

Wellbeing in the Curriculum

A 5-step simple guide on why and how

The aim of this simple guide is to set out 5 steps on how to embed wellbeing into the curriculum. This can be through either big or small adjustments to the environment and through the ways in which teaching is developed and delivered. All of which can contribute to and enhance the wellbeing of both students and staff, whilst promoting the enjoyment of learning and teaching, enhancing the student experience, inclusivity and outcomes.

Context

Mental health and wellbeing have a central part in the quality of life we all experience. Universities UK (UUK) set out their vision for 'UK universities to be places that promote mental health and wellbeing, enabling all students and all staff to thrive and succeed to their best potential'

Aberystwyth University's Mental Health & Wellbeing Strategy (2020-2023) sets out the importance in the development of student Mental Health and Wellbeing through the four 'P's. With the aim to promote positive mental health, through partnership working to prevent mental ill health by providing appropriate support and development opportunities.



The MH and Wellbeing Strategy Group will be working to deliver on this strategy, focusing on implementing, measuring and reviewing how we, as a University, are delivering good practice, in line with our Teaching and Learning Strategy (2019-2022) and various guidance from Student Minds, UUK, and HEFCW.

5 simple steps to embed wellbeing

- Foster positive connections
- Relate Learning to the present
- Encourage autonomy in student learning
- Consider performance pressures
- Set clear expectations from the start

Foster positive connections.

Why?

Social Cognitive Neuroscientist - Matthew Liebermann, set out how meaningful social connectedness has been evidenced to make us smarter, happier and more productive, along with healthier and we live longer! As humans, we prefer smaller groups, no more than about 50 so we can understand our position in the group! Anything bigger can cause heightened anxiety. When we are anxious the body is working harder to keep us safe whilst our ability to think clearly can also be diminished.

How?

Smiling lowers blood pressure and cortisol levels helping the nervous system to relax which can aid concentration and confidence. Encourage a smile by smiling yourself, by talking about smiling, or by showing images of smiling. Science has evidenced how smiling each morning can help reduce stress, build confidence for the day. Why not start each lecture with a smile?

When in a large group environment, break down any anxiety by getting students to smile at someone next to them or by drawing or visualising a smiling face (not everyone is comfortable with facing and talking to strangers).

Talk about dignity and respect towards fellow humans and the importance of effective communication and connection. Encourage students to make time for meaningful, helpful connections. Encourage students to take time to say hello to others, to ask how are you, what's been working well. Asking others how they are also make you feel good. Schedule connection breaks. Encourage a message or phone call to a trusted friend or family member. Students may like to send a message of genuine thanks to another student, staff member, friend or family member (how good does that feel?). As personal tutor offer regular time for connection with each student individually or in small groups either face to face or remotely.

Connections with animals are also evidenced to help – talk about pets, show wildlife images perhaps.

Relate Learning to the present.

Why?

Professor Jon Kabat-Zinn has evidenced the significant health benefits of every day mindfulness and how gaining 'present moment awareness' can have a very effective grounding technique to the here and now (rather than worrying about something that happened last night for example). Just a few minutes of daily mindfulness can positively strengthen student's ability to cope with life's challenges. Professor Richard Davidson has evidenced how 'positive neuro growth' is strengthened with mindfulness.

How?

Connecting students taught learning, to their everyday lives and activities and their here and now senses can help – Offer a brief 2 minutes mindfulness practice at the start of session to help ground students to the here and now. Display calming everyday visuals related to the taught subject. Play gentle music related to topics. Students may want to form a music playlist, which can be incorporated into group sessions? Get them to label/name the thoughts and emotions that may be linked to a learning activity. Eg. Frustrating, exciting, I do not want to do this, I want to do this. Offer green spaces real or virtual to aid sensory experience bringing the student to the here and now.

Encourage autonomy in student learning.

Why?

Not feeling in control of a situation can impact on our self-esteem, confidence and motivation. Allowing students to make decisions and work autonomously can help build an optimistic outlook and increase happiness, greater productivity and a feeling of being valued.

How?

Enable opportunities for students to bring their interests into a discussion, learning activities and assessments to help promote their curiosity. Encourage students to talk about what could work well or what has worked well in their particular learning interest – Big or small - It can be 5 very simple things eg. An interesting word, visual, the design of a text book/webpage, the name of a researcher, favourite research paper.

Consider performance pressures.

Why?

We know that the transition in, the transition out and deadlines throughout university time can all be extremely stressful. Prolonged stress contributes to heightened cortisol levels and adrenal fatigue, bringing low energy and immunity response, low mood/depression and anxiety. Reducing any potential prolonged stressor periods, whilst students are learning to adjust to the new environment, social group and the mixed emotions that come with any change, will help students 'calm' their biological and psychological being. This will aid concentration and confidence, allowing them to rebuild strength for any forthcoming stressor. We also know that January to spring can be a vulnerable time for humans' mental health, so considering when we ask them to participate in 'stressor' events can be helpful.

How?

Can an induction be delivered in smaller, more bite size information sections with time to collect thoughts between sections. Perhaps assessments can be delivered differently and at different times. Reducing the number of module assessments in close proximity can help. Can colleagues share information about assessments within modules, so a broader understanding of the entire programme is captured so a student's perspective is understood.

Set clear expectations from the start.

Why?

We can feel less anxious and more confident in our environment, enabling us to be more productive, happier and healthier, if we know what the boundaries are and what the expectations of us are.

How?

Being really clear from the start in an induction programme, or regularly repeating information at key times, can really help. It may be about a process linked to modules, assessments perhaps. Set out what they can expect from you, what are your office hours, when can they expect a response, how regularly will you plan to meet and what to do outside these times if they need help. What are your professional limitations (what you can and can't help with). What are acceptable behaviours as set out in the student code of conduct, and what to do if there is a dignity and respect issue, finance worry, wellbeing concern for instance.