

Embedding Wellbeing into the Curriculum

Introduction

Students entering third-level education are going through a time of significant personal transition and disruption, moving from the highly structured, closely monitored, and familiar secondary school system to a new environment that offers both welcome advantages and unexpected challenges. Students relish their newfound independence; the opportunity to study in an academic area of their choice, often with like-minded people; and the liberation from daily homework and strictly supervised projects. But this freedom demands that they quickly learn self-direction, motivation, discipline, organisation, and time management.

All of this is going on while they adjust to the other changes involved in becoming a third-level student: living away from home for the first time, missing old friends and trying to make new ones, managing finances, and so on (Fox et al., 2020). Mature students have their own challenges, perhaps juggling education with family life, or dealing with additional financial pressures of car loans or mortgage payments, and learning how to fit in with younger classmates. International students grapple with the practical difficulties of moving to a new country while navigating culture shock and language barriers.

Mental health in higher education

In recognition of this, and acknowledging a duty of care to students, a lot of work is being done to drive proactive mental-health initiatives in higher education institutes (HEIs) globally. The recent *National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework* reminds us that 'the HEI environment is distinct in that it provides a single setting where work and social life as well as health services and other supports are integrated. Institutions are well positioned to develop, evaluate, and disseminate best practice in support of students with mental ill health' (Fox et al., 2020; see also Callendar et al., 2011).



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Much work is being done to drive mental-health initiatives in higher education institutes. This article assesses the challenges and enablers of such an approach, considers its feasibility, and makes the case for embedding mental health across the curriculum at higher level in Ireland.

But shouldn't our attention to mental health go beyond offering support to those experiencing mental ill health – those already in crisis? True mental health, or mental 'fitness', involves proactive interventions and initiatives to help students 'not just survive but thrive' and improve their wellbeing so they may be more resilient to inevitable stressors (O'Brien et al., 2020). Universities UK's (UUK) strategic framework *Stepchange: Mentally Healthy Universities* calls on universities to take a whole-university approach to mental health, meaning that it is considered across every aspect of the university and is part of all practices, policies, courses, and cultures (UK Healthy Universities Network, 2020).

As educators, our purpose is to create a range of learning opportunities for students to enable them to achieve explicit learning outcomes and develop skills and attributes that will stand to them upon graduation. We work hard to use the most effective teaching and learning techniques along with creative and level-appropriate assessment methodologies to help students work successfully towards their qualification. We now know that students' academic success is largely influenced by their mental health and wellbeing (Chu et al., 2023). Feedback from industry tells us that desirable graduate attributes include things like resilience, confidence, ability to work in teams, and effective communication, as well as more specific and perhaps more easily measured hard skills. So the question becomes: Should we, and can we, include mental health and wellbeing in the curriculum itself?

A joint report from the Union of Students in Ireland and National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Ireland makes a direct call to action to HEIs to embed wellbeing across the curriculum, reporting that 'where institutions do provide students with mental wellbeing knowledge and skills through academic courses, the positive effects on students are evident' (Byrne & Surdey, 2021). The UUK Stepchange framework also urges 'curricular infusion' of mental health across all academic disciplines. I strongly advocate this approach for several reasons:

- » Campus wellbeing programmes that are optional supports often only reach people currently in crisis or already convinced of the need to take care of their mental health. Including wellbeing and resilience education in the curriculum means that this important knowledge and training will reach every student on those programmes.
- » Embedding wellbeing in the curriculum is a clear demonstration of a HEI's commitment to mental health and wellbeing as a strategic priority.
- » Including wellbeing in a credit-bearing module with specific learning outcomes ensures academic rigour and the use of quality material that is evidence-based and research-based.
- » Inclusion in the curriculum as a full-semester module allows more time to properly cover each topic and tailor the material to different groups of students. This enables deeper learning and an opportunity for experiential learning and reflection.

Student wellbeing has always been an important consideration in Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT), and we recognise the importance of meaningful efforts to support and encourage our students' positive mental health. As far back as 2015, we included a full, credit-bearing mandatory module on resilience and wellbeing in three programmes in the School of Business & Humanities, and as an elective module on a further three programmes.

The module covers goal-setting, habit formation and modification, fixed vs growth mindset, time management, signature strengths, and stress management. The teaching-and-learning approach is a combination of theory, experience, and reflection. Students are assessed through several projects that challenge them to further investigate, experience, and reflect on the research and recommendations explored in class. Their feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, particularly in response to the assessment methods used.

Challenges

For those HEIs considering embedding wellbeing into the curriculum, the biggest challenge is the competition for space in a programme, particularly for a mandatory module. There are a limited number of modules, and every academic will be vying for space for their own subject, as they believe passionately in its value and importance. The ability to introduce a new module or course also depends on the system of programmatic review and development practised in each institute.

But there are creative ways to address this challenge. While in many ways a standalone module is ideal, some of these topics can be 'infused' into existing modules across the programme. For example, in DkIT, the material on habits and stress management has been added to several modules such as those on leadership and sustainable entrepreneurship in programmes in the Science Department, while mindset is taught as part of a module on organisational behaviour in another Business programme.

Another challenge is the criticism that positive education lacks rigour, is an easy or less demanding option for students, or is a waste of precious academic time (White, 2015).

Enablers

To successfully embed wellbeing in the curriculum, there are several enablers – first and foremost strong leadership. At an institute level, if senior management explicitly includes wellbeing and mental health in its strategic plan, this paves

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the way for embedding wellbeing into the curriculum, as those strategic priorities inform objectives, translating into tactics and a call to action for curriculum development. At a programme level, if there are wellbeing and mental health champions among the academic staff, they can argue the case for making space in each programme and negotiate with colleagues on the most effective way to do this.

Another enabler is the societal shift from avoiding mental health discussions, because of the stigma, to a more accepting and positive view. When we began work on this module ten years ago, there was little discourse in the Irish media about mindfulness, mindset, habits, or signature strengths. But what was once the domain of the psychologist and psychiatrist is now more mainstream, and people are more open and willing to engage with these ideas. This familiarity with and acceptance of the material is coming through in student feedback.

So it is not only desirable but very feasible to embed wellbeing into the curriculum as a credit-bearing, academically sound area of third-level education. As educators, we have options in how we can accomplish this and contribute to the ongoing work of HEIs to fully support the development of students both academically and socially throughout their college years.

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