

#Take5 #65 Wellbeing: The chasm between students' expectations and institutional provision

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This #Take5 blog is brought to you from Debbie Holley and David Biggins, two researchers from Bournemouth University who are interested in the digital experiences of students, with a focus on digital wellbeing and support.

Mind the gap

"Be more mindful about the situation, be more kind". Advice to academic staff from an undergraduate student.

"Be better at supporting students who need help or who are behind"

"Be more understanding especially with non-visible disabilities and health issues!"

This blog post reports on a piece of work we carried out in May-June 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic where we asked students about their experiences of using technology, and their experiences of accessing wellbeing support. The results were not at all what we expected. We were surprised at the technologies they were more confident in using, and our assumptions about easy navigation through our Virtual Learning Environment were challenged. Despite the stresses of the semester, most students had not accessed any of the wellbeing resources the University signposted. We cover the key policy themes before giving a snapshot of the research, and conclude by suggesting some responses that the LD community of educators could adopt.



Image: New Forest Walks: Debbie Holley

Fulfilling experiences of Higher Education?

Increasing the wellbeing, resilience and potential for lifelong learning of students is now a core responsibility for institutions. The ways in which we can develop institutional compassion to promote and enhance the student experience is rapidly gaining traction within the sector. Innovative work at the University of Hertfordshire, led by Gilbert (2018, 2020), shows assessing and allocating credit to students for demonstrating compassionate micro skills in group work has been shown to improve student wellbeing and academic performance; and Biggins, Holley, and Zezekova (2020) in their three year study call for more nuanced and planned strategies to promote and enhance wellbeing at Higher Education Institutions.

The [Office of Students](#) (OfS), the independent regulator of HE in England, aims “...to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers.” However, the pandemic has seen 87% of students reporting mental health issues, and the OfS [Insights Brief](#) (2020) points to the importance of looking at the data on students with mental health conditions, including the links between different datasets, and at these students’ specific needs.

The large gaps in attainment and continuation rates between black students with a mental health condition and their white peers are a cause for special concern. The poorer outcomes of these students suggest that the overlap of multiple identities can have a drastic effect on students' experience at university (OfS 2020).

Compassion Fatigue

The requirement to also provide empathy and pastoral support to students is a challenging shift for many academics, with compassion fatigue being reported, in addition to 'Zoom fatigue', the exhaustion which [Weiderhold \(2020\)](#) so carefully articulates in her paper. Academics want students to do well and have a fulfilling university experience that prepares them for the future. A greater emphasis on academics to provide first line pastoral support for students has been accelerated through the pandemic. Many academics are naturally empathetic and compassionate, providing a listening ear and caring for students which then increases the emotional labour of their workload. Compassion fatigue, which is better known in soldiers and those working in the helping professions, has become more prevalent in HE as professionals deal with more students under emotional distress (Raimondi 2019). With increasing disclosure by students and wider acceptance that meeting emotional needs promotes a more fulfilling student experience, how do institutions, departments or individual academics conceptualise a compassion focused pedagogy that builds students' resilience and wellbeing? How can academics be supported in this work?

Sinfield and Burns (in unpublished research at LondonMet University) found WP students were expecting more kindness and 'interest' from staff and for staff to be available and accessible at times when the students needed support. Boo in a previous [#Take 5](#) reports on his research at the LSE, with care and kindness being high on the list of what makes an excellent lecturer. More recently, Roper and Clarke (2020) have explored the ancient African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, a Xhosa word meaning 'I am because we are' and now adopted into (a very few) UK tertiary education sectors. The work is based upon truth, harmony and reciprocity, practice that echoes those values and the authors call for this to be the basis for creating more empowered, engaged and positive team environments in Higher Education.

A "softer, better, slower, stronger" response?

Danny Dorling in his book 'Slower' (2020) posits the notion that Higher Education will need to become "softer, better, slower, stronger" at institutional, pedagogic and individual levels. The workloads and demands of the pandemic have certainly not reflected this desire!

We have undertaken a small scale study (n=92) about our students' experiences of wellbeing in the past year. We found that many students find access to the internet and access to learning materials problematic. These are fundamental bedrocks of a quality online experience and immediately put pressure on students' wellbeing and impact their learning potential and experience. Only 16% of students reported always having a good internet connection. One in seven students found it difficult or very difficult to access material relating to their assessments

and one in ten students reports difficulty in accessing recorded materials, a primary method of communication during remote learning. Organising their studies also posed problems with a third of students saying access to the calendar was difficult or very difficult.

Going mobile!

The study looked at the levels of student confidence in using technology. This found that students felt very confident in using mobile phones and social media but lower levels of confidence were reported in the hardware and software used in HE to facilitate learning, computers and the virtual learning environment (VLE). Figure one shows the levels of confidence broken down by level of study across four technology types.

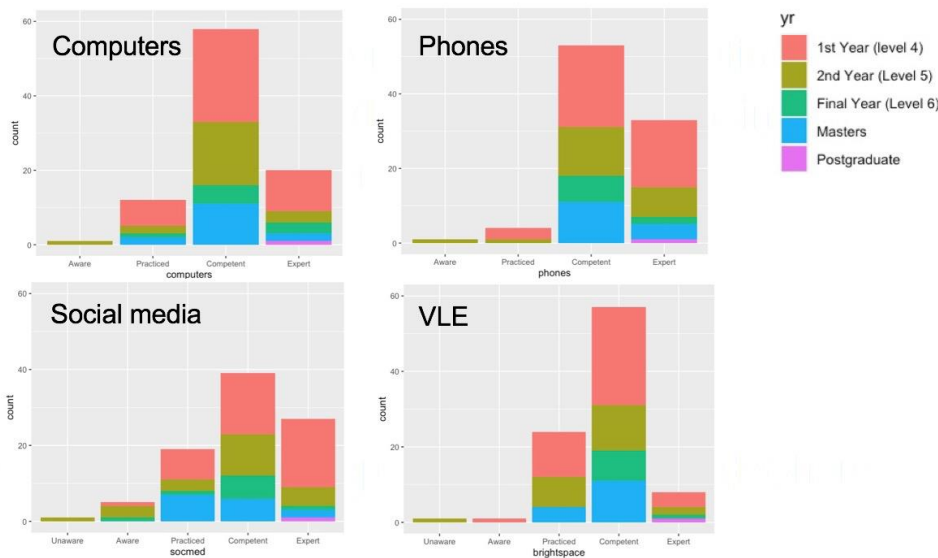


Figure 1. Levels of student confidence

The interim report on this study (available [here](#))

While our study focused on students, its findings reinforced the vital role played by staff and institutions who have an essential part to play in creating the environment that acknowledges, fosters and encourages positive student wellbeing. In our study, the desire of students to succeed is strongly felt but the environment created for them fails to meet their needs for a high quality and consistent experience. Participating student comments indicate they feel let down by teaching staff who struggle with the mediating tools of their online trade, technology, and show little empathy for those they teach. Solutions are around robust pedagogically underpinned learning design and careful considerations of the standardisation/ personalisation continuum for the use of technological tools.

A potential LD response?

The ability of young people to develop their skills is patchy, due to uneven access and socio-economic issues outside the scope of this paper, however, this remains an important

environmental issue. We argue that universities, as part of their duty of care to students, need new ways of embedding the digital, that are comprehensive, inclusive and based on a critical literacies approach, such as that advocated by Pangazio and Selwyn (2019). This is a human-centred approach to digital competence which Potter and McDougall (2017) emphasise as the possibilities of human life rather than the deficits; Maguire et al (2020) showcase how this would be possible. And our responses as an LD community?

The top six items our small scale study identified students want staff to do:

1. Listen better, empathise more and provide more support for students.
2. Recognise that students learn in different ways and at different rates.
3. Endeavour to provide more personalised learning experiences for students.
4. Become better and more confident in using digital learning tools.
5. Be more consistent in the use and application of those tools.
6. Support students in navigating and making the most of VLEs

And more widely, our responses could be around:

- Supporting each other to build individual compassion to collective compassion in teams
- Influencing University policies to promote institutional compassionate strategies that are more than words
- Considering ways to share good practice through ALDinHE (and other) professional bodies
- And reflecting on how we can become “softer, better, slower, stronger” at institutional, pedagogic and individual levels.

We wish all a year of empathy and compassion...

Resources:

Department for Education (2020) State of the nation 2020: children and young people’s wellbeing (see ‘older young people’ for 16-24 age group)
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/925329/State_of_the_nation_2020_children_and_young_people_s_wellbeing.pdf

Student Minds Charity <https://www.studentminds.org.uk/latestnews/your-university-mental-health-charter-is-here>

University of Hertfordshire 2018 Embedding and Assessing Compassion on the University Curriculum (Part 1) online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jFVTCuSCOG>

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[Holley, D.](#) and [Biggins, D.](#), 2020. Institutional compassion: a co-design approach to developing digital wellbeing. In: Association of Learning Technology Online Summer Summit 26-27 August 2020 Online.

Gilbert (2020) Assess compassion in the curriculum – why would we do that?

<https://www.herts.ac.uk/link/volume-2,-issue-1/assess-compassion-in-higher-education-how-and-why-would-we-do-that>

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<https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/pdfplus/10.1089/cyber.2020.29188.bkw>

Biographies:

Debbie Holley: Debbie Holley is Professor of Learning Innovation at Bournemouth University, where she leads innovation in research, teaching and professional practice within the Department of Nursing Sciences. Her expertise lies with blending learning and innovation to motivate and engage students with their learning inside /outside the formal classroom, at a time and place of their own choosing. As National Teaching Fellow, she is a passionate educator, with research interests in digital frameworks and the affordances of technologies such as Augmented Reality, Virtual/ Immersive Realities and Mobile Learning. She is currently working on digital health and wellbeing with EU colleagues as part of the work to revise the EU Digital Competence framework (DIGICOMP).

David Biggins: Dr David Biggins came to learning technology by way of project management. He has a strong interest in technology enhanced learning and led the academic development of an open access [TEL toolkit](#) at his institution. Since then he has championed the use of TEL amongst colleagues and run numerous TEL-related projects; and his teaching has been

recognised through the award of multiple 'You're Brilliant' awards. These culminated in the award of the Students Union (SUBU) silver award for 'Most Brilliant Lecturer' and the 'Most Outstandingly Brilliant Gold Award'. David, based in the Business School, continues to lead learning analytics projects and has research interests in the positives and negatives of using data for the benefit of staff and students.