



Is using the term wellbeing with students a mistake? Evaluating a wellbeing intervention in a UK Law School - suggestions for repositioning strategies to address the impact of deficit-discourse

Denise Meyer & Caroline Strevens

To cite this article: Denise Meyer & Caroline Strevens (2022) Is using the term wellbeing with students a mistake? Evaluating a wellbeing intervention in a UK Law School - suggestions for repositioning strategies to address the impact of deficit-discourse, *The Law Teacher*, 56:1, 54-66, DOI: [10.1080/03069400.2022.2030955](https://doi.org/10.1080/03069400.2022.2030955)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069400.2022.2030955>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 07 Mar 2022.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 279



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

Is using the term wellbeing with students a mistake? Evaluating a wellbeing intervention in a UK Law School - suggestions for repositioning strategies to address the impact of deficit-discourse

Denise Meyer^a and Caroline Strevens ^b

^aHead of Wellbeing Student Wellbeing Service, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, England;

^bFaculty of Business and Law, Portsmouth Law School, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, England

ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates a curriculum-based and student co-created approach to improving student wellbeing and psychological resilience in a law school. The pilot employed an enhanced pedagogic framework informed by an evidence-based psychological literacy model compatible with self-determination theory (SDT). Level 4 students were introduced to a simple psychological model for recognising the role of emotion regulation in successful learning and the relevance to this of developing supportive connections and a sense of belonging within an inclusive learning community. Student “Wellbeing Champions” received further peer support and leadership training referencing this model and were then supported in developing the role primarily through community-building initiatives. Staff were also issued with a bespoke “Student Success” framework, encouraging them to support student motivation and success by incorporating activities for building relationships, creating a sense of community and belonging with safety to make mistakes, and scaffolding understanding of assessment and feedback. Recognising the limiting positions offered within a medicalised or deficit-focused narrative about wellbeing and mental health, the findings evaluate the effectiveness of the repositioning strategies represented within the pilot interventions, including a focus on learning success and leadership.

KEYWORDS Wellbeing; students; deficit-discourse; emotion regulation; repositioning

Introduction

Student wellbeing and mental health is now widely recognised as an important focus for the attention of university leaders and educators, with the launch in May 2021 of an award scheme for the University Mental Health Charter “created by thousands of staff and students to shape a future in which everyone in higher education can thrive”.¹ The Charter clarifies detailed principles to action the landmark Universities UK #Stepchange

CONTACT Caroline Strevens  caroline.strevens@port.ac.uk  Portsmouth Law School Faculty of Business and Law, University of Portsmouth, Richmond Building Portland Street, Portsmouth PO13 DE, UK

¹Gareth Hughes and Leigh Spanner, “The University Mental Health Charter” (Student Minds, Leeds 2019). See for details of the Charter Programme and award scheme. <<https://www.studentminds.org.uk/charter.html>> accessed 9 February 2022.

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

framework, which advocated that universities “reconfigure themselves as health-promoting and supportive environments”² within a whole-institution approach to student mental health.

This paper outlines a collaborative innovation project compatible with these recommendations undertaken at a UK University Law School. Authors Professor Caroline Strevens, then Head of the Law School, and Dr Denise Meyer, Head of Wellbeing, at the University of Portsmouth, were awarded a Learning & Teaching Innovation grant building on their respective prior research and innovation work to run a pilot “whole-school” intervention in the Law School starting in September 2019. Employing an enhanced pedagogic framework informed by an evidence-based psychological literacy model³ compatible with self-determination theory⁴ the proposed project was intended to develop students’ psychological literacy and skills for personal resilience with a focus on building a sense of belonging within an inclusive learning community. Level 4 students were introduced to a simple psychological model for recognising the role of emotion regulation in successful learning and the relevance to this of developing supportive connections and a sense of belonging within an inclusive learning community. Student “Wellbeing Champions” received further peer support and leadership training referencing this model and were then supported in developing the role primarily through community-building initiatives. Staff were also issued with a bespoke “Student Success” framework, encouraging them to support student motivation and success by incorporating activities for building relationships, creating a sense of community and belonging with safety to make mistakes, and scaffolding understanding of assessment and feedback.

This paper provides further detail of the intervention, sets out the theoretical context for the project in more detail, clarifies the research methodology, and reports on its findings. It considers the project as a piece of applied discourse analysis, using the framework of positioning theory aiming to “shift the direction of inquiry from reflecting or representing the social world, to actively transforming it”.⁵ It is based on analysis of qualitative data gathered via two focus group conversations with students and a survey conducted at the conclusion of the first year of the pilot intervention and considers the discourses shaping the positions taken up by students, staff and researchers as part of their reflections on strategies for improving student wellbeing and resilience.

Research method and intervention: pragmatic, co-created action

This pilot project was conducted during the 2019/20 academic year, as a piece of practical action research⁶ planned and executed in collaboration with Law School staff and with student leaders from the student-led Law Society respectively.

²Originally launched in 2017, the #Stepchange framework was updated in 2020 to ‘Stepchange: mentally healthy universities’ - see <<https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/step-change-mentally-healthy-universities>> accessed 9 February 2022.

³Paul Gilbert, *The Compassionate Mind* (1st edn, Hachette 2009).

⁴Edward L Deci and Richard M Ryan, “The General Causality Orientations Scale: Self-Determination in Personality” (1985) 19 *Journal of Research in Personality* 109.

⁵Kenneth J. Gergen, “A Constructionist Conversation with Positioning Theory” in Bo Allesoe Christensen (ed), *The Second Cognitive Revolution* (Springer 2019) 78.

⁶Hilary Bradbury (ed), *Handbook of Action Research* (3rd edn, Sage 2015) 1.

The intervention in the Law School had two parts. The first comprised a continuation and enlargement of a curriculum intervention within a core Level 4 module that introduced law students to the notion of personal values, motivation and wellbeing. This annual lecture and supporting seminar, designed by Stevens as part of her research interest into intentional curriculum design for wellbeing underpinned by self-determination theory (SDT), was supplemented with activities conducted within group personal tutorials introducing Meyer's simple psychological literacy model⁷ for recognising the role of emotion regulation in successful learning and the relevance to this of identifying personal values and developing supportive connections and a sense of belonging within an inclusive learning community.

Concurrently, we worked with leaders from the student-led Law Society to develop a new volunteer peer support/leadership role, "Law Wellbeing Champion". A group of six student volunteers, mainly at Level 6, balanced in terms of gender and including students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds, were introduced to the psychological model within the context of peer support and leadership training, and then supported in developing the role mainly through devising and delivering extracurricular initiatives and events aimed at building an inclusive student community in the Law School.

In March 2020 the global pandemic brought about seismic changes with an inevitable impact on the project. Teaching staff no longer had capacity to continue developing the project interventions and it was no longer possible to collect a meaningful "after" measure of wellbeing to provide an indication of the impact of the project. However, we were able to gather data from two focus groups in July 2020, where we reflected with students as collaborators on practical actions taken within this outlined action research. The first focus group comprised students who had undertaken the leadership training tailored for law students (WBC focus group) whereas the second focus group comprised Level 4 and Level 5 law students who had experienced the first school-wide intervention (L4&5 focus group).

The eight students across the two focus groups had slightly more female than male participants, and included international students and/or students from minoritised ethnicities. Students were asked to evaluate their experience of the pilot intervention, their coping strategies in the current challenging circumstances, and their recommendations for improving student wellbeing, resilience and inclusion. The discussions were run using Zoom, with an anonymous Mentimeter poll running simultaneously to capture anonymous comments and reflections. In accordance with the ethical approval the recordings were transcribed for analysis without referring to the identity of these students.

In addition, 63 students from the School of Law, representing a range of demographic backgrounds and year groups, were among those who completed an all-student mixed method "Wellbeing in Difficult Times" (WiDT) survey as part of a separate piece of research into student wellbeing in the context of the pandemic. In addition to completing a battery of standardised measures relating to wellbeing, and belonging, survey participants could respond to open questions about their challenges and coping strategies during the pandemic; what they had learnt about themselves and their values; and their experience of the survey itself as an opportunity to reflect on their

⁷Denise Meyer, "Emotion Regulation for Learning: Skills for addressing the anxiety epidemic in the classroom." (Workshop at the Advance HE Learning and Teaching Conference, University of Northumbria, 3 July 2019). See also note 21.

wellbeing. The overall findings from the WiDT study are due to be reported elsewhere, but qualitative data from law student participants in the survey has been used to supplement the data from the focus groups as the basis for the analysis reported in this paper.

Research design and theoretical underpinning

Action research is a democratic and participative orientation to knowledge creation which “asks us to consider how we can act in intelligent and informed ways in a socially constructed world” – it is “about working towards practical outcomes, and also about creating new forms of understanding”.⁸ This paper serves as an extension of the reflection cycle within this piece of action research, drawing from a thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected and using the framework of positioning theory⁹ to identify and consider the usefulness of the discourses shaping the positions taken up by students, staff and ourselves as action researchers when reflecting on strategies for improving student wellbeing and resilience in learning.

Positioning theory “recognises both the power of culturally available discourses to frame our experience and constrain our behaviour while allowing room for the person to actively engage with those discourses and employ them in social situations”.¹⁰ The theory suggests that we are both *positioned* by others – in direct interactions and/or by dominant cultural discursive practices – and also have a role in positioning ourselves, by claiming or resisting the positions offered. It thus offers a powerful framework, within social constructionist thought, for addressing issues of agency and change. Meyer has previously argued that:

... the dominant discourses around student distress or psychological difficulty – invoking diagnostic and medical categories as well as equality and disability measures – arguably offer relatively limited and limiting, overly binary positions from which to address these issues and challenges.¹¹

We would add that the way in which this dominant deficit discourse feeds an “individualist presumption ... [means we] fail to explore the broader circumstances in which actions are enmeshed” – as Gergen rightly argues, “If my job is boring and my boss a tyrant, why should I be treated for my feelings of depression? Why not change the workplace?”.¹² Similarly, Strevens has also argued, with others, for the ethical imperative to recognise the location of law student distress within “the context of the neoliberal university ... as a way of resisting the potential injustices and de-humanising tendencies of that paradigm”¹³ quoting Parker in recognising the shaping power of discourse: “The ways that lawyers and academics talk and write about these issues are powerful – they create discourses that frame the way young lawyers see their situation, and the ways that the profession and public respond”.¹⁴

⁸Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, “Inquiry and Participation in Search of a World Worthy of Human Aspiration” in Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (eds), *Handbook of Action Research* (Sage 2001) 2.

⁹B Davies and R Harré, “Positioning and Personhood” in Rom Harré and Luk Van Langenhove (eds), *Positioning Theory* (Blackwell 1999).

¹⁰Kenneth J. Gergen, “A Constructionist Conversation with Positioning Theory” in Bo Allesoe Christensen (ed), *The Second Cognitive Revolution* (Springer 2019) 78.

¹¹Denise Meyer, “The Student Lifecycle: Pressure Points and Transitions” in Nicola Barden and Ruth Caleb (eds), *Student Mental Health & Wellbeing in Higher Education: A Practical Guide* (Sage 2019) 74.

¹²Kenneth J. Gergen, *An Invitation to Social Construction* (3rd edn, Sage 2015) 97.

¹³Nigel Duncan, Rachael Field and Caroline Strevens, “Ethical Imperatives for Legal Educators to Promote Law Student Wellbeing” (2020) 23 *Legal Ethics* 65, 72.

¹⁴*ibid* 77

Countering this dominant discourse, Meyer has argued for greater recognition of the “emotional discomfort, challenge and even distress ... [that is] an integral part of learning and the student experience”¹⁵ and has introduced Gilbert’s Compassionate Mind model for emotion regulation as shedding “new light” on the What Works? student retention findings,¹⁶ “that the promotion of a sense of belonging is a crucial factor in successful student retention initiatives”, with its recognition that the psychological security required to regulate this inevitable discomfort “is provided *in relationship* with others, through shared identity within an identifiable community and a sense of acceptance and belonging within that community”.¹⁷

Strevens has long called for curriculum intervention to address law student wellbeing,¹⁸ arguing (with others) for the ethical imperative to recognise and attend to law student stress and distress and proposing “ethical obligations for intentional curriculum design for the promotion of student wellbeing and the ongoing wellbeing of practitioners”.¹⁹ These publications have all investigated the application of Deci and Ryan’s²⁰ self-determination theory within the context of legal education.

Self-determination theory (SDT) suggests that motivation for learning and growth is linked to three innate and universal psychological needs – competence, connection and autonomy.

This approach, aiming to facilitate autonomy, competence and relatedness, informed the Student Success policy which Strevens devised and disseminated to staff across the School of Law for the 2019/20 academic year, encouraging staff to support student motivation and success.

Highly compatible with self-determination theory, Meyer has developed an innovative application of Gilbert’s three-system Compassionate Mind model for emotion regulation as a framework for psychological literacy in relation to teaching and learning²¹ and as the basis for a distinctive whole-institution approach to mental health and wellbeing aiming to enhance psychological flexibility, resilience and learning mindsets with a focus on skills for building social connection, community and inclusion. The approach aligns with the key principles of self-determination theory with its emphasis on a sense of connection and belonging (i.e. relatedness) as a vital part of the soothing response helping to regulate the uncomfortable threat response emotions arising in response to learning and other challenges (i.e. challenges to a sense of competence), which in turn helps to successfully engage the drive response to pursue valued tasks and goals (i.e. establishing a sense of autonomy). Like self-determination theory, the model recognises the motivating role of personal values in helping to regulate emotions in the interests of persistence in the face of failure or other barriers in the pursuit of challenging goals.

¹⁵Denise Meyer, “The Student Lifecycle: Pressure Points and Transitions” in Nicola Barden and Ruth Caleb (eds), *Student Mental Health & Wellbeing in Higher Education: A Practical Guide* (Sage 2019) 74.

¹⁶Liz Thomas, “Building Student Engagement and Belonging in Higher Education at a Time of Change” (Final report from the What Works? Student Retention and Success Programme, Paul Hamlyn Foundation 2012).

¹⁷Note 15, page 76.

¹⁸Strevens, C., & Wilson, C. “Law student wellbeing in the UK: A call for curriculum intervention.” (2016) *Journal of Commonwealth Law and Legal Education*, 11(1), 44-56.

¹⁹Note 13, page 65.

²⁰Note 4.

²¹D Meyer, “Emotion Regulation for Learning: Skills for Addressing the Anxiety Epidemic in the Classroom” (Workshop at the Advance HE Learning & Teaching Conference, University of Northumbria, 3 July 2019).

The approach aims to undermine the overly dominant medicalising discourse by de-pathologising ordinary threat response emotions like anxiety or low mood, and offering a more constructive position presenting emotion regulation as a life skill which can be learnt and practised in the interests of learning success. In particular, the approach challenges the dominant deficit-focused narrative around the idea of “support” by depicting support as a basic human need, and mutually beneficial “supportive connections” as a central ingredient in learning success. This undermines the individualised responsibility for wellbeing implicit in the dominant discourse, and introduces the vital role of inclusion and belonging in promoting wellbeing and mental health for all. An introduction to the model has been captured within an engaging four-minute explanatory video animation entitled “Emotion Regulation for Learning and Life”.²²

The aim for the pilot project was to explore ways to introduce this psychological literacy model to students as an integral and deliberate part of the curriculum, complementary to the Student Success framework and offering “learning and tools for self-care and positive mental health” in a format consonant with the whole-institution approach recommended in the #Stepchange guidance. Likewise, the project enlisted students in developing the proactive “communities of learning and peer support”²³ recommended in the guidance.

Analysis: developing fruitful positions for wellbeing

The Covid-19 pandemic offered a ready-made opportunity to consider emotions and strategies in relation to the new challenges it posed. Under the rubric of “Wellbeing in Difficult Times” students participating in the survey and focus groups were asked about the move to online learning and other challenges they had faced personally, and what old and new coping strategies they used to help them face these challenges. All focus group students were also asked to reflect directly on their experience of the project interventions. The following analysis identifies discursive themes in how students are positioned or position themselves within these reflections about the two project interventions.

Part 1: student leadership

A key focus for the project was co-creation with students to foster and support student wellbeing in the Law School. Student leaders from the student-led Law Society, affiliated with the Students’ Union (UPSU), had been keen to develop a peer support programme and agreed to work with us in the spirit of action research drawing on the learning from an existing institution-wide student leadership programme (led by Meyer) to develop a bespoke co-created scheme for the Law School.

The student leaders had initially envisaged setting up a traditional peer support scheme, seeing students as more likely to seek support from trained peers than from specialist services for anxiety, depression or other mental health difficulties. However,

²²See <https://myport.port.ac.uk/guidance-and-support/health-and-wellbeing/student-wellbeing-service/learning-well>

²³Phrases from the original 2017 #Stepchange framework - the refreshed Stepchange: Mentally Healthy Universities guidance can be found at <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/stepchange-mentally-healthy-universities> accessed on 9 February 2022.

Meyer's experience in the initial stages of the institution-wide programme was that finding students eager to occupy supporter roles is easy, while meaningful engagement with their support is often disappointingly low.

The fatal flaw in traditional schemes is their inherent positioning along deficit lines, implicitly requiring users to identify themselves as "in need" of support – a vulnerable disempowered position avoided by most, particularly those sensitive to stereotype threat or imposter syndrome. By contrast, the "supporter" position is sought after as it delivers clear benefits, enhancing confidence and developing transferable skills to populate students' CVs. The training programme developed as part of the wider project explored the ethics of this with prospective supporters and used the Emotion Regulation for Learning model as a framework for rethinking the idea of "support", reframing peer support to focus on developing peer "leadership".

This approach positions student leaders as role models in upholding the values of the University's Student Charter, which emphasises a commitment to learning and self-development, respect, support and community building. Instead of focusing on one-to-one peer supporting skills, the training focuses on developing students' psychological literacy and self-respect as the basis for leadership skills such as empathic listening, facilitation of respectful and inclusive social interaction, bystander intervention and restorative conflict resolution. The leadership model positions students themselves as the agents of the supportive learning community which fosters learning success for all, encouraged to focus their leadership efforts on inclusion and community-building activities helping fellow students to make connections with their peers in order to develop a sense of belonging.

The six students who had been recruited for the Law School programme decided to call themselves "Law Wellbeing Champions" and the scheme they developed is described by one of them in a video recorded to share with other students:

LWC video: We try to create a sense of community, a sense of belonging and an overall support network for Law Students. We help look after the wellbeing of students, we're a support system and we run different kind of events ... so we've run different workshops, like How to Deal With Rejection, How to Manage Your Time, so you're not too stressed, and we direct people to the help that they need and where they can find guidance.

Reviewing the benefits of their participation in their WBC focus group, the students recognised benefits similar to traditional peer support programmes through developing transferable skills, but also recognised the personal benefit:

LWC2: that is definitely what brought me into it ... the fact that someone could train me and it's something to talk about at interviews and ... then I've had a community grow through that.

Others reflected on the personal benefit from learning the psychological literacy model – "I developed my emotional intelligence" and "[it] taught me to reach out for support", in addition to the wider skills such as developing their empathy and general people skills.

Overall as they reflected on how they would evaluate the success of their event programme, these students felt pleased with the events themselves and a perception that the students attending had found them beneficial, but disappointed that they had not attracted greater numbers. One student reflected:

LWC1: One thing that keeps popping up with me is the stigma around the word “wellbeing”. So, as soon as someone sees that it’s a wellbeing event that’s like a good 80% of people just gone, like that ... I don’t have a clue how to go and destigmatise the word “wellbeing” ...

This participant’s comment led to further explicit reflection in the focus group discussion about how people are positioned by the dominant discourses around mental health and wellbeing, with us respectively referencing our previous research and a reminder of how the co-creation discussion for the law wellbeing champion role had considered the effect of including the word “wellbeing” in the title. The general consensus was that it would be more effective not to badge a role or events with the word “wellbeing”.

Students in the L4&5 focus group were also asked whether they had been aware of the student-led aspects of the project, or anything which had been effective at building a sense of community. Only one of the students was confident that they’d been fully aware of this part of the project, and felt that they had benefited personally, but wasn’t sure how far it had reached

I went to most of the Law Society events last year and I was aware of the Wellbeing Champions and everything. I have made new connections and some friends from attending events which is useful as it increased my sense of inclusion within the university.

I’m not really sure if they were that well known, outside of the Society – I’m not really sure how far it got to students who didn’t really integrate that much.

Several students commented on the benefit of a particular “Study with different years” event, agreeing that they had found it beneficial to extend their network to students from other years.

In the WBC focus group there was a more detailed discussion about the value of their supportive connections with others on their course for coping with the challenges of online learning:

LWC2: I’ve actually felt quite lucky this year to have a good group of friends on my course and in the Law Society, ‘cause I think in my first and second year I didn’t have that. – my friends were all on different courses and I think I would have really struggled this year if there was no one else I could text or talk to, ... who was going through the same thing.

This comment implies an element of randomness and “luck” relating to this sense of community with others on the course, and these students underlined their belief in the importance of their Wellbeing Champion role for a more proactive approach to inclusion.

The students’ ideas for how to build on these findings are discussed in more detail below.

Part 2: curriculum intervention

The starting point for the project was the expectation that university-wide measures addressing student wellbeing would be most effective when embedded within academic departments and by academic members of staff, with reinforcement by student peers. From the perspective of positioning theory, embedding a focus on wellbeing within the curriculum in this way, along with peer endorsement, should go some way towards normalising conversations about wellbeing and at the very least providing a step forward in the battle against the stigma surrounding mental ill-health.

The main intervention in this context was through two tutorial sessions introducing the Emotion Regulation for Learning model. However, when the L4&5 focus group participants were asked to evaluate the curriculum interventions directly, only one of the five participants remembered having seen the Emotion Regulation for Learning video previously, and they suggested that introducing the model in a personal tutorial session might not have been the most effective method for dissemination

Student 5: I'm afraid to admit it no, I haven't actually been to many tutor sessions because I've been working between uni ... I just want to add though that that's no reflection on my tutor ...

This was interesting as it echoed something the staff members had reflected upon during conversations to shape the intervention – staff were aware that attendance at tutorial sessions often tended to drop off quite significantly and had speculated that a “deficit” mentality might be affecting this, with students possibly seeing tutorials as something which were there mainly for those who “needed” more support or possibly for “remedial” skills development.

Staff were also aware that without credit-bearing status, tutorial sessions were likely to suffer from the strategic approach implied in Student 5's comments, with many students under financial pressure having to make difficult choices about how to allocate time to their studies and more likely to sacrifice sessions which did not have a direct bearing on credit-accrual.

Students in the L4&5 focus group also felt that tutorial sessions weren't as clearly signalled in the course timetable as other sessions, with comments like:

Student 4: I did find that ... some tutors weren't really making it aware that there was a session it would just be expected you just need to check your timetable ... And then by the time [you] realised [you] had a tutor session, it was too late.

Other students agreed with this and suggested that email reminders from tutors would raise the profile of tutorial sessions more. The implication in this discussion was that this suggestion was not just about “nannying” students, but rather that tutors' actions (or inactions) were communicating something about their own valuing of the tutorial sessions and their content.

This exchange offers food for thought regarding choices about how and where wellbeing-related content is integrated into the curriculum, and what that communicates to students about staff members' perception of its importance and relevance. Lip-service level of attention to both wellbeing and inclusion is insufficient – psychological or wellbeing literacy may be a good starting point, but it is only through thorough embedding via changes in core, everyday practice that more fruitful possibilities and positions for action are properly opened up.

In the general L4&5 focus group, participants were shown the video animation to remind them of the model and were asked to reflect on what was helpful for themselves or other students from their understanding of the video's message. The students' comments made it clear that they could see the relevance of the key concepts communicated, one saying it was “interesting to learn about and useful to know ... the different parts of why we feel different emotions”. Another reflected the message that emotion regulation is a skill which can be acquired and practised:

I think it's all very useful especially if students just keep these three things in the back of their head and strive for a compassionate mind throughout their university experience. Like the video said, it's about practising.

There was also clear recognition of the message regarding the relevance of wellbeing skills for dealing with common learning challenges:

The part regarding the need to find a balance between the drive and the fear system. New students might tend to work too much since they fear failure so it is important to remind them to also take some time to look after their well-being.

This student's comment highlights the over-work and perfectionism that can arise in the pursuit of competence, and demonstrates how the model can provide reinforcement for the requirement in Strevens' Student Success policy for staff to structure in opportunities for students to make mistakes and experience fruitful failures.

One student's reflections on the helpfulness of the video very clearly identified the constructive benefit of the "de-pathologising" framing of anxiety in the model:

"Running away is not helpful" as this is something that I struggled with when my anxiety developed during lockdown. I just wanted to forget about uni and socialising completely but [the video shows that] this is just my flight or fight instinct and it's fine.

The comment underlines the way in which the model aims to position students with the mindset to persist in the face of challenges, as one survey respondent also demonstrated: "I have been trying to stick with the task at hand, whereas previously I would give up. I have also been asking for help in more places".

When the L4&5 focus group students were asked what they did remember of the curriculum input about wellbeing it was the values session which stood out for them:

... because it made me reflect on something I had never thought about before. During lockdown I was able to see how some of those values actually apply to me in reality.

Asked to reflect on learning from their pandemic experiences related to their values, survey respondents demonstrated development of greater psychological literacy in line with the model: "not to spend so much time stressing and completing work and learn to take a break", "some things not important and to just focus on what is important" and many of them found the survey itself a useful opportunity for self-evaluation: "It feels useful to reflect upon what specific things have helped me to keep motivated so I can use them further in my studies", "it is always good to pause and think to reflect on your own experiences and personality – this is so important in growth and adaptation to the next year of university".

These findings have helped to reinforce the intention to develop the curriculum intervention on the basis of a streamlined self-reflection tool which helps students to evaluate their psychological literacy and continue to monitor the associated skills as they progress.

The final comment on the helpful aspects of the model from the video animation focused on another fundamental aspect of its message, reinforcing aspects of the Student Success policy focusing on relatedness: "The part about protecting personal connections". Recognition of the importance of social support was a significant part of this focus group's reflections in relation to the challenges of the pandemic. They had initially focused on technical or practical barriers, like lack of access to computers and physical resources in the library, but as they reflected they recognised the wider well-being implications of losing a sense of being part of a learning community:

I think it's not necessarily just the library . . . but . . . not being able to meet up and start to discuss it with people and to go to a social space and get yourself going for the day like, that kind of lack of routine, I think, is what throws a lot of people off when something like this happens.

Students also made an overt connection between wellbeing and a sense of inclusion: "you have to be somewhere that is inclusive and right for you". One student also recognised that her awareness of being "at a disadvantage because being a minority" meant that she felt she had to "isolate [herself to] work harder", thereby missing out on some of the fun of being a student and worrying about the impact of this: "I just don't want it to take a toll on my wellbeing".

A survey respondent who felt that having to do a lot of paid work had made it harder for her to enjoy a full student experience, affecting her sense of belonging and her mental health, said: "I hope the university uses this survey to help students . . . who need the most because they come from disadvantaged backgrounds". Likewise, a focus group member from a minoritised background who had struggled to feel a sense of community on his course said: "I think it's the uni, and also the students that should be in it as well, to create a community so you feel close".

There is an interesting implicit point, when considering these students' comments, about how both material disadvantage and disadvantage through minoritised identity can affect students' access to the extracurricular or "optional extra" aspects of learning – and if wellbeing and belonging-focused activity are located here rather than in the core curriculum then this potentially compounds the learning advantage for those who already have the privilege of wider access. These students are clear about the university's responsibility to be more active in addressing disadvantages and lack of inclusion, in order to deliver a better student experience for all students.

Part 3: next steps

The latter part of the discussion in both focus groups moved from evaluation on to creation of next steps and further actions, which are summarised in this section.

The Wellbeing Champion group decided to drop the idea of a separate Wellbeing Champion role, but wanted to retain the value by ensuring that as many students as possible could benefit from the training and leadership experience for their CVs. They thought it would be better to build from the existing community-building function served by the student Law Society using the traditional "buddy" system used in student societies, where every new member is assigned an older member to welcome and induct them.

However, there was also an awareness of deficit positioning – that those who "need" something like this might be less likely to come forward, and miss out on the benefit. They were keen to see that such a system was made properly accessible and inclusive, by being automatically available for everybody. In order to achieve this they felt that the scheme should be embedded as part of the course, but they felt that it was difficult to know on what basis to match people, and that one-to-one pairings might also be a bit hit and miss, with a danger that "there's always going to be people who can't be bothered to do it as well":

Student 4: . . . and if you get put with someone who's just not interested, then that's also an issue because that's gonna make you feel a bit deflated.

They therefore preferred the idea of new students being assigned to peer groups with several trained senior students to facilitate – “that’ll be quite cool to have a little support network”.

The most obvious arena for taking forward some of these ideas was within the group tutorial system, as long as these were given a higher profile and prominence by staff. Students felt that there needed to be much more publicity, “more awareness at the start of the year on how to be involved, for people wanting to train and for people wanting to [participate]”, as well as better communication generally, for example trying to “notify more students about their tutor sessions (by email) so they can get more involved”.

In general, there was a feeling that involvement from tutors and other staff was essential – for structuring and promoting students’ engagement with each other, and demonstrating the value of the activities – but with room for students to take the lead and set the agenda within this structure.

Discussion and findings

Positioning theory supports a “future forming sensitivity [which] shifts the direction of inquiry from reflecting or representing the social world, to actively transforming it” by “challenging existing traditions of understanding and offer[ing] new possibilities for action”²⁴ in the field of student wellbeing and mental health.

The action and reflection cycle described here has allowed for the development of a number of ways to position students and staff with fruitful possibilities for action circumventing some of the traps created by deficit discourses about wellbeing and mental health.

This analysis of reflections from the student focus groups gives some indication of the difficulty in promoting psychological literacy. Despite the animation being shown to groups of law students on several occasions, only one student could recall it and then in only general terms. This reinforces our view that measures need to be embedded into the curriculum and endorsed by academic staff.

We remain of the view that embedding university level mental wellbeing measures within the department and incorporating them, in addition, into the curriculum as opposed to into personal tutoring is likely to address some of the issues identified in this discourse analysis. Students highlighted problems with personal tutorial sessions that were not timetabled and not sufficiently promoted by academic staff and that resulted in low student participation.

Students recognised the limiting impact of the deficit model and the problem with using the term “wellbeing”. They endorsed Meyer’s approach to using leadership training and the practice of such leadership skills in building an inclusive community and increasing a sense of belonging as being both a personal benefit and of benefit to the wider student body. They reflected upon the benefit of creating peer learning communities where students were mixing with students from other levels. This could form a new model for either personal tutoring or a new group-based buddy system.

²⁴Gergen (n 6) 78.

Students also valued input and commitment from their tutors and expressed the view that staff endorsement of student support measures would increase student engagement.

This pilot has reinforced our views about the power of co-creation with students and the importance of academic staff commitment. It has also reinforced our view of the need to increase students' engagement with personal tutoring and the possibility that the current lack of engagement may be as a result of students seeing this framed as addressing deficit.

We have been unable to comment upon any specific impact on students' academic motivation, resilience and confidence, given the confounding factors related to the global pandemic. However, useful practical resources and suggestions for structuring curriculum-based activity have been made, and the authors would welcome correspondence and discussion with colleagues in other contexts who would be interested in testing and further developing this approach in their own context.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Caroline Strevens  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9016-839X>