

**2020 EUROPEAN LEARNING & TEACHING FORUM  
BALANCING TRADITION AND CHANGE  
HOSTED BY UTRECHT UNIVERSITY, THE NETHERLANDS  
13-14 FEBRUARY 2020**

**PAPER PROPOSAL FORM**

Deadline for submission: 1 October 2019

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ISSN:2593-9602

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**Short bio (150 words max):**

Stef Black is a graduate of Bangor University, Wales, with a BA (Hons) in English Literature and Journalism, and a Masters in Literature. She started her career at the University of Glasgow, working with postgraduate taught and research students, before moving to the University of Stirling Students' Union, where she undertook the role of Policy and Research Coordinator. There, she focused on enhancing student engagement in quality processes, developing representation roles and educational policy and governance. She has spent the last three years at sparqs, a publicly-funded agency for Scotland's university and college sectors which aims to support student engagement in the quality of the learning experience. Her main areas of work include several data-driven research projects, supporting developments in student representation structures, developing initiatives in student mental wellbeing in the curriculum and enhancements in online training.

*Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 1 October 2019 to [LTFForum@eua.eu](mailto:LTFForum@eua.eu). The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith\_Jones.docx. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.*

## Proposal

**Title:** A new approach to existing challenges: addressing student mental wellbeing from a learning and teaching perspective

**Abstract (maximum of 150 words):**

The challenges around addressing student mental health and wellbeing are not new. Over recent years the number of students disclosing a mental health condition in the UK has increased: 47,625 more students disclosed a mental health condition in 2015/16 compared to 2007/8.<sup>1</sup> Student support and counselling services are at capacity across the sector and student mental wellbeing is one of the most prevalent areas of discussion amongst student officers and institutions. Yet the traditional approaches employed by institutions to tackle this area are not enough anymore; they are fire-fighting and struggling to meet demand. This session will explore a new project developed in partnership with the sector over the last year that encourages institutions to look at student wellbeing through a learning and teaching lens, offering an alternative and new approach to addressing the existing challenges around student wellbeing.

**Key words (up to five):** students, wellbeing, learning, teaching, mental-health.

**Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? If yes, give details.** No

**Text of paper (maximum of 3000 words, excluding references):**

sparqs is the national agency in Scotland for student engagement in quality of learning and teaching – student mental wellbeing is not something that seems like a natural fit. However, it became apparent through our conversations with student officers and feedback from our annual support visits that this was a top priority across the sector. sparqs felt the need to respond to what students were saying, but we were unclear as to how a project like this would fit into the work we do with the sector. We were encouraged by a 2017 report ‘Embedding Mental Wellbeing in the Curriculum: Maximising Success in Higher Education’ published by the Higher Education Academy (now known as Advance HE).<sup>2</sup> This report made us consider how we could look at student mental wellbeing from a learning and teaching perspective and provide an alternative stream of work for those who sit outside of traditional student support roles, but nevertheless, can still have a role in supporting and developing good mental wellbeing amongst students.

With the number of students disclosing a mental health condition on the rise, institutions are struggling to cope with the demand for support; over the past five years, 94% of UK universities have experienced a sharp increase in the number of people trying to access support services, with some institutions noticing a threefold increase.<sup>3</sup> Alongside this increase in disclosure there are also more students talking openly and honestly about mental wellbeing. We all know university can be a challenging and overwhelming experience and this can impact negatively on students’ mental wellbeing but the statistics are startling: students scored

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<sup>1</sup> Advance HE (2018) Equality in higher education: statistical report [online]

<sup>2</sup> Jill Anderson and Ann-Marie Houghton (2017) Embedding Mental Wellbeing in The Curriculum: Maximising Success in Higher Education. *Higher Education Academy* [online]

<sup>3</sup> Craig Thorley (2017) Not by Degrees: Improving Student Mental Health in the UK's Universities. *Institute for Public Policy Research* [online] pg.4

between 15% and 22% lower than the total UK population on all four wellbeing measures - life satisfaction, life worthwhile, happiness, low anxiety.<sup>4</sup>

In recent years there have been several reports and guidance documents produced on student mental health and wellbeing with emphasis given to institutions that proper support for student mental wellbeing requires an institution-wide approach:

*“Universities should make the issue a strategic priority and adopt a **‘whole-university’** approach based on prevention and promotion, early intervention, and low-level support, responding to risk and crisis management, and referral into care and treatment”.*<sup>5</sup>

*“To facilitate **integration and embedding** of student mental wellbeing across the institution, this guidance should be circulated widely”.*<sup>6</sup>

These documents all perpetuate a commonality that student wellbeing is a responsibility for us all, but to achieve it, we need “to look beyond mental health services into wider public services; then beyond public services into our society as a whole;<sup>7</sup> everyone in the university has a role to play.

However, with this comes other challenges. There is sense of inevitability amongst academics now that dealing with student mental health and wellbeing is just ‘part of the role’.<sup>8</sup> This acceptance though comes with ambiguity as to what this means and what academics are supposed to do when students turn to them for support:

*“Well I remember that I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to do with the information ... because she was also saying like don’t tell anybody about this. I feel she mostly like just wanted to talk to someone, so I felt good to feel she was reaching out, but I also felt a little bit like (..) am I supposed to do something with this?”*  
(Anderson & Houghton)

It is understandable why frontline staff such as academics have become the go-to for many students when discussing things of a sensitive nature – they already have a relationship with these staff members and are in many ways far more accessible than traditional support routes such as counsellors – but this raises questions over capability and capacity. A lecturer’s skill is in their subject knowledge and teaching quality and rarely would they also have the relevant background or qualifications to deal with mental health conditions.

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<sup>4</sup> Ian Neale, Laura Piggott, Josephine Hansom, and Sam Fagence (2016) Student Resilience: Unite Students Insight Report.

<sup>5</sup> Thorley, pg.3

<sup>6</sup> Universities UK (2015) Student Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education: Good Practice Guide.

<sup>7</sup> Department for Health (2014) Closing the Gap: Priorities for Essential Change in Mental Health [online] pg.35

<sup>8</sup> Gareth Hughes, Mehr Panjwani, Priya Tulcidas and Dr Nicola Byrom (2018) Student Mental Health: The Role and Experiences of Academics. *Kings College London, University of Derby, Student Minds* [online] pg. 5

## **Our project**

With these factors in mind we began to develop our project 'Student Mental Wellbeing: A Learning and Teaching Perspective'. Our work is focused on how can we can support institutions to become more proactive in supporting and promoting positive student mental wellbeing rather than fire-fighting once the issues are already established and more developed. If we can encourage institutions and students' associations to work together to embed student mental wellbeing into areas such as curriculum design, learning and teaching processes, assessment and feedback and quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms, we hope we can in some ways alleviate the pressure felt on the frontline and create a more responsive learning experience that is adaptable and considerate to the ever-changing dynamics of student cohorts and their mental wellbeing.

The project will also challenge the preconceived notion that students' mental wellbeing and associated work is the sole responsibility of councillors or mental health advisors. Whilst we appreciate that many staff are not equipped nor feel comfortable dealing with such issues, there are many ways that lecturers, quality managers, librarians, programme leaders and Vice-Principals, to name just a few, can help support and enhance student mental wellbeing from a learning and teaching perspective.

The project is developed in partnership with students and institutions across Scotland so that we can help institutions shape their approach to dealing with student mental wellbeing in a way that works for them and their students. We hope that they will be able to see how best to align student wellbeing in effective learning and teaching processes and enhanced quality arrangements to complement existing support and services. The project also will help support students to engage in conversations around their learning experience, whilst considering what this means in terms of their mental health and wellbeing.

## **The workshops**

We hosted several workshops in summer 2019 to gather information and feedback from the sector on the challenges and possible solutions to addressing student mental wellbeing – all from a learning and teaching perspective. Using an existing sparqs tool known as the Student Learning Experience (SLE) the activity was centred around the seven areas of the SLE (detailed below) and prompted participates to think about both current practice in their own institution that could be considered best practice as well areas for development.

- **Curriculum**
- **Learning and teaching process**
- Learning resources
- **Assessment and feedback**
- Student progression and achievement
- Guidance and support
- **Quality enhancement and assurance**

We will further explore the outcomes of the workshops in relation to four of the seven areas which are closely aligned to the work of EUA Learning & Teaching Forum and its attendees: curriculum, learning and teaching process, assessment and feedback and quality enhancement and assurance.

The feedback from our workshops provided insight into what students and staff think some of the biggest gaps are in mental wellbeing provision and what changes need to happen that will start to embed student mental wellbeing in all aspects of the learning experience.

Reflecting on the workshops it was clear that the comments and suggestions were a starting point for conversation; they raise more questions for us to consider rather than providing all the answers. The comments offer an opportunity for institutions to continue dialogue internally and see where as individual universities (but also as a sector) small changes could have a big impact. Many of these observations and suggestions are changes that would create a better learning experience over all, but the more you consider and reflect it is evident how some things really can have an impact on mental wellbeing, despite maybe not being initially obvious.

The key themes in relation to challenges and solutions that the workshops identified were:

### **Curriculum –**

- Foundations for learning – Developing core skills and resilience in the curriculum, thinking about the “growth mind set” and how we discuss failure as part of what we teach/learn. Opportunities for mindfulness or meditation sessions early on, or even specific 1st year modules on wellbeing.
- Timetabling – flexible, more personalised timetables that could be designing with wellbeing in mind. Opportunity for students to review proposed timetables with considerations given to managing other time commitments. Timetables which are released earlier. Timetable that offer class free days or early finishes on certain days. Timetables that spread workload over period, particularly for ‘heavy’ subject areas.
- Student co-creation of the curriculum – consulting with students and the students’ association more in co-creation, finding ways to bring students in at the start of the process. Utilising existing structures and processes to engage students in curriculum design and development. If students have a role in the design of the curriculum they are more likely to ensure it reflects current student needs.
- Support for students who have work-based learning - additional support is there pre- and post-placements, site visits or required internships, especially for those in areas that may experience difficult or emotionally challenging experiences, such as nursing or social work.
- Trigger warnings – can there be guidelines for when content that some students may struggle with is being shown/discussed?
- Linking learning to the real world – if students can clearly see the link between the module and associated content and future employment this may help alleviate a big worry amongst students. They need to be able to see transferable skills and knowledge from degree to job.
- Student Support Services incorporated into the curriculum – in what ways can SSS have a role to play in the curriculum? Can time and space be made for this so it is recognised as an important part of the whole learning experience?

- Mental health and wellbeing embedded in the subject area – this could be as simple as talking about wellbeing in class, particularly in discipline relevant areas, or including relevant texts on a reading list.
- Managing expectations – ensuring that course content, practical work, reading lists etc. are as students expect, and if not, considering how that is dealt with and the impact it can have.

### **Learning and Teaching Process –**

- Awareness of learning styles – students need to have better self-awareness of their own learning styles and how this can help support their experience. Also, better staff awareness of who is in their class and how they learn and being more adaptable to different styles.
- Learning approaches (group work, individual study, class discussions, presenting to the class) – particularly the impact of group work on some students' wellbeing. Flexibility or adapting some elements so students can engage positively.
- Staff training and awareness – sensitivity training, awareness and empathy for students who disclose MH conditions or wellbeing issues and what this means for classroom engagement. Training to support tailored or individualised contact, as well as how to converse appropriately and have discussing in class about mental health and wellbeing.
- Keeping students engaged 'in the class' – how can we ensure the teaching process can minimise distractions and keep students focused?
- Individuality – can we keep options open? Can we tailor our approach? How do we create a learning environment that all students can resonate and respond to? Ensuring staff are more sensitive to individual needs and challenges.
- Feeling comfortable to ask – how can staff generate conversations that are supportive and relevant? Keeping the conversation open and flowing as and when students need it. What does the support look like for staff too?

### **Assessment & Feedback –**

- Alternative assessment methods – more choice and flexibility, or just a wider variety beyond essays and exams. Could a selection of assessment methods be beneficial? Just as students have different learning styles they also respond to different types of assessment.
- Pre-assessment support – Clear and consistent guidelines, notice of assessments, clear marking criteria, and timeline of feedback; what is the process once assignment is handed in (if a feedback policy states there is a 3-week turnaround time then students should have their feedback in 3 weeks.)
- Personalised feedback – feedback offered face-to-face and 1-2-1. Opportunity to discuss feedback and engage in a dialogue about what to do next with that feedback.
- An end to end-loading assessments – spreading assessments out. Linking up across the institution to mitigate doubling-up of assessment deadlines and exams (especially for joint-honour students).
- Changing the language used around assessments – using 'portfolio of work' or 'steps' in a process help students to see assessments more holistically and positively.

- Formative/summative – how can they play a role in student evaluation and success? Do we prioritise one over the other and what impact does this have on wellbeing? End of year 100% exams do not support positive mental wellbeing.
- Peer feedback – are there ways to make peer-to-peer feedback more prominent in assessments, learning from one another as equals. Are students more likely to respond positively to constructive feedback from a peer?
- Personalised support – in what ways can we tailor the support offered to students in preparation for assessments?
- Feedback as ‘Feedforward’ – if feedback is more constructive and aligned to a plan of work students will benefit from having clarity over next steps and areas for improvement, rather than just a response to the assessment in hand.
- Environment – what impact can the layout, space, and equipment have? What flexibility is there to this?

### **Quality Enhancement & Assurance –**

- Student-led – how can we guarantee that students are at the heart of the process? Student partnership is important if we want to begin to address the challenges at a structural level.
- How do we support students who are involved in both internal and external quality arrangements? – Training, 1-2-1 support, guidance/toolkits? We ask a lot of students and the processes can be time demanding and intense so we need to ensure we are properly supporting and equipping them. Their involvement shouldn’t come at the expense of their wellbeing.
- Feedback tools – ensuring they are designed and delivered in a way that promotes and addresses good mental wellbeing, such as national surveys and module evaluations. Option to feedback anonymously? Procedures in place to protect students whose feedback is not always positive?
- How can we measure happiness in our processes? Is this a priority for institutions?
- Additional qualifications and/or requirements for training – what support or guidance is needed for both staff and student officers (course reps, lead reps, sabbaticals) with regards to the minimum training they should have? Do they understand the various needs and dynamics of their cohort to address wellbeing issues and challenges?
- Processes – how do we embed questions and considerations of student mental wellbeing into key processes of an institution, for example in programme approval, annual programme monitoring and review and external examination reporting?
- Linking internal and external reviews – internal and external quality review processes should align with one another in terms of discussing and addressing student mental wellbeing.

### **What next?**

The project is developing quickly: we are beginning to shape the future of our work in partnership with students and the sector, including the development of a sector working group that will begin to explore some of the workshop suggestions and test what impact some of the suggested changes could have. We are in dialogue with our colleagues at NUS Scotland to see how our work aligns with their national portfolio of work on student mental health, including the development on Student Mental Health Agreements in all Scottish institutions.

We have recently secured external funding from QAA Scotland to set-up a 'collaborative cluster' alongside colleagues at Glasgow Caledonian University as part of the national Enhancement Themes activity and hope to deliver best practice sharing workshops around developing a 'mentally healthy curriculum' over the next academic year. We have also reached out to researchers at Keele University, De Montford University and the University of Edinburgh who are all exploring similar areas of work to see how we can collaborate activity and outputs.

We are also looking to develop a toolkit that students and staff can use to take forward some of the suggestions and recommendations discussed in this paper, which will include case studies informed by the developments of the new working group.

Ultimately, this project aims to help support the sector by offering a new, alternative approach to dealing with the existing challenges surrounding student mental wellbeing, and that by balancing what we already know with this new approach we can make the necessary changes to support our students long-term.

**References:**

Advance HE (2018) Equality in higher education: statistical report.

Craig Thorley (2017) Not by Degrees: Improving Student Mental Health in the UK's Universities. Institute for Public Policy Research.

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Gareth Hughes, Mehr Panjwani, Priya Tulcidas and Dr Nicola Byrom (2018) Student Mental Health: The Role and Experiences of Academics. *Kings College London, University of Derby, Student Minds*.

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