

# SUPPORTING STUDENT WELLBEING THROUGH CURRICULUM DESIGN AND DELIVERY

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Students' wellbeing can impact on their learning and how students' learn can impact on their wellbeing. The role of staff in curriculum design and delivery is a key element in ensuring successful and well learners. This guide provides some key considerations for staff on creating healthy and successful learning environments.

There is growing concern, among academics across the UK, about an apparent increase in mental illness and distress in the student body. Academic colleagues have expressed concern about the number of students seeking support from them, their role and boundaries and how they can best support the wellbeing of their students (Hughes, et al, 2018). Alongside this, there is increasing evidence that there is a clear, two way link between student wellbeing and learning. Wellbeing can impact on how well students learn; but how students engage in learning and how effective their learning is, can also impact on their wellbeing (Houghton & Anderson, 2017; Baik, et al, 2017). Given this, the best and most important way in which academics can support the wellbeing of their students, is probably via the curriculum

## WELLBEING AND THE CURRICULUM

As many authors have argued, the curriculum is the one consistent element in students' lives, with which universities can influence behaviour and learning. Academics and the curriculum are the only guaranteed points of contact between students and the university. There is also evidence that how and what students are taught and how they are assessed, can influence their wellbeing and mental health (Houghton & Anderson, 2017).

Some authors have raised concern that this is an argument for removing 'stress' from student learning and therefore, will inevitably lead to dumbing down or diluting the academic integrity of the degree (Ecclestone, 2020). To remove stress, this argument goes, we must remove anything that is difficult or upsetting. But this is not, in fact, the case. Challenge and learning are good for wellbeing. A degree of desirable difficulty in our day to day experiences, helps to generate meaning and to develop, what Meichenbaum (1985) called, stress inoculation. When students learn to engage with difficult problems or concepts and gradually understand and master them, this can develop confidence, self-efficacy and the ability to engage with other difficult problems in future.

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The key is to ensure that students have been well prepared for these challenges in advance, are well supported through them and are helped to reflect on the learning and development that has taken place as they mastered them.

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

Ideally, curriculum design and delivery should focus on developing student learning and wellbeing. Helpfully, good teaching appears to have a clear role in helping to support student wellbeing as well as learning. However, there are a number of aspects which are worth considering and where extra gains may be made.

### 1. Transition(s)

The transition into university is particularly important for student persistence, success, sense of belonging and wellbeing (Kift, 2009). How students experience their first days and weeks of term, can have effects that sustain all the way through to the end of their degree. This is particularly a key time for students to build a sense of social connectedness and academic self-efficacy – to believe they belong and that they are capable of success.

The student experience of their programme begins the moment they arrive (virtually or in person). However, their first week is often designated as induction or orientation and it isn't unusual for there to be no disciplinary learning until the following week.

It can help if the student's first week is also the beginning of their learning journey. An early group task, that contains a degree of sufficient challenge and engages students with an interesting aspect of their course, can help to build cohort identity, student confidence and excitement about the degree. This early impression and activity can increase student confidence and engagement and promote positive feeling.

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## **2. Scaffold**

Students arrive at university with a spectrum of preparedness. This is important because novices and experts engage with learning and problem-solving differently (Kirschner and Hendrick 2020). Experts will benefit from more freedom to explore topics and problems on their own or with peers. Novices need more explicit guidance and support to develop the skills required to become an expert. If your curriculum is designed for experts and some of your students are closer to novices, they will feel alienated, lose confidence, doubt their worth and be left behind academically.

A truly inclusive curriculum begins where students are at the beginning of the year – not where we might wish they were. Early no stakes testing and activity can help you to assess what your students know and are able to do and to adjust your teaching to that. This does not mean you can't be ambitious for them – but we do need to recognise that students need support to develop the skills and knowledge to be successful. A simple guiding rule is that if you want students to know, understand or be able to do something – then teach it explicitly within the curriculum. This includes activities such as group work. We know that group work can significantly improve learning but only when well-structured and if students have been prepared to utilise it effectively.

## **3. Encourage deep learning**

Students who learn deeply tend to achieve more than those who surface learn – they also tend to have better wellbeing (Postarreff, et al, 2016). Deep learners derive meaning, confidence and positive emotional experiences from their learning. Surface learners tend to be focused on grades and the possibility of failure, making learning a risky endeavour. You can encourage deep learning by discussing it and the benefits it brings, demonstrating to students how it works and through your own passion for your subject and belief in them. Helping to build student self-efficacy and self-attribution can also encourage students to engage more deeply.

## **4. Develop a collaborative classroom culture**

Collaborative learning appears to provide better support for learning and wellbeing than individualised learning. Spending time on classroom culture, agreeing rules between you and your students and asking everyone to invest in each other's learning can create a culture in which students can excel. Key to this is the creation of 'psychological safety' in which students feel able to take risks and make mistakes in the knowledge that they will be supported and not harshly judged.

## **5. Ensure narrative cohesion**

Students can find content harder to engage with if they struggle to understand its relevance or to find it meaningful. This can result in them becoming frustrated, alienated, disillusioned and losing motivation. Key to addressing this is ensuring that the curriculum has narrative coherence. This is important both within and between modules. We cannot assume students are able to do this for themselves – making links between different topics is a higher order, expert skill. If we want students to be able to develop this, we must teach it. This can be made easier if a sense of narrative coherence has been developed across the curriculum. Kirschner (2020)

recommends starting with the big picture – setting the scene at a higher, potentially abstract level, then narrowing in to one detailed aspect before coming back out to look at how it links back to that bigger picture.

## **6. Signpost – with confidence**

Your role is not to be a counsellor, psychologist or life guru. If students are experiencing problems with their mental health, it is right to signpost them to services that can provide the clinical help they need. It is equally important that you maintain your boundaries – this does not mean you don't care. Maintaining your boundaries helps keep you and your student safe and will make it more likely that they access effective support.

However, there are two important elements that can help this to work. The first is that you explain your boundaries and role to students explicitly at the beginning of your relationship. This is particularly important for academic tutors. Be clear that there are some things you cannot keep confidential and would have to pass to Student Services. Students can then make informed judgements about what they tell you.

The second aspect of signposting is that how you signpost can affect how likely students are to access formal support (Hughes, et al, 2018). If you express confidence in the service and can refer to other times that your students have benefited from support (anonymously), students will be more likely to follow your advice. Being able to talk knowledgeably about what is available and how it might help can also increase the effectiveness of your signposting.

## **7. Look after your own wellbeing**

Your wellbeing is important in and of itself. You are as entitled to good wellbeing as anyone else and to prioritising activity that will benefit your wellbeing. Your wellbeing is also important because it can affect your students. If students see you modelling good wellbeing behaviours they are more likely to adopt those behaviours as well. Teaching, lecturing and research are also demanding tasks that take a huge amount of energy, concentration, effort and empathy. The quality of your work will be better if you are able to maintain your wellbeing and your students will benefit as a result.

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## 8. Assess for learning

A key question for assessment is – ‘what is difficult and why?’ Ideally, students should understand what has been asked of them, know how to do it, believe they can be successful but have to work hard and experience ‘desirable difficulty’ in completing the work.

Alternatively, assessments which are confusing in design, for which students haven’t been prepared and without clear outcomes can be unhelpfully anxiety inducing.

Consider whether the assessment is ‘constructively aligned.’ Does the assessment test the knowledge, understanding and skills that are important for the module? Have students been prepared for this type of assessment? Does it encourage deep learning activity? Are students able to see the relevance and linkage with other parts of their learning?

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

As an academic, you have the opportunity to influence student wellbeing and learning for the better. You can do this by using your teaching role to increase student confidence, self-efficacy, deep learning and love of their subject.

However, you do not have to become their counsellor; maintaining your boundaries and effectively signposting to support services is a caring and helpful act.

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