Embedding Mental Wellbeing: Methods and Benefits Collaborative Enhancement Project 2021

Embedding mental wellbeing in students' learning

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Introduction

In the Academic Support Team at the University of Greenwich, we believe it's everyone's responsibility to ensure the health and wellbeing of our students, and we do this best with a joined-up approach to enable our students to thrive, progress and achieve at university. Our attention to mental wellbeing is implicit within our wide range of teaching and learning materials and modes of engagement with students at all levels and from all backgrounds.

The Academic Support Team embeds mental wellbeing in the following ways:

- By providing students with a smooth transition to university via a range of induction and pre-induction events such as GREFest and WinterFest.

- By seeking to empower students to take control of their educational experience by helping them to develop academic skills and graduate attributes.

- By developing an agenda of confidence building implemented via a robust system of 121 tutorials and group workshops aimed at helping students develop their reflective processes and their ability to interact with staff and peers in a relaxed and collaborative way.

Rationale

We have a diverse student body with 51% identifying as BAME and 36% mature learners. A large proportion of our student population are disadvantaged through coming from deprived neighbourhoods or from low HE participation areas. We found that students starting university didn't all have the same skillsets. This was linked to their entry qualifications, e.g. BTEC or A Levels; internal reporting showed that students with BTEC qualifications were three times more likely to drop out of university than students with A Levels (university internal report 2016-17). Research into student retention in higher education consistently shows that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are better able to progress and achieve when they feel a sense of belonging, a good start to university and when they have academic success (What Works, 2017). Furthermore, in an internal survey for new starters, students reported feeling nervous, worried and overwhelmed at the start of term (LevelUp report 2020).

As a result, we created resources and activities to alleviate negative emotions such as feeling anxious, impostor syndrome or lack of confidence.

Method

We ran a series of consultations working in collaboration with students and academic staff to identify what would help students feel less anxious and more prepared for university. This has helped us to understand what students want and need at the start of their studies and throughout their university journey. Over the past few years, we have grown our knowledge and understanding of how best we can support our students, and we continue to adapt our approach to ensure that our focus is informed by the student voice, student need and student wellbeing.

Below are two examples of how we have been supporting our students by embedding mental wellbeing in students' learning. LevelUp aims to help students develop skills for transitioning into university. Our Academic and Digital Wellbeing initiatives support students by equipping them with the skills and support to navigate through the university journey.

LevelUp: A self-directed online course covering library skills, study skills and digital skills which students can work through at their own pace. The activities are designed to complement the support and advice they get through their subject departments and personal tutors. Students are invited to sign up to the course as soon as they get their place at university in August. Useful videos, tips, games and activities alleviate any worries about starting university and promote a smooth transition.

Find out more:

> LevelUp report in Appendix 1
> www.gre.ac.uk/articles/public-relations/level-up
>
> Videos:
> https://youtu.be/OJ1Jru3WJE8
> https://youtu.be/DIYOE5mMm5g

Digital wellbeing: We recognise that our students' mental wellbeing can be affected by the myriad of stressful situations they encounter in their university studies. In 2020, inspired by university mental health day, the Academic Support Team launched a campaign encouraging students to take care of their "digital wellbeing".

During our 2020 campaign, we encouraged students to take a plant home and take time out to care for it. We also challenged our students to become a 30-minute "digital drop-out", i.e. by encouraging students to turn off their phones and chill out with friends or a book. Students loved the initiative and they also loved the plants.

> [05/03/2020 17:53] Sharon Perera on Yammer
> Digital Wellbeing for Mentally Healthy Universities. A good day in SWS Library today, reminding students that good academic practice includes looking after your digital wellbeing. Students loved the plants and some braved the digital drop-out challenge. Student: "I am very glad that the university cares about my wellbeing. I spend a lot of time on my phone and it's nice to see that someone else cares and they will help me with my digital wellbeing. The Digital Drop-out was a good experiment - I turned off my phone for 30 minutes and now I will try doing this for a whole day or even a whole week!".

The Academic Support Team shared their personal tips on what they did to improve their own digital wellbeing. For more information, view our webpage on Digital Wellbeing: Mental Health Awareness | Articles | University of Greenwich

In 2021, to celebrate university mental health day, the team ran a digital capabilities workshop to raise awareness of the impact of technology on our lives and how to manage this proactively. We used the [Jisc Digital Capabilities framework](#) and the [Jisc Discovery Tool](#) to help students manage and develop their own digital skills and capabilities.

We also developed a self-directed digital skills course for students to use as a follow-up to the workshop. [View our video on the Developing Digital Capabilities course](#).

During the lockdown in January, we launched a campaign on "Academic Wellbeing" to help students beat the January "blues" by nurturing a positive mindset. We created a video sharing tips on how to maintain a healthy *academic* wellbeing. We also ran WinterFest, for January starters and continuing students - a skills festival aimed at welcoming and nurturing students during the long and cold days of self-isolation.
[View our webpages on Academic Wellness here.](#)
[View our video on Academic Wellbeing here.](#)

References

University of Greenwich Access and Participation Plan 2021-2025: available on https://docs.gre.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0012/120603/Access-and-Participation-Plan-2020-21-to-2024-25.pdf
accessed on 12 November 2021
'*What Works? Student Retention and Success'*, Paul Hamlyn Foundation: 2017 available on www.phf.org.uk/publications/works-student-retention-success-full/full-report-final/ accessed on 22 May 2020

Appendix/supporting document

LevelUp Pilot Report 2020

This document was produced as part of the [Collaborative Enhancement Project - Embedding Mental Wellbeing](#).