

How to Flourish in Third-Level Education

Just surviving is not enough

Third-level education is challenging for many students, so they brace themselves and aim to survive until graduation, when their lives truly begin. However, both universities and students can dare to believe that psychological flourishing is possible and can take steps to experience it in their college years. This article provides examples of how to do it.

Thriving and flourishing

Surviving third-level education is not enough. We need to help students not only to survive but also to thrive and flourish at third level, especially given the rising rates of mental health issues and pandemic-related changes at teaching institutions worldwide, such as the increase in remote teaching – not to mention the rapidly climbing cost of living. We constantly focus our attention on the 20% of students who are not doing well, but we could pay more attention to the majority of students, helping them become the best versions of themselves and maintaining or improving their wellbeing.

Thriving is about being your best and getting the best out of your environment. In a recently published guide to feeling and doing well at university, psychologists share some tools available to help students thrive (van Nieuwerburgh & Williams, 2022). These include helping students learn by making small life changes; for example, ensuring good nutrition to keep their body healthy; avoiding multi-tasking, to improve cognition; and actively searching for opportunities that generate positive emotions, such as spending time with people and minding their emotional health. Third-level institutions can help students thrive by providing them with the right conditions and necessary knowledge, and by helping them tap into the best of what they can be.

Flourishing, on the other hand, is the optimal level of psychological, social, and emotional wellbeing. It is a range of resources that students develop to help them cope more effectively with adversity and live a good life. The flourishing state may signify physical and psychological health, but only sometimes. Research shows that over 30% of those who showed signs of flourishing battled with mental health challenges, such as substance abuse (see Burke, 2020, for a review). Thus, flourishing and mental health issues are not mutually exclusive. They support each other in that the resources that flourishing people develop help them cope more effectively with other life challenges.



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In addition to helping students cope with adversity, flourishing protects against mental health issues. In a recent longitudinal study, when flourishers' wellbeing declined, they were seven times more likely to develop depression two years later (Keyes et al., 2020). Thus, flourishing is a fluid state, with as many as half of flourishers declining in a decade (Keyes et al., 2010). Triggers such as distress experienced through education at third level can negatively impact people.

Wellbeing in education

Using a model created by Dempsey and Burke (2022), we considered four critical components that impact students' wellbeing in education:

1. Curriculum choices that make learning practical and relevant to young people's lives.
2. Pedagogical choices that help students create, enact, and experience knowledge.
3. Epistemic agency via collaborative learning with significant peer group interactions.
4. Relationships, be they intra- or inter-personal.

All these components play a significant role in students' learning experience and become the foundations for flourishing at the third level of education. Therefore, they should also be considered when designing a flourishing third-level education.

Finally, there are other ways in which third-level education institutions can enhance students' wellbeing and help them flourish. These include a range of activities that can become part of their educational experience, such as a mini-break for stretching every 20 minutes during a lecture, or wellbeing challenges such as conscious application of tools that students can use to enrich their lives.

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Tools and activities for flourishing

Recently, my colleagues from the Centre for Positive Psychology and Health at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland and I compiled over 100 research-based tools for helping people flourish (Burke et al., 2023). They derive from positive psychology (the science of wellbeing) and lifestyle medicine (the science of lifestyle choices that prevent non-communicable disease such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes, and chronic lung disease). The six pillars of lifestyle medicine are nutrition, physical activity, stress management, quality sleep, positive relationships, and substance use.

Our latest research (Burke & Dunne, 2022) showed that even though lifestyle medicine relates mainly to people's physiological health, those who flourish psychologically are three times more likely to use three or more pillars of lifestyle medicine in their daily lives than those who are moderately well.

Flourishers are also nine times more likely to use three or more pillars than those who are languishing (i.e., those who have lower wellbeing but not enough symptoms to diagnose with mental illness). Thus, when designing interventions to help third-level students flourish, it is essential to consider tools for both body and mind.

Here are a few adapted activities that lecturers and students could use in third-level education:

- *What Went Well (WWW)* – reflecting on the good things that happened that day. This activity is beneficial on days when things go wrong. It allows people to have a more balanced perspective on their situation. Instead of thinking narrowly of the bad things that happened, thinking more positively shows that amidst adversity, they also experienced good outcomes, or that there is more to their lives than what happened on this one bad day. This balanced view helps students develop optimism, allowing them to keep going in adversity.

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- *Best Possible Self* – This tool asks students to consider what it would be like if everything went well for them. It encourages them to imagine they are in excellent health, their studies are going well, and their friendships are thriving. They have worked hard and accomplished all their goals. They are asked to imagine what it would feel like and to reflect on the critical steps they took to help them get there. Then they need to take 10 minutes to write what they have imagined. This activity can boost their positive emotions, but more importantly it can create hope and help students find pathways to get where they want to get.

- *Picture This!* – This tool encourages participants to create a picture diary of their 21 days on the campus, be it the first 21 days of an academic year, 21 days of preparing for exams, or 21 days of building friendships. They are asked to review them every evening, reminiscing on the meaningful events that happened to them, and once a week to share their pictures and meaning with their family or friends. This simple activity was used to help people realise their life's meaning and boost positive emotions, and it predicted that participants' eudaimonic wellbeing would increase the next day.

Conclusion

It is not one approach that will help us create a thriving and flourishing environment for lecturers and students, but a mix of all approaches relevant to individuals, institutions, and programmes. What matters is that we take the time to consider not only the reduction of illness, distress, and upset but also an increase of wellbeing and flourishing. Many people are capable of flourishing, but not enough people experience it. So what small things can you do today to help your people flourish at third-level education?

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