first appear (1). Simply telling students about the existence of services does not guarantee they will access that support. This is consistent with studies in the general population that demonstrate people often do not engage in healthy behaviours, even when they are aware of their apparent benefits of doing so (2-3). Some authors have identified a range of reasons as to why students do not access support (4) – these include stigma, accepting the possible need for support, not believing support will help, being concerned about the time commitment of receiving support and not believing they need or deserve support for the problems they are experiencing.

In effect, for students to choose to access support, three elements must be in place.

1. They must identify that they are experiencing a difficulty which would potentially benefit from support.
2. They must be able to identify appropriate support, know how to access it and be able to access it in a timely manner.
3. They must believe that this support will help them and be motivated to access it.

Behavioural science suggests that whether or not someone engages in healthy behaviours, such as help seeking, can also be dependent on how easy and speedy the process is likely to be (5).

Academics also identify problems that they experience in signposting students. These include knowing and understanding what support is available and is most appropriate to an individual student and managing the feeling that they are rejecting the student by sending them elsewhere (1, 6).

There are a number of steps academics can take to make the process of signposting easier and more effective. This begins in laying solid groundwork in advance. Academics can do this by:

1. Clearly explaining how student – lecturer/tutor relationships work at the beginning of the academic year and occasionally recapping this to maintain common understanding. This includes what the boundaries of the relationship are and what the academic can do and cannot do or help with.
2. Ensuring students are aware of the support that is available and how it can help.
3. Including information about support services in class slides as standard, so the information is being relayed to students on an ongoing basis, not just at the beginning of the year.
4. Reminding students verbally of the support available and normalising the use of this support. This can be done by highlighting that many students access such support and find it helpful and that doing so often results in students being more able to engage in academic work.

If a student discloses a mental health problem, there are then a number of steps that may be appropriate and helpful for an academic to take – this may need to be adapted to individual circumstances.

1. Be clear that you have heard what the student has told you, that you care and that you want their situation to improve.
2. Explain that because you care, you want them to get the best support possible for their issue and explain what you cannot do or are not best placed to do.
3. Ask the student what they think might help. Act on this if feasible.
4. Identify for the student the support that is available – it may help to provide some options such as student services, chaplaincy, their GP etc.
5. State your confidence in the support that is available and, if possible, provide details of how the service can help.
6. It may help to provide a narrative to encourage the student to access support. This is known as a My Friend John story, in which you explain how students in a similar position accessed support and found it helped – any such story should, of course, be changed and anonymised, so it does not relate to a specific student.
7. In some circumstances it may help if you can make it easy for the student to access support there and then by, for instance, offering to let them use your office telephone or suggesting they use an online contact form, while they are with you.
8. Set out what you can do to help (eg, helping them get an extension to a deadline).

These steps will make it more likely that a student will access support but remember it must remain their choice. People cannot be compelled to engage in support – even if pushed to make initial contact they can disengage later. It is important that academics maintain their boundaries, actively encourage students to access support when appropriate but leave them with their own autonomy and control.

Key Lessons

+ effective signposting is key to maintaining boundaries and appropriately supporting students
+ academics can increase the effectiveness of signposting by laying groundwork in advance – this includes clarifying boundaries, normalising the use of support and ensuring students are aware of the support available
+ effective signposting will motivate students to access support by increasing their belief that the support on offer is likely to help them

Top Tips

+ include details of support services on all slides as standard and on the VLE so this information can be accessed at any point during the year
+ ensure academics know and understand the support that is available to students
+ when signposting, academics should express their confidence in the support available and provide illustrative examples of how other students have been helped

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7.4 Collaboration between academics and support professionals

Previous work has shown that when gaps exist between academic staff and student services, student risk falling into those gaps (1). As the University Mental Health Charter makes clear,

> "inconsistent advice, improper, ineffective or non-existent signposting and promises made by one part of the institution that cannot be fulfilled by another, can have negative impacts on student mental health and belief that the university can provide the support they need. Alternatively, when different teams are able to collaborate and work well together, support to students improves and is more effective."
>
> *(2)*

Academics and support staff therefore need to work together to provide cohesive, appropriate responses and interventions for students. This is not to ignore the differences in roles and responsibilities and the implications of these differences (3). There are, however, areas in which academic and support professionals can collaborate to the greater benefit of students. Closer collaboration can also help academic staff maintain their boundaries by enabling more effective signposting and increasing student willingness to accept support from appropriately qualified staff.

Unfortunately, traditional divisions within universities mean academic and student support staff can exist in different worlds with limited interaction. This can give rise to misunderstanding and incoherence for students. Universities can address this by creating opportunities to bring academic and support staff together. There are a number of examples of this in practice that include:

+ involving support staff in curriculum development and design
+ academic and support staff working together to co-create interventions and responses to better support student wellbeing
+ enabling support staff to deliver or co-deliver workshops, as part of the curriculum, on student self-management, wellbeing and learning that are tailored to the subject area through collaboration between academics and support staff
+ developing opportunities for staff on both sides to deliver training to each other to increase knowledge of student wellbeing on one side and academic learning and life on the other.

These practices can help to create better relationships between academics and support professionals, improve understanding and thus improve the responses, interventions and advice that students receive. A more cohesive relationship also reduces the possibility that at risk students will slip through the net.

Key Lessons

+ when there are gaps between academics and student services, students can fall into those gaps
+ appropriate boundaries must be maintained between student services and academics but within these boundaries there are opportunities for more cohesive, collaborative relationships
+ when both sides understand and trust each other students are more likely to receive cohesive support, interventions and responses
+ this can help academic staff to maintain their own appropriate boundaries and thereby protect their own wellbeing

Top Tips

+ consider how staff can provide training and development to each other
+ look for natural opportunities for academics and support staff to co-create together – it may help to bring them together to map out their respective responsibilities and roles and how they can interact
+ create easy methods of communication between academics and student services

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7.5 Maintaining Boundaries

Maintaining boundaries as an academic or personal tutor can be difficult because of the inter-relationship between learning and wellbeing (1-3). It is inevitable that conversations with some students, about their learning, will turn into conversations about their life circumstances and wellbeing. When a tutor asks a student how their studies are going, the student may respond "I'm behind because…" and the conversation immediately turns to non-academic aspects of the student's life. For this reason, it is impossible to draw hard and fast lines between academic and non-academic issues.

One of the consequences of this inter-relationship is that the boundaries between an academic and a student can incrementally drift (4). The borders of the relationship can become confused, and the academic can find themselves providing ongoing support to a student who may be in difficult circumstances or is significantly ill. This can be exacerbated if the student presents in mental health crisis to the academic, with an expectation that the academic will support them and not report their conversation to anyone else (2, 5). Research has shown that this can have a negative impact on the academic and create risk for the student (2, 6). Despite the difficulty of separating wellbeing and learning, it is important that students and academic staff understand the boundaries of the relationship and that these are maintained (7).

Clear boundaries mean that students can make informed choices about where they can access appropriate and effective support. They protect academics from being drawn into providing support that is beyond their role and competency (4). Boundaries also mean that students can maintain a consistent relationship with an academic – if students reveal personal details to an academic, when in crisis, they may be reluctant to step back into the classroom, knowing that the academic is aware of this personal information.

There are a number of steps academics can take to enable them to maintain boundaries.

1. It is easier to maintain boundaries if the student is aware of, and understands them, in advance of encountering problems. This can be done by explicitly explaining the purpose of the relationship and any boundaries in the first meeting/class.
2. It can be easier to maintain boundaries if the staff member has a clear conceptualisation of what their role is (not just what it is not). This provides a structure to adhere to, rather than just things to avoid. For example, being a tutor could be conceptualised as a teaching role. This would allow the tutor to support wellbeing by developing the student's understanding of the process of completing academic work, including the importance of self-management and accessing appropriate support.
3. Boundaries are maintained through consistency. Over time, students will be able to predict an academic's responses. This predictability will give them a sense of certainty and security and make it less likely that they will overstep the boundaries of the relationship.
4. Part of maintaining consistency is being aware of, and avoiding, behaviour that unconsciously indicates a change in a relationship. This can include giving students a personal mobile phone number, interacting on social media outside of the professional role, physical contact or responding to emails and messages late at night.
5. When students present with problems or in crisis, it is important to remind the student what the boundaries are – both what the academic cannot do and what help they can offer (which may include supporting the student to access services).
6. Effectively signpost in a way that demonstrates belief in Student Services.

On occasions some students may, despite these actions, overstep boundaries and seek more support from their academic. When we are in difficulty, we tend to turn to those we know, trust and like – for many students this will be their academic. While it can be tempting to make an exception in these cases, particularly if the student is distressed, it is likely to create greater problems in future. If an academic is concerned about maintaining boundaries in these circumstances, it may be sensible to seek advice from academic colleagues, colleagues in Student Services or from a staff counselling service.

Key Lessons

+ the inter-relationship between student learning and student wellbeing can make it difficult to define and maintain boundaries. This can result in academics being drawn into supporting students beyond their role and competency
+ maintaining boundaries protects students, staff and the university
+ it is easier to maintain boundaries if they are explained in advance of students experiencing problems and if they are consistently modelled
+ if academics are concerned about a student and how to maintain boundaries, they should seek support from appropriate colleagues.

Top Tips

+ explain boundaries of the role in the first class/meeting
+ have a clear concept of the purpose of the academic/tutor role and where that purpose ends. This conceptualisation can help guide what to do and not do
+ be aware of, and avoid, behaviour that unconsciously indicates a change in a relationship such as sharing personal phone numbers, interacting on social media outside of the professional role, physical contact or responding to emails and messages late at night
+ seek advice from colleagues if concerned about maintaining boundaries; don't continue alone in a relationship or situation with a student that is causing you concern.

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7.6 When a Student Presents in Distress

Research has shown that when students experience problems with their mental health, they may choose to disclose this to an academic first (1). When people are distressed, they will often turn to someone they know, like and trust – for students this can be their tutor or lecturer. For this reason, students disclosing mental health problems and presenting in distress is now a common feature of the academic role. Despite this, many academics do not feel equipped to respond effectively (2-3).

This does not mean that academics can, or should, become mental health professionals. Maintaining the boundaries of the academic role remains important – even when academics are mental health professionals, they are usually not best placed to support students experiencing mental illness (4). The following guidance has been developed to support academic staff to respond effectively when students present to them in distress.

1 Acknowledge and accept your own emotional response.

   It is ok to feel worried, anxious or sad about being in this situation. It is also ok if your thoughts aren't all concerned for the student ("I don't have time right now. I don't want to know about this. I'm scared of saying the wrong thing"). These are normal human responses and don't make you an uncaring person. Fighting these thoughts and emotions can get you tangled up in an internal argument that makes it more difficult to identify what you need to do. The thoughts may actually be helpful – you may not have the time right now and that is a practical fact that needs to be part of what happens next. Remember, you are not solely responsible for what happens to this student – you are just one part of a response.

2 Assess whether the conversation can and should happen here and now.

   If a student begins to disclose, you must be sure that you are in an appropriate place and have the required time. If they've just stopped you in a busy corridor, it probably isn't right to discuss what is happening in any detail. Instead, (if appropriate) you might gently explain this and suggest they see you at a more appropriate time and place or refer them to Student Services.

3 Be clear about your boundaries.

Be honest with the student about what you can and cannot do - they can then make informed choices about what they tell you. It may help them to know that you don't need to know all of the details about what is happening. You only need to know enough to connect them to the support, resources and interventions that will help. Stating your boundaries is not a rejection of the student, it can be part of you honestly helping them: Eg "I'm concerned about you and I want to make sure we get you the help you need. I'm not going to be the right person to help with everything that's happening, so I'm going to suggest we include some of my colleagues who I'm sure can help."

4 Give the conversation a structure.

If a student is in distress or in mental health crisis, it can feel like a situation that is in freefall. A deliberate, transparent and structured response will help the student and you. Explaining how you are going to structure the conversation can also help to give the student clarity and support them to organise their thoughts, which in turn can increase their sense of control.

a. What is happening?

Be clear that you only need to know enough to work out what will help the student. Listen to their story and empathise with what they are experiencing. Repeating back what they have told you can help them to feel heard and may calm them down. Eg, "So, let me just check I've understood. X has happened to you, and it is having Y impact. I can see that must be hard."

b. What might help?

Students often have the resources to resolve their own problems, but because they are upset or distressed haven't identified this. You can ask:

– Has anything helped when you've felt like this before?

– Is there anyone else around who might help?

– What do you think might help?

These questions help the student to stay and feel in control. You can also suggest other options, such as accessing student services, their GP, Chaplaincy etc. You can find more on this in Effective Signposting.

c. How can you work together to get the student to what might help?

Together you can build an action plan. Where appropriate, this may include things you can do (eg, extending a deadline). As much as possible, give the student autonomy over the plan and what they will do next. You can facilitate them to access support if that helps.

d. Close down safely.

Reiterate the plan and who is doing what, remind them of your role and, if necessary, your obligation to tell others.

If there is risk

It is not your role to accurately assess risk, beyond what would be expected of any responsible adult. If you believe the student may be at risk, you must inform an appropriate person, by appropriate means. This may include contacting Student Services or calling 999, if the student appears to be at immediate risk. Remember, while you should treat conversations with students with respect, you are not so bound by confidentiality that you cannot tell someone else if you are concerned.

All of this is much easier if you have prepared the student by setting out your role and boundaries in advance.

Key Lessons

+ it is inevitable that students will disclose mental health problems and present in distress to academics
+ being prepared can help academics respond effectively, within the boundaries of their role
+ academics are not responsible for providing qualified mental health support – a helpful structured conversation can help students access appropriate support
+ where there is potential risk, academics must tell an appropriate person by appropriate means. Confidentiality does not prevent this.

Top Tips

+ explain your role and boundaries to students when you first meet, so they are not surprised when you suggest they access support from colleagues in Student Services
+ be honest about what you can and cannot do
+ give your conversation a structure and, as much as possible, let students take responsibility and control of the situation
+ know who you can contact if you are concerned about a student and how you can contact them.

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